One Year on Probation

by FlOrangey

Summary

Akira Kurusu was a sixteen-year-old boy arrested for a crime he did not commit. Convicted of assaulting a man, expelled from his school, and put on probation, he must attend Shujin Academy in the city Shibuya for one year. If he makes it through his probation, he has the chance of having his record wiped clean and being able to live a normal life. If not, he can say goodbye to his future.

It should have been a year he could breeze through, working to change hearts and reform society. However, his life was not an urban fantasy. In this world, there are no palaces, no changing hearts, no Persona, and while there are cats, they don't talk. How is Akira going to survive a year in a school that has no qualms about making it clear he's not welcome? Is he going to survive at all? If he wants to even hope for a future, he'll have to try.

(Currently on hiatus)
Christmas

Chapter Notes

Thank you for choosing to read this story. I hope you enjoy it.

Content Notice: This chapter opens with the implication a character attempted suicide.

12/25/2016
Very Early Morning
Shibuya General Hospital

Christmas was supposed to have been the day they all got together at Leblanc, had a nice late breakfast together and then went out on the town to see if they could find stuff for cheap as shops tried to get rid of all their Christmas themed merchandise. It was supposed to have been a day where they would all grab lunch at a local sandwich shop and laugh, celebrate not having school for two weeks and discuss what they would be doing in the coming new year.

None of them had expected to spend Christmas sitting in silence, in the hallway Shibuya’s General Hospital, waiting for any news. They were all quiet, except Ryuji, who would tap his foot as he leaned against the wall, then start pacing every few minutes. His anxiousness was a reflection of how they all felt as they waited. Futaba was curled up in one of the seats, leaning against her stepfather, her eyes heavy from a lack of sleep. Sojiro noticed, and wrapped a hand around her shoulder.

“You want me to take you home?” He asked. Futaba shook her head rapidly.

“No. I don’t wanna leave.” She said and pointed to the others. “If they’re staying, I’m staying too.”

Sojiro nodded, “Alright. If you say so.” He stood up, “I’m going to let your mom know not to stay up waiting for us.”

“Okay.” She said and watched as Sojiro walked away. She sighed and then let out a loud groan, the silence becoming too much for her to bear.

“You sure you’re okay Futaba?” Ann asked. “I mean, seeing that-”

“Makoto…” Haru muttered, a sad look on her face.

“It’s my fault.” Makoto suddenly spoke up, cutting her off and getting everyone’s attention.

“Mako-chan…” Haru muttered, a sad look on her face.

“I should have noticed something was wrong. He hasn’t been himself since the election.”

“Makoto, none of this is-” Yusuke started but was cut off.

“I should have stayed with him on Christmas Eve. If I did maybe he wouldn’t have-”

Ryuji stopped and let out a loud yell that sounded like a mix of frustrated screaming and crying. “Enough!” He said, “Stop blaming yourself! It isn’t your fault, stop thinking it is! Do you really think staying over would have changed anything?!”
The others fell silent, Makoto stared at Ryuji, her eyes wide before looking away as tears fell down her face. Ann put a hand on her shoulder and gave Ryuji a cold glare.

“Don’t you think you’re being a little harsh?” She asked and Ryuji winced. He thought over his words and found, yes, he had sounded callous.

“Sorry.” He muttered. Again silence until Haru spoke up.

“Ryuji is right.” Haru said getting their attention, “Placing blame is not going to change what has happened. None of us are responsible for Akira’s condition, and trying to point fingers is not going to make him wake up sooner. Please don’t punish yourself Mako-chan, it’s not your fault.”

Makoto said nothing at first, but after a moment or two reached her hand up and wiped her tears from her face. “I wish I could say you’re right, but I can’t stop thinking if I had been there he might not have taken all those pills.”

Ryuji walked over and took a seat next to her. He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it. He could not think of anything that would make Makoto feel better so he just kept his mouth shut letting Ann do the best she could to comfort her. He got up when Haru wanted to take a seat next to her and took a seat next to Yusuke, who was staring at his hands which were folded on his lap. He had a serious look on his face.

They were all quiet again for some time, even when Sojiro came back and sat down next to Futaba, who leaned against him. Several minutes later she was asleep and he was considering taking her home as the sun came up, when the doctor finally stepped out of Akira’s hospital room. He stood up making Futaba wake up from the sudden movement. “Well?”

“He’s stable, but has not regained consciousness.” The doctor explained. Sojiro frowned.

“And how long will that take?”

“Hard to say, cases like this vary from person to person. I will say we expect some form of brain damage or physical impairment, but we won’t know how severe until he wakes up.” He said and Sojiro did not like how the doctor sounded so indifferent. Makoto stood up from her seat and took a deep breath.

“Is it possible we can see him?” She asked. The doctor frowned.

“I’m afraid we can only allow his immediate family too-”

“His immediate family won’t come.” Sojiro cut the doctor off, a frown on his face, “He’s not from around here, I’m the closest thing he has to a parent right now, and these kids are more his family than they are.” He explained keeping his statements short and to the point so the man in front of him could not argue, “When can we see him?”

The doctor looked at Sojiro, a hint of annoyance on his face before shaking his head. “No more than two people at a time. Afterwards, I’m going to ask that you leave so we can continue monitoring his condition. You can visit him during regular visiting hours later today.”

“Thank you, sir,” Makoto said. The doctor nodded and excused himself. Once he was a little further away Ryuji spoke up.

"So who’s going first?" He asked. The question hung in the air until everyone’s eyes fell on Makoto.
“Me?” She asked in surprise.

“Of course. You are his girlfriend, it’s only fair you see him first.” Yusuke said. Everyone else nodded, except Makoto who shook her head.

“Maybe I should go last. I don’t want to keep you all waiting and…” She started then trailed off. No matter what they told her she could feel guilt crawling in her chest and the idea of seeing her boyfriend lying comatose in a hospital bed was eating her up inside. Ann gave her a light push.

“Take all the time you need. We don’t mind waiting.” Ann said.

“Yeah. If we have to, we’ll just come back tomorrow.” Ryuji said, “Go on and see him. We’ll be right here.”

“I’ll come inside with you, for support,” Sojiro said and Makoto nodded as he looked at his daughter. “Do you want to come to Futaba?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think I’m prepared enough. Sorry.” She said and Sojiro put a reassuring hand on her head.

“It’s alright. You can stay out here with the others.” Sojiro then turned his attention to Makoto. “Ready?”

No, she was not, but she had to see him. She had to. “Yes. I’m ready.” She said and turned to the door leading into Akira’s room. After some hesitation, she opened the door. The room was white and bright because of the lights, which only made Akira’s dark and messy hair stand out, but that was not the first thing Makoto noticed. It was the sound of the heart monitor, the mask covering Akira’s face, the occasional noise of a machine that was helping him breathe. Makoto felt her body run cold, dizzy at the sight as she walked over to him and sat down in the chair next to his bed. He was lying on his side, like he was asleep, except he was not.

Makoto looked at his face, his skin had taken on a gray color similar to his eyes and felt her hands shake. “Akira...” She muttered looking down at her knees, fresh tears dripping down her cheek, hitting her knuckles, as her fists tightened. She looked at him, lying in a hospital bed fighting for his life.

She wanted to ask how this could have happened, why it happened, but she already knew those answers. She knew what lead up to them spending Christmas in the emergency room because Akira took a dozen pills just hours ago desperate to make all the pain he was in stop. She knew because of how he changed just a week after with news of the election, how he just seemed to give up trying to think things would be alright. She knew because months ago he told her about a man who ruined his life and that same man was now Japan’s Prime Minister.

She knew because he told her everything which happened that led to his arrest, his criminal record, and him being forced to move to Tokyo, in a tone that made it clear even as time went by the events were so fresh in his mind he could recall every single detail. As she reached up and ran her fingers through his black hair, she could remember every word.

It had started months ago, on a winter night while he was walking home from school, then spring came, and with it the new school year...
Probation

Chapter Summary

Akira Kurusu arrives in Shibuya.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

4/9/2016 (Saturday)
Daytime
Train to Shibuya Station

“Someone, please help me!”

“Damn brat, I’ll sue.”

“This young man came out of nowhere and attacked this gentleman.”

“What did we tell you about sticking your nose into other people’s business? We’re being sued because of you!”

Something woke Akira up. He was not sure if it was his father screaming at him in his nightmares, or if it was the train jostling as it slowed to a stop to let more people on. He was not even sure if he had fallen asleep, or if he had been in some kind of half-conscious stupor. He could not remember closing his eyes, but he did open them, and as he did he looked around.

He was on a train. An ordinary train for everyone who was packed onto it - and packed it was - but for Akira Kurusu it was the train leading him to what would be his prison for the next year. He frowned as he thought about it. Prison was not the right word, in truth he was staying with someone his parents knew in passing, but at the same time, he still felt like he was going to some kind of prison. He was not moving to the city or attending his new school by choice. It was part of his year long probation, and complying with the court was the only way he had a chance of regaining some normalcy in his life.

“Akira Kurusu, you have been found guilty of assault.”

His face scrunched up, his grip on his bag tighter as the memories of the past several months echoed back into his mind. The sirens, the yelling, the nights he stayed in juvenile hall because his father refused to let him stay at home during the trial. The sound of the judge slamming the mallet which finalized his fate. It all came back to him before the sound of the trains automated announcement brought him back to reality.

“We are now entering Shibuya. We are now entering Shibuya. Doors will be opening on the right side of the train.”

Akira stood up from his seat, hand to the nearest pole, body swaying a bit as the train slowed to a stop. He exited with the crowd as the doors opened, eyes wide at how quick everyone appeared to move in the city. He kept his hand in his pocket until he left the train station and stepped into the
Station Square Plaza. It was then he pulled out his phone and looked at it.

He needed to get to Yongen-Jaya. The train he was supposed to take was closed down because of a railway accident the other day, but his GPS had updated to give him a new route. He walked down the street, noticing the people walking past him as though they were in a hurry. He stopped at the crosswalk, noting the sign was red but saw people walking the road anyway. He was hesitant at first, but he followed the crowd across the street and reached the other station.

By some miracle, Akira found his train and kept his hand on one of the poles, his bag under his arm, as it began to move. He glanced around and saw most people on the packed train were minding their own business. Some were reading, some were playing games or looking at news on their phone. Few were actually speaking and even then it was simple greetings or an apology for bumping into each other. It surprised him a little, he thought people in the city would be more social since there were so many people, but instead, everyone seemed to prefer their privacy.

No one wanted to talk to each other.

He stayed silent and did not move until he heard the announcement the train had arrived at Yongen-Jaya. He got off the train and left the station as quick as he could, desperate to get away from the crowd. He stepped outside and was greeted by narrow streets and the scent of stale, dirty air. He coughed and cleared his throat trying to ignore the smell and be grateful the area looked less crowded. He never thought of himself as claustrophobic, but now he was questioning it.

At least Yongen-Jaya felt a little more familiar. Smell and tight streets aside, the place looked more homely. He looked down at his phone as he walked the street and checked his notes.

From what his parents and his probation officer had told him he would be living with a man named Sojiro Sakura. Akira had the home address, but his parents had told him the man ran a small cafe in the area called Leblanc. Considering the time of day Akira guessed it would be better to go this 'cafe' before stopping at the man's house. Akira entered the name of the cafe into his GPS. The small circle which told him it was for his destination appeared and then a message.

No match found.

He sighed, his phone had no information on the cafe. He either needed to restart it or download a new map and that could take a few hours. He put his phone in his pocket and looked around the general area. People were talking on the streets or walking in and out of shops, a few passing him. Most were adults or small children. He noted the lack of teenagers his age, then remembered today was Saturday and school had not let out yet.

A police officer was standing on a street corner. Akira frowned as he saw him and tightened the grip on his bag. A few months ago if he was lost he would have asked the officer for directions without a second thought. Now, seeing anyone in an officers uniform left him distrustful and on edge, especially since he had no idea who was paying the officers paycheck. He turned on his heels and started down the street, looking for anyone else who could give him directions.

An old man running a second-hand shop was kind enough to point him in the direction of Leblanc and Akira thanked him for the help. The cafe ended up being just a block down the street. It had an old look to it, different from the modern cafe’s he saw around Shibuya and even in his hometown. It felt more like a family shop, somewhere his mother would take him for a late Sunday breakfast. If she felt well enough too. He took a deep breath, opened the door, and stepped inside.

There was a man sitting at what appeared to be a bar table reading the newspaper, and an old couple sitting in one of the booths watching the news.
“The accident has caused a delay that is believed to continue into tomorrow. Commuters should mind any schedule changes and adjust their travel time accordingly.”

“How awful. Makes me glad I’m retired.” The older man said, a small chuckle in his voice. “I feel bad for all those businessmen needing to get into the city for their morning meetings.”

“The smart ones will call off, no one should be working on Sunday.” The woman muttered. The third man, in an apron and pink button down shirt, grumbled something under his breath. Akira noticed the pencil in his hand. He was working on a crossword puzzle.

“Course if everywhere was closed Sunday we wouldn’t be able to enjoy a nice coffee tomorrow. Right Sojiro?” The elder said and the man looked up.

“Huh?” The man looked up, he had not been paying attention to the conversation. However, with his attention diverted from his puzzle, he noticed Akira’s presence. Akira watched as the indifference on the man's face was replaced with annoyance.

“Oh, right.” He said, putting the paper back on the table. “They did say that was today.”

As though sensing the change in the air, the old couple got up from their seats. “We should be going, the money is on the table as usual.” The elder said and the man Akira guessed was Sojiro turned his attention back to them for a brief moment, face becoming a little softer.

“Thanks for coming.”

“Of course. This cafe is one of the safest in the city, out of the way from the noise and chaos.” The man said, “Plus it being in an ally means any car accidents won’t reach it. At least we hope not.”

Sojiro shrugged. “Not my concern what goes on in the inner city.” He said short and simple. The elderly couple said their goodbyes again and Akira stepped out of the way so they could leave. He then turned to Sojiro, who let out a loud sigh.

“Four hours for a single cup of coffee.” He muttered then turned his attention to Akira. “So, you’re him. Akira Kurusu, right?”

Akira nodded, he needed to be on his best behavior. Which was not difficult under normal circumstances, but the air of hostility made him uneasy. “Are you Sakura-san?”

He saw a flicker of a smile cross Sojiro’s face, “Yes, I’m Sojiro Sakura, the guy in custody of you for the next year.” He said, then the smile dropped. “I was wondering what brat would end up on my doorstep, but you’re him, huh?”

Akira said nothing, but he did nod as he watched Sojiro look him over. He then saw a frown form on his face. “You’re a quiet one aren’t you...” He said then motioned for him to follow. “Come with me upstairs.”

Akira watched, confused, then followed him up some stairs and into an attic. “This is your room. It’s on you to clean up the mess.”

Akira’s eyes widened as he looked around. The attic was a mess, books and gardening supplies were scattered across the floor and the whole place was covered in dust. The floor was so dirty he could barely see it. “This is my room?” He repeated, unsure if he heard him right.

“Yes,” Sojiro answered, annoyed he might need to repeat himself. “I’m to provide you with food and shelter for your stay, but I don’t have space for you to live in my home, so this attic will be...
your room for as long as you are in my custody.”

Akira winced and decided the best thing he could do in his situation was keep quiet as Sojiro continued to speak to him. “I got the gist of your situation. You tried to defend a woman from a drunk man trying to throw himself on her, he got injured, and sued you, right?” He asked. Akira nodded, “That’s what you get for sticking your nose into a matter between two adults. You should have—”

“-ignored it and kept walking,” Akira muttered. Sojiro paused, a frown on his face, and Akira expected to be yelled at for interrupting him. Instead, his guardian continued to speak.

“So now you got a criminal record, were expelled from your high school, and the only place your parents could find that would even consider re-enrolling you is Shujin Academy, so they shoved you out here. In other words, they got rid of you for being a pain in the ass.” Sojiro’s words were a harsh reminder Akira did not need, but he kept his face as neutral as possible as he listened.

Sojiro gave him a basic rundown of how living in the shop would work. He locked up the store at the end of each night. Akira was free to roam about downstairs if he wanted, but there were security cameras in the cafe. When the store was open he was required to either stay upstairs or outside. If Akira touched any of the coffee or curry ingredients without permission or tried to steal anything he would be kicked out and sent back to juvenile hall. Everything in the top fridge was off limits, the bottom had been cleared out for Akira to put whatever food he wanted in it. There was a bathroom with a sink, but no bath, and no laundry. Sojiro had already gotten him a pass to the bathhouse so he could get washed at a discount, and there was a public laundromat nearby that cost two hundred yen a load.

Akira noted right away he would be paying for several commodities he used to have for free at home, including his own food, and doubted the monthly stipend his parents were required to send him each month would cover it all. He would need to either budget heavily or get a part-time job.

At least Sojiro was kind enough to provide sheets for his bed. Akira gave a bitter chuckle to the box lying in the middle of the dusty floor after the man went back downstairs, telling him to ‘get this mess cleaned up.’ He knelt down and opened the box. His parents had sent him basic necessities; spare clothes, some toiletries, the uniforms Shujin Academy had sent, and a small box containing an extra pair of glasses and his contact lenses.

He was surprised to see the contacts, his mother had told him several times just to wear his glasses. A kid who needs glasses will look less threatening than one that does not. So far his mom’s train of thought was not working. He looked back up at the room and put a hand to his head. All the dust was giving him a headache. He decided to get changed and begin cleaning.

By the time the evening rolled around, his headache had blown up and he was sure he was going to be sick. However, his room looked a little more livable than it did before. The floor was moderately clean, the gardening supplies were put away, the books that were stacked in messes on the floor and on a nearby desk had been organized by author and shelved. His bed was made, the windows were open to filter the air.

He was hanging his school uniforms onto a wire he strung up over the ceiling when Sojiro came upstairs. The man looked surprised, even impressed. “I heard you making a lot of noise but I didn’t think you were actually cleaning.” He took another look over, “This actually doesn’t look too bad.”
“T-thank you,” Akira said, keeping the statement short and simple and not trusting his throat. All the cleaning made him feel tired. Sojiro gave the room one last look over then brought his attention back to Akira.

“Well, I’m locking up the store and heading home for the night.” He said then placed some papers on the far table next to Akira’s book bag. “Sign those for tomorrow and then go to bed. They’re your papers for Shujin Academy.”

A nod from Akira and a grunt from Sojiro as well as a not so friendly ‘good night’ ended the conversation. Akira walked over and looked at the paperwork. It had his name and all his information, including his arrest, former school, and his grade average. He could not help but notice the information regarding his arrest was front and center while his grade average - 88 - was hiding on the second page. The sight left him feeling angry, but then he resigned himself to the reality he was grateful the papers even bothered to include anything good at all.

Akira checked everything over and signed his name on the papers. He then folded them and put them in his bag. He changed into his pajamas and crawled into bed.

Despite feeling tired earlier, he could not sleep. His head still hurt and he kept thinking about how he ended up in his current situation. How he ended up arrested just for trying to get a drunk man to leave that woman alone and stuck in an attic under the care of a man who obviously wanted nothing to do with him.

He remembered getting a call from his parents while at school and being told to come home right away. They had something important to discuss but did not want to over the phone. He switched his cleanup duties with someone he thought was his friend and skipped his drama club. He had taken a shortcut home instead of going the usual route that led to the library and was walking the street when he heard the voices.

“Someone help!”

“Just get in the car!”

“Please, stop it! If you don’t I’ll-I’ll call the police!”

He had hurried over to see what was happening to find a drunk man harassing a woman.

“The police? The police are my bitches, they won’t listen to a skank like you.”

“Help!”

Akira remembered the first thing his father told him was the same thing Sojiro had tried to tell him. He should have ignored what was going on and walked the other way. But he could not just ignore it, she had been in trouble and needed help. It was simple to him, someone was in trouble and they needed help.

He guessed society thought otherwise because he was the one with the criminal record while the man in question walked away free. He did the right thing and got screwed over for it. It left his stomach turning on itself from frustration.

Akira felt his eyes become heavy and pulled his blankets over him to go to sleep. He had a long day tomorrow and he needed to be up early.
I hope everyone that read this enjoyed this two chapter preview. Expect the work to be continued after 'An Alternate School Trip.'
Akira wished yesterday and the past few months were just a bad dream. Anything would be better, even a nightmare about being in a creepy velvet colored jail cell surrounded by twin child guards and a warden with a giant nose, bloodshot eyes, and the voice of a demon would be preferred to the reality in front of him. Instead, he was waking up in his new bedroom, an attic still dusty enough it irritated his eyes and was staring at the ceiling.

Today he was visiting Shujin Academy to turn in his papers and finalize his enrollment. He forced himself to get out of bed, his body not used to the idea of getting up early on a Sunday. He did not feel like he recovered from his trip either, but his headache was gone. Maybe when he got back from visiting the school he could climb back into bed with a book and then take a long nap. He glanced at the bookshelf. He had plenty of options.

He got dressed in his school uniform and started looking over the books on the shelf. One caught his eye so he pulled it off the shelf and read the title:

_Arsene Lupin: Gentleman Burglar_

Akira opened it and read the summary. It was a story about a gentleman thief, written by an author in the west. He recognized the name of the translator then checked the date on the book and saw this copy was released in the Japan in the early seventies. Footsteps on the stairs to the attic got his attention and looked over to see Sojiro come into the room. He forgot for a second he had no door. Which meant no privacy.

“Up and dressed already.” He commented. Akira could not help but notice he sounded surprised. He put the book he was holding back on the shelf. “The trains are still out of sort, so I’ll be driving you to Aoyama-Itchome today.”

“Aoyama-Itchome?” Akira asked. He thought he was going to Shujin. Sojiro gave him a perplexed look, then sighed.

“Right, you’re still new to the area. Your school’s in Aoyama-Itchome. Normally you’ll take the train there, but I’ll drive you today for your enrollment.” He explained then seeing Akira’s face added, “Stop looking all slack-jawed and follow me.”
Akira stared at Sojiro as he turned his back to him. For a second it seemed Sojiro actually cared a little about him.

“Dammit...men usually aren’t allowed in my passenger seat.”

And with one sentence Sojiro was back to annoyance.

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4/10/2016 (Sunday)

Morning

Shujin Academy: Principal’s Office

Shujin Academy was a high school that specialized in preparing students for college. Akira remembered the joy on his mother’s face as she told him he had been accepted. Shujin was one of the best high schools to attend in Japan, one where any family would pay the steep tuition just because it guaranteed entrance to some of the best universities in the country. He had been surprised when he heard the news, but at the same time relieved. Having a school as accredited as Shujin on his resume would be a huge help to him thanks to his newfound record.

The principal’s office had not been difficult to find. There was a student roaming the hallways - a girl with brown hair and red eyes - who pointed them in the right direction. Akira stood in silence, hands in his pockets as Sojiro finished signing the remaining papers. He looked at the principal, an overweight man in a brown suit which looked a size too small for him, and then the woman standing next to him, in a simple yellow sweater and denim knee length skirt. She looked to be in her late twenties and from the expression on her face, Akira could tell she was not enthused about being in the office. He also noticed she looked tired.

“Now remember, if you cause any trouble you will be expelled immediately.” Principal Kobayakawa told Akira, who nodded. “Honestly, I was hesitant to accept someone like you, but there were some circumstances on our side.”

Akira already knew what those circumstances were. The school’s reputation would improve if they could ‘reform’ a juvenile delinquent. He was a pawn in a larger scheme the principal had in mind and he was expected to play his role. Akira kept those words to himself. If he made one wrong move or said the wrong thing, he would have nowhere else to go and no future. So he gave a small bow and replied in the politest tone he could manage. “I understand. Thank you for giving me this chance.”

The words sounded sour on his tongue, but the principal seemed satisfied. “I’m glad to hear you understand your situation.” He said, then motioned to the quiet woman. “This is the teacher in charge of your homeroom.”

“I’m Sadayo Kawakami.” She said. Her tone was as indifferent and uncaring as Akira expected. “Here’s your student ID and handbook. Make sure you read the school rules. Any violations will send you straight to the guidance office.”

The teacher placed his ID and school book on the desk, as though refusing to hand them to him herself. Akira picked them up and placed the ID in his pocket. He’d clip it to his book bag when he got back to the café, the student handbook he could read on his way home.

“The schedule for the year is in your student handbook, but in case you choose not to look at it, we have a volleyball rally on the 13th and sign ups for club activities begin next week.” She said,
“Though I get the feeling you won’t be welcome at any of them.”

Akira stayed silent. His new teacher was making it obvious his presence was a burden. Sojiro had been tapping his foot, his patience running thin.

“Is there anything else? I have a store to get back to.” He said.

Principal Kobayakawa double checked his list. There was the matter of a school tour, however he decided against suggesting it. “No, that is all. Sakura-san, please keep a close eye on him. Don’t let him cause any trouble outside of school.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice.” Sojiro muttered, “I’ll make sure he understands how serious this is.”

Akira said nothing and Kawakami sighed before giving him one final bit of information. “Come to the faculty office on the second floor when you arrive tomorrow morning. I’ll show you to your classroom.”

Akira nodded. His teacher gave him a look that made him guess his silence irritated her. After a few more exchanges between Sojiro and the Principal, they were allowed to leave the office. Once at the school’s entrance and there was no one else around, Sojiro let his shoulders sag.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a teacher treat a student like they were such a nuisance. Guess that’s what happens when you have a criminal record.” He said.

“Looks like it,” Akira muttered, hands in his pockets, trying hard not to sound like he was upset.

“Guess your past really does follow you wherever you go.” Sojiro said, more to himself than to Akira, then turned to look at the young teenager, “Just don’t get expelled, I won’t hesitate to kick you out if you are. Got it?”

Akira nodded. He then saw Sojiro was still waiting for him to answer. “I won’t get expelled. I promise.”

Sojiro huffed and after a few seconds of silence spoke up again. “Look, I get you want to come off as polite, but if you’re too quiet people will think you’re up to something. Learn to speak when you should and be silent when you’re supposed to and you’ll get through the year fine. Hopefully.”

Akira looked at him, not sure what to make of the man’s statement. It sounded like advice. He was receiving advice from a man who had not even a few seconds ago casually threatened to kick him out into the streets. He nodded again, then when he saw Sojiro was still looking at him realized it was expected for him to speak up. “I will. Thank you.”

Sojiro turned and walked to the school doors, seeming satisfied with his words. Akira followed him, hands still in his pockets.

Cloudy days in the school courtyard were the best days as far as Sadayo Kawakami was concerned. It was not too warm, not too cold, and the wind was gentle. On any other day, she would stop and take five minutes to herself to relax a little and enjoy the scenery before having to get back to work. Today was not one of those days. She still stopped for five minutes to get some air, but she was not relaxed.

While she tried to be indifferent, she was a little curious when she was told she would be receiving
a sudden transfer student. It was rare for a student to transfer after the year began, but looking at his file told her more than she wanted to know. She was shocked, even repulsed, to discover he had a criminal record. His file said he was arrested for assault, and she kept thinking about who he attacked. Was it a former classmate of his? An ordinary person who just looked at him the wrong way? Did the police catch him before any real harm came to them or were they in the hospital? It led her to worry if he would be a danger to her students.

“Well look who’s here.” Kawakami was snapped out of her thoughts and looked up to see a familiar face. A tall, well built and athletic man with a strong face. The school’s gym teacher. Suguru Kamoshida. “Saw you leaving the principal’s office, got a bit of a troublesome situation huh.”

“That’s an understatement.” Kawakami said, “Sudden transfer or not, I can’t believe they pushed someone with a record on me. Ushimaru-san would have been a better choice for keeping a delinquent in line.”

“Why’d the school allow someone like that in here anyway?” He asked.

“I don’t know, it was the principal’s decision. Something about him being a good way to bolster the school’s reputation.”

The gym teacher scoffed. “I would’ve thought my volleyball team had done more than enough to cover that.” He said. “Be careful okay? Course if it were me I’d kick a student like him out before he could cause problems.”

Kawakami sighed. A part of her was hoping the kid would just not show up for school, but as a teacher knew she could not say that statement out loud. “I should make preparations for tomorrow. I have textbooks I need to order among other things.”

“And I have to get back to practice.”

“Oh, that’s right, the tournament’s coming up.”

Kamoshida grinned. “Expectations are high. Not only do we have a delinquent joining our school, but we have to make up for the track team too.” The gym teacher said, “It’s quite a burden, trying to keep everyone's spirits up.”

From how Kamoshida spoke, the lightness in his voice should have brought some reassurance. Instead, it left her uneasy and a little on edge. Ever since Kamoshida joined the school’s staff the school’s atmosphere had not felt right. The volleyball team's performance had improved since he started coaching, however, the bruises on one of her student’s face had not gone unnoticed. She had not brought her concerns to the principal - she doubted he would do anything - but did ask the student about them. He said it was because he messed up during practice and missed the ball.

For some reason, that explanation did not sound right to her. He sounded too scared when trying to explain what happened.

She watched as Kamoshida took his leave back to the gym and then sighed. Why did she have to end up with a delinquent in her class? She had far more important things to concern herself with. She checked the calendar on her phone. The due date for her next payment was coming up.

4/10/2016 (Sunday)
Akira was woken up by Sojiro pounding his fist on the dashboard and making a noise that sounded like he wanted to break something. The student handbook he had been reading was resting in his hands threatening to fall on the floor, and he felt drool on the side of his face. He wiped it off with his sleeve and looked out at the road.

They were in the same spot they were when he fell asleep. No, actually, he was sure the sign on the sidewalk was two feet closer than it was before. “You’re taking the train starting tomorrow!” Sojiro said, agitated. “Should have had you just come here by yourself. I won’t be able to open the shop today because of you and this damn traffic. What a troublesome kid I’ve taken in!”

“If I’m so troublesome, why’d you take me in?” Akira asked.

“I-,” He heard Sojiro pause for a second then answered, “-was asked and just did.”

Akira looked up. “That’s it?”

“Well, I am getting paid for it too.”

Of course Sojiro was being paid for it. Akira should have expected the answer. There was no reason for his guardian to take in a stranger unless money was involved. Akira continued to read the handbook, trying to keep look as apathetic as possible, even though a part of him was boiling under the surface. He turned to the next page, where it listed all the clubs and sports activities. Just like his last school, Shujin Academy had a drama club.

“So, what did you think of the school? Think you can manage?”

“They have a lot of trophies at the entrance,” Akira said as he closed his book. He leaned against the car's window as he watched the traffic continue to crawl. “I think it will be okay.”

“It better, you do realize you only have one chance right?”

Akira nodded. He did not know if Sojiro was waiting for him to give a verbal response or not. At the moment he wanted to stay quiet, he felt like his voice was going to crack if he said anything. His fingers twitched, he was beginning to feel restless sitting with nothing to keep his hands entertained, so he started to run them along the cover of the handbook.

It took another couple of hours but traffic did start moving at a normal pace again and they got back to the cafe by evening. Sojiro grumbled as they entered the building. It was too late to open the store and he was complaining about how he was going to need to mark the day in his book as a loss. Akira was quiet, lifting a hand up to move some stray hair out of his line of sight. Sojiro’s phone went off and the older man lifted it to his ear.

“Hey, what's up?” He asked. Akira raised an eyebrow noting Sojiro’s demeanor change, “…yeah, I’m leaving right now. Let your mom know I’m running a little late. No, nothing’s wrong, just horrible traffic on the road.” The older man let a small smile sneak across his face. “See you two soon.”

He ended the call and Akira could not help but notice the happy look on Sojiro’s face. A small smile crossed his face.

“Hot date?” He asked. The glare he got made him regret opening his mouth. He expected Sojiro to ridicule him. Instead he adjusted his hat and gave a few orders.
“I’m going to close the shop. Go upstairs and don’t cause trouble for the night.”

Akira nodded and went up to the attic. He put his school handbook on his spare table and pinned his school ID to his bag. He undid the plastic bag that contained his school badge and a pin with a number two on it. All students at Shujin had a pin to tell others what year they were in and wearing them was a requirement. Akira pinned the number close to his collar and the badge a little further down.

He sighed. Tomorrow was the start of his new school year. He hoped the beginning of his second year was better than the end of his first year but had a feeling he was fooling himself. It would be a miracle if his school year went well. He imagined a week of normalcy. Maybe two if he was lucky. Something was bound to go wrong. Something always went wrong. Akira shook his head and finished getting his uniform ready.

The sound of ringing caught his attention and he looked at the stairs to the cafe. It sounded like a phone, but he could not remember seeing a phone in the building. Akira climbed downstairs and spotted a bright yellow phone that looked at least sixty years out of date. How he had not noticed it the first time he walked into the cafe he had no idea. He walked over, stared at it, then with some hesitation, and not quite sure how it worked, picked it up. “Hello?”

“Oh good. You actually picked up.”

Akira froze for a second, his heart feeling like it jumped in his chest. “W-who is this?”

A groan on the other line. “Have you forgotten my voice already? It’s Sakura.” Akira sighed in relief. “Look do me a favor. I closed the shop but accidentally flipped the sign to open and I don’t want to bother going back over to fix it. So earn your keep and fix it for me, alright?”

Akira looked at the door and indeed the sign was facing the wrong way. “Yeah su-” He paused, “Why did you call the public phone? Why not just call my cell?”

“Because I don’t have your cell number,” Sojiro told him. Since he was by himself, Akira rolled his eyes. “Now flip the sign for me. And don’t cause trouble in the kitchen!”

“Alright.” He was only halfway through his response when Sojiro hung up on him. Akira hung up the phone and opened the door, flipped the small sign from ‘Open’ to ‘Closed’ and closed the door and locked it. He then went back upstairs to finish what little he needed to finish before going to bed.

He changed into his pajamas and double checked the train route he needed to take to his new school. There was no direct route to Aoyama-Itchome, he would need to go out to Shibuya first and then transfer to the Ginza line to get to the school. The news reported the subway accident from the other day would also throw off the timetable, with the recommendation commuters add an extra thirty minutes to their regular commute. He did the math in his head. School started at eight-thirty. His commute was shorter than he expected because he was in the city, but he needed to account for extra time in case he got lost.

Akira gave up halfway through figuring out his timetable and set his alarm for five-thirty, the time he normally got up during the school year. He then brought up the book app on his phone and selected the ‘return to current page’ option. He read the next chapter in his book and played with his shirt with his free hand. After what felt like an hour his eyes began to feel heavy, so he closed out the app, pulled up his blankets and went to bed.

He was not looking forward to starting school.
“Hey did you see those rumors?”

“No way, am I really going to be in a class with a criminal?”

“Arrested for assault? Oh shit.”

“My parents are pissed.”

“I’m scared. Maybe I should call in sick tomorrow.”

“No, you don’t wanna miss the first day of school.”

“I hope he doesn’t show up.”

“Shit, who managed to find and leak this anyway?”

“Whoever it was, I’m grateful.”
The First Day Is Horrible

Chapter Summary

Akira Kurusu starts attending Shujin Academy.

Chapter Notes

I've decided I'll be uploading new chapters on Tuesdays for the next few weeks.

4/11/2016 (Monday)
Early Morning
Cafe Leblanc

Akira had not slept well. However, he did not hit the snooze button when his phone’s alarm went off. He pulled himself out of bed, got dressed, and put some money in his pocket. He planned to buy breakfast at one of the stalls he saw in the station the other day. He was not sure what options he had, but anything would be better than what he had been stuck eating in juvenile hall. He grabbed his school bag and climbed downstairs.

Sojiro Sakura was already in the restaurant. The older man looked up, a mix of surprise and another expression Akira could not quite place, on his face. He looked a little tired. “You’re actually planning to go to school?” Was it really so surprising? Sojiro checked the old clock ticking on the wall, “It’s early.”

“Don’t want to be late on my first day,” Akira said as he walked passed him.

“Hold on a second,” Sojiro said. Akira stopped in his tracks and looked at the older man to see him placing a plate of curry and a glass of water on the table. “Have some breakfast, just finish it before my customers start lining up.”

Akira stared at the dish, then at Sojiro, then back at the dish. The indecisiveness made Sojiro frown, “What? You got a problem with free food?”

“N-no,” Akira said. He took a seat at the table, not sure what to make of the sudden gesture or the food in front of him. He had never had curry for breakfast, the idea of having it at any time other than dinner just sounded strange to him. As the thought crossed his mind, he found he could barely remember the last time he had a proper home cooked meal.

It had been in late January, just before his arrest. His mother had felt well enough to make him breakfast before he left for school. He remembered being surprised to see her in the kitchen, as well as her smile when she told him to go back upstairs and make his hair look like he did not just crawl out of bed. He had not gone back upstairs, instead sitting with her to eat and talk before school.

“You’re starting to look like your father.”
“...Hopefully I don’t start acting like him.”

“Don’t start this again, Akira. Not today.”

He felt his stomach twist at the memory and was not sure if he would be able to eat breakfast anymore, but if Sojiro was going to show him some kindness he figured he should at least try. He took a bite of his meal and his eyes widened as he was hit by the intense taste. There was a noticeable sweetness under the spiciness of the curry and the texture was not like any curry he had eaten before. The subtly in how the flavors mixed woke him up. It was as though the recipe had been crafted by either a talented chef or some kind of food scientist.

Before he knew it, he was eating the last bite off his plate. He let out a content sigh as he finished his glass of water and put a hand on his stomach. “That was delicious.” He said. He got out of his seat and pushed the chair in. “Thank you for the meal.”

“Seems you have proper manners after all,” Sojiro said, and Akira was sure he saw some kind of smile on the man’s face. “Alright get going, you do know the way there right?”

Akira nodded, “I double checked last night.”

“Good, because I’m not gonna be there to hold your hand if you get lost,” Sojiro told him. “Make sure you flip the sign to open. Wanna get the morning commute while I can.”

Akira made a small noise as he shifted his weight on his feet and slung his bag over his shoulder. He left the cafe, flipped the sign like he was told to, then walked the tight, bike filled street to the train station. He almost tripped over one bike that looked like it had been sitting there for days. There was rust forming on it.

Reaching the Yongen-Jaya station and riding to Shibuya was easy. It was crowded and he found himself huddled near the door feeling like his personal space bubble had been invaded. The morning commute was filled with men and women in business suits and teenagers in various school uniforms. He saw a few Shujin students, some sleeping, some playing on their phones or game systems. He saw a girl talking to a boy wearing a blue uniform which had a badge with the words Kosei High emblazoned on it. If Akira had to guess they must have been friends from middle school catching up and sharing the latest school gossip.

His train stopped at Shibuya station and with just one look around Akira could tell his commute was about to get much more difficult. His map told him he needed to change to the Ginza line, however as he walked the station looking at the signs above him, he discovered finding the line was next to impossible. Either the JL line had four different entry points or he was walking in circles. After almost twenty minutes he sighed and noticed a nearby gate attendant. He hesitated but knew he needed directions or he would be late for school.

“Excuse me.” He said walking up to him, “How do I get to the Ginza Line?”

“Ginza Line? Gotta get yourself in the right building first. Follow the eight path, go through the Taikyu building and that’ll bring you to the Ginza Line.”

Akira stared at the attendant, trying to figure out of the if the man was speaking Japanese, English, German or some bizarre mix of the all three. The attendant must have noticed his cluelessness, so he pointed out the colored circles and squares on the floor and told him to find a yellow one with the number eight. Akira thanked him, embarrassed the man seemed to imply he should have already known about the path markings and excused himself. He followed the route to a set of stairs painted yellow, with a large black eight painted on them, and hoped the day would not get
“Wow, look at all that rain.”

Sojiro looked up at his customer to see the suited man staring out the door. “Huh?” He asked and just as he did he saw rain pouring down outside and heard it pounding on the roof. “Well, how about that.”

“Strange, the forecast never predicted rain. Think it’s that climate change thing everyone’s talking about?”

Sojiro shrugged as he went back to making his customer's coffee. He then paused as a thought crossed his mind. Did Akira remember to bring an umbrella?

Akira wished he remembered to bring an umbrella.

As he exited the train and left the Aoyama-Itchome station he found himself hurrying with a few other students from his school. Unlike them, he stopped under the pane of a shop to get out of the rain, because unlike him many of them remembered to bring umbrellas. He watched as his classmates ran past him then checked the time. He had a few minutes to spare, but could not wait long. A sigh escaped his lips. He hoped the rain would let up soon, he did not want to start his first day of school looking like a drenched rat.

He looked up to see someone with a feminine figure join him under the cover the shop provided. They were wearing a similar blazer to him, except under it was a white hoodie, the hood up to keep them from getting soaked by the rain. Smart person, or smart girl if their figure told him anything. He watched as they brushed some of the water off themselves and then pulled off their hood.

Akira did a double take as he saw the girl’s face. Her features were Japanese, but her blonde hair and blue eyes were so distinct, and her eyebrows the same blonde color, Akira was positive it was natural, not dyed. Her eyes were a little more round too. He found himself wondering if she was a foreigner or if one of her parents was from another country. She then looked at him and he noticed her large pigtails made her face look heart-shaped.

She smiled at him. “Hey.” She said. Akira relaxed, her voice was pleasant.

“Hi.” He said back. She seemed friendly and Akira had to admit, now that he was no longer taken aback by her odd features, she was cute. His thoughts moved back to the fact she was wearing a similar blazer to him and he wondered if they were both going to the same school. “Uh, are you -”

He was cut off by the sound of a horn and he and the girl turned to see a car slow to a stop in front of them. He could not help but noticed the girl’s shoulders become tense. The window rolled down and Akira saw a man in the driver's seat. He was wearing a tracksuit.

“Morning. Lovely day huh?” He asked, a lightness in his voice that sounded a little off. The girl
gave him a nervous grin.

“Oh, good morning!” The girl said. “I wouldn't say it’s nice. More rainy.”

“Yeah, no kidding. Hey, you want a ride to school? You're gonna be late.”

The grin faltered, but she nodded. “Um, sure, sounds good.” She said and walked over to the car. Akira guessed the man was someone the girl knew if she was comfortable getting into his car. He then noticed the man look at him.

“You want a lift too?”

“Uh, I’m fine, thank you.” He said.

“Well don’t be late, you hear?”

Akira nodded as the man rolled up the window. He caught a brief glimpse at the girl's face before it was completely obscured by the dark screen. The car drove off, water kicking up a little from the puddles which had formed.

“Oh goddammit!”

Another voice caught Akira’s attention. A boy ran past him and slowed to a stop just a few feet away. The boy, like the girl, also had blonde hair. Akira noticed right away it was dyed, the black roots and his eyebrows giving it away. His uniform was the same as Akira’s, only his jacket was open showing he was wearing a bright yellow shirt instead of a plain white one. The teenager let out a loud growl. “That piece of shit pervert teacher!”

Akira stared at him, surprised by his words. “Pervert teacher?” He repeated. The question caught the other’s attention and he turned around. He seemed startled by his presence, but that surprise quickly turned to anger.

Akira took a step back as the boy got close enough to him to invade his personal space. His hostility was so intense it radiated off him. “What do you want? You gonna rat me out to Kamoshida?”

“Kamoshida?” Akira asked. The confusion must have been obvious on his face, because the anger on the boy’s face died down, if only for a moment.

“The guy who just took Takamaki-chan in his car?” He said, asking the question like Akira should have known who he was talking about. He then glowered again. “Piece of shit does whatever he wants. Thinks he's the king of the castle or something.”

“King of the…what are you…” Akira started, but then trailed off and decided against asking questions. The teenager in front of him was making no sense and his vulgarity made Akira wonder if it was even a good idea to be talking to him. He shook his head, “Nevermind, I don’t want to know.”

“Don’t want to - you really don’t know Kamoshida?” He asked. Akira turned to walk away but the boy cut him off. “You are a Shujin student, right? Hell, that pin means you’re a second year, you should know about his shit by now!”

Akira looked down at the pin he was wearing. He then looked up and noticed the boy in front of him was wearing the same pin. The teenager was frowning, looking him over, then his eyes widened. “Wait. Now that I think about it I don’t think I’ve seen you before. I’m sure I’d recognize
anyone with that hair and those glasses. Are you a transfer student or something?”

Akira frowned. He was not sure if he was just insulted or not, but he was beginning to get annoyed. “Yes and I don’t wanna be late for my first day.” He said glancing up at the sky and noting the rain had begun to lighten up. The teenager pulled out his phone.

“Goddammit, we’d better hurry up or we’ll be late.” He said, “There’s a shortcut that’ll get us passed the main street, should shave a few minutes off the clock.”

Akira considered it. Just one look at the kid in front of him told him he might be trouble. He did not need or want trouble, but he also knew he could not afford to be late. “Sure.” He said. They started walking and Akira hesitated for a second before speaking up, “So you also go to Shujin.”

The vulgar boy looked at him like he had two heads. “Uh, yeah. No other school has the same uniform.” He said. Akira nodded to himself. In hindsight, it should have been obvious, but with how insane the city was he was not sure if some school’s had similar uniforms.

He noticed the teenager had gotten several feet ahead of him and was waiting.

“You’re not from around here are you.” He said “You walk real slow. Are you from the countryside or something?”

Akira nodded then spoke when he saw the boy was still waiting for him to answer. “Yes.” He saw the teenagers eyes widen.

“Damn, going from the country to the big city. Bet you got lost on the way here.” Akira refused to answer that question. “So what brings you to this part of Tokyo? You’re dad get a new job or something?”

“How much further?” Akira asked changing the subject altogether. He was not explaining his situation to a stranger, but he was not going to lie, so he decided it was better to avoid answering altogether. The teenager grumbled, annoyed by Akira’s avoidance, and then fell silent.

The vulgar boy had been right, cutting away from the main road and into a back alley had saved him a few minutes. Now he did not need to worry about being late. He looked over the school building. It was tall and radiated what to him felt like an oppressive atmosphere.

“Well, here we are. It might be a college prep school, but if you ask me it feels more like a prison.” The teenager said. Akira felt his chest tighten just at the word prison but kept a straight face.

“Thanks for showing me the way,” Akira said. He saw the boy give him a surprised look. It was like he was not expecting a thank you.

“Sure. No problem.” He said. A grin then formed on his face. “Well, I guess I’d better get to my homeroom. You need anything else before we break off?”

“The faculty office. It’s on the second floor right?”

“Yeah, second floor. Just take a right at the stairs you can’t miss it.” He said. Akira nodded, brushing some of his hair out of his face. The boy looked at him, confused. “Uh, you did hear me right?”

Akira realized, again, he needed to say something. “Yeah, I heard you.”

“Well you gotta say something, don’t just bob your head!”
The teenager sounded exasperated and Akira sighed. Right, learn when to speak and when to keep quiet. That’s what Sojiro told him. He needed to speak up here. “Sorry. I heard you, thank you.”

The air between them was becoming awkward, so Akira turned and hurried up the steps to the school. He glanced around as he ignored the mumblings of the vulgar boy behind him and entered the building. The moment he stepped inside he realized something was wrong. Most of the students paid him no mind, but a few stopped what they were doing to look at him and then whispered to each other. He went up to and opened his assigned locker, took his street shoes off and put his school shoes on. He then stepped into the hallway.

There was a somewhat large teacher with glasses and hair that looked gelled to the point of trying to hide a balding spot glaring at him. Akira walked past him, keeping his head down to avoid his gaze. A few girls stopped walking and stared at him, backing away. At first, he wondered why and then he heard someone say something that sent a shock through his spine.

“Hey isn’t that him?”

“No way, the rumors are true? The school really let in a criminal?”

“Oh I can’t wait to tell my parents about this…”

“This is a college prep school, people like him have no place here.”

His stomach turned and he thought he would need to take a detour to the nearest restroom. He felt his breath get stuck in his throat and he put a hand on the railing to steady himself.

“Is he okay? He doesn’t look good.”

“He’s probably high or something. Just leave him alone.”

He hurried up the stairs and following that boy’s instructions found the faculty office. He opened the door just as the clock struck eight-thirty. His homeroom teacher, Sadayo Kawakami, was sitting at her desk. She looked up when he stepped into the room. Her face was hard to read, but Akira could tell she was tired.

“You actually showed up. Here take a seat.” She motioned to the empty seat next to her desk. Akira hesitated but did as instructed. “You look upset. I’m guessing you already heard the students in the hall.” She said. He did not answer, but he had an unsettling feeling in his stomach. “Well I suppose there’s no beating around the bush and I should just tell you. Your records leaked.”

His eyes widened. “What?”

“We were informed this morning they leaked onto the school’s student forum.” Kawakami said though her tone only showed a little concern, “If it makes you feel better, I didn’t do it, but if you were hoping for a fresh start and to make some friends, you’re probably out of luck now.”

Akira felt the lightheadedness from a few minutes ago come back to him. His records had leaked. Everyone knew about his record. Everyone was judging him. “Who?” He asked. Kawakami shrugged.

“We don’t know,” She said. Akira stared at her, her tone made him feel sick. However seeing his face became a shade whiter, her stern features relaxed. “Look, I know this is gonna make the year
hard for you, but I promise as long as you’re in my class I’ll try and make sure no harm comes to you. However, I cannot stop students from whispering behind your back or trying anything outside of school. My suggestion would be to make yourself as small as possible until everyone forgets about it. Pay attention in class and go straight home when school is over. Understood?”

Akira nodded, fingers playing with the edge of his blazer to try and keep him calm. He felt anxious and like his mental safe space had just shrunk in size. Kawakami watched him, like she was taking note of his reaction, and then stood up. “Alright, come with me, it’s time for homeroom. I’ll have you introduce yourself to the class. Try not to say anything unnecessary.”

Akira followed her down the hall. He could see students filing into their classrooms. He saw a girl - for some reason she looked familiar - going downstairs to the third year classrooms, and a boy hurrying up to the first year ones. He could not help but notice the boy had a fresh black eye and bruising on his cheek.

Kawakami entered the classroom, and he followed behind her. The room had been buzzing with social chatter but fell silent at their presence. Akira noticed all their eyes fell on him. Some of them looked shocked by his presence, some angry. Many of them looked nervous. He heard a few people whispering loud enough he could catch every word and his face scrunched up. It was like they wanted him to hear what they were saying.

“Isn’t that him?”

“I thought those were just rumors.”

“Is the principal crazy?”

“They really let a delinquent into our school?”

“Alright everyone, settle down,” Kawakami said. The students fell quiet, but the tension stayed in the room. “Now as you are all aware we have a new student joining our class. This is Akira Kurusu. I’m sure everyone by now has heard of his...unique circumstances, but I expect you to treat him like you would any other classmate. Now Kurusu-san, please say something to the class.”

Akira doubted any of the students would do what their teacher said, but he tried to put on a smile and make himself sound pleasant. “I’m Akira Kurusu. It’s nice to meet you all.”

Somehow he managed to give his introduction without his voice cracking. There was a brief silence, but then a girl in the classroom said something to her neighbor. “He seems quiet...but I bet when he loses it...”

“Bet he’d slug ya if you looked him in the eye.”

Akira kept his head down, trying to pretend what his new classmates were saying didn’t bother him. He had several days to prepare himself mentally for his probation and imagined everything that could go wrong, but thinking it and experiencing it were two different things. He was used to being ignored, but not used to people talking about him like he was some kind of monster.

He noticed a student who was staring at his desk. He had bruises and cuts on his face.

“Okay now let’s see,” Kawakami said getting his attention. “Ah, there’s an open seat behind Takamaki-chan. Takamaki-chan?”

Akira looked over to see a girl look up and raise her hand. It was the same girl he had seen on the sidewalk, who had gotten a ride from that man. The man who the boy with bleached blonde hair
called a ‘piece of shit pervert teacher.’

“Kurusu-san please take your seat,” Kawakami told him and he nodded and walked over to it. He looked at the girl who frowned at him before turning her attention to the window. Akira guessed with his record leaked and people talking about him he could expect what little kindness she had shown him to be a one-time thing. He took his seat, ignoring the gossip around him taking a life of its own, and pulled out his notebook. He kept his head down as Kawakami asked the kid he saw with the bruises to stand up and begin roll call. He raised his hand when his name was spoken and looked out the window to see it had begun to rain again.

The day crawled at a snail's pace, the rain not letting up again until the afternoon. His teachers seemed to feel the need to comment on his presence, as though his existence in the classroom was an eyesore. One teacher, the one who had been glaring at him when he came into the school - Ushimaru - had decided to put him on his ‘list’ the moment class began. He then yelled at Akira for not paying attention in class and playing with his pencil. Akira did not like the accusation. He fidgeted with things because it helped him concentrate or calm down when he was nervous, but had a feeling the teacher would not listen, so he put the pencil down and instead started tapping his foot.

His head hurt from having chalk pelted at him and the laughter of his classmates made him feel miserable. He kept his head down wishing he could become invisible and everyone would forget about him.

Lunch rolled around and to his relief, most of the students left to eat in the cafeteria. The fact Shujin Academy had a cafeteria caught him by surprise, most school’s did not have one, and he remembered he did not bring anything to eat for lunch. If everyone was going to the cafeteria, however, he decided it would be better to avoid it and instead just buy a snack at the school store. He got up at the same time Takamaki did, almost bumping into her.

“Sorry.” He said. She looked at him then walked away. He sighed, confirming her silence was indeed the cold shoulder and walked out of the classroom.

He took a few steps out, saw some of his classmates looking at him, even pointing at him, and felt his stomach ball up. He did not feel hungry anymore. He went back into his classroom and sat down at his desk. The number of eyes on him made him nervous, the whispers made him anxious. He skipped lunch in favor of doing some school work. Of course, since he did not eat anything, the afternoon was worse, his empty stomach making him feel more miserable.

When the bell rang, he did not even wait to hear who would be cleaning the classroom that week, he doubted his name would come up anyway. He got up and bolted out, trying to ignore the people talking about him, hearing them say they were relieved he was leaving and hoping he would not turn up tomorrow. He increased his pace, not even caring who he cut off as he left the school building.

He did not want to go back tomorrow, but he had to. His future was riding on him surviving a year in a place that was worse than his stay in juvenile hall. He could not believe the thought crossed his mind, but the kid he met that morning was right, the school felt like a prison. His residence at the cafe felt like a prison. No matter what his options were he was behind bars, either literal or figurative.

He took the train to Shibuya, but meandered at the station for an hour, before stepping on the next train to Yongen-Jaya and reluctantly returning to the cafe.
“Bad day?”

Akira looked up from his dinner when his Sojiro spoke. He was sitting in one of the booths back in Leblanc. The cafe was still open, but Sojiro had told him to come downstairs and have some dinner. Granted it was less dinner and more leftover soup from the lunch crowd with some rice, but after skipping lunch at school Akira felt like he could eat anything. He did get a warning he should consider buying and cooking his own meals, but he was only half listening as he finished his homework.

“That obvious?” He asked.

“You look like a kicked puppy.” Sojiro said, “Hate to say it, but it's to be expected. No one wants a criminal around. You better suck it up and find yourself a distraction or you’ll be in for a long year.”

Akira thought about Sojiro's words, his 'advice' if it could be called that. He had a feeling his guardian was right and was a little grateful there were some things he could do to keep busy. He could start by trying to figure out how to get around Yongen-Jaya and Shibuya, find the grocery store or the batting cages he saw online. He wondered if there was a bookstore or a library around. Granted he now had a plethora of books in the attic - his room - he could look through, he just needed to weed out the ones about gardening and find the detective and mystery novels. It was a nice thought but did not change the fact he was expected to attend a school that made it clear wanted nothing to do with him, outside of improving their reputation.

He wanted to find a job. “How hard is it to get work around here?”

“Usually not that hard, but the economies been rough. Plus you got your record.” Sojiro said. Akira sighed, his criminal record would follow him wherever he went. He could not lie about it either, with the internet it was easy to find information on anyone’s background. He got up, put his things in his bag and took the bowls of soup and rice. He was going to finish eating in his room, then try and relax. Thinking about everything he needed to do and what happened at school left him exhausted.

“Make sure you wash those when you’re done,” Sojiro said. Akira nodded and went upstairs.

He finished his light dinner but stayed upstairs until Sojiro hollered that he was leaving for the
night. Once he was gone Akira climbed back downstairs, washed his dishes and took a seat in one of the booths to try and get a little light reading done. His fingers tapped on the table as his eyes stayed glued to his phone. He decided out of curiosity to go onto the student forum.

He found a thread that made his heart sink titled ‘Terrifying new student.’ He had a feeling he knew what was inside the thread but clicked the title and read the first page of responses. He then read the second.

He went upstairs, slid under his comforter, and tried not to cry.

4/12/2016 (Tuesday)
Shujin Academy

Day two of what Akira knew was going to be a long school year was worse than the first day. People were still talking about him, he was positive that piece of paper thrown at his head was not someone missing a trashcan. He was also sure the kid by the vending machines would have lobbed his bottle of soda at him had his friend not stopped him.

“You don’t wanna risk it, I hear he’ll knife you if you set him off.”

He saw the older man he now knew was the gym teacher Kamoshida greeting students outside the school gate. His good morning sounded cheerful, but there was a hook to his grin that made Akira uneasy, and he could not help but notice some of the female students trying to keep their distance. He nodded when Kamoshida looked at him and climbed the stairs into the school building. He and opened the door to his shoe locker to find a folded piece of paper lying in it. He pulled it out, unfolded it, and read the messy handwriting. He then shook his head and tossed it into the nearest trash can.

Someone wanted to meet him on the roof at lunch to talk. Akira was not stupid, with how the school was treating him he was pretty sure ‘talk’ was shorthand for someone wanting to use his face as a punching bag. In the last twenty-four hours the student body had decided he was not only arrested for assault, he also drank, smoked, had attacked multiple people with a knife, was involved in drug trafficking - and even did hard drugs - and might have murdered a man. There was also something about him being involved with Takamaki and she was cheating on him with a teacher. Where that rumor came from he had no idea. Akira was starting to wonder how he was going to survive the school year.

By the time classes had begun, he was in desperate need of something to help relieve his growing stress. He started playing with his pencil, listening as the teacher spoke.

“Kurusu!” He looked up at his teacher, Usami-sensei, when his name was called. “Since you’re clearly paying attention you must know the answer to the question.”

Akira sighed and looked at the board then answered. “It’s C.” He said. The classroom was silent as they waited for the teacher to answer. He saw she looked surprised.

“Yes. And?” She asked.

“The question was ‘is the line extending from A connecting to B or C?’ It looks like it should connect to B, but that is because it’s an optical illusion. Drawing the line makes it clear it’s connected to C.”
He heard some murmuring from the students and saw something in Usami’s eyes light up before giving an approving smile. “Yes, very good. I’m impressed Kurusu-kun, I didn’t think you were paying attention. I suppose your brain just functions a little different.”

Akira shrugged, not sure what to make of her statement as she continued her lecture. He did notice her change in how she addressed him, but his growing pessimism told him not to get his hopes up that his peers would think better of him.

The day continued with little incident. He skipped lunch again, seeing how even the slightest movement had everyone staring, and decided to use the extra time to at least finish some homework. When the school day was over, again he got up and left the classroom, not wanting to stick around. He did, however, stop when he saw Kamoshida approach Takamaki, a grin on his face that even he could see made her uncomfortable. He took a step forward, then stopped as he remembered what happened the last time he interfered with something he was told he should have stayed out of.

“Damn brat, I’ll sue!”

He turned and hurried down the stairs, hand in his pocket, pretending he had not seen or heard anything. Once at his locker he opened it and began to switch out his shoes. It was then he heard a familiar voice.

“Hey!” He looked behind him. It was the vulgar teenager from the other day. He was frowning and Akira watched him, wary of what he might try to do. “What the hell man? You don’t just leave a guy hanging.”

Akira stared at him, confused. “Huh?”

“You sent it?”

“Yeah. So what gives? I told you to meet me on the roof and you no-showed.” He asked, then paused, like he realized something. “Wait, crap, did I forget to sign it?”

Akira sighed and turned back to his locker. “Even if you didn’t I wouldn’t have known who it was from.” He said. He pulled his shoes out and closed his locker. The boy was still standing behind him.

Akira took a deep breath, then let it out. This was the kid who wanted to ‘talk’ and if he was confronting him now it might be a better idea just to get it over with. He just hoped it was quick and did not give him too many bruises. He did not need his guardian thinking he got into a fight.

“Alright, you want to talk, let’s talk outside.”

He led the way and cut across into the nearby alley the teenager led him through the other day. He stopped somewhere around through the narrow path and put his school bag on the ground. He turned to the teenager and took his glasses off. “Let’s get it over with.”

He stared at the bleached blonde teen in front of him and waited. Then waited a little longer. He had no idea what expression was on the teenagers face. He was nearsighted so outside of a few distinct shapes everything was a blurry mess. After waiting long enough to become irritated he spoke again. “Well?” He asked. He did see the boy jump.

“Sorry, but I’m really confused. What are you getting at?” He asked. Akira stared at him, not sure what was going on anymore.
“Aren’t you gonna hit me?”

“What? No, I’m not gonna hit you, where the hell did you….?” He paused as though realizing where Akira had gotten his train of thought. “Oh, shit. Okay... now that I think of it, totally can see where you got the idea. Especially with how everyone’s talking about you.”

Akira could not believe what he was hearing so he put his glasses back on so he could see the teenagers face better. He looked sympathetic. Sympathetic. Akira doubted his own eyes. “So, you really just wanted to talk?” He asked.

“Yeah. I heard everyone talking about you in my class. Sure you’ve noticed by now the school loves its rumor mill.” He said, “I wanted to ask if any of that stuff was true but more important, I wanted to make sure you were okay. Some of the stuff they’re saying is nasty.”

It took a second for the teenager's words to process and when they did Akira had no idea what to say. His voice choked in his throat, then he laughed. It was a hard, choked laugh that sounded like he was going to begin crying any second. He stopped himself, his hands shaking as he tried to regain his composure. “Am I okay?” He asked looking down at the ground. He shook his head, “I’m fine. Thanks for asking.”

“No offense, but you're bad at lying.” The teenager said taking a few steps closer. Akira watched him, cautious and prepared to run as the teenager picked his bag off the ground and held it out for him. Akira could not help but notice they were near the same height, even though the boy’s posture made it hard to notice. Akira took the bag and slung it over his shoulder. He let out a shaky breath, unsure what to say.

His stomach spoke for him, turning a little and then growling loud enough for both of them to here. Akira’s face turned red and tried to hide a little, but looking down so his hair obscured his eyes. He could see the teenager grinning.

“Someone’s hungry.”

Akira said nothing but did nod. Skipping lunch had been a terrible idea, he felt starved and it was not helping his growing anxiety.

“Well hey, since you’ve been having a tough time, why don’t I give you a proper city welcome?” The teenager suggested. Akira looked at him, less because of the offer and more because he sounded friendly. “Have you had a chance to walk around Shibuya yet? We can go to Central Street. There’s an arcade, a bookstore, the diner, oh and the beef bowl shop. If there’s one place you want to go for a good meal it’s there.”

The thought of food had Akira’s head spinning, but he hesitated. “I don’t know. I have to be home by seven.”

“Seriously? Geeze your parents are strict if they want you home that early.” The teenager said. Akira was quiet and watched as this strange boy considered his options and then shrugged. “Well how about this? How about I treat you to an early dinner and we can do a tour on Sunday or something. Beef bowl around here is pretty good if you want to try it out.”

Akira was quiet, gripping his bags strap tight in his hand as looked the teenager over. He seemed okay, even nice, but he also remembered he was the same one swearing up a storm the other day. Combined with his appearance a part of him was sure he was some kind of trouble. On the other hand, he was also the only person who had bothered to engage him in a civil conversation. Which meant he was either a good person, or he was luring Akira into some kind of trap, and he would
end up having his face beat in in the next few minutes.

His paranoia was about to have him thank the teenager, but decline his offer, but then his stomach growled again. His desire for something other than bland soup won out against his skepticism. He kept his head down but answered. “Okay.”

“Great!” The teenager had a large grin on his face and Akira found it contagious enough to get a small smile on his. “Oh yeah, I’m Ryuji Sakamoto. You can call me however you want.”

“Alright Ryuji.” He said, “Akira Kurusu.”

“Nice to meetcha Akira,” Ryuji said. He sounded happy and for the first time since he started school Akira felt like he could relax a bit, “Alright, let’s get outta here!”

4/12/2016 (Tuesday)
After School
Central Street: Beef Bowl Shop

The taste of warm meat on his tongue made Akira realize how much he missed going into a beef bowl shop. There was one in his home town, but it was not even close to the size of the one Ryuji had taken him to. He downed the large bowl he ordered quicker than he intended. The food was cooked just as he requested, the sauce was not too salty, and the meat was fresh. The last one surprised him, considering the size of the shop a part of him expected it to have been frozen for a period of time and lacking in taste.

“Damn, you must have been hungry if you ate all that,” Ryuji said getting his attention. There was a teasing grin on his face.

“Yours is the same size.”

“Yeah, but which one of us is already at their rice?”

Akira stared at him then realized Ryuji had not even gone through half his meal, having been peppering his beef with ginger. Meanwhile, all that was left in his was rice. Akira's face turned a little red and he decided he was never skipping lunch at school again.

“You want another bowl?” Ryuji asked, “It’s all on me so don’t worry about it.”

“I think I’m good,” Akira told him. He was sure he would be feeling stuffed in a few minutes but more importantly, he did not want Ryuji to think he was taking advantage of him. The teenager was the first person to treat him with some decency since he got to Shibuya. It was almost strange being treated like a person instead of a criminal, he felt like his senses had dulled from apathy and were starting to wake up again.

Despite their odd and almost hostile first meeting, he found Ryuji to be a good person. He had a grin on his face which was contagious and even as he kept berating Akira for walking slow he did not sound as annoyed as he did the first day.

Akira did find it strange the teenager walked with a limp but decided not to ask about it. It was not his business to ask something that might be personal. Instead, he watched and smirked as Ryuji smothered his beef with ginger before putting it in his mouth.

“Have enough beef for your ginger?”
Ryuji almost choked but then laughed. “You’re missing out. Hey, since you didn’t use yours can I take it?”

Akira motioned for him to take his ginger and Ryuji did so. He continued speaking even as he ate. “See, told you it’d be worth coming down here.” He swallowed, “Central Street is where all the fun stuff is. I saw you eyeing that book shop on the way here. They have a lot of bestsellers, some more niche things, and get new stock in each week. Below us in some old no longer used part of the train station is the underground mall. They have some good shit down there too.”

“Like what?”

“Well, there’s the CD shop which specializes in classics, mostly stuff from the 80s to early 2000s. There’s also a clothing boutique. Most of its stuff for girls but they have some guy things that you can’t get anywhere else at a good price.” He paused then said, “Hey why don’t we check it out after we finish eating?”

“Nah, might be better to save it for another day.”

“Ah right, you gotta be home real early. And you walk slow so that’s another ten minutes off the clock.” Ryuji said. Akira gave him a disapproving frown. He did not walk slow. Ryuji - and everyone else in the city - just walked fast. “No offense and I’m not questioning your folks, but it’s weird hearing you need to be home by seven around here. Are your parents that protective?”

“Not really,” Akira muttered, then after a few minutes decided to come clean to clear up some confusion. “I’m not living with my parents. I’m staying with a legal guardian and he wants me home at a certain time so he can keep an eye on me.”

“Oh right, you’re on probation.” Ryuji said, “So, what? Your parents just shipped you out here to live with a stranger?”

“Pretty much. Shujin was the only school that would accept me so it’s not like they had a choice.” Akira muttered, “And it looked better than a year in juvie.”

“Man, that sucks.” Ryuji said, “Still if you’re just on probation it’s safe to say half the shit being said at school is bull. I mean if you killed someone you’d probably be locked up.” Akira kept his thoughts to himself but was internally relieved Ryuji had enough sense to know that. “But I have to ask, that thing about being arrested for assault? Is that legit?”

“That’s...complicated,” Akira muttered as he pushed his bowl away. It still had rice in it but he was far passed wanting to eat now.

“Can I ask-”

“No. I’m not sure I want to tell my whole story to a guy I just met. No offense.” Akira said. Ryuji shrugged.

“I guess that’s fair. I mean with how everyone’s been treating you, I can’t blame you for being a little cautious.” He said and then after a few seconds let out a groan as he changed the subject. “So changing the subject, tomorrow’s the volleyball rally. Just gonna warn you now, it’s gonna suck.”

“Why?” Akira asked, playing with one of his chopsticks as Ryuji mulled over how to answer.

“Well I guess for most of the school it won’t be bad, the rally means no afternoon classes, but it gives that bastard Kamoshida a chance to stroke his ego.”
“You don’t like the gym teacher much,” Akira noted and watched as Ryuji’s face contorted into the same one he had the day they ran into each other.

“Oh ‘don’t like’ doesn’t even cut it.” He shouted loud enough that Akira jumped a little and a worker needed to ask them to be quiet. Ryuji apologized, as though not realizing he raised his voice and then got quieter. “I’d rather not go into big details, but I’ve seen the shit Kamoshida does first hand and it ain’t pretty. He used to be in charge of the track team—”

“Shujin had a track team?”

“Yeah. ‘Had’. And he treated us like shit. Made us do all these ridiculous exercises and talked shit about us.”

Akira noted Ryuji’s use of ‘us’ as well as the fact he walked with a limp. “Were you on the team?”

“What? Uh….” He asked, stuttered for a bit, then skipped over the question. “That’s not the point. What is is that Kamoshida is also in charge of the volleyball team and he’s putting them through the same shit. He runs them ragged, some of them are covered in bruises that are just not normal for the sport. It’s nothing like you’d expect from a regular practice, more like they had the shit beaten out of them.”

“You think he’s abusing them.”

Ryuji’s frown became a furious scowl. “I don’t think, I know.” He said then the scowl faded. “And I’m going to try and prove it. Because of the rally, the teachers will be distracted and I hope someone can give me hard evidence. A testimony or something.” He sighed, “You know, there’s rumors going around that Takamaki-chan and Kamoshida are…together.”

“Yeah, I heard that one,” Akira said, leaving out the part of the supposed soap opera like love triangle the student body had come up with.

“I don’t get it. We used to be classmates in middle school. Her grades aren’t the best, but I can tell you right here, she’s not dumb. So what she’s doing with him I have no idea.”

“Is it possible she doesn’t know?” Akira asked.

“Maybe? But her best friend’s the starter for the girl's team so...” Ryuji said then shook his head, “Sorry, this wasn’t supposed to turn into a downer, but thanks for hearing me out. I think I’m going to ask some of the guys and girls on the teams and see if they’ll tell me anything. Considering my reputation I doubt a lot will say much, but I have to try.”

“What are you gonna do if they do?”

“Try and force the school's hand.” Ryuji said, “There’s no effin’ way the teachers and principal don’t know what’s going on. If I can bring hard evidence, even a testimony, to the police, they’ll be forced to do something. At least I hope.”

Akira decided to keep his thoughts to himself. He did not trust the cops, but if what Ryuji was telling him was true he hoped someone would listen. He remembered when he saw Kamoshida approach Takamaki at the end of the school day and seeing how uncomfortable she was. If she was seeing him, she had a feeling it was not because she liked him.

Akira picked his phone off the counter when he heard it buzz and moved in his seat. “I need to go.”

“Ah shit, you’re right.” Ryuji said, “I’ll walk you back to the train station.”
Akira nodded and got up from his seat. Ryuji followed him outside then as they walked - this time at Akira’s pace - he spoke up again. “Hey, thanks for hearing me out. Not a lot of people will do that.”

“Well, you did buy me food,” Akira said, as he played with his hair. Ryuji grinned and gave him a light punch on the shoulder.

“Well you know what they say, the best friendships start over a bowl of beef.”

Akira was sure no one said that however, that was not what got him to almost trip on his own feet. “Friendship?”

The word stuck out to him and Ryuji looked at him, confused. “I mean why not? Just because your school year started out bad doesn’t mean you have to deal with it alone. Besides you seem pretty cool, if a bit nerdy.”

“Excuse me?” Akira asked, looking right at him.

“Dude, the only thing that caught your eye on this entire street was the damn bookstore. Admit it, you read. You’re a nerd.”

“What? You don’t read?”

“Oh, I read. I just read Manga.”

Akira stared at him then laughed a little. “Yeah, I don’t think you have any right to call me a nerd.”

The two laughed and Ryuji walked him all the way to the train station before the two said their goodbyes for the night.

4/12/2016 (Tuesday)
Evening
Cafe Leblanc

He was late, so when Akira entered the cafe he was not surprised to see Sojiro glaring at him from his crossword puzzle. “You’re late.”

“Sorry.” He said.

“You better have a good excuse. I’m not going to stay here waiting for you every night.” Sojiro said frowning as he noticed Akira’s stance and overall demeanor. “You seem more relaxed. Something happen? You’re not on anything are you?”

Akira stared at him, the tension returning to his shoulders. “No. I was just hanging out with a friend.”

“A friend?” Sojiro asked. He let a small smile cross his face before forcing it off. “Well, hopefully your new friend isn’t trouble. You don’t need that.” He paused as his cell phone rang and he picked it up. “Yeah? Yeah, I’m still at the shop. I’m- hey, don’t use that tone of voice with me, young lady, I know I’m running late. I’m not old either!” He paused as he heard something on the other line then sighed. He then looked at Akira.

“Go upstairs.” He said. Akira nodded resigned to his night in the attic and walked passed. He
paused as he heard Sojiro go back to talking on the phone. “No, I just hired a part-timer. Huh? She did? Alright, I’ll heat some up when I get home. Love you too.”

Akira stared at him wondering who his legal guardian could be talking to before deciding it was none of his business and went upstairs.

Chapter End Notes

Oh hey look, a chapter that ends on a somewhat happier note.
Whenever Kamoshida spoke to Ann, she felt sick to her stomach and wanted nothing more than to go home, lock her doors and windows, and hide under the blankets of her bed. The smile on his face was terrifying. It was a mask of friendliness which hid sinister intentions that became more and more obvious with each passing week. He was far more forward than before and she found her excuses to stay away from him hindered him less and less. However Ann never hurried home after talking to him, she always felt like if she did it meant letting him control her life.

Besides if she ran away, there would be no one to watch out for her friend.

It was not her week for classroom duties, so after speaking to Kamoshida she hurried down to the library to do some homework. Volleyball practice would begin soon and much as Ann wanted to watch, Kamoshida refused to let other students into the gym during practice. Even she was not allowed to watch, despite her best friend being on the team. Their previous coach had no issue with students coming to the gym after school to watch practice. When Kamoshida took over, it was as though he treated the gym like some kind of closed off sanctuary.

She paid no mind to it at first because different teachers did different things. However, in hindsight, Ann should have seen this as the first red flag. She started to notice the bruises after a few weeks. Then the rumors about the track teams disbandment and Sakamoto’s involvement began floating around. Then one of the boys on the male volleyball team left with a black eye and one of the girls was crying, her arm bruised like someone had grabbed her too tightly and it got worse from there.

Ann worked on as much of her homework she could, finishing her English first before moving onto her other subjects. She checked her phone to see a text from her agency, telling her they rescheduled her photo shoot tomorrow for next week. The news made her feel a little relief, it meant she could stay after the volleyball rally and spend time with her best friend.

Her phone buzzed to let her know it was almost the end of volleyball practice. Ann packed her books into her bag and left the library. She climbed the stairs to the ground floor and stepped out into the courtyard just in time to see her friend leaving the gym, her head hanging, her shoulders slouched, her school bag looking heavier than normal.

Ann noticed right away her friend's wrist covered in a fresh pair of bandages. Just one simple sight told her far more than words.

“Hey, Shiho!” She shouted, a grin on her face as Shiho looked up, her black ponytail falling from her shoulder to her back. She looked startled, then smiled when she saw her.
“Ann!”

The two took a seat at one of the benches in the courtyard. Ann had offered Shiho some water, but she shook her head, explaining her stomach still had not settled from the rigorous workout. She was smiling, however, Ann noticed the smile looked not only exhausted but forced. The light in Shiho’s eyes had dulled, and her face had a paleness to it that left Ann concerned.

“So, now I’ll be able to stay after the volleyball rally.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, hopefully it’ll make the day go by a bit faster. And it’ll give us a chance to catch up.” She said, trying to sound cheerful so Shiho would smile. However the smile faded just as it came to her, and she let out a sigh. “Are you okay?”

It was a stupid question and Ann knew it. She already knew the answer even as her friend lied.

“I’m fine. Just, I haven’t been sleeping well lately.” She said, “When I close my eyes, my thoughts start racing. Nationals are coming up soon, and with how practice is going I keep wondering if I’m good enough to be on the starting lineup.”

"Has Kamoshida said anything?"

"No. Not really."

“Then don’t worry about it!” Ann told her. “Kamoshida-sensei wouldn’t put you on the starting line if he didn't think you were perfect for it. You work harder than anyone else and he knows it.”

Saying those words made her feel like she was twisting a knife in her own chest. Ann could feel her own hands shaking as her anger welled up and she gripped the bench tighter to steady them. Shiho had not noticed, her eyes cast to the ground as she nodded. “Yeah. Volleyball’s all I have, after all.” She then winced as she moved her wrist.

“You okay? That doesn’t look good.” Shiho's wrist looked swollen and Ann remembered the other day Shiho had a small bruise on her knee. Today she was wearing a brace she only worse when she needed to.

“It’s fine, just hit the ball at the wrong angle today.” She said. Ann stayed silent. Even though her friend's answer was possible - and had happened before - she could tell just by how Shiho answered her that her friend was lying. She almost called her out on it but kept her mouth shut. There was a silent agreement between everyone not to talk about what happened at volleyball practice.

Ann and Shiho looked up as a teenager with short blue hair came over. Ann recognized him as her classmate Yuuki Mishima and just like Shiho, he looked exhausted “Uh, Suzui-san?” He asked, “Sorry to bother you, but Kamoshida-sensei told me to get you.”

Ann saw the look of fright on her Shiho’s face before her best friend had a chance to mask it, but her voice gave it away. “W-what does he want?” She asked.

“He didn’t say,” Yuuki told her and Shiho looked back down at her swollen wrist. Her eyes were heavy and it looked like what little strength she had was being sapped out of her. Ann took a deep breath and let it out as she put a hand on her friend’s shoulder getting her to look up at her.

“It’ll be alright.” She said, “It’s probably just a meeting about the starting lineup or something.”
“Yeah. You’re probably right.” Shiho said and got to her feet. Ann stood up too. “I should go see what he wants.”

“Good luck!” Ann said, still trying to sound cheerful despite the atmosphere becoming heavy. She watched as Shiho gave her a small nod and left with Yuuki to see Kamoshida. It was when they were out of sight her smile faded and she wrapped her arms around herself.

If she gave in to Kamoshida’s advances, would he leave Shiho alone again? Or would things get worse? All he wanted was a date. Just to take her out to dinner. But what about after? She knew he wanted far more than just a simple date.

Ann shook her head. Her stomach was starting to feel sour and herself sick. She needed to go home. She needed to get away from the school for a couple of hours.

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4/13/2016 (Wednesday)
Early Morning

Akira yawned as he walked the street to school. Staying up later to finish the chapter in his e-book had been a mistake, but by some miracle, he managed to not miss his train and was not late for school. He even had a little extra time to stop and get himself breakfast. Sojiro had the cafe open by the time he left which meant no morning curry for him.

Unfortunately, the sausage and egg sandwich he got was not nearly as appetizing. He promised himself he would stomach it and get a decent lunch for a change. Maybe Ryuji and he could get lunch together and talk on the roof. The idea made him smile, even if his instincts were telling him to be wary of the teenager. He still looked like he could be trouble.

The thought left his mind when he heard a noise and stopped. He frowned and looked behind him, then into the alleyway. Nothing. He shrugged and was about to continue on when he heard it again. It was a small cry, but not a person. It sounded more like a small animal. He took a cautious step into the alley, then looked down at a turned over trash can when he heard it a third time.

A small and messy black ball of fluff with white paws and bright blue eyes crawled out of the can. It was a small cat, too big to be a kitten, but it was thin and dirty. Akira watched as it began licking something off a plastic bag, a sad look on its face. Akira watched it then looked down at his breakfast. He looked back at the cat when it let out a small whine and dipped its head. The animal looked hungry and miserable.

Akira approached the trash can and the cat looked up at him before bolting behind it. “Easy, I’m not going to hurt you.” He said.

He opened his sandwich and pulled the sausage off it, setting it on the ground. He watched as the cat looked at it, before approaching with caution and sniffing the food. It then started to nibble on it, making a noise like a purr. Akira let a small smile cross his face, then stood up. “Alright, enjoy.” He said then turned and left. The cat looked up and watched him, before going back to its new meal.

Akira finished his walk to school and gave the building a bitter look before stepping inside. Something told him giving a stray cat some food would be the only good thing to happen to him. At least with the volleyball rally going on, he could try and make himself invisible for most of the day. From what his school book told him, the volleyball rally would be going on in the morning.
After there would be pizza for lunch and it was free time until the end of the school day. Students were free to leave the building if they wanted to after lunch. Akira planned to do just that, the less time he needed to spend in Shujin the better.

However, despite his growing contempt, he did not feel as miserable today as he did the day before. His outing with Ryuji was still fresh in his mind and having a good day for the first time in months was helping his mood. Akira grabbed his gym clothes and changed in the bathroom, then followed his classmates to the gymnasium. When he got inside he could tell just from some of the eyes on him he was not welcome, so instead of taking a seat on the bleachers with his class, he took a seat on the floor.

He was not the only one not sitting with their class. Ryuji was on the opposite side a the gym, a serious look on his face that lightened for just a brief second when he saw Akira. He smiled and held a hand up which Akira returned before following his gaze. There was another student not sitting with their class. Takamaki was sitting in a chair near the volleyball players. Akira watched as she smiled when Kamoshida approached her to tell her something and then saw that smile drop when he left. The look on her face was similar to when she first went with him in his car two days ago.

She looked scared.

Kamoshida approached the center of the gymnasium, a microphone in hand, and welcomed everyone to the volleyball rally. Akira listened as he went through a by the numbers speech about how hard both teams were working before announcing the first event would be a few matches between the boy's team and girl's team. The crowd murmured, some saying something about how the matchup sounded unfair, as the two teams took their places.

Akira found himself watching the starter on the girl's team, noticing she did not seem to have a lot of energy when sitting down but was a ball of fire on the field. The bruise on her eye looked painful but did not seem to slow her down. A well-aimed spike had the crowd cheering. Akira noticed when the whistle blew Takamaki stood up and began cheering. The starter looked at her and smiled, pumping her fist up.

Akira had a pretty good idea now why Takamaki was sitting on the other side of the gym. The two had to have been close friends. He continued to watch the match, the girl's team winning by a landslide, then Kamoshida announcing the next round. The boy's team would play against Kamoshida and a mixture of teachers and some of his old trainees. Akira frowned. Reading had not been the only reason he stayed up late. He also looked up Kamoshida’s profile online so he could get a better idea of who he was. The man was a former Olympian turned school coach. He had been arrested once for driving while intoxicated, but beyond that his record was clean. At least it appeared to be on the surface.

A student blew the whistle and the resulting game was a disaster. Akira winced when he saw Kamoshida spike the volleyball into one kid's face and the teenager collapse onto the floor. “Are you okay?” He heard Kamoshida ask and Akira got a good look at the kid's face. He knew him from his homeroom class. It was Yuuki Mishima. “Someone take him to the nurse's office!”

Akira found himself frowning as again he felt something off about Kamoshida. Maybe it was because he was new or Ryuji had told him stuff the other night, but the man's concern sounded fake. He stood up and walked over. “I'll take him.”

Everyone was staring at him, and the look on Mishima’s face told him the boy was scared by his presence. Kamoshida however, was grinning.
“Thank you.” He said helping the teenager to his feet and leaving him in Akira’s hands. Akira helped him off the gym floor overhearing Kamoshida tell one of the boys on the bench to get in the game and for the match to resume.

The two left the gym and went to the nurse's office, where the women checked Mishima’s head and then gave him an ice pack. It was suggested he stay in her care until school let out. “You’re free to go back to the rally Kurusu.” She said in a tone that was a little softer than most of the school body, but not by much.

“I wanna make sure he’s okay,” Akira said. The nurse shrugged then after doing some paperwork for a few minutes, excused herself to the bathrooms. Akira turned his attention to Mishima. The boy was staring at him like a deer caught in headlights. “You okay?”

“Y-yeah. I’m fine.” He said, “You don’t have to stay here. Actually, it might be a bad idea if you...” He trailed off and Akira cast his gaze downward, trying not to look too bothered by what Mishima was implying. Then he heard the boy snuffle. “I messed up again…”

Akira looked at Mishima, looked at all the bruises on his face, what Ryuji told him last night came back to him and found himself wondering if he misunderstood why Mishima did not want him near him.

“What happened out there. That wasn’t an accident was it.” Akira said.

“What?” Mishima looked like he was going to jump out of his skin, “What are you- of course it was, what else could it-” He stopped, unsure what to say as Akira held his gaze. Then Mishima’s face scrunched up and he looked down at the floor.

“Mishima, I won’t say you said anything, but I have to ask. Is this normal?” He asked then when the teenager did not answer he was a bit more forward. “Is Kamoshida abusing the boy’s volleyball team?”

He saw Mishima’s shoulders tense up, and that was all the confirmation Akira needed.

____________________________________

“Come on man, I swear, I won’t tell anyone you fessed up.”

The teenager Ryuji was trying to talk to had a large bandage over his eye. It looked like someone whacked him with a baseball bat, but Ryuji was positive it was either a fist or a volleyball. “Look I told you, Sakamoto, you’re delusional. This is normal for practice.”

“That’s not normal. Having a few scratches or maybe some redness on your arms or knees is one thing, you look like someone beat the crap out of you.”

“Sakamoto enough!” The teenager said and while he sounded angry it was obvious from how his eyes darted around he was scared a certain coach might come around the corner. “I know what you’re trying to do. You just wanna get Kamoshida in trouble for what happened to the track team.”

“What? That’s not-”

“Well I’m telling you, it’s not gonna work. Everyone knows whose fault that really is, right ‘Track Traitor?’”
Ryuji winced at the name, his chest tightening and his vision turned red. His fist clenched up but he kept his composure best he could before turning and his heel and walking away. For a split second he felt angry at the teenager for bringing up the track team, but it he needed to keep himself in check. It was not worth getting in more trouble over. Ryuji was not about to let any of those stories keep him from doing what he felt was right. He climbed the stairs to the second floor and hoped someone would talk to him there.

To his frustration, no one wanted to say anything. He wanted to feel surprised, but in truth, he was not. Even assuring them no one would know they came forward, he was either told to buzz off or they panicked and claimed they needed to be somewhere else. One even said the reason they were covered in bruises was because they tripped at the station and got hit in the face with the train. Ryuji found himself staring for a moment, but did not have the heart to point out if that happened, they would be in the hospital. Not at school.

Ryuji ran a hand through his hair and let his shoulders drop. He needed a break. There were two other people on his list; Yuuki Mishima, and Shiho Suzui. He had a good idea Yuuki was still at the nurse. Akira was probably still with him, he had not seen the guy since the two left the gym. He decided he would save Mishima for last and went to look for Shiho.

He was out in the courtyard when he heard two familiar voices. “You did great out there Shiho.”

“I don’t know. My form was off, and the boy's team hits a lot harder than the girls.”

Ryuji walked over and stopped for a second, slinking behind the thin wall that cut him off from the benches, vending machines, and of course the two girls.

“Please, you had them by their balls the entire time. That scoreboard doesn’t lie after all.” Ann said. “How you feeling? Got a bit of a confidence booster out of that right?”

Shiho laughed, actually laughed a real laugh and for a few minutes, everything seemed normal. “I guess.” She said then stopped, “By the way Ann, can I ask you something?”

“Sure. What is it?”

“Are you okay?” She asked and Ann stopped, face frozen. “It’s just I heard that transfer student was in your class and while I’m sure most of what the others are saying about him is exaggerated...well he hasn’t tried to do anything to you, has he?”

Ann felt a wave of relief wash over her. If Shiho was asking she was okay because of the transfer student, it was safe to say she was not asking about Kamoshida. Good. She smiled and shook her head.

“No, he’s been fine. He comes to class on time, then leaves at the end of the day. Doesn't talk to anyone and only really speaks if a teacher calls on him,” She explained, “Granted it’s still early in the year, but right now the worst thing about him is he won’t stop tapping his damn pencil on his desk. That's gonna get annoying...”

“I see. Well, I guess that's mostly good.” Shiho said. Ann frowned.

"No, not really. It's really distracting and if he keeps doing it, my grades are gonna drop."

Shiho stared at her, then rolled her eyes. "Ann, I don't think your grades can get any worse than they are."

Ann felt her ears turn red from embarrassment, before breaking into a laugh. Shiho laughed too
then winced when Ann gave her a light hit on the arm. Ryuji watched the too for a few seconds
longer, then stepped out from his hiding place.

“Hey uh, Suzui-san, Takamaki-chan?”

His voice got their attention and the reaction was immediate. Shiho diverts her eyes, while Ann
stood up. “Sakamoto.” She said, a little surprised by his presence, “I haven’t seen you in awhile,
what’s up?”

“Not much. I have some things to ask Suzui-san.” He said. Shiho looked up at him.

“Me? What is it?” She asked and Ryuji looked around, then at Ann, then at Shiho again.

“Sorry, but could we talk alone?” He asked. Shiho’s did not give a verbal answer, but from how
she fidgeted in her seat, trying to make herself smaller, the answer was obvious to anyone who
knew her. Ann turned to Ryuji.

“Whatever you have to ask her, you can do it in front of me,” Ann said.

“In front of you?” Ryuji asked, “No offense, but the last thing I need is more trouble.”

“Trouble?” Ann asked, raising an eyebrow before shaking her head. “You know what, maybe we
should be the ones talking. I’ll be right back Shiho.”

Without waiting for her best friend to reply, Ann grabbed Ryuji’s arm and dragged him away from
the sitting area and to the inside of the main building. It was once inside he managed to pull his
arm away. “What the hell?”

“Allright, I’m only going to say this once, and I pray you listen for a change,” Ann said, crossing
her arms, a cold look on her face. “Stay away from Shiho, and stop trying to mess with
Kamoshida.”

“What are you-”

“Don’t play dumb. You know how fast words gets around here. You know how much trouble
Shiho could get into just by talking to you?” Ann asked, “I know you’re trying to bust Kamoshida,
but it's not gonna work, so just give it up.”

“Give it up? So you’re okay with your friend-”

“Of course not!” Ann said louder than she intended. Ryuji's eyes widened, not expecting her to
shout, but then she closed her eyes and tried to calm down. “Even if you could get someone to
come forward, who's going to listen? The principal? The student council president? If they cared
don't you think something would have been done by now?”

“Well, the police-”

“Will do what? Ask him a couple of questions and then walk away with a signed autograph.” Ann
said. “Just stop Ryuji, and don’t come near Shiho again. Got it?”

Ann walked back out to the courtyard and while Ryuji tried to find words to say to her, instead he
found himself unable to think of anything to say. He kicked the floor in front of him and then
walked down the hall to the nurse’s office, only to stop when he saw Kamoshida walking inside.
He took a few steps back and decided to go to the lockers. Maybe returning home for the day to
think would be a good idea.
It was when he was getting his shoes on he saw Akira walk into the lobby. “Hey, how’s Mishima?” Ryuji asked.

“He was fine until Kamoshida showed up.” Akira said, “Uh, I need to tell you something. I asked Mishima about the volleyball team.”

“Did he say anything?” Ryuji asked.

“Kinda. He just said ‘there’s no point in bringing it up because everyone already knows about it.’ Even his parents.”

"You've got to be kidding me," Ryuji said, feeling his blood boil. Without hesitation, he punched his locker then winced and let out a small cry as he felt pain run through his hand. "Dammit. That piece of shit can just do whatever he wants."

He turned around and leaned against the locker. He noticed Akira staring at him, his eyes half hidden by his hair and glasses. “Ann...I mean Takamaki-chan said similar. Said even if someone said anything the principal and student council president will just sweep it under the rug. If I wanna bust him I need more than just one confession.” He chuckled, "I'd probably have to rally half the school."

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Akira said, putting one hand in his pocket and the other on his school bag.

"Gonna need all the luck I can get." Ryuji said, "But thanks for telling me about Mishima. Kinda didn't think you would."

“Well, I guess my curiosity got the better of me,” Akira said. It was not a complete lie, "But no offense, I don't want to get caught up in this. I'm already on thin ice."

"No worries, I'll figure something out," Ryuji said. "Oh hey, off topic, but what's your number? Would be good to have it if we're gonna hang out."

Akira nodded and pulled his phone out. He and Ryuji exchanged numbers and then chat IDs. After a few seconds, his phone buzzed and Ryuji's icon showed up on his voice chat.

**Ryuji:**

*Testing 123. Can you see this?*

Akira glanced at him then typed his reply.

**Akira:**

*No.*

Ryuji laughed. "Dude, you're a damn liar." He said and put his phone away. Akira let a smirk cross his face.

"Well I'd better get going before the school remembers I exist."

"Alright, see ya later man," Ryuji said. Akira held up a hand in a half wave and walked out of the building.
The School is Broken

Chapter Summary

Akira meets Makoto, talks to Ann, and feeds a cat.

Chapter Notes

I have a very busy day tomorrow because of work so here's the next chapter a little early.

4/14/2016 (Thursday)

Shujin Academy
After School

The day, to Akira's relief, went by with little incident. He heard people talking about him in the hallways again, but no one bothered him. The student body's whispers almost sounded like white noise in his ears. He heard some his classmates saying they saw him hanging out with Ryuji, probably when they went up on the roof to have lunch together, but other than that it was the same things being thrown around he heard all week.

He was a little surprised how fast he had become numb to it, but found himself wondering if that was for the best. If he did not care, it meant he could not get hurt. It meant someday his chest would stop feeling so tight when he entered the school and walked the hallways, and he would be able to leave his classroom to go to the cafeteria by himself instead of needing to be dragged out by his friend. His friend he still found himself hesitant to call his friend.

Akira stopped fidgeting with his pencil and turned from the window to find himself staring at the back of Takamaki's head. When he had walked into the classroom, he noticed she had looked paler than normal, and he had a sneaking suspicion it was not because she was trying a new brand of makeup. Something was wrong, and he found himself spending a decent portion of his day wondering what could be wrong. It could just be she was feeling under the weather, but she seemed more anxious than sick.

He remembered how nervous she looked when Kamoshida was talking to her the other day. If it had anything to do with him…

“Damn brat, I'll sue.”

...He would stay out of it. He did not need any trouble.

The final bell rang and Akira got up to leave, only to stop when Takamaki stepped in front of him. “Oh, sorry.” He said. She looked at him, and Akira noticed she looked exhausted. She then let her head drop and walked away. Akira watched her leave for a few seconds, then exited the classroom.
For once he did not feel like meandering at the Shibuya train station for an hour before going back to the cafe. Today he wanted to see if he could get some homework done in the library. The smell of coffee was so prominent in the cafe he was positive he was beginning to smell like it and he did not know how to feel about that fact.

He found the library on the third floor and opened the door. The moment he did, he realized he made a horrible mistake. Students were standing near the bookshelves or sitting at tables and everyone’s eyes were on him. Except for a girl sitting at one of the tables with a large stack of books in front of her. She glanced up for a second then went back to her studies.

“Isn’t that the second year criminal?”

“What the hell’s he doing here?”

Akira tried to ignore everyone as he approached the student supervising the library. “Excuse me.” He said getting her attention. She jumped when she saw him.

“Y-yes? What do you- I mean, what can I help you with?” She asked. Akira tried to ignore the hostility in her voice.

“Student handbook says I need a card to check stuff out of the library?” He asked. He doubted he would check anything out, but it did not hurt to have.

“Yes. It helps us keep track of who checks out what and if they have anything overdue. Most students rent extra textbooks from us.” She said, “Do you want a card?”

“Wouldn’t be asking if I didn’t.” Akira said. The teenager frowned, it was clear she did not want him anywhere near her.

“Very well but I’ll tell you right here, you're better off leaving after.” She said and pulled out a blank card that she swiped under the electronic reader. “Name and date of birth please.”

"Akira Kurusu, September 15th..."

The girl entered in the information. Once done and approved, she pushed his new library card over to him and he picked it up off the desk. He then sat at one of the free study booths and began working on his school work. At least he tried too, but the whispering made it difficult to concentrate, so he put his textbook back in his bag and pulled out a book he had grabbed from the attic. Sojiro never said anything about him not being allowed to take reading material out of the cafe, and from the state of the attic, Akira had a feeling he would not care one way or the other. He looked at the cover, it was the same book that caught his attention earlier in the week, and it, letting himself be absorbed in the text.

He stopped reading after an hour and folded the page to mark his progress, then closed the book. He felt a little better and noticed it had become quiet. He poked his head out of his study booth and saw most of the students were gone. If he had to guess they left to go to their clubs or part time jobs. Only a small handful were still studying, including the girl with the stack of books near her. Akira noticed the stack had shifted more to the left and she was scribbling notes at a brisk pace. Akira watched for a moment, amazed at how quick she worked, almost like she had elevated studying to an art form. He put his book in his bag and got up to leave the library.

“Hey! Hold it!” He jumped as soon as he heard the supervisor's voice and looked at her. “What do you think you’re doing? Get over here!”

Akira hesitated but decided it would be better to do as told and walked over to the desk. She held
“Hand it over.” She said. He looked at her confused. “Don’t play dumb, hand over the book in your bag.”

“Wha-?”

“A student told me you had taken a book from the shelf. Hand it over right now!”

“What are you-?” He started then paused. He reached into his school bag. The only book he had with him besides his text books was the book he brought with him from Leblanc. He pulled it out. “This?”

Without hesitating, the teenager swiped it. "Hey!" Akira shouted as she held it up, a frown on her face.

“I don’t know what kind of backwater town you’re from but here at Shujin we don’t tolerate theft!”

“What?” He stared at her, dumbfounded, and his ears caught the commotion.

"You see that?"

"He tried stealing school property."

"Wonder what else he's stolen."

“I didn’t-" He stammered, looking back at the students then back at her. "That book is mine! I brought it from home!"

“Oh so not only are you a thief and a felon, but you’re a liar! I tell you, when the principal hears about this-”

“I didn’t-!”

“Enough!”

A loud bang got their attention and Akira turned around to see the girl who had been studying had stood up, both her hands on the table. She looked at them, a cold and annoyed look on her face. Akira found himself staring at her eyes. They were bright red.

It was hard to forget such a striking color. The girl had to be the same one who had told him and Sojiro where the principal’s office was on Sunday. He was sure of it. Akira took a deep breath and let it out as he watched her. The girl’s posture was perfect and her composure sent a small chill down his spine.

The librarian stuttered before finding her voice, “Niijima-senpai. I’m sorry, did I interrupt your studies?”

“Yes, but it seems we have a situation that needs to be settled.” She said approaching the desk. She looked at Akira, eyes moving up and down him before turning her attention to the girl, and folded her hands in front of her. “Now what appears to be the problem?”

The girl smiled. Akira had a feeling she had been planning to cause a scene. “Well Niijima- senpai, I was told by another student that he was stealing a book and as you can see, we were right. He was clearly trying to take this novel.”
“Is that so,” Nijima said. Akira let out a breath at her matter-of-fact statement. He had a feeling he knew where the conversation would go and was ready to add ‘book thief’ to the growing list of things the student body accused him of. “May I see it please?”

The girl gave the book to Nijima and smirked as she glanced at Akira, who at the moment wanted to just run out of the library and hide in the bathroom. Nijima looked at the cover, then opened it. She looked at the first few pages and then to him.

“You’re Akira Kurusu correct.” She said, “The student who transferred to class 2-D four days ago?”

Akira nodded. He had a feeling he was supposed to speak but his throat was tight and he was not sure his voice would work. She took his silence in stride.

“You’ve certainly been the talk of the student body, for better or for worse.” She said, “Tell me, where did you get this novel?”

“From home.” He managed to say. She tilted her head as though asking him to elaborate. He did, “My guardian had it lying around. It looked interesting so I borrowed it.”

“I see. Are you a fan of these kinds of books?” She asked. Akira stared at her, confused by the question. To him, it seemed like an odd one to ask.

“Yeah. Detective and mystery novels are my favorite.” He said and got a reaction he did not expect. Nijima's eyes widened for a brief second, as though his answer had broken through her composed mask. He saw a small smile form on her face.

“Really. I happen to like them a lot too.” She said. She turned her attention back to the library supervisor. “I’ve read the Gentleman Thief more times than I can count, so I can confidently say this is not the copy we hold in the library.”

The teenager's eyes widened. So did Akira’s. “S-senpai? What do you mean?”

“This iteration was translated in the 1970s. It was at the time the translator's first major work before later going on to adapt several successful screenplays. Because of this, while still enjoyable, there are several translation errors and liberties taken with the source material. Our school carries the retranslation released ten years ago, which is a more faithful adaption. You’re free to check the library database yourself, though I assure my information is correct.” Nijima explained. She then opened the book to its first page and held it out for them to see.

“Furthermore as you can see there’s no tag. You could argue he ripped it out, but that would cause damage to the book and as you can see the pages in this one are in good condition.” She snapped the book shut, “Therefore it can be concluded this book does, in fact, belong to Kurusu-san.”

“But-” The girl stammered, then looked at him and back at Nijima, “T-that’s-he still could have stolen it, just not from here. Maybe a bookstore or-”

Akira felt his frustration rise and he clenched his bag harder to keep himself from losing his already failing composure. Nijima kept a straight face, even as her frown deepened.

“And do you have any proof of this?” Nijima asked.

“U-um…well not really but...”

“You’re making a serious accusation regarding one of our students,” Nijima said.
“Well, it’s possible he could have! I mean Niijima-senpai, you’ve heard the rumors, you know what kind of person he is.”

“Yes, I am aware of his record. The principal showed it to me personally.” Niijima explained. Akira felt tense as he let that information process. How his record leaked suddenly made more sense if the principal had been willing to show it off to a random student. “Tell me, was your reason for assuming theft because of his student record?”

The girl did not answer and that was all Niijima needed for her conclusion. “I see. Now don’t get me wrong, I understand concerns. However as student council president, it is my duty to make sure this school is a safe place for all students. That includes Kurusu-san here and I won’t take false accusations like this lightly.”

Akira let the phrase ‘student council president’ sink in and kept his head down, just letting the scene in front of him play out. He got a strange satisfaction at seeing the teenage girl shrinking under Niijima's statements, but at the same time felt angry. If she was supposed to keep the students safe, why was he having such a hard time? Why did his record leak? He kept quiet as Niijima finished her argument. “I’ll let you off with a warning, but should you try pulling a stunt like this again, I will have your status as library supervisor revoked by the principal.”

“But-” The girl started, but seeing the glare on Niijima’s face she sighed, “Yes, senpai, I understand.”

“Good. Now, Kurusu, you were leaving for the day correct?” She asked turning her attention to him. He gave her a small nod. “Then I’ll accompany you to the lobby.”

“Okay.” He said. He took his book back when she gave it to him and followed her out. He got one last glimpse at the supervisor's frustrated face before closing the door behind him. He walked with Niijima in silence until they reached the lobby, his thoughts elsewhere until she spoke again.

“Well, here we are.” She said, “I’m afraid I’ll need to part with you here, I have other things I need to attend to before I leave for the day.”

“You didn’t need to walk me downstairs,” Akira said.

“Considering the rumors I’ve been hearing and what just happened I thought it might be necessary.” She said. Then after a few seconds spoke again, “I’m sorry.”

He looked at her, not expecting those words, then down at the floor. “For what?”

“For what has been going on in the school. The rumors and your treatment.”’ Niijima explained. Akira kept looking at the floor. “Because of my position as student council president the principal informed me of your transfer and record. I was supposed to be the only person outside of the school faculty to see your history, but obviously, that’s no longer the case. I’ve been attempting to find out who leaked your records but-”

“Don’t bother.” Akira said, his voice harsher than intended, “It happened and nothing’s going to change the fact that it did. Finding the person responsible isn’t going to make everyone stop talking about me.”

“I know, but whoever did so was out of line and deserves to be held accountable for their actions.” Niijima said, “You might have a record, but you deserve to be treated with the same decency as anyone else here. It’s a necessity for having a proper rehabilitation.”

Akira did not say anything at first. He was not sure if he should be grateful she considered him
worth defending or upset because from her word choice it was obvious just like everyone else in the school she considered him a criminal. Just a criminal worth pitying instead of hating.

"You really think that?"

"So I've read. And your record gives me no reason to think otherwise."

Akira said nothing but moved his head a bit as he considered his thoughts and her words. "You’ve seen my entire record."

"Yes. It’s very respectable. Outside of your arrest and expulsion of course."

So she had not just seen the note about his criminal record, but also about his club activities at his last school and his grade average. He wanted to feel relieved, but now he was wondering if she would have stood up for him if he had not had a decent grade average or been involved in school activities. Would she have done anything if his record looked worse? His growing cynicism made him doubt it and in turn, he just felt angry.

“I’m glad you think so.” He managed to bite his tongue and say the nicest thing he could think of. His mouth felt dry. “I think I should head home for the day.”

“Of course.” Nijima started then Akira noticed her change in demeanor, “Just...one more thing…”

Akira noticed her eyes divert downward and he realized she was staring at his book. He looked at it then held it up for her. “You want this?”

“Well, what I said in the library is true, but I’ve never read that iteration before,” Nijima said. Akira noticed her face turn a slight shade of red, similar in color to her eyes. “Um, could I borrow it please?”

Akira held it out for her. “Don’t lose it.”

“I promise I won’t,” Nijima took the book from him and Akira saw a smile cross her face. A genuine smile. “I’ll have it back to you in two weeks time.”

“I’ll hold you to it.”

“Oh and one more thing. For real this time. Should you need anything, the student council room is open to all students. If you don’t feel comfortable talking to the other members don’t hesitate to ask for me; Makoto Nijima.”

Akira nodded. “Thank you,”

"Well, if you'll excuse me...” With the conversation over Makoto walked passed him and back of the stairs. If Akira had to guess one of those things was retrieving her giant stacks of books from the library. He got his things from his locker before walking outside, feeling a lot of the stress he felt in school leave him as he walked down the steps. He walked the street, a hand in his pocket and stopped at the alley he had been in more times than he could count the last few days.

He pulled his bag off his shoulder and knelt down, unzipped it, and pulled out a small can of cat food he bought on his way to school. He pulled the top off and placed it near the garbage can. Then he waited.

“Yo, there you are.” Akira looked up when he saw Ryuji walking over to him. “Geeze for someone everyone won’t stop talking about, you’re hard to track down. Whatcha doing?”
Akira put a finger on his lips, telling Ryuji to stop talking and looked back at the garbage can. After a few seconds he got what he hoped for, a small meowing noise came from it, making his friend jump a bit, and out popped the same black cat with white paws from the other day. The cat looked at Akira, then Ryuji, and was about to hide back inside when it saw the food in front of him.

“Go on,” Akira told it. The cat sniffed the can before testing the food. It let out another meow as it decided it liked the moist chicken like mix and began eating it. “There we go.”

“Dude, you do realize if you keep feeding him he might follow you home, right?” Ryuji asked kneeling down next to him. He then frowned, noticing something he had not seen before. “Is that a collar?”

“Yeah, saw it on him yesterday.” Akira said, “Was thinking of trying to get him to trust me so I can get a look at it.”

“Doesn’t look like he has any tags from here.” Ryuji said, “Must have been abandoned.”

“Is there a shelter nearby?”

“None that aren’t overcrowded and good with their animals,” Ryuji said. Akira sighed and reached for the cat. The small animal's reaction was immediate, he scurried back into the trash can. Ryuji chuckled as he saw the pitiful look on Akira’s face and gave him a light smack on the shoulder, “You know, you being a cat person doesn’t surprise me at all. You got that kind of face. Maybe you should take him in when he likes you more.”

“Yeah that’s not going to happen,” Akira said. He had wanted a pet since he was a kid, but living in the attic of a restaurant was not going to make it easier for him to get one. He waited as the cat poked its head back out and then went back into hiding. “Well, I think he doesn't want me around anymore.”

“Gonna head home?”

“Yeah,” Akira said pushing himself back to his feet. “You going too?”

“Nah, gonna head to the arcade for a little while.” Ryuji said, “My investigation's going nowhere, thought maybe shooting some zombies might help me clear my head.”

“Sounds cathartic,” Akira said.

"Wanna join?"

"Tempting, but wanna finish my homework so I'm not up until midnight." He said.

"Or you could just not do it, get a good nights sleep and rush it on the train," Ryuji suggested. Akira rolled his eyes. "Alright. We'll do zombies Sunday then. At least walk with me to the station."

Akira smiled and listened as Ryuji talked about various things while they walked to the station. Once in Shibuya, they said their goodbyes and split up.

Ann watched Shiho’s face, unsure if it was a good idea to bring up the fact her friend looked like she had not slept, or ask about the bruise on her eye. She kept a hand free in case she needed a shoulder to lean on, but her other was bunching at her skirt. She had a bad feeling she knew where
“So, how was practice?” She asked. Shiho looked at her.

“It was fine. We did a lot of drills, Kamoshida's running us ragged.”

“Looks like it.”

“He’s been a lot harder on the boys team than the girls though.” Shiho said, “I guess he thinks we’ll do okay at the tournament.”

“Well you are the team's starter,” Ann said, trying to sound confident. In truth she was worried. Her eyes fell back on the bruise. “You okay though? That bruise looks like it hurts.”

“It’s nothing. Just lost my focus for a moment.” Shiho said, a little too fast. Ann wanted to say something but stopped when she felt her phone vibrating in her pocket. “Shouldn’t you get that?”

“It’s probably just my part time job.” Ann lied. Her modeling agency texted her information and never called her during designated school hours. “I’ll give them a call later, it’s probably just to schedule another shoot.”

“You just had one though didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but the summer issues are going to print soon so they need more models for the swimwear.” Ann explained, “I think I’ve had more shoots this month than normal. I might actually be able to pay the rent on my own for once.”

“Oh no,” Shiho said, then grinned, “That won’t do, you need to fix that and splurge on some new clothes!”

“Hey, I just bought new stuff last week!” Ann said faking offense before laughing. Her laughter was cut short when she saw even though Shiho was smiling she had not joined her. Normally the two laughed about stuff together. “Hey how about this? How about I do the shocking thing of saving the money...so after the tournament, I can treat you!”

“Huh?”

“You need a new summer wardrobe and obviously I’ve got mine sorted out way in advance.” Ann told her, “Or if you want we can skip the wardrobe and go somewhere like Destiny Land. I hear they reopened that roller coaster and finished renovating the arcade.”

Ann watched Shiho’s face, seeing her smile drop. Something was wrong, “Shiho, you know you can tell me anything right?”

“I know.” She said, trying to smile and then stood up from the bench. “I should get going. I have homework to finish up.”

“Okay, I’ll see you later.”

Shiho gave her friend one last smile and then walked away. It was again not the smile Ann had grown to love as she and Shiho became close. It was a forced one that was all wrong. Ann winced as she felt her nails dig into her palm, even through the fabric of her skirt. Her phone buzzed again, and again she ignored it, getting up and walking out of the courtyard.

She passed some boys and moved faster when she overheard one of them mention ‘Kamoshida’s
bitch.’ She left the school, continuing to pass her classmates and fellow students, and while she was tempted to see why Sakamoto and Kurusu were hanging out near the alley she instead kept walking, wanting to get as far away from the school as she could. She got on the train just as it was about to leave and got off in Shibuya.

She stopped inside one of the buildings in the square and breathed a sigh of relief, then jumped when she felt her phone vibrate again. Three times in barely a half hour, if she had her suspicions before she was positive now. She took out her phone and froze when she saw his number. She held her phone out, trying to steady her hands before answering the call and putting the phone up to her ear.

“Hello?”

“Oh so now you’re going to answer my calls.” Ann tried to keep her composure as she recognized the voice on the other end.

“What do you want?”

“Now now that’s not how we agreed you would talk to me.” She heard him say, “You still at school?”

“No. I left after talking with Shiho.” Ann said, “I couldn’t help but notice she had a very nasty bruise on her eye.”

“Oh yeah, that. My fault. Thought she was paying attention when I spiked the ball at her. No biggy.” He said. He sounded so nonchalant Ann felt like she was going to be sick. “Anyway, I was going to ask if you could come to the PE faculty office, but if you’re already at the train station, you should probably take a detour to my place instead.”

“This again? I just told you the other day, I don’t feel comfortable with that.”

A long silence and Ann waited. Then he spoke.

“I see. Well, that’s a shame. Suzui was doing so well too, but I guess we’re going to need a new starter.”

“What?!” Ann shouted, “You can’t! This isn’t what you promised. Just a few dates and nothing more.”

“Yeah, considering the stress we’ve been under the last few days, I decided to...make a few amendments to our agreement.” Ann felt her stomach twist. “Anyway, let me know when you’ll be stopping by.”

There was a small ‘beep’ that told Ann he had ended the call and she dropped down to her knees. She knew exactly what Kamoshida was expecting and tears welled up in her eyes as she realized she had been played like a fool the entire time.

“Takamaki-san?” A voice made her look up and she almost screamed until the glare from Kurusu’s glasses vanished when he moved a little closer. He was staring at her, confused, and concerned. “Are you okay?”

She got back to her feet and wiped her eyes. “How much did you hear?”

“Yelling, then I saw you.” He said. Ann watched his face then looked around to see there were some people were staring at them. He looked uncomfortable, but kept his focus on her, “Do you
want to talk about it?"

Ann watched him to see if he would try anything. He shifted his weight from one leg to the next, hands kept in his pockets, his school bag slung over his shoulder. Ann knew what she wanted to do, she wanted to say no, and to tell him to mind his own business. She also wanted to say yes, because he seemed genuinely worried about her.

She remembered seeing him with Sakamoto. Sakamoto was not the smartest person in school but had one thing many people didn't, a good judge of character.

"Not here." She said, "Follow me."

The cafe was in a small out of the way location. Takamaki had told Akira it was her favorite place to go when she needed to breathe and get her thoughts together. She ordered a decaf coffee and he got himself a house blend. They sat by the windows, away from everyone else. Neither had said anything since they left the train station.

"You sure about paying?" Takamaki asked, playing with her hair. Akira nodded, and she fell silent again. After a few seconds, a worker approached and gave them their drinks. Takamaki thanked the woman as did Akira, but then the two fell silent. After a little bit, Takamaki spoke again, "So, how much did you hear?"

Akira hesitated for a second, wanting to answer the same thing he did when she asked him the first time. However he knew he needed to be honest. "Something about an agreement and a few dates. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop."

Takamaki took a sip of her coffee. "You can probably guess who I was talking to. In fact I wouldn't be surprised if you already knew." She said, "I saw you talking to Sakamoto-kun, so I'm going to assume he told you about the rumors. Well unlike most of the crap this school spreads, the stuff about Kamoshida is true."

"So he is abusing the volleyball teams."

"And there's nothing we can do about it. Or at least that's what I thought. I have a friend named Shiho, she's the starter for the girl's volleyball team."

"The girl who dominated the boys at the rally."

Ann let a small smile cross her face. "Dominated is putting it mildly." She said. The smile dropped as she continued, "When I first saw the bruises on Shiho’s arm I went to Kamoshida to talk about it. There we struck a deal, I’d go on a few dates with him and in exchange, he wouldn’t lay a hand on Shiho. Seemed like a good idea at the time, Kamoshida gets the ‘exotic, young, half-white girlfriend’ he’s always wanted and I get to see my best friend smile again. It tanked my rep, but it wasn’t that good to begin with because of my appearance so that wasn’t a big deal."

Her hand twitched on the table. Akira stayed silent and nodded for Takamaki to continue, "I should have known it was too good to be true. Once the new year began Kamoshida started pushing. Just little things at first, wanting my phone number so he could call or text when he wanted to go out, giving me rides to school. Now he’s...I’m sure you’ve heard." Her tone became bitter and Akira saw her hand ball up into a fist. "Everyone thinks's we're getting it on and now he's got that idea in his head."

"He wants me to go to his place tonight. You know what that means, right?" Takamaki asked. It was not a question Akira needed to answer, "If I don’t go, he’s going to take Shiho off the team,
he’s already started going after her again. I want to protect her, but I can’t...I can’t do that.” She started crying. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Don’t go,” Akira said before he could stop himself. He knew he should not say anything, he should just stay quiet and listen, but hearing her...

“Someone, please help!”

Takamaki looked at him, fresh tears streaming down her face and wiped her eyes. “Shiho loved volleyball more than anything, but nowadays when I see her go to practice, I see this terrified look in her eye. I remember she told me, before Kamoshida became her coach, how much she wanted to get a scholarship for college or to compete in the Olympics.” She said, “If I don’t go see Kamoshida she loses that.”

"There's no guarantee he'll keep his word," Akira said. Takamaki reached up again to wipe her eyes with her sleeve. Before she could Akira passed her a napkin.

"Thank you." She said wiping her eyes. After taking a few seconds to calm down looked at him. "You're right. For all I know he'll just keep making demands and upping the stakes. I can't give into him." She thought her words over and nodded. "I won't go. Sex was never part of our arrangement and he can't just do whatever he wants. If he wants it that bad he can play with his hands.” Then hearing her own words, she laughed, “oh man, just saying that feels like a weight fell off my shoulder.”

Akira let a small smile cross her face as he saw her grin. She then leaned over and looked at him.

“I have to admit I didn’t expect you to be the person I’d open up to about this. Maybe because you’re a new face it helped?”

“Yeah, I’m not corrupted by Shujin’s craziness yet.” He said and to his surprise, he got a laugh out of her.

“Probably.” She said leaning back, “Can I ask you something? I know most of the stuff they’re saying about you is crap, but…” She paused and then shook her head, “No, nevermind, you’re hanging out with Sakamoto. Everyone thinks he’s trouble, but I’ve known him since middle school. He’s an idiot, but he has a good heart. He wouldn't be hanging around you if you weren't a good person too.” She paused again then said, “I hope Shiho will be okay.”

“You care about her a lot don’t you,” Akira said. She nodded.

“She’s my best friend.” Takamaki explained, “...I wouldn’t mind being more than a friend, but I don't think that'll happen anytime soon.” She took a breath then lifted her cup up to her lips and finished her coffee before getting standing up, “I think I should go home. Thanks again, uh, it’s Akira, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I never properly introduced myself to you, sorry.” She said, “I’m Ann. Thanks for hearing me out.”

“Get home safe Ann.” He told her and she smiled and nodded to him. Akira watched her leave and let out a sigh. His hands had stopped shaking enough that he could pick up his coffee and drink it. He thought about everything he learned the past few days and came to one conclusion.

Shujin was a broken mess.
Shiho stared at the door of the PE Faculty office, her knees shaking. Mishima had told her Kamoshida wanted to speak to her about something, but what she had no idea. She had done fine in practice outside of the one time she spaced out and got hit in the face with the volleyball. Maybe he wanted to talk about that? It was the only thing she could think of. She swallowed the spit forming in her mouth and knocked on the door.

“It’s open.” She heard Kamoshida’s voice and opened the door. She stepped in.

“You wanted to see me Kamoshida-sensei?” She asked. Kamoshida looked up at her and smiled.

“Oh, I thought you went home already.” He said, “But this is perfect. Come in. Lock the door behind you, I don’t want any disturbances.”

Shiho stared at him, but then nodded. She closed the door and flipped the lock.

Chapter End Notes

Since Akira doesn't have a full official profile, I made his birthday the same day as Persona 5's Japanese release date. I thought it'd be appropriate.
They Fell Down

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

4/15/2016 (Friday)
Shijin Academy
Morning

“So what I’m thinking for Sunday is we circle around main street and then head down to the arcade or the mall. What do you think?”

Akira and Ryuji were walking to school together. They had run into each other while Akira was waiting for the next train and since then the bleached blonde had been talking about what they were going to do on Sunday. Ryuji was still adamant about showing him all the places he knew they could hang out. “Sounds good to me, just don’t expect me to remember where anything is. I can barely get to the grocery store in Yongen without getting lost.”

“Ah, you’ll be fine. You got me!” Ryuji said giving Akira a light hit on the shoulder that caused the teenager to stumble forward and almost lose his balance. “Whoops, sorry.”

Akira gave him a small smile before stopping in front of the alley near the school. He put his bag down and pulled out another small can of cat food. He opened it and put it down near the can he left the previous day. Ryuji checked the time on his phone.

“Come on man, we gotta pick up the pace or we’ll be late.”

“Alright alright,” Akira said. He wanted to stay and wait for the cat but knew he could not afford to be late for school. He got to his feet and followed Ryuji to the building. Kamoshida was, again, greeting students, and Akira saw Ryuji's grin turn into a scowl. He could not help but notice Kamoshida's smile seemed wider than normal too. To Akira it just made it look even faker, like a cheap plastic mask with poorly drawn on lips.

"Well if it isn't Sakamoto and Kurusu." He said, raising an eyebrow. "Quite a combination."

Ryuji grumbled and walked passed. Akira forced himself to smile and give a small bow. "Good morning Kamoshida-sensei."

He guessed from the look on Kamoshida's face it was not a response he expected from Akira. A wry smile formed, "Well at least one of you has some manners. Have a good day, stay out of trouble."

Akira walked passed him and followed Ryuji up the stairs. He could feel Kamoshida's gaze on him until he entered the building. At the lockers he noticed Ryuji was particularly aggressive with his door, slamming it shut. It reopened slowly.

"Easy, you'll break your door."

"I know! But I'd rather take a swing at this than the other guy."

Akira winced. He had a feeling he knew Ryuji was referring to Kamoshida. That was one thing he noticed in the few short days he had known the teenager. Ryuji was nice, open, and enthusiastic, but short tempered. It made him uneasy and his gut kept telling him he should start distancing
himself from the blonde. At the same time, Ryuji was the only person in the school that had treated
him with some manner of friendliness.

He had no idea what to do. He could not afford to get into any kind of trouble. Yet he also knew if
he stopped hanging out with his new friend he was going to close up again. The school was
difficult, hanging with Ryuji at lunch or for a few minutes before leaving for Leblanc made it
easier, almost bearable.

The two climbed the stairs to the second floor and Ryuji said he'd grab him from his classroom at
lunch. "Today you're gonna brave the cafeteria whether you like it or not."

"Alright." He muttered, then let a smile cross his face. "I'll see you at lunch."

"Later."

Ryuji dove into his classroom and Akira walked to the next door and stepped into his. He saw Ann
was already sitting at her desk, looking at a magazine. She looked up and gave him a friendly smile
which he returned before taking his seat behind her. Kawakami entered the classroom and had
Mishima begin the roll call. He looked up and raised his hand when his name was called and was
not surprised when his fellow classmates began whispering.

"I can't believe he's come to class all week."

"Thought he would stop showing up by now."

He turned his attention to the window, to try and ignore his classmates. The sky had been dark
when he left for school and the clouds were thick and gray. He would not be surprised if it began to
rain.

Classes began and Akira fidgeted with his pencil as Ushimaru wrote a few things on the chalk
board before slamming the chalk on his desk. The sound made some of them jump. Akira glanced
up at the teacher.

"Alright, put your textbooks away, we're gonna discuss something important." He said. Akira
closed his book and the classroom fell silent. "This year is the election season so you'll begin
seeing an increase in campaigns, especially with so many seats up for grabs. Now I'm assuming
you all about the separation of powers? Kurusu!" Akira's head snapped up. "What are the three
branches of our government?"

"Legislative, executive, and judiciary," Akira said not looking up from his pencil. It was not a hard
question.

"Correct, but look up when I'm talking to you and stop playing with that damn thing!" Ushimaru
ordered. Akira put his pencil down and looked up at Ushimaru. He could feel his attention span
fading by the second as his teacher continued his lecture.

"The National Diet is legislative, the Cabinet is executive, and the Supreme Court is judiciary. This
division of power provides checks and balances, which ensures no one branch becomes
unstoppable."

Akira was not sure how, but Ushimaru made social science even duller than his last teacher did.
However, he did not have the chance to space out and risk getting chalk chucked at his head. A
student stood up, getting half the classes attention.

"Hey? What's that?" He asked.
“Sit down Umeda, we’re in the middle of—”

Ushimaru was cut off when a girl stood up. “Oh god! She’s going to jump!”

Akira glanced up as the classroom erupted into chaos, students getting up from their seats to get a look out of the room, some hurrying out the back door. Mishima’s eyes were wide, “Suzui?”

Ann jumped to her feet hearing her friend’s name, “Shiho?!”

Ushimaru shouted for everyone to sit back down, but at that point, no one was listening. Ann rushed out of the classroom. Akira followed her. All the students in their class and the one nearby gathered at the window, their teacher’s warnings to sit down ignored.

Ann pushed herself passed everyone getting to the window. Her eyes were wide, her hands pressed against the glass as she gazed at the roof above them.

Shiho was standing at the edge of the roof, looking down at the ground below her. The murmurs of Ann's classmates became white noise as she felt her heart pound fast and hard in her chest. "Shiho..." The name escaped her lips before she could stop herself. She had to get out there. She needed to hurry to the third floor, to the roof.

But her legs were locked. She couldn't move. Just stare at her friend as her skirt and hair fluttered in the wind.

She saw Shiho take one step forward...and then drop.

"SHIHO!"

Time felt like it slowed down, then went into fast forward as Shiho plummeted to the ground. Ann rushed down the hall, her arm slamming into Akira’s chest knocking him back. He followed after her only stopping when Ryuji rushed out of the classroom.

“What the hell’s going on?” He asked.

"Ann's friend. She..." He couldn't say it, the words got stuck in his throat. He hurried down the stairs Ann had just taken. The two rushed to the lobby, it was packed with students who had heard the commotion. He pushed through the crowd just in time to see Ann hurry over to her friend.

Ann could feel herself shaking as she heard her friend's ragged breathing, saw her leg twisted in a way that should not have been possible for a normal person. "Shiho..." She looked up at the crowd. "Someone, call for help! Shiho, it's okay, hang in there."

Kawakami had stepped forward and Ann could hear her calling an ambulance on her phone and then ordering the nurse - who was pale from shock - to get the girl a blanket. Everyone else who had their phones out was either taking pictures or recording the incident. Ann felt her blood boil as she realized they were more interested in the fact someone jumped than actually making sure they survived.

She tried not to focus on them. Instead, she just focused on her friend and leaned down as she opened her eyes.

“Shiho... Why?”

“Ann...I’m sorry. I...can't take this anymore...” She let out a small whimper in pain, “Can you...come closer?”
Ann leaned in a little closer, close enough for Shiho to whisper something in her ear. She pulled back. “What? Kamoshida?” Shiho let out a small groan then collapsed back against the ground, losing consciousness. “No, Shiho wake up!”

Akira stood frozen, watching Ann break down in tears, barely hearing the teachers shouting for students to return to their classes or the sound of sirens approaching the school building. He did, however, see a student turn and run from the scene. Ryuji saw him too.

“Mishima,” Ryuji muttered. The two looked at each other. “Let’s go.”

Akira gave one last look to Ann and followed Ryuji back into the school.

The paramedic had requested one of the teachers come with them to the hospital. None of them were eager to go, many were hesitant. Not even Shiho's homeroom teacher volunteered to go into the ambulance. Kawakami told Ann to go. She would call Shiho's parents and tell them what happened.

"Don't worry about class, I get the feeling it'll be canceled." She said, "Her having someone with her is more important right now anyway."

"Thank you."

Ann climbed into the back of the ambulance and the door shut behind her. The paramedics placed a mask on Shiho’s face and the ambulance raced down the road. Once they arrived Shi was immediately brought into the ER. Ann tried to listen to what was going on, but the blinding white walls, the strong lights, and the medics listing off details to the doctor made her head spin.


“Who’s this?”

“A friend of hers from the school. The patient’s parents are on the way.”

Ann put a hand to her head and took a seat. The chair was hard and cold. The doctor took one look at her. “Don’t worry. We’ll do everything we can.”

Ann was silent. His words had a hollow sound like he was reciting a script rather than showing any genuine sympathy. She watched as he entered the room the paramedics brought Shiho into. The curtain was closed leaving her in the dark to wonder what could be happening behind the screen.

Ann took a seat. She squeezed her hands together, tears streaming down her face, her mind racing everywhere as it tried to organize her thoughts.

This was her fault. Her fault. Had she just gone to Kamoshida’s - she stopped herself as those thoughts ran through her mind, her eyes widening as realization smacked her across her face. She felt shock, then anger, her face turning red as she thought his name and saw the disgusting smirk on his arrogant face. She remembered what Shiho had whispered to her before losing consciousness.

“Kamoshida….he…”

It was because of Kamoshida. Kamoshida was the reason Shiho jumped off the roof. He hurt her
They found Mishima hiding in the boy's locker room. Ryuji got him into a corner, Akira right behind him. “Stop that hurts!” Was the first thing Mishima shouted. Ryuji loosened his grip on Mishima's wrist and the teenager backed up until he was pressed against the wall.


"I-I don't know what-" Mishima started and jumped when Ryuji slammed his fist into the lockers.

“She jumped and tried to kill herself! If you know something, spill it!”

“I-…” Mishima stammered. His entire body was shaking like he was afraid if he said the wrong thing Ryuji would snap and beat him up.

“Mishima.” Akira said, voice calmer, but it was obvious he was on edge, “Do you know anything?”

Mishima stared at him, then looked down at the floor. Ryuji shook his head and regaining his composure tried to keep his voice low. “If you know anything, tell us. I promise we won’t say you talked.” He said, “Why did Shiho jump? What’s going on?”

Mishima whimpered and backed into the wall, struggling to keep eye contact with either of them. “K-Kamoshida…” Mishima muttered as he started shaking again, then shouted. “Suzui-san was called out by Kamoshida!”

“Called out?” Ryuji asked, then he remembered what that meant, "Oh shit..."

“During practice, Kamoshida was worse than usual. He made us run more laps, was more violent with his spikes. Usually, if he’s in a bad mood he’ll call out whoever did the worst in practice, then take them to his office and hit them.” Mishima explained, “But yesterday, he called Suzui-san for no reason. She didn’t do anything wrong, didn’t make any mistakes, but a little after practice he told me to get her. I don’t know why, but he was really irritated that day. Whatever he did, must have been worse than usual…”

“Worse?” Ryuji repeated as Akira silently absorbed the information, his eyes widening as he reached the worst possible conclusion. “No, don’t tell me.”

Mishima said nothing and Ryuji’s face turned red in anger as he turned to the door of the locker room. “That son of a bitch!” He rushed out of the locker room.

"Ryuji!” Akira called out, but the teenager was already out the door. He looked at Mishima then hurried after Ryuji, just in time to see him climbing the steps to the second floor. Akira followed him, trying to keep up. Even with his limp Ryuji was a fast runner. He reached the office just in time to see Kamoshida turn around and Ryuji yell at him.


“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb with me!”
Ryuji kicked a nearby chair, sending it flying. Akira winced at the noise as well as the sound of Kamoshida slam his hands on his desk.

“That’s enough!” He said. He dropped his paperwork and stood up. He looked them over and smirked. “Well well, look who’s here. All three of my least favorite people.”

“What you did, wasn’t coaching,” Mishima said, finding his voice. “You made me call Suzui here. I can only imagine what you did to her.”

“What makes you so sure I did anything to her?” Kamoshida asked, “After all, Suzui was very stressed about the upcoming tournament. For all you know, she jumped because she thought she was not a good enough volleyball player.”

“Bullshit,” Akira muttered as he remembered what Ann told him yesterday.

"Shiho loved volleyball more than anything...She wanted to get a scholarship for college or compete in the Olympics.”

“Suzui was the best player on the girl's team, she wouldn’t try and kill herself because of a damn tournament,” Ryuji shouted.

“Oh really? How do you know?” Kamoshida asked, “After all Mishima’s the one telling you all this, he could be spewing crap because he’s not good enough to be a regular on the team.”

“Shut up!” Mishima shouted and for a second Kamoshida’s calm composure cracked, a mask of furry covering his face as he saw the three of them glare at him. Then in a moment, he recomposed himself.

“Getting a bit mouthy there Mishima. Maybe you’re next for a little coaching,” Kamoshida said. “Even if you what you say is true, that I’m responsible, do you have any proof? We just got word from the hospital, Suzui’s in a coma.”

Ryuji and Mishima's eyes widened. Kamoshida continued to speak. "She was lucky the grass softened the fall but even then her chances of recovery are slim. The poor girl. How would she make a statement?”

“No that can’t be,” Mishima muttered.

“You piece of shit,” Ryuji shouted. He raised his arm and for a split second Kamoshida’s mouth twitched into a smile. However before Ryuji’s could throw a bunch, Akira grabbed his arm. “Hey! Let go of me!”

“Don’t!” Akira said, keeping a tight grip on Ryuji's arm. “You’re just going to give him what he wants!”

“And he deserves it!” Ryuji cried out.

“Ryuji!”

Ryuji ripped his arm out of Akira’s grasp, letting out a frustrated growl as he turned his attention from the teenager to the teacher in front of them. However, he did not try and slug the man again. Kamoshida smirked and then laughed, a sick glow in his eyes.

“Wow. For a second I thought we would have another case of ‘self-defense.’” He said, “But this here, three teenagers with an agenda against their honest, hard-working teacher? One with a history
of violence, one with an actual record? No, this won't do.”

He took a seat, “Everyone present in this room will be expelled. I’m reporting all three of you at the next board meeting.”

Akira felt his heart leap in his chest as one word penetrated his brain and made everything stop. Expelled. He barely heard the others around him.

“You can’t make a decision like that!” Mishima said and Kamoshida turned around and looked at them.

“I don’t think you’re in a position to be saying what I can and can’t do Mishima.” Kamoshida said, “After all, who was the one who leaked his criminal records?”

Akira looked at Mishima. “You?”

“He...he…” Mishima started looking between him and Kamoshida. Then his head dropped, “I’m sorry. I had no choice.”

"Oh don't give him that crap. You wanna know what that choice was Kurusu?” Kamoshida asked. "Post your record online or be kicked off the volleyball team. That was it. He ruined your school life just because he wanted to play a sport he was already shit at." Kamoshida laughed and Akira froze, his brain struggling to process what was happening. He could not believe it, he did not want to believe it.

He screwed up. Not even a week into the school year, and already he was being threatened with expulsion. He felt lightheaded, the room tilting as a dizziness washed over him. He felt hot and somehow cold at the same time. Everything felt so far away, except Kamoshida's words which were ringing in his ears like a siren.

“It’s no use fighting it, you’re futures are mine to take. Now get out of my sight.”

“You can’t do this you piece of shit!” Ryuji’s shouting snapped Akira back to reality long enough for him to find his voice.

“Enough.” He said, his voice was low and hollow, but it got Ryuji’s attention and any protest he had fell flat on his lips when he saw Akira looked at white as a sheet. His friend's eyes had lost their color.

"Akira?"

“Let’s just go.”

Akira did not wait for Ryuji to argue or for anyone else in the room to say anything. He only heard Kamoshida laugh, the laughter echoing in his head as he left the office. He walked through the hall of the practice building and without warning slumped against the wall. He slid down to the ground, putting a hand to his head, curling himself up so he was as small as possible. His mind was racing trying to make sense of what just happened. Everything felt like it was moving too fast.

Ann’s friend...Kamoshida... Ryuji.... Mishima... expulsion.

Expulsion.

Expulsion.
Expulsion.

His thoughts focused on that one word and he put his hands to his head. It meant he had just lost everything. His one chance to take control of some part of his future had been ripped out of his hands and thrown into a fire. No other school would take him. Sojiro would kick him out of the cafe. His probation would be revoked. He would be thrown back into Juvenile Hall. His eyes widened and his breathing quickened, he could feel his heart beating faster in his chest. His fingers gripped his hair.

“Akira.” Akira did not hear Ryuji call his name, but when he felt a hand on him he jumped and tried to back away only for his head to hit the wall behind him. “Whoa, easy. Hey, it's okay. It's gonna be okay.”

It was not going to be okay. He was going to get expelled. His probation would be revoked. He would be sent back to Juvenile Hall for the year. He would not finish school. He had no future. He felt a hand on him and he shoved it away.

“Don’t touch me!” He screamed, losing what little control over himself he had in that moment, his body moving on its own as he fell over and curled up on the floor. Ryuji stared at him pulling his hand back, unsure what to say or even what to do. He looked at Mishima, who kept his head down trying not look at either of them.

“Attention all students.” Kawakami’s voice came over the loudspeaker. “Please return to your classroom’s for final roll call. We will be closing school early due to the incident. Again return to your classroom’s for final roll call and dismissal.”

Ryuji brought his attention back to Akira. “Hey, we should go,” Ryuji said.

Akira did not move. He stayed huddled on the floor, his face obscured by his hair. He looked like he had lost himself in his head and was not ready to come back to the real world. Ryuji took a deep breath and let it out. He had no idea what to do. He got to his feet. “Come on, let’s get back to our classrooms.”

Mishima watched as Ryuji turned and left then looked back at Akira. “Kurusu, I’m sorry.”

Akira said nothing and did not move as the other two left to return to class. He just let himself be lost in his thoughts, his mind racing as it screamed at him. He messed up. He should have kept his head down to everything going on in the school and just been a ‘good student.’ Now his life was over.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was difficult to put together. The opening events of the game are very strong, but this particular event I was anxious to adapt because it’s an extremely painful event. To me anyway. Like...oh lord.

On a happier note, this week on the 15th is the one year anniversary of Persona 5’s Japanese release! I'll be posting an additional chapter that day as a kinda-sorta-but not really celebration.
Akira was not sure how long he had been lying on the floor. He was not sure how long it had taken for his racing thoughts to slow down and for him to realize he was alone. A part of him felt like he had been hit by a truck, and another like his limbs had fallen off or lost all feeling. Somehow he managed to find the strength to stand and walked from the practice building to his classroom. When he reached it, he saw Kawakami outside speaking to someone on her phone. She looked up and huffed.

“Nevermind, he’s here. No that’s everyone, thank you.” She said and ended the call. She then looked at him. “Well look who decided to grace me with his…” She trailed off, the annoyance leaving her when she saw his face. “Oh dear, you don’t look good. But I guess with what happened I’m not surprised.”

Akira kept his head down, he felt like if he said anything he was going to throw up. “The faculty just got out of an emergency meeting. We’ve decided to close the school for the day and have everyone go home.” She explained. “Why don’t you head out now? You don’t look like you can handle your classmates.”

“Thank you.” He managed. His voice sounded strained and without waiting for his teacher to say anything else he turned down the hall and climbed the stairs to the bottom floor. He walked past a few third-year students, barely registering any of their presence outside of Makoto talking to another student wearing a large bright pink sweater and left the school building. The ride back to Leblanc felt longer than normal, the dark tunnels feeling like they went on forever.

When he reached the cafe he found himself staring at the ‘OPEN’ sign for what felt like a long period of time. After the next board meeting, he would no longer be welcome in the cafe, not that he had ever been welcome. Sojiro got his money, he did not need him around anymore.

Akira opened the door, stepped inside, and Sojiro looked up to greet him. “There you are. I already got a call from the school. That poor girl.” He muttered. Akira kept his head to the floor, his hair
and glasses hiding his face. “I’m going to close up the shop and head home soon. If you need to get
anything at the nearby store, do it now then come back.”

Akira shook his head and without being told went upstairs. It did not sound like Sojiro knew he
was going to be expelled in a few weeks. Expelled, the thought of that one word made his stomach
flip on itself and he even felt his vision spin so hard he almost lost his balance. He stumbled over to
his bed and laid down on the mattress, curling up into a ball as he broke down and began sobbing.

He could already see the outcome; Kamoshida would report him and then the police would show
up either at Leblanc or at the school. He would be dragged to his feet, cuffed, and shoved into a
police car. Then the report of his failed probation would be sent to his father and then...he brought
his hands to his head and snapped his eyes shut.

He felt his phone vibrate in his pocket and pulled it out to see he got a text message:

**Ryuji:**

*Hey, you okay?
Didn’t see you after school let out.
Wanna talk?*

Akira stared at the name and a flash of anger ran through him. He turned off his phone and tossed
it across the room before rolling back onto his side. He cursed himself as he realized he had been
right all along. He should never have talked to Ryuji.

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**4/16/2016 (Saturday)**

**After School**

**Shujin Academy**

“Hey, did you hear?”

“Hear what?”

“Some second-year students are
gonna get expelled!”

“No way!”

“This early in the school year?”

“Who?”

Ryuji grumbled as he left his classroom and hurried down to the cafeteria before it closed. He
wanted to get himself some food before going to look for Akira. He left him a text message the
other day and again in the morning to meet in the courtyard and while his notice said the messages
were read, he had not gotten a response. Ryuji had originally planned to talk to him during lunch,
but when he got to his classroom, he saw Akira was asleep at his desk and decided to leave him
alone.

Ryuji thought of Akira's freak out after Kamoshida threatened them and hoped he had calmed
down.

“I hear it’s Sakamoto and that criminal in 2-D.”
“Ha! Not surprised.”

“Sakamoto had it coming after the track team.”

“I bet the other guy had it coming too.”

“Well, he was arrested for assault.”

“I heard they threatened Kamoshida-sensei.”

Ryuji ignored the whispers of the student body as he got himself and Akira a leftover sandwich from the cafeteria and stepped out into the hall. He was walking back to the stairs when he saw Akira come down them. His face was pale and his eyes were dark. “Hey,” Ryuji said getting him to stop. “Did you get my text?”

Akira looked at him for a second then looked away and continued walking. “Hey!” Ryuji said putting a hand on Akira’s shoulder. Akira’s pulled himself away from Ryuji and turned to him.

“What do you want?” He asked and Ryuji noticed he sounded not just upset but exhausted.

“Dude you okay?” Ryuji asked. Anger crossed Akira's face and Ryuji realized he should not have asked.

“Am I okay? Do I look okay?” He asked. “The next board meeting is in two weeks and we’re going to get expelled!”

“I know, trust me, I was there.” Ryuji started, realizing he was the calm one in the conversation. “That’s why we’re meeting in the courtyard. Everything’s gonna be fine. You, Mishima, and I going to figure out how to deal with Kamoshida and-”

“Deal with Kamoshida? How? Are you gonna try and slug him in the face again? Because that worked so well the first time!” Akira said, his voice so loud he was practically yelling at Ryuji, “You have no idea how much you’ve just screwed me over! This was my only chance to get some hold on my life after it was taken from me and in less than a week, it’s gone because of you! I knew when I first saw you you might be trouble, but since you actually seemed like a decent guy I...” He stopped, losing his voice for a moment, and Ryuji saw his eyes begin to water before shaking his head and trying to regain his failing composure. “Just leave me alone. Let me have these last few weeks to myself before I have to go back to Juvie.”

“Akira, that’s not gonna happen,” Ryuji said. Akira looked at him, shook his head, then turned and hurried to the school’s exit. “Akira!”

Akira did not turn back and Ryuji sighed, his shoulders sagging. He messed up, he knew it even before Kamoshida threatened to expel them. That just meant he needed to do something to fix it. He walked into the courtyard and took a seat on one of the benches. After a few minutes, Mishima turned the corner, hands in his pockets.

“Hey.” He said then looked around. “Where’s Kurusu?”

“He’s not coming,” Ryuji said leaning back. “Dammit, I seriously screwed up.”

“It’s not your fault. If I didn’t tell Suzui that Kamoshida wanted to speak to her, then maybe she’d be…” He started, trailing off. He then looked up, his eyes widening as he saw someone.

“Takamaki-chan?”
Ryuji looked over to see Ann come around the corner where they were sitting. She looked at Mishima, then Ryuji. “Hey. I overheard you and Akira. Are those rumors true? Are you three really getting expelled?” She asked. Ryuji and Mishima looked at each other and the lack of response was all the answer she needed. “If you two are gonna try and bust Kamoshida, let me in on it too.”

“Huh?” Ryuji asked.

“Shiho’s in a coma because of that bastard. He practically threw her off the roof himself after putting her through all his shit.” Ann said, “I’m gonna make him pay, and no offense but you two look like you’ll need all the help you can get.”

Again Ryuji and Mishima looked at each other then Ryuji shook his head. “I dunno. We’re already in trouble, you might get threatened with expulsion too just by talking to us.”

“Please, Kamoshida’s a creep but he’s not stupid. The last person he would try and get expelled is me. It’d look real suspicious after what happened yesterday.” Ann said. “So you gonna let me in on this or not?”

Ryuji still wanted to say no. He did not want to put Ann in any danger, but he had a feeling if he refused her help she would go off and do an investigation on her own. It would be better if all three of them - no, all four of them - were on the same page. “Well, I guess, the more help we have the better.” He said, “You okay with this Mishima?”

“Honestly, I don’t think I’m really up to this. I’m scared of Kamoshida,” He answered, “But if we don’t do something our lives are pretty much over. I don’t know what I’d do if I got expelled. It’s hard finding work without a degree these days and I can’t imagine how my parents will react.”

Ryuji sighed at the mention of parents. He had not told his mom that he might be getting expelled from school. He already put her through enough with the track incident, he did not need to put her through more.

His thoughts were shaken when Ann took a seat next to him and spoke up. “So what’s the plan?” She asked. Ryuji let his shoulders sag.

“Well, I was hoping we’d come up with that today then execute that plan Monday. We can’t do anything tomorrow because the school will be closed.” He paused, “I tried getting evidence on Kamoshida earlier in the week but no one wants to talk about it.”

“No offense Ryuji but with your reputation, I’m not surprised.” Ann said, “If you want, I can try talking to the girls on the volleyball team. I mean they want little to do with me too but after what happened to Shiho…” She trailed off, becoming quiet for a second before shaking her head. “There’s bound to be someone that cares enough to come forward.”

“Alright,” Ryuji said. “I’ll try talking to some first-year students on the boy’s team. They might be more willing to say something since they haven’t been fully brainwashed yet. Think you can help me out, Mishima?”

Mishima looked hesitant but nodded.

“Okay, I guess that’s it.”

“What about Kurusu?” Mishima asked.

“Honestly, I’m not sure,” Ryuji said. “He freaked out after Kamoshida threatened us and he still
seems pretty upset.”

“He didn’t look very good in class today.” Ann said, “Maybe he needs some time to cool off?”

“I hope so.” Ryuji said, “We were going to hang out tomorrow. I’ll send him a message to see if he still wants to go into town, but I have a feeling I’ll have a lot of free time. Either way, we’ll start trying to gather info Monday.”

“Right,” Ann said then after a few seconds stood up. “Well, I should get going then. I wanna see Shiho before going home. Tell her about what we’re going to do and all that.”

“Is she awake?” Mishima asked. Ann shook her head.

“No, and from what the doctors say she probably can’t hear me either. But it doesn’t seem right to keep her completely in the dark if she can. I want her to know I’m there for her, and we’re going to make Kamoshida pay.” She looked back at them and tried her best to smile. “Well, I’ll see you all Monday!”

She then hurried out of the courtyard. Ryuji took a deep breath and let it out. Even with everything going on, Ann had changed little from middle school. He got off the bench. “Guess I’ll head home too. See you Monday, Mishima.”

“See ya,” Mishima said and watched as Ryuji left. He then looked down, putting a hand on his arm. He made a small, nervous noise like he was about to do something he was going to regret.

Ryuji made it home a little later than normal. Rather than take the train to Shibuya, instead he decided to walk home. Once he got to his apartment he opened the door and saw no one was home. If he had to guess his mother was still at work. There was a small light blinking on the house phone. He pressed the button and selected play.

“Hey Ryuji, it’s your mom. Just leaving this to let you know I’ll be home late again. Dinner is already in the fridge for you. Don’t forget to do your homework. Love you!”

Somehow Ryuji was not surprised, his mother took whatever extra hours she could to pay the rent. He had tried getting a part-time job to help ease her burden, but she was adamant he focus on school instead of working. With that thought in mind, he would at least try and get his homework done today. He finished a few assignments then grumbled in frustration before going to his room and turning on his PS Vita. He could do his homework on Sunday.

A few hours later he heard the door open and jumped out of his room and to the hall. “I’m home!” His mother called, and she looked up and smiled at him. “Oh good, you’re here already.”

“Hey ma! How was work?” He asked. She sighed and shook her head.

“My boss, as always...no, you have enough things to worry about than listening to me complain about him. Why ask such questions?” She asked taking a seat at the table. “Come here, sit down. How was school? Are you still going out with that boy tomorrow?”

Ryuji smiled and decided a little white lie wouldn't hurt. “It was alright. And I’m not sure. He didn’t look too good today. Think the city air is getting to him or something.”

“You said he was from the countryside right? I imagine being in a big city is overwhelming for
“It’s good you finally have a friend. Make sure you make him feel welcome and help him out, okay?”

“Yeah, of course,” Ryuji said. “You want a drink?”

“Dr. Salt, caffeine free.” She said. Ryuji went over to the fridge and grabbed two bottles of soda. He gave one to his mom and saw she was giving him the same look she did whenever she was trying to read him.

“What?”

“Ryuji, you said school was alright but did something happen?”

“N-no.” Ryuji said, “It’s just the same shit with Kamoshida like always. You know-”

His mother sighed. “Ryuji, I believe everything you’ve said, but you have to let all this go. No matter how much you try, Kamoshida is never going to be convicted of his crimes. He’s a retired Olympic Athlete. He’s trained numerous professional track and volleyball stars-”

“It doesn’t mean he’s protected from the law.” Ryuji said, “Someone almost died because of him, he shouldn’t just be able to walk free. Someone has to do something and if no one is going to then I will.”

His mother looked at him, some of her black hair falling in front of her face before giving him a tired smile. “I don’t see how I managed to raise such a kind-hearted boy like you.” She said, “You deserve far better than what I can give.”

Ryuji was not sure how to answer. He hated it when his mother said that kind of stuff. “I have you looking out for me. That’s more than enough.” He said, “Look I promise I’ll figure things out and you don’t need to worry about anything, alright?”

Her smile dropped, “Now you’re starting to worry me.” She said, “Can you heat me up some dinner?”

“Course.” He said then grinned, “You want me to add extra spices?”

“No. And don't try and sneak anything on there.” She said. Ryuji put some food in the microwave and set the timer. A frown formed on his face. He had to do something, he needed to get Kamoshida. He did not want to tell his mom that he was expelled from school, not after all the work she did to get him into Shujin in the first place. He did not want to disappoint her or have her blaming herself again for something that was not her fault.
alone and just let him get even a few decent hours of sleep. He checked the time and saw it was near three in the morning. He dropped his phone to his side and stared at the ceiling.

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4/17/2016  
Daytime  
Niijima Apartment

**Makoto:**  
*Are you free today?*

Makoto had sent the text message when she got up in the late morning. She was a studious person, but even she liked to sleep in on a Sunday and she was sure her friend was still asleep. His sleep schedule, because of his job and his night classes, was more than a little unpredictable. It did not help that they had talked little since the school year again. So she took her morning bath and began getting dressed, expecting she would not hear anything for a few more hours.

Then once she had sat down to begin reading the book she borrowed from Kurusu, her phone buzzed. She picked it up. She had gotten a reply:

**Goro:**  
*For you? Always.*  
...*except for the next ten minutes because I need to clean the apartment.*

She frowned as she read his message and replied.

**Makoto:**  
*You have been doing your laundry right?*

**Goro:**  
*Yes. My clothes are clean and put away. I just have some work papers and comics scattered around.*

The response had her still concerned.

**Makoto:**  
*And you are eating, right?*

**Goro:**  
*Yes?*

**Makoto:**  
*Something besides Ramen?*

**Goro:**  
...*I’m still talking to Makoto-chan, right? Sae didn’t take your phone, did she?*
Makoto sighed. Her friend was avoiding the question, which meant, no he was not eating anything other than instant ramen. He did the same thing last year.

Makoto:
...I’m going to bring you a decent lunch...

Goro:
Thank you Makoto-chan? ^^;

Makoto let out another sigh and put her phone away. If she was making food she had to get started now so she got there at a reasonable time. She left her room and stopped when she saw her older sister in the living area, putting on her suit jacket.

“Sis?” She asked and Sae turned to her. Right away Makoto noticed a flash of annoyance on her face, but it was hidden as soon as it appeared, replaced with that normal, all-business look her sister normally had on her face.

“Oh, good morning Makoto.” She said, voice neutral.

“You’re going to work today?” Makoto asked and Sae sighed.

“There’s been an incident and I need to go in to process some paperwork.” She explained, “What about you? You finished your homework last night, are you gonna take the day to yourself?”

Makoto hesitated, then gave a small nod, “I was planning to go to Shinjuku to see my friend.” She explained and she saw Sae’s eyes widen.

“A friend in Shinjuku?” She asked before realization hit her. “Ah, that’s right. Goro had to move to Shinjuku to start his apprenticeship. How is he? Is he eating right?”

“He’s working on it.” Makoto said, “I was going to make us lunch and then head down.”

“Well be careful. If you stay out after dark, have him escort you to the train station and regardless leave before ten at night. You do have school tomorrow.” Sae explained as she put her laptop in her briefcase and closed it. “I’ll probably be home late, so don’t wait on me for dinner.”

“Okay. I’ll make sure there’s something in the fridge for when you get back.” Makoto told her older sister. Her sister gave her a nod and then a brief smile. Makoto hesitated for a second, wondering if she should leave the conversation be, or wish her sister a good work day. The flash of annoyance had not gone unnoticed. Sae always seemed to be a little annoyed by her as of late. Makoto hoped it was just because of stress.

She put her thoughts aside and began to make lunch for herself and her friend. She made sure to add extra vegetables to Goro’s box, knowing him she had a feeling he neglecting his greens again, and once she was finished, she put together dinner for her sister.

Once she was ready to leave she walked to the train station and paid the fare for the train. One packed train right later and she was walking the streets of Shinjuku, passing by the people on the streets, some who made remarks about her appearance, one whistling and commenting she wished she looked more ‘legal’. She kept a straight face but could feel her blood boiling under the surface.

Makoto found Goro’s apartment building and then went up to his floor. She found his door and knocked on it. There was the sound of stumbling, something falling over, cursing, and then finally the door opened, revealing a boy her age with light hair in tan sweats and a white shirt. He blinked then checked the time.
“Huh, somehow I thought you’d be a little later.”

“You’re laundry was not put away was it,” Makoto said glancing into the room to see leftover clean clothes in one of his laundry baskets. He let out a small and sheepish laugh.

“It’s much easier just to take out of the basket.” He said. Makoto shook her head then let herself in. Goro closed the door behind her. She had to admit she was surprised, his studio apartment in Shinjuku was in better shape than the one he had in Shibuya. The scattered clothes were few and far between, everything was organized. There were no full trash bags stacked in corners in the apartment. She looked at his closet and opened the door. His uniforms were put away and hung up. She smiled.

“You’ve gotten better.” She said.

“Only because you and your sister kept on my ass.” Goro said as she closed the closet door, “I try to please those who show they care just as much for me as I do them.” He held his arms out. “Do I get a hug?”

Makoto rolled her eyes, but she put her bag down and walked closer, letting Goro squeeze her a little too tight. She put his hands on his back and felt his grip loosen. She then let go and pulled back a bit. “May I sit?”

“Certainly,” Goro said. Makoto sat down on the bed, and Goro took a seat next to her.

“So, how are you doing?” She asked.

“Better. Always a little at a time.” Goro said a smile on his face, which he then dropped and a serious look crossed it. “What about you? It’s not like you to just up and want to visit. You usually want to schedule weeks ahead of time.”

Makoto nodded, and looked away, brushing some hair behind her ear. “There was an incident at the school a few days ago. I wanted to talk to someone and you were the first person that came to mind.” She explained. Goro continued to look at her, waiting for her to explain. “We had a student in the second year try and commit suicide.”

“Oh,” Goro said, his eyes a little wide. “That’s quite a way to start the year.”

He was not wrong, but Makoto was not sure how to gauge his reaction. Goro’s responses to heavy news were always a little odd. She reasoned it was because of his upbringing. She kept talking, “There are rumors going around a teacher has been sexually harassing some of the female students. I think this is related, and I want to investigate it but…” She paused and sighed, “When my predecessor asked me to become the new student council president, he told me it was my utmost duty to protect the students. It feels as though I’ve failed.”

“You think this student tried to kill herself because she was being harassed,” Goro said. Makoto nodded, “If that’s the case I don’t think there’s anything you could have done.”

“But-”

“It’s true you’re the student council president, but your ability to protect the students is fairly minimal.” Goro said, “I mean you could report if a student is bullying another student, or keep disturbances and vandalism to a minimum, but if a teacher is harassing your peers, what could you do to prevent that?”

“I could report it to the principal. Tell him I suspected something and that it needs to be
investigated.” Makoto said.

“And he’ll listen?” Goro asked. “How do you know he’s not going to just turn a blind eye to it?”

Makoto’s hands tightened into fists as she kept them at her knees. Her face scrunched up in a way Goro could see what was on her mind. “He’s the principal. He should-”

“Makoto, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but people like your principal are only interested in what their school looks like from the outside. The inside can be damned. That’s why he let a criminal into your school, because rehabilitating one would look good on advertising boards.” He told her. She winced. “You might be the student council president, but unless he has a use for you, anything you of your own will just be swept under the rug. You don’t have any real power.”

“When you put it like that you’re pretty much saying I’m useless…” She said. Goro stared at her, shocked, then upon realizing his words could be interpreted that way, shook his head.

“I’m sorry. That was not my intention.” He said, “You’re a wonderful person Makoto, the fact you care is admirable, but I think you need to understand you only have as much authority as the ones who actually have power will give you. Focus on settling the small things rather than something you can’t do anything about.”

Makoto looked at him then down at her hands, resting on her thighs. She saw him reach over and take her hand. She reacted by pulling it out of his and placing it back in her lap. In some ways, she wanted to say Goro was right, but his life left him with a far more cynical outlook than she had. She wanted to believe there was something she could do, instead of just twiddling her thumbs and watching the days at school pass by. She wanted to investigate the rumors surrounding Kamoshida.

Goro’s stomach growled and she let out a small laugh when his face turned bright red.

“Someone’s ready for lunch.” She said. Goro smiled and leaned over.

“I can smell it through the containers. What did you make?”

She handed him his small box and watched as Goro’s eyes widened, then he sighed as he looked at hers. “This is a lot of vegetables.”

“You need to get proper greens in you Goro,” Makoto told him taking a bite of her chicken. He looked at them and sighed.

“Ever the health nu-uh I mean enthusiast.”

“Good save,” Makoto said and the two ate in silence for a little bit before Goro spoke up again.

“Makoto-chan.” He said and she paused. “I’m sorry if I-”

“Goro.” Makoto said, “I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Tell me about you, how has your week been? You met the man you’ll be apprenticing under, right? How is he?”

Akechi took a bite of his meal and after savoring the meat swallowed and answered. “He’s quite intelligent. He has a lot of past experience as a police officer and has been working as a detective for a number of years now. I think almost a decade. He’s very kind and patient.”

“Sounds like a good teacher,” Makoto said then paused as he saw Akechi’s grip on his fork tighten.

“He’s also cheating on his wife with a sixteen-year-old high schooler.” He said, “I admit, I look
forward to learning a lot from him, then locking him up behind bars.”

Makoto noticed the smile on Akechi’s face as well as his normally pleasant grin taking on a sadistic look and decided not to say anything.

Chapter End Notes

I originally did not plan to include Akechi in this work, but after awhile I thought it'd be interesting to explore how a lack of the metaverse would affect him and his relationship with other characters.
It was the end of the school day. Mishima paced back and forth in the boy's locker room, already dressed and ready for Volleyball practice. He had not gone out yet because he was waiting for a few people to show up. Kamoshida was still in his office looking over some things anyway, so it was not like he was needed to begin setup.

A part of him hoped by some miracle all the first years just did not show up for practice, but that was impossible. Sure enough, as he turned around and began walking from one side of the locker room to the next for the tenth time, the door opened and three first-year students entered the locker room. Neither of them looked happy and tensed up at the sight of Mishima.

“Oh, hey Mishima.”

“Hey guys…” He said then trailed off. He really should not be doing this, but after spending his Sunday arguing with himself over it, he could see he had no choice. “Um, Kamoshida wanted me to tell you guys something.”

“What?”

“Is it about Saturday?” Another asked in a panic. “Oh man, I was freaking out about that all day yesterday. I knew my form was off, he’s gonna call me up next isn’t he.”

Mishima’s eyes widened. This was a horrible idea. He shook his head, “No, nothing like that. He just wanted me to give you guys a message. Said it was important.”

The three looked at each other than one of them, a taller one finally spoke, “What is it?”

Mishima mentally cursed himself as he opened his mouth. "Don't talk."

The week, as far as Ryuji was concerned, was not the worst he had in his life, but it was high on the list.

He had tried to send Akira a text on Sunday evening, asking if he could meet him and the other two
on the roof at lunch, and got a notice saying his number had been blocked. Ryuji did see him Monday morning, feeding the stray cat like usual, but the moment Akira saw him, he got up and hurried into the school. If Ryuji was hoping Akira was willing to talk after having a few days to calm down, it was at that moment he realized there'd be no patching things up without stopping Kamoshida first. The bleach blonde mentally smacked himself; he had lost someone he had already been seeing as a good friend because of his own impulsive attitude.

Lunch came around and Ryuji, Ann, and Mishima finalized and initiated their plan to try and dig up dirt on Kamoshida. It was now Thursday, Ryuji and Mishima were waiting for Ann to join them. He let out a loud groan.

“What’s taking her so long?” He asked.

“I thought I saw her going to the cafeteria,” Mishima said and just as he did they heard quick footsteps and Ann appeared in the doorway.

“Sorry I’m late!” She said, slowing to a stop and gasping for breath. “But I promise, I have good news.” She took a seat on one of the desks, making sure she did not hit the pot planter on accident. She put the boxed lunch she purchased down next to her. “I found someone who’s willing to talk.”

“Seriously?” Ryuji asked. He glanced at the box and reached for a piece of food. Ann swatted his hand away.

“Hey, that’s mine.”

“Come on, please? I didn’t bring lunch today and mom doesn't get paid until tomorrow.”

Ann looked at him, then her lunch box, then motioned for him to grab a few things. As he did she began talking, “Okay, like I said, I managed to find someone who is willing to tell us about Kamoshida. A third-year student named Ikusaba.”

"Seriously?" Ryuji asked. Mishima looked at her surprised.

"Ikusaba?" He repeated. Ann nodded.

“I grilled the girl running the newspaper club for some details.” She explained, “Ikusaba-sensei just quit the volleyball team, said it was because she wanted to focus on her entrance exams. I talked to her while in the lunch line and she said she would be willing to tell me everything Kamoshida did while she was on the volleyball team.”

“When?” Ryuji asked.

“I’m gonna meet her- hey!” Ann swatted Ryuji’s hand away from her box again. He glared at her.

“What the hell? You gave me the okay!”

“Not to eat the whole thing! Ugh, you even ate the best part! Those sweet dumplings were calling my name all week.” Ann said. She let a small whine escape her lips before shaking her head. “I’m going to meet her in the library after school today. My guess is we’ll schedule a time to meet somewhere Kamoshida can't sneak up on us.”

“Good idea. Less of a chance Kamoshida will find out what we’re up to. Then before he can see it coming...bam!” Ryuji said, slamming his fist into his palm. A grin formed on his face. “Alright, let us know what happens. Oh, we should exchange numbers so we can keep each other updated and all that.”
“Sure. Give me your Chat ID too.” Ann said. She and Ryuji pulled out their phones and exchanged numbers. “Oh, your number’s the same one you had in middle school. Okay Mishima, your turn.”

“Oh. Sure.” Mishima said. He pulled out his phone and all three exchanged numbers. They then looked up when they heard the door to the roof open and saw a girl looking at them. She had short, light, curly hair, and was wearing a large pink sweater over her Shujin Academy uniform. She looked surprised to see them but hid that surprise behind a small smile.

“Hello there.” She said. Her voice was soft and had a gentleness to it. “I thought no one else would be up here. Mako-chan said the roof was supposed to be closed off to students.”

“Mako-chan?” Ryuji asked, eyebrow raised.

“Oh, sorry. I mean Niijima-chan. She told me the roof was to be closed off because of the accident.”

It had been and the three had seen the notice but chose to ignore it. Ann decided, carefully, to explain and hope it did not get them into trouble. “We needed to talk about something private.” She said then frowned. Something about the girl's presence was off. “What are you doing up here? Watching for people?”

She looked surprised then shook her head. “Oh, sorry if it seemed like I was spying on you. I asked Niijima-chan if I could come up here to tend to my plants.” The girl explained, motioning behind them to a set of planters that were resting in the middle of the roof. “It’s been cloudy lately so I wanted to make sure they’re getting enough sun.”

The three looked at them and Ryuji opened his mouth, “Honestly, a roof’s not the best place to be growing something. Maybe you should take them to the gardening club.”

The girl bit her lip, “Unfortunately these are part of a personal project, non-club members can't keep things in the club room.” She trailed off.

"So it's a hobby?” Ann asked. She nodded, "That sounds cool. Do you grow vegetables or flowers?"

"Uh well, nothing yet. But I'm hoping vegetables." She said, "Anyway, you three should probably get out of here before you get into any trouble."

"Well, we kinda finished everything we need to do," Ryuji said getting up. "Uh...could you not tell anyone we were up here?"

The girl smiled. "I didn't see anything." She said. Ryuji looked relieved, as did Ann and Mishima and the girl got out of the way for them to leave the roof. Ann grabbed her boxed lunch and stared at it. Her face turned red at the sight of the empty box.

"Dammit Ryuji!" She said, giving him a glare while he let out a sheepish laugh. She walked past them and down the stairs. Once she was out of sight Ryuji looked at Mishima.

“Remind me to get her some sweets the next time I have some cash.” He said.

“You could have used some restraint you know,” Mishima said. The girl looked at them, a little confused, but kept a smile on her face as the boys walked away. She turned her attention back to her planters and grabbed the nearby watering can.

Ann split off from the guys and went down to the school store to purchase a small sandwich so she
could eat something before class continued. Once done she tossed the wrapper in the trash and entered her classroom. Some of her classmates were chatting with each other over lunch. Akira Kurusu was, as always, by himself. His head was on his desk, his eyes were closed, glasses folded and placed nearby. Ann had noticed for the past few days he was sleeping during his lunch and free period instead of doing homework or socializing. Had she not known better she would have assumed like the rest of the class he had given up on trying to play the part of a ‘good student.’ However, she remembered the talk they had in the cafe the week before.

He was friends with Ryuji. Or had been friends with Ryuji. She was not sure at this point, and the bleached blonde had not gone into detail about their falling out. She had not asked Akira about it. He left school the moment he was able to.

The bell rang and everyone in the class gave a collective groan before returning to their seats. Ann returned to hers, just as Akira stirred and forced himself to sit up. His face was pale, and there were thin lines under his eyes which became hidden by his glasses after he placed them on.

Ann leaned over to look into her bag, stealing a glance at him then turned her attention to the teacher entering the room. She put her book on her desk and tried to listen to the teacher as classes drolled on until the final bell. When it rang she grabbed her bag and looked up in time to see Akira sling his over his shoulder and hurry out of the room. She frowned as she watched him leave then decided to make her way to the library.

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4/22/2017 (Friday)
Lunch Break
Shujin Academy

Ikusaba had agreed to talk to Ann in Inokashira Park on Sunday. Ryuji had not been the most enthusiastic, he had been hoping they would have some dirt on Kamoshida by the end of the week, but at the same time was grateful someone was willing to talk to them at all. “We still got some of those third-year students to talk to Ryuji,” Mishima said. Hearing Ann was having luck with a senior student that left the volleyball team, the two decided to try and refocus their efforts to former members.

“Yeah, I guess.” He said. “This sucks though, we keep hitting dead ends. It’s like they were told ahead of time not to talk to us or something.”

Mishima was quiet but nodded.

Ann returned to her classroom a little early and again found Akira asleep at his desk, his hair covering most of his face. She took her seat and pulled out her books for her next class. She then drummed her fingers across her book and after a few seconds let out a loud sigh. She turned around and put a hand on Akira’s arm and gave him a light shake. She felt his arm become tense, saw his hand twitch and head move. He opened his eyes and looked at her. Then after a few seconds, he jumped in his seat and looked around the classroom.

For a second he thought he had slept through the bell, but no it was still lunch break. He sighed and reached for his glasses only for his hand to slip and knock them off his desk. “Dammit.” He reached down to get them only for Ann to pick them up and hand them to him.

“Here.” She said. He stared at her fingers then looked at her face before taking his glasses from her. He put them on, everything went from blurry to sharp in an instant.
“Thank you.” He said, looking away from her. If his nap was over early he might as well try and work on some of his homework or read something. He pulled out his textbook and saw Ann was still watching him. He was not sure what to say, but he tried to be polite. “Do you need something?”

“Oh, no not really.” Ann said then after some hesitation kept speaking, “Actually, can I ask you something?”

“You just did.” He told her, a hint of a smirk showing on his face before fading out.

“Well besides, ugh, you know what I mean.” She said. “Is everything alright between you and Ryuji?”

He stared at her, then frowned and looked away. Ann had a feeling that answer was a no. “It’s just, well all three of you are going to be expelled, but only Ryuji and Mishima are doing stuff to stop it.” She paused as though realizing something, “Unless you’re doing something by yourself? Are you? Do you know anything?”

“I’m not doing anything,” Akira said, bringing a hand up to his head. He could not tell if talking to her was making him feel more tired or if it was his headache. “Sakamoto tried to slug Kamoshida and I stopped him. Now we’re getting expelled. So no, everything’s not alright between us.”

So that was what happened. Ann was not surprised Ryuji had tried to punch Kamoshida, it would not be the first time. “But we’re trying to stop it.”

“It’s pointless,” Akira told her, his voice flat and defeated. “Adults like Kamoshida have so much power they can get away with anything. It won’t matter what Sakamoto or you do. Any evidence you find can just be swept under the rug by the principal and he’ll get away scot-free.”

“But if we have enough proof—”

“You can have a witness who was just hit by him in the same room as you, him, and some police officers and he’ll still get the witness to testify against you,” Akira said. Ann noticed his fingers twitch and then ball into a fist. “What’s the point of even trying?”

Ann fell silent, trying to keep her composure. How he could be so indifferent after what happened not even a week ago baffled her. After he and everyone else saw Shiho jump from the roof because Kamoshida had gotten away with making her his plaything for too long.

“Because if we don’t try, it’s like saying we don’t care about the people who suffered because of him,” Ann told him. Akira kept his eyes on her, “Shiho, the volleyball team, the track team, even Ryuji. They’ve all suffered because of Kamoshida. We can’t just let him walk, we have to try and get justice for them.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do?” She asked, “Because someone has to listen!”

The right thing to do.

“Someone help!”

He took a deep breath and let it out. Ann was still watching him and noticed his reaction to her words. “It’s the right thing to do.” He muttered. He agreed with her, “but good luck finding someone in charge who cares about what’s right. I doubt they’re in this school.”
“Akira…”

"Ann, I'm going to tell you the same thing I told Ryuji. Just leave me alone, let me have these last couple of days to myself before I get dragged back to juvie. Please."

He looked down at his desk, ending the conversation. Ann tried to think of what to say to get it going again. However, the bell rang so she shook her head and turned around in her seat.

While the teacher continued her lecture, Ann found herself mulling over Akira's words and general attitude. He sounded defeated, but he also sounded like he was speaking from experience. His record was not a secret in the school, and after deciding he was a good person she had not thought much of it, but his words were so specific it made her wonder what happened.

She had a feeling if she asked he would not answer.

After some more thought, she decided he was wrong. Someone in their school had to care about what was happening, even if it was just caring because they cared more about their job.

The day went by far slower than she wanted it to, but the final bell did ring, so she packed her things away and got up. Akira was already leaving the classroom. Ann watched him hurry out of the room and then pulled her phone out when she felt it vibrate.

**Ryuji:**
*Alright, now that school’s out,
I’m gonna try and talk to some of
the upperclassman.***

**Yuuki:**
*Will be there in a minute.*

Ann pocketed her phone as Mishima walked up to her. “Hey, you wanna help us?” He asked and Ann shook her head.

“I’d love to, but I wanted to visit Shiho today.” She said. She had gone over to the hospital every day except the previous and wanted to make up for it.

“Oh. Well, that’s okay. We’ll let you know if we learn anything.” Mishima said, then shifted his weight on his feet, “How’s she doing?”

“She’s still not awake, but she’s stable.” Ann said, “She’s strong, so hopefully she’ll wake up soon.”

“Yeah. Hopefully.” Mishima said, “Don’t worry, I’m sure by the time she wakes up, we’ll have Kamoshida behind bars.”

Hearing Mishima’s words made Ann smile, “Yeah. I hope you’re right. Well, see you later Mishima.”

He held a hand up to wave her goodbye, and once she was out of the room dropped it. His smile dropped and his eyes lost hope he had been trying to give Ann. “Dammit, this really sucks.” He muttered to himself. He got his things and stepped out into the hallway just in time to see Ryuji getting out of his classroom. Seeing the bleached blonde team meant that it was time to go to work.
“Okay, so I have a couple of names.” Ryuji said, “You wanna stick together or split up?”

“Well splitting up would let us cover more ground.” Mishima said, “They could be anywhere at this point.”

“Alright, how about I start at the classrooms and you start at the library. We’ll meet in your classroom in an hour.” Ryuji suggested. Mishima nodded and watched as Ryuji hurried to the first floor. He then looked down at the ground and found himself repeating an apology over and over again before making his way to the practice building.

Akira sat near the train station for longer than he had planned to. He just did not feel like going back to Leblanc and facing the possibility Sojiro found out he was expelled. He was not ready to be yelled at for ruining his one chance at a normal life. Instead sat in station square watching people walk by, some adults in business suits and others students in their uniforms. Finally, his phone went off to tell him it was time to go home, and he got up and began walking back inside.

He paused as he heard a voice and looked over to see a man in a nice suit, standing on a box and giving a speech. If he had to guess, it was a preacher or someone. There were a few people standing around listening. His curiosity getting the better of him he decided to watch.

“Everyone, wake up! This country is twisted and should we continue to keep our heads down and not question the actions of our leaders, we will…”

Akira found himself shaking his head. The man was a politician. He wanted nothing to do with politics, so he turned around and entered the train station. Once back in Yongen-Jaya he walked back to Leblanc and opened the door.

“So that’s what happened.” Akira looked over as he noticed a woman in the cafe. She had short hair and was wearing a blue dress with a black jacket. She looked like a punk rocker, or a goth. “That certainly explains why I haven’t seen her lately. Can’t imagine what the kid was thinking trying to add legs to that chair.”

“Well, you know her…” Sojiro started then stopped when he saw Akira had stepped entered the cafe. The woman looked at him.

“Oh, this is a surprise. I didn’t think high schooler’s visited an old cafe like this.” She said getting his attention. "Is he that kid you took in Sojiro?"

"Yeah, that's him."

The woman looked him over and smirked, "My you really do look like trouble. When's the last time you combed that hair?"

Akira stared at her, then reached a hand up and tested his strands. "This morning?" He answered though he was a little surprised at how greasy it felt. One day without a bath and already his hair felt messy.

"Really. Well, you might wanna consider a better comb."

Akira did not answer. He was not even sure what to say, but he frowned because he was sure he had just been insulted. Fortunately, the woman looked at her watch and shook her head. “Well, it looks like my breaks over. Time to get back to work.” She stood up, “Thanks as always for the
coffee Sojiro. Let me know when the kid can stop by the clinic again.”

“Take care Takemi,” Sojiro said. The woman nodded and left the money for her coffee on the table then left. Sojiro sighed, "I thought I told you not to talk to my customers."

“She talked to me first. Would have been rude not to say anything” He said. Sojiro considered his words and had to admit the young teenager had a good point. “Who was that?”

“That is Tae Takemi.” Sojiro said, “She operates the clinic in the area. She’s weird. Really weird. But she’s good at her job. If you ever get sick, I’ll have you go to her first before considering a hospital. You're guaranteed better treatment from her than most doctors in Shibuya.”

Akira nodded then let out a small yawn. “Another long school day?” Sojiro asked. Another nod. “Go upstairs, I’ll make you dinner tonight.”

Once again Akira found himself got a bit off guard by Sojiro’s unexpected kindness, but he was not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. He thanked Sojiro and climbed the stairs to the attic. He put his book bag down on the spare table and sighed as he pulled off his school uniform and changed into some more comfortable clothes.

He had another long night and it felt like a brick was being dropped on his head. So he flopped onto his bed and pulled his blanket over him to block out some of the sunlight. He closed his eye, then after a few seconds opened them. Ann’s words flashed in his mind. Even with everything against them, she and the other two were trying. Because stopping Kamoshida was the right thing to do.

He wanted to think that was enough, just doing the right thing would make everything better, but doing what was right was what got him into this mess in the first place. He shook his head to force himself to stop thinking about it, then closed his eyes. He already had a feeling he was not going to fall asleep, but any rest he could get would help him for tomorrow.

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4/22/2016 (Friday)
Aoyama-Itchome Hospital
Evening

Ann found herself sitting in the waiting area instead of in Shiho’s room. The doctors had asked if she could wait outside while they ran some routine tests. Nothing invasive, just taking Shiho’s blood pressure, making sure her eyes responded to light, little things to make sure she was not getting worse. They just wanted her to wait outside just as part of standard protocol. After waiting several more minutes the door opened and the doctor gave her the okay to enter the room.

“Any changes?” She asked.

“Unfortunately we can only give that information to her parents.” He said, “But I can assure you she is fine.”

In Ann’s opinion, the answer was not good enough, but she kept that thought to herself. She just entered the room and closed the door. Shiho was lying on her back in bed, the oxygen mask covering her face. One of her arms and her leg was in a cast. They said she broke them in the fall and had multiple injuries to her spine and ribs. She overheard a nurse mention the chances of her being able to walk again when she woke up were ‘minimal’ but she did not think of that. She just
wanted her friend to wake up first.

Friend. Ann felt her chest tighten and tried her best to ignore it. “How you doing Shiho?” She asked. “It’s been, a bit of an insane week. You know how I promised to get even with Kamoshida? Well it’s been a lot harder than I thought it would be to get people to talk.

“I dunno, I thought people would be more open to talking about Kamoshida’s crap after what happened, but I guess many are still scared. I can’t say I blame them.” She leaned back in her chair, “I promise I’ll avenge you Shiho. It’s really hard right now, but I promise when you wake up I’ll be able to tell you Kamoshida is in jail. Where he deserves to be. I swear it.”

She leaned closer, putting her hands in her lap then after a few seconds took her best friends hand, careful not to touch her IV. She ran her fingers over Shiho’s palm and smiled. Everything was going to be okay.

At least she hoped it would.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so first off, 10 chapters! Hurray! I've officially crossed a milestone I like to call 'well crap now I have to finish this thing, what am I doing halp!'. With that said I've been mulling this for a while and have decided there will not be a new chapter next Tuesday. I have two reasons for this:

The first is general burnout. With Makoto week, this fic, and my job, I need some time to cool off and relax. I've been writing more the past two weeks than I have in a long time. My fingers hurt. My brain is tired. I need to lie down.

The second is this; without giving much away I have the Kamoshida arc pretty much all written out. However, while I was proofreading the chapters I saw a few things I was not particularly proud of so I want to go back and tighten some stuff up. I know this is inconvenient, but I want this fic to be as good as I can make it and I'd rather delay a week than upload something kinda messy.

With that said, thank you to everyone that decided to stick with me throughout this fic. It's been quite a ride (and an admittedly alienating premise) but it's been a good one.

So with that said the next chapter is planned for release October 3rd. Look forward to it!
A Day for the Student Council President

Chapter Summary

Makoto has a long day

Chapter Notes

I'm back and I'm kinda rested, but I also got sick so maybe it's a good thing I took a week off? Hehe.

Before I get to the chapter I just want to let you all know that The Crimson Compendium is still looking for writers. We got quite a few applications, but the majority of them were artists. If you're a fan author and are interested click the link above for more details!

Also thank you to whoever made this TVTropes page for One Year on Probation. I did not expect that at all and it was a surprise to see (and made me lose my voice from screaming in excitement).

Anyway, onto the fic!

4/23/2016 (Saturday)
Early Morning
Aoyama-Itchome

Makoto was getting off the train and leaving the station when she felt her phone begin buzzing in her pocket. She pulled it out and saw Goro had sent her a text message. It only surprised her a little bit. She expected some kind of message from him but was not expecting it so early in the morning.

Goro:
Happy Birthday!

Makoto smiled. Today was her birthday. Her sister had not come home the previous night, or at least not at a time she was awake, so she did not get the chance to see her before going to school. She wanted to pretend she was past the age where getting birthday wishes was a big deal, but the lack of recognition from her sister - even a simple card waiting on the table for her - made it feel like someone was pushing down on her chest.

Goro’s message made her feel a lot better as she walked to school.

Makoto:
You’re up early.

Goro:
Couldn’t sleep. It happens.
You have any plans tonight
birthday girl?

She paused and wondered. It was a good question. She had been hoping her sister would be available so they could have dinner together. Sae promised last month she would try and get the night off for her.

**Makoto:**
Nothing planned now. Was hoping me and my sister could go out for dinner tonight.

You should join us.

**Goro:**
That’s tempting, but I wouldn’t want to be a third wheel for what sounds like a family gathering.

That might be a little awkward...

Makoto rolled her eyes.

**Makoto:**
It’s a birthday dinner, not a family gathering. And I’m inviting you, so why does it matter?

She stopped walking for a second as she saw the three little dots that showed Goro was typing vanish from her screen. They popped up again, then vanished, then popped back up. Then vanished. She shook her head and type her own message out.

**Makoto:**
Goro, would you like to join me and my sister for a birthday dinner?

More waiting, but then he left a response.

**Goro:**
Yes, I’d like that.

**Makoto:**
Great. I’ll let you know if anything happens.

**Goro:**
Then I should try and get a little sleep.
Have a good day at school Makoto-chan.

Makoto smiled as she put her phone back in her pocket and continued her walk to school. Her day felt a little brighter now, even if the sky had taken on an overcast appearance. The rainy season was approaching earlier than usual. She continued her walk to school and once in the building hurried to the student council room to work on her morning duties. There was little to do on a Saturday, just sort through the usual requests to see if any were worth bringing to the principal. She also spotted the weekly request from the president of the newspaper club to be given proper funding.
Makoto sighed as she read the request and again had to write out the reason funding was being denied. There was no reason to fund a club which only had one person. Everyone who might have been interested signed up for the computer club instead because of it’s ‘make your own blog and get internet famous’ campaign. A campaign Makoto was sure was going to blow up in the club presidents face any day now.

She put the request aside for the time being and instead looked over a list that she had been given the other day. It was of all the students who had chosen not to partake in after-school club activities. It excluded third-year students, who would be preparing for entrance exams, and only focused on the first and second years. She read the names over because she knew she would be expected to speak to them about their lack of school participation.

One name crossed her eyes and she focused on it. Akira Kurusu. She had become more familiar with that name than she expected for someone she was only borrowing a book from. The second year had transferred to their school after being expelled from his last for assaulting someone. She had read his student profile herself several times over to get an idea of who she would be dealing with and even had the chance to speak to him in person, albeit under not so wonderful circumstances.

Nothing gave her an idea what to expect of him. His criminal record contradicted his grade average and while it was true criminals could be quite intelligent, his quiet demeanor made him seem almost meek compared to the dangerous felon her peers described. Of course, many of those were just rumors. She needed to remind herself she could only work with what was in front of her.

However, there was a rumor she heard in passing a few days ago that she could not stop thinking about. This one not just about him, but also Ryuji Sakamoto - who was also on her list - and Yuuki Mishima - who was not. She doubted it was true, it was impossible for anyone to be expelled so early in the school year. For any normal student anyway. Kurusu was not normal, he had a record, and Sakamoto had a history of violence.

She looked up when the bell rang and decided once lunchtime rolled around she would request Kurusu come to the student council room.

Kurusu was prompt. Makoto had to admit she was a little surprised, she expected him to be late or not show up at all. She smiled at him as he closed the door behind him. “Good afternoon Kurusu-san, please have a seat.”

She motioned to the chair across from her. He hesitated for a second but did as he was instructed, placing his bag on the floor and taking a seat at the table. He folded his hands in his lap and hunched over a little. Makoto took a seat across from him.

“I’m sure you have better things to do with your free time so I’ll make this quick.” She said. Akira nodded and Makoto noticed he was avoiding eye contact. “Kurusu, can you look at me?”

He sighed and looked up at him. Makoto noticed his face was pale. “Are you alright? You don't look well.”

“I’m okay. Just having trouble getting used to the area.” He said. Makoto could tell by his voice he was lying. “It’s so noisy it’s hard to sleep at night.”

She decided to play along. It was possible there was some truth to his words. “I see. Yes, I imagine
going from a quiet town up north to a big city would make it difficult to get a good night's rest.” Makoto said, putting her hair to her chin, “I assume that’s why you’ve been sleeping during your free period?”

“How did you-?”

“Word gets around fast at Shujin. Especially if it’s about you, unfortunately,” Makoto said. Akira fell quiet, he was not surprised by her words. “Anyway, I’m not here to tell you how to use or not use your free time.”

“So why am I here?”

“Just a routine check-in. It’s been almost two weeks since you transferred to our school and it’s no secret the beginning of the year has been quite...chaotic. I just wanted to see how you were doing.”

She waited for him to answer, watching his face, seeing it not change as he looked down at his hands and began playing with his fingers. He was like a closed book, with a lock on it that she did not have a key for. Makoto waited a little longer, but when he did not speak came to her own conclusions.

“I guess your silence is more than enough of an answer.” She said and decided to move onto her next point. “Kurusu, as student council president, it is my job to make sure students are doing the best they can at Shujin Academy and assisting them if needed. One of those is following up with students who have decided not to take part in any school-related activities. I noticed you were on the list of second years who did not sign up for an afterschool club. Any reason?”

Akira could list many reasons, but instead just settled on, “I didn’t feel like it.”

“You didn’t feel like it,” Makoto said, repeating his words. Something about how she said it must have annoyed him, because she saw him twitch a little and his tone became sharper.

“What, are clubs mandatory at Shujin?”

“No. As with most schools, after-school activities are optional. However Shujin Academy has a 96% club sign-up rate among first and second-year students, and we highly encourage students to take part in clubs or sports. If they don't it's usually because they opt to work part-time jobs or do volunteer work.”

“Or feel unwelcome.” Akira bit back at her, “Maybe you should add that to the list of reasons.”

“You feel unwelcome,” Makoto repeated and saw his face contorted.

“I have people talking about me behind my back and treating me like dirt. Some asshole threw his empty water bottle at my head when I came in this morning, and another tried to grab my bag and rip it open.”

“Rip it open?”

“He wanted to see what knife I carried. I don’t carry a knife!” Akira said, louder than he intended. Makoto watched as Akira paused to try and calm. She stood up from her seat and moved to a seat closer to him. His hands were shaking.

“How often does this happen?” She asked.

“It’s been going on since I got here. Not every day but to much.”
“Have you told your teachers?”

“Only person who's done anything is my homeroom teacher. Everyone else turns the other cheek.” He let out a bitter chuckle. “So I’m not exactly open to taking part in after-school activities.”

Makoto frowned. Shujin was supposed to have a zero-tolerance bullying policy and the teachers were supposed to reinforce that policy. She decided she needed to speak to the principal about this. “Yes, I suppose you have a good reason to not want to join any clubs.” Makoto said, “I guess I was just confused since I saw in your profile you were part of your previous school’s drama club. I thought-”

“-that I’d want to join Shujins? If my record hasn't leaked, maybe.”

“You could still ask to join.”

“Niijima-san, no one wants me around. Far as this place is concerned I’m nothing.”

More concern crossed her mind. “Kurusu I can assure you, you are not considered nothing at this school.”

“Right I forgot, I’m also a meal ticket to bolster this school’s rep and get it more funding. ‘Shujin Academy, so good we can even reform teenager criminals.’ How’s that for a slogan?”

Akira’s sarcasm was so heavy it made the atmosphere in the small room worse. Makoto kept her composure, but she was now more positive his pale appearance was more than just it being too noisy to sleep.

“I’m going to assume by your statements you have not had much luck making friends.” No answer, which she assumed was a no but decided to try and push a little more. “I did hear you were associating with Sakamoto.”

He huffed. “Not anymore.”

“I see. I suppose then you heard of his history of violence?” Makoto asked. Akira’s looked at her, his expression going from stone cold to being a little more curious. “You didn’t know?”

“I heard something, but you never know with this place.”

“I understand, so I’ll just come out and say it. Sakamoto was almost expelled last year because he attacked a teacher.”

Akira looked right at her, then to the table as his thoughts drifted to what happened Friday. He felt his heart leap out of his chest but squeezed his hands into fists to try and keep himself calm.

“Which teacher?”

“Suguru Kamoshida.”

Kamoshida. He frowned when he heard that name. “What happened?” He asked. Makoto watched his face, it seemed the topic had piqued his interest.

“I don’t know all the details, only the official story,” Makoto said. He nodded. “Allegedly one day during track practice Sakamoto ‘just snapped’ and attacked Kamoshida. Kamoshida broke Sakamoto’s leg, claiming it was in self-defense and statements from other members of the track team supported this claim. Sakamoto was supposed to be expelled immediately, but Kamoshida argued against it after speaking to Sakamoto’s mother. It was agreed the incident was a ‘freak
“accident’ and swept under the rug.”

“This happened during track practice?” Akira asked. Makoto nodded and Akira remembered the fact Ryuji walked with a limp. “Was Sakamoto part of the track team?”

“I thought I was the one asking questions Kurusu-san.” Makoto pointed out, but answered anyway, “Yes, he was part of the track team, and the incident was used as an excuse to dissolve it.”

Akira took in what Makoto was telling him and his thoughts went back to what Ann had told him the other day. How they needed to get justice not just for Shiho, but other students hurt by Kamoshida. Including Ryuji. He thought about the type of person Kamoshida was, what he was being told now, and what he had seen for himself. He looked up when he heard Makoto say something else.

“Huh?”

She frowned at him, “I said, getting back to the matter at hand, is there anything I can do to make your school year more comfortable? It’s obvious from your face and body language that you’re under a considerable amount of stress.”

He stared at her, his face as stone-cold as it had been when he sat down. “No, Niijima-san. Can I go now?”

Makoto had a feeling he did not want to stay in the room any longer. She glanced at the clock and saw lunch was halfway over. “Yes, you can leave.” She said. He stood up and she spoke again, “Kurusu-san, do you remember what I said after we met in the library?”

He stared at the floor.

“If there is anything you need, please do not hesitate to come to the student council, and if you do not feel comfortable speaking to the other members-”

“-ask for you. I know.” He said then after some hesitation looked at her, “Thank you, but I don’t think there’s anything you can do for me. Not unless you can make the student body forget about my record.”

Makoto did not need to say whether that was possible or not, they both knew the answer. Akira walked toward the door and put his hand on the handle. He then stopped and turned to look at her again. “Suzui…” Akira started, “The reason Suzui tried to kill herself is because of Kamoshida.”

“What?” She asked. “How is- what makes you so sure?”

“You haven’t noticed?” Akira asked, “That everyone who’s had the crap beat out of them is connected to Kamoshida? Suzui, Sakamoto, Mishima, me.”

“You?”

“Kamoshida had Mishima leak my school records onto the student forum. I was there when he admitted it. You’re free to believe me or not, I don’t care.” Akira said, “Maybe the official story about what happened to the track team needs to be looked at again.”

Without saying another word, Akira opened the door and stepped out. Makoto watched him leave thinking about his last words and the information now laid in front of her. Sakamoto’s incident, Suzui’s suicide attempt, Mishima leaking Kurusu’s record. And Kamoshida was in the middle of them? The volleyball team often looked overworked, and the three people who would have the
biggest problem with Kamoshida were the one's front and center of the expulsion rumor going around. Add to it Suzui had been the starter of the volleyball team, who Kamoshida would be giving extra attention too.

The connections were all there, all lined up too perfectly to be coincidental. She needed to have something confirmed for her.

This was a mistake. That was Makoto’s first thought as she stared at the door to the principal’s office. She wanted to knock on the door and demand the full report about the track incident from last year, but she could see every possible way the event could run in her head and it all came to one conclusion; failure. Still, she needed to try.

She knocked on the door and waited a few seconds. “Yes, come in.” She heard Principal Kobayakawa say and she stepped inside. “Ah Niijima-san, was there something you needed?”

“I just had a couple of questions sir, if you don’t mind?”

“Not at all, I could use an update on your work on the student council anyway.” The Principal motioned for her to close the door and take a seat in the chair near his desk. “Have you made progress meeting with our students?”

“Well, admittedly at the moment I’ve only spoken to one student, but that is why I’m here.” Makoto said, “Principal Kobayakawa, I’ve been hearing a rumor that some students are being expelled from Shujin Academy.”

“Is that so?” The principal asked. He sounded surprised or at least was feigning surprise. “I wonder how the student body found out.”

“So it is true then.”

“Kamoshida claims, Sakamoto-san, Kurusu-san, and Mishima-san, threatened him and with Sakamoto’s past history and Kurusu’s record I can’t say I’m surprised.” The principal said. Makoto frowned, pondering the principal’s words, “It’s a shame, even with his record Kurusu looked like he could have been an upstanding student if he had not fallen in with Sakamoto.”

“That reminds me.” Makoto said, “Are you aware that Kurusu is being bullied?”

Wrong choice of words, she saw the principal give her a cold look. “Niijima-san you know that Shujin has a zero-tolerance bullying policy.”

“Yes, however, the student body seems to have forgotten about it. Kurusu told me that more than a few students have been harsh to him” Makoto said, “I’d like to suggest we hold a morning assembly to remind everyone that this kind of behavior is not tolerated at the school.”

“Yes, I’ll keep it in mind.” The Principal told her, the tone dismissive. “I’m a little surprised you’ve taken so much interest in him since when Kamoshida’s report passes he won’t be here much longer.”

“And you aren’t going to investigate Kamoshida’s claim?”

“What’s there to investigate?” The principal asked raising his voice.
“It’s just, doesn’t it seem strange all of this surrounds Kamoshida? First last year and now a student under his watch almost died and-”

“That is enough Niijima!” Makoto jumped a bit when the principal raised his voice, “As student council president, your task is to have our students best interests in mind, but just as important it is to preserve the reputation of Shujin Academy. Sakamoto has done nothing but give us trouble since last year, he’s dragged a criminal into his schemes and while I do have some sympathy for Mishima he obviously went along with everything. He did leak Kurusu’s records after all-”

“He was threatened by Kamoshida too-”

“And who told you that? Kurusu?” The principal asked. Makoto said nothing. “I don’t have time to deal with this Niijima, please tell me you’ve come here with something actually worth my time.”

Makoto hesitated. She had a feeling there was no way she would be able to ask about the track incident with how the conversation was going. However she could not help but notice how defensive Principal Kobayakawa was about Kamoshida. It was one thing to defend a teacher that was obviously good, but he seemed to be trying a little too hard.

She was starting to think Kurusu was right. There was far more to the ‘official story’ than what was on the record, but...she couldn’t do anything about it. She might have been student council president but if the principal was actively stopping her...

Goro was right, she was only as powerful as Kobayakawa let her be.

“There’s nothing else sir. I just thought I’d make you aware of the bullying incidents.” She said and stood up. “Thank you for your time, sorry for wasting it.”

She saw the principal’s eyes soften for just a brief moment, “Niijima, you’re an upstanding student with excellent grades. Don’t let a simple issue like this distract you from your work.” A smile crossed his face, “I’m sure your sister would say the same.”

“I...I understand.” She said. She gave the principal a small bow and hurried out of the office. She closed the door and took a deep breath. That meeting was somehow worse than what she expected it to be and she felt like she had been tossed around like a ragdoll.

She stayed at school a little longer, meeting with some other students who had chosen not to take part in club activities. As she expected they either decided to work part-time after school or were needed at home to help family. One was taking extra cram school courses because Shujin’s curriculum ‘bored him.’ She wrapped up everything she needed to do and walked out of the building. It was as she was walking the street that she received a text message from her sister.

*Sae:
I can’t make it home tonight.
Sorry.*

She stared at the message and felt her heart sink into her stomach. She was not surprised, a part of her had been expecting it, and yet at the same time she found herself upset and hurt all the same.

*Makoto:
It’s okay. I’ll leave dinner
in the fridge like always.*

She let her hand drop and after a few seconds texted Goro.
Makoto:
Sis just canceled. We won’t be going out to dinner tonight.

She got a reply within seconds.

Goro:
Oh. That’s too bad.

Doesn’t mean we can’t go out together though. Are you interested?

Makoto looked at the message and considered it, but the thought of going out after the long day left her feeling drained.

Makoto:
No. I suddenly don’t feel up to doing anything.

Goro:
I see. I’m sorry.

Makoto:
It’s not your fault.

Goro:
I know. I’m just expressing my sympathies. I know you were looking forward to spending time with your sister.

I miss seeing Sae as well...

Makoto:
Sis works so hard, and I try to make things easier for her, but sometimes it feels like...

She stopped for a second, not sure she wanted to put her thoughts into words.

Goro:
Feels like?

She shook her head.

Makoto:
Nevermind. I don’t want to talk about it right now. I’m sorry.

Goro:
Don’t apologize.

You sure you don’t want to do something tonight?
Makoto:
Yeah, I’m sure.

Goro:
Alright. Take care of yourself then.

Makoto:
Shouldn’t I be telling you that?

Goro:
True true, but sometimes you need to be told it.

Have a good night Makoto-chan.

Makoto let herself smile at the end of their conversation, then sighed as she continued to walk the street. She got home and once inside went into her bedroom and closed the door behind her. She finished her homework, climbed onto her bed and put a DVD into her laptop. She began watching one of her favorite Yakuza films, trying to cheer herself up. About halfway through she sighed and looked down at her bedsheets.

“I can’t do anything.” She muttered then looked back at the movie.

No, there had to be something she could do. She just did not know what.

4/24/2016 (Sunday)
Daytime
Inokashira Park

Ann double checked her phone to make sure she had the time right. When she spoke to Ikusaba two days ago they had agreed to meet in Inokashira Park to talk about her time on the track team. The focus was on what it was like being instructed under Kamoshida. The girl had seemed hesitant but at the same time determined to tell her everything Kamoshida had done to her and the other girls.

Ann was not sure if she wanted all the gritty details, but the more they knew the better. Maybe knowing Ikusaba came forward would get some of the others to come forward and talk to. Or maybe it would be enough for the school to finally do something about Kamoshida.

Ann took her seat on a park bench and pushed some of her hair out of her face. Because it was Sunday, the park was a little more crowded than normal. She could see some young couples renting out boats and some families walking along with their kids. Ann let a small smile cross her face then took out her phone and set up a group chat with Ryuji and Mishima.

Ann:
I’m in the park.

Just waiting for Ikusaba-sensei to arrive.

Ryuji:
Okay! You have everything?
Ann:
Yup. Gonna record what she tells me on my phone.

Ryuji:
Alright. Good luck!

Mishima did not respond to the conversation. Ann shrugged it off, guessing he was either busy or just did not have it on him. She checked the time, Ikusaba should have been arriving any minute so she left the chat room and brought up a game on her phone. After playing a few rounds she checked the time again.

It was now one in the afternoon. She looked around, specifically at the park's entrance and noticed the girl she was waiting for had not yet arrived. She continued to play on her phone to distract herself and keep from drawing unwanted attention. She glanced up when she thought someone was approaching her, but it turned out just to be a group of college students out for an afternoon jog.

At one thirty she began to worry and grabbed a snack to nibble on while waiting. She was not ready to believe Ikusaba had stood her up after promising to meet with her. She hoped it was just cause she might have been running late or lost track of time. When two in the afternoon rolled around she went through her phone contacts and found herself wishing she had insisted on Ikusaba giving her her contact information.

It was three in the afternoon - two hours after their promised meeting time - when Ann sent another text to Ryuji and Mishima.

Ann:
Guys, we might have a problem.

No sooner had she sent her text message her phone began buzzing. Ryuji was calling her. She answered and put her phone to her ear. “Problem? What problem.”

“Ikusaba never showed.”

“Are you serious?”

“Do I sound like I’m joking?” Ann asked then sighed when she felt her phone vibrate again and saw Mishima had texted her.

Yuuki:
What’s wrong?

She sighed and added him to the call. He rejected it.

Yuuki:
Sorry, in a busy area.

Ann shook her head and put her phone back to her ear. “This is not good,” Ryuji grumbled.

“No, it’s not. Look I’m gonna try and talk to her tomorrow and find out what’s going on. Maybe she just forgot or something conflicted with her schedule.”

“Argh, we’re running out of time. The board meeting is next week and we still have nothing to bust Kamoshida.”
“I know. Look don’t worry, we’ll figure something out.” Ann said. She could hear Ryuji letting out a loud frustrated growl, followed by the sound of a controller being dropped on the floor. “I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation, there has to be.”

“I hope you’re right Ann.” Ryuji said, “Shit, I still haven’t told my mom any of this. I can’t get expelled, she’ll blame herself!”

“Ryuji, we’ll get him. I promise.” She said, “Look I’m going to go visit Shiho. If I think of anything I’ll let you know.”

“Alright. Thanks, Ann. And tell her I said hi.”

Ann ended the call and put her hand up to her temples. Since Ryuji and Mishima had no luck getting anyone to speak up, all their hopes had been riding on Ikusaba. She shook her head. There had to be some kind of explanation for her not showing up. She sighed and began walking out of the park. Maybe visiting Shiho would help her put her mind at ease. She stopped and shook her head. No, her mind would not be at ease until Kamoshida was behind bars and Shiho regained consciousness.

She took another few steps then stopped again and turned around. She frowned, for a brief second, she thought she saw someone looking at her. She chuckled trying to steady her nerves. It must have just been her imagination. From a distance, she did not stand out that much. She walked out of the park and stopped and turned around again.

Someone was following her, she was positive. So rather than walk to the train station like she planned she decided to hail a cab driver and request to be taken to the station instead.

Had she turned around just before closing the door, she would have seen a head of well-kept blue hair watching her leave.
Ann Takamaki hated art class. Granted, her dislike of art class was an extension of her dislike of school in general. The year had barely started and already people were hounding her over her appearance. Her homeroom teacher made her sit at the back of the classroom because her presence ‘was a distraction’ and another teacher yelled at her and tried to make her an example of a problem child by pointing out the color of her hair. She thought it was dyed and Keimusho had a strict policy against ‘unnatural’ hair colors.

“Sensei, this is my natural hair color.” She said. Her teacher then argued with her saying that since she was mostly Japanese she should have been black, not blonde. The argument died down after it took up a large chunk of class, but then she was forced to be on afterschool duties for a month as punishment for allegedly speaking out of turn. Ann had complained to her parents, and while her father did try to speak to the school administration over the phone, nothing had been done. At least the complaints about her hair died down after a few weeks.

If Ann disliked anyone more than the teachers at school however, it was her classmates. Most of the girl’s in her class appeared to dislike her or were to afraid to approach her. Then there were her male classmates, who tried to make advances on her. Apparently the fact she looked a little bit European meant she was ‘easy’ and she also heard some of her classmates commenting on how she liked ‘lying on her back’. The girls had been the ones to make that comment, it was a note they left in her locker with a pillow. She threw that ‘gift’ in the garbage the moment she made the connection.

There was one kid in her class who was okay. His name was Ryuji Sakamoto. He was a pervert too, and she saw him sneaking peeks at her chest when he thought she wasn’t paying attention, but he at least made an effort to keep his eyes on her face most of the time. He at least tried to get to know her a bit.

He was not a friend, but as Ann spent time with Ryuji she found she could not call him an acquaintance either. School buddies was the best description they could think of. They hung out during lunch and played video games on their handhelds. She bought him the newest volume of his favorite manga one time as a thank you for beating the crap out of a boy who decided he was a bit too confident for his own good. She laughed with him because even though them getting detention was awful - she got it too because of course she did - laughing about the incident made it easier to move past it.

Today Ryuji was absent, so Ann found herself sitting on her own during art class as the teacher talked about the magnificence of painting. She rolled her eyes and wished they would stop talking about painting and let her actually paint.

“So everyone take out your brushes and paint whatever is on your mind.” She said, “It can be anything.”
Some of the boys snickered and the teacher slammed her ruler on the desk.

“Anything except that!”

Ann heard some more snickers and a few groans then turned her attention to the blank canvas in front of her. The teacher said she could paint anything, but that just made it harder to decide what to do. The pictures her parents sent her of Finland were still fresh in her mind, and after thinking about it a little more she decided to see if she could replicate one from memory. She opened her paints, dipped her brush in some green and began setting to work.

She stopped for a second when a girl walked over and stood at the canvas next to her. She had black hair which was pulled into a short ponytail. For a second Ann wondered if she was gonna say something, maybe try and swipe her paint set, but instead, she just put her canvas on the free stand and began to set to work, starting with a nice deep blue. Ann turned back to her work and resumed painting.

After a few seconds of working with green, she switched to blue. She paused. The painting looked flat, maybe a lighter color to make the trees pop. She searched around for her yellow, but when she could not find it she shrugged and switched to orange.

A few more minutes of painting and she grinned as she looked at her picture.

“Excuse me.” A voice said, and she looked at the girl seeing she was staring at her painting. Now she remembered, the girl was Shiho Suzui, a quiet girl who did not really hang out or speak to anyone in their class. “You’re Takamaki-san right?”

Ann blinked, confused, before remembering that in Japan, acquaintances addressed each other by last name first. She always called Ryuji by his first name, and outside of him laughing the first time she did, he really did not care. “Yes. You need something Suzui-san?” She asked. She did use the right honorific, right?

Suzui looked at her, then the painting, then back at her. “I don’t really know how to tell you this, so I’ll just be blunt.” She said, “Your painting is awful.”

Ann lurched back, face bright red and then she glared at Suzui. “Oh yeah, well yours is-” She stopped and leaned over to get a look at Shiho’s painting. She froze, it was a mess of purple, red, and blue swirls that looked like they were ready to swallow each other. “Yours is...wait, what the hell is that?”

“It’s what I’m thinking about,” Suzui explained. Ann looked at her, confused. Then back to the painting. Then back to Suzui.

“But it doesn’t look like anything.”

“Exactly.”

Ann stared at her, then the painting, then looked back at the girl in question to see she had a bright grin on her face. She chuckled, then Ann started laughing so hard, her teacher yelled at her for disturbing the class and asked her to leave.

4/26/2016 (Tuesday)
Shujin Academy
Ann wandered the hallways, looking for the sight of short black hair and a distinct butterfly beret. She did not see Ikusaba anywhere in the school on Monday, so she was hoping to run into her on her way to the cafeteria. As she hurried down the stairs and walked through the hallway, she saw someone exiting the cafeteria wearing the item in question in her hair. She had her arms folded across her chest, like she was holding onto her lunch like her life depended on it.

“Ikusaba!” Ann shouted. The girl froze, then began to walk faster. “Ikusaba wait!”

She moved faster but did not outpace Ann, who practically ran up to her and put a hand on her shoulder. The gesture made the upperclassman freeze in place. “Ikusaba, I promise I’m not mad, but why didn’t you show up on Sunday?” She asked and waited for the girl to answer before speaking again. “Did something happen? Please, if you want we can meet after school and-”

“Takamaki-san,” Ikusaba spoke and Ann moved her hand away as the girl turned around. Ann’s eyes widened as she saw her upperclassman had a large bruise over her eye, and a part of her lip was cut and swollen. She looked like someone had jumped her and beat her face in. There was another bruise on her left cheek. When she spoke, her voice sounded strained, and fresh tears formed down her face, “Please leave me alone.”

It took Ann seconds to process Ikusaba’s appearance, her mind racing, as she realized who could have done that to her. “Just tell me one thing. Did he do that?” She asked. Ikusaba looked away, and grabbed her arm, like she was too ashamed to answer. Ann took a step closer. “Did he?”

“Did who do what?”

The voice behind them made Ann freeze and the girl she was questioning look up like she had seen a ghost. Ann turned around and saw the one person she had hoped would not be within two feet of her looking at them, a fake smile and feigning confusion. “Kamoshida?” She asked. He grinned and looked at Ikusaba.

“Everything alright? Ann’s not bothering you is she?”

“No. I-I was just returning to my classroom.” She said, giving a low bow. “P-please excuse me.”

Ikusaba raised herself up and without waiting for Kamoshida to say anything turned and hurried down the hall. He then turned his attention to Ann, who diverted her eyes, not wanting to look directly at him. “Now, since we have some time alone...”

“What do you want?” Ann asked. She did not look at his face, which made his silence all the more nerve-wracking. She could feel his intense gaze on her and she wanted nothing more than to try and run. She would not run, she would not show him any weakness. She decided that just as he began to speak again.

“Wow, such a harsh tone. You okay?” He asked. Ann looked away from him.

“I’m fine.” She said trying and failing to keep her voice steady.

“Still upset about what happened to your friend?” He asked. Ann did not answer. She saw him shrug out of the corner of her eye. “Can’t blame you. Anyone would be upset if it were there best friend.”

His sympathy sounded so fake, Ann felt disgusting just being near him. She wanted to scream at him, to call him out on his facade and tell him to his face he was a monstrous human being.
Instead, she kept silent, she was not going to cause a scene in front of the student body. Not while he still had a free pass to do whatever he wanted.

However when he said something - she had no idea what - and she felt his calloused fingers on her cheek, she reacted before she could think. She grabbed his hand, squeezing it tight as she could, pulled it off her. She froze as she realized what she just did, and looked at him. There was shock on his face, which changed to annoyance. Then anger.

She closed her eyes and let go of his hand. She could tell he was already looking for a reason to make her life more difficult than it already was. “Sorry. I guess I’m still kinda on edge.” She said, trying to weave a convincing lie. “What with Shiho and the rumors…I’m sorry.”

She looked up at him with the most pitiful look she could manage waiting to see his reaction. That anger appeared to subside, though she could see in his eyes he was already scheming. “Well, I guess at your age it’s easy to get emotional about, well, everything.” He said, then a smirk formed on his face, “If you need to talk about it, I’m free after school in the PE office.”

“No, I have to be somewhere after school. It’s my job.” Ann said. That was not a lie, her photographer asked her if she could be in Harajuku by four-thirty. Kamoshida normally backed down by that point.

“Oh. Well if you want I’d be happy to take you there. Probably be faster than taking the train.”

She wanted to scratch the smile off his face but instead kept her composure. “Actually, a friend is already going with me and you know how photographers are. They don’t want a lot of people there to avoid leaks.”

“Oh?” Kamoshida said. That terrible smirk returned. “What friend? It’s not Sakamoto, is it? You of all people should know better than to associate with someone like him.”

Ann kept her face neutral, not wanting it to be obvious his words bothered her. That was when the bell rang and Ann never thought she would be so relieved to go back to class. Kamoshida shrugged and stepped to the side. “Let me know when you change your mind.”

Ann nodded, keeping her head down, and walked past him. She climbed the stairs and the moment she could not see him anymore, hurried to the second floor. She stopped and leaned against the wall, feeling herself shaking. Even after everything he did to Shiho and the volleyball teams, he still had the gall to try and play games with her. She watched as everyone else filed into their classrooms before going to hers. She took a seat at her desk and looked up to see Mishima entering the classroom.

Ann guessed Ryuji had to be back in his classroom too. She pulled out her phone and brought up their group chat.

Ann:
I saw Ikusaba during lunch.

Ryuji:
Yeah?

Ann
Kamoshida got to her.
Ryuji:
What?!

Ann saw Mishima look at her then take a seat at his desk.

Yuuki:
What? How?

Ryuji:
That’s not possible! How?!
There’s no way he should have known you were going to talk to her!

Ann:
I don’t know! I just saw her and she had bruises on her face and a bloody lip.
When I tried to ask her about it, Kamoshida showed up.

I bet he’s watching us and knows what we’re up to.

Ryuji:
You gotta be effing kidding me…

Yuuki:
But how would he be watching us out of the school?

Ryuji:
Well, it could be he has someone spying on us.

Yuuki:
But still, out of school?

Ryuji:
You know how he is Mishima, he could easily get someone to do it off school grounds.

Ann thought Ryuji’s statement over and found he was right.

Ann:
I got some other news too and a bit of a favor to ask.

I have a photoshoot after school and Kamoshida was persistent about taking me to it.

I’m not letting that son of a bitch see me while at work, especially with what I’ll be wearing.
I need you two to come with me, or at least walk
with me to the train station so he doesn't follow.

**Ryuji:**
*Yeah, no problem.*

**Yuuki:**
*I can’t. I’m stuck on classroom duties.*

**Ryuji:**
*Ah damn. But that’s okay, just one of us should be enough right?*

Ann hesitated. One person should be fine, but if it was just Ryuji, that would give Kamoshida more of a reason to follow them.

**Ann:**
*Considering it’s Kamoshida I don’t know if he’ll back down if it’s just you taking me.*

*Especially since he was badmouthing you just now.*

**Ryuji:**
*Of course he was …*

*Well, I guess I can ask around. Is it a swimsuit issue? Someone might come along to see that.*

Ann’s eyebrow twitched at Ryuji’s question. He probably meant well, in fact, she was sure he did, but the idea of asking a guy to walk with her to a swimsuit shoot to leer at her just so she did not get leered at by Kamoshida left a bad taste in her mouth. She was about to reply but stopped when she heard Ushimaru clear his throat.

“I see not everyone wants to pay attention today.” He said. Ann tensed up and hid her phone in her pocket as he walked over to and began approaching her desk. She almost expected him to stop in front of her and demand she hand over her phone or read her texts out loud. Instead he walked past her and stopped at Akira’s desk. Ann turned around in her seat.

Akira was still asleep; the bell had not woken him up. She jumped in her seat as Ushimaru slammed his fist on his desk and the teenager snapped awake, eyes wide, looking like he had just been scared by a ghost. He looked around, confused and still half asleep. It took a moment for him to realize what was going on. He then looked at Ushimaru, who even through blurry vision he could see was glaring at him. He hurried and put his glasses back on.

“Sleep in my class again, and you’ll go straight to the principal’s office.” He said. He then turned to the rest of the class, “That goes for all of you, you try anything: sleeping, playing on your cellphones, and you’ll be out of here before you can say you’re sorry.” He looked back at Akira. “Is that understood?”

Akira was quiet at first, eyes downcast, and when he finally spoke his voice sounded strained. “I understand.”

Ann watched as he avoided looking at anyone, keeping his eyes on his desk. When Ushimaru
walked back to the front of the classroom he finally looked up, eyes locking with Ann’s for a brief second before he leaned forward and began playing with his pencil. Ann turned her attention back to the front of the class so Ushimaru did not try and make her his next target.

She slipped her phone out of her pocket intending to reply to Ryuji before stopping. She thought it over and decided she knew who could help her out.

After class, just as the bell rang she turned around as Akira was packing his things. “Hey.” She said. He looked up at her for a brief second before putting his pencil case in his bag. “Sorry, I know you usually want to leave right away, but I need a big favor.” She said. He looked at her. “Can you please help me out? I’d be really grateful.”

Akira paused and looked back at her. “Is it about Kamoshida?”

She bit her lip, “Yes, but it’s not what you think I swear!” She said, quickly when he got up. She stood up and grabbed his arm. He looked down at it, a frown on his face, and she kept talking to keep him from pulling away from her. “Please hear me out! I just need someone to take me to the train station so he doesn’t follow me to my job.”

“Your job?” He repeated. “Why would he…” He paused and trailed off thinking about everything he had learned about Kamoshida. He then looked at Ann. He wanted to say no. He wanted to say no.

He sighed. “Alright, I’ll take you there. Not to the train station, but to your work, just in case.”

He saw Ann hesitate then sigh in relief. “Alright, that’s fine. Actually, I’d prefer that. Just don’t be surprised if they ask you to sign an NDA or something.”

He frowned confused. “What are you talking about?”

“...I’m a part-time model.”

The ride to Harajuku was awkward. Ann had sat in between the two boys, Ryuji looking like he wanted to start a conversation and Akira looking like he was actively avoiding engaging in them. He had asked Ann about her job and she explained that they were just going to take some photos for a spread for a summer fashion magazine. Akira nodded then fell quiet.

Ryuji was a little surprised Ann even got him to agree, but seeing him avoid eye contact made it clear Akira still did not want to associate with him. They had not spoken for a little over a week and judging by how he either gave one-word responses or no responses at all, it was obvious he was only staying around because Ann asked him too, not because he wanted to talk about what happened in the PE faculty office.

The photographers looked confused and annoyed at their presence, but once Ann explained what was going on, they agreed to let them stay nearby once they signed the proper paperwork - which was an agreement they wouldn't take photos of the shoot and spread them around. The two did so and Ann was taken to get dressed and have her make up applied. Akira took a seat on a nearby bench, and took a book out of his bag. Ryuji got a can of soda from a nearby vending machine and took a seat next to him. The teenager ignored him, sticking his book in his face, trying to pretend the other was not there. Ryuji took a long swig of his soda and fell silent, leaning over so his elbows were resting on his knees. He watched the crowds walking by, some people stopping for a second to see why there were photographers on the street before moving on their way.

After a waiting a few minutes more and hearing a few pages be turned Ryuji leaned back and
asked, “Watcha reading?”

Akira glanced at him then moved the book so Ryuji could see the title on the cover. *Cat’s and You: How to get your feline friend to stop treating you like a scratching post.*

“You’re still feeding that cat?” Ryuji asked. Akira nodded and went back to the book. “Are you having any luck with it?” A shrug. Ryuji guessed the shrugged translated to ‘no’ or ‘kind of’.

Ryuji turned his attention to where Ann was. He grinned as he saw her posing for the photographers and gave Akira a light elbow bump. “Hey, check it out!”

Akira glared at him but followed his gaze to see Ann posing for the camera. The cameraman made some gesture that Ann took as a cue to lean in, a grin on her face. There was a flash from the camera and praise.

It was obvious even from a distance Ann was having a lot of fun. She looked happier than she did at school.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Ryuji asked getting his attention. He nodded and turned back to his book. Ryuji’s grin dropped. “Come on you must have something to say. We’re seeing a photo shoot for a magazine! That’s not something you see every day.”

Again Akira ignored him, turning another page in his book. Ryuji frowned and continued to watch Ann’s photo shoot. Then after a few minutes more and the silence between them becoming too tense, Ryuji let out a deep breath.

“Look, I’m not really good at these kinda things but...I’m sorry.” He said. Akira paused in his page flip, “What you said last week, you were right. I effed up when I tried to slug Kamoshida.”

Akira was still for a moment, then finished turning the page and let his hand rest on his book before speaking. “Saying you're sorry isn't going to change what happened.”

“I know. I screwed you over. Hell, I screwed Mishima and myself over too, not gonna deny it. I acted in the moment, without thinking.” He slouched a frown on his face, “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Akira moved his head a little, Ryuji could not tell if he was nodding in agreement or not. He then closed his book and turned to him. “Tell me about the track team.”

“The track team?”

“Yeah. What did Kamoshida do to you? Why did you attack him?”

Ryuji looked at him, jaw dropped. "How did you-?"

He stopped and guessed Akira probably learned about the 'track incident' through Shujin's ever gossipy rumor mill. It would not be a surprise considering all the rumors their peers talked about. So instead he looked up at the sky, then at the ground, and frowned as he tried to think of the best way to start his story. His face turned a little red as he gave the first answer he could think of.

“He insulted my mom.”

It took several long seconds for Akira to process that information. “Huh?”

Ryuji rubbed the back of his neck. “Alright, some backstory. My dad was a jackass. I’d rather not
go into details, but he was and he’s been out of my life for about a decade now, so it’s just been me and mom. My mom, she does everything. Works long hours so we can pay the rent and bills, tries to keep me out of trouble, doesn’t always succeed, all the stuff a good parent does.

"She congratulated me for getting into Shujin by buying me a PS4. We typically don’t have enough money in the house for something like that. And she won’t let me help out either. One day I told her I got a part-time job to help pay the bills; she calls the convenience store I’m supposed to be working at to tell them I can’t work for them because I have to focus on school. That’s just the kind of person she is."

Akira was quiet, but nodded so Ryuji knew he was listening. Ryuji continued, “Well, one day at track practice Kamoshida’s running us harder than usual and I got mouthy with him because he refused to give us a damn water break. He gets snippy, tells me I’m scum with no right to tell him what to do, and uses my living situation as ‘proof’. Brings up my dad being out of my life and called mom some stuff that he probably calls most women when they’re not around. And I just start seeing red and next thing I know my fist is in his face. Then I’m on the ground screaming with this sharp ass pain cutting through my leg.”

“He broke it.”

“The principal didn’t bother asking me what happened. Kamoshida claimed it was self-defense, and yeah I guess if you squint really hard and twist the truth a bit, he could be right, but that doesn’t change the fact he was abusing me and my teammates. Course that didn’t matter since I’m the ‘troublemaking child of a woman who can’t keep a man’ so obviously it was an unprovoked attack. Exact quote from Ushimaru by the way.” Ryuji rolled his eyes, though the anger in his voice subsided a bit.

“You wanna know the worst thing about it? When we got home, she sits me on the couch and I’m expecting to be yelled at or told I’m grounded for a month. Instead, she tells me ‘I’m sorry that I can’t be a good mother for you.’ I’m the one who screwed up and yet my mom is apologizing to me. Shouldn’t that be the other way around?”

Akira diverted his eyes, not saying anything.

“I haven’t told my mom about the expulsion because if I do she’s gonna end up blaming herself again. And I don’t need to give her more shit.” Ryuji finished then after a few seconds added. “Busting Kamoshida, it’s not just about covering my ass to keep me in school, it’s about getting back at him for all the people he hurt. He shouldn’t be able to walk around free after what he did to Shiho, after what he’s doing to the volleyball teams, and what he did to the track team. We gotta do something about it.”

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” Akira muttered, repeating what Ann had told him only a few days ago. He saw Ryuji looking at him.

“Yeah, pretty much. People like Kamoshida don’t deserve to be walking around free.”

“People like Kamoshida have the world protecting them.” Akira told him, “It doesn’t matter what you do or what you say, they’ll still get away with it.”

“But there has to be a line. There has to be some point where they push so far someone has to lift their head up.” Ryuji said, “Besides if we don’t at least try who knows what Kamoshida will keep doing. And who else might jump off the roof...”

Akira sighed, his shoulders sagging. He felt like he was trapped in a box and a choked cry escaped

“No,” Akira said. He was not okay, “I don’t understand how you can still think things will be okay.”

Ryuji gave him a weak smile. “Honestly? I think it’s cause I keep thinking about what’ll happen if I don’t. I’m thinking about Ann, my mom, how all this will affect them. Heck, you too.”

“You barely know me.”

“Yeah, but I can tell you’ve been through a lot and you don’t need more shit.” He said. Akira said nothing, he had no idea how to respond to Ryuji’s statement, except to give a numb nod. “You don’t need to tell me your story if you don’t want to, but I can tell you right now there’s still time to turn this around. We still have a week.”

Akira’s fingers twitched, the grip on his book becoming tighter. He could feel his hands shaking, the world beginning to spin a little, then he felt a hand on his back and shoulder. “Whoa, easy.” He heard Ryuji say, felt the teenagers hands on him. He had started shaking.

The photographers were taking a short break so Ann came over to where they were sitting, still in the somewhat revealing outfit she had been dressed in. “Oh man, it’s too warm here.” She said, “Hey, Akira you okay? Ryuji what’d you do to him?”

Ryuji opened his mouth to say something but Akira shook his head. “I’m okay.” He said. He was not okay, he felt almost like he was not completely there, like his fingers had become numb. He loosened his grip on his book to find they were a pale white. He felt Ann take his hand in one of hers. He took a deep breath and let it out.

When he felt more composed, he spoke. “I’m scared.” He said, “I’m scared of going back to juvenile hall. Of what my parents might think that I failed my probation, barely a month after it started.” He was scared of his dad yelling at him and him hurting his mom by messing up.

Ryuji and Ann looked at each other and after a bit, Ryuji said, “We’ll make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Yeah, we aren’t gonna give up until Kamoshida pays for his crimes.” Ann said, “Like I said, we have to stop him-”

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” Akira repeated.

“Because we can’t let him keep getting away with this stuff.”

Akira looked between them and nodded his head. He still did not believe they could do it. Kamoshida was a powerful individual with connections and they were just a bunch of ordinary teenagers. He knew from first-hand experience what happens when someone like him went against someone with power. However, a small voice in the back of his mind was screaming at him to keep going. To help because if no one tried to stop Kamoshida, who would?

“I want to help.” He said before he could stop himself. He wanted to help, he was scared, but at the same time he could not just stand by and watch everything happen. Ryuji and Ann were staring at him, then they both smiled and Ryuji cheered loudly.

“Alright! With the four of us on him, Kamoshida won’t know what hit him.” He then paused and added, “Sooo...can you unblock my number now?”
“Oh. Right.” Akira answered, as he reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

“So I tried to arrange a meeting with Ikusaba-senpai and found her today with her face all messed up,” Ann said. After her photo shoot, she insisted they all get crepes. Akira found himself at a loss for words as he watched her gobble hers down. “What?”

“You really like crepes,” Akira said as he sipped on the coffee he ordered. Ryuji chuckled, a grin on his face.

“This is normal, but it is kinda funny seeing a model stuffing her face with sugar,” Ryuji commented. Ann glared at him. Akira took another sip of the coffee and tried to divert the conversation back to their previous topic.

“So you found Ikusaba-senpai and then what?” He asked. Ann frowned and explained the rest to him. When she finished he sighed and brushed some hair out of his face. He was hoping for more good news other than ‘we’ve been trying but haven’t gotten any luck.’ “So now you think Kamoshida is having someone tail you.”

“Only way he’d know about her,” Ann said. “Anyway I have an idea that might work but it’s kinda risky.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, you know what they say, video doesn’t lie,” Ann said. Ryuji and Akira looked at each other. They had no idea who said that. “We should get Mishima to record tomorrow’s volleyball practice.”

Ryuji looked at her, “Um, no offense, but there’s no way that’s gonna work. If it did, Kamoshida would have been busted by now.”

“But what other options do we have? I mean it’s not like we can do it. We aren’t on the volleyball team.” “Ann explained then after second looked at Akira, “You don’t have any ideas do you?”

Akira folded his hands in front of him and tried to think of something. An idea popped into his head, “Can’t we talk to the student council?”

They both stared at him and he could tell the suggestion sounded baffling to them. Ryuji then sighed and shook his head. “Hate to say it, but we’re pretty sure they aren’t gonna do anything.”

“Yeah, the student council is less for the students and more for what the teachers want.” Ann said, “Especially their president. I heard some students saying she knew what Kamoshida was doing to the track team and helped cover it up. Wouldn’t be surprised considering who she is.”

“I heard that too, but these are the people who are saying he carries a knife on him,” Ryuji said, pointing his thumb to Akira. “Weirdest thing he’s carried in his bag is a can of cat food.”

Ann looked at him, confused and concerned, “Cat food?”

“I’m friends with a stray cat,” Akira said though friend was still a stretch. The cat in question at least was now popping up faster when he dropped something off for it. It even let him pet its head before being startled by the morning bell. He saw the perplexed look on Ann’s face, then her eyes lit up.

“Oh, so that’s why you’re near the alley after school.” She said, “You know hearing you’re a cat
person is not surprising. You kinda look like a cat.” Akira felt his face turn red and checked his watch to find he had been out a lot later than he planned too. Sojiro was going to be on him for getting back so late.

“I need to go.” He said. Ryuji nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, I should get back too.” He said, “Let’s meet on the roof tomorrow. It shouldn’t be hard to so long as no one follows us.”

Akira nodded in agreement and Ann paid for their food before they left the shop and returned to the train station. While Ann and Ryuji were busy talking Akira found himself staring at them and then down at his hands. He should back out now while he still can, stay as far away from everything as possible so it did not hurt as much when they failed.

Except he couldn’t. He wanted to help. He wanted to help.

Chapter End Notes

...
The final bell rang and Akira, Ann, and Mishima were sitting on the school roof waiting for Ryuji to show up. They had been discreet enough not to be followed, and while they were sure they were noticed they doubted anyone cared enough to tell a teacher they were on the roof. The planters Ann and Mishima saw a few days ago were still present but had been moved around to capture more sunlight. Ann wondered for a brief second if they would run into that girl again. They all took seats around the desk.

It took almost ten minutes for Ryuji joined them. The teenager hurried up to the roof and once there Ann shook her head. “About time,” she said.

“Sorry. Ugh, what a pain in the ass.” He said as he walked up to them and took a seat at one of the free unused desks.

“Hello to you too,” Akira said, giving Ryuji a tired smile.

“Dude you look beat.” Ryuji pointed out.

"He didn't get a lot of sleep last night," Ann explained as Akira yawned and nodded.

“I am running on three hours of sleep, an hour-long nap, and no lunch,” Akira said, ignoring the concerned looks on the others faces.

“Dude, that's so not healthy. Go home and take a nap or something.” Ryuji told him and Akira shook his head.

"Said I wanted to help, so I'm here and I'm staying." Akira said, "What took you so long anyway?"

“Yeah, did something happen Sakamoto?” Mishima asked. Ryuji grumbled something under his breath before saying it out loud.

“The usual. School sucks, teachers suck, homework sucks. Oh and the student council president snuck up and interrogated me about some old bullshit while I was coming up here.” He said then paused as he looked at Akira. “Actually she was asking about that thing we talked about yesterday.”

“Huh?” Akira asked.

“You know, the track stuff.”

“She was asking you about the track team?” Mishima asked, his eyes wide. Ann frowned.

“Why would she care about that?”

Ryuji shrugged. “Don’t know, don’t care. She asked for my side of the story.”
"Did you tell her anything?" Akira asked interest piqued. Ryuji shrugged.

"Nah, I told her to eff off. The school already decided what it wanted to believe and nothing’s gonna change about it. Anyway, we need to start thinking of our next move. Yo Mishima, we need you to-"

Mishima pulled out his phone like he heard it go off and then looked at them. "Sorry, I gotta go. Maybe tomorrow?"

Ryuji was about to protest, but Mishima hurried off like he was in a panic. The other two watched and Akira got up from his seat.

“What’s gotten into him?” Ann asked. Akira kept his attention on the door back into the school. Something about Mishima’s sudden behavior was causing an alarm bell to ring in his head. He barely knew the guy, but even he could see Mishima suddenly taking off was unusual. He took a few steps forward, then quickened his pace and hurried down the stairs.

“Akira? Hey, where you going?”

Akira did not answer, following Mishima down the stairs and kept his distance as trailed behind him. He followed him down the hall and then into the practice building. He saw Mishima turn a corner and kept himself close to the wall. He poked his head around the corner and froze when he recognized where Mishima had gone. He was standing outside the PE faculty office.

Ryuji and Ann had mentioned that they thought Kamoshida was onto them and he felt his stomach drop as he connected the dots together. “Hey!” He jumped and turned around to see Ryuji and Ann had followed him. “What’s going on?”

Akira shushed them and looked back. The other two followed his gaze.

“Shit! What’s-”

“Mishima’s…” Ann started, losing her voice as she saw Mishima enter the PE office. “Dammit. He must have told Kamoshida about Ikusaba-senpai.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. Even after being threatened with expulsion he’s still doing Kamoshida’s dirty work?” Ryuji asked, his volume going up. “What the hell’s going on?”

Again Akira put a finger to his lip and told them both to be quiet. Ann then spoke a little quieter.

“What are we gonna do?” She asked. Akira frowned trying to think of something, but then pushed himself off the wall and turned the corner.

“Stay here.”

“What are you doing?”

“Going to ask,” Akira told them. Ryuji and Ann looked at each other then back at him. Akira took a deep breath and let it out, putting his hands in his pockets. He walked up to the door of the office and after some hesitation pulled a free hand out and opened the door.

The room was quiet and both had turned to see him. Kamoshida looked surprised, then glared at Mishima. “I thought I told you to lock it.”

“I…” Mishima started, his face was pale, and he was shaking a little. He then fell silent as
Kamoshida held a hand up.

“No, it’s alright. This could actually work out for us.” He said, “Come in Kurusu, make sure you lock the door behind you.”

Akira stared at him, hoping his glasses and hair hid his eyes well enough that it was not obvious he was nervous. He stepped inside and closed the door. “Door stays unlocked.” He said. Kamoshida shrugged.

“Guess it doesn’t matter.” Kamoshida said, “So what brings you here? Come to beg me to take back my threat? That expulsions gotta have you on edge.”

“Came to ask Mishima why he’s feeding you information.”

Mishima winced and looked down in shame. Kamoshida chuckled, “Simple. He keeps tabs on you guys, make sure you don’t cause me any trouble, and I let him stay in school. An eye for an eye. Or my good word in exchange for a few favors. Too bad about Ann though, she was a doll. Fell into a bad crowd, guess what happened to Suzui did a number on the poor thing.”

Akira glared at him and tried to keep his free hand steady. Kamoshida smirked, the teenagers silence amusing him. “Oh, that’s a scary look. That the look you gave the guy you assaulted?” Akira’s fingers twitched and Kamoshida scowled at him, “Punks like you don’t know your place. Unlike Mishima here, he knows he’s trash.”

“He’s not trash.” Akira said, “You’re a coward using him as your dog.”

Mishima looked at him, then Kamoshida when he let out a laugh.

“I’m a coward? That’s funny!” Kamoshida said, “Here I am, working to make sure you worthless piece of shits can get into colleges, and meanwhile there’s scum like you ruining your lives and trying to blame hardworking people like me. And I’m the coward? Which reminds me, I’ve heard from Mishima that you’ve been moping for the past week. That scared about getting kicked out huh?”

Akira was silent, trying to keep his composure, while at the same time grateful his hair did a decent job of hiding part of his face. Kamoshida took his lack of response as a cue to keep talking.

“Kurusu. The only coward here is you because you don’t understand what it takes to stay on your feet.” He said. “Tell me, how important is it that you stay in Shujin? I think the principal said something like ‘you mess this up, there will be no one else to take you.’ Am I right?”

Akira watched Kamoshida’s face and wished for a split second he could wipe that smirk off it. He was not surprised Kamoshida was getting a kick out of taunting him. Keeping a straight face was becoming more difficult as he kept talking.

“So why don’t we make a deal? I heard the student council president is poking her nose where it doesn’t belong. She’s a decent gopher for the principal, but if you ask me she doesn’t know her place very well.” He let out a small sigh. “Why don’t you bring her to me so I can have a little talk with her? Then you and I can discuss your expulsion. I admit I don't look like it, but I'm a reasonable guy. After a few favors, this whole mess could easily be swept under the rug. What do you say?”

Akira looked down at the floor. If he brought Makoto, then Kamoshida would revoke his expulsion. He hated Shujin, but he needed to complete the year in order to have his probation and his record lifted. He had to admit, a part of it was tempting.
Then the terrible thought crossed his mind of what Kamoshida could possibly do to her and he doubted he would simply talk to her. Not after what he did to Ann, Ryuji - who would still get expelled - and Ann’s best friend. He frowned and looked back up. “No.” He said.

“No?” Kamoshida asked. “You’re even stupider than I thought.”

“I’m not stupid enough to think you’ll keep your word.” Akira said, “I know people like you. You’re like the asshole who got me locked up with a record. You’ve threatened and abused your students. You talk about Ann like she’s your property. Her friend almost died because of you.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Kamoshida said, the grin on his face fading as Akira spoke, being replaced with a scowl.

“I know exactly what I’m talking about and you know what else? You can take your offer and shove it up your ass. Adults like you deserve to be locked up and left to rot and be forgotten!”

He touched a nerve, and he knew it the moment Kamoshida slammed his fist on the table. The sound echoed through the room and then it became quiet. Kamoshida stood up. “Mishima, leave. I want to talk to this brat in private.”

Mishima hesitated, but nodded and crossed the room. He gave Akira one last apologetic look before leaving the faculty office. Akira heard the door close behind him and for a split second, he wished he kept his mouth shut. He kept his eyes on Kamoshida, his head tilting upward as the man approached him. He never realized how tall Kamoshida was until that moment and as he did, he saw the man’s arm reach out, felt the collar of his uniform push against the back of his neck.

“Since you seem so convinced you know what you’re talking about, why don’t I give you a live demonstration of how I coach the boy’s volleyball team?”

Akira barely had time to think before feeling pain shoot through him. His glasses dug into his face, but it was Kamoshida’s fist hitting his head that had him seeing stars. He grunted, his vision spotting, then going black for a brief moment as he felt Kamoshida’s fist on his face again. He heard something crack then the back of his head slam into the wall. Kamoshida let go of him, and Akira’s vision spun as he collapsed on the floor. He groaned, forcing himself to open his eyes. His vision was blurry and sharp, his glasses were cracked, and he head felt fuzzy. He groaned and tilted his head up to try and get a look at Kamoshida’s face. The man had a grimace on his face.

“You’re pathetic.” He said. Akira’s eyes narrowed as he tried to catch his breath and forced himself to speak.

“No. You are.” He said. Kamoshida growled and Akira’s eyes widened as he felt Kamoshida kick him in the stomach. He cried out as he felt pain run through his abdomen, and coughed, saliva dripping from his mouth. He let out a pained moan as his body writhed in agony. He had not lost consciousness, but the pain running through him was so intense he couldn't move.

He could almost hear the whistle blowing as the officers in the juvenile detention center entered the room...then he came back to the present when he heard Kamoshida speak again, the teacher glowering at him.

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll keep quiet. Tell the nurse or any doctor what happened to you and you’ll be out of here faster than your little friends.” He said. Akira let out a small noise as he curled himself onto the floor. He heard footsteps, then a door opening and closing behind him. He stayed lying on the floor, trying to keep as still as possible until the throbbing in his head and his stomach stopped. He tried to take in a breath and let out a moan. He let his eyes close.
Then he heard the door open and he forced himself to open his eyes again. “Oh, shit!” He recognized Ryuji’s voice. He tried to move, then felt Ann’s hands on his shoulders as she helped him sit up.

“Easy, don’t move too much.” She said. Akira groaned a little and lifted his hand up to his glasses. He pulled them off and saw they were bent in places, and one of his lenses was cracked. One of them was even missing.


Ryuji and Ann looked at each other, then looked out the door. Akira tried to follow their gazes but found himself struggling to focus. His head felt like it had been cut open. Mishima was standing in the corner, he looked miserable.

“Kurusu, I…” He started then stopped and Akira thought he saw his head hanging. He wasn’t sure, everything was blurry. He could make out Ryuji looking at Mishima, but not if he was glaring at him or not. Then for a split second everything blackout before coming back into focus. He winced as Ann’s fingers touched his cheek.

“We should get someone to look at these.” Ann said, “The hospital isn’t a long walk from the school, we’ll help you get there.”

Ryuji sighed as he brought his attention back to Akira. “Shit man, what were you thinking?”

Akira opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again. “I don’t think I was.” He finally managed to say. He barely saw the two look at each other, before feeling himself being helped to his feet. He swayed a little but then felt secure when Ryuji slipped an arm around him to give him some support. He closed his eyes for a few long seconds to try and get his barrings and when he opened them again. His vision felt a little steadier, but it was hard to tell when everything was as blurry as it was.

A thought crossed his mind as Ann mentioned the hospital again and he shook his head, a mistake when it made the throbbing in his head worse. “Later. First, I need to get to the student council room.”

All three of them looked confused. “The student council room?” Ann asked. Akira nodded. “Help me get there.”

“But-”

“Please!” He said, a little louder. Ann fell quiet and after some hesitation, Ryuji nodded.

“Alright, but once we’re done whatever you need to do, you’re going to the hospital.” He said and once Akira nodded in agreement he helped him out of the room. Mishima stepped out of the way.

“Uh…” He started then when the others looked at him he swallowed and kept his head down. “Uh-I…”

“Save it.” Ryuji said, “We’ll talk about this later.”

If Mishima wanted to protest he did not, he just kept quiet keeping his head down as Ann and Ryuji helped Akira down the hall and back to the main school building.
It took more time than normal, but the three did reach the third floor and the student council room. Akira was sure he could keep himself upright on his own so he let go of Ryuji and knocked on the door. There was no answer so he knocked again.

“Yes, one moment.” A voice said. Akira recognized it and after a few seconds the door opened and he saw Makoto’s eyes widen as she stepped back. “Kurusu-san? What in the-what happened?”

She ushered them into the room and closed the door behind her. She then locked it and Akira took a seat at the table. He was starting to feel dizzy again, but he forced himself to look at Makoto when she spoke.

“Okay, please tell me what happened. Who did this to you?” She asked. Akira explained everything to her. He could not see her face well but did see her hand move to her chin and then her fold her hands into her lap while he spoke. When he concluded she sounded like she was at a loss for words.

“I see…” Makoto said, then fell silent. The three waited for a little while then Ryuji spoke up.

“So? Are we going to do anything? Go to the principal? The police?” He asked. Makoto frowned, trying to come up with an answer. "I mean, if we needed obvious evidence against Kamoshida we have it."

“The principal won’t do anything. I tried to speak to him the other day but…” Makoto started, trailing off and not noticing the surprised looks on Ryuji and Ann’s faces. She continued, "Kamoshida brings a good name to our school and the person he just attacked in what he’ll call ‘self-defence’ is the student on probation for a criminal record. The other two who witnessed it are…” She paused not wanting to insult them though she had a feeling she was doing a poor job of that already.

“So you’re just going to do nothing?” Ann asked. “Just sit there and twiddle your thumbs while he continues to ruin our lives.”

“I-I never said that. I’m just-”

“Just what?” Ann asked. The room became quiet and Ann threw up her hands, “You know what forget it, you're just as useless as the teachers here.”

Makoto stayed silent, but Akira noticed she had become tense, she winced like she had been hit, and her fingers twitched on her skirt. Akira put a hand to his head, it was starting to hurt again. It felt like pressure was being put on his skull and he was beginning to feel dizzy.

“Niijima-senpai, if there’s anything you can do, anyone who you know even cares a little about what Kamoshida is doing, or getting rid of him, please tell us.” He said, “I promise, if you’re worried about getting in trouble, we won’t tell anyone, but we need your help. Please.”

Makoto looked at him, then after a few long seconds nodded and stood up. “I think we need to speak to your homeroom teacher.”

“You’re homeroom teacher?” Ryuji asked.

"Kawakami-sensei?” Ann asked, "Why? I mean yeah she's not as bad as Ushimaru, but is she really going to do anything."

"Regardless, she's probably going to ask why Kurusu looks like he got into a fight.” Makoto said, "I've sat in on a few meeting with teachers and when he's not around Kawakami has not had the
Ann considered it. Her memory of the events was vague, but she did recall Kawakami being the only person to take action after Shiho jumped. She had called the ambulance, even followed up with her the next day. "Alright, but after we take Akira to the hospital and if we have time we go to the police."

"I understand." Makoto said then looked at Akira, "Are you okay Kurusu-san?"

Akira nodded slowly to not bother his head even more and stood up slowly. Makoto got up from her seat and urged for them to follow her to the faculty office on the second floor.

Going downstairs felt more difficult than going up them, but they reached their destination. Makoto stopped in front of the faculty office. She pushed open the door not even bothering to knock and as she hoped, Kawakami was sitting at her desk. She had her elbows resting on her desk, her hands to her forehead, as though she was trying to stave off a headache or delay the papers she needed to grade. She looked up and her eyes widened when she saw Akira. She then let out a frustrated sigh.

"Kurusu? Oh geez, I can only imagine the story behind this."

Makoto let them explain, standing to the side as Akira sat down and told Kawakami what just happened. When he shook her head. "You've gotta be kidding. Do you have any idea what you just did?"

"I hope not guarantee my expulsion?" Akira asked. Kawakami sighed.

"Why do I get all the troublemakers?"

"Come on sensei, you gotta help us. Please?" Ryuji said. She rolled her eyes.

"And why should I? You're the one who attacked a teacher last year, and don't get me started on you." Kawakami said looking at Kurusu. "I still don't understand why the principal let in someone with your record."

Akira opened his mouth trying to come up with some words, before falling silent. Again his record. Just hearing it brought up made him feel too defeated to speak. Makoto cleared her throat, getting Kawakami’s attention. "If I may Kawakami-sensei. It is true Kurusu has a criminal record, however, an accusation like this needs to be investigated." She said, "A student almost died. A student under the care of a teacher who is connected to a self-defense incident with one of our former track members. Then there are the rumors we've heard regarding his relations with some female students."

"I hope you're making a point Nijimachi-chan."

"It’s just the more I think about it, don’t you think it’s too much of a coincidence all these incidents happened around Kamoshida. Yes, Sakamoto has a motive-"

"Hey!"

Makoto ignored Ryuji and continued, "but neither Takamaki nor Kurusu had any reason to target Kamoshida for anything. Not until the day Suzui-san jumped from the roof. The star starter for the volleyball team, the best runner on the track team..." Makoto stopped and her face turned red as she realized Kawakami was glaring at her. “I’m sorry, I’m aware I’m overstepping my boundaries, but the more I think about everything that’s happened since his arrival the more obvious it becomes there needs to be an investigation. A proper investigation.”
Ryuji stared at Makoto, opening his mouth and then closing it before turning his attention back to Kawakami. “She’s right. Please Kawakami-sensei. We wouldn’t be doing this if we weren’t positive Kamoshida was a bad guy.”

“Sakamoto, you have a well-known grudge against Kamoshida and a history of troublesome behavior. However...” Kawakami said then after a few seconds of contemplation, let out another tired sigh. Even if what she said was true, Ryuji’s more trouble making tendencies only started after ‘the track traitor incident’ as the students liked to call it. Before than Kawakami knew Ryuji had never been a good student when it came to grades, but he took his duties and contributions to Shujin seriously. It was expected that he would receive a recommendation and scholarship for college.

Then there was the uneasy feeling she got around Kamoshida.

She took another deep breath and let it out. She then turned back to her desk and dialed a phone number. They watched and waited as she spoke. “Hi, sorry, but can you find someone to cover my shifts until Saturday? No, just some issues with the start of the school year. There was an incident and...uh huh. Yes, if she can take my shift tonight and tomorrow I can cover her weekend. Thank you. Yeah, bye.”

Ryuji, Ann, and Makoto exchanged looks while Akira raised a confused eyebrow. Kawakami hung up, put her hand to her forehead and rubbed her temples. She then turned to them and gave them a look Akira had not seen on her face before. She looked serious.

“Alright. Takamaki, I want you to sit down and tell me everything you know.” She said. Her tone had changed; she sounded more authoritative, even if she still sounded tired. “As for you three: Nijimai-chan, take Kurusu to the hospital to get looked at then make sure he gets home. Sakamoto-kun you’re free to head home or go with Nijima-chan, I don’t care which.”

“Yes, Sensei.” Makoto said, “And thank you.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Ryuji said. Akira nodded, deciding he was not in a good enough state to speak. They helped Akira leave the faculty office and get downstairs. The hallway was mostly empty, students had either gone home or gone to their club activities. Ryuji helped Akira get his shoes on and the three left the school. Ryuji stopped once they got down the stairs. “Okay, I think I can take Akira from here-”

“I’ll accompany you to the hospital.” Makoto said. “Right now his well being is just as much my responsibility. I want to make sure he gets home alright.”

“Only because you were asked to. Would you have if you weren't?”

Makoto frowned. “Yes. I would have.”

Akira blinked as he overheard the two and for some reason chuckled. “Just gonna say I love how you two are fighting over me.” He said. The two looked at him and Ryuji gave him a small smile.

“Dude, I think Kamoshida did a big number on you if you think this is funny.”

“Just coping the best I can.”

They walked the street, passing the alley where a black cat with white paws watched them go by and began to follow.
The doctor concluded Akira had a concussion and he was going to have some bruising around his eye. He checked his eyes to confirm his pupils were dilating properly and not different sizes, then that Akira could track his finger movement. He then wrote down a prescription for acetaminophen and printed out some information on how to care for himself over the next few days. Akira had not looked at it, he had not put his glasses on since Kamoshida had broken them and he had a feeling trying to read anything would make his head hurt worse. Instead, Makoto read the instructions for him.

“According to this, you can take two painkillers every four to six hours. His notes also suggest taking tomorrow off from school.” Makoto said. Akira blinked then moved his head a little.

“Can’t, it’d look weird.” He said.

“Dude I’d jump at the chance, especially since tomorrow your face is gonna look like crap.” Ryuji said, “Honestly you should consider it.”

“Showa Day is the day after. I can survive the school wondering who I got into a fight with. Bet they’d like talking about that.” He said, a tinge of bitterness in his voice. The announcement the train was approaching Yongen-Jaya come over the loudspeaker. Akira winced and stood up. “I think I can make it from here.”

“No offense, but I’d feel a lot better taking you directly home,” Ryuji said. Akira did not need 20/20 vision to know Ryuji was serious and he felt dread welling up inside him. Ryuji wanted to take him straight home. Makoto nodded in agreement. His home was the attic of a cafe. He sighed and let the others help him up the stairs as they exited the train station and navigated the narrow street until they stopped in front of Leblanc. Both looked at the sign then him confused.

“Uh, you sure you're all there? We’re supposed to be taking you home,” Ryuji said. Akira sighed and pushed the door open.

“This is home.” He stepped inside and as he did Sojiro looked up. He saw some movement and guessed his eyes widened in either shock or anger (or both) from his appearance.

“What the hell?” Akira winced and kept his head down. Sojiro sounded angry. “Dammit, I thought I made it clear to you not to cause trouble! What did you do?”

Akira stayed silent and only looked up when Makoto stepped forward. “E-excuse me, are you Kurusu’s legal guardian?” She asked. He frowned as he looked at her.

“And you are?”

“My name is Makoto Nijima, I’m the Student Council President at Shujin Academy.” Makoto started. Sojiro's frown faded a bit, as he looked her over, then looked at Akira. I was asked by one of my teachers to escort Kurusu-san home and to explain his current condition. Unfortunately, there was an incident with another student—”

Sojiro held a hand up to stop her from talking and then motioned for Akira to go upstairs. The messy haired teen started for the stairs and Ryuji followed, knowing his presence was not needed. The two heard Makoto continue her story, her voice becoming quieter as they went upstairs. Once up the stairs Ryuji looked around the attic. He looked at the floor, the bookshelf, the empty desk, and Akira's bed, which looked like the mattress had seen better days.
“Wow, this place is... kinda dusty.” Akira groaned as he sat down on the bed. Somehow the dust made his headache feel worse. Ryuji looked around again and tried to come up with a compliment. “Got a lot of space though. I wish my room was this big.” He then frowned, “Kinda lacking in personality though.”

“Haven’t cared to personalize it,” Akira said running his hand through his hair. He then motioned to his desk. “Can you get my spare glasses? They should be in the left drawer.”

Ryuji nodded and once he had them handed them to Akira. He put them on, then after several seconds took them off. He could feel his eyes straining and decided they needed to rest for the day.

“You need anything else?” Ryuji asked. “Some water, something to eat? Maybe a poster to make your walls look less dull?”

“One Risette poster based on her newest album, please. Thank you.” He said. Ryuji chuckled.

“Nice try, you know how hard it is to get one of those?” He asked, a grin on his face. He saw Akira smile, “Ah there it is. Only took getting the shit beat out of you to get that damn grin on your face.”

Akira’s smile faded and he sighed and made himself more comfortable on his bed. “Won’t be smiling much if we get expelled.”

“We won’t.” Ryuji said, “We’ve been busting our asses for two weeks, something’s gotta hit and if Kawakami is talking to Ann about what happened to Shiho, we’ll get him. We have too.”

“I won’t be celebrating until we know.” Akira said, “Don’t be surprised if I pass out the day we get the news.”

“I’ll keep that in mind and make sure you don’t hit your head,” Ryuji said. “Everything is going to be fine. I have a pretty good feeling about this. Then we can have that tour we were planning. If you still want to that is.”

Akira paused and after some thought nodded. “Yeah, I think I’d like that.” He said. The sound of footsteps on the stairs caught his attention and he looked up to see Makoto had climbed up to join them. She looked around, her face unreadable in his visions naturally blurry state, but he did see her stop and look at them.

“I explained everything to Sakura-san. And by explained I mean lied. If he asks you any questions you were attacked by a student and tried to defend yourself. Sakamoto found you disoriented in the courtyard.” She explained. Akira nodded. “Anyway, we should leave so you can rest.”

“Yeah, I should probably get back to Shibuya, mom’s home early today and she’s probably wondering where I am.” Sakamoto said, “Well I’ll see ya later man. Seriously consider taking tomorrow off, you look like you need it.”

Akira shrugged and watched as he climbed downstairs. Makoto approached him. “You should take Sakamoto’s advice.”

“I’ll think about it.” Akira said, “Thanks for walking me to the hospital, and back here.”

“You don’t need to thank me, but if you don’t mind me asking...” Makoto trailed off and looked around the room before turning her attention back to Akira. “...these living conditions are odd. And I admit a little concerning. You do have all your necessities right? Plenty of food, a place to bathe?”
“I have access to the fridge and go to the bathhouse every other morning,” Akira said, waving the concern off. “Sakura-san's a pain in the ass, but he’s not abusing me or anything like that. That's what you're thinking about isn't it.”

To his surprise, she sighed in relief. “That’s good news. Unfortunately, I’ve read stories of teenagers in your situation living in poor conditions, and I admit I’ve seen it first hand. It’s not uncommon for people to take in...troubled youth, just for the government money I’m afraid.” Akira was quiet, a frown on his face as he remembered Sojiro did admit he had been paid to take him in.

“It’s not the best, but it’s not the worst.” He said, then forced himself to smile, “I mean I have no tv and the internet kinda sucks, but I have a bed and books. A lot of books.”

“Yes, your bookshelf is quite full,” Makoto said looking at the bookshelf. Her eyes then widened and she reached into her school bag. “Speaking of books, I should give this back to you.”

She reached into her back and pulled out a decent sized book and handed it to him. His eyes narrowed as he took it so he could make out the title. It was the book he had let her borrow two weeks ago. “You weren’t kidding when you said you would have it back to me in two weeks.”

“It was a more difficult read than I expected.” Makoto admitted, “I did like it quite a bit, but I think I prefer the retranslation from a few years ago more. It’s easier to follow and the word choice makes more sense. The older appears it's trying to make it sound more archaic than it actually is.”

“Probably just wanted to make sound more epic,” Akira said a smirk on his face as he let the book rest on his lap. “Thanks.”

“Of course.” She said then stood up, “Well I should get home. Please get some rest Kurusu-san.”

“I will. See ya Niijima-senpai.” Akira said. He was sure he saw a smile cross her face before she left down the stairs. Akira sighed and propped his pillow up before lying down to try and wrap his head around what he just did, and if it was even going to be worth it in the end. He closed his eyes then opened them when he heard footsteps coming upstairs and pushed himself up when he saw Sojiro enter the room.

“Just a heads up, I’m closing the store in an hour and calling Takemi over.” He said. Akira frowned and sat back up.

“I just saw a doctor.”

“Remember what I said the other day?” Sojiro asked and it took a second for Akira to realize what he was talking about. Sojiro had said Takemi was better than any doctor at a hospital. “I”m not having you dying on me because some idiot didn’t give you a good look over.”

Akira gave a small nod. “Okay.”

“You're staying home tomorrow too. Got it?”

Akira sighed and decided to give up arguing about school and just listen to what everyone was telling him. “Sure.” He muttered and laid his head back on his pillow.

Chapter End Notes
The original summary for this chapter was 'Akira gets the crap beat out of him' along with 'need for conflict results in original story timeline going off the rails and needing to be reworked'. Hate it when that happens X_X

Anywho next chaps a favorite and I'm excited about it <3
Akira Kurusu did not come to school. Sadayo Kawakami was not surprised, considering the state he was in when she saw him the other day. She was a little annoyed because she did want to speak to him in detail about his confrontation with Kamoshida, but at the same time, she was relieved he had stayed home. He looked like he had gotten hit by a truck.

His legal guardian had called the school to let her know Akira was staying home so Kawakami tried to put him out of her mind for the time being. Of course his absence, much like his presence, set the rumor mill ablaze and she was already hearing her students gossiping during class.

"Heard he got into a fight."

"Wonder who started it."

"I saw the bruises on his face! So scary!"

"Man, wonder what the other guy looks like."

Kawakami finished making her notes and looked up at the student she was talking to. It was a first-year student on the volleyball team with a black eye and a wrist brace on his right arm, which he was using to hide fresh purple bruises. "Is there anything else you’d like to tell me?"

"No, ma’am." He said.

"Alright. Thank you."

"Uh, if you don’t mind me asking--"

"-you aren’t going to get into any trouble for coming forward. I promise no one will find out." She
Kawakami put the paper she had written into another folder. He had been the third student she had spoken to about how Kamoshida handled the volleyball teams and every story made a chill run down her spine. They talked a lot about how Kamoshida was not afraid of using corporal punishment forcing them to run extra laps and denying them water breaks. Then there were the beatings, the boy she just spoke to had told her about one time he singled out one of the second years to ‘make them an example’ and kicked them so hard in the stomach they vomited on the gym floor.

Just as bad if not worse were the stories the two girls she spoke to had told her. One told her about how Kamoshida had made advances on her, so she began skipping practice. Then when she would show up, he would humiliate her in front of the other students. She had some bruises on her arms and legs explained they were from when Kamoshida made her run laps until she tripped and collapsed on the floor. The broken blisters were from slipping off a bar while doing chin ups.

Kawakami closed the book she had been writing notes in and turned off her phone's camera. She then let out a sigh as she put a hand to her head. The stories were terrifying, but there was one thing that made them all worse and knowing it made her stomach twist. They all happened under her nose and the signs were obvious. She had seen how Mishima had looked during the day, had seen the state Suzui was in when she saw her in the halls, and yet she had not even noticed.

Or maybe she did notice. Kamoshida always had an air about him that made the female staff uncomfortable. Maybe she had noticed and had just not cared enough to do anything about it.

When did she stop caring?

Kawakami found herself asking that question and thinking about how her own students had to plead with her to do something. Ann had started crying when she told her about the days that led up to Suzui’s suicide attempt and she found herself at a loss for words until she moved closer and gave the young teenager a shoulder to cry on.

“It’s alright. Everything is going to be okay. I promise.” She had said.

When did she stop caring?

Kawakami sighed again. She wished she could say she had no idea, but she would be lying to herself. The answer was in an incident that left her paying out of pocket every month to make amends for her past mistakes. And here she was making new ones. She frowned and decided when she stopped did not matter. All she knew now was one look at Kurusu’s face and hearing the pleas from the other two that something needed to be done. Enough was enough. Suguru Kamoshida needed to be locked up.

Kawakami stepped out of the faculty office and froze as she almost bumped into someone. “Oh, Kamoshida.”

“Kawakami, haven’t seen you in awhile.” He said, a grin on his face, which dropped with concern. “You alright? You look tired.”

“No more than usual. The cost of being a teacher, overworked and underpaid.”

“You got that right.” Kamoshida said then looked down the hall and then back to her, “By the way, I saw Gota leave here? Were you talking to him?”

Kawakami nodded, keeping her composure steady. “I noticed he hadn't turned in his most recent
assignments and wanted to speak with him.” She explained. It was technically not a lie, Ms. Chouno had been complaining about him neglecting his homework since the start of the school year.

“Look at you looking out for the kids here.” Kamoshida said, a small grin on his face then a shrug, “Though honestly, you’re wasting your time with someone like Gota. With his grades, he isn’t going anywhere in life.”

She frowned. That was not something a teacher should say. “Well, sometimes a little follow up goes a long way,” Kawakami said. Kamoshida gave her a skeptical look which she shrugged off. “Anyway, I should be going. I want to be set up for class before lunch is over.”

“Alright. Just don’t overwork yourself.”

Again Kawakami shrugged and walked away before Kamoshida could say anything else. She kept her notes as close as possible.

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4/28/2016
Takemi Medical Clinic
Afternoon

Akira had to admit, he had not expected to be woken up by Sojiro and dragged to the clinic down the street for a follow-up appointment. Takemi had checked on him the other day and concluded he was okay, but Sojiro insisted on having him looked at again. He blinked and then winced when Takemi gave him a light tap on the forehead with her flashlight.

“I told you not to blink.” She said. Akira let out a breath and tried to relax even as he felt his eyes begin to water. After several seconds, Takemi turned off the flashlight and began writing some notes down. Akira glanced up at Sojiro.

“Is this really necessary?” He asked.

“Yes. Did you forget what I told you last night?”

Takemi chuckled at Sojiro's answer, getting Akira's attention. “That’s just his way of saying he’s worried about you.” She explained. Sojiro grumbled something under his breath. “Anyway, you seem to be recovering quite well, you should be back in school tomorrow - oh right, tomorrow’s a holiday. Saturday then. Lucky you, you get to sit around and watch TV for two days.”

“I don’t have a TV,” Akira said.

“Oh that’s right, you’re staying in the cafe,” Takemi said then paused and gave Sojiro a disapproving look. “You never put a TV in the attic?”

“There was no point, with the state it was in until he showed up,” Sojiro said. Takemi’s stare bore into him and after a few seconds, he sighed in defeat. “Geeze you just as bad as her. Alright, we’ll go to the second-hand shop and see if there’s something there. A set ten years out of date is better than nothing.”

Akira nodded but found he was not very interested in a TV. He wanted to take a nap because even if his head felt a little better he still had a horrible headache and it made him feel tired. Takemi wrote down a few more notes and then closed what was now his medical folder.
“Alright, I have everything I need. Congrats, you’re now a part of my medical family of... a very small number.” She said. Akira raised an eyebrow. The smile on her face was unsettling. “Outside of your mild concussion and obvious lack of a proper sleep schedule, you’re probably the most mundane patient I’ve ever had. Hopefully, that means you won’t need much medical attention in the future.”

“You’re a doctor, don’t you want me to need medical help?” Akira asked. Takemi shrugged.

“No, not really.” She said then after a few seconds added, “There is one thing I want to discuss in private. Sojiro, can you wait outside?”

Sojiro shrugged and grumbled as he left the room. Once the door was closed Takemi looked at him. “Your hands are trembling.” She pointed out.

Akira stared at her, then looked down and saw his hands were shaking a little in his lap. He frowned and folded them together, squeezing them tight to get them to stop. Takemi scribbled down a note.

“Your reaction tells me this has been happening for awhile. Are you nervous?” She asked. Akira was quiet, but his face turned a little red. Takemi watched him then nodded. “Come see me if it gets worse. Oh, and tell Sojiro I’ll give him the bill for your visit when I come in for my usual next week.”

Akira looked at her, hesitant and unsure what to say, but then gave her a small thank you and left the exam room. He gave Sojiro Takemi’s message and saw the older man smirk as they left the clinic.

“She’s very….” Akira started then stopped not sure how to phrase his thoughts.

“Deadpan? Sarcastic?” Sojiro asked, then shrugged. “It’s normal.”

“It’s off-putting.” He said.

“Yeah…” Sojiro nodded in agreement then smiled, “But it’s all part of her charm.”

Akira had a feeling the grin on Sojiro’s face was from more than just appreciation for the doctor's work ethic. He could not help but notice her short dress made her legs very… prominent. He kept the thought to himself as he walked with Sojiro down the street, keeping his hands in his pockets as they approached the second-hand shop.

They were greeted by a kind old man who Sojiro spoke to while Akira looked around at the items on display or laying haphazard on the floor. After some searching, he found a CRTV with a tag saying it was released in 2008. The old man looked happy he was interested in it, even offering to throw in a DVD player for no additional charge. Akira took him up on the offer, he liked the idea of being able to watch a movie or have it on for background noise and he paid the man the two thousand yen he wanted for the set.

It was a good deal but Akira found himself checking how much money he had left and would not be surprised if he ran out before the end of next week. His stipend did not come in until May 9th and that was assuming he was not arrested and thrown back into juvie.

Juvie. The thought made the color drain from his face and for a second the room became slanted. “Hey!” He felt hands on him and it took him a second to realize Sojiro was keeping him steady. He waited a few seconds for the world to right itself before moving away.
“Sorry.” He muttered, keeping his head down so his hair obscured his eyes. He could tell Sojiro was watching him.

“Come on, I’m taking you back to the store.”

Akira did not protest, he nodded as Sojiro told the shop owner he would be back to get the television in a half hour. He walked Akira back to Leblanc and once inside Akira started for the stairs. “Hey, one second.” He said getting the teenager to look at him. “You sure you’re alright?”

Akira raised an eyebrow and pointed to his head. “Concussion. Fight in school remember?”

Sojiro frowned and Akira had a feeling he was well aware if his dizzy spell was because of that, he would be back in the clinic. He sighed. “It’s just stress from school. Like you said, no one wants a criminal around and Shujin does a great job of reminding me of my record every single day I’m there.”

It was not a complete lie, it was the threat of expulsion that was doing him in the most, but just being in school was exhausting. Akira found himself watching Sojiro’s face, unable to read it. Then the man shook his head. “School’s changed a lot since I was your age. Just one step into the building and you can tell. The atmosphere in that place is all wrong.”

“Did you go to Shujin?”

“No, it wasn’t around when I was your age, but you seen one college prep school you’ve seen them all.” He said as he grabbed a can of coffee beans off the shelf and motioned to the fridge. “I got you something for lunch, it’s in your fridge.”

Akira looked at him, a little surprised, then opened the door to find there was a small plastic box with a sandwich cut in half inside it. It looked like it was something he could buy at the local grocery store. “When did you-?”

“This morning while you were still asleep.” Sojiro said, “Don’t think I’m going soft on ya, but I feel sorry for you getting your ass beat like that. Don’t need to pay me back or anything either.”

Akira grunted and pulled the container out of the fridge. Sojiro poured him a glass of water and told Akira he was going back to the shop to get his new television. Akira ate in silence in one of the booths as Sojiro left the store. He pulled out his phone and flipped it on and immediately regretted it. His head was still too fuzzy to want to read.

He had a text from Ryuji, updating him on what was going on at school. Ann gave them some details on what Kawakami asked her the other day. Ryuji also mentioned feeding the stray cat for Akira in the morning, but it never showed up.

Akira sent them a thank you along with a message saying he would see them when he got back to school before turning off his phone. Once he finished his meal he cleaned his dishes in the sink and went upstairs. A few minutes later he heard the cafe door open and before he knew it, he was sitting on his bed - Sojiro told him to stay back so he didn’t hurt himself - watching as a man in his thirties set the television and DVD player up for him.

“Alright, that should do it.” He said.

“Great. Thanks for the help.” Sojiro said, as the man nodded and went back downstairs. He then looked at Akira. “Don’t turn the volume too loud or I’ll rip it from the wall.”

“I won’t,” Akira said. Sojiro, appearing to be satisfied by his response, went back downstairs. Akira
walked over, picked up the remote and turned the television on, then took a seat. The picture quality was not as bad as he thought it would be, but it was still a sharp difference from the television downstairs and even the one he had back home.

Home. Akira frowned as the word crossed his mind. He had not heard about anything from home since he was dropped off at the train station. No call from his dad making sure he was not getting into any trouble, no updates on his mom. He wondered if she was okay, it was getting warmer so her condition should have been improving, but even with better whether there were still bad days.

He lifted his phone up and wondered if maybe he should try calling home. He lifted his finger to the power button and stopped. He wanted to call his mom, but what would he do if his dad picked up? And what would he tell them? That he was going to get expelled and sent back to juvie? He put his phone down and sighed. Maybe he should wait until he had some actual good news for a change.

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4/29/2016 (Friday)/Showa Day
Cafe Leblanc
Daytime

Akira’s plan to try and catch up on his sleep came to an abrupt end when he was woken up; not by Sojiro, not by his phone - which was still off - and not by the TV, but when he felt something soft pat him on the head. He felt it again and maybe it was just his imagination but he was sure something was on his chest. He winced and opened his eyes and came face to face with a black furry head with bright blue eyes.

Akira blinked as he stared at the furball, concluded he was dreaming and closed his eyes again. A few seconds later he heard a small noise and his eyes snapped open. He stared right at the face and became aware of the fact its weight was pressing on his chest. He then - in a half asleep daze - cried out and moved so quick the thing had to jump off him and he fell face first on the floor.

The teenager let out a groan as he forced himself into a sitting position and heard the small noise that he now recognized as a meow coming from his bed. He looked up, a cat was staring at him. Not just any ordinary cat, it was the same cat that had been hiding in that trash can in the alley for the past two weeks. The one he had been feeding. “I know you.” He said, resting his elbows on the mattress. “What are you doing here?”

The cat meowed and Akira let a soft smile cross his face as he reached a handout. The cat sniffed his fingers then licked one before moving its head towards his palm so he could pet it. “Oh, so you like me now. Must have been all that tuna I gave you.”

The cat meowed as though confirming Akira’s statement and a small chuckle escaped his lips. However, the moment was cut short when he heard footsteps on the stairs and turned around to see Sojiro hurrying up. He looked like he was trying to hide any concerns under a mask of annoyance.

“Hey, what’s with the noise? It’s opening hours-” he stopped and Akira saw his eyes widen and he go from pretending to be annoyed to what sounded like horror slowly mixing with fury. “Is that a cat?”

Akira recoiled as Sojiro’s voice went up in volume and the cat’s ears drooped, his tail moving between his legs. Akira jumped to his feet, “I can explain.” He said, then paused. No, he could not. He had no idea how the cat ended up in his room let alone how it figured out where he lived. He
wince as he saw Sojiro's face turn red and he tapped his foot impatiently.

“You do remember you’re living in a restaurant right? My restaurant!” Sojiro said, “This isn’t some damn cat cafe! What the hell were you thinking bringing that thing here?”

“I-I didn’t bring it here. I swear!” Akira stammered and started to try and explain why there was a cat standing on his bed. As he did he felt his nerves shrinking as Sojiro continued to give him frustrated and even dumbfounded looks. When he finished, the man looked like he was going to blow his top.

“So you’ve been feeding a stray cat for two weeks and you didn’t expect it to try and follow you home? Are you stupid or something?”

Akira winced and lowered his head. Sojiro was yelling at him at this point and he put his hands in his pockets so his guardian could not see them trembling. Not that it mattered because his arms were shaking too. The middle-aged man, however, regained his composure, muttering under his breath. “First my favorite beans go bad and now this. Can this day get any worse?”

The two heard the sound of the bell from downstairs followed by a loud and cheerful noise. “Hello! Sojiro!”

The noise sounded like a young girl. Sojiro turned around and Akira heard him swear under his breath. “Yo Sojiro! Where are you?”

There was a brief pause then another voice spoke. This one sounded like an older woman. “Soji, are you up in the attic? Get down here, my new wheels came in!”

“Dammit,” Sojiro grumbled and looked at Akira. “Stay up here and don’t even think about coming downstairs.”

Without waiting for Akira’s reply, Sojiro turned and hurried down the steps. Akira stared as he left then looked at the cat meowed at him, and gave him what Akira guessed was a smile. After a few seconds of contemplation, Akira decided he did not feel like holding himself up in the attic. He climbed down the stairs, the cat climbing off the bed and following him. As he got downstairs he could hear Sojiro talking.

“What are you two doing here? I told you because of that kid you couldn’t come visit for awhile.” He said.

“Come on Sojiro, seriously? It’s been almost a month now, do you know how hard it is walking past this cafe and not going inside? It’s hard. Very hard. You’re completely throwing off my routine here.” The young voice said.

“You know how Futaba is regarding her routines.” The older voice added, a small chuckle in her voice.

“Damn right. I still don’t know what to do with myself with that extra two hours.”

Sojiro sighed, “I know, and I understand, but-”

Akira reached the bottom steps and saw Sojiro was talking to two other people. One a young girl with bright reddish-orange hair with glasses. She looked like he was around his age, maybe a year or two younger. The other was a woman in a wheelchair with short black hair. She also wore glasses. Right away he could see they were related, they had similar faces, even if the color of their hair was as different as night and day.
The younger girl’s grin then faded and she leaned a little to the left making it obvious she had noticed him. Sojiro then turned around and his face paled. The girl made a small noise and ducked behind the wheelchair. The older woman smiled. “Oh, is this the ‘part-timer’ you mentioned Soji?” She asked, then a smirk formed on her face. “Or is it more accurate to say the ‘bratty delinquent’ you agreed to take in?”

Akira stared at her, looking at Sojiro then back at her and seeing the girl with bright orange hair poking her head out from behind the chair. She raised her head slowly, then her eyes widened as she looked past Akira and to something behind him. “Is that a kitty?”

Akira looked at the cat in question, which meowed to get all their attention. Sojiro brought a hand to his forehead as though trying to stem off a headache, then walked over to the door and flipped the sign from open to closed.

The women insisted on Akira taking a seat across from her. The cafe was not the most wheelchair friendly place, so after she pulled herself out of it and took a seat in the booth, Futaba pushed it over to where Sojiro’s small number of customers would put their shoes. Sojiro poured her some coffee, then handed Akira a glass of water.

“That’s it? Soji, at least treat him to a decent brew.” She said.

“Kids recovering from a concussion. No caffeine for him.” He explained.

“Oh, that’s awful. Explains the black eye you got.” She said, nodding as he pointed it out, “What happened?”

“Fight in school,” Akira said and hoped she would not ask any more questions. To his relief, she did not, instead picking up her cup of coffee and taking a sip. She let out a small moan and placed the cup down. Akira took a sip of his water, then put the glass on the table before moving his hand to the cat’s back. The small furball had jumped into his lap as soon as he sat down and made himself comfortable. He had to admit, betting the small animal made him feel more at ease.

“Looks like he likes you.” The woman said. Akira nodded then looked up at her.

“So, who are you?” He asked. The woman looked at him, her amused smile never leaving her face, but she did look a little disappointed.

“I’m going to assume from your question, Soji hasn’t told you much about his family.”

“I sometimes hear him talking on his cell phone. Is he talking to you two?” Akira asked. The grin stayed on the woman’s face.

“You’re a smart kid. I’m Wakaba Isshiki, that is my daughter Futaba.” She said motioning to the young girl who continued to stare at him from behind the counter. Futaba seemed to be studying him to see if he was safe to be around or not. He gave her a smile. Futaba frowned at him. His smile dropped as he looked back at Wakaba.

“So, you’re Sojiro’s wife.” He concluded. Wakaba laughed.

“His wife? Please, no, Soji’s a lot of things, but the marrying type isn’t one of them.” She said. Akira saw Sojiro almost drop the plate he was cleaning. “We’re together, but not married. And Futaba isn’t his either if that’s your next question. I’m pretty sure if she were that bright orange hair would be impossible.”
Akira blinked not quite sure how to respond to such a forward statement. He glanced at Futaba who was helping Sojiro put some things away. He could not help but notice his guardian smile as he motioned for her to grab some canisters and check the dates, and help him write down anything that needed to be ordered. She then gave him a salute, calling him 'Boss'.

“How long have you known Sakura-san?” He asked noticing how close Sojiro was to the girl. Wakaba though for a moment then shrugged.

“Quite a while now. At least a decade.” She said, then smiled, “Long enough to not be surprised when he told us we couldn’t come to the cafe for awhile because he took in a ‘delinquent with a criminal record’. When he explained your story my first thought was ‘this is just like him to take someone in that needed help.’”

“Well, he did get paid for it.” He said as she lifted her coffee to her lips. His words made her pause, a frown formed on her face, then after a few long seconds she put the cup down and circled the rim with her fingers.

“Sojiro, you told me you refused to take any money.” She said. Akira froze, his eyes widened and his hand twitched. The cat looked up at him confused. He then turned to Sojiro who had paused when Wakaba spoke up. With all three of them looking at him he was less a grumpy old man running an old-style cafe and more a deer staring at headlights.

“Oh...did I.” He said. Futaba nodded her head.

“I distinctly remember you saying,” Futaba said, raising a hand up, “‘The kid's dad offered me a lot of money to take him, but I told him it was not necessary.’ Exact quote from April 2nd.”

"How do you remember that?"

"You know I remember everything."

"Except your bedtime..."

“You lied about being paid?” Akira spoke, finding his voice. The room became quiet. Sojiro rubbed the back of his head as both Wakaba and Futaba gave him disapproving frowns.

“A customer of mine knows someone who knows your parents. They mentioned how they were having trouble finding a caretaker for you after Shujin agreed to enroll you. I...kinda just offered.” He said.

“You just offered,” Akira repeated.

“Yes, I offered to keep an eye on you. I got a call from your dad a day after offering to pay me to take you in. What he was offering could have helped finish paying the house renovations, but something seemed off to me, so I refused. I’m not getting any money for taking you in, not even from the government.”

Akira turned away, looking down at the table. He felt confused and at a loss for words, and was not sure what to make of what he was being told. He was not sure whether he was upset Sojiro lied to him or shocked there had been no underlying motivation for him taking him in after all. He settled on confused as the words sunk in. He could not think of a single legitimate reason why Sojiro would lie about being paid to take him in.

However, his thoughts were shaken when he felt eyes on him and looked up to see Futaba had somehow snuck up on him and was now standing in front of him. He stared at her. She stared back,
tilting her head as though trying to read him. She then turned her attention to the cat who was now licking Akira’s finger.

“So, what’s his name and why does it smell like he’s been living in a trash can?” She asked, "And is it a boy or a girl?"

“Oh, well…”

While Akira had been feeding the cat for a few weeks now, he had never actually gotten a look at its collar. He adjusted his arms and moved the cat off his lap and onto the table, ignoring Sojiro’s frustrated grumblings. The cat was male, but when Akira looked around its collar he found it had no tags. “...nothing for an owner or anything.”

Futaba poked the cat’s head and shuddered. “Ugh, he feels like he hasn’t had a bath in months. Alright, before we conduct operation name the cat, we need to begin mission bathe the cat.”

Akira had to admit, she had a point, and was about to ask about a nearby vet or pet salon when Futaba grabbed the cat off the table. The cat yelped in surprise as Futaba ran with it out the door. “Futaba!” Wakaba shouted then sighed and shook her head. “And off she goes. Hope it doesn’t scratch her…”

“Hey,” Sojiro said getting Akira’s attention, “go make sure that thing doesn’t hurt her. Anything happens, it’s on you.”

“Me?”

“It’s your cat,” Sojiro said giving him a look. Akira nodded and hurried outside. He saw Futaba turn the corner just in time and chased after, catching up to her just outside a two-floor house with a small gate he did not recognize. She opened the gate and turned to him.

“Hey, you gonna help or what?” She asked. Akira sighed and put his hands in his pockets.

“Well, he’s my cat.” He repeated. He looked up at the house and seeing Futaba step into the tiny yard with no concerns, guessed it was where Sojiro lived. He took the cat and sat on the steps as Futaba hurried to get the hose.

Cleaning the cat had been an exercise in patience that left Akira soaked from head to toe in water. The cat yowled the first time Futaba turned on the water and Akira had to tell her multiple times to not put the spray on its strongest setting. Then they needed soap and she ordered him to go to the store to get some. Ignoring the looks he got for shopping while looking like a wet rat, he came back to find both Futaba and the cat had fallen into the mud, which led to more screaming from the cat and even the girl when Akira grabbed the hose and turned it on them.

By the time they were done, both of them were covered in soapy water and Akira’s vision looked like waves and then spotty after a failed attempt to clean his glasses. The cat, on the other hand, had clean fur which glistened in the sunlight and was glaring at them.

“Aww, kitty looks so cute when he’s not a matted furball,” Futaba concluded, a cheeky grin on her face. She reached out to pet the cat only for it to dart for Akira. Sojiro approached them and shook his head as he saw the mess they had made.

“I see you two were having fun,” Sojiro muttered moving out of the way so Wakaba could get a good look. She laughed, amused as Futaba gave them a thumbs up.

“Mission cat cleansing complete.” The girl said. Sojiro sighed and the young girl let out a sheepish
laugh. The cat climbed into Akira’s lap, not seeming to care he was soaked through his clothes and made a small noise that made it obvious he had declared the teenager his human companion. Akira looked at the small animal, and let a smile cross his face.

“He really seems to like you,” Sojiro said, mulling over his thoughts. “Alright, I guess you can keep him. Maybe having a pet will keep you out of trouble.”

Akira said nothing, but it felt like ice had just fallen into his stomach. He still had no idea what would happen with Kamoshida and his expulsion. He tried to push the thought to the back of his mind. “So he’s mine?”

“On three conditions. First, you’re solely responsible for him. I’ll help you buy some necessities today but after that, you’re on your own. Second,” He paused wondering if his suggestion was a good idea then looked at Wakaba who gave him a nod, “You help me out in the cafe starting next month. Not often, maybe once or twice a week.”

“Are you hiring me?” Akira asked.

“More like I’m offering you volunteer work you can’t refuse.” Sojiro said, “Think of it as you paying your rent and earning your keep.”

Akira gave a small nod. “And the third?”

“Third: I name the cat,” Sojiro said. Akira’s eyes widened a little. That third condition was not what he was expecting. “I’m thinking...Prince!”

The cat’s ears perked up and it let out an angry hiss that startled all of them. Futaba laughed and Wakaba grinned. “I don’t think he likes that name Soji.”

Sojiro let out a sigh. “I rescind my third condition. Name him whatever you want.”

“Well let's see,” Futaba said, crouching down next to Akira to get a better look at the cat. “He’s dark, like a ninja. I propose the name Neko Shogun.”

The cat let out a displeased noise which had all four of them wondering if the cat was smart enough to understand them. “I’m thinking something a bit simpler, like Chestnut,” Wakaba suggested, again the cat gave a displeased grunt. “Hmm, doesn’t seem to like that one either. What about Kuro? You like that one little guy?”

The cat made a low noise in his throat. Akira frowned and then looked up at the sky trying to think of something. He looked back down at the cat. “Mr. Sparkles.”

Akira winced when the cat bit his finger and next thing he knew Sojiro was hurrying him back to Takemi.

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4/29/2016 (Friday)/Showa Day
Cafe Leblanc
Evening

Akira sighed as he changed into his pajamas and laid down on his bed. What he thought was going to be a slow and relaxing day had been more hectic than he thought. However, he let a small smile form on his face as his new feline companion curled up next to him letting out a happy meow.
There was now a food bowl and a litter box in one of the corners, and a few cans of cat food in one of the drawers of his desk. Akira made a mental note that he would need to remember to clean the litter box at least once a day. He reached a hand up and scratched the cat behind his ears.

“Guess you’re mine now. Or maybe it’s more like I’m yours or something.” Akira said and the cat let out a happy meow. He then turned his attention to the new tags attached to its yellow collar. One had Akira’s name and the address of the cafe on it, the other was the cat’s new name. He looked at the tag and smiled.

“Well, I guess welcome to the family, Morgana.”

Morgana meowed again and Akira smiled before stretching and making himself comfortable. It was still a little early, but his headache had resurfaced and it was making him feel tired. He took his glasses off and placed them near the windowsill. “Alright, bedtime. Night Morgana.”

He covered himself with his blanket and closed his eyes. He twitched when he felt a weight on him, then realizing it was just his new companion climbing on him to make himself comfortable. His sleep was a little more peaceful that night.
Hey everyone, I'm sorry this chapter is a day late. The last few days have been rough between work and personal stuff so I fell behind on a few things. But it's here so enjoy!

Content Notice: Nothing specific, but the 'r' word is mentioned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

4/30/2016 (Saturday)
Shibuya Station
Early Morning

It was not uncommon in a city like Shibuya for police cars to be on the streets, though most police either walked the sidewalks or rode bikes. However, the sight of two cars near a well-known school had many stopping and asking questions.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"That school...."

"Isn't that where your cousin goes?"

"The hell's going on?"

The question hung in the air as two police officers stepped out of one of the cars and entered the school. Kawakami was waiting for them and at their request guided them to the principal’s office. She took a deep breath to steady her growing nerves and knocked on the door.

"Yes, come in." The Principal said and Kawakami already knew he sounded nervous. He could obviously see the police cars out his office window. He cleared his throat and tried to make himself appear composed. "Was, what is it- I mean, how can I help you?"

One of the officers stepped forward and spoke, "Yes, we’d like to speak to you regarding one of your teachers."

Either the trains were late or he was late; Akira had no idea because it felt like the timetable in Shibuya shifted one way or the other every few minutes. He sighed as he checked his phone again, then tilted his head when he heard a strange noise coming from his bag and felt it move a little. He sighed, looked around, then knelt down and pulled the bag off his shoulder.

He opened his school bag and Morgana’s head popped out. The cat gave Akira an annoyed meow and what the teenager guessed was the equivalent of a glare. “What's wrong?”

The cat made a noise that sounded like a disgruntled grumble. Akira sighed, he knew Morgana would hate being stuck in his bag. “I know it’s not fun hiding in there, and I’m sorry if my book
almost squished you, but you just need to stay in my bag until I get to school. Then you can wander
about while I’m in class. Okay?”

“Uh, dude.” A voice behind him made Akira jump at first, but he recognized it and turned around
to see not just Ryuji, but Ann staring at him. Ryuji had been the one to speak, “Are you talking to
your school bag?”

Akira stared at them then leaned back. “No, I’m talking to my cat.”

The cat looked up at the two and meowed. Ryuji and Ann watched it, then Ann grinned and knelt
down next to Akira’s school bag. “Aww, he’s so cute. Or is it a she?” Ann asked.

“He. Vet says he’s a little more than a year old.”

Ryuji looked down at the cat and frowned then grinned as looked at Akira. “Isn’t this that stray cat
you’ve been feeding?” Ryuji asked. Akira nodded.

“Yeah. Guess he followed me home the other day or something because I woke up yesterday with
him in my room.” Akira explained. “Sakura-san said I could keep him.”

“Does he have a name?” Ann asked.

“Morgana.”

Ann looked at him confused, “Morgana?” She repeated and he nodded. “Isn’t that a girl's name?”

“He picked it,” Akira said pointing to the cat in question. The two looked at him confused and Ann
gave him a skeptical look.

“Really? You’re telling me this cat is smart enough to pick his own name.” She said.

“You had to be there.”

Ann gave him a look that made it obvious she did not believe him, then turned her gaze to the
small animal. She held a hand out and waited as Morgana sniffed her fingers. He then pushed his
head forward and purred as she scratched him behind his ears. “Looks like he likes me.”

Ryuji knelt down and reached out for the cat. Morgana looked at him, then nudged Ann’s hand
again demanding more head scratches from her. Ryuji’s bowed his head in dismay.

“Sorry Ryuji, you’ve been rejected by a cat,” Ann said a laugh in her voice. Akira watched the two
in front of him a small smile on his face.

The train arrived later than expected, but the three boarded and got off at Aoyama-Itchome station
along with several other students. The walk to school was animated with chatter from those nearby,
and Ann telling Ryuji and Akira about the clothes and games she purchased with some of the
money she got from her modeling work a few days ago. Akira tried to listen while attempting to
keep Morgana from popping his head out of the bag. "Stay in there, I don't need to get into any
more trouble.” He muttered and was sure he heard Ryuji start to say something, but the three all
fell quiet as they approached the school and saw a large crowd had gathered several feet from the
gate. They couldn't see anything except for what looked like red and blue lights bouncing off parts
of the building.

Akira knew those lights anywhere. He was sure the other two did too and the three of them hurried
over to the crowd. Ryuji did not even ask what was going on, he just pushed past his classmates,
leaving room for Akira and Ann to follow him. They reached the front of the crowd and Akira’s eyes widened, his face becoming pale as he saw two police cars outside the school building.

He thought they had more time. Wasn’t the meeting supposed to be at the beginning of May? He thought they had more time. He thought…

He put a hand to his head and for a split second, he felt hands grab him. It was not morning, it was evening and he was in the middle of the street. A man bleeding from his forehead and a young woman watched as the police restrained and put handcuffs on him before shoving him into the police car. Then he heard screaming, a male voice screaming at him words he never wanted to hear as he stared at the concrete floor of his cell.

His heart beat rapidly in his chest as he forced himself back to reality. He saw police officers coming out of the school gates. Once was in front as though escorting the other and he could hear someone shouting.

"I haven’t done anything." It was Kamoshida. Another officer was escorting him out of the building, forcing him forward when he tried to turn around and glare at the teachers. "You’re all gonna be hearing from my lawyer! How dare you treat me like this!"

Akira stared at the teacher as the officer forced him into the back of the cruiser, struggling to make sense of the scene playing out in front of him. It didn't feel real. It almost felt like he was dreaming. He took a step back bumping into Ryuji, the blood drained from his face as the world and the voices around him funneled together.

"Is that Kamoshida?"

"No way, what’s going on?"

"He’s being arrested? Why?"

"Does that mean that rumor was true?"

"Huh? What rumor?"

"Hey, you alright?" Ryuji asked. Akira looked at him, then at Ann who had her hand over her mouth, face as white as a sheet. He looked back at the scene, still not sure if what he was seeing was real or not.

The crowd dispersed once Kamoshida was in the police car and slowly all the students entered the building. Some went to their classrooms, others stayed in the hallway. Akira made a beeline for the nearest bathroom, going inside and leaning against the sink. He put his bag on the ground and turned on the water. He scooped some up in his palms and splashed his face with it trying to settle his nerves. He took a deep breath, letting it in, then out. His hands would not stop shaking, and for several long seconds, he felt his vision spin.

Then he felt something nudge his leg. He looked down to see Morgana had climbed out of his bag and was rubbing his face against his pants. He looked up and made a small meow. Akira let his shoulders drop, feeling the tension in his body begin to fade and took another deep breath.

"I’m okay." He finally said, less to the cat and more to himself. He then knelt and put his hand on the cat's head. He felt calmer just having his new pet near him. Maybe he should take him to school more often. He opened up his school bag and picked Morgana up. “Come on, get back in there.”
He put Morgana back in his bag and exited the bathroom. Ryuji and Ann were waiting for him in the hallway. “Dude you okay?” Ryuji asked.

“You look really pale.” Ann pointed out. Akira took a deep breath.

“Yeah. I-I’ll be fine.” He said. “Just seeing those cars brought back some bad memories. For a second I thought they were coming to take me away. I guess I got scared.”

“Well, it’s not every day the police show up at our school,” Ryuji said.

“Yeah...” Ann said, then slowly her eyes widened as though realization hit her, “Does that mean we did it?”

Her question hung in the air for a moment. Police at the school and Kamoshida getting arrested. Ryuji was the first to answer. "It’s got to. I mean what else could it be.” He said then a wide grin formed on his face, “Yes! We busted Kamoshida. We won’t get expelled!”

“We got justice for Shiho,” Ann said, her eyes misting up, a tear streaming down her cheek. “I can’t believe it, we actually did it. We did it!”

Without warning, Ann grabbed Ryuji and pulled him into a hug, then turned to Akira and hugged him as well. Akira froze at the touch, not sure what to do and relieved when she pulled away from him. She was smiling as she looked at them. “I gotta go.”

“Where?” Akira asked.

“To the hospital! I have to tell Shiho. She has to know now, and she needs to know again when she wakes up.”

“Well don’t just stand there, get going!” Ryuji said. Ann nodded and without waiting for them to say anything else turned and hurried out of the school. Akira watched her go then lowered his head.

“I guess I don’t quite believe it,” Akira said, muttered. Ryuji looked at him, confused, “Kamoshida has a lot of power. Isn’t it too soon to say we got him? He might be back Monday with this whole thing forgotten about.”

“I don't think so. He was cuffed and practically dragged into that police car, and the whole school saw it. I don’t think he’s gonna just walk.” Ryuji said. Akira looked away, down at the floor and tightened his grip on his bag.

“I hope you’re right.”

“Honestly? I really hope I’m right too.” Ryuji said then gave Akira a playful hit on the shoulder. “But you gotta believe a little man. Don’t be so...what’s the word? Down? Pessimistic? We’ll be fine.”

Akira gave a small nod, wishing he had Ryuji's optimism. The bell rang and the two climbed the stairs hurrying to their classes. Akira was the last student to enter his homeroom and kept his head down when he saw people staring at him. Because Kamoshida had punched him in the face, he still had some slight bruising around his eye. It did not look as bad as it did two days again, but still noticeable enough someone was going to say something.

However, to his relief, his classmates seemed more interested in Kamoshida’s arrest than his existence. No one was talking about him for a change and after another few seconds, Sadayo
Kawakami entered the room making them all fall silent. She looked at each of them, took in a deep breath, and then let it out.

“Alright, I had something else I wanted to talk to you about homeroom, but given the circumstances, I think we should clarify a few things.” She said, taking a deep breath and then letting it out. “I’m sure many of you saw it, however for those who arrived a little late, Suguru Kamoshida was arrested this morning.”

The uproar was instant, students were looking at each other, confused and asking questions. Kawakami raised her voice to get their attention. “Hey, quiet down.”

“Uh, Kawakami-sensei?” A girl spoke up, raising her hand. “What was Kamoshida-sensei arrested for?”

Kawakami looked over her class then after some contemplation said, “The principal did not want us teachers to say anything, however technically it is your right as students to know. Kamoshida was arrested on allegations of assault, sexual assault, abuse of minors...and rape.” The room buzzed with conversation. “After investigating claims made by students, I found strong evidence linking Kamoshida to Suzui’s suicide attempt two weeks ago. I went to the police and they're conducting an investigation—”

More murmuring and Kawakami needed to clear her throat again to get their attention. "Hey, enough! Now, the principal will be holding an emergency meeting with the staff and student council to discuss our next move. I don't know what exactly is going to happen next, but I can tell you it's very likely we'll be seeing reporters on our doorsteps in the next few days. Do not talk to them about the incidents, instead, tell them to contact the school.” Akira frowned as he kept his eyes on his desk. He had a feeling no one was going to listen to that. Judging by Kawakami's tone she was probably thinking the same thing.

“And one more thing. We are aware of the rumors going around that some students are being expelled.” Kawakami said. Akira looked up at her, “I just want to assure everyone that no students, regardless of record, history, or involvement with Kamoshida, are being expelled from our school.”

Akira let out a sigh of relief and looked back down when he felt his phone buzz in his pocket. He pulled it out and saw Ann had sent them a group message.

Ann:
Shiho’s awake.

Aoyama-Itchome General Hospital

Ann stood in the hallway outside Shiho’s room. She got the news from a nurse the moment she saw Shiho’s parents inside the hospital room. Her best friend had woken up a few hours ago. She was weak, and still needed plenty of rest, but the doctors were positive she would make a full recovery.

Since Shiho's parents were still inside Ann waited in the hallway until she could have a chance to see her. Even if it meant waiting all day and missing school. She texted Akira and Ryuji and even sent a brief message to Mishima. Despite him selling them out to Kamoshida, she felt he had a right to know that Shiho was going to be okay. She looked up and put her phone away when the door opened and Shiho’s parents stepped out along with the doctor.

“We should let her rest for now. We’ll let you know if there are any changes.” The doctor
explained then looked at her. Ann tensed up a bit then spoke.

“Uh, sorry, but is it okay if I see her? Just for five minutes.”

The man looked like he wanted to say no, but having seen her at the hospital almost every day changed his mind. “Just five minutes. Then she needs to rest.”

“Thank you,” Ann said. She looked at Shiho's parents and seeing her mom looked like she had been crying, gave her a hug before entering the room. Shiho lying in the hospital bed looking out the window. Her eyes were open, but she was blinking slowly, like she was trying to stay awake. Ann closed the door and the noise got her best friend's attention. She looked at her, then her eyes lit up a little.

“Ann?” She asked.

“Yeah, it’s me,” Ann said, putting her bag down and sitting down. “How are you feeling?”

It took a second for Shiho to answer. her eyes going up to the ceiling before looking back at her friend. “Well, I can’t feel my legs…” She started and Ann was not sure if it was because of the delivery or because all the anxiety from the last two weeks had finally gotten to her. She chuckled then broke down in tears. “Ann, what’s-”

Before Shiho could finish her question Ann was on her feet and wrapping her arms around Shiho the best she could while the girl was still lying in bed. “Shiho, I’m so sorry!” She cried out. Shiho winced and made a small noise that went unnoticed until she spoke.

“Ann, you’re crushing my arm.”

Hearing that Ann pulled back and straightened. “Sorry.” She forced a laugh, “Wow my bedside manner sucks.”

A pause then Shiho smirked. “Yeah it kinda does.”

“Oh shut up,” Ann said and laughed again, a laugh mixed with a cry as she sat down and took her friend's hand. “I’m so sorry. I should have been there for you. I should have…” She trailed off and shook her head. “No, I shouldn’t be sorry. Well, I am because you’re my best friend and I feel like I should have done something, but if it weren’t for Kamoshida…”

“Ann I’m the one who should be apologizing.” Shiho said, “I'm sorry I worried you and didn’t tell you the truth. Maybe, it would have made things easier.”

“None of this should have happened. Kamoshida should never have done what he did to you.” Ann said. “He should have never gotten away with any of the shit he did at our school.”

“You’re right, he shouldn’t have,” Shiho said. “Still, I am sorry I worried you. I know you just said I don’t have to but I feel like I should say it anyway. I just...lost myself after everything and in that moment just wanted it all to end. But, I’m so happy you're here.”

“Shiho…” Ann started, squeezing her friends hand tighter. She leaned in a little, then stopped herself and pulled back. “I have good news. Kamoshida was arrested today. We got him.”

“You got him?” Shiho repeated, her eyes glazing over as Ann nodded. She was thinking, processing what Ann just told her, before smiling and sighing in relief. “Good. I hope he’s locked up for life.” She then frowned, “Wait, what do you mean ‘we’ got him?”
“Me, Ryuji, Mishima helped a little. Akira too.”

“Akira Kurusu? The transfer student?”

“Yeah. He’s been through a lot, got a little beat up too, but it got Niijima-senpai and Kawakami-sensei to do something about Kamoshida.” Ann explained. “Everything’s going to be okay now. I promise.”

Shiho nodded and smiled. "Good."

Everything was going to be okay from now on. Shiho closed her eyes and it took a little while for Ann to realize she had fallen asleep.

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Makoto let out a sigh as she left the principal’s office with the rest of the student council and faculty staff. Principal Kobayakawa had called them all in for an emergency meeting. Because of Kamoshida’s history as an Olympic Athlete, he was counting the minutes down to when the reporters showed up at the school’s doorstep and he was positive not all of them would be from reputable news sources. He had already received some phone calls regarding the arrest and had been spending most of the morning preparing and doing damage control.

He told the teachers and the student council to make sure the students understood it was prohibited for them to speak to any press. He also handed each of them a long list of tabloid magazines for them to memorize so they knew who was trying to dig up dirt.

“We need to protect the school’s reputation as much as possible.” Principal Kobayakawa had told them. “The future of our students, and your paychecks, is on the line.”

Makoto noticed Kawakami looked like she wanted to make a comment, but refrained from doing so, though the disapproving frown on her face was obvious. Makoto read over the long list of tabloid magazines, raising an eyebrow as she noticed some of them were not even from Japan. Kobayakawa was either worried about the news reaching international waters or just made a random list of tabloid journals he found online.

“This is a mess.” A boy on the student council said getting her attention, “If it’s true Kamoshida did all that stuff, what’s going to happen to my college recommendation?”

“We had a teacher who might have sexually harassed your teammates and you’re worried about a college recommendation?” Another asked, his eyes wide, “What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“Hey! My family can’t afford college tuition, and it’s impossible to get a half decent job without a degree anymore.” He said. The other two council members glared at him and his face turned red, realizing he should have kept his thoughts to himself before turning his attention to Makoto. “Well, Prez? Any ideas what we should do?”

Makoto put a hand to her chin as she tried to think, but nothing was reaching her. She shook her head. “For the time being, we should do as Principal Kobayakawa says. Remind your classmates not to speak to any media and if anyone asks questions that they should direct them to the principal.”

“That’s it?”
“Yes. This is a delicate situation and should be handled carefully.” Makoto reminded him. The second-year student backed off and gave her a simple nod.

“Well, I guess you know what’s best being council president.” He muttered. Makoto noted the passive-aggressiveness of his tone but kept her composure like she always did.

“I’m glad you understand. Believe me, I wish we had more options, but right now the best we can do is try and keep gossip to a minimum.”

Despite her calm, Makoto had to admit she was a little worried. Shujin Academy had a well-established brand as a college prep school and Kamoshida’s arrest was going to attract undesired attention. However, she found herself less worried about her college recommendation and more worried about what her sister would think once she learned a teacher was arrested. Then there was Goro, he was bound to come to the worst possible conclusion when he learned about it.

She pushed the thought out of her mind and excused herself to the second floor. She had a few things she wanted to finish up before the break was over. She had overheard a few students saying they saw Akira in his classroom. The last time she saw him was the day she needed to take him to the hospital and she wanted to check in and see how he was doing. She stepped into his classroom and looked around. There were a few students talking and eating lunch or doing homework, but no messy-haired boy with glasses in sight. She stepped out and frowned as she wondered where he could have gone. The cafeteria was possible, but when she remembered the rumors circulating about him she doubted he would go somewhere crowded. Instead, he might prefer somewhere a little quieter.

The best place for quiet was supposed to be off-limits but Makoto decided to go there anyway. She climbed up the stairs to the roof and began to hear voices when she was partway up the stairs.

“I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Come on, relax. Besides cat’s love this shit.”

She stopped for a second at the mention of a cat, then heard a meow which made her question her own ears. She hurried up the stairs and stopped just at the exit. Her eyes were not deceiving her, a cat was chasing a red dot along the roof of the building. Ryuji was playing with a laser pointer, waving it around and then stopping so the cat would jump on the red dot. He then turned the light off and the cat jumped back and looked around. Akira was watching, and Makoto noticed he was smiling and laughed a little when Ryuji turned the light back on and the cat rushed right for it.

He had a nice smile. Makoto felt her heart skip a beat when she realized she just thought that and shook her head.

“Stop teasing him,” Akira said. His voice sounded light. Ryuji was laughing.

“No way man, this is hilarious.”

The red dot appeared again this time closer to the door and the cat hurried for it and pounced. He stepped back and scratched his paw on the cement. He then looked up and let out a small meow and Makoto realized the cat was looking right at her.

Akira’s smile dropped. “Morgana? What are you- hey!”

Makoto took a step back as Morgana approached her. She watched as the small animal began sniffing her shoe then looked up to see Akira had stopped short upon seeing her. His expression had changed; he was no longer smiling so his face looked less soft, instead replaced with a guarded
unease. “Niijima-senpai…”

Makoto looked him over then looked down at the cat as he pawed her black leggings as though trying to figure out if it was clothing or not. She then looked back at him, “This is your cat?”

“Yeah.” He said. A tense one-word answer. Makoto nodded, noted the contrast in his behavior and that Ryuji was approaching them.

“Oh hey Niijima-senpai, you need something?” He asked.

“Y-yes.” Makoto stammered then cleared her throat and tried to ignore the fact the cat was still experimenting with her leggings as she looked directly at Akira. “I heard you were back in school so I wanted to see how you were doing. I’m glad you took the doctor's suggestion to take an extra day off, you look a lot better.”

“Uh...thank you. My headache isn't as bad.” Akira said, “Clinic doctor in town says I should be back to normal in about a week.”

“I see. That’s good.” Makoto said looking down at the cat. “Well I just wanted to check in and I suppose remind the both of you that the roof is closed off until the new fence can be put in place.”

“And now you’re going to tell me cats are not allowed on school grounds.”

Makoto opened her mouth to agree but stopped herself. Yes, if a student did bring an animal to school she needed to report it immediately, but that smile she had just seen on his face a few seconds ago was fresh in her mind. Akira looked far more relaxed than he had at any other point she had run into him since the year began.

She winced and looked down. The cat’s claws had broken through her leggings and scratched her skin. Morgana, satisfied by his discovery, got bored and walked back over to Akira, nudging his face into his leg. Makoto watched as Akira knelt down and scooped the animal in his arms.

He looked a lot better when it was nearby. The tension in his shoulders was less, his face had more color. She remembered reading about how animals could give people emotional support and while she doubted the cat was meant for that...

“What cat?” She asked and Akira looked at her surprised. “I have no idea what you're talking about.”

Akira stared at her, then his shoulders relaxed and a small smile crossed his face. It was not the exact same but it was close enough. “Thank you.” He whispered.

She wanted to see that large smile and laugh again, but the small one was good enough. “Just make sure it doesn’t disturb your classes.”

“I won’t.”

“Well then, I should return to the student council room and finish my duties. Take care of yourself Kurusu-san. You too Sakamoto.”

With nothing else to say, Makoto turned and hurried down the stairs. Akira watched her go, face a little red, before turning his attention back to his feline companion.

Chapter End Notes
Oh wow, nothing bad happened.
Oh hey, I managed to upload on time this week.

Edit: Fixed a proofreading error.
Edit 2: Fixed the dates for Golden Week from Wed - Fri, to Tues - Thurs (which they are on the 2016 calendar).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

5/1/2016 (Sunday)
Middle of the Night
Cafe Leblanc - Attic

“Someone please help!”

“If you don’t stop this, I’ll report the money!”

“The police? The police are my bitches. They’d never listen to a skank like you.”

“Damn brat. I’ll sue!”

There was a scream and Akira’s eyes snapped open, a gasp escaping his lips as he sat up and looked around the room. For a second he felt lost, confused by his surroundings, before remembering where he was. He was in the attic of Leblanc, and he had as always had trouble falling asleep and was waking up to another bad dream. His phone said it was three-thirty in the morning. He lifted a hand up to his head trying to get his thoughts to stop racing and calm down.

A small meow got his attention, and he saw Morgana look up at him. He smiled, “Sorry. Didn’t mean to wake you up.” He said.

Morgana stared at him, then got to his feet and got closer before nudging his head under Akira’s hand. It twitched, but then he relaxed and began petting the cats head. Already he could feel the tension in his shoulders leaving. “I don’t know what it is about you, but you make me feel a lot calmer.”

Morgana mewed and laid down near his waist. Akira scratched put a hand on his pets head and ran his fingers on his fur. “You know, when I was a kid, I always wanted a cat. Never happened, dad hates pets. Course he was never home so…” He paused as a thought crossed his mind. He stopped scratching the cat which led to it staring at him. “I’m going to need to figure out what to do with you when I go back home. I hope mom will let me keep you. If things keep going like this, dad might not be around anymore, so there's that.”

Home. Akira frowned and looked down at his bedsheets as the word crossed his mind. With all the stuff going on back home he wondered where home would be. He pushed the thought from his mind and looked back at Morgana. “Well, guess we should try and go back to sleep, huh?”

The cat already had his eyes closed so Akira laid back down and pulled his covers up a little
higher. He closed his eyes but found his mind still spinning so he rolled onto his back, opened his phone and read for another hour to get his brain to focus on something else before trying to go back to bed again.

Morgana had an internal clock that led to him pawing Akira’s face at eight in the morning until the teenager woke up. Akira forced his eyes opened and glared at the cat, who stared back at him and then let out a small meow. He had a feeling this was going to be a regular thing, his desire to sleep in being thwarted by his cat demanding to be fed. He sighed and motioned for his cat to move, then moved Morgana himself when the eight-pound weight stayed sitting on his chest. He got up, grabbed a can from his desk drawer, and walked over to Morgana’s empty food bowl.

It was when he put the food in Morgana’s bowl and his new companion started eating that he heard Sojiro calling him from downstairs. He got dressed in some jeans and an off-white long sleeve shirt and hurried down. To his surprise the booths in the cafe were full and there were two people at the counter. Sojiro was giving a man their coffee then turned to Akira. “Ah, good timing. Earn your keep and get started on the dishes.”

He pointed at the sink and Akira’s stared at the piles of dishes that were stacked in it. He remembered Sojiro saying he was expected to help in the cafe in exchange for keeping Morgana. He put on some gloves, let out a small yawn, and got to work. He looked back to the customers as he saw the door open again and two more people come in. Sojiro let out a breath. Apparently even he was overwhelmed by the sudden increase in customers.

By the time the crowd began to disperse and the cafe quieted down it was near two in the afternoon. Akira was still washing the plates when Sojiro turned off the water on him. “Break time. I might not be paying you but I should give you lunch.”

Akira did not argue. He pulled off the gloves and tossed them in the trash. He washed his hands and took a seat at one of the booths. Sojiro put a plate of curry down in front of him, then a cup of coffee. “I thought I wasn’t supposed to have this.”

“It’s been four days, one cup isn’t gonna do anything. Also, it’s decaf, less caffeine than regular coffee.”

Akira examined the cup and after some consideration tasted the coffee. The coffee, like the curry, was nothing like he had ever tasted before. The blend was perfect, there was a slight acidity to it, but not intense enough to bother his stomach. The flavor was strong but not overpowering. It was delicious. “Wow.”

Sojiro chuckled, “That’s the reaction of someone who's only ever had instant coffee.”

“Dad never wanted anything else. Claimed it took too long to make and wasn’t worth it.” He said, then sighed as he took another long drink. “Thanks for the meal.”

“Thank you for helping me out on such short notice.” Sojiro said as he poured himself his own cup of coffee, “I expected traffic, but this is a lot compared to last year.”

“It's busy. You normally don’t have any custo-” he stopped when he saw Sojiro glare at him so he changed his sentence, “–uh, it’s normally quieter here.”

“Good save. As for the increase in traffic, you can blame Golden Week for it. Biggest holiday you can get in the working world. Hell, it was the only time I could get Wakaba to even think of taking
a day off before her accident.” Akira noticed the smile forming on Sojiro’s face. “You kids have that three-day break right?”

Akira frowned and gave him an odd look. “Yeah. Isshiki-san didn’t say anything?”

“Futaba? She’s homeschooled so the holiday’s blur together.” Sojiro told him, “We tend to go on vacation during the off-season since it’s cheaper. Not that you needed to know that.” Sojiro explained, “Anyway I just wanted to know if you had any plans. I get the feeling I’ll need a dishwasher for the afternoons.”

Akira shrugged. “Don’t know. Might go out with my friends.”

“Friends? As in plural?”

Akira hesitated for a second then answered, ”Yeah.”

Ryuji and Ann were his friends. It was an obvious statement but one that he found himself having some trouble believing. Much as he enjoyed Ryuji and Ann's company, there was a part of him expecting them to stop hanging out with him once everything began to settle down. That they would abandon him just like his so called 'friends' back home had. He felt his chest tighten and his stomach turn.

“They aren’t the two who showed up here a few days ago are they?” Sojiro asked.

“The blonde is one of them.” He said. Sojiro frowned.

“He looks like a delinquent.”

“Yeah well he’s one of the few people at school who bothered to treat me like a decent person, so sorry.” Akira snapped and for a second he thought Sojiro was going to scold him. Instead, he saw the man grin and chuckle.

“Well as long as your friend doesn’t get you into any trouble, I don’t care who he is or what he look like,” Sojiro said. “But if he looks at Futaba the wrong way, I’ll kill him.”

Akira almost choked on his curry. He coughed and drank down his coffee and shuddered as he felt the heat burn his throat. He coughed again and cleared his throat. Sojiro shook his head as he took Akira’s cup off the table.

Akira pulled his phone out of his pocket when he heard it vibrate. He saw he had a message from a group chat and pressed the chat icon upon seeing Ryuji and Ann’s icons.

Ryuji:
Hey, you guys there?
Turn on the news, it’s important!

Sojiro always had the news on in the cafe, so Akira turned around in his booth and looked at the screen. His eyes widened as he saw footage of Kamoshida being dragged out of the school on Saturday and an image of his mugshot.

“Police have confirmed that on Saturday Suguru Kamoshida - gym teacher at the prestigious Shujin Academy - was arrested on allegations of assault and sexual harassment. Due to it being a Sunday, we have been unable to contact the principal for his comments on the situation. However, several students have been coming forward, regarding the alleged behavior of their gym teacher.”
As the reporter spoke, an image of a student in a male Shujin Academy uniform appeared on the screen. His face was obscured, and his voice distorted to the point subtitles needed to be added on the screen to make him understandable.

“My friends would come back from practice with bruises all the time. It was scary, but I’m relieved the abuse is finally going to end.”

Another image, this time of a female student, again face obscured and voice masked. “He would touch me and stuff all the time...I’m so relieved I don’t have to deal with the sexual harassment anymore…”

A third image, another girl.

“You said you tried to come forward and were beaten to stay silent correct?”

“Yes. Kamoshida had me followed and threatened me to stay silent. If it’s alright, I’d rather not go into any details.”

Akira looked down at his phone when he felt it go off.

Ann:
That was Ikusaba-senpai...

Akira looked back at the news then turned his attention to Sojiro to see a look on his caretakers face that left his body cold. It was a terrifying expression, an anger he never thought he would ever see on the man’s face.

“Absolutely disgusting. He better get locked up for life.” He said and turned his attention to the counter to prepare another brew of coffee. He then sighed, “But he won’t. He’ll have the best lawyers on him. Bet he’ll get a year…”

Akira turned his attention back to the screen for a few seconds, then stood up. “Gonna head upstairs for a bit.”

“Take your time.”

Akira hurried up to his room and took a seat on the sofa. Morgana jumped onto his lap and he put a hand on the cat’s head.

Ryuji:
This is awesome!

Ann:
Damn right it is. No way the principal is gonna be able to do much in the way of ‘damage control.’

Ryuji:
I know!

Ann:
Serious props for Ikusaba-senpai coming forward like that.
Akira:
Probably her way of saying ‘thank you.’

Ann:
Honestly, I thought the same way.
She wanted something to be done, but
Kamoshida scared her. Now that she’s no
longer under his thumb…

Akira let a small smile cross his face. His friend’s sounded happy.

Ryuji:
Oh, off topic, sorry, but question.
You guys got any plans for Golden Week?

Ann:
Oh yeah, we got three days off the day
after tomorrow.
I have a shoot Wednesday afternoon, but
it’s short. And that’s about it.

Akira:
Don’t know yet. Sojiro wants some help
in the cafe, but it’s my choice.

Ryuji:
Dude, we gotta pick a day to make up for
missing our Sunday. How about Tuesday?

Ann:
Missing your Sunday?

Ryuji:
Akira’s from the country and has never been
to the city before.

Ann:
Oh, you were going to take him on a tour?
Count me in! I know a lot of cool places
we can check out.

Oh and also-

Akira watched as Ryuji and Ann texted each other a mile a minute and found himself slowly but
surely becoming tired. Before he knew it he had a full schedule in front of him.

On Tuesday Ann and Ryuji were going to take him down to Central Street and they were going to
go shopping at the Underground Mall, hang out at the arcade, and several other things that that he
could not keep track of. Ann was also insistent on them going down the ‘barcelona slope’ -
whatever that was - to have lunch at one of the restaurants. Wednesday he and Ryuji would meet
Ann after her photoshoot to visit Shiho in the hospital and on Thursday they were going to
Akihabara.

He made a note of all of this and rubbed his forehead. Ann and Ryuji were still talking after they
made their plans, and while he had tried keeping up with the conversation he decided he needed some time alone. He put his phone on silent, got up while holding Morgana and laid down on his bed. He sighed and Morgana let out a small meow and tilted his head.

“I guess I’ve got a few busy days coming up.”

His cat stared at him, confused, and meowed again.

“Ryuji, can you come here for a second?”

Ryuji looked up from his phone. He and Ann were still talking. Akira was either still following the conversation or had gone to do other things since he had not responded in almost twenty minutes. He posted a simple ‘brb’ in the group chat and jumped off his bed. His mother was sitting on the couch in their small living room, a frown on her face as the news story wrapped up. She looked up at him.

“What’s up?”

She motioned to the news on the television. It had just wrapped up about Kamoshida’s arrest. “My look at this, isn’t that the teacher we were talking about barely three weeks ago?” She said. Ryuji opened his mouth but snapped it shut when his mother raised a finger. She frowned at him. “What did you do? And don’t try to deny it.”

“Uh, well…” He started then sighed and sat down, “Please promise you won’t freak out.”

He decided to start from the beginning. About Suzui’s suicide attempt, and the fact he, Akira, and Mishima almost got expelled, and everything that went on over the past few weeks. He chose his words as carefully as he could as he watched his mother's face, trying not to scare her, while at the same time trying not to make her angry. His mom was a scary woman when angry.

When he finished, she was glowering at him, then brought her hand to her lips, contemplating her next words. Finally, she said, “You're an idiot you know that.”

"Uh...yeah...wait, hey!” Ryuji protested, then sighed. "Yeah. I am. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about my expulsion. I didn't want you to worry, and I kinda have an idea why he changed his mind the first time. I didn't want you to go through that again. And it wouldn't have helped Akira or Mishima or gotten rid of the main problem anyway."

She sighed and shook her head. Then gave her son a small punch in the arm. "Well, I'm proud of you for sticking up for your friend."

Ryuji grinned and let out a sheepish grin as his mom continued talking. “Men like Kamosida, unfortunately, don’t stay locked up for long. Don't be surprised if his final sentence is not what you hope it'll be.”

"Yeah, I know." Ryuji said, "But this ruins Kamoshida. Even if he doesn’t get that much jail time, he’ll never be able to get another job as a teacher again. No parent will want them near their kids, especially their girls.”

He watched as his mom smiled and told him, “Still can't believe you turned out so well. Your grades are shit, but you’d ace a test on human decency.”

“Of course. You raised me.” He said, “I love you, mom.”
Ryuji leaned in and gave his mom a hug which she gladly returned. “I love you too. Don’t spend my entire paycheck when you go out on Golden Week.”

Ryuji laughed. He decided not to tell her he was going to spend the week applying for part-time work.

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5/2/2016 (Monday)
Shujin Academy
Early Morning

The school had just opened and already Makoto was standing in front of the principal's office. She had, like always, come in early to take care of a few student council duties, but Ushimaru-sensei had told her Principal Kobayakawa wanted to speak to her as soon as possible.

She knocked on the door. “Yes, come in.” He said. She opened the door. “Ah, Niijima-san please have a seat.”

Makoto closed the door behind her and approached the principal's desk. “You wanted to speak to me Principal Kobayakawa?” She asked as she sat down in the nearby chair.

The principal smiled at her, “Yes, I’m sure you noticed what was on the news yesterday.”

She bit the inside of her lip. She had not seen when the story aired, but her sister had called her from work and Goro had texted her non-stop until she had finally been able to get off the phone and answer his constant questions. They both asked the same things. Was she alright? Did Kamoshida do anything to her? Why did she not tell them what was going on?

The answers were ‘I’m fine, no he did not do anything to me,’ and ‘I didn’t know what was going on until recently’. She also needed to assure Goro that no he did not need to come down and walk her to school the next morning.

“You did tell the students not to say anything about the incident did you not?” The principal asked. Makoto swallowed the spit forming in her mouth and nodded.

“Y-yes, I did. Because this is a delicate situation I made sure it was clear not to speak to any press.” She said, “But there are many who are angry over what Kamoshida did, not just to them, but their friends. I'm honestly not surprised some decided to speak out.”

Kobayakawa said nothing at first and let his chin rest against his hands. “The situation with Kamoshida is delicate indeed. Should the wrong thing be said, it will tarnish this school’s reputation. We have students preparing for college, I’m sure you’ve wondered what will happen if our school goes from ‘one of the best Japan has to offer’ to ‘that school with the teacher who assaulted their students.’”

Makoto winced. The thought had crossed her mind, even her sister mentioned it on the phone. Principal Kobayakawa continued to speak, an understated anger in his voice.

“Tell me Niijima-san, you weren’t involved in Ms. Kawakami’s investigation were you?”

“What? N-no sir.” She said. It was a lie, she had been working with Kawakami after school for two days, but the teacher said to deny involvement just in case she got into trouble. She frowned, “Principal Kobayakawa, how much of Kamoshida’s activities did you know about?”
“Excuse me?”

Makoto found herself regretting being so forward but now that she said it she could not hold her tongue. “Well with the rumor’s all over the school you must have suspected something—”

“We’re getting off topic.” He said. Makoto knew from his avoidance she had her answer. She watched as he opened one of the drawers of his desk and pulled out a file. He put it on his desk and pushed it toward her. “I’m sure you know what this is, you’ve seen it several times.”

Makoto picked up the file and opened it. Right before her eyes Akira Kurusu’s profile picture as well as his student information. She frowned, not quite sure why the principal was showing her the file. She had reviewed it so many times she could recall most of the important details from memory. “Kurusu-san’s student profile? What about it?”

“As you are aware I agreed to enroll Kurusu because rehabilitating a delinquent would bolster our school’s reputation. The news would make headlines; ‘college prep school takes chance on delinquent: succeeds’. The prestige I - the school would receive would allow any student here to apply to any college.”

“Yet when Kamoshida threatened to have him expelled, you did nothing to stop it.”

“Let me ask you this Niijima, who is more valuable? A teenage delinquent or an Olympic medalist?”

Makoto stayed quiet. She knew the answer to that question; she also knew it was not the answer Kobayakawa wanted to hear. “What do you want me to do with Kurusu-san?”

“Tutor him.”

Makoto raised an eyebrow, confused, “Tutor him?”

“If he’s going to be an example of what this school can do for… ‘troubled teenagers’ he’s gonna need to do well on his exams.” The principal explained then after thinking it over added, “Yes, I’m thinking, top ten in his grade. I can see it now ‘Prestigious high school reformed troubled teenager.’” He paused and muttered, "Actually no, that's not as catchy..."

Makoto gave the principal a bewildered look. Something was not adding up. “Principal Kobayakawa, I understand the severity of the situation, but I doubt Kurusu-san needs any help studying for his exams and I don’t think he’ll want help either. His grade average-”

“Dropped twelve points since the school year began.”

Makoto stared at him, then turned to the second page of Akira’s profile. Plain to see it was there, the ‘88’ had been crossed out and replaced in bright red with a ‘76’. Akira had gone from an A student to a C student in less than a month.

“His teacher’s claim he was quite attentive during his first week, but since the incident, he’s been sleeping in class and not turning in homework. This is a problem, and you need to fix it before he becomes a liability.”

Makoto stared at the information in the folder and then closed it. Considering the circumstances she could understand why Akira’s performance had diminished. “I understand sir. I’ll speak to him before the end of the day.”

“Good,” Kobayakawa said, then hummed a little before looking up at the trophies on the wall.
“You know, with your grades and experience on the student council, you could get into any college of your choosing on a letter of recommendation. Your sister must be proud of you.”

“Uh…” Makoto started. She had no idea where this came from. “My sister has been very busy as of late, but yes I do like to believe she is.”

“Well then, we better not disappoint her.” He told Makoto, looking her in the eye. “Now would we?”

Makoto knew what he was implying. If she got Kurusu in the top ten of his grade he would write her a recommendation to whatever college she chose. It was almost too good to be true. If she got that recommendation than she could finally tell her sister something that would make her proud of her.

Except she still had no idea what school she wanted to attend or even what she wanted to do for the rest of her life. The whole thing sounded a little underhanded and she was not sure if she should feel uneasy about it or not. She shook her head and gave Kobayakawa a respectable bow. “Thank you. I should be going now sir.”

“Yes, of course.”

Makoto stepped out of the principal’s office and leaned against the wall. She took in a deep breath. She could already see this blowing up in her face.

“Now as you all know tomorrow is the beginning of Golden Week. You’ll have three days off, however, keep in mind that you have exams next week.”

Akira’s eyes widened and he groaned as the rest of the class did. In all the chaos from Kamoshida and being worried about being expelled he had forgotten about mid-terms. Kawakami rolled her eyes at the student bodies collective annoyance. “Hey, you all knew it was coming up if you read the handbook. Also because some of you decided to speak to reporters we are to remind you to not answer questions from any press regarding the events last week. Not until the principal makes a statement.”

“She can say it a hundred times. It’s not gonna happen.”

“I can’t believe our teachers wanted us to keep quiet about this.”

Kawakami brought a hand up to her head to massage a forming headache. Even she knew that telling the students to be silent about Kamoshida was an exercise in futility. “Whatever, do what you want, just don’t be surprised if there are consequences. Okay, now it’s time to begin class. Please turn to page....”

Classes went on as expected. Akira took notes when he needed and played with his pencil or bopped it on Morgana’s nose when he found he needed help concentrating. Ushimaru attempted to single him out and had chalk ready to throw at him when he made a fool of himself. Which he did not, but got the chalk thrown at him anyway. This time he tried to dodge it; he leaned too far to the right and fell out of his chair onto the floor. His face turned red when he heard some of his classmate’s laugh.

When the lunch bell rang Ann turned around and grinned at him. “Hey, why don’t the three of us eat out in the courtyard.”
Akira stared at her for a second, then nodded. “Sure.” He said and got up to follow her. They went
to the cafeteria and seeing the large crowd Akira almost turned around to go to the store. Ann
grabbed him by the arm and pulled him along. He felt his heart racing in his chest as he stepped in
line with the crowd, but he felt a little bit at ease having someone he was acquainted with near him.
He grabbed something already made and hurried with Ann out of the cafeteria.

“See that wasn’t so bad.”

Akira nodded and kept a grip on his food hoping his hands would stop shaking. He felt better once
they got outside in the courtyard. Ann got them some water and soda. Akira ripped off a part of his
meal and held it out for Morgana. The cat sniffed it and turned his nose up to the meat. He then
looked at Ann’s meal and meowed as he stared at the sweets.

“Morgana no. You can’t eat half that stuff.” Akira said. The cat tried to jump out of the bag, Akira
grabbed him. “No!”

Morgana let out a noise that made it obvious he was annoyed. Ann giggled. “Sorry Mona, you
can’t have sweets.” She said scratching him behind his ears. Morgana purred then after a moment
began to dig into the food Akira was holding out for it.

“There we go.” He said then looked up as Ann smiled at him. “What?”

“You’re a lot calmer now that you have that little guy around you.” She said. The two looked up as
Ryuji came over and took a seat next to Akira. He then let out a loud groan.

“What’s wrong?” Akira asked.

“Exams are coming up. Dammit, I totally forgot about them.” Ryuji muttered then shrugged, “Well
not like I’d do well on them or anything.”

“You aren’t gonna study are you,” Ann said.

“Eh, I’ll try but knowing me I’ll just stay up all night playing video games.”

“I feel ya there. I don’t have to worry about English, but everything else? Just end me right now.
And even the English one is no guarantee, all the focus on proper grammar an actual speaker will
never use.” The two then looked at Akira, “What about you?”

Akira shook his head. “No idea. I usually do fine on exams but with everything that’s happened
I’m not so sure.” He hated to admit it, but he felt unprepared.

“Maybe we should consider a group study session or something,” Ann suggested.

“No offense but do you really think we’ll get anything done?” Ryuji asked.

Ann considered it, then shrugged, "Probably not but we'll at least have fun." She said with a smile,
"Anyway forget about exams for now. Tomorrow starts Golden Week! You guys all set for three
days of no school?"

“Damn right!” Ryuji said and gave Akira a light jab in the shoulder "What about you man? Ready
to see the sights?"

Akira thought about the long list of the things the two set up and could already feel the exhaustion.
There was too much to do in the city.
He was about to ask if they could cut their list in half but stopped when he heard footsteps. He looked up to see Mishima walking over to them. Akira noticed his face had cleared up a bit, the bruises and scratches were not as prominent, many had begun to heal. He was slouching, and he looked nervous to be standing in front of them. Akira scowled and looked down at Morgana, who let out a small meow and nuzzled his arm.

Ryuji was the first one to speak. “Mishima.” He said.

“H-hi…” Mishima said, “I’m sorry to bother you guys. I just…I heard Suzui-san woke up and…” He trailed off. Akira kept his head down as Ryuji and Ann looked at him. Ann was the first to speak.

“Yeah. Shiho’s awake now. She’s still in the hospital, but they expect her to make a full recovery.”

“Oh. That’s a relief.” He said. Silence fell between the four of them. Ryuji’s eyes moved up to the cover above them, Akira kept his hand on Morgana’s head. Ann looked between all of them.

“Are you okay?” She asked. “I’m going to visit her after school today. Do you want to come?”

“Uh well…” Mishima started, “I get the feeling she might not want to see me. It’s my fault.”

“Mishima. Stop.” Akira spoke up getting all their attention, “It’s no one’s fault what happened except Kamoshidas.”

Mishima stared at him then nodded, “Yeah. You’re right. Still, I do want to say, I’m sorry. About screwing you guys over. I’m a coward and I was only looking out for myself. And even though Kamoshida made me do it, I’m sorry I leaked your record Kurusu. You’ve been dealing with a lot because of me, and you don’t deserve it.”

Akira tried to keep a straight face even as he felt himself seething. He could feel his muscles tensing up as he tried to keep his composure. His hands twitched. “It is what it is. If one thing came out of it, it’s it made it easier to figure out where I belong,” He said. Ryuji and Ann stared at him. “Please, don’t bring it up again.”

“R-right.” Mishima said, “Guess I’ll be going now. See you guys.”

Without waiting for them to say anything Mishima turned and hurried out of the courtyard. Akira frowned and lowered his head and Ryuji and Ann saw his face scrunch up. “Hey, you okay man?”

Akira shook his head. “I don’t know. A part of me wants to punch him in the face, the other just wants to forget about it all.” He sighed, “Is today over yet?”

“Two more classes.” Ryuji said, “Then we can focus on nothing except our vacation.”

Akira nodded. Vacation. Time away from school. He needed it more than he realized.

Chapter End Notes

Alright time to roll back down the hill again. *rolls down the hill*
School was out of session, and while most of the students were leaving, Makoto was not one of them. She promised the principal she would speak to Akira before the end of the day, but she found herself not even prepared to approach him on the topic.

“Relax Makoto, you’re just bringing up a tutoring session. That’s all it is.” She told herself. Technically she was not lying to herself, she was being asked to tutor Akira. The problem was she was more or less going to tell him ‘your grades are slipping and the principal wants me to tutor you to make the school look good after what happened to Kamoshida.’ No matter how she tried to word it the whole scenario sounded manipulative and given his current treatment at the school, he was going to be unhappy about it.

Her thoughts stopped racing as she saw Akira walking down the steps, Ryuji and Ann behind him. Even without his two blonde friends with him, his unkempt hair and thick-rimmed glasses made him stand out from the rest of the crowd. Makoto walked over, hearing Ryuji say something about picking him up for their vacation.

“Kurusu-san,” She said. Akira stopped and looked at her. “I’m sorry to bother you but could I speak with you for a moment? It won’t take long, I promise.”

Akira thought it over then looked at the other two. “I’ll see you guys later?”

“We’ll wait up. Don’t worry about it.” Ryuji said with a shrug. Ann nodded as well and Akira smiled a bit before turning his attention back to Makoto.

Makoto led him a little ways down the third year hallway, and around the corner so they would not be disturbed. She took a deep breath in and let it out. “Sorry, I promise I won’t keep you long. And I suppose it would be better to just get to the point. The Principal wanted me to speak to you.”

She saw the scowl form on Akira’s face and when she explained what he had told her, she saw his face turn red and that scowl deepen. When she was finished she could see he looked upset.

“You gotta be kidding me.” He said. He brought a hand up to his head, running his fingers through his hair.

“I know this is sudden but-”
“No.” He spat out and Makoto winced when he laughed, “If that bastard really thinks I’m going to go along with whatever plan he has after Kamoshida, he’s out of his mind. Just hearing this makes me want to bomb my exams just to spite him.”

“I-I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Makoto said, “Doing poorly on your exams could—”

“No. Effect the school’s reputation, which I find really hard to care about right now.”

Makoto opened her mouth to protest but closed it. She closed her eyes for a brief second and opened them, “Ignoring the school's reputation, doing poorly on your exams could have a negative impact on your probation.”

“My probation?” He repeated, voice going up in volume. Makoto noticed he looked anxious, so she tried to remain calm as she explained.

“Well, I imagine your parole officer and Sakura-san are keeping an eye on your academics. You’d probably get in trouble if your grades dropped too much.” Akira let out a huff and looked away as she continued to speak. “Furthermore you’re far more likely to be accepted into college and even receive a recommendation if you keep your grades up. If your original grade average says anything, you could go to any university if you applied yourself.”

“Yeah right,” Akira said rolling his eyes. “Shujin might increase my chances of getting into college, but most are gonna take one look at my record, see that assault and say ‘I’m sorry I don’t think our school is right for you.’”

“You don’t know that.” She told him. Akira sighed and Makoto guessed because of how difficult the month had been for him that higher education was the last thing on his mind. “Kurusu, you have two years to prepare for university. I’m sure by then the average school is going to be more interested in your academics than your record.” He was silent, Makoto continued, “If you do well and stay out of trouble—”

“Why do you care?”

She stopped, his question catching her off guard. “Excuse me?”

“Why do you care?” Akira repeated, “You’re quite insistent about this and I’d think being a third-year student you’d rather be focusing on your college admissions than dealing with tutoring an underclassman.”

“I’m just trying to—”

“Are you getting something out of this? Did Principal Kobayakawa promise you something for tutoring me?”

Makoto froze at the accusation and while she tried to keep her face neutral, she winced and that was enough to make Akira's eyes widen a bit and his anger flare up.

"I knew it. What did he promise you?"

"N-nothing. He just—"

"What did he promise you?!"

Makoto jumped as he screamed at her. Several students that were nearby stopped to look at them. The air became tense, people were starting to whisper, and Makoto found herself feeling small.
"He...mentioned a college recommendation..." She told him then in a hurry added, "But Kurusu-san, that's just-

"Enough. Just, stop.” Akira said, bringing his hands up to his head and rubbing his temples. His hands were shaking and Makoto could tell from the tone in his voice he was losing what little composure he had. She heard the cat he was hiding in his schoolbag let out a small noise and guessed he sensed something was wrong. "Tell the principal, that whatever ideas he has for me he can shove up his fat ass. I’m not playing his game, I just want to get through this damn year so I can go home."

"Kurusu-san..." His voice sounded strained.

"And please, don't talk to me about this again. Actually, don't talk to me at all. Just leave me alone, you probably don't want to be around 'a criminal in need of rehabilitation' anyway."

"Kurusu-

He ignored her as he walked away. Morgana meowed behind him, pawing at his hair to get his attention. Makoto watched them leave and sighed. That conversation ended up going worse than how she thought it would. She took a few steps down the hall and stopped when she saw Akira meeting back up with Sakamoto and Takamaki. She moved closer to the wall so they could not see her.

“You okay? What did she say?” Takamaki asked. She sounded annoyed.

“It’s nothing. Can we go?” Was Akira's answer. He sounded stressed and worn out.

Makoto sighed as she kept close to the wall. Being so forward had probably been a bad idea. She should have just said she noticed his grades slipped and asked if he wanted some help with his exams. Leave the entire part of the principal and school's reputation out of the conversation. She frowned and shook her head. He would think something was suspicious about her just offering to tutor him, then when he found out why he would just be angrier.

She looked over and watched them leave, Sakamoto putting a hand on Akira's shoulder to give him some support. She was not going to give up on this, she just needed to think of another way to talk to him. Maybe after the vacation and getting away from the school he would feel better and they could talk it over again.

Three days with no school. She hoped her sister had gotten Children’s Day off like she promised she would.

“So you know your plans for Golden Week yet?”

Akira sighed at Sojiro’s question. The moment he got home Sojiro asked him to help with the dishes and he had been washing plates and cups for almost an hour. He should have felt annoyed, but just being able to silently let his thoughts wander and the sound of the water pouring into the sink made him feel more at ease.

“I have a busy day tomorrow. My friends are going to pick me up and drag me around half of Shibuya.” He said. His tone was flat and for some reason the thought of going out made his stomach turn a bit. Sojiro shook his head, but Akira could see the smile on his guardian’s face.

“Well, I say it’s about time you started to get out more. Which reminds me,” Sojiro reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of keys, “catch.”
Even with the warning, Akira had been caught off guard, and the keys hit him in the arm before falling onto the floor. The teenager dried his hands and reached down and picked them up. “What’s this?”

“Spare set of keys to the cafe. You’ve kept out of trouble for about a month now, which is more than I expected.” Sojiro explained. Akira stayed quiet, he almost forgot Sojiro did not know about the expulsion. “If you want to go out and explore Shibuya’s nightlife you’re free to do so long as you lock the store when you leave. Just remember the trains stop at half past midnight. If you miss the last one, the manga cafe’s are cheaper than a hotel room. Trains start running again at around four.”

Akira nodded. A part of him doubted he would be going out a lot in the evening, but he put the keys in his pocket and made a note to remember Sojiro’s oddly specific advice. “Thanks.”

Sojiro looked like he wanted to say something else but the door opened and another customer stepped into the cafe. He sighed and greeted them and Akira got back to work cleaning the dishes. By the time the cafe quieted down enough Akira could stop doing dishes, his gloves had soaked through to his skin and his fingers were pruned. Sojiro walked over to the sign and flipped it from open to closed. He then told Akira to sit down for some dinner.

“I’ll make you some-” He stopped when the door swung open.

“Hey Sojiro!”

“Soji!”

Akira looked up to see Futaba and Wakaba enter the cafe, the short orange-haired girl pushing her mother forward, who was holding a large covered container. “Closing up early I see.” She said giving him an amused look. Sojiro grunted.

“With how busy it’s been, I’ve double profits in two days. I won’t lose much over closing two hours early.” He said, then grinned, “I’m guessing you brought me dinner.”

“Not just you.” Futaba said, “All of us. We wanted to eat together for a change.”

“And I thought our long-term guest would like to eat something besides curry,” Wakaba said. Akira stared at her and it took a second for him to realize she was talking about to him. “I hope you like pork young man.”

He blinked and nodded still not sure what to say. Futaba maneuvered herself around her mother by jumping into one of the booths, diving under it, and popping out the other side. She then walked up to him and stared at him. He stared back wondering what she was going to say or if he should be the one to start the conversation. He heard Wakaba giggle in the background and Sojiro sighing and muttering something about the two of them being ‘equally socially awkward.’

Futaba fidgeted a bit and played with her fingers, then spoke up. “Uh…” She then turned to Sojiro. “Can his cat join us?”

Sojiro looked like he wanted to say no, then sighed. “Ask the kid himself.”

Akira saw Futaba pout, then turn back to him and after some hesitation asked, “Can you bring your cat down so we can have dinner together?”

Akira looked at Sojiro testing whether he would give him a look to lean one way or the other. Instead, he just looked away. Akira sighed turned his attention back to Futaba who looked like she
was hoping he would say yes. “He’s upstairs, go get him.” He said. He saw a large grin form on Futaba’s face and without hesitation she rushed up the stairs, making a lot of noise in the process.

“Come on Akira, sit down,” Wakaba said. Akira hesitated for a second - she was using his first name - but took a seat across from her. They all then looked up when they heard Morgana screech. Futaba’s shouting followed.

“Oops! I think I stepped on his tail!”

Akira found himself staring at the tempura breaded pork cutlets as Sojiro placed a plate with rice in front of him. He was sitting next to Futaba, who was petting Morgana. The cat had an annoyed look on his face, which Futaba did not seem to notice as she muttered ‘pet pet pet’ under her breath with each movement. It was obvious she enjoyed Morgana’s company more than his cat did.

“You gonna eat or what?” Sojiro asked. Akira looked up at him then took his fork and knife and cut a piece of pork and stuck it in his mouth. He chewed slowly and swallowed it. “So, what do you think?”

Akira did not answer, he just kept eating. Wakaba grinned, resting her chin on the back of her hands then glanced at Sojiro and whispered just loud enough to hear, “I think he likes it.”

“He better. Anyone who doesn’t like mom’s cooking is insane.” Futaba spoke up.

“Now now Futaba, there’s always gonna be people who don’t like my way of getting things on the table.”

“And everyone who doesn’t has been proven to have poor taste.” Futaba pointed out. Wakaba’s smile dropped a bit.

“Futaba, what have I told you about tact?”

“That I don’t have any.”

Wakaba and Sojiro sighed and Akira swallowed his meal. He then cut a piece off for Morgana and put the fork to his mouth. Futaba frowned at him. “Eww, gross. Shouldn’t you use a clean fork instead?”

“It’s fine,” Akira said. Morgana sniffed the pork and began nibbling on it then took a large chunk out. Futaba made a face and gagged.

“Yuck. Now Mona’s gonna have human germs and your gonna have cat germs.” She said, “By the way you’re room is dreadfully plain. Your TV is lame and old too.”

“I got it for two-thousand yen.”

“Oh, no wonder,” Futaba said as though Akira had just proved her right. He pouted and dug into his meal. Wakaba gave Futaba a stern look, it went unnoticed. “But seriously, no posters, no computer. You got a lot of books, but it’s all gardening or detective novels. Lame!”

“All those books are Sakura-san’s and I only read the detective novels.”

“Still lame!” Futaba said. Akira frowned at her, not sure if he should be insulted or laugh at her bluntness. Sojiro said nothing about his gardening books being implied to be lame. “Look, you
need a nicer setup. Even a poster or something will give your room more charm.”

“I’ll tell you the same thing I told one of my friends. If you can get me the poster from Risette’s latest concert I’ll hang it up.” He said. It was a joke, especially since Ryuji had confirmed for him how hard they were to find. However, he saw the smirk on Futaba’s face and then she let out a chuckle that could only be described as evil.

“Challenge accepted.” She said. “And when I win you need to get me this once it comes out.”

She pulled out her phone, ignoring Wakaba when she told Futaba to put away her phone. Free from Futaba’s grasp, Morgana snuck into Akira’s lap and tried to nab another piece of pork. Akira put a hand around Morgana’s chest to keep him from jumping on the table. He did give his cat the last bite of pork and moved on to finishing off his vegetables when Futaba brought her phone up. “Here.” She held her phone up and saw a screen with the collector’s edition of a video game priced at eighty-eight hundred yen. Seeing that price he shook his head.

“No. No deal.”

“Aww man.” Futaba pouted. Morgana meowed as he tried to go for what was left on the table, again Akira holding him back.

“Morgana, no.” He said. Sojiro glared at the cat as Wakaba smiled.

“Well, this is quite a lively dinner. Haven’t had one with the whole family in a while.” She said.

“Lively is one way to think of it,” Sojiro said. Akira looked at both of them and saw when Wakaba took Sojiro’s hand his guardian smiled. Even with his more grumpy demeanor, he seemed happy to be around her. The smile was genuine, his face looked less serious.

The two loved each other. Sojiro, Wakaba, and Futaba were a family. A happy family. A family that smiled at each other, a father who scolded but was fair to his daughter. Futaba wasn’t even his and he still played the role of one.

Akira wondered when the last time was he saw his father smile at his mother like Sojiro smiled at Wakaba and realized he could not remember.

He was snapped from his thoughts by Futaba. “Okay, so can we have dessert?”

“No, we had desert last night.” Sojiro scolded and Futaba pouted. Akira looked at all of them and let out a shaky breath. His hands were starting to shake again. He was starting to hate how it seemed like they would not stop.

“Is it alright if I go upstairs?” He asked. Wakaba’s eyebrows shot up. “It’s just, I want to finish my homework so I don’t need to worry about it over break.”

“Smart idea.” Wakaba said, a grin on her face, “You should do the same thing Futaba, do your homework when we go home so you don’t need to rush it on the last day of vacation.”

“Or you could just not give me any homework. Then I don’t need to worry about it at all.” Futaba suggestion. Wakaba gave her a look that made Futaba put a nervous smile on her face and let out a sheepish laugh. “Right, homework right when I get home.”

“And make sure you go to bed on time,” Sojiro muttered. Futaba grunted and muttered something about ‘hating timed missions.’ Sojiro then brought his attention to Akira, “And since you finished dinner, yes you can go upstairs. Put your plate in the sink, Futaba will do the dishes.”
Futaba’s eyes widened, “But my homework!” She protested. Wakaba grinned.

“She’s right Soji, you do the dishes. Let the girl do her homework.”

Sojiro sighed, “Ugh, fine.”

Akira stood up and thanked Wakaba for dinner. He put his plate in the sink and hurried upstairs. He pulled his textbook out of his backpack and sat down at his desk to try and do his homework. He finished a few problems and frowned as he heard some laughter downstairs. He sighed and closed the book and laid down on the futon. He turned the television on to drown out the noise downstairs and played on his phone until he felt tired. He dropped it on the bed and rolled over, closing his eyes.

At some point, Morgana climbed on the bed and curled up by his back.

1/19/2016 (Tuesday)
Kurusu Residence

It had been a long walk home. Granted the time it took Akira to get from school to his house was the same as always but the cold weather made it feel like it was longer than usual. He opened the door and was greeted by the familiar sight of a house that appeared empty at first glance. The only light on was the kitchen, at least downstairs. The upstairs lights were still on from this morning, he could see the hallway light from the door.

“I’m home.” He said out loud, as he took off his jacket. He was not expecting anyone to come downstairs to greet him. His mom was having a bad day and judging by the state of the house he guessed his father was still at work. He was always at work, and he would not be surprised if he called late saying a 'meeting ran over' or he 'needed to meet with a business partner'. Or just did not come home at all. Did he even keep his promise and come home at lunch when he said he would? Probably not.

Akira took off his shoes and hung up his jacket. He walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. The cream stew he had made his mom was untouched in the refrigerator. He glanced up the stairs then grabbed two bowls from a cabinet and pulled the large bowl of stew out. He heated the meal up properly and put the bowls on a tray. He then noticed a light blinking on the phone. He picked up the phone and pressed the button to listen to the voicemail.

It was from his Cram School teacher. She was - once again - unhappy that he was skipping class. He deleted the message and hung up the phone. He then grabbed the tray and made his way upstairs. He stopped at the second door on the right side of the hall and rebalancing the tray knocked on the door.

“Mom, you awake?” He asked. The door was already somewhat open, but that did not mean he could just barge in.

“Akira? Come in.”

He pushed the door open. The light in the room was on, the television was playing. His mother was sitting up in bed, dressed, but covered in a warm blanket. Her hair she tried to keep straight on good days had fallen back into its naturally wavy appearance. Akira guessed that she had gotten up to do a few small things, but stayed in bed for most of the day. When he checked on her in the
morning - his father had either long left for work or never came home the previous night - she looked like she was in a lot of pain.

She looked over at him and pushed herself up a bit. “You’re home early.”

“No drama club today,” Akira said. He walked over and placed the tray on a table, then sat down on the bed. “How you feeling?”

“Continuing to hope for better weather. Maybe then my nerves won’t hate me as much.” She groaned and gave him a small smile, then frowned at his face, “Come on, don’t look so serious.”

“Sorry.” He muttered and tried to relax his face and smile, ”I brought dinner.”

He picked up one of the bowls and handed it to her, making sure she did not drop it. He then gave her a fork and she dug into the meal. She licked her lips as she tested the meal and swallowed. “You’re improving. Still a little watery, but the flavors better.” Akira nodded and pulled out his phone and selected the recipe. He changed the number for how much milk to put in it.

“I’ll try and make it creamier next time.”

“Could just be it’s settled a bit from being in the fridge all day.” She told him, “You should really be doing your homework.”

“I will. Just wanted to make sure you ate dinner.”

“Akira, it’s not your job to take care of me.”

“Well someone has to.” He said a frown on his face, “Dad won’t.”

His words were far more bitter and angry than they should have been and he winced when he heard his mother sigh. This was not a conversation she wanted to have today. Or ever. He rubbed the back of his neck, realizing he just made the bittersweet but overall pleasant atmosphere far worse. ”Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything."

The room became silent then after a few short seconds his mother spoke, changing the subject, “Well, if you want to stall on your homework, tell me how your school day was.”

“It was okay, same as always. My history teacher still hates me.”

“Did you derail class again?” She asked. Akira let a small smile cross his face.

“I...may have said some things she didn’t like.” He said watching as his mom shook her head, but judging by the similar smile on her face, she was less mad and more amused. “Have to admit, surprised I didn't get stuck on cleaning duty as punishment today.”

“Keep pushing your luck and it'll happen. You have any stories that don't include you almost getting into trouble?”

“Well during free period…”

He told her a few more things about his school day, and that he might go the arcade after clubs the day after. When dinner finished, he stayed in the room for a little while, reading on his phone while she watched tv. After a while, he felt a hand on his arm. “Homework.” She said, a serious look on her face. Akira sighed, but nodded.

“Alright.” He said sitting up and stretching out his neck. His eyes felt funny, he guessed he had
been dozing off when she got his attention. “Anything you need before I lock myself in my room?”

“I need you to be a normal child.” She said. He stopped, the response had caught him off guard, “Stop worrying about me and focus on what matters. Your school, your clubs. Stop skipping cram school classes too,” he sighed, she already knew, “It’s tiring hearing the teacher call to complain.”

Akira grumbled under his breath and climbed off the bed, “Well if dad came home to check on you like he should, I wouldn’t have to skip cram school.” He said. He heard his mother sigh and he knew where this was going so he stopped, “When I get my homework done I’ll draw you a bath, okay?”

She nodded, “Thank you Akira.”

He nodded and left the room. He got to his room and closed the door behind him, leaning against the wall and trying to get his thoughts together. How much longer was this going to go on? That she was going to keep denying his dad, her husband, had stopped caring about them years ago. And how long until she started blaming herself for it again?

For a brief second, he felt angry, but calmed himself down and took a seat at his desk to do his homework. He got through one assignment, then found he could no longer concentrate so he opened the browser on his laptop and began looking at pictures of cats.

5/2/2016 (Monday)
Late Night
Cafe Leblanc - Attic

Akira stared at his phone and rolled over. He put a hand around Morgana and closed his eyes again, to try and get some sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Next week begins Golden Week! That'll be fun.
“You’re up early.”

Makoto looked up from the kitchen when she heard her sister speak and grinned. “Morning sis.” Makoto said, “Do you want some coffee? It should be ready in a few minutes.”

Sae let a small smile cross her face, “Yes, that sounds good. Can you put it in a thermos? I need to be off soon.”

Makoto stopped what she was doing and stared at her. “Need to be off soon? What about breakfast?”

“No time, unfortunately. I need to get to work,” Sae said. Makoto frowned.

“I knew you’d be working most of the week, but so early?” She asked. She was sure her sister mentioned she had limited hours since the office was supposed to be closed, not that it would stop employees from going in to play catch up or get ahead on some work. Sae moved some hair out of her face.

“Since I’m taking Children’s Day off, I need to go in to finish up some reports which can’t wait. We also got a case in recently of...personal interest.” She said. Makoto looked up at her, “It’s related to your school's gym teacher. Well, I guess he’s now your school’s former gym teacher.”

“I see.”

“Which reminds me.” Sae said walking over and putting a hand on Makoto’s shoulder, “I know I asked this before, but are you sure you’re okay? Did he do anything to you? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Sis, I’m fine. He didn’t try anything,” At least, nothing Makoto knew about, and she shuddered to think if he did, “And I didn’t say anything because it was mostly rumors, there wasn’t any solid evidence that Kamoshida was dangerous until recently. And even then, when I went to the principal with my concerns he said it was not my place to investigate it.”

Sae looked at her and shook her head. “Makoto, you know with my position you could easily have spoken to me and I could have taken care of it.”

Makoto was silent for a second, a part of her skeptical about her sisters claim. “Is it possible to
open an investigation based on nothing but suspicion?"

“Well, considering you’re family I could have easily pulled some strings.”

From Makoto's experience, she knew if she had asked her sister to look into it she would have told her she needed some solid evidence first. There was also the fact that Sae already had enough on her plate with her job and Makoto did not want to bother her with school related things that Makoto herself was supposed to be able to handle on her own.

“Makoto,” Her sister speaking up snapped Makoto out of her thoughts, “You know you can talk to me about anything, right?”

“O-of course I do.” She said and Sae let her arms drop to her side. She looked her sister over one last time and nodded.

“Good.” She said, then changed the subject, “Now, have you picked a place you want to go for your late birthday dinner?”

“No, still thinking it over.”

“Well, make sure you have one by Friday or I’ll pick,” Sae told her. Makoto smiled and nodded as she finished getting her sister’s lunch together. She handed the box to Sae and walked with her to the door. “Are you hanging out with Goro today?” She asked as she put on her jacket.

“No sure yet. I was going to text him and see if he was free.”

“Well if you go to Shinjuku, be careful. Okay?”

“I will, promise,” Makoto said. Sae gave her one last smile and wished her well before leaving the apartment. Makoto finished making her breakfast and then cleaned the kitchen before sitting down with her school books. Since she was up early she figured she could do a little extra studying before going out and enjoying her day. She pulled up her phone and sent a message to Goro.

Makoto:
Hey, Sis said she would be free on Friday. Can you still get that day off?

And if you’re not busy, would you like to go out and do something?

She pushed her phone away and sunk herself into her books, knowing she was unlikely to receive a response for at least a few more hours.

5/3/2016
Morning
Cafe Leblanc

Akira put Morgana’s food bowl on the floor, then laid back down on his bed once his cat started eating his breakfast. He had a few more hours before Ryuji and Ann came by and picked him up, which meant he had a few more hours to try and steady his nerves and his stomach. They were going to go to the mall the moment they reached Shibuya, which he expected to be packed with
people hoping to take advantage of the Golden Week sales to buy clothes for the summer season. Ann and Ryuji were planning to do the same thing, and Akira had checked his limited wardrobe and noticed he needed some clothes for summer too.

He should have been looking forward to it, but the thought of the crowds made him uneasy. The city streets were still not something he had been able to adjust to, but that could just be because he had not really had a chance to go out and explore them. Until now.

He felt nervous and each breath he took got choked in his throat. Sojiro had brought him something Wakaba made for breakfast, but it was mostly untouched on the shelf by his bed. He kept his eyes closed and tried to keep himself from wanting to curl up in a ball.

...Going out was a terrible idea. He should cancel. However just as that thought crossed his mind, he felt a lump of fur touch his hand and then felt pressure on his chest. He opened his eyes and saw Morgana had climbed on him. His cat’s face was a bit fuzzy, which was about as clear as it would be while he was not wearing his glasses. “Hey.” He said.


Morgana kept staring at him and Akira sighed, “Okay, you win I’m not fine. I’m...promise not to laugh?” Morgana started licking his front paw. “I’m scared. And I don’t mean like just a bit nervous about how well this outing will go. I mean, scared to go out. Scared what will happen if I bump into the wrong guy, scared that I might get lost. I’m scared to leave the cafe and just want to stay here all break.” He paused, “I sound crazy, huh.”

Morgana looked at him and blinked. Akira stared at him. “Maybe I shouldn’t go out. What do you think?” He waited for Morgana to do something. The cat kept staring at him. “Okay, uh, how about this? Hit me with your right paw if you think I should stay home. Left paw if you think I should go out.”

Morgana stared at him for a few seconds longer then climbed off the bed and rolled onto the floor. Akira watched him and sighed. “You’re not helping.”

Morgana made a noise that sounded like a purr and Akira smiled before looking back at the ceiling. He took a deep breath and let it out. Everything was going to be fine. Ryuji and Ann would pick him up and they would go shopping and have a good time. Nothing bad would happen. The bad stuff was behind them now.

He opened his eyes again when he heard Sojiro shouting for him to come downstairs and checked his phone to see it was eleven o’clock. He climbed out of bed and went downstairs, taking the bag Morgana had climbed into and slinging it over his shoulder. He walked downstairs to see Ann talking to Sojiro and Ryuji leaning against one of the tables. He was the first to notice him.

“Hey.” He said, a grin on his face. Akira could not help but smile when he saw Ryuji’s cheerful demeanor.

“Ready to go?” Ann asked, then paused as he saw the bag, “You’re bringing Morgana with you?”

“Is that a problem?” Akira asked.

“No, just surprised.” Ann took a few steps closer and Morgana let out a happy meow, putting his paws on Akira’s shoulder to get a better look at Ann. She reached up and scratched his ear, “So cute. They don’t allow pets in the mall though, so make sure he stays hidden when we get there.”
“You can always just have Futaba take him for a day,” Sojiro suggested. Akira shook his head. Having Morgana around helped him feel a little steadier and he was sure his cat was not ready to deal with Futaba two days in a row. Ryuji got closer and reached a handout. Morgana narrowed his eyes and moved his head away, making a growling noise that made it clear Ryuji did not have permission to pet him.

“Geeze that cat really doesn’t like me.” He muttered, “Anyway, we should get going. Hopefully they have some good but cheap summer clothes.”

“They should have a few things, off brands have been pretty big this year.” Ann said, thinking it over and then turned to Sojiro, “It was nice meeting you Sakura-san. We promise we’ll keep Akira out of trouble.”

“I’m sure with you around he should be fine.” He said. Ann nodded, giving Sakura a friendly goodbye as she and Ryuji exited the cafe. Sojiro smiled and looked at Akira. “I’m impressed. Those two seem pretty okay.”

Akira nodded. “They’re nice.”

“Hey, come here,” Sojiro said and Akira approached the table to see Sojiro pull out a small envelope. He motioned for Akira to hold out his hand and placed some yen in his hand. Akira frowned and counted the bills and his eyes widened as he realized Sojiro just gave him twenty-five thousand yen*. He looked at Sojiro and shook his head.

“I can’t take this.”

“You can and you will. You’re almost broke until next week aren’t you?” Sojiro asked. Akira looked hesitant but Sojiro was right and he knew it, “Just give me back what you don’t spend and you can make up the rest by helping in the cafe. Now go out and have a good time.”

Akira gave his guardian a numb nod and put the money in his wallet before leaving the cafe. He followed Ryuji and Ann to the train station and felt a lump form in his throat when he saw the huge crowd in the train station. He felt his hands shaking again, so he stuffed them into his pockets and followed the two onto the packed train.

The main streets of Shibuya were packed with people. It was normal for the city and Akira tried to remind himself of that, but somehow the crowd felt worse than the one he had gotten lost in on his first day in the city. He tried to remind himself it was because of the holiday. With Golden Week, everyone had a day off at one point or another, and many were taking advantage of it. He should not have minded as much after having lived in the city for almost a month, but outside of one trip to the Beef Bowl with Ryuji and to Harajuku for Ann’s photoshoot, he only went to school or back to the cafe. He never had a reason to deviate from his usual route.

The number of bodies and the voices in his ears made him feel uneasy and even a little claustrophobic. He should have canceled. He should have texted Ryuji and Ann and told them he did not feel well and he did not want to go anywhere. He should have stayed in the cafe.

He tried to shake the thoughts out his mind as soon as they came to him. Ryuji had been looking forward to taking him out into the city, and Akira himself wanted to spend time with him and Ann, especially now that the fear of expulsion was behind them. However the uneasy wouldn’t leave his stomach, and his body felt like it was on fire.
Going out was a bad idea. He shook that thought out too. If he did not go out he could not get used to the city. He was not going to keep himself hauled up in Leblanc for a year. “You okay?” He jumped a little when he saw Ann looking at him. He let a small smile cross his face and nodded.

“Yeah.” He said. He was not good, he was screaming on the inside, but was trying to ignore it. “The malls close by right?”

Central Street was at least a little familiar since he had gone down it once before. Ann and Ryuji dragged him to the underground mall, the entrance/exit packed with people talking to each other that they were forced to push passed. Akira felt the unease run through him, his legs becoming shaky as he took the steps down. He looked around. So many people and the shops were small and pushed tightly together. And they were underground.

He took in a shaky breath and let it out. His ears were whistling as he felt the anxiety rush through him. He heard Ann say something and then Ryuji reply back and next thing he knew the two were hurrying over to a shop. He called for them to wait and started after them only to be cut off by some people.

“Oh, excuse me.” He stammered trying to push through the crowd only to trip and bump into somebody.

“Hey, watch it.”

“S-sorry.” Akira stumbled back and into another person, who he apologized to and tried to navigate through the mall. He looked around, trying to find any trace of Ann or Ryuji.

He saw neither of them. How was it that the two people he was supposed to be out with were a natural and dyed blonde and he couldn’t find any of them in the crowd? He looked behind him, his heart racing as he realized he not only couldn’t find his friends but had absolutely no idea where he was. He could feel his body becoming hot, his stomach twisting as he heard his heart pounding in his ears, his breath quickening.

He panicked and ran, and slammed right into someone. He didn’t hear what they said, didn’t notice his bag drop on the floor, didn’t see some of the faceless masses look at him as he bolted trying to find a way out. It didn’t matter where he just needed to get away from the crowd.

His mind must have gone blank because next thing he knew he was stumbling against the wall in some corner he had no idea how he had gotten too. But everything was further away. The sounds were quieter, there was no crowd. His body was shaking, and his breathing was harsh, and he let himself sink onto the floor and curled up into a ball. If they saw him like this...he hugged himself tighter and hid his head.

He shouldn’t have gone out. He should have stayed home.

He missed home. The city was too much.

Too much. He wanted to go home...

“Excuse me.”

He heard a soft voice, but it was the sound of meowing that caught his attention. He felt Morgana’s head bump his elbow and then looked up to see a young girl, maybe his age, maybe a year older, staring at him. She was holding a bag, her auburn curly hair framed her face, but was parted in a way that made her forehead prominent. She was wearing a blue jacket with a pink skirt. She was looking at him concerned, then smiled. “So that cat is yours. Then this bag must be too.”
Akira looked away from her, and down at Morgana. His cat pushed himself into his lap and Akira wrapped his arms around him. He held him close, running his fingers along Morgana’s soft black fur, closing his eyes. He then opened them when he heard footsteps and saw the girl take a seat near him. She was close, but not close enough he felt like his personal space was being invaded. “I’m sorry, I hope that I didn’t startle you or anything. Are you okay?”

Akira stayed silent and did not answer the girl’s questions. She was a stranger and one part of him was hoping she would leave while the other was hoping she would stay. He did not feel like he could trust his own voice, so instead he kept his hands on Morgana, holding the cat like it was a lifeline keeping him grounded.

The girl, to his surprise, stayed with him as the minutes passed. Akira found himself calming down a little, enough to look at her. She was smiling, her face calm as she waited for him. Akira looked away then jumped when he heard his phone vibrate. He tried to grab it, it took longer than usual, but he did manage to pull out his phone and look at it.

Ann and Ryuji were texting him, wondering where he was. His hand was shaking and he tried to respond back. He held his phone with both hands, but as he tried to type it almost slipped out of his palm. He stared at his screen, his arms shaky. Then looked up at the girl who was still watching him. “C-could….you…” He stuttered and she nodded and moved a little closer. He passed her his phone.

“You want me to reply to your friends?” She asked. He nodded, holding Morgana close to him. “Okay. What’s your name by the way?”

“Akira…Kurusu...” He muttered.

“Akira Kurusu.” She said, “It’s nice to meet you Kurusu-san. I’m Haru. Now let’s see.”

Haru began typing her message and Akira listened as he kept his focus on his cat.

“Dammit, where the hell is he?” Ryuji said. Akira was nowhere in sight, which had both of them a little worried. There were people all over the place and while he found Ann with little trouble, their friend had more or less disappeared into the crowd. “Geeze I knew the mall would get busy but this is a bit ridiculous. Hope he didn’t get lost.”

“It’s not a big mall. Don’t worry, we’ll find him,” Ann said. She checked her phone. Still no response from him. They still weren’t sure how Akira got separated, but they both agreed their first priority was to find him. She thought about how Akira looked when they left Leblanc, how pale and uneasy he seemed. “Hey Ryuji, maybe it’s just me, but did Akira seem kinda nervous when we were leaving Leblanc? He looked really pale when we got off the train.”

“Yeah, a little.” Ryuji said, “But honestly, he’s been a bit on edge since I first met him. Hell, when I first talked to him his first thought was I wanted to beat the shit out of him because of his record. I mean, with how the school treats him I’m not surprised, but that’s kinda bad to think you know.”

Ann thought Ryuji’s words over and nodded. “Yeah, I get what you mean. But I gotta be honest with you Ryuji.” She saw the frown form on Ryuji’s face, “I don’t believe the rumors about Akira, I think he’s a good person, the fact he turned around and helped us get rid of Kamoshida is proof of that, but the more I think about it the more I realize I don’t really know much about him. Has he told you anything about himself? Like his home life or anything?”
“Well, he likes cats? And detective novels?” Ryuji said, but thinking it over he found himself realizing Ann was right. “Honestly, all I know is he’s here on probation because of that assault charge. I did try to ask him about it, but he didn’t want to talk about it.” Ryuji explained, then paused for a second before adding, “Uh, after we had that brief fallout he did mention being afraid of going back to juvie...so I guess he was stuck there before he went on probation? That’s pretty much it. I think he knows more about me than I do about him right now.”

Ann nodded. She wanted to be open to having Akira as a friend, but what Ryuji just told her confirmed how little they knew about him. It was then her phone began to vibrate and she looked down. Her eyes widening. “Huh?”

“What’s wrong?” Ryuji asked.

“Got a reply, but it’s not from Akira. Or it is, but...here just look.” Ann held her phone out so Ryuji could see the text message.

Akira:
Hi!

I just want to say right away this is not Kurusu-san, but I am with him. He asked me to message you because right now he’s not doing so well and can’t himself.

We’re around the corner passed the music store and flower shop. I’ll stay with him until you get here.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Ryuji asked.

The two made their way past the crowded stores as quick as possible and reached the music store and the flower shop. Just as the text message said Akira and another person, a young girl, were around the corner away from the crowd. She looked up at them and stood up.

“Oh!” She said eyes wide. Ann and Ryuji looked at her, surprised.

“Hey, you’re that girl from a few weeks ago! The one with the planters on the roof.” Ryuji said. The girl let out a small giggle.

“And you’re the two who weren't supposed to be there. This is quite a coincidence.” She said, giving them a gentle smile. “I take it you two are Kurusu-san’s friends?”

Ryuji and Ann’s eyes shifted from her to the teenager in question. He kept his head down, scratching the back of his cat's neck, trying to keep calm. He only looked up when Morgana noticed and meowed getting his attention and when he did, his face was so pale it made his eyes look darker and lifeless. Ryuji was by his side in a second, Ann as well, kneeling down.

“Hey.” She said. “You okay?”

“You had us worried there man. What happened?” Ryuji asked. Akira looked down, hiding his face behind his hair and Morgana’s head. He became tense when he felt a hand on his shoulder. “Hey, easy there. What happened? You can tell us.”

“I…” He started and then lost his voice again as it got stuck in his throat. His face turned red as Ann and Ryuji waited for him to answer. He opened his mouth to speak, then stopped and shook
his head. He felt embarrassed that his panic was because he got separated from them. He felt more like an overly emotional child than a teenager. Ann and Ryuji looked at each other and Ryuji put a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, we’re right here so it’s okay.” He said. Akira was silent and Ryuji watched him. The sight of his friend huddled on the floor was far too familiar. It was not as bad as when Kamoshida threatened them with expulsion, but it was still bad. “Uh, why don’t we get out of here and go somewhere a little quieter.” He suggested. Ann nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, good idea.” She said and looked around, “But where?”

The question hung in the air for a few seconds, then the young girl spoke up.

“What about renting out a room at Karaoke?” She suggested. Ann’s eyes lit up at the suggestion.

“Yeah, good idea. No one really goes there in the day so we should be able to get a place for a little while.” She said, “What do you think Akira? Is that okay? It’s not far.”

It took a few seconds, but Akira nodded and with some help stood up. His legs were still shaky and he was dreading going back into the overcrowded mall. Ann and Ryuji looked at the girl, “Hey, um…” Ryuji started.

“Haru.” She said. Ryuji waited for a second then realized she was not going to give her last name. He shifted on his feet, a little uncomfortable.

“Oh, uh, thanks for the help Haru.”

“It’s no trouble.” Haru told them, “If it’s okay, I’d like to at least walk with you guys to Karaoke. I want to make sure Kurusu-san’s okay.”

Ann and Ryuji looked at Akira, who nodded, his face still half buried against his cat. Ann grinned, “We’d love it if you came with us Haru.” She said, giving herself and Ryuji a proper introduction. Haru nodded and kept the smile on her face as she slung Akira’s bag over her shoulder. Ryuji looked around and found the nearest stairs out of the mall and with some encouragement helped Akira walk out of the mall, Ann, and Haru behind them.

Haru was kind enough - and insistent - on paying for their Karaoke room. Unfortunately not long after paying, she got a text message and the friendly smile on her face faded as she read it. “Sorry, but I need to get back home.” She said. Ann and Ryuji noticed she looked dejected.

“Is everything okay?” She asked. Haru looked at them and nodded.

“Yeah, just my father wanting me home to talk about something important.” She explained, “Sorry I can’t stay.”

“It’s okay.” Ryuji said, “But thanks for walking with us.”

“Yeah…” The three looked over when they heard Akira speak. He kept his head low but there was a little more color in his face. “Thanks, Haru.”

Haru’s smile was soft and sweet and it made him feel more at ease. “You don’t need to thank me, I’m just glad I could help a little.” She said, “Well if I don’t see you guys again, have a great
“Golden Week.”

“Maybe we’ll see you on the school’s roof sometime,” Ann said a grin crossing her face and Haru giggled.

“Probably. Take care!”

The three said their goodbyes to Haru and got their card key for the Karaoke room. They took seats around the table and Ann reached into a small fridge that had been placed in the room and grabbed two bottles of water and a can of soda. She gave Ryuji the soda and placed one of the bottles on the table in front of Akira, who had again become quiet as he continued to hold Morgana and pat his head.

It took another ten minutes but then Akira let out a loud sigh and his shoulders dropped.

“Feeling better?” Ryuji asked. Akira shook his head.

“Not really.” He said. His face flushed and he sounded worn out, “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Ann asked, trying to lighten the mood. Seeing Akira’s face made her shake her head and change her tone. “Hey, no need to be sorry. We should have been more careful. I keep forgetting you’re from the countryside; being in the middle of Shibuya on its busiest holiday has to be overwhelming.”

Akira said nothing and the three fell quiet for a little while before Ryuji spoke up. “Hey, uh, Akira, can I be honest with you about something?” He asked. More silence, but Akira did look at him. “It’s just, this is the second time I’ve seen you all freaked out like this. Don’t get me wrong, I understand being nervous, but it’s like…” He rubbed his neck, hesitant. “Ugh, I don’t know how to say it without sounding like an asshole.”

“I think what Ryuji is trying to say is that seeing how panicked you are is not normal,” Ann said. Ryuji gave a quick nod. “And to be honest, I kinda agree. No offense but you’ve been clinging to Morgana less like he’s your pet and more like he’s your lifeline.”

Akira looked down at Morgana who then meowed at him. His grip loosened a little. “Having Morgana makes me feel better. I kept feeling scared thinking about going back to juvie or Kamoshida’s threat, but I’ve felt better since I got him.”

“I gotta agree with Ann. It’s scary seeing you curled up on the floor like that.” Ryuji said. Akira looked down at his cat, scratching its head, then after some thought nodded.

“I don’t like feeling like this.” He said. Ann lifted a hand up then after some hesitation placed it on his back. Ryuji got a little closer joining her. They both noticed Akira flinched, but he did not pull away from them or ask them to take their hands off him. He seemed to take some comfort in the gesture. “There’s a doctor in Yongen-Jaya I can talk to.”

“Then we’ll go there after you calm down a bit more,” Ryuji said.

“You sure?” Akira asked. Ryuji grinned.

“Yeah. Wouldn’t be suggesting it if I wasn’t. Heck if you want we can even walk back instead of
taking the train.”

Akira nodded and the three spent the rest of their hour in the room, Ryuji and Ann helping Akira feel more comfortable by showing him videos on Ann's phone.

Takemi sighed and looked up when the clinic door opened. Despite the Golden Week bringing business to everywhere else, her clinic had been as quiet as ever. She helped an old lady with a cold and that was about it. It was a slow day and she was enjoying it since it gave her time to work on her personal projects.

So when she heard the door open she was not looking forward to putting down her notes. However when she saw who it was, and saw the look on his face as he held onto his cat, she knew exactly why he was there. “Kurusu.” She said putting her papers away and standing up. “Let me guess: nervousness.”

Akira nodded and she stepped out from behind her desk. There were two other people with him. “You can keep the cat with you, but those two need to stay out here.”

“Seriously?” Ryuji asked.

“We’re going to be discussing information that he might not be open to sharing with anyone besides a doctor. If he wants to tell you about it, he can after the exam.” Takemi said, then smiled. “Don’t worry, I’ll take good care of him.”

Ryuji frowned but Ann put a hand on his shoulder and he reluctantly took a seat in the waiting area. “We’ll be waiting out here.” She said. Akira nodded. Takemi opened the door to her exam room and motioned for him to come inside. His eyes glanced around the room, seeing it looked the same as last time, just more papers on her desk, which she put into a folder and shut before sitting down. She motioned for him to sit down on the bed. Akira did so. Morgana looked around and let out a meow.

“He’s cute,” Takemi said. “When did Sojiro get a cat?”

“He’s my cat,” Akira said. Takemi nodded, an amused expression on her face. She looked Akira over and with one look knew he was on edge. She took a piece of paper and leaned forward.

“Okay, start from the beginning.” Takemi said and Akira looked at her, “Do you remember when you first started feeling this anxious?”

Akira nodded. He remembered. “I think it was after I got arrested.” He said. Takemi nodded, her lack of reaction made him guess Sojiro already told her about his probation.

“When was this?”

“In late January.” He told her, keeping his eyes on his cat. She looked at him. “I remember being locked in a cold cell in my town’s prison. I remember not sleeping, being confused, and scared.” He stopped when he heard her scribbling some notes, and she motioned for him to continue. “It got worse when I was transferred to juvie. Then kinda just stopped for awhile and I didn’t feel anything.”

“What were you arrested for?”
“...Assault.”

Akira noticed Takemi’s expression change, as well as her push her chair back a little.

“You assaulted someone.”

“No!” He said, louder than he should have, and Takemi noticed his grip on his cat tighten, his arms beginning to shake. “No, I...I didn’t. I just wanted to help…”

“Easy.” She said, moving a bit closer again, as Akira buried his head in Morgana’s fur. She put a hand on his arm and he flinched. “Kurusu, look at me.”

He did, it took a few seconds but he did, and Takemi began writing her notes, “Tell me what happened but don’t squeeze your cat in half.”

Akira loosened his grip on Morgana and the cat let out a noise that sounded like a relieved sigh. He then nodded and started speaking. He told Takemi about his arrest, how his father refused to take him home, and instead had him transferred to a Juvenile facility while waiting for the trial, which he stayed at after the judge found him guilty. He told her about the three boys he roomed with, and a fight that broke out that he somehow got dragged into that needed to be broken up by the security.

“Really. 48 hours in solitary.” She said as scribbled her notes and then brought her hand up to his neck and shoulders. She noted the tension and wrote it down. “That’s inhumane, especially for a child.”

Akira was silent, and Takemi noticed he looked worn out. “You mentioned some security officers were abusive. Considering what you just told me, am I right to guess you were abused at some point?” A brief pause then Akira gave her a small nod.

“I didn’t get it as bad as some of the others. Most just left me alone.”

“You didn’t get it as bad, but spent two days in solitary confinement,” Takemi said. Deflection. She scribbled it down, “You also mentioned your father, but not your mother. Is she not in your life?”

“She is, but she’s sick a lot. Dad probably didn’t give her a say in it anyway,” He said. “Only time I saw her while in juvie was when she visited to tell me my sentence had been changed to a probation in the city. She didn’t look great.”

“And this was?” Takemi asked.

“Late March I think. I don’t know.” Akira said, “I was given some paperwork to sign, had my photo taken for the school and then on April 9th I was told to change into my school uniform and escorted by the police and my dad to the train station. He gave me my phone, the directions to Leblanc, and told me not to screw up my probation.”

“I see.” She said then fell silent as she turned to her computer and brought up some paperwork. She pressed print, then turned back to him. “Alright just let me do some physical checks and then I have some more questions I want you to answer.”

Akira nodded and let Takemi take his blood pressure and check his heart rate. He followed her instructions, taking a deep breath in and then letting it out, and flinched when she put the scope under his shirt and to his bare back. She removed it and then handed him the papers with a pen, telling him to answer the questions as honestly as he could. He took them, Morgana moving out of his lap and lying down next to him.
He looked them over, feeling his heart racing as he circled whatever answer he felt was most appropriate for each question. He signed his name on the last page and handed it back to her. Takemi looked them over, nodded. “Yes, just like I thought.” She said and looked at him, “You’re symptoms line up with having an anxiety disorder.”

Akira looked at her, then down at Morgana before looking at her again. “So I'm just anxious?”

“Not 'just anxious'. No one who is ‘just anxious’ is holding onto their pet cat like you were.”
Takemi said, “It’s normal to feel some anxiety, especially since you just moved from the country to the city. However based on your answers, demeanor, and everything you’ve told me, there’s an underlying issue beyond just new city jitters.” She looked at his answers and what she wrote down, “Everything here tells me it’s most likely generalized anxiety, or do you think I'm wrong?”

Akira was quiet, looking down at his hands which were folded into his lap. His thoughts were everywhere. Did Takemi just imply he was mentally ill? What would happen if his school found out? What would Ryuji and Ann think? He could feel his nerves beginning to unravel, and Morgana nudged his chest trying to get him to calm down. He looked up when Takemi gave him a light touch on the head with her papers.

“It’s alright.” She told him, “I can promise that this is not something to feel ashamed of, and you’ll feel a lot better with proper treatment. Which we should begin today.”

Treatment. “What treatment?”

“Well first, I’m going to put you on a low dose medication, that’ll help you keep calm. It’ll be something you can take at night so it can help you sleep. You’ll need to take it every night before bed so try to come up with a consistent sleep schedule. You should start feeling the effects in a few days.” She instructed. Akira gave a small nod, “I’ll give you some printouts of exercises and coping mechanisms to help ease your anxiety as well. I’d recommend looking into seeing a therapist. Unfortunately, I can’t provide you with any help finding one.” She paused, “Are you religious?”

He stared at her, confused. The question seemed almost random. “Not really.”

“I see. If you were I would have suggested visiting the church in Kanda.” She paused again then shrugged, “Course some people I know that aren’t religious go there anyway. I guess it’s a peaceful area, not that I would know or anything……”

Takemi got up from her seat and walked over to the door. “Alright, you’re free to wait in the lobby with your friends while I get your prescription.”

Akira nodded and picked up Morgana. He left the room and saw Ryuji and Ann waiting for him. They both stood up, “So?”

Akira sighed and sat down. His two friends sat down with him, and he explained. He saw Ann give him a sympathetic look and put a hand on his arm. Ryuji looked confused, “But what she’s giving you is gonna help right?”

“I hope so,” Akira said. He looked up and got to his feet when Takemi got out from behind her desk. She handed Akira a white bag, which he took and looked at as she spoke.

“Allright, instructions are in the bag.” Takemi said, “I’ll forward this information to your school after the holiday.” Akira nodded and hoped like his student record, his medical record did not leak. “Also, I want you to come back in two weeks for a follow-up, just to see how you are doing. The
“17th is fine right?”

“Yeah…it’s fine…” He muttered. Takemi let a small smile cross her face.

“Good. Now get out.” She said. The three stared at her surprised by the bluntness. She then frowned, “What? There’s no reason you need to be here anymore. Shoo.”

On cue, the three hurried out of the clinic and once the door closed Takemi sighed and shook her head. “Sojiro, you really know how to pick’em.”

The three climbed the steps and stopped in the small street. Akira read the instructions on the bag. They were just as Takemi had said, he was to take one pill each night before bed. There was enough medication for the full month. He sighed. He had no idea what he expected, but it was certainly not being told he needed medicine. “You okay man?” Ryuji asked.

“Don’t know.” He said looking at the two. “Never thought I’d be taking pills. Kinda don’t want to.”

“Maybe it’ll just be temporary?” Ann suggested. “Might be a good idea to do what she says, even if you don’t want to.”

Akira looked at the bag again. Takemi said they would follow up in two weeks. He’d give it until then to see how he felt. He then looked at his friends and his head dropped. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Ryuji said, “So going out didn’t go the way we thought it would, it’s not the end of the world or anything. And besides we have the rest of the vacation, we’ll just take it slower.”

“Yeah, no more trips to the mall. Maybe we should try some smaller shops outside of the main hub. Or we can go to the park for lunch or something.” Ann said.

Akira sighed, but smiled, “I think I just wanna go back to Leblanc and get my head straight.” He muttered.

“We understand. Is it okay if we come with you?” Ann asked. Akira looked at them, a little surprised Ann offered. He did not mind if they came back with him to Leblanc. He actually wanted the company. He felt comfortable around Ryuji and Ann. His smile faded for a second and they noticed. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s just…” He started then after some thought nodded to himself. “I need to tell you guys something. It’s about my arrest.”

He was not sure he was ready to fully relieve that night, but if Ann and Ryuji were sticking with him after what happened in the mall, he was sure they would stay around after he told them what happened. Maybe it would help him a bit to get it out in the open. “What is it?” Ryuji asked and Akira hesitated for a second before saying.

“Let’s go back to Leblanc. I’ll tell you there.” He told them and the three walked back to the cafe. He took a deep breath and let it out.

Things had to get better. Right?
*Unless I got my numbers wrong AGAIN, Sojiro gave Akira roughly $250 for Golden Week (because clothes shopping is expensive no matter where you go).
Okay, some bad news. I have a shoulder that decides it likes to act up and put me through a lot of pain every couple or so months and it's acting up again, so I'm gonna take the next week off. That means Chapter 20 will be uploaded on Dec 12th instead of Dec 5th.

Sorry for the delay everyone.

One other thing and this is a bit random: does anyone know how images show up in AO3's download options? I know they appear in PDFs but I don't know how they look in the other download formats. I would greatly appreciate answers!

Anyway, enjoy the chapter ^^
“I dunno. I think money was mentioned, but everything was happening so fast I don’t really remember.” Akira said. Again silence and Akira leaned over and sighed. “So, that’s my story.”

“So you were arrested, sent to juvie, and after a few months they changed your sentence to a Probation in Shibuya.” Ann said, “I’m sorry Akira. You’ve been through a lot and the crap that’s been happening at school hasn’t helped either.”

“Yeah, no kidding.” Ryuji said, “But look, everything’s gonna be alright now, okay? We won’t need to deal with Kamoshida anymore.”

“Still have a leaked record.” Akira muttered.

“Yeah, but you have us too,” Ryuji told him. Akira looked up at them to see Ryuji had a grin on his face, “And honestly, we don’t care about your record or anything like that.”

“So you don’t mind being around someone who’s pegged as a criminal?” He asked. The two looked at him strangely and then looked at each other.

“No? If we were we wouldn’t be here now.” Ann told him. “You’re a good person Akira, we wouldn’t be around you if you weren’t.”

“Yeah, the criminal thing isn’t much of a deal breaker,” Ryuji said, a grin on his face. “Don’t forget, school’s got me pegged as a delinquent too. And I’m not even going to repeat half the crap Ann’s got on her.”

“Good.”

“Far as we’re concerned you fit right in with us,” Ryuji said.

Akira looked at them again, and smiled, as Morgana pushed his head into his chest and then nudged his hand. “Thank you.” He said, moving his hands as his cat jumped off his lap and onto the table.

“No need to thank us for being honest,” Ryuji told him and Akira gave him a small nod.

“I guess. Just between two and a half months in Juvie and then the school, it’s strange being treated like I’m just a normal kid. Minus the whole living in the attic of a cafe thing.” He said then after a few seconds added, “There’s a part of me that’s been worried now that Kamoshida’s out of the school you guys were gonna stop talking to me.”

“Well, stop worrying about that.” Ryuji said, “You’re our friend, why would you think we’d ditch you after Kamoshida?”

“Well, back home, none of my friends ever visited me after I was sent to Juvie.” He mumbled.

“Then they probably weren’t good friends to begin with.”

Akira found himself agreeing with the comment. He continued to stare at the table and then, without warning, he put his arms on it and laid his head down on them. Only a few hours had passed in the day, and with everything that just happened, he felt exhausted.

“You gonna be okay?” Ann asked.

“I don’t know.” He muttered, then groaned, “Why did this have to happen today?”

“Well better now than in school. If you freaked out like you did in class instead of the mall, I don’t
think it would have gone over well...” Ann started and trailed off as Akira let out a small groan. He did not want to think about what could have happened if he had an episode in school. He did not need to hear more whispers from his classmates about how he was dangerous and crazy.

It became uncomfortably quiet, so Ryuji spoke up to change the topic. “So, what are we gonna do tomorrow?” He asked. Ann looked at him and Akira forced himself to sit up.

“Well after my shoot I was planning to visit Shiho. You guys still coming?” She paused and looked at Akira, “Do you want to? Or did you wanna try and rest a bit more?”

Akira opened his mouth to answer then stopped. Maybe it was because he was still shaken from earlier but his first thought was he wanted to stay home. On the other hand, he knew he needed to try and go out again. And Ann had sounded like she really wanted him to meet her best friend. The girl she wished she could be 'more' with.

“I want to meet Shiho. And I can’t stay cooped up in the attic all year.”

“I’ll come by and pick you up then,” Ryuji said. Akira nodded, “I think you’ll like Shiho, she’s pretty nice.”

“Yeah and I’m sure she’ll be happy to meet you too,” Ann said. Akira nodded again and pushed himself up. “I promise I said mostly good things about you.”

Akira froze for a second. ”What do you mean 'mostly good things'?”

Ann gave him a smile he could not quite read that neither made him uncomfortable, nor made him feel entirely safe either.

5/3/2016
Evening
Sakamoto Apartment

Ryuji stared at his phone as he lay on his bed. He and Ann stayed at Leblanc for a little while longer, but when Akira decided he needed to lie down for a little while, the two left the cafe. They both let Akira know if he needed anything he could text them. So far his phone had been quiet, which made him hopeful everything was alright.

Then his phone buzzed and he reached for it as quick as he could. It was not Akira. Ann had sent him a text message.

Ann:
Hey, got a sec?

His reply was quick.

Ryuji:
Shoot.

Ann:
I’m still thinking about all that stuff Akira told us today.
It’s really messed up huh? What
they did to him?

**Ryuji:**
Yeah. And I thought my shit with my dad and Kamoshida was bad.

I don’t get it.

**Ann:**
Get what?

**Ryuji:**
Like why do people do that?
Shit on people like us because of something we can’t control or because we were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

It makes me mad.

There was a brief pause, but after a few long seconds, Ann finally answered.

**Ann:**
Yeah, me too.

I can’t stand how people will use others and hurt them like that...

**Ryuji:**
And there isn’t much we can do about it either.

**Ann:**
Except look after each other.

**Ryuji:**
Yeah. You think he’ll be okay?

**Ann**
Don’t know. I’m really worried and I don’t know why. I guess it’s because...

Ryuji saw some dots at the bottom of his phone. It told him Ann was typing her message, but then they disappeared. He decided to respond.

**Ryuji:**
Because?

Ann started typing again and the response popped up.

**Ann:**
It’s like with Shiho. Well, not the same but I can’t stop thinking about it.
I don’t want what happened to Shiho
to happen to him. I don’t think I could handle
seeing another friend jump off the school
roof...

Ryuji sat up and dialed Ann’s number. After a few seconds, she picked up.

“‘You didn’t have to call you know.’”

“Yeah, but I thought it’d be better to say it.” He told her, “It won’t. What happened to Shiho won’t happen to Akira. I promise.” There was a brief silence and Ryuji spoke up again, “Look I’ll be picking him up tomorrow, so don’t worry. Just go to your shoot, have fun with it, and we’ll meet you at the hospital. I’ll make sure he’s not overwhelmed or anything. We’ll walk instead of taking the train if we have to.”

“Okay, I trust you.” Ann said then paused and laughed a bit, “Never thought I’d say that.”

“Hey. You already know I’m trustworthy.”

“Yeah. You never told anyone my secret, even though we weren’t good friends,” There was another brief pause then Ann continued speaking, “I really hope you’re right Ryuji.”

“...I hope I am too.” He said then looked up when he heard the door to their apartment open.

“Gotta run, mom’s home.”

“Alright, later.”

The call ended and Ryuji got up from his bed and left the room to greet his mom.

5/3/2016
Evening
Cafe Leblanc

The cafe had become quiet. Sojiro closed up shop early because again with Golden Week so busy for him he had double his profits compared to a normal day and did not feel like working anymore. He called Akira downstairs for dinner. Again it was curry, but this time a bit on the sweeter side than the usual.

“I thought I’d try something a little different. Good?” He asked as he restocked the back of his counter and counted his inventory. Akira gave him a quiet nod, but unlike most times he was presented with food made by his guardian he was not wolfing it down. He had hardly touched it. Seeing the lack of movement, Sojiro sighed. “Alright, what’s wrong?”

“Huh?”

“You came home early and looked like you saw someone get murdered in the streets. You had that bag too...” He trailed off then nodded, "I might be old but I’m not blind. You got medicine from Takemi didn’t you.”

Akira sighed. Sojiro was too observant. He mulled over his options, wondering if he should say anything or not, for a few seconds before speaking. “Can I ask you something?”
“If I let you, will you tell me what’s going on?” He asked. Akira nodded. “Alright go ahead.”

“What did you lie? About why you took me in. Why did you lie about being paid to do it?”

The question hung in the air for a long while before Sojiro answered, “A stranger hears from a customer he barely knows, that this friend of a friend of theirs has a kid that got in trouble with the law and offers to take him in with no strings attached.” He explains, “Would you have believed me if I told you the truth?”

Akira let his head drop so he was looking at the food. No. No, he wouldn’t have. In fact, now that Sojiro spelled it out for him, the entire concept sounded suspicious, even a little creepy. He took a deep breath in and let it out. “It’s anxiety.” He said and when he noticed Sojiro looked confused explained, “The pills Takemi gave me. They’re to help with anxiety.”

Sojiro made a small noise and nodded his head. Akira watched him, noticing there was a look on his face he could not quite read. Finally the man shook out his hands and picked up his pack of cigarettes. “I’m going to head out, you gonna be alright on your own tonight?”

“Yeah. I’ll be fine.”

“Make sure you eat before you take your meds. Don’t wanna make yourself sick.” Sojiro said. Akira nodded and Sojiro lit one of his cigarettes and left the cafe. Akira sighed and looked down at his bag, Morgana poking his head out now that Sojiro was gone. He meowed and Akira gave him a weak smile.

“Yeah. I know.” He muttered. Morgana let out another meow and he sighed, picked up some of the rice with his fork and fed it to the cat. He ate most of what was on his plate and cleaned it off before going upstairs. He changed into his pajamas, looked at stuff on his phone for a little while, Morgana curled up next to him, then when it was near the time he would normally go to bed, got up and walked over to his desk. He picked up the small white bag with his prescription and read the instructions in the prescribers notes:

‘Take one pill each night an hour before bed’

Akira pulled the vial out of the bag and looked at the small white pills inside it. He unscrewed the cap dropped one in his hand and inspected it. "This is supposed to help me." He muttered as he looked at the small tablet. He took a deep breath, popped it in his mouth, and swallowed it with the glass of water he brought with him upstairs. He shook his head and sighed, looking at Morgana who meowed and had an annoyed look on his face.

"I’m coming, relax," Akira said, a weak smile on his face as he laid back down on the bed. He felt Morgana push himself into his ribs, so he put a hand on the cat’s head, then closed his eyes to try and sleep.

5/4/2016
Daytime
Shibuya Train Station

Ryuji hurried up the stairs out of Shibuya Station, and into the square, Akira moving slower behind him. “Alright, it’s just a few blocks down the street from here,” He said, turning around to look at his friend, “You hanging in there?”
“Yeah. Just wish I brought Morgana.” Akira said. He had been quiet since Ryuji had picked him up, from the cafe. He felt a bit calmer compared to the other day, but there was still a feeling of unease in his stomach and tension in his shoulders. Takemi said it would take a few days until he felt the full effects of his new medication. He hoped she was right, at the moment he felt more on edge than he knew he should.

“Sorry, unfortunately, pets aren’t allowed in the hospital.” Ryuji said, “Even if they were Shiho's got that allergy. Well come on, it shouldn’t take much longer to get there.”

Akira nodded and finished climbing the stairs. Sojiro had assured him Futaba would take good care of Morgana, though from what he had seen, his cat did not appear to like the orange haired girl too much. Still having her keep an eye on him was better than letting him wander the streets while Akira was inside the hospital. At least now he did not need to worry about his pet getting lost somewhere.

Akira followed Ryuji out of the train station and seeing his hands shaking a bit, put them in his pockets. Ryuji had assured him today would be a slow day. They were going to visit Shiho and then if they had some time and he wanted to go to a DVD rental place called Scarlet’s to see if they had anything good. They were also going to take a look at the bookstore downtown, the one he noticed his first time down Central Street. Akira had to admit, he was curious what the store had in stock. Ryuji had described it vaguely as ‘a little old, a little new, not a lot of manga so I don’t go there much.’

“Which reminds me - and I know this sounds random - but have you heard of Medjed?” Ryuji asked. Akira raised an eyebrow.

“Medjed? Sounds like some evil doctor or something.”

Ryuji thought for a second, then chuckled. “Yeah, now that you mention it you’re right. Anyway, apparently, they're a hacker group that’s been going around and leaking company information. I guess they started with small-time crooks but became a pretty big deal after some bank hack a few months ago.”

“Really.”

“Yeah. Some investigator or something is releasing a book called ‘Medjed Menace.’ I guess he’s been following them for awhile and is publishing all their shit. Comes out in two days.”

“Wonder if I can order it,” Akira muttered, interest piqued. Ryuji said something about his fondness for reading (though Akira was sure his friend used the word ‘obsession’), but he was not listening. Instead, his attention diverted to a man standing on a box in the middle of the square. He frowned, he had seen that man before. He was the politician he had stopped to listen to a few weeks back.

“These incidents cannot be ignored. The increase in train accidents, a school with a teacher so corrupt he would harm his students…. Akira and Ryuji stopped as they heard him speak, “Can anyone deny this? The apathy that permeates society is a direct result of negligence by our government and the media.”

“Huh, listen to that.” Ryuji said then turned to Akira, “He makes some good points if we didn’t have plans I’d probably stick around to hear what he had to say.”

Akira was quiet as he continued to follow Ryuji down the street. They reached the hospital and stepped inside. Immediately the busy streets became muted behind the hospital doors and Ryuji
asked the receptionist for Shiho’s room, giving his and Akira’s names. The woman smiled at them and told them to go down the hall and take a right. She was the fifth door in the next hallway. They were sure they were in the right place when they saw Ann sitting in the waiting area, looking at her phone.

“Hey, Ann.” Ryuji said, “You alright? Don’t tell us we’re late.”

“No, you’re fine. My shoot got canceled last minute. No explanation, or anything. Talk about unprofessional...” She muttered, “Anyway, you two ready?”

“Yeah, let’s go in,” Ryuji said. Akira nodded as Ann opened the door and the three stepped inside. He saw a girl with black hair tied back in a messy ponytail playing on her cell phone. She looked up when Ryuji spoke. “Hey, Suzui-san.”

“Sakamoto,” Shiho said, a smile forming on her face as the three entered the room. Her smile faded a bit as she saw Akira behind them, before remembering what Ann had told her the other night. “Oh, you’re Kurusu, right?”

Ann grinned and put a hand on Akira’s shoulder. He looked at her, a bit startled by the contact. “Let me give you a proper introduction. Shiho this is Akira Kurusu. Akira, Shiho Suzui.”

“Hi. Uh, Ann’s told me a lot about you. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Nice to finally meet you too. Ann’s told me a lot about you,” Shiho said then giggled, “She complains all the time about how loudly you tap your pencils in class.”

The room went quiet, Akira could feel his eyebrow twitching. So this was what Ann meant by ‘mostly good things.’ He glanced at Ann who let out a forced laugh as she walked over to Shiho’s bedside. “Oh, Shiho’s just exaggerating. Right?”

“No, actually you complain about it a- ow!.”

Ann punched Shiho in the arm. “Why don’t we all take a seat and talk about something else?”

The two boys stared at the two girls, as Ann kept her grin plastered on her face and Shiho rubbed her arm and glared at her friend. They took some seats on the opposite side of the bed and watched as Ann attempted to start a conversation. The room soon became more animated and less awkward once Ryuji joined in. Akira stayed quiet for most of the conversation but smiled as they talked and joined in once or twice when Ryuji or Ann encouraged him too.

After a while, the topic diverged to Shiho’s recovery.

“So, my doctor was talking to my parents the other day.” She said, “I’m starting to get feeling back in my legs so their thinking I should begin physical therapy soon.”

Ann’s eyes widened and a smile formed on her face, “You mean you’ll be able to walk again?”

“That’s what I’m hoping!”

“Oh man, that’s good news.” Ryuji said, “Any idea when you’ll be able to come back to school Suzui-san?”

Ann was about to tell Ryuji to be quiet but paused when a thought crossed her mind. “Actually, that’s a good question. Do they know when you’ll be able to come back to school?”
“That’s a bit complicated.” Shiho answered, “From what the doctors told me, it could take a few months before I can walk again and in the meantime, I’ll be in a wheelchair. Shujin doesn’t have the means to accommodate that.”

“Right, not a lot of school’s here do,” Ann said. Ryuji made a face, remembering how hard it was to get around on crutches the year before. Shujin had no elevators or other means to get from floor to floor except the stairs.

“And, it’s possible by the time I can go back to school, I might not be attending Shujin anymore,” Shiho said.

Ann’s eyes widened a little. "What?"

“My parents are considering transferring me to another school. Mom mentioned wanting to sue Shujin Academy as well. She’s actually been very vocal about it since Kamoshida's arrest hit the news.”

“That’s to be expected,” Ryuji said.

"It...actually makes me angry" Shiho said, "Because both my parents were so quiet about the injuries I came home with, and even my grades dropping. And now they want the school to pay my medical bills."

"That sounds..." Ann started but was cut off when Shiho shouted.

"Why didn't they do something before I jumped off the roof of that damn school?!

Her scream caught them all off and Shiho gasped for breath before falling silent. Ann moved a little closer, taking her hand. "Shiho..."

"I'm sorry." She said, "I'm happy my parents care about me, but I can't stop thinking about what could have happened if they just did something instead of ignoring it! If I said something to them, would it have changed anything?"

Akira frowned. If he was honest with himself it would have changed nothing, but seeing Shiho's face he decided to keep that comment to himself. She looked like she wanted to break down in tears like she had been holding in an anger that was just creeping out at the edges. Instead, he folded his hands in his lap and muttered to himself, a frown on his face. “Bet the principal’s going to be desperate to keep the school looking good.”

The three looked at him. Shiho's face scrunched up and she nodded. "That bastard should be locked up with Kamoshida." She said, "But the only ones that are gonna suffer are my old teammates."

“I don't want to say it, but this whole mess is gonna affect everyone,” Ann said. “Our senpai are getting ready for college. So will we next year, and Akira's got his probation. If Shujin’s reputation tanks...I have to admit, I don’t want to care about it, but I kinda do.”

“Does it really matter though?” Ryuji asked, “It’s one incident out of how many accomplishments the school is known for? Are people really gonna just assume the worst?"

"You're right, but still...."

“Takes one bad day to ruin someone’s life,” Akira said, his tone bitter. He then shrugged, “But I don’t think Shujin’s rep falling to pieces is gonna affect my probation. The statement was to
complete a year without getting into trouble. School can go down in flames during it for all I care.”

“Uh, actually you probably should care.” Shiho spoke up, “If the school burns to the ground you technically can’t complete your probation because the building doesn't exist anymore.”

Akira stared at her, confused, before shaking his head. “T-that’s not what I-”

He was cut off by the sound of Shiho’s laughter. Both Ann and Ryuji looked surprised, but then the blonde girl smiled and Ryuji chuckled and gave Akira a light jab in the arm. “She’s got a point.” He said as Akira rubbed the spot Ryuji hit him. He gave his friend a light glare, but then looked at Ann and Shiho. The three of them looked happy and he felt happy too. He let a small smile cross his face.

The atmosphere, despite them being in a hospital, felt so normal.

A little longer passed, Ryuji and Akira decided to leave so they could visit a few stores down the street. They said their goodbye’s to Ann and Shiho, and Ann closed the door to the hospital room behind them. “Sakamoto is as lively as ever,” Shiho said.

“You’re telling me.” Ann said, “Actually I think this is the happiest I’ve seen him in a long time. Guess having Kamoshida out of our lives has lightened his mood. And with Akira around it seems like he finally has a guy friend he can just chill with.”

“Kurusu seems like a nice person. A bit quiet, but pleasant,” Shiho said.

“He’s is nice. Has some personal stuff he needs to work out, but I think he’ll be okay now that things are settling down.” Ann said. Shiho looked at her as though wanting to know more about what Ann was talking about, before shrugging it off and nodding her head. Ann leaned forward and changed the subject entirely. “So, you really aren’t coming back to Shujin?”

“I don’t know.” Shiho said, “And to be honest, I’m not sure if I even want to stay at Shujin. I want to because you’re there, but everything that happened over the last couple of months was just too much.”

Tears began to form in Shiho’s eyes again, so Ann squeezed her arm tighter to keep her there. “I understand. You need to do what’s best for you. Right now that’s what matters most.”

Shiho shook her head, “That’s the thing. I’m not sure at this point what’s best for me. Do I stay in a school that had a teacher that abused me because my best friend is there or do I move onto a different school and start over, but end up alone?” Shiho asked, “What would happen if my new classmates found out why I was in the hospital and transferred schools?”

“I see what you mean.” Ann said, “But you know something Shiho? You don’t have to decide right now. There’s plenty of time to think about it. And no matter what you pick, I’ll always be there for you.”

Shiho looked at her and smiled. Her eyes began to water, so she wiped them away with her free hand. “Thank you, Ann. You’re the greatest.”

Ann let out a small laugh, her face taking on a slight pink tinge as she and Shiho continued to spend time together.
Akira yawned as he walked the narrow street of Yongen-Jaya back to the cafe. The day had felt long, but being able to walk a little down Central Street, even if it was just from the hospital to the bookstore, and the DVD rental, had felt like a victory. The crowds had not gotten better and after the venture, he decided he needed to go back to the cafe and rest for a little while. His head was starting to hurt. Ryuji saw him off at the train station and Akira assured him he could get home fine by himself.

He was about to enter the shop in question when he saw Morgana appear out of the corner of his eye, and he turned to see the cat had an annoyed expression on his face. Akira frown confused before realizing there was a leash hooked to his collar and Futaba was at the end of it. The girl looked up at him, then grinned. “Oh! You’re back.” She said. “You’re cat’s really talkative so mom told me to take him out for a walk.”

Akira stared at her. Futaba was walking his cat like a dog. The city was weird. He decided not to say it out loud and just shook his head. Futaba then unhooked the leash from Morgana’s collar and the cat wasted no time jumping onto some greenery and then onto the awning of the cafe. Akira noticed he was going right for the attic. He let a small smile cross his face and followed Futaba into the cafe.

He found the moment he entered that his hope to take a nap before helping Sojiro in the evening was not going to happen. The cafe was still busy, so he put his things upstairs, changed into a fresh shirt and tossed his jacket aside to help with the dishes. It was a few more hours until the cafe quieted down and by that point Akira wanted to flop onto his bed and pretend the day was over. Sojiro had told him to sit down for dinner and Akira massaged his temples to calm himself down.

“Long day?” Sojiro asked as he handed him and Futaba plates for dinner.

“Kinda. Better than yesterday though.” He said. He took his fork and ate his food slowly, before looking up to see Futaba scarfing down her curry and rice. She then coughed and slammed her fist into her chest before swallowing. Sojiro sighed.

“Easy. You eat this almost every day.”

“But it’s so good!” Futaba chimed in, then looked at Akira, “So what did you do today? I mostly just spent all my time in my room playing video games.”

Akira recounted the day to her, and she nodded as she listened, “You got another book? Why not buy a game console or something? At least with that, you can do stuff with your friends.”

“Too expensive and I have a PS4 at home anyway, don’t need another one.”

“You don’t need a top of the line system. What about just a retro console or something? They’re pretty cheap if you know where to look.” She paused and sighed, “Man, I wish I had friends.”

“What about Kana?” Sojiro asked. Futaba’s hands froze for a second before she recomposed herself.

“She doesn’t really game...” She said then added, “And I mean friends nearby, not friends I talk to online or in another country. I can’t exactly hang out with the guys in The Last Saga, they’re kinda an ocean away.”
Sojiro muttered something under his breath that Akira was sure an overprotective dad would say, but he had no idea what. He then spoke to Akira. “So, you going out again tomorrow?”

Akira nodded, “Ryuji and I are going to Akihabara. He said it was a-”

Futaba slammed her hands on the table, startling him and making his cat cry out and hide back in his bag. She stared at him with a serious expression on her face. “Did you just say you’re going to Akihabara?”

“Yes?”

She continued to give him that serious look, “I’m going with you.” She said, then grinned and looked at her step-father, “There’s a game I wanna play I can get really cheap there. Can I go Sojiro? Please please please?”

Sojiro sighed and pointed to Akira, “Ask him.”

Futaba turned to Akira with pleading eyes and after a few seconds the teenager sighed and pulled out his phone. “I’ll ask Ryuji.” He said. He heard Futaba let out a cheer as he typed his message.

**Akira:**
*Hey.*

**Ryuji:**
*Yo!*

**Akira:**
*I got a question for you.*  
*Sakura-san’s...daughter (?) wants*  
*To come with us to Akihabara.*

**Ryuji:**
*Why do you have a ‘?’ next to daughter?*

**Akira:**
*Can she?*

**Ryuji:**
*And I dunno man. I want to go out to have fun, not babysit some kid.*  
*How old is she?*

Akira looked at the text, then Futaba, and after some hesitation just decided to ask, “Futaba, how old are you?”

Futaba’s head tilted, “Fifteen. Why?” She asked, then frowned, ”You’re not planning something are you?”

Akira ignored her and typed his response to Ryuji.

**Akira:**
*She’s our age, about a year younger.*

**Ryuji:**
Oh. Yeah, it’s fine.
We’ll meet at the station around noon.
You gonna be alright getting into the city?

**Akira:**
Yeah.
*If something happens I’ll let you know.*

**Ryuji:**
*Cool. Don’t be late!*

**Akira:**
*I won’t.*

Akira put his phone on the table. “He said you can come with us.”

“Hell yeah!” Futaba shouted and Sojiro let a smile sneak onto his face. Akira went back to eating his dinner, listening as Futaba rambled about all the cool stuff there was in Akihabara. He listened to her talk about the arcade, the retro game and anime stores, and how the place was a large subset of Otaku culture.

He had to admit, her enthusiasm was rubbing off on him a little. He wanted to see this place for himself.
A Reason to Care

Chapter Summary

Akira goes out with Futaba and Ryuji to Akihabara. Makoto and Goro go out for a belated birthday dinner. Golden Week comes to an end.

Chapter Notes

Gonna keep on the biweekly updates thing until the month is over. The holiday season, as well as work, has been stressful.

5/5/2016
Daytime
Akihabara Train Station

Akihabara had a distinctness to it that Akira noticed the moment he stepped off the train and into the city with Ryuji and Futaba. It was busy, much like Shibuya, but there was a flare to the setup of shops and people in the area that made it feel more open than Shibuya's cramped streets. The colors added a uniqueness to it he did not expect either. He was about to comment on it when Futaba rushed in front of him and shouted into the street.

"Woohoo! Akihabara!" She exclaimed then turned to them. "Welcome ground zero for Otaku culture. Anime, manga, game shops. I bet they have a nice retro game store somewhere around here. And the electronics store, we have to go to the electronics store and see all the latest stuff. I bet they got some sweet new anime and games that are just begging to be purchased. Let's go!"

Akira and Ryuji looked at each other, but before either could say something, Futaba turned and ran down the street to the nearest shop, one which looked like it was selling clearanced merchandise. Ryuji sighed and shook his head.

"Wow, I thought she'd be more like you because of how quiet she was on the train, but man she's lively," Ryuji said. Akira gave Ryuji a questioning look, "You sure she’s near our age?"

"Sakura-san says she ‘bounces to her own drum’,” Akira told him. It was something Sojiro had cautioned him to expect. Futaba’s fondness for computers, games, and anime, was like a laser focused on a single point. Not an obsession, but a passion, and he told Akira to make sure the younger girl did not get lost or anything. He and Futaba made sure to exchanged cell numbers before leaving for Shibuya to meet with Ryuji, and Akira had a feeling they might need them.

Akira looked across the street to see the orange haired girl in question waving to them. He then saw Ryuji chuckle, "Well she’s waiting for us. Would be a shame to keep a girl waiting. You know what I mean?"

Akira raised a confused eyebrow at him then the two hurried across the street. The three walked into the electronics store and Akira stopped. His eyes glanced around the entrance. There were a lot
of people inside. His eyes darted up to a sign hanging above them that read ‘Golden Week Discount Sale. All Electronics 50-65% off’ and then down to the crowd. He could feel himself tensing up, and his heart beat louder in his chest. Then he heard someone take in a deep breath and let it out.

His eyes darted down to Futaba. She had balled her hands up and kept them close to her chest. She took another breath,

“Alright Futaba, you can do this. Remember, they are just NPCs and none of them have questlines. Just look forward and pretend they have no hit detection.” She told herself and took a few steps forward and looked around. She bounced on her heels as something caught her eye and hurried down one the aisles. Akira watched her, thoughts going to the papers Takemi had given him about coping with anxiety. He remembered one had instructions for breathing exercises. Thinking about what he read, he took a deep breath in through his nose, held it for a few seconds, then let it out. He did it again and found his nerves become more steady.

He looked at Ryuji who was waiting for him to move and followed Futaba. The orange haired girl turned around with a grin on her face. "Hey, come here!" She said as she grabbed his arm and began to drag him along.

They looked around the electronic store for some time. Even with the sale going Akira noticed the majority of modern TVs and computers were far out of their price ranges. Even the ones that were a year or two dates were still too expensive. He thought he heard Ryuji sigh and mention something about needing a part-time job soon, but was distracted by Futaba pulled him into the game department. Her eyes fell on the latest releases, and she spent time playing a few demos on display. Akira and Ryuji looked at the handheld games that were in stock.

"I thought this was digital only," Akira muttered as he picked up a box and flipped it over. Ryuji leaned over to look at it.

"Oh yeah, that's a limited release. Probably didn't get a lot of copies shipped out of Tokyo." Ryuji said. Akira shrugged and then put the box back in the large pile of games. Ryuji picked up a few than after some consideration pulled out his phone and brought up his calculator. He put all the prices in and Akira saw his face pale and Ryuji put his phone back in his pocket. He then dropped the games back into the bin.

“Uh you know, looking and wishing we could afford this stuff is great and all, but why don’t we go somewhere we can actually play a few games together.” He suggested. Akira's head tilted a bit and Futaba paused her demo and looked at him. “Who wants to hit up the arcade?”

“Ooh, I do!” Futaba said, putting her controller down. “Never been to the one here before. I bet they have a lot more games than the arcade on Central Street does.”

“Central Street has an arcade?” Akira asked.

“Yeah. We should go there sometime.” Ryuji said, “Gets kinda crowded on the weekends though.”

“Everything here is crowded.”

Hearing Akira point it out made Ryuji chuckle, “Yeah, I guess to a country kid, the whole city feels congested. But I’ve seen some progress, you don’t walk nearly as slow as you did when we first met.”

Akira glared at him. "I don't walk slow. You and everyone else just walk fast." He said. There was
a brief silence then Ryuji laughed. Akira's turned a little red and Futaba looked between the two before poking them both in the shoulder. Akira stepped back at the sudden contact.

"Are we going or not?" She asked. Ryuji led them out of the electronics store and to the arcade. They stepped into the building and saw a large crowd around one of the machines. The title of the game was in large letters above the arcade case: 'Gun About.'

"Woah look at that!"

"Another one, man he just doesn't stop."

"He might break his high score again."

The three got a bit closer, Ryuji pushing through the crowd and letting Akira and Futaba through, to see what all the excitement was about. There was an elementary school-aged kid playing the game, the plastic laser gun that worked as the controller gripped loosely in his hands as he moved and shot with precise accuracy at the enemies on the screen. Each shot was a headshot, or a leg shot to disable his opponents before going for their heads. Akira frowned as he watched the game. Arcades were not the first place he would go after school, but he did now and again and he could easily see the kid was good at the game.

He looked at the score on the screen and realized calling the kid 'good' was an understatement.

"Wow, he plays like a pro," Futaba said. Ryuji mumbled something in agreement as the numbers on the screen only increased. Then when the countdown as at its end, the screen turned black and a bright red 'Winner' sign appeared followed by the scoreboard. The kid had a smirk on his face as looked at the screen.

"He did it!"

"Can’t expect less from ‘The King’"

The name caught Futaba’s attention and she looked at the people talking. Some were high schoolers and a few were young adults.

"Man I wish I could play as good as him."

"You could if you practiced more."

"Who has time to be hardcore when you got work?"

She blinked and then her eyes widened as she looked at the kid. "What?!” She shouted so loud everyone fell silent and looked at them, including the young boy. Akira shrank back when he felt everyone's eyes on them, but Futaba rushed forward until she was standing next to the young kid. She looked at him. The kid looked a little surprised as he gazed up at her.

"No way. You’re the king?" She asked.

"Uh...yeah.” He answered. Futaba stared at him for a little longer and then burst into laughter. The kid pouted. “W-what’s so funny?"

"Sorry! It’s just, having heard and even played against you one time I thought....” She trailed off and thought her words over for a second before putting a hand on his hat. “Well, I guess I was expecting someone a little taller.”
“Hey!” The kid smacked her hand away, “Just because I’m a kid doesn’t mean I’m not good at games. And what do you mean ‘played against you one time.’”

“Gun About 2015 group tournament. The King’s Glaive versus Alibaba’s Thieves. Ring any bells?” She asked. The kid frowned and thought it over for a second.

“Oh yeah, I remember.” He said, a grin forming on his face, “You’re team sucked!”

Futaba’s smile dropped into an annoyed face and her eyebrow twitched. “That was the lamest match I ever played. You weren’t bad though, maybe with a little practice you could come close to beating me.”

“Why you little…” Futaba started and then grabbed the second controller on the arcade machine. “You think you’re so tough you little twerp. Well, I challenge you to a duel!”

“Did you hear that?”

“Did that girl just challenge the King?”

“A duel?...The hell?”

“First one to the tower of the Moon Swatters and defeats the boss has to buy the other lunch or whatever.” Futaba declared and grinned as the kid stared at her, unsure whether to answer or not. “Well?”

Ryuji and Akira exchanged looks and the latter wondered if he should step up and drag Futaba away. He was not sure by the murmuring if the crowd was taken back by an older person challenging a younger to a game, or in disbelief of the possibility a girl would be challenging a boy. Or both.

The kid reached into his pocket and counted some bills then put them away. He then gave a chuckle that sounded like it was supposed to be dark and intimidating, which failed in both categories because of his higher pitched voice. “Challenge accepted.”

“Oh, you’re gonna regret crossing the great Alibaba!” Futaba shouted as she put the coins in the machine and the game began.

Trounced.

Defeated.

Shamed.

Futaba let out what Akira guessed was the tenth sigh in the few minutes as they walked down the street, her head hanging like it was about to fall off her body. The kid, Shinya Oda, was walking next to them with a triumphant look on his face which was the opposite of the defeated and frustrated frown on Futaba’s. “Man I can’t believe I lost to an elementary school kid.” She said then straightened. Shinya laughed.

“Hey, you should feel honored. That’s the longest anyone has lasted against me.” He said. “Maybe if you trained more you could go toe to toe with me someday. Or if you asked nicely I could give you some pointers.”

“Ugh, please. I bet if I was on my PC, I would have whipped your ass.” She said. Shinya gave her a
knowing look that could be read as ‘no, you wouldn’t’ which Futaba made a face too before shaking her head. “Anyway, did you decide where you wanted to eat yet?”

“Yeah, I wanna go to Big Bang Burger.” Shinya said, “I want to savor this victory with a nice double cheeseburger and a large fry.”

“You wanna savor it by giving yourself an upset stomach. You sure you’ll eat all that?”

“What are you, my mom?”

Futaba jumped a bit at Shinya snapping at her, “No, just don’t want you puking on the train or anything.”

“I’ll be fine. Besides mom says I should eat well or I’ll stay short.”

“Don’t think eating well includes greasy burgers,” Ryuji muttered to Akira, who gave a small chuckle and a nod.

Regardless, a deal was a deal and after a little extra prodding Futaba conceded to Shinya’s demands with a cheeky smile on her face and the four continued down the street to the train station. Akira thought the sight over a little and looked around. No one seemed to find it odd to see someone who could not be older than ten walking and chatting with a bunch of teenagers like it was no big deal. Then again, as he had noticed many times in the city, everyone was wrapped up in their own affairs and not paying attention to anyone else.

Akira was pulled from his thoughts when he felt Ryuji’s hand on him and he yelped as he was suddenly pulled a few steps back. He looked at him. “What’s up?” He asked and noticed Ryuji had a large grin on his face.

“Dude, check this out!” He said. He pointed to a set of stairs and a building painted bright pink. There were large posters that showed a group of young woman in maid outfits as well as signage that encouraged patrons to 'enjoy the wonderous food and company'. Akira stared at the posters and looked up at the signage then turned to Ryuji, who looked like he was trying hard to contain his excitement.

“Aw man, I’ve heard so many stories about these places, but have never gotten to go in one.” He said then looked at Akira.

"Is this a maid cafe?” Akira asked.

"Yeah, dude, do you have any idea how big a deal these things are?” Ryuji asked. Akira stared at him with a blank look on his face. Ryuji shook his head, "That's a no. Well, let's fix that. Let's go in. Like, now.”

“Now?” Akira asked, “But Futaba and Shinya-”

“Just leave them-”

“-I can’t! If I lose Futaba, Sakura-san will-”

“-Dude, she’s fifteen. She can take care of herself. Besides, when else might we get the chance to check out this slice of heaven?”

Akira felt his eyebrow twitch. He had no idea if he was annoyed at Ryuji’s insistence of going into the cafe or not, though he was definitely irritated Ryuji just wanted him to ditch Futaba when
Sojiro had made it clear he was supposed to keep an eye on her. He looked back at the building. Seeing a maid cafe in real life was a surreal experience since he only saw them in manga. He remembered the guys at his old school talking about them like they were the most amazing thing in the world.

Just one look at the building and he found himself with very mixed feelings to the whole idea. “You sure we’d even be allowed in there?” He asked.

“Yeah, look, says sixteen and older. You’re sixteen right?” Ryuji asked. Akira nodded, “Then what are we waiting for? Look, they serve pancakes. Think about it, a cute clumsy maid, serving you brunch with a cheery smile asking if you want more whip cream. Doesn’t that sound fun.”

“Uh...” Akira started then stopped when he heard Futaba shout from the other side of the street.

“Hey! What’s taking you slowpokes? Hurry up!”

“Yeah!” Shinya chimed in, “We don’t have all day, some of us need to be home before the rush hour!”

Akira sighed in relief and looked at Ryuji, “Come on, we’ll indulge your maid obsession another time.”

“Alright alright,” Ryuji said. Akira noticed he did not deny the obsession comment but decided not to bring it up and hurried across the street. Ryuji started to follow him, then stopped when he saw a small poster out of the corner of his eye. It, like the cafe, was also adorned with maids, so he grabbed it, folded it up, and stuffed it in his sweater pocket before crossing the street.

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5/5/2016
Late Afternoon
Niijima Residence

The close up of the thug’s nose bleeding after being slugged by the Yakuza had Goro squirming on the couch. He was not afraid of blood. At least, it did not affect him in real life, but in a movie was another story. He had no idea why blood in cinema made him uneasy, but if he could take a guess, it was probably because the slowed down footage made the whole scene look off.

Makoto’s reaction had been the opposite of his, she winced at the impact but there was a huge grin on her face like a small child who was excited about visiting a candy store. “Oh, right in the jaw. He’s going to feel that in the morning.” She said and turned to him, “Did you see that?”

“Hard not too. The camera lingered so long I think I saw more than I wanted.” Goro said giving a sheepish laugh, “So violent.”

“You think this is violent?” Makoto asked, “These older Yakuza films are nothing compared to the new ones. Those get crazy, it’s amazing how much they can get away with.” She heard Goro let out an audible gulp and sighed, “You’re always so squeamish, and you’re trying to become a detective.”

Goro chuckled a little, “I think seeing the action is what makes me uneasy, rather than the blood itself.” He said then added, “Though my mentor hasn’t shown me anything really gruesome yet, thank goodness. The worst so far was this robbery in Shinjuku and...wait that hasn’t reached the news yet so I don’t think I can talk about it.”
“No one’s going to know you told me about work.” Makoto said. Goro let out a small noise and nodded his head, but before he could open his mouth to explain, the door to the master bedroom closing caught their attention. Sae stepped into the living room, pushing her hair behind her shoulder and letting out a content sigh. Her hair was still a little damp from her bath, however to Makoto she looked far more relaxed than she did the other day.

Makoto blinked twice as though making sure her eyes were working correctly. She had not seen her sister out of her business suit and in casual jeans and her favorite black sweater in so long, it was like she was looking into a distorted mirror. Sae noticed them staring and raised an eyebrow.

“What’s wrong? Is there still soap in my hair?”

Makoto smiled, “No, it’s just been so long since I’ve seen you in something besides your work clothes.”

“I have to admit it did feel a little odd just putting on something besides my suit,” Sae said. If she was honest with herself, she was also relieved her jeans still fit. Sitting in the office for hours and then coming home tired meant she was getting far less exercise than she wanted to. She got close and leaned over the back of the couch putting her hands on Makoto and Goro’s shoulders. “I see you two are having a good time, but are you ready to head out?”

“I’ve been ready since I got here,” Goro said. “And I must say you look quite refreshed Sae. Is that a new-”

He stopped when Sae gave him a glare and Makoto chuckled. Shut down before he could even start. A new record. Sae then turned her attention to Makoto. “Did you decide where you wanted to go.”

“Yes. Do you remember the Thai restaurant we went to a few years ago?”

“The one we went to celebrate you getting into Shujin Academy?”

“Yes, I was thinking maybe we could-”

It was at that moment the phone rang and Makoto felt her stomach drop. She wanted to hope whoever was calling was not who she thought it was, but that was an exercise in futility. The only time the home phone went off was when her sister was calling her from work or work was calling for her sister. She saw the look on her sister's face and then sighed when her sister went to answer the phone. Makoto looked away and stared at the television screen, then let her head drop as she heard her sister answer it. Goro placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Hello? Yes sir.” She heard Sae say, “What? I’m sorry, I had plans today and- ...well you see it’s...”

A brief pause and then Sae sighed again. “Yes sir I understand. I’ll be there as soon as possible.” She said then hung up the phone. “Dammit.”

“Is something wrong?” Goro asked. Makoto looked up to see her sister massaging the bridge of her nose with her fingers.

“Someone at the office messed up some papers so they’re telling me to come in and fix it. It’s for a hearing tomorrow.” Sae explained, “Though why they picked me… I’m sorry Makoto. I know I promised we’d have the day together but-”

“It’s alright.” Makoto cut her off, “I still had fun shopping today, I mean it. You go if you need to. Goro and I will do something together and I’ll make sure dinner is in the fridge for you tonight.”
Sae hesitated for a second. She doubted she would be home tonight, but decided not to say anything. “Alright. You two enjoy dinner.”

It took only a few minutes for Sae to change back into her suit and she gave Makoto and Goro one last goodbye before stepping out the door. Makoto saw the look on her sister’s face. She looked like she regretted picking up the house phone. Makoto sighed and looked down at her lap, then looked at Goro. “Well, I guess we should get ready to go.”

“You sure?” Goro asked. Makoto hesitated. She picked the restaurant less because she liked the food - she could take it or leave it - and more because her sister did. They had not done anything special in a long time, not since her sister became a public prosecutor.

“Well, honestly I picked that place because it was sis’ favorite, not mine. I wanted to do something nice for her for a change,” Makoto explained. “I don’t really want to go if she’s not here.”

“I understand.” Goro thought it over for a second then spoke up, “In that case would it be alright if I picked the place? My supervisor has a co-worker that kept talking about a small coffee-curry shop in Yongen-Jaya. Odd combination, but apparently the food is excellent. Would be worth looking into if you want.”

Makoto thought Goro’s suggestion over. Were she in a better frame of mind she would have made the connection and been more hesitant, but at the moment her mind was more on her sister. Sure Sae missed an outing now and again because of work, but she never did it twice in a row before. “Sure, let’s go.”

As she saw the words ‘Cafe Leblanc’ on the cafe’s awning Makoto found herself regretting her decision. If she should have been paying more attention, she would have connected the dots sooner. Akira Kurusu lived in the attic of the cafe and considering their last conversation she had a horrible feeling if he saw her there he would think she was following him or something similar.

“Is everything okay Makoto?” Goro asked. Makoto looked at him, startled and shook her head.

“Oh, no…” She trailed off then after a few seconds nodded, “Actually I should tell you something. The transfer student I told you about, the owner of this cafe is his legal guardian.”

“The one with the assault record. That is a bit concerning. Did you want to go somewhere else?”

She considered it, but couldn't think of anywhere else she would want to go. “No, we already came all this way, might as well make the most of it.”

It was Golden Week, if she was lucky, Akira would probably be hanging out with Sakamoto and Takamaki and not even be home. Or he would be upstairs and not even know she had ever been here. As long as the owner did not say anything, she would be fine. She nodded to Goro and motioned to the door. “Well, shall we?”

Goro gave her one last look, but then nodded and pushed the door open. At the sound of the bell, Makoto saw Sojiro look up from his crossword puzzle as the two stepped inside.

“Huh, I remember you.” He said, then saw Goro behind her looking around at the building.
“It looks even nicer than my co-workers described,” Goro said, a grin on his face. “Uh, table for two please?”

Sojiro pointed his pen to the empty tables. “Pick a seat and tell me what you want.”

There was a small pause and after a few seconds, Makoto and Goro took a seat at one of the far right booths. They ordered the specialty curry that was on the menu as well as some coffee. Makoto had never drunk coffee before, so left the suggestion up to Goro. Sojiro did not bother to write the order down, just nodded his head, frowned at his crossword puzzle, then got up and began to put together their order. Makoto drummed her fingers on the table as Goro pulled out his phone to answer a text message. She then looked around the small room.

Now that she had a chance to sit down and look around, she found she liked the homey feel of Leblanc. The brown colors, yet warm feel of the decor, was a nice change compared to the more modern feel of cafes in Shibuya. The sterile design and hurried workers made it feel like she was being pushed out as quickly as possible when she entered one for a cup of tea. Instead, Leblanc felt like somewhere she could sit down for several hours with some dinner while doing her homework or reading. The only thing missing in her mind was a fake fireplace.

Her mind wandered as she saw the stairs in the back. To think Akira Kurusu lived in a place like this. She found herself wondering what that was like.

“So, what brings you two here?” Sojiro asked getting her attention. “This isn’t exactly a hot date spot for kids your age. Unless you’re into this kind of thing.”

“Less a date and more friends making up for a missed birthday,” Goro said. Sojiro glanced up at them for a moment.

“Is that so. Whose birthday?”

“Hers.” Goro pointed to Makoto whose face turned bright red. Sojiro smiled, noticing her embarrassment.

“Really.” He said, “Well I’ll make sure to make the best coffee you’ve ever had.”

“Uh, that’s okay, you don’t-” Makoto began to protest, then stopped when she heard the bell telling them someone else came into the store. Her face paled as she saw Akira step into the cafe, an orange-haired girl pushing past him.

“We’re home!” She said and Sojiro looked up at her.

“Hey, you have a good time out Futaba?” He asked, a smile on his face.

“Mnhmm, I got some really cool anime. I’m gonna head home and watch them now.” She said, then turned to Akira, “Thanks for taking me out with your friend. That was definitely a quest worth doing.”

Akira looked at her, a little taken back by her directness and word choice, but smiled. “It was fun. Glad you had a good time.” He said. Futaba nodded and then hurried past him, leaving the cafe. It was then Akira noticed Makoto staring at him. He frowned and turned to Sojiro. “I’m going upstairs.”

“Don’t stay up there long, I got dishes that need cleaning,” Sojiro said pointing to the substantial pile near the sink. A grunt escaped Akira’s mouth that made it obvious the very thought of being in the same room as Makoto irritated him, but nodded and hurried upstairs. Makoto let her head
drop, then looked up at Goro, who had watched the scene with his lips to his coffee cup.

No words were exchanged. She knew what he was asking just from his face and he nodded. She then saw him frown and clasp his hands together. Makoto sighed, she should have said she would rather go somewhere else. The cafe was a mistake. Her last few choices were proving to be terrible mistakes. After a few minutes, Akira came downstairs, the only thing that changed was he took his jacket off. He made a beeline for the kitchen only for Sojiro to cut him off.

“Hey.” He said then kept his voice down as he gave Akira the tray with two cups of coffee and two plates of curry. “Give this to those two and wish the girl a happy birthday alright?”

Akira frowned at the tray but did pick it up off the counter. He brought it over to Makoto and Goro and placed it on their table.

“Here, two coffees and two plates of curry.” He said, passing each to them. His tone was flat then he looked at Makoto, “Sojiro wanted me to wish you a happy birthday. Happy birthday.”

“...thank you,” Makoto said, her voice low and not even surprised by his lack of enthusiasm. She picked up the cup of coffee and took a sip. It was bitter. Akira looked at her, then Goro, then back at her.

“So, is this your boyfriend?” He asked. Makoto put her cup down and shook her head.

“No, Goro’s just a friend of mine.” She explained and Goro grinned at Akira.

“Goro Akechi.” He greeted, then folded his hands together, “You must be Akira Kurusu. Makoto has told me a bit about you.”

“Is that so. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.” Akira said. Makoto took a sip of her coffee and winced again. Definitely bitter.

“Makoto tells me a lot about what happens at Shujin Academy.” Goro continued, “Sounds like it's been a rough beginning to the year. The incident with that teacher was deplorable, I hope no one you know was hurt by him.”

“Actually, I’m friends with people who were hurt by him and I’m not happy it took so long for something to be done about it.” Akira said, “Enjoy your meal. Please excuse me.”

He turned and walked away and Makoto put her coffee down staring at her plate. She suddenly did not feel all that hungry and her sister’s words from a few days ago flashed in her mind. Goro looked at her, then put a forkful of curry into his mouth. His eyes widened a little and he nodded in approval. “This is good.” He said then motioned to her plate. “Go on, try it.”

She looked at the plate and took a bite. It was good. It did not make the atmosphere any better.

Sojiro watched the scene and turned his attention to Akira. He approached and put a hand on the teenager's shoulder, making him jump.

“Easy it’s just me,” Sojiro said. Akira let out a breath he hadn't even realized he was holding and went back to the dishes. “Hey, when they finish eating, take them somewhere.”

Akira stopped and turned to look at him, “Why?”

“Because it’s the girls birthday, she’s obviously a little down, and you aren't making it better.” He said. Akira sighed and shook his head. “Is everything alright? You seem pretty upset with her.”
“It’s school related. Don’t worry about it.” He said and hoped Sojiro would drop the topic. The frown on his guardian's face showed he would not.

“Look whatever it is, talk it out with her instead of giving her the cold shoulder. Take her to the batting cages, and work out your frustrations there. Not in the cafe.” He paused, then a smirk formed on his face “Course you could always take her upstairs and work out your frustrations after I close up shop…”

Akira put his hands up to tell Sojiro to stop his train of thought and turned back to the dishes. He tried to focus on just his cleaning. Sojiro’s idea was a terrible one, he dealt with enough at school with people talking behind his back, the last thing he wanted to do was be some plaything for a student council president to get a recommendation to a college. He turned around and looked back at her.

Makoto’s face was a little red. She looked like she was trying to keep herself composed as she listened to her friend comment on the curry and coffee. She kept her hands on the cup, frowning at it. The coffee must have been too bitter for her. He turned back to the dishes then after a few seconds sighed and dried his hands. He reapproached the table.

“This curry is really good. I don’t think I’ve ever had something with such a perfect blend of sweet and spicy” He heard Goro say, “And this coffee. I wish I could put together something half as excellent as this.”

“At least you’re enjoying it, do you want the rest of mine?”

“Ah sorry. I should have considered ordering you something sweeter.”

“It’s fine.” She said. The two looked up when they saw him and Akira realized he had no idea how to segue in an offer to go somewhere after they finished eating. He noticed Makoto keep her head down, while Goro was all smiles.

“Is something wrong? If you’re worried about the service the food is good. My compliments to the chef.” Sojiro grunted and gave an indifferent shrug and Goro pouted, “Customer Service, however, is a bit lacking…”

“I’m glad you two are having a good time.” Akira started, as he looked at Makoto. She kept her head down, hiding her red eyes under her hair. For a split second, he thought maybe she was going to cry, but there was also a glint in her eyes that made him second guess that. She looked more like she wanted to break something.

He decided just to get the offer over with and hope she said no, “Uh, Niijima-senpai, do you two have any plans after you finish dinner?”

She looked up at him and Akira was sure he could see fire in her eyes.

Makoto hit the ball with such an intense swing Akira was almost convinced the fence at the far end would have split open. It held as strong as it was supposed to, but the reverb was so loud he almost put his hands to his ears. Goro winced. “Oh dear, I knew her sister taking off last-minute upset her but I didn’t think she was that angry.” He said. Akira looked at him.

“Niijima-senpai has a sister?”

“Yes, an older sister. She was supposed to come with us today but worked called her in.” Goro explained, “I get the feeling I made a poor decision taking her out here. I’m sorry.”
Akira was silent as Makoto swung her bat and missed the ball. There was a look on her face that he caught for a split second. Not just a bit of frustration, but pure anger, like a boiling pot ready to explode. She hit the next baseball that came her way and it slammed right into the bell at the top of the cage. A home run. Akira took a deep breath and let it out. For a brief second, he felt a little scared of Makoto Niijima.

She hit the ball a third time, but missed on the last shot, though Akira was sure he saw her contemplating through her bat across the batting cage. Instead, she took a breath so deep her shoulders visibly moved and then let it out. She put the bat down and stepped out of the batting cage. Akira noticed that while she looked calmer she also looked like she could use another round in the batting cage. “So, who's next?” She asked. Akira took a few steps back and motioned for Akechi to go.

“I guess me. Please, don’t make fun of me to much when I fail at this.” He said and stepped into the cage. Makoto closed the door behind him and Akira put his hands into his pockets and kept a safe distance away from his upperclassman as Akechi stepped up to the plate. The first swing missed by a mile. The second did too. It was not hard for Akira to see batting cages were not Akechi's strong point. His eyes then fell on Makoto and she looked up at him. He looked away.

They were silent for a few more seconds and then after some hesitation, Makoto spoke up.

“Can we talk for a second?” She asked. There was still a bite to her tone, that even she seemed to notice so she closed her eyes and tried to steady her breathing. When she opened them again the fire had died down and she looked a bit calmer. “I'm sorry.”

He looked at her. “For what?”

“For making you think the only reason I was going to help you study was because the principal promised me a college recommendation if I got your grades up.” She said, “I'll be honest, it is a partial motivation-”

“Wow, honesty from a Shujin student, amazing.” Akira cut Makoto off, “And may I ask why this college recommendation is so important for the smartest girl in school?”

There was some hesitation, but Makoto did answer. “Because getting that recommendation will put less pressure on my sister.” She said, diverting her gaze from him.

“Your sister,” Akira repeated. Goro had mentioned a sister a few moments ago.

“Yes. My older sister.” Makoto said. "If it’s alright the reasons are rather personal and I don't want to get into the details, but I can assure you like I said it is only part of the reason I’m doing this. As student council president it is my job to aid students to the best of my ability. Seeing a student who transferred here with top marks suddenly go to barely passing academically is a concern that needs to be corrected.”

“Corrected.” He repeated. Makoto paused and shook her head.

“I’m sorry, I mean ‘addressed.’ She stopped. No that did not sound right either. She shook her head again, “I know I’m not doing a good job of convincing you but I am on your side in this matter.”

“You only approached me for tutoring after the Principal told you to.”

“I only knew you stopped doing your homework and your grades dropped because the Principal told me,” Makoto said. “Kurusu-san, as I said before if you don’t want to study with me for the school's sake, do it for yourself.”
Akira sighed. He was not as mad as he was the day she first approached him about the topic. Whether it was because he had some time away from school to calm down, the medication he was on, or some combination of the two he had no idea. What he did know was he did not want to continue this conversation.

“Nijima-senpai. I know what you’re trying to do. You’re trying to tell me that I need good grades to get into college and help get my future in line. And you’re right, I know that, but right now I just don’t care.” Akira told her, “Between being arrested, Juvenile, sent off to some city I feel constantly lost in, and everything that’s happened the last month, I’m just...not in a place where I care about doing well in school. I'm still wrapping my head around the fact I have actual friends, I just don't think I can deal with everything all at once right now.”

“...I suppose given the difficult few weeks...” Makoto started, then trailed off, trying to find the right words. Then her shoulders dropped and she kept her head low, "I'm sorry for pushing so hard..."

There was a sincerity in her voice Akira had no idea how to react to, so he sighed and let his shoulders slouch, "It's fine. I'm sorry for yelling at you at school."

"It's fine. I deserved it."

The sound of Goro hitting the ball echoed behind them. It bounced on the dirt as Makoto and Akira stood in silence for a little while. Makoto spoke up a few seconds later.

“Can I ask you something?” She said. Akira gave a small nod, "Is there anyone who would want you to succeed? Who you would want to tell that you’re doing well despite the odds against you?”

Akira looked at her then turned around so his back was resting against the fence. He kept his hands in his pockets and became very quiet, trying to think if he had an answer to Makoto’s question. He did.

“Yeah, my mom.” He said. “I know I hurt her because of all of this. She always insisted I focus on school; it’d be nice to send home some good news for a change.”

“I see...” He looked at her and noticed Makoto was smiling. “I suppose even if our circumstances are different, our motivations are similar.”

“Similar?”

“We do things for people we care about.”

The two fell quiet, Akira pushed his glasses up a little higher, not wanting to look Makoto in the eye. He did not like the thought of being compared to her. He only turned around when he saw Goro come out of the batting cage. “Well, that was quite a poor display.” He said. Akira’s eyes went to the scoreboard. One hit, four misses. “Your turn Kurusu-san.”

Akira took a few steps then stopped. He looked at the display again. Makoto had three hits and two misses. The gears in his head turned and he looked at her. “I bet I can hit more balls than you can.” He said. Makoto raised an eyebrow than saw the scores. She smirked and looked at him.

“I bet you can’t.”

Akira found a small grin forming on his face as he entered the batting cage and grabbed his bat.
It was a tie, but after walking them back to the train station, Akira told Makoto he would meet her after school in the library for their first study session.
Interlude: Please Wake Up

Chapter Notes

Note: This segment was intended to be the opening for Chapter 19, but got cut during rewrites. I've been trying to sort out how to 'close' and 'open' each arc and I thought maybe a flash forward back to 12/25 would be worth considering. I decided to polish this up to test how a short interlude between arcs could work - and if it would work at all. The next 'real' chapter of Probation will still be on the 26th.

Since this brings us back to Christmas please keep in mind this interlude mentions an attempted suicide.

12/25/2016
Daytime
Shibuya General Hospital

Ann yawned as she walked the halls of the Shibuya General hospital, rubbing her eyes and sipping the coffee she had gotten from a vending machine. It tasted terrible, and she would have preferred some proper coffee, but she did not want to travel all the way to Yongen-Jaya and bother Sojiro for it. She guessed he, Futaba, and Wakaba wanted some time to themselves to process what happened that night.

After staying in the hospital for hours, everyone decided to return to their homes to try and get some sleep, except Ryuji who said he would stay around for a little longer, and Makoto, who wanted to stay with Akira. Ann stopped short in the hallway when she saw Ryuji slumped over in one of the chairs. He must have fallen asleep at some point. A small smile crossed her face, and she approached him. She put a hand on his shoulder and gave him a light shake. “Hey.”

Ryuji twitched and his eyes fluttered open. He blinked a few times, looked at Ann, then stretched out his neck.

“Dammit, how long was I out?” He muttered to himself as he reached for his phone. He checked the time, then looked up at Ann. He blinked and lightly hit his cheeks to wake himself up a little more, then got to his feet.

“Well, if you're back I guess I've been out for a few hours.” He said and yawned again. He stood up and stretched. He felt his back crack, which confirmed to him that hospital chairs were not comfortable for sleeping. “You manage to get any sleep?”

“No really. Shiho and I ended up talking for a long while and even when I laid down I couldn’t really fall asleep.” She said, taking another sip of her coffee. She cringed at the taste then offered the cup to Ryuji. He held a hand up and shook his head.

Ann turned her attention to the closed door to Akira’s room. “Is Makoto still inside?”

Ryuji frowned then turned and peeked into the room. Her head was lying on Akira’s bed, from the way her arm was bent it looked like she was holding his hand. “Yeah. Looks like she fell asleep.” Ryuji said, turning back to Ann. “Can’t blame her. It’s been...a really long night.”
The two fell silent and after a bit, Ryuji sighed, his shoulders drooping, a frown on his face. “Dammit, I still can’t believe this happened. Can’t believe he pulled this on us.”

Ann frowned at Ryuji, her fingers twitching. “Ryuji, don’t say that!”

Her raised voice made Ryuji wince. “Sorry, you’re right. I’m just... trying to get my head straight? I don’t want to believe this is happening. That my best friend tried to…” He trailed off and took a deep breath, “…tried to kill himself.”

Ann looked at him, seeing the pain on his face, and leaned in. She wrapped an arm around him and gave him a hug. Ryuji jumped a bit but then relaxed and wrapped his arms around her. She heard him sniffle, felt some water drip on her clothes, and didn’t move when she realized he had started crying. They stayed still for several long minutes, then after a bit, Ryuji pulled away and lifted a hand up to wipe his eyes. He laughed a little.

“Shit, isn’t this supposed to be the other way around? Isn’t the guy supposed to comfort the girl?” He said, a smile forming on his face for a brief moment before vanishing. “I wanna go inside and see him, but...” He stopped again, but Ann nodded, knowingly.

"You're scared."

Ryuji nodded and sighed, “Yeah. It feels like after all these months we failed him. That I...fucked something up. Didn't see something I should have.”

Ann lowered her gaze, looking down at her feet. “I know what you mean.” She said, “But, we can’t put blame on anyone for this. Not him, not ourselves, okay?”

“We can blame the jackass that got him into this mess,” Ryuji grumbled as Ann crossed her arms. “I just want to point the finger at someone, to say ‘you did this to him’ and beat the shit out of ‘em. But honestly? Right now, I just want Akira to wake up.”

“Me too,” Ann said, nodding her head. “But until then, the best thing we can do is just be there for him. Then when he wakes up, help him through this best we can. Be there for him like we were for Shiho.”

“Yes. You're right,” Ryuji said but was cursing himself wishing there was more they could do. He took a deep breath. “Okay, I think I’m gonna go in. You coming?”

"Yeah, I'm right behind you."

Knowing Ann was behind him, Ryuji pushed the door open and stepped into the room. Ann followed behind, taking a deep breath as she saw the hospital bed before them. Everything felt like it was happening to fast and to slow at the same time. The sight was too familiar and too soon, but she kept her composure as best she could.

Ryuji took a few steps closer, looking down at Makoto. Her breathing was soft as she slept, her hand holding Akira’s. Ryuji did not want to disturb her, but after some seconds put a hand on her shoulder and gave it a light shake. She stirred, slowly opened her eyes, and forced herself to sit up. Her eyes fell on Akira, her shoulders drooping as she rubbed her eyes. She turned to her friends.


“Thank you, but I'm okay.” She trailed off as she looked back at Akira. Her smile dropped. “I was hoping, that this was just a bad dream...”
“Is it okay if we sit with you?” Ann said. Makoto gave her a nod and reached over to move some of Akira’s bangs away from his eyes, running her fingers across his hairline before holding his hand again. Ann and Ryuji took their seats, Ann next to Makoto, and Ryuji across from them. Ryuji took his seat and his eyes fell on the IV inserted into his friend’s arm, the mask over his face, and felt his heart drop into his stomach as the beeping of the heart monitor in his ears. He got up and moved the chair so he was sitting next to Ann.

The three were silent for awhile, then after some time, Ryuji spoke up.

“You think he can hear us?” He asked getting the girl’s attention. “I mean, if we said something, or talked to him, you think he might hear it?”

“There’s no way of knowing,” Makoto said, her voice low and tired.

“You feeling okay?” Ann asked. She shook her head.

“I’m...not sure how I feel right now.” She said. The only thing Makoto really felt was exhaustion. She had been distressed earlier, but now she just felt numb. A part of her wanted to go home and try and get some sleep, but she did not want to. The apartment would feel empty and cold. Either way, she did not want to leave Akira.

It was her phone buzzing that shook her out of her stupor and got their attention. She pulled it out of her jacket pocket and saw she had a message. “It’s Goro. He’s waiting outside the hospital.”

"What's he doing out there?” Ryuji asked, a slight frown on his face. "It's not like he needs an invite in or anything."

Makoto frowned as Goro sent her more messages. If he was texting her it meant he finished the formal investigation. "He wants to talk to me about something important before going to the office." She put her phone back in her pocket and got out of her seat. “I’ll be right back. Please, let me know if anything changes.”

She turned and walked out the door. Ann and Ryuji watched her leave then turned their attention back to Akira. “You think I should we should try and say something to him?” Ryuji asked. Ann shrugged.

“I talked to Shiho every day when she was in a coma. I still don’t know if she could hear me or not, but I like to think it helped her come back.” Ann said. Ryuji thought for a second, then leaned a little closer, putting a hand on Akira’s arm.

“Hey, Akira. Been a bit of a long night huh?” Ryuji started, trying to laugh a little in a vain attempt to lighten the mood. It wasn’t working, in truth somehow he just felt worse. “Ah geeze, this kinda shit isn’t my strong point. But hey, I hope you’re hearing me because I have something to tell ya.”

He took a deep breath and let it out, “You gotta wake up. Yeah, the years been pretty shitty, but you gotta remember, you have us. We always got your back, and we still do now, just hang in there. Okay?”

“Yeah. We’re going to stay strong for you. So, come back to us Akira. Please, wake up.” Ann told him.

The room fell quiet, the only sound being that of machines and the heart monitor beeping. Ryuji sighed and squeezed his best friend’s arm a little tighter.
Akira let out a loud yawn and rubbed his eyes, trying to get himself to wake up a bit more. His sleep had been fairly peaceful, but he had trouble getting out of bed, even with his alarm buzzing and Morgana pawing at his face. He felt tired and was sure it was not just because he had been running around with Ryuji and Ann for most of Golden Week.

Akira had read that the most common side effect of the medication Takemi prescribed him was drowsiness. He barely noticed during Golden Week. Sure he felt tired when Morgana woke him up at 8 AM - exactly 8 AM. Every day. - to be fed, but after giving his cat breakfast and scratching his head, Akira would lie back down and by the time he woke up again the worst of that drowsy feeling had passed. Getting up at five-thirty so he could get dressed, have breakfast, and get to the train station was another story. Sojiro refused to give him anything caffeinated too. He yawned again as he waited for the next train to arrived and hoped he would not fall asleep while standing.

“Yo!”

He felt a hand on his back an jumped turning around. He relaxed when he realized it was just Ryuji. “Hey,” Akira said and yawned again. Morgana poked his head out of the bag as Ryuji looked him over.

“You look beat. Didn't sleep well?” He asked, a little concerned.

“No, just can’t wake up.” Akira explained, “Don’t know if it’s my meds or how busy we were over the holiday. Probably both.”

Hearing that Ryuji relaxed and gave a light chuckle, “Too much excitement for ya?”

“I think I did more in the last three days than I have in the last four months,” Akira said, stretching his neck and then shoulders. "And it's busier here than back home too."
“Right, country boy, but hey, you had fun, right?” Ryuji asked, giving Akira a knowing grin.

Akira let a small smile cross his face and nodded. The first day had been difficult, but he got to finally meet Shiho and hanging out in Akihabara with Ryuji and Futaba the other day had been more fun than he expected. However, for him, the best part was finally opening up to Ryuji and Ann about his arrest and them being accepting, even angry at what happened to him. It felt like a weight had been taken off his shoulders.

Something had clicked that evening. He felt like after that day he could stop hesitating to think of Ann and Ryuji as his friends. “Yeah, I did. Just wish it was longer.”

His response got Ryuji to laugh, “Now that's what I want to hear,” his voice going up in volume, “Stick with us and we’ll turn you into a city kid in no time.”

“I kinda doubt that,” Akira said. Ryuji chuckled, and Akira looked up when he saw a familiar face entering the train station. Ann was walking over to them, then stopped and turned around. She turned back and hurried over to them.

“Hey, morning.” She said. Akira opened his mouth to greet her back only for a yawn to escape instead. A small smile crossed her face, making her features relax a little, “Still waking up?”

“We wore him out over break,” Ryuji said. Akira rolled his eyes. “You okay? You look like you saw a ghost or something.”

Ann hesitated for a second, then spoke up. “Can I talk to you guys about something important? Not here, but when we get to school?”

The two boys looked at each, confused, but nodded in agreement. “You sure it can wait that long?” Akira asked. Ann turned around and he could see she was nervous. She then looked back at them.

“Yeah. Strange as it sounds I'd actually feel safer at school than here in the train station.”

Akira and Ryuji looked at each other, then Ryuji nodded. "Yeah sure. Let's meet in the courtyard so we don't get any trouble."

They were eating lunch in the courtyard, Morgana poking his head out of Akira's bag, and attempting to steal bites of his lunch when Ann told them the news.

“I think someone’s stalking me.” She said. The boys looked at her. Even Morgana stopped trying to steal food from Akira and stared at Ann, a noise coming from his throat.

“You sure?” Ryuji asked as Ann pushed one of her pigtails behind her shoulder.

“Positive.” She said, “And I think they’ve been following me for awhile. I first got this feeling when I was leaving the park a few weeks ago. You know, when I was supposed to meet with Ikusaba-senpai? I brushed it off thinking maybe someone noticed my hair and was just trying to get a better look. But I’ve been getting this feeling on and off since yesterday and I’m positive someone was following me to the hospital.”

“That’s not good,” Akira said. He then paused, a frown on his face, “Wait, wasn’t it Mishima who
followed you to the park?"

“That's what I thought after we found out he ratted us out.” Ryuji said, “But, you’re sure it's someone else?"

“Positive.” Ann said, “Whoever was watching me in the park is the same person who followed me to the hospital yesterday and it was definitely not Mishima. He’s barely talked to us since last week.”

The three fell silent, Akira tightened his grip on his bag as a frown formed on his face. Just when things were beginning to settle down something else happened. He wanted to complain about it, but he was more worried that something could happen to Ann. Ryuji was also voicing his thoughts before he could anyway, “Dammit, and here I thought all our troubles would be over after we got rid of Kamoshida.” He sighed then, “But we’ll deal with this asshole too, somehow. I’ll think of something. Are you visiting Shiho again today?”

Ann nodded, “Yeah. She asked me to bring her Vita. She’s tired of having nothing to do but watch TV.”

“Well, we’ll go with you then. Right, Akira?”

"Yeah, we'll..." He started then cursed under his breath. He had a study session with Niijima.

“Something wrong?” Ryuji asked.

“I have a study session with Niijima-senpai after school.”

The two stared at him. “Wait, I thought you told her to leave you alone after she tried to get you to study with her.”

“Well I did, but I ran into her and her friend yesterday-”

“Niijima has friends?”

Both Akira and Ann glared at Ryuji for interrupting. Ann then motioned for Akira to continue. “She’s friends with some guy from another school, but that’s not the point. She apologized and we talked things over and I promised I’d study with her after school today.” Akira said, then shook his head, “And I hate to admit it, but I do need her help. My grades dropped because I stopped doing my homework, if they get any lower, I don't know how that'll affect my probation.”

“Right, your probation,” Ann said concern crossing her face. For a second she had actually forgot Akira was on probation. She then nodded and smiled, “You should study with her then. I think Ryuji coming with me to the hospital will be more than enough to keep whoever’s following me at a distance. Actually, we should probably do some studying there too.”

“Study?” Ryuji asked then groaned, “What’s the point, I’m just going to flunk everything like always. And you are too.”

“I am not. I do fine on my exams.”

“Yeah because your English grade keeps your average up,” Ryuji said. Akira stared at them, unsure if he wanted to interject into the argument or not, before feeling Morgana hit his hand. He looked down to see his cat had eaten the meat in his lunch.

“Bad boy.” He said. Morgana meowed at him and dove back in the bag for his afternoon nap.
Akira said his goodbyes to Ryuji and Ann after class before readjusting his bag and beginning his climb up the stairs to the library. It was then that he was stopped by a familiar voice getting his attention.

“Ah, Kurusu-san. There you are.”

Akira took a step back to see Makoto was right behind him. “Nijjima-senpai. I was just going to the library for our study session.”

“Yes, I wanted to talk to you about that,” Makoto said. “This is probably going to sound silly, but there are some study materials I need to pick up at the Central Street bookstore. I want to get them right away so I don’t need to worry about rushing home to make dinner. I was hoping you’d be okay studying in town instead of the library.”

Akira blinked and felt his shoulders drop. The idea of not studying in the library felt far better to him than it should have. It meant not needing to hear people whispering about him as much. He had an uneasy feeling the rumors were going to start spreading again. “Sure I don’t mind.” He said then paused as he remembered something, “Actually I wanted to get something at the bookstore too. I ordered a book over the holiday and it’s supposed to come in today.”

“Really.” Makoto thought it over. “Well, this works out for both of us then. Shall we go?”

“Uh, sure,” Akira said and watched her go back down the stairs before following her. He tried not to pay attention to some of the students commenting on why he was leaving school with Makoto.

The train ride was silent, neither of them said anything to the other. Akira kept his grip on the pole and kept his head down, trying to pretend the train was not as crowded as it actually was. Makoto was looking at her phone, he caught a brief glimpse and saw she was checking her text messages and sending something to a person. He could not see who she was texting or what she wrote. It was not his business anyway.

He remembered Makoto mentioned a sister the other day, and also that she did not want to rush dinner. Maybe she was asking her sister what she wanted to eat.

The train stopped and Akira sighed as he got off it. Makoto looked at him. “That’s a heavy sigh.”

“I still don’t like how crowded the train is.” He muttered. Makoto said nothing but nodded. The two left the station and Akira followed her across the station square and to central street. He felt his stomach twist a bit, the crowd was as large as ever, but the bookstore was a little quieter. Makoto walked up to the counter, Akira behind her, as she spoke to the man at the desk.

“Something I can help you with?”

“Yes, I ordered the study materials for this years college exams,” Makoto explained, giving her name to the man. Akira watched as she was handed two large books and several folders. What was more surprising was the frown on her face.

“This is it?”
“Yeah. To save money most of the material is digital. There should be some DVDs in those folders to help you with your studies.”

“I see. I guess I won’t be studying while watching my movies after all.” Makoto said. Akira could not help but notice she sounded a little disappointed as the man gave a small apology that sounded indifferent. He then looked at him.

“Can I help you?”

“Uh, just picking up a book.” He said giving his name. The man checked the computer system and nodded then went into the back room for a few seconds before coming out with the book. It had his name on it, and the man motioned for Akira to step over to the register so he could pay for it. Once paid for he was handed the book and gave the man a small thank you as he looked at the cover. Akira ran his fingers over the cover. The hardcover book had a decent weight to it. A small smile crossed his face.

“What did you get?” Makoto asked, getting his attention.

Akira held out the book for her to see and she looked at the cover. There was a glimmer of recognition in her eyes. “I know this name. This is about that hacker group. They were in the news for a while, especially after that incident with the Okumura Foods leak. I think my sister worked on that case for a little while…”

Makoto trailed off as she began to think and Akira could not help but notice she sounded interested. He turned his attention back to the cover and opened it. He took a look at the preface, then turned his attention to Makoto, who was putting her study materials into her bag. He saw her take a quick glance at the book again.

She was interested. He watched her then after a few seconds of hesitation took a deep breath and let it out. "Niijima-senpai," He started getting her attention.

Her red eyes were so bright he lost his voice for a second, then caught himself. "Do you want to look at it with me?” He asked.

Makoto blinked, surprised by his offer. She then nodded.
because that same strand kept falling into her face.

He tried to focus on her face, her eyes were inquisitive as she read over the text. Why were they so red? It was to easy to get distracted by them. “So according to this passage, the incident that shut down the Yoshiro bank was caused by Medjed.”

He nodded, “Yeah, looks like it.” He watched as she leaned a little forward - lucky or unlucky him she was wearing a turtleneck - and then leaned back. “You know it’s quite fascinating.”

“What is?”

Makoto moved some hair out of her face and put it behind her ear. “The reaction to Medjed shutting down such a large and corrupt corporation. It says here some praised Medjed for bringing justice to the people, while others lambasted them for it. It says here ‘while many agreed Medjed’s actions brought justice and saved the livelihoods of many citizens, a few believed that their actions did not justify acting outside of the law.’” She paused, “This almost sounds like something my father and sister would have argued over.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Dad would say that regardless of the law, Medjed’s actions were just, while my sis would believe regardless of their good deed, they should be held accountable for their actions because they still operated outside the law.”

Akira made a small grunt, “Sounds like you have fun debates at the dinner table.” He said. Makoto winced, he noticed.

“Unfortunately my statement is more hypothetical.” She said, glancing up at him to see his confused face. “I’m sorry, you wouldn’t know so I guess I understand the confusion. My father passed away three years ago.”

“O-oh.” Akira muttered. He diverted his gaze, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. Like I said you wouldn’t know. And because I know the question is going to crop up next, my mother passed away shortly after I was born. So it’s just me and my sister.”

“Must be tough.”

“It was at first. We had some help from extended family but when my sister decided to enter the workforce instead of marrying they...stopped.” Makoto said, “I guess a grandparent was unhappy with her decision, but my sister’s a career woman and wanted to pursue justice like my father did.”

“What did your dad do?” He asked. Why was he asking? He shouldn't have been interested. He saw a smile cross Makoto's face.

“He was a detective. He believed what mattered most was the good of the people. Sometimes he skirted the lines of the law and got in trouble with his superiors for it, but if his work led to Shibuya’s streets being safer, he considered it a successful day.”

“He sounds like a good man,” Akira said. The smile on Makoto's face widened. It was obvious she had a lot of pride in her family. “Is your sister also a detective?”

“No, she’s a public prosecutor. She’s amazing at her job, but I do worry about her at times.” Makoto then paused, “Can I ask you something? What do you think of this argument? About whether Medjed’s actions were just or if they should be held accountable for their actions in the
“You want my opinion?” He asked. Makoto nodded, a look on her face that made it clear that she was not going to take ‘I don’t have one’ as a satisfying answer. Akira sighed and leaned forward, putting his elbows on the table, folding his hands.

“I think what Medjed did was the right thing.” He said, “People were suffering because some big wigs were using their power to hurt them and they did something about it. Doesn’t matter if they broke the law to do it.”

“I see.” Makoto said, “Yes, I have to agree. The law is supposed to protect people-”

“-Well it’s not doing a good job at it.”

Makoto looked at him, startled by him not just cutting her off but also how his tone had become cold. However, she nodded in agreement, “Yes. Unfortunately, there are people in power that are more interested in serving themselves than serving the people around them. And of course, there are the laws that hurt others as well.

“But I like to think there are more people doing good out there than those who intend to hurt others.”

Akira did not say anything for awhile then sighed, “Well wherever they are, they weren’t there when I needed them.”

Makoto was quiet. Akira’s words piqued her interest. She had a feeling he was mentioning his assault charge. She opened her mouth to ask but stopped. From the look on his face, she had a feeling he was not ready to talk about it. She decided not to pry, she had not even come close to earning his trust on such a sensitive topic.

She decided to change the subject. ”Anyway, we did come here to study, so why don’t we start with your best subject,” Makoto suggested. Akira nodded and pulled his history textbook out of his bag before trying to put Medjed’s Menace in it, easier said than done with Morgana curled up in it.

“You really should leave your cat at home.”

“Absolutely not.” He said a small smirk forming on his face, ”Sakura-san's stepdaughter is too rough with him.”

Makoto nodded and motioned for Akira to open his book and take out his notes so they could go over what would be on the exam.

They worked at it for a little while then Akira looked at her. “What do you think?” He asked, getting her attention, “About what Medjed did?”

"What do I think?"

"You asked me, only fair I ask you.”

She looked at him, confused by his sudden interest, but then after a few seconds answered. “Medjed’s actions now are….hostile. When people say their most recent event was the equivalent of cyber terrorism I find myself agreeing with them. However, I won’t deny in their early months they were doing what they thought was best for the people.”

“You think their actions were just.”
“Yes. Though the keyword there is ‘were’.” Makoto said, “I admit I followed Medjed in the news for awhile so I couldn't help but notice when one of the stories of their actions seemed a little off.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, do you think an organization that hacks controversial companies would leak their customer's private information or put their credit card information on the black market?” She asked. Akira thought it over for a second then shook his head. “Exactly. Obviously, it’s just conjecture but Goro and I have theorized the Medjed people fear now is not the same Medjed that originally leaked a corrupt banks tax records.”

“Almost sounds like there was a change in leadership,” Akira said. Makoto shrugged.

“They are anonymous. It could be there was a change in leadership, it could be the original Medjed is no longer active and someone else is using their name. Goro told me that one thing he hopes to do as a detective is to find the answer to that.” She sighed, “Though if he’ll succeed is another story entirely. Now, your studies.”

Akira nodded and listened as Makoto helped him catch up on his school work.

5/6/2016
After School
Aoyama-Itchome Hospital

Shiho had a frown on her face as she stared at her Vita screen. Ann and her had been trying to solve a puzzle in their game for a little while. The puzzle in question was timed and this was the fifth time the two had gotten a game over. Seeing the screen say ‘whoops you’ve been executed’ made the two sigh and Shiho saved the game and leaned back in her pillows.

“I need a break,” Ann muttered. “I didn’t think a game about solving a murder would be so hard.”

“It’s a mystery it’s supposed to be hard.” Shiho said, “The first game was a lot easier than this, why did they have to make this one so hard?”

“Because sequels are harder than originals,” Ann muttered. “Except when they’re easier.”

“Can I have easier?”

Ann smiled and laid down next to Shiho on the hospital bed. It was a bit cramped but there was enough room for the both of them. The two looked at each other and then Shiho looked back up at the ceiling. “So you have exams coming up right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then why are you here goofing off with me instead of studying?”

Ann frowned and looked at her, “What you don’t want my company?” She asked then giggled, “For your information, I was planning on studying while visiting you, but you distracted me with by yelling at your game.”
“I distracted you,” Shiho repeated, giving Ann a look that made it obvious the girl did not believe. “So is that why you immediately jumped on my bed and began watching me play it and then started laughing at me when I was cursing it out.”

“I totally did not do that.”

Shiho kept the skeptical look on her face, then laughed. Ann did too, then moved a little, "Come on, one more round."

"No, I'm tired of being executed." She said, "Go study. I'm not gonna let you cry on my shoulder if you flunk every class again."

“Relax. I’m always just average enough to not go below the average. I thank my wonderful English skills.” Ann said, then after a few seconds added, ‘wait what do you mean ‘again?!”

“Summer exams last year?”

“No idea what you’re talking about.”

Shiho rolled her eyes, but could not help but grin. “If you say so. Uh, by the way, is Ryuji still in the hallway?” She asked. Ann sat up and climbed off the bed. She moved over to the door and looked out the small window. Sure enough, Ryuji was sitting in a chair playing on his phone. Ann checked the time. She had been with Shiho for almost two hours. She wanted to stay longer but did not want to keep Ryuji waiting on her for much longer.

“Yeah, he’s still out there.”

“ Weird he’s just waiting outside,” Shiho said. "What's he doing?"

“He’s probably texting Akira or something,” Ann said. It was a lie. She was not going to have Shiho worrying about her, her best friend already had enough to worry about with her doctor scheduling her physical therapy. “But I should get going so he’s not waiting around for long.”

“...Ann, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Ann said. Shiho frowned at her.

“Ann, you’re a terrible liar.”

Ann blinked, eyes wide as she stared at her before letting out a forced laugh. “I’m serious, it’s nothing to worry about. Anyway, I think I will study at home tomorrow, so I’ll see you Sunday.”

“Sunday is good. Just be careful okay?” She asked, “You know I worry about you.”

“Shiho…” Ann started, then paused, and smiled, “You don’t need to worry about me, just focus on yourself okay.” She walked over and after some hesitation leaned over and gave her friend a hug. “Please?”

Shiho said nothing for a little while, but then returned Ann’s hug and looked at her. “Alright. Just don’t do anything I would, okay?”

“I promise!”

Ann turned to leave and gave one last look at her friend before saying her goodbye and stepping out the door. Once she was out in the hall she sighed and felt her face turn red. Ryuji looked up at her. “Hey.”
“Sorry, I took so long.”

“It’s no problem and sorry I took off to ‘use the bathroom’ I thought you two would want some
time alone today.” He said. He reached up and scratched the back of his head, "Hey, not that this is
any of my business, but you gonna tell her or..."

“Tell her what?”

“You know…” Ryuji trailed off, his eyes glancing at Ann and then the door to Shiho's hospital
room. It took a few seconds to click, but when it did Ann sighed and shook her head.

"I don't know..." She said, "I mean, I want to, but there's always...you know how it is."

"No, not really." Ryuji said, "I mean, I like girls, but I'm a guy. That's just expected. But with
you..."

"Exactly why I don't know if I'll say anything," Ann said, "It's not as okay here as it is in other
places I've lived. Besides, I don't know how Shiho would react. We have a good friendship, I don't
want to lose that because I tell her I've been crushing on her for almost a year now and she doesn't
like it."

"I...guess I understand." Ryuji said, "But, and you can just ignore me, I might be 'book dumb', but
I'm not 'dumb dumb.' I don't think how she looks at you is how someone who just sees you as a
friend looks at someone."

"Ryuji, you've never liked someone like that. How would you know?"

"I dunno. I just do. You know how I am." Ryuji said, "I guess, I get it's a risk, but maybe it's worth
taking?"

"I dunno." Ann said, "I'll think about it after exams, but honestly Ryuji, I don't think you really get
how badly this could go."

"You really think Shiho would just turn against you if you told her?" Ryuji asked.

"I...I don't know." Ann said, then looked around before leaning closer to Ryuji, her voice becoming
quiet, "I know when I told you I was bi, you didn't care, but not everyone is like you."

"But Shiho's your best friend-"

"And friendships have been lost because of something like this. I don't think I can deal with that. I
know I can't." She said, then straightened and spoke at her normal volume, "Come on let's get out
of here. I wanna get something to eat."

Without waiting for Ryuji to speak up, she turned and hurried down the hallway. She felt angry
that Ryuji brought the whole conversation up. She cared about Shiho, but did not want to ruin their
friendship, even if it meant keeping her mouth shut.

Chapter End Notes

I have to admit I have very mixed feelings on the note this chapter ends on, but the
holiday left me low on time to find someone to look it over.
Chapter Summary

Akira pushes his personal boundaries a little bit.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who voted. I got 85 votes and the results are as followed:

Akira Kurusu: 76%
Ren Amamiya: 24%

One Year On Probation will continue to use the name Akira Kurusu. This is gonna get so confusing when I write standalone fics using Ren Amamiya. And hilarious. Thank you all for voting!

5/7/2016 (Saturday)
Shujin Academy
After School

"Is that...the transfer student and Nijima-senpai?"

"No way, what are those two doing together?"

"Are they studying?"

"She must really want a college rec if she's gonna tolerate that guy."

Makoto felt her hand twitch as she overheard her classmates whispering to each other. She looked at Akira, whose eyes looked darker and heavier than they did when they first started. He also began to look more tense, the whispers in the air making him uncomfortable. She reached up as he brought his hand to his forehead and closed his textbook. She saw him stare at it, dumbfounded.

“I think that’s enough for today.” She said.

Akira looked at her, then back at his book as he nodded in agreement. His head was beginning to hurt and he felt a little tired. The library’s quiet conversation becoming louder as students went in and our was not helping. To his surprise, he had barely heard most of it, but when Makoto said she would be working him hard, she was not kidding. They had spent over an hour on history and another hour on math and most of the noise had become white noise in the background. He only started making out what they were saying because his concentration had waned.
“I think you’re right.” He said taking his glasses off and rubbing his eyes. He looked at her while his glasses were still between his fingers. Even with his vision blurred her eyes stood out. “Is it okay if we take tomorrow off?”

“I don’t see why not. Tomorrow’s Sunday, it’s natural to take the day off.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll spend most of it studying,” She said and Akira noticed she sounded a little dejected. Was she really going to spend her day off studying? “But I promised Goro we’d go out when he got off work. He wants to go to the theater.”

“You two are pretty close,” Akira said.

“Well, he is my friend,” Makoto told him.

Akira nodded and pushed his glasses back on. The moment he got home he was going to lie down and take a small nap. He was shaking from his thoughts, however, when he heard a small noise and looked down to see Morgana had wormed himself partly into Makoto's school bag.

“Dammit. No Morgana.” He said just barely loud enough for Makoto to hear. He bent over and scooped the cat up. He noticed there was something white and gray in his cat's mouth and tried to pull it out. “Let go of that, that’s not yours.”

Morgana let out a small growl and then meowed in protest once Akira got the item out of his cat’s mouth. It dropped onto the floor and before they could make an even more obvious scene Akira stuffed the cat back into his bag. "Now be quiet."

The cat made a noise that sounded like a growl. "Be quiet or I zip the bag shut." He said. The cat glared at him then laid down in the bag. Akira sighed in relief then looked up when he saw a few people staring at them. He felt his face turn red.

How long until more of his classmates were acting like he was crazy? He tried to shake his thought from his mind as he turned his attention to the item that fell on the floor. It was a pencil case, one that, if he were to be honest with himself, looked familiar. He stared at it for a few seconds longer and it his him.

The design reminded him of a character from a cartoon he saw as a kid. He reached down to pick it up only for Makoto to swipe it from his reach. She then picked up her bag and stuffed it in there, with more force than normal. Akira stared taken back by the sudden aggression.

“Oh, sorry,” Akira said.

“I-it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.” Makoto said. Her face was red with embarrassment. “But please, keep your cat under control or I’ll report you to the principal.”

“I will, I promise.” He said, jumping a little at her words. He hesitated for a second, he was positive he had seen that character before. “Is that a Buchimaru-kun pencil case?”

She froze, her eyes wide. “You know about Buchimaru-kun?”

“I watched that cartoon when I was a kid.”

He noticed her expression deflate. “Oh. Yes, it is a Buchimaru-kun pencil case. I’ve...had it for a very long time.”
Akira nodded. The case had looked pretty old. It was discolored in some places and the zipper looked like it had been replaced more than once. "It's odd to see." He said. She looked at him.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, with how you are and..." He paused as he saw the frown on her face form and backtracked. "What I mean is, it's a cute case and...I don't see it around often anymore."

“I see...thank you.” She said, unsure what to make of his statement. “Does it seem so strange for me to have a 'cute' pencil case?"

Sensing the possibility of danger if he gave the wrong answer, Akira kept his mouth shut as he closed his textbooks. Makoto waited for a bit, then sighed and put her things away as well. "Anyway, I should be going. I want to get home at a reasonable time to make dinner."

“Alright, see ya Nijijima-senpai,” Akira said. He watched as she turned and left the library at a brisk pace. He let out the sigh of relief he had not even realized he was holding and got his thoughts together.

Makoto had a cute pencil case. The polite, but somewhat cold, and possibly terrifying student council president had a soft spot for cute animals. He was not quite sure what to make of that revelation. It was odd, but for some reason kind of fitting.

His thoughts were broken off again when he heard growling and looked down to see Morgana glaring at him from the bag with narrow eyes. “What?” He asked.

His cat kept making the noise and Akira sighed. Morgana was probably unhappy he had taken away the cat's 'toy'. He then felt his phone begin vibrating in his pocket and pulled it out.

He had a text message from Ryuji, his friend wanted to meet up with him near the school’s courtyard.

Ryuji thought he had been seeing things when he saw some of his former track teammates in their gym clothes after school. With Kamoshida arrested, gym classes and all sports-related activities had been indefinitely canceled. To see his former track-mates practicing in the courtyard had caught him off guard. He was even more surprised with himself when he found himself watching them practice. He had thought running and the track team was behind him, but now he was beginning to doubt his own feelings. He watched as one of his former teammates - Nakaoka - gave orders and then the boys began doing sprints in the courtyard.

Ryuji let a knowing grin cross his face. If Kamoshida were still at the school, they would have never had the guts to practice on school grounds. He then he looked down at his right leg and let his shoulders sag.

“Hey.” Ryuji looked up when he heard Akira’s voice and looked at him.

“Hey man. How’d studying with Nijijima-senpai go?”

“Like being handled by a drill sergeant.” He said, rubbing the back of his neck. “But I think I understand everything we looked over. You?”

“I haven’t studied one bit.” Ryuji said, giving Akira a grin which was met with a sour look, before
moving on, “So, you doing anything tomorrow?”

“Not really. Sakura-san might make me help around the cafe, but that's it. Why?”

Ryuji motioned to the door and Akira looked outside. “Those guys over there are my former track-mates. After Kamoshida disbanded the team, we all stopped talking to each other, but seeing them practicing again, makes me...I dunno. Kinda happy and kinda jealous.”

“Jealous?”

“Well, because my leg got all messed up I stopped running. I mean you’ve seen the limp I walk with, it’s kinda obvious, so I kinda thought running again would be pointless, but with that asshole gone and seeing them going back at it? It kinda makes me want to.”

“So what’s stopping you?” Akira asked.

“Feeling like I’m extremely out of shape.” Ryuji said, embarrassed, “I mean look at them, they look like even after the track team disbanded they were still practicing. I’m pretty sure I’d make a fool of myself if I went out there and tried to join them.” He paused and grinned, “Alright I just got this great idea. I’m thinking I should do some private training, but I need motivation, someone to help me out.”

“And you’re asking me.”

Ryuji grinned as Akira came to the right conclusion. “How about it? Inokashira park, tomorrow at noon? We’ll run a few laps around the lake, then grab some ramen for lunch?”

Akira had a feeling his friend was not going to take no for an answer. He also could not remember the last time he did any extensive running. There was a part of him that wanted to say no, but he kept that part in the back of his mind. “Alright, sure.” He said, then added “It sounds like it'll be fun. I actually haven’t gone to the park yet.”

“Well, we get to fix that.” Ryuji said, “Time for you to see another side of the city.”

Akira nodded. A visit to the park and a quick run with his new friend. How bad could that be?

5/8/2016 (Sunday)
Daytime
Inokashira Park

Going jogging with Ryuji was a horrible idea that Akira regretted the moment he started running. The train ride was fine. If he focused on his destination, it made the claustrophobic trip almost tolerable. Walking to the park was fine, his GPS on his phone was up to date and got him there without any problems. Even the park itself was beautiful and Akira was not against the idea of going there again for a leisurely stroll or just to read while lying on the grass.

The actual jogging was a disaster. He was not the most physically active person, he skipped gym class as often as possible, but even knowing that he severely underestimated himself. His legs felt like jelly as he ran and he quickly fell behind as he discovered Ryuji ran like a blue hedgehog. His friend’s jogging was more like a sprint and Akira realized within seconds that trying to keep up would be an exercise in futility. By the time he made it halfway around the lake his lungs were on fire and once he reached their starting point again, he felt like he was going to collapse.
He was not sure if he should have been relieved he skipped breakfast or not, but once he was done emptying his stomach on the grass he bought a bottle of water and took a seat on a nearby bench. He groaned and ran a hand through his sweat soaked hair, his bangs sticking to his forehead. He looked up as Ryuji passed him again then slowed to a stop and started walking, swinging his arms to keep his balance. Akira was pretty sure that was the third time he ran around the lake. An impressive feat, which left him slack-jawed when he heard Ryuji say:

“Dammit. Only three laps?” He then groaned, “I’m so out of shape.”

“Seriously?” Akira asked getting his attention. He stood up and shook his head, “If that’s ‘out of shape’ I can’t imagine how you were on the track team.”

Ryuji straightened and grinned. “Best runner on the team. Sprints, long distance, I could do pretty much everything. Really pissed Kamoshida off.” His smile dropped, “But man, it took a lot of hard work to get that good, I feel like I haven’t run in years.”

“You did a lot better than me.” Akira said, putting a hand in his pocket, “I’m soaked in sweat.”

“Well, I guess that’s what happens when you don’t work out a lot,” Ryuji said. He then thought if over and a grin formed on his face, “You know, track was always a bit of a solo sport, but running together and laughing with the guys after a hard workout made us feel like a team. We kept motivating and pushing each other to do better.”

Ryuji paused for a second and thought it over then gave Akira a grin. "You should train with me."

"Train with you?" Akira repeated, not quite sure he heard his friend right. Ryuji nodded.

"Yeah think about it. It’ll get you out of Leblanc more and I get someone who can take me out for a post-workout meal."

Akira’s head bobbed as he thought it over. On one hand, the run was a horrible experience he did not want to repeat again. On the other hand, he knew he needed to get out more and he liked hanging out with Ryuji. “Sure. Except for taking you out for a post-workout meal. You’re buying your own Ramen.”

“Aw come on man, you know I don’t have much cash.”

“Me neither. Weren’t you trying to get a job?”

“Huh?” Ryuji asked confused, “Oh right, I forgot to tell you. I got an interview at the Beef Bowl later today. ...Kinda wanted to run to steady my nerves for it...”

“Congrats.” Akira said, “Hope you get in there.”

“It’ll be part-time, not sure how many hours that means, but it’ll be nice to have my own spending money. Won’t feel bad taking money out of my mom’s paycheck anymore. Which reminds me.” Ryuji said and took a step closer, “If I get this job, she can’t find out, so don’t say anything to her. Got it?”

“Your secret's safe with me.” Akira said, giving his friend a reassuring smile. ’Ryuji then stretched, a little.

“Alright, time for a cooldown walk and then a ramen break. I know a few good places where we can get something light. Never a good idea to have something heavy after a hard workout.”
Akira decided to take his friend's word for it and walked with Ryuji around the lake, listening as his listed off every single Ramen shop in the area. He mentioned about five before Akira cut him off and told him just to pick one and to stop asking for his opinion since he had no idea what or where any of them were anyway. Afterward, Ryuji sighed and settled for taking him to a place down the street, not far from the train station.

5/8/2016 (Sunday)
Evening
Cafe Leblanc

Ann:
I give up.

The sound of his phone buzzing stirred Akira from his nap. He opened his eyes and held his phone up as he put his glasses on. Morgana was snuggled up next to him, undisturbed by the movement.

Akira:
What’s wrong?

Ryuji:
You okay?

Akira guessed by Ryuji’s message he was done with his interview.

Ann:
No. I’m not.
I can’t concentrate
on this stupid textbook!

Akira sighed in relief. For a second he was worried Ann was going to tell them her stalker had found where she lived.

Ann:
I’m trying to get some studying
done since I have a shoot tomorrow,
but-

ARGH! This is impossible!

Ryuji:
Just do what I do. Cram it.

Ann:
No! Then I’m guaranteed to fail everything.

Ryuji:
You’d have flunked everything besides English anyway.

Ann:
I’m guessing by your answer, you haven’t studied one bit.

Ryuji:
Well, I did for five minutes...

Ann:
That doesn’t count.
By the way Akira, how’re your study sessions with Nijima-senpai?

Akira:
She doesn’t pull any punches.

Ryuji:
Akira called her a drill sergeant the other day.

I don’t know how someone can spend all their time studying. I mean I know college is important, but does she have nothing else to do?

Akira frowned as he read Ryuji’s text message. Makoto had mentioned that she studied so hard to ‘make things easier for her sister.’ If everything she told him about her family was true, ‘make things easier’ sounded like not needing to pay for college. A college recommendation would go a long way to help with receiving some kind of financial aid.

Which she could get by helping keep a ‘delinquent’s’ grades up.

He found himself frowning, but then took a deep breath in and let it out. He could understand that was not her only reason for helping him but the thought still stung like being stabbed with a knife. Morgana looked up and meowed at him, getting his attention. He smiled at his pet, then pushed himself up when he heard someone hurrying up the stairs. Futaba stepped into the room.

"Hey.” She said, staring at him in a way that made him a little uncomfortable. It was like once she made eye contact she was burning a hole in his chest.

“Hi.” He said, sitting up. He watched as she tilted her head and then played with her fingers.

“So...that book you bought the other day…” She said, “Can I look at it?”


He motioned to his desk and heard Futaba make a small noise and pick up the book before sitting herself on his uncomfortable sofa. He turned his attention back to his phone to see Ryuji and Ann were still talking to each other. He watched the conversation for a bit and found he was not sure what if he could contribute to the conversation. He then looked back at Futaba who was reading his book, then glanced down at Morgana. After a few minutes of contemplation, he climbed off the bed. He put on his coat and motioned for Morgana to get into his spare bag.

He could have sworn he heard Futaba mutter something in annoyance at his book as he climbed down the stairs. Once downstairs he saw Sojiro cleaning the counter. The older man looked up at him.
“This is a surprise.” Sojiro said, “You going out for awhile.”

He nodded. “Just going for a walk. I kinda want to see how Shibuya looks at night.”

He saw a smile cross Sojiro’s face, “About time. Don’t forget, the trains stop at 12:30 and you have school tomorrow.”

Akira nodded. He doubted he would be out for long, but promised Sojiro he would be back before the trains stopped. He stepped outside and right away noticed the air was different from how it was during the day. The smell of alcohol was more prominent, but he found himself able to ignore it as he walked down the street to the train station. He got to Shibuya as quick as he always did and turning on his phones GPS. He then typed in an address Dr. Takemi was kind enough to provide him with.

He looked at the railways and purchased his ticket before getting on the train to his destination. It took about a half hour, but the train finally stopped at its destination and Akira stepped off and walked the streets. He again found his eyes wondering as people walked passed him, mostly young college students, subconsciously stepping to the side to try and keep some distance. He checked his GPS as he walked down the street, then looked up to see a large building just a few blocks away. It stood out from some of the other buildings, and once Akira was standing in front of it he found himself looking around to see if anyone was watching him.

No of course not. He was just another face in the crowd, no one would be whispering about why he was entering a Catholic church. He took a deep breath and put his phone away. He climbed the small set of steps and entered the building.

He took a few steps in, feeling his stomach turn from anxiety. He glanced around. The church was not empty, but it was certainly not packed with people. The lack of a crowd actually made him feel more at ease. There were several older men and women sitting in the pews, reading or praying. Some younger college students were talking to each other or doing their homework.

A man he assumed was the church’s pastor was speaking to a man in a suit, who nodded and thanked him for his time. They shook hands then the suited man bowed one last time before turning down the walkway. Akira took a few steps forward. The pastor noticed him.

“Ah, hello there.” Akira stopped in his steps and the man gave him a smile, “No need to be so nervous.”

“Uh, sorry just….” Akira started. Was his unease that obvious. The man at least seemed friendly. “Never been in this kind of place before.”

The pastor chuckled, “Yes, well, we don’t get many youths coming through these doors. Most of my parish consists of men and women who are middle-aged or elderly, but I do get the occasional visitor from the local colleges. Mostly young ones in distress in need of a quiet place to get their thoughts together. Some return, many don’t.” He explained as he looked Akira over, “You look to be high school age.” His eye then widened, “Are you a student of Kosei High perhaps?”

Akira looked at him, confused then shook his head. “No. I attend Shujin Academy.”

“Shujin Academy?” He asked. When Akira nodded, the man shook his head, “My sympathies, you’re school’s been in the news of recent and not for the better.”

“Yeah…” He said, looking down, hands in his pockets, “School’s been difficult.”

“Is that why you’re here? Looking for some peace?”
“Something like that.” Akira said, “...Do you know someone named Dr. Tae Takemi?”

A light shone in the man’s eyes, “Yes. Tae Takemi regularly visited me for some time. I would see her every Sunday after Mass and speak to her. I haven’t seen her for at least a year though.”

Akira paused. That story sounded different from what Takemi had said. He decided not to bring that up. “She’s my doctor. She suggested coming here might help me.”

“Takemi has a habit of being right about many things.” The man said, a knowing tone in his voice, “Well regardless of whether you are here for spiritual healing through Christ or just in need of a place to get away from the world, our doors are open for the next few hours. Please take a seat and if you need anything don’t hesitate to ask.”

“T-thank you,” Akira muttered. The Pastor nodded to him, then excused himself to meet with an older couple that had just sat down in the pews. Akira looked around, then noticed a girl in a white and red checkered dress sitting near the front of the church. She looked like she was playing Shogi by herself. After some contemplation, Akira walked over to her. “Uh, excuse me.” He said. She did not look up, instead concentrating on her game. “Can I sit here?”

She looked up at him for a brief second then back at her game. “It’s fine, just don’t disturb my practice.” She said, her distant.

Akira took a seat as far away from her as he could. He put his bag next to himself and Morgana poked his head out letting out a small meow. Akira scratched the cat's head and leaned back. He looked behind him and pulled a book out of its holder and opened it.

After a few seconds, he heard a voice get his attention. “Is that your cat?”

It was the girl sitting next to him. Akira looked at her and nodded. “Yeah. His name is Morgana.”

“He’s very cute.” She said then looked back down at her game.

“Uh, thanks,” Akira said. Morgana let out a happy meow, seeming to understand and like the compliment. Akira went back to reading. After an hour he closed the book and placed it on his lap. He sighed and rubbed his eyes, keeping a hand on Morgana's head. He felt a little more relaxed, the place did give him an odd piece, which was weird, but not unwelcoming. He stayed sitting for a little while longer, just taking in the atmosphere. He did feel at ease.

However, he checked the time and decided he wanted to return home so he could get a decent nights sleep. He motioned for Morgana to hide back in his bag and thanked the pastor for his time. He left the church and brought his GPS up to help him get back to the train station.

As he was walking he stopped as he saw himself coming across Book Town. He glanced up at what looked like an old bookstore, the lights off and the doors locked. Not surprised with how late it was. He made a small note to go out and visit the Book Store again, the next time he had a chance. If his exams went well maybe he would treat himself to something nice.

He spotted several cafes in the area and wondered if Ryuji and Ann would want to come with him too.
Again the study session went well. Akira struggled a bit to grasp some of the material from his science class, but once explained to him a few times Makoto noticed he started to understand and catch on to it well. “Yes, good.” She said. Akira nodded. “You’re doing quite well. Far better than what I expected.”

“Well contrary to what it might seem I was never a bad student.” Akira told her as he scribbled some notes down.

“No, from what I’ve seen you aren’t,” Makoto said. Akira looked at her for a brief second and then went back to writing down more notes. She frowned, he was not a bad student, in fact, he seemed like a decent person, but he still assaulted someone. Why would he do that? She found herself wondering and staring at him for too long because he looked back up.

"What's wrong?” He asked. Makoto blinked and shook her head.

"It's nothing." Makoto said, then smirked, "I'm just thinking if you're doing so well I should push you even harder."

She got a reaction out of him, his eyes widened a little, "Uh, well, I-I don't think that's necessary.” He said. He then checked the time on his phone. He had another half hour. "Uh, can you help me with my English for a bit? I still don't understand some things."

"Sure.” Makoto leaned closer as he opened his English book and turned to the page in question. He pointed to a passage that discussed sentence structures. He asked his question and she helped him through the exercises one at a time.
Ryuji let out a groan as he stared at his textbook. A few minutes later he groaned again and this time Ann smacked him in the arm. “Ow, hey!”

“Will you quit it? I can’t concentrate.” Ann said. Morgana meowed and nudged her thigh with his head. Since they sat down to study Morgana decided he would be spending it with Ann and was taking every opportunity to demand affection from the girl. Ann looked down at the cat and put her hand on his head. The purring noise became louder and she swore she saw a smile form on his face. “Hard enough to study with a cat demanding my attention.”

“You could just give him back to me you know…” Akira muttered. His head was resting on his palm, his elbow propped onto their table. His history book was in front of him, but he had not been actively studying for a while. After he had his two-hour study session with Makoto after school, Ryuji and Ann asked if he wanted to have a last minute cram session. He was starting to regret agreeing to it. His head felt mushy and the notes he took down were starting to blur together.

“It’s fine. Besides at this point, I think I’m just gonna ride my English grade and hope for the best.” Ann said.

“At least you have a class you can ride on. I’m just about ready to throw in the towel.” Ryuji said.

“You aren’t gonna tell your mom about it either are you.”

“Uh...probably not?” Ryuji picked up the remote and turned on the TV, then looked at Akira. “It alright for me to put something on?”

Akira sighed. He would have appreciated it if Ryuji had asked before turning on the television, but his head was so fried after studying for almost four hours, he was passed the point of caring. “Sure, it’s fine.” He muttered. He closed his textbook and leaned back as Ryuji flicked through the limited channels and stopped on the news.

“-For this week. And now in other news, a worker at Big Burger in Kanda allegedly attacked a customer who was complaining about receiving the wrong order. The man, thirty-six-year-old Taro Tanaka, claims the worker was ‘cold and hostile’ and that the attack was unprovoked.”

The man in question appeared on screen, “All I told him was tell him I ordered the spicy jack burger and it tasted too mild and the kid just flips out.”

“However other workers on staff claim the man in question was aggressive and threatening the
worker with violence. One staff member on duty claimed he saw the man attempting to climb over the counter, and that was when the worker took action."

"I see him put his hands on the counter, looked like he’s gonna strike him, then next thing I know he’s on the floor." One of the workers said to the reporter. Ryuji looked over at the others.

"Geeze, what a mess," Ryuji asked. "You think the cashiers gonna get fired or something?"

"He will." Akira said, "Since it reached the news he’ll get fired just so the heat is taken off the company. Probably will have trouble finding a job after that."

"That’s usually how it is." Ann said, "I’m really glad I don’t work in fast food or retail, people don’t treat you well in that field."

The news story continued concluding with the confirmation that while Big Bang Burger was contacted, there had been no response from representatives and that they would update the story when they heard from the company. Akira shook his head, he doubted they would get anything other than a phoned-in PR statement. He sighed and stretched out his neck. Ryuji changed the channel until he found a station airing some kind of drama that none of them were interested in.

"Well, that was depressing." He muttered. "Speaking of Big Bang Burger, I’m getting hungry. Wanna go out and get something to eat?"

"Uh Ryuji, we’re still in a cafe." Ann said, "Let’s just get something here. I’ve been wanting to try some of Sakura-san’s curry for a little while. You think we can have some Akira?"

"Come to think of it, free food is usually better than paid for food."

"You guys won’t, but I will. With more dishes." Akira pointed out, but grinned and got up. "I’ll ask if he can make us something."

He hurried downstairs.

5/12/2016 (Thursday)
Afternoon
Shujin Academy

Exams were scheduled to take place over three days and there were two tests each day except for the last day where there was only one. The exams took place in the morning so students were free to spend their afternoons as they pleased. Most stayed at the school to study until their usual closing hours, while other people took advantage of the free time to go home early for one reason or another. Akira spent the extra time studying in the courtyard. Or at least trying to, studying proved to be impossible when Ryuji was playing video games right next to him. The two ended up spending half of their so-called study session playing on their phones.

Day two went about the same as day one. Akira rubbed his temples, deciding he needed a break from pencils and schoolbooks.

"Yeah me too," Ann said when he mentioned wanting to take it easy. They were talking outside they’re classroom with Ryuji. "Well it’s lunchtime now, you guys wanna head up to the roof? It’s getting warmer, would be nice to have some fresh air."

"Sounds good to me," Akira mumbled. He stretched out his neck and adjusted his glasses. He
could feel them digging into his ears and nose. However, Ryuji swayed on his legs and then shook his head.

"Gonna have to pass, sorry." He said, "I got a text on my phone. The manager at the Beef Bowl wants to do a second interview after school."

"Really? That’s almost a guarantee you got the job then!" Ann said. Ryuji chuckled.

"Well let’s not celebrate yet, but if I get it..." He trailed off and shuddered. "Oh man, I’m nervous."

"Don’t sweat it, you’ll be fine," Akira said.

"Yeah sure. Alright, I gotta get home to change. Wish me luck." He said and hurried down the stairs. Akira and Ann looked at each other, then when sure no one was watching them, went up the stairs to the third floor of the school, then to the roof. Ann opened the door and the two stopped when they saw they were not the only two that had the idea of coming up to the roof of the school.

"I understand Okumura-san. However, I insist you move your plants to the Gardening Club. It’ll only be temporary, just until the fence is finished construction."

Makoto was talking to Haru, and both of them looked like they were enjoying their conversation. Haru was the first to notice them and when she looked at them, Makoto did as well. The student council president then sighed. "Why does everyone keep insisting they come up here? The sign clearly says the roof is closed."

"That’s probably why everyone keeps coming up here," Ann said. Her tone had a lightness to it that made Makoto sigh in defeat. "We aren’t bothering you two are we?"

"No, we were just finishing up our talk." Haru said, "Makoto-chan. Believe me, I understand why the principal wants my plants removed from the roof, and if I were in just the starting phases of my project I’d agree, but now that I have everything organized I need to keep my plants up here."

"But I’m sure the gardening club would be willing to provide some room," Makoto protested. Haru frowned and looked at her planters, at the small buds she could see beginning to protrude from the soil. She looked back at Makoto.

"I’m sorry, I can’t. This project is too personal and I’m worried moving it will upset my plants."

Makoto blinked, a little dumbfounded by the word choice. "Plants can’t-" She started, then stopped herself from trying to argue. It was entirely possible the plants could react negatively to being moved. She shook her head, "Well, I guess since construction was delayed there’s no harm and keeping them up here for now..." She said. Ann frowned.

"Setting up the fence was delayed?" She asked. Akira looked around the roof. There was some black fencing, but it looked like it hadn’t been moved in days. He could not recall seeing any construction staff in the school either.

"It was supposed to be put up during Golden Week," Makoto explained. "Unfortunately it's been delayed for reasons I don't know."

Ann rolled her eyes. The delay was probably because the principal was trying to save face with the media. "Great to see where this school’s priorities are."

Makoto did not say anything at first. She kept her head down, contemplating how to continue the
conversation or if it would be worth trying too. She then looked up, “I’m sure it’ll be up in time.” She said then after some hesitation added, “By the way, Takamaki-san, how is Suzui-san doing?”

“She’s doing fine,” Ann said. She kept her statement short and simple, trying to hide how annoyed she was. However, Makoto looked a little relieved.

“That’s good.” She said. There was some relief in her voice. She looked at Haru, “I’ll let the principal know you are against moving your plants Okumura-san. I’ll try and explain why it should not be a priority.”

“Thank you Makoto-chan, that’s very kind of you,” Haru said. Makoto nodded and excused herself. She looked at Akira for a moment then hurried down the steps back into the school. With her out of sight, Haru sighed in relief and chuckled a bit. “That was close. I was worried I’d need to reorganize everything downstairs.” Haru said, then looked at them, “I guess you were right after all Takamaki-san, we would meet again on the roof.”

Haru’s smile was calm and gentle. Ann found her face turning a little red from embarrassment. She had forgotten she made that comment, “Yeah, right?”

“So what brings you two up here? Are you going to study?” She asked, then paused as she looked at the two. A thought entered her head, “Or were you two looking for some time alone together?”

“Uh, We just wanted some air.” Akira said, then looked behind him when he felt a familiar presence begin rustling, “And a certain cat is getting restless...”

He put the bag down and unzipped it further so Morgana could poke his head out of the bag. The cat glared at Akira, meowing in annoyance, then looked around the roof. He climbed out of the bag, testing the cement with his paws and then looked up. He saw Haru and he cautiously walked over and sniffed her shoes. He then looked up at her and meowed.

Haru smiled and knelt down when she saw the cat’s big eyes and held out a hand to it. Morgana sniffed the hand and pushed his head forward for attention. Haru giggled, “He’s cute.” She said. Morgana let out a higher pitched meow, as though he understood and loved the compliment.

“Yeah, he is.” Ann agreed.

“Glad someone thinks so.” Akira said, a cheeky grin on his face, “More of a pain in the ass than anything.”

“Kurusu-san, that’s not a nice way to talk about your cat,” Haru said, giving him a disapproving frown. Morgana yowled at him in agreement. Akira rolled his eyes and the three laughed.

He could not help but notice Haru was the third girl to call Morgana cute. Or was she the fourth person? He found himself wondering if Makoto also thought Morgana was cute, then paused and shook his head. That was a train of thought that had little to no place in his head.

He took a seat with Ann near the desks piled up on the roof. Haru sat with them and Morgana wandered on the desks before finding them to unbalanced for his liking. He climbing onto Ann’s lap and nuzzled her chest, demanding attention. Akira watched. Why did he have a feeling if Morgana was human, he would be flirting with his friend?

“It’s really nice to see you too again.” Haru said getting his attention, “By the way Kurusu-san, are you feeling better?”

He nodded, “Yeah a bit.”
“So you’re Golden Week was okay after all?”

“Y-yeah. It was a rough start, but we had a lot of fun during it. I got to go to Akihabara, it was nice,” He said. The answer was a little awkward, but Haru took it in stride.

“We still need to get you some proper summer clothes,” Ann spoke up, getting their attention. “Once the rainy season passes it’s gonna get warm fast. That sweater of yours is gonna be terrible for it.” She said.

“Long as we don’t go back to the mall,” Akira muttered.

“You two should try some of the shopping places in Ginza,” Haru suggested. “It’s a bit on the expensive side, but there’s a lot of great fashion there.”

“I don’t think my budget can let me have anything ‘on the expensive side’,” Akira said.

"We'll find something. There's more than enough stores to explore in Tokyo." Ann told him. “So, did you have a good Golden Week Okumura-”

“Please, call me Haru.” She interrupted. Akira and Ann stared at her, a bit surprised. Morgana mewed because Ann stopped petting him, and pawed at her chest to get her attention.

“Right, sorry. Uh, did you have a good Golden Week, Haru?”

“It was relaxing. But I did miss taking care of my plants.” She motioned to the planters, which had small green sprouts in them.

“What are you growing?” Ann asked. Haru paused for a moment, contemplating what to say, then answered.

“Flowers to make poison.” There was a brief, uncomfortable pause, then Haru giggled, “I’m just kidding. I’m trying to learn how to grow vegetables, but it’s a bit tricky so I thought I would start with something easier. They’re gonna be Zinnia’s and Pansies.”

“Zinnia’s huh?” Ann repeated. She took out her phone, opened her internet browser, and typed the name into the search engine. A series of pictures came up, “Oh wow, those look pretty.”

Akira leaned over to take a look. “They're very nice.” He said.

“They’re easy to grow, I think maybe I’ll put them in my room after they bloom. Then I think I'll move on to growing carrots. I don’t think those are to difficult,” Haru paused, “I wonder, maybe I should get a part-time job at the flower shop. I could learn a lot more about caring for plants if I did. Though, I don’t think my father would approve…”

Akira and Ann glanced at each other. “Why not?”

“He... believes I shouldn't ‘concern myself with such things’.”

There was a brief hesitation in Haru’s voice that both Akira and Ann noticed.

“Well, you start college next year, right? I’m sure he thinks your studies are more important than finding a part-time job.” Ann suggested. Haru shrugged.

“I guess that’s one way to put it. I do have to prepare for practice exams next month. Maybe I can ask Makoto-chan for some study materials.”
“Are you and Nijijima-senpai close?” Akira asked. Haru again shrugged.

“No, not really.” She said, “Well, we used to talk a lot more last year and were even on a first name basis, but since she became student council president, we haven’t seen each other as much. When I asked her to help me set up my plant project, I thought we’d be able to catch up and spend more time together. But I guess it wasn’t meant to be.”


“It is what it is. It’s not like we don’t talk to each other, we just have different lives.” Haru said, then sighed, “Very different lives.”

The roof became quiet and Akira shivered a little when the wind blew. He moved a little, uncomfortable by the sudden silence. Haru then spoke up again, “This is gonna sound strange, but I need this garden here. I don’t want to go into details, but it helps me relax after a long day of school and with everything at home.”

“I understand.” Ann said, “And I get what you mean too, everyone needs something to help them get away from the real world for a little while.”

“What do you do?”

“Go shopping.” Ann said, “I don’t always buy stuff though when I’m between modeling jobs I usually just go window shopping.”

“I just read a lot and play with Morgana,” Akira said. Haru giggled.

“You’re lucky to have a pet Akira.”

“He’s a pain in the ass,” Akira told her, then a grin formed on his face as Morgana glared at him.

5/12/2016 (Thursday)
After School

Akira sighed as he pulled his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose, hoping it would delay the headache he could feel forming at the side of his head. After meeting with Haru and having lunch, he and Ann went back to their classroom to study together until the final bell rang. They were walking down the street, Akira thinking once exams were over he was going to spend the day after relaxing and doing nothing but watch his TV.

“Hey, when we’re done exams, we should do something to celebrate,” Ann suggested getting his attention.

“Like what?”

“I dunno. Maybe we should all go out somewhere nice to eat or something.”

“Somewhere nice?” Akira asked, raising an eyebrow, then shook his head. "Like where?"

“Well, there's the buffet at the Milton. Though that's a bit on the expensive side. And proper sushi is pricey too.” Ann paused as she thought for a second. “Actually maybe an at home party would be better. We can grab something at Big Bang Burger, put on a movie or play some video games—"
Ann suddenly fell quiet. She froze mid-step, her eyes widened. Akira frowned. "Ann?"

She frowned, but a worried look crossed her face like she had just seen a ghost out of the corner of her eye. She moved her head a little, enough that she could see over her shoulder than glanced at him.

“Keep walking.” She said, her voice low and commanding. Akira nodded and the two continued down the street. He then felt Ann's hand touch his and he jumped a little. “Take my hand, and don’t let go until we get on the train.”

He nodded and wrapped his fingers around hers, giving her palm a light squeeze. He felt uneasy but the sudden change in Ann’s demeanor and he had a pretty good idea what was going on, even if he hadn't seen anything. He kept silent, trying to relax his face and make it look like holding her hand was not natural to him.

He could feel Ann’s hand sweating and even shaking a bit. She sounded calm, but she was scared. The two walked down the steps together into the train station and waited in the crowd for the next train. When it arrived, Ann hurried him on and let go of his hand. She grabbed the nearby pole and leaned over, letting out a sigh. Akira stayed standing, offering his seat to someone else and watched the window. He frowned as he saw someone who looked out of place in the crowd, but before he could say anything, the doors closed and the train began to move.

Akira let out a breath he had not realized he had been holding and looked at Ann. Her shoulders had dropped, but she did not look relieved. She still looked nervous. “Are you okay?” He asked. Ann shook her head.

“I think that was him.” She said. Akira’s eyes widened. “This isn’t good, he was practically near the school.”

Ann bit her lip, and twirled her hair with her fingers, trying to think about what to do next. She had originally planned to see Shiho, but if her stalker was that close to her there was no way she was going to the hospital. She needed to go somewhere else, somewhere she could throw him off her trail. She thought for a few moments, then looked up at Akira. “Hey, is it okay if you stay with me a little longer? Maybe if he sees me with someone he’ll back off a bit.”

“Yeah, sure.” Akira said looking around, then at Ann, “So, where are we going?”

Ann smiled, relieved by his answer, then when the train stopped in Shibuya, took his hand and led him off the train. They left the station, entering the heart of Shibuya. They walked one of the busier streets, Akira watching as Ann looked around and then quickened her pace. He stayed with her best he could, one hand in his pocket on his phone in case he needed to call for help or knock out whoever was following them.

They continued on, Ann leading him down another street, both walking hand in hand like it was normal. They reached a large apartment building and once inside Ann let go of him. Akira followed her to the elevator and watched as Ann pressed a button. It closed, went up, and then reopened on the twelfth floor. He followed Ann to one of the apartments and watched as she swiped her key.

“Come in, no one’s home except my caretaker.” She said then paused. “Oh, sorry, I should explain. This is my apartment.”

“I kinda guessed,” Akira said. He looked inside, the lights were off and for some reason, he felt a little nervous. “You sure I can come in?”
“Yeah, it’s fine.” She said. She motioned for him to come inside and he did so and she followed closing the door behind him. He took off his shoes and looked up when he saw Ann step into the room, hers still on. “Milly? I’m home!” She called out.

Akira frowned. He caught a name, but nothing else. Ann was speaking in English. He finished removing his shoes as he heard Ann continue to shout for whoever she was looking for, and stepped into the apartment. The place had a clean and modern look to it. Just from the appearance of the apartment, it was obvious Ann’s parents had more than just an average salary. Ann being a part-time model probably helped too. He stayed standing in the living area as Ann walked back into the room. Her shoes had been kicked off and she was muttering something in English as she looked at her phone.

“Does someone live with you?” He asked getting her attention.

“I have a caretaker who keeps an eye on me when my parents are out of town. Like a babysitter, only not really.” She explained, “I guess she’s out doing shopping, which is fine, and good for us. Why don’t you sit down? I’ll get us some drinks.”

Akira did as told, and Morgana popped out of his back the moment he put it on the floor. The cat looked around at the sights and then rolled around on the floor. “Morgana, don’t,” Akira said.

“Don’t worry, it’s fine,” Ann told him. Morgana meowed and climbed onto the couch to test his claws on the mattress. Akira sighed and scooped up the cat and placed him on his lap. Ann took a seat next to them and put two glass bottles on the table, “Here, hope you don’t mind grape soda.”

Akira nodded, then took a bottle and opened it. He took a long gulp and put the bottle back on the table. Ann sipped her drink and let it rest in her lap. They were silent for a little while, then Ann spoke up after a few seconds.

“I can’t do this anymore.” Ann said, “I thought I got him off my trail a few days ago, but if he was that close to the school how long until he finds out where my home is?”

Akira frowned, his thoughts drifting. He shook his head, he did not want to even imagine what could happen if that happened. “We need to do something about this.” He said, “I’ll text Ryuji, we should try and come up with a plan to deal with this guy.”

“Yeah.” Ann paused and looked at Akira, “I need to call Shiho. I promised I’d visit her, but I swear I’m not letting whatever creep is following me near her.”

Her words had a strong bite to them. Akira unlocked his phone and typed his text to Ryuji while Ann got up and disappeared into her room.

5/12/2016
After School
Ann’s Apartment

“You aren’t coming to visit today?”

Ann could hear the sadness and disappointment in Shiho’s voice. “No, something came up and, uh, I won’t be able to make it today sorry.”

“Last minute shoot?”
“Uh...yeah. Something like that.” She said. There was a brief silence and Ann knew immediately Shiho knew something was wrong.

“Ann, is everything okay?” She asked then one second later said, “Of course it isn’t. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing! It’s-”

“Ann.” Ann winced at Shiho’s tone. It was sharp and she found herself feeling even more guilty for lying.

“Okay, you’re right it’s not ‘nothing!’” Ann said, “I can’t explain, but I need to take care of something today and tomorrow, but I promise I’ll come by to visit soon.”

Another brief silence then Shiho answered, “Okay. Whatever is going on I trust you. But please don’t do anything stupid.”

“I will. I mean, I won’t! Dammit... I’ll be fine, I promise.” Ann said, then trying to lighten the mood added, “Hey, how about I visit after exams? I’ll bring crepes and we can celebrate if you want.”

“Celebrate you just barely passing your math class again?” There was a lightness to Shiho’s voice that made Ann smile, “Just promise me, whatever is going on, you won’t be in any danger.”

“I won’t, I promise,” Ann said and hoped at the same time she could keep that promise. “I’ll see you later.”

“Bye.”

Ann ended the call, took a deep breath, and let it out. Her mind raced wondering if she had been smart not telling Shiho what was going on, or if leaving her in the dark was better. She did not want Shiho to worry, but with her terrible acting skills, she probably did. Ann left her room before she could think to much about it too see Akira looking at his phone and Morgana resting his head on his leg. He typed a quick response and looked up at her when she took a seat.

“Ryuji said he’ll have us do a group call tonight and think of a plan.” He said. Ann looked at him, surprised and Akira held out his phone to show him the text message.

**Akira:**

Hey, I’m at Ann’s place. That guy who was stalking her was near our school.

**Ryuji:**

Seriously?

Okay, this bullshit’s gone on long enough. Let’s talk tonight and think of a plan. We’ll catch that bastard tomorrow or something. Get some answers out of him.

Ann read the message over more than once, then looked at Akira. “You sure?” Ann asked.

“Yeah. If we don’t do something now, who knows how confident this guy will get.” Akira said, “We can’t let him try anything. I promise I won’t let him.”
“Akira…” Ann trailed off, feeling touched by his words. She smiled and gave him a determined look. “Yeah. Let’s get this guy and give him what’s coming to him. But I’m going to say this right now. I get first dibs punching him in the face.”

“Uh, if that’s what you want.”

“Damn right it is. Guy got in the way of me visiting my friend.” Ann pouted, then laughed a little. Akira felt himself relax a little more. Ann was nervous, but she was trying to make the best of the situation. “Anyway, can you stay until Milly gets home? We can watch something? What kind of movies are you into?”

The two discussed movies and upon realizing they had very different tastes in movies, decided instead to play something on their phones together. Once Ann’s caretaker came home, Akira turned on his GPS and slowly made his way back to the train station.

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5/13/2016
Shibuya Station
Early Morning

Akira was looking at his phone, waiting for the other two to arrive at the train station. They had talked over a plan the other night, and while he did not think it was a bad plan, it was not a good one either. Ann had been downright uncomfortable with it, and he could not blame her. They were more or less going to be using her as bait.

He frowned as he reread over Ryuji’s idea, positive this was not going to work the way his friend hoped it would. A meow caught his attention and he looked up to see Morgana peeking over his shoulder. “Hey. Look you’re gonna need to keep quiet on this, okay?” He asked. The cat meowed again, this time a chirp that sounded like it lasted a few seconds too long. “You’re worried about Ann?”

Morgana again made a low meowing noise and Akira reached up and scratched his head. “Don’t worry. I promise we’ll keep Ann safe, but you need to keep quiet and not do anything okay?” He said. Morgana mewed again and while Akira was not sure his cat understood him, did poke his head back into the bag. Akira checked his phone again, looked up to see Ryuji approaching, and put it in his pocket.

“Hey!” Ryuji called to him, a grin on his face. “No cat?”

“Cat’s still here,” Akira said pointing to his bag. “You sure this is a good idea?”

“Heh, you kidding? Even I can see the holes in it.” Ryuji muttered. He stretched and let out a loud yawn before shaking his head. “I pulled an all-nighter trying to think of something better, but I got nothing.”

Ann approached them, and Akira saw she had a frown on her face. She looked over her shoulder before turning to them.

“He’s here.” She said then glared at Ryuji. “This is a horrible plan. What if something happens?”

“We’ll beat the shit out of him.” Ryuji told her, “Don’t worry, everything will be fine. You guys remember your positions, right?”
The two nodded and once it rolled in and the doors opened, stepped onto the train. Ann stood next to the support rail, while Akira took a seat and pulled out his phone, pretending to play with it. Ryuji moved away from them, further to the back of the car. He looked around at the various people in business attire and school uniforms. The train eventually stopped at their destination and the three got off. Akira saw Ryuji standing a distance away to watch the crowd. Ann stopped and pretended to readjust her bag as she looked behind her and then looked at her phone.

Akira felt his phone buzz and he looked down at it.

Ann:
*He’s here.*

That was the confirmation he needed. Akira walked ahead of Ann and up the stairs. He stepped to the side, just like he was supposed to. He waited, watching the crowd and then Ann, looking as nervous as she did when they stepped off the train climbed to the top of the stairs. She took her place in the open like they told her too and pulled out her phone to look like she was being distracted. Akira watched the faceless crowd pass her. No one stuck out, at least not at first.

Then he saw him. A young man about their age in a white shirt with fleur-dis-lis on the chest. His hair was well kept but looked a little greasy. Akira saw him stop for a second and then walk forward and reached out for Ann. Akira stepped forward:

*“Damn brat. I’ll sue!”*

And froze. He suddenly felt dizzy. However, a voice, Ryuji’s voice, got his attention and he forced himself to see straight.

*“Hey!”*

Ryuji was right where they were supposed to be and the teenager stopped. Akira took his place in front of Ann, who had turned around when Ryuji had shouted. The teenager looked at the two of them, then turned to Ryuji. Then turned back to him, and Ann. Akira watched him, but could not help but notice that the teenager did not look annoyed, or angry that they had just trapped him.

Instead he looked...confused? The slight tilt to his head made it more obvious.

*“Can I help you?”* He asked. His voice was low and pleasant, but what surprised them was he sounded honest.

*“Is this him?”* Akira asked Ann. Had they made a mistake? Was his friend being followed by a different person?

Ann did not answer him, she glared at the teenager and stepped in front of Akira. She looked the young man her age over and without warning slapped him across the face. His head turned, eyes snapping shut from pain. The sound of the slap made Akira and Ryuji wince. Morgana popped his head out of Akira’s bag.

*“Who are you? Why are you stalking me?”* Ann shouted. The teenager blinked a few times and put his hand on his cheek.

*“Stalking? Whatever are you-“*

*“Don't play dumb!”* Ann shouted, *"I know you’ve been following me for weeks! You’re the guy who was staring at me at the park aren’t you?"*
Those questions got a reaction out of the teenager. His eyes widened slightly, “I’m sorry, I think there’s been a misunderstanding. Yes, I did see you at the park, but I’ve only been pursuing you for the last week. And I assure you I have not been stalking you.”

Ann felt her blood boil. He was pursuing her, but not stalking her?

“You aren’t stalking her, but you’ve been following her for a week?” Ryuji repeated. "Sorry man, that doesn’t make sense.”

The teenager looked at him and tried to remain calm, “Look I can assure you...just hear me out! I promise I do not mean her any harm.”

“You were following her for a week and you mean her no harm,” Akira said, trying to make it obvious the teenager's statement sounded sketchy.

“You have five seconds.” Ryuji said, forming a fist, “If your story sounds slightly believable, maybe I’ll let you go with a black eye instead of a broken jaw.”

The teenager's eyes widened, horrified. “Please, that’s hardly necessary.” He said then paused and added, “I’d rather not be sluged by someone as unkempt as you.”

“What did you say?!”

“Yusuke, enough!”

Akira looked at the station's exit when he heard another person’s voice and Ryuji turned around in time to see an older - elderly - man climbing the stairs. He was dressed in traditional Japanese clothing, his long white hair tied back, his beard well kept. He had a smile on his face, but also looked like climbing the long row of steps left him winded. He reached the top and took several breaths. The teenager - apparently Yusuke was his name - gasped and shoved passed Ryuji.

“Sensei, are you alright? Good heaven’s, this is why I argued against you taking the train.”

The man smiled as he straightened with Yusuke’s help, “You worry too much Yusuke. Besides, had we not you would never have found your muse.” He looked at the girl, “Am I wrong?”

Yusuke looked back at Ann, who while still angry looked far more confused. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, held it for a few long seconds, then let it out. “Okay, who are you?” She asked. “I don’t want to cause a scene in front of a senior, but if you don’t explain I will beat the crap out of you.”

The old man frowned and looked at the teenager, “Has something happened Yusuke?” He asked. Yusuke sighed.

“It appears I may have upset her, Sensei.” He said. He straightened and looked Ann directly in the eye. “I apologize if I made you uncomfortable. I was unsure how to approach you while you were with...less desirable company,” Ryuji and Akira glared at him, “so I hoped by following you I would find an opportunity to meet with you while you were alone...and I’m starting to realize how horrible my idea sounds now that it’s not in my head…”

Ann, Ryuji, and Akira exchanged looks. They weren’t sure what was worse, that the teenager had admitted to stalking Ann for a week or that he did not even realize that had been what he was doing. Ann looked him over then in a much calmer voice said, “You still haven’t answered my question. Who are you? And who’s this man?”
She motioned to him. Yusuke looked at her, perplexed. “You don’t know of him? This is my master, Ichiryusai Madarame.”

Ryuji frowned, confused, but Akira blinked, recognizing the name. Ann’s widened in shock. She looked at Yusuke, and then the old man. “WHAT?!”

Chapter End Notes

Morgana's a 'chick magnet.'
Akira and Ryuji stared at Ann. Her sudden outburst had got them off guard, and needless to say none of them were sure what was going on anymore. “You’re Madarame? The great artist Madarame?” Ann asked.

“Who?” Ryuji asked. Yusuke’s head snapped to attention.

“Who?” He repeated like he was personally offended by Ryuji’s question, “Only the greatest artist in all of modern Japan.”

Ryuji looked at Madarame and raised an eyebrow, “This old guy? Oh yeah, he was on Good Morning Japan the other day. Didn’t think he was that big of a deal though.”

“How dare you insult-” Yusuke started, but was cut off when he heard laughter. The elderly man was laughing joyously.

“It’s okay Yusuke. I don’t expect youth outside of the art world to know much about an old man like myself these days.” The man said, “In fact, I’m actually surprised you recognized me young lady.”

“Oh well…” Ann started, trailing off, trying to come up with a way to explain, “Just, it’s a bit embarrassing, but we covered some of your work in middle school.” Her face turned a little red from embarrassment, "My art teacher was a huge fan of yours. She went into an extreme amount of detail about some of your art pieces. I think her favorites were Matchstix and The Bears from the North.”

“*The Bears from the North...*” Akira muttered, a frown on his face, then his eyes lit up. "I’ve seen that one. It was on a display in a city near my home last year. You painted that while touring Hokkaido.”

Madarame nodded, “Yes, that’s correct. You’re a quite knowledgeable young man.”

Akira adjusted his bag as he looked down, his eyes being covered by his hair. He had gone with his mother to see the painting at her insistence and she had told him a lot about it. Though he had a feeling she was less interested in the actual artwork and more interested in the controversy surrounding it.
Ann shifted uncomfortably on her heels, her face a little red. She was having a casual conversation with a famous artist. She then frowned and looked at Yusuke.

“Okay so, who are you then?” She asked. Yusuke jumped to attention and straightened, like a soldier in a lineup.

“Yes, forgive me. I am Yusuke Kitagawa. I’m a second-year student at Kosei High School and Madarame’s apprentice.” He explained, “I’ve been searching for a subject for my latest piece, but none had caught my eye. At least not until that day I happened to spy your beautiful figure and golden hair in the park. So I must ask…” He paused and took a deep breath. Then shoved Ryuji out of his line way as he stepped forward and stared into Ann’s eyes, “Would you be the model for my next piece?”

Ann took a few steps back, Yusuke being so close to her made her a little uncomfortable. However, the word model got her attention. “Model...for your art?” She asked, then thought about it for a second, “Me, a model for the apprentice of Madarame…”

“Hey, hey!” Ryuji shouted stepping between them. “What makes you think she’d want to accept your offer after you’ve been following her for over a week?”

Yusuke gave Ryuji a look of disapproval as well as made a huff. “I think it’s in her right to decide whether she wants to be my model or not.” He said, “A ruffian like you should mind his own business.”

“Excuse me?”

Akira sighed and looked over his shoulder as Morgana’s head popped out of his bag. The cat made a confused chirp as he shook his head.

“Yusuke,” Madarame spoke up getting his apprentices attention. “You might have more luck swaying the young lady’s decision if you don’t insult her friends. Afterall you never know when inspiration will strike again and this piece does have a deadline.”

There was a glint of nervousness in Yusuke’s eyes, but it went away just as quickly as it came and he looked at Ann. “Yes, you’re right Sensei,” He muttered, “Very well, I will refrain from speaking negatively of your rueful friend.”

“Why do I feel like I was just insulted?” Ryuji asked. Akira gave him a weary smile. Ann continued to stare at him, then shook her head.

“Look, I appreciate the offer but this is a little sudden, and no offense but you aren't exactly giving the best first impression,” Ann said. Yusuke was silent, contemplating her words, then nodded.

“I understand. In that case, let me give you this to assuage you.” Yusuke said and reached into his pocket, then paused and turned to Madarame. The man nodded, a smile on his face, and Yusuke took several tickets out of his pocket. “These are to the opening of Sensei’s art-exhibit this Sunday. I will be there to assist in the opening ceremonies and make sure the arrangement of the display is up to standard. I’m sure once you’ve seen his work up close, you’ll understand why I desire to work with someone I feel is only qualified to grace the presence of my canvas.”

“Uh...sure…” Ann said taking the two tickets Yusuke was offering her, “…Sunday huh? I’ll think about it.”

Yusuke smiled then looked at the other two. He turned to Ryuji, frowned, and then turned to Akira and looked him over. Then after some contemplation handed him two tickets as well, “You seem to
have an adequate understanding of art, surely you’ll appreciate the exhibit on some level.”

Akira raised an eyebrow as Yusuke held the tickets out to him. He reached out and just as he took them Yusuke’s eyes widened. The teenager grabbed Akira’s shoulders making him freeze up. Yusuke just popped his personal space bubble.

“Fascinating,” Yusuke muttered, staring at him. “Your appearance is so plain it’s almost forgettable, yet your eyes are of someone who has the worst horrors of humanity. I must capture them on paper…”

Akira winced at Yusuke’s words. It should have been the ‘horrors of humanity’ comment that got to him, but for some reason, his mind focused on the other half of Yusuke's statement.

He did not look that plain, did he?

A growling noise reached his left ear and his eyes moved to see Morgana glaring at Yusuke, who raised a curious eyebrow. “Is that a cat?” He asked. He reached a hand out to the cat and Morgana let out a hiss before scratching him. Yusuke winced in pain and stepped back, looking at the red scratches on his hand. He frowned and looked at Akira. “Your cat is quite violent.”

Morgana hissed at him again. Akira held a hand up and told Morgana to quiet down. The cat did but still kept glaring at Yusuke.

“Yusuke!”

The elderly man’s voice got their attention as a black car drove up and stopped near them. A driver stepped out of the front and opened one of the back passenger doors so Madarame could step in. He sighed sounding relieved before motioning for Yusuke to get in the car. Yusuke nodded and then turned back to Ann. “I must go and make preparations for the exhibit. Could I get your name please?”

It took a few seconds for Ann to decide if she felt comfortable giving Yusuke her name. She then decided if he did not already know it, he was bound to find out what it was from one of her magazines. “Ann Takamaki.”

“Ann...Takamaki…” Yusuke said, a smile forming on his face, “Simple and familiar, yet slightly foreign. Beautiful…” The three stared at Yusuke as he gave Ann a low bow, “It was wonderful meeting you Takamaki-san. I hope to see you again at Sensei’s exhibition.”

Yusuke stepped into the car and took his seat across from Madarame. The elderly man gave the three a pleasant smile before the door closed on them. The driver then got back into the car and the three watched as the vehicle drove down the street. A small silence passed between the three of them, Ann and Akira looked at the tickets in their hands, while Ryuji rubbed his forehead. He was the first to find his voice.

“Okay, what the hell just happened?”

No one answered, but then Akira’s eyes widened and he pulled out his phone. His face turned white. “Shit!”

“Akira?” Ann asked, but the teenager had already turned and was running down the street. She looked at Ryuji, confused, then pulled out her cell phone. “Crap, we’re late!”

“What? Dammit!” Ryuji cursed and the two chased after Akira.
Afternoon
Shujin Academy: Teacher Faculty Office

Makoto frowned, unamused as she stood in the doorway of the Teacher Faculty Office and saw Ann Takamaki, Ryuji Sakamoto, and Akira Kurusu seated inside. Kawakami was waiting for her. “Ah, there you are. I was hoping you didn’t leave after your exams.” She said. Makoto shook her head.

“May I ask why, Takamaki-san, Sakamoto-san, and Kurusu-san are here, Kawakami-sensei?” She asked and Kawakami sighed.

“They were late for their exams this morning, so we couldn’t let them into their classrooms. They’re gonna do them in the student council room and you’re to keep an eye on them.”

Makoto frowned. She was pretty sure this was not part of her student council duties, but instead something a teacher should be doing. Specifically their homeroom teacher. However, Kawakami did look tired and like she wanted to go home as soon as possible. Makoto wanted to go home as well; she had an apartment to clean, laundry to do, dinner to make for herself and her sister (and then bring it to her sister's work if she was staying late), and needed to prepare for her practical exams in June.

She wanted to say no, but seeing Kawakami looking at her with expectation, she lowered her head and said, “Yes, I understand.”

She glared at the three and saw Akira look up at her from his textbook at her, then back down at his lap, his face being hidden by his glasses and hair. She shook her head. Dedicated studying for four days, and he decides to be late during exam week of all times. He had a lot of nerve, but she kept her mouth shut and took the exam sheets and booklets from Kawakami.

“Follow me upstairs and we’ll get started,” Makoto told them.

Ann groaned, “This sucks.”

“Seriously. Why did we get stuck waiting three hours to take our exams?” Ryuji asked. Kawakami gave the two a stern look.

“Well maybe if you had set your alarms this morning you wouldn’t be late.” Kawakami told them, “And no one was stopping you from doing some last minute cramming. At least one of you was smart enough to take advantage of the extra time.”

Akira kept silent as he put his book in his bag and got up from his chair. The three followed Makoto upstairs to the student council room. She opened the door and motioned for them to go in first before following and closing the door behind them. “Please put your bags against the wall. That includes you Kurusu-san, no cats during exams.”

Morgana poked his head out and let out a small whine. Akira gave the cat a small smile, “It’s okay Morgana.” He said and carefully took his bag off. Ann and Ryuji’s tossed theirs over to the wall while he laid his down and then joined his friends at the table. Makoto placed their tests and booklets in front of them.

“Your tests will be fifty minutes long with a ten-minute break in-between them.” She said.
“Uh, we know. We’ve done it twice already.” Ryuji said. Makoto gave him a disapproving frown then took a seat on the far side of the student council room.

“Please begin. I’ll let you know when it’s time to put your pencils down.”

The three began there tests. Makoto watched them for a few seconds. She had a feeling the next few hours were going to feel longer than they actually were. She pulled out her phone to try and keep herself busy. She glanced at the top news stories, taking a moment to look over a story about a wage strike in downtown Shibuya, before searching the web to look at some pictures of motorcycles. Many were on sale, something she was not surprised by with summer around the corner. They were still out of her small price range.

Sae had been so proud of her when she got her motorcycle license. Makoto remembered that day fondly. They had gone out to celebrate and her sister had promised her once they had more income she would buy Makoto a motorcycle. It was hard to believe that was almost a year ago. Sometimes, with her sister's okay, she would rent one so she did not become rusty, but owning an actual motorcycle was a dream still out of reach.

She was still looking at the bikes when she felt something touch her leg. Akira's cat - what was his name again? Morgana? - had snuck out of Akira’s bag and was tugging at her leggings. The cat meowed and looked up at her, it’s blue eyes pleading with her to pick him up off the floor. Makoto stared at him and wanted to say no. Technically Morgana should not even be allowed on school grounds and she was not exactly keen on getting cat fur all over her school uniform.

She turned her attention to her phone. A meow brought it back to the cat, who was still watching her, tail moving in expectation. Makoto’s lips twitched as she tried not to smile, then gave in.

“Alright, come here.” She said. Morgana let out a small chirp then jumped into her lap. She had not expected him to move so suddenly and she hesitated at first as the cat tested his paws on her skirt before deciding how he wanted to settle down and laid down on her lap. Morgana purred in content, closing his eyes.

Makoto smiled and let a hand sit on the cats head. She had to admit, Morgana was cute. He was also not allowed on school grounds, and she knew she needed to report him at some point or tell Akira he needed to stop bringing the cat to school. Yet her underclassman seemed much calmer and at ease when the small animal was with him. She scratched behind Morgana’s ear and the cat made a noise that told her he liked her touch.

Makoto then looked up when she felt eyes on her to see Akira looking at her. He had a grin on his face. It was soft, but she could not help but notice a little bit of mischievousness in it. Makoto felt her chest tighten a bit and forced herself to keep a straight face. “Kurusu-san. The clock is ticking.”

She saw his smile drop and he went back to his exam. Makoto sighed and looked back down at Morgana, who looked like he was smiling.

5/13/2016
After School
Shujin Academy: Student Council Room

The two hours passed and Makoto felt her phone buzz in her hand. She unlocked it and stopped the timer. “Okay, times up. Put down your pencils and put your hands under the table.”
Ryuji groaned and his head hit the table. Ann massaged her temples and rolled her eyes at Ryuji's gesture. Akira sighed as he put his hands under the table, but continued to fiddle with his pencil. He had finished both of his exams before his friends, his answer sheet was already in his exam book. Makoto picked up the booklets and sheets - she could not help but notice Ryuji only finished half his test - and placed them in the folder Kawakami gave her. “Okay, I’ll bring these to the Faculty Office. You’re free to go.”

Ryuji grumbled something under his breath and jumped to his feet. He hurried to grab his bag, and Ann followed him. Akira followed as well, picking his bag off the ground. He then turned to the chair Makoto had been sitting in to see Morgana had curled up onto it.

“Morgana, time to go.” He said. The cat looked up at him and then laid his head back down to sleep. Akira sighed walked over to the corner. He picked Morgana up and the cat grumbled in protest.

“Yeah, I know you're comfortable, but we gotta get home.” He said. The cat made an annoyed meowing noise, but let Akira put him in the bag. Akira then carefully slung his bag over his shoulder.

“He’s quite a talkative pet,” Makoto said getting Akira’s attention. She was trying to get some fur off her skirt. “And quite clingy.”

“Morgana likes attention,” Akira said. To think only a few weeks ago his pet was a stray afraid of most people. Now he wanted to cuddle up with everyone. “So, now what?”

“Well, tomorrow is the last day of exams and the results will be posted next week.” Makoto said, “I guess then we’ll see how well your study sessions paid off.”

“The principal was hoping I’d be in the top five of my grade, right?” Akira asked.

“That is what he’s hoping.” Makoto said, “Though, more importantly, I’m sure your mother would love to hear you did so well on your exams.”

“Yeah…” Akira trailed off for a second. Makoto had just said giving good news to his mother was ‘more important.’ Was she just saying that or did she really mean it? Still, regardless of her motivation, she helped him more than she probably needed too. “Thank you, Niijima-san, for helping me study. I don’t think I could have covered all that material by myself.”

Makoto stared at him, surprised by his words, but then smiled, “I’m glad I could help you with your studies Kurusu-san. Though I think my favorite session was when we ended up spending half of it reading that book on Medjed.”

Akira looked down but found a weak smiling crossing his face. He liked that too. “How is it by the way?” She asked and Akira shook his head.

“I actually haven’t gotten around to reading more. My legal guardian’s…daughter nabbed it from me on Sunday and I haven’t seen it since.” He paused, he could feel his chest becoming tight, but he did not feel anxious. His face felt warm, “If you want we can look at it again. Or maybe look at something else?”

“Like, a reading group or something?” Makoto asked. Akira thought about her question. It wasn't quite what he had been thinking about, but he also was not sure what he had been thinking, so he just nodded. “I’m not against it, but I can’t take too much time away from my studies.”

“Right…of course, you can’t.” He muttered. For some reason, he felt a little more disappointed by
“But, perhaps we could have a study session once a week. Maybe on Saturday?” Makoto suggested, “Spend part of it on our school work and if we have time we could read together. I’m not picky about my books, provided they aren’t too provocative, I’ll read most anything.”

“You sure?”

“I wouldn’t be suggesting it if I weren’t.”

Akira smiled. Again it was that soft smile that Makoto found herself surprised by, “Yeah, sounds good. Can we start next week?”

“Of course,” Makoto said. A part of her doubted they would meet up, but it was worth trying. “We’ll hold it in here, so we aren’t distracted by the talk in the library.”

Akira nodded and was about to say something when the door to the student council room opened and Ryuji poked his head in. “Hey man, you coming or not?”

“Y-yeah, on my way.” Akira said, “I should get going.”

“I should get these to Kawakami-sensei then,” Makoto said, reminding him of the folder in her hand. “Take care Kurusu-san.”

“You two, Niijima-san, uh, Niijima-senpai.”

Makoto gave him a small bow and excused herself from the room. Akira stepped out and closed the door behind him. He noticed Ryuji staring at him. “What?”

“What took you so long?”

“Nothing, I was just thanking her for helping me study.”

“That was a really long thank you.” He said and then looked at Ann, who was looking at the two tickets Yusuke had given her, a mix of a frown and a concerned look on her face. “Yo, Ann.”

“Huh?” She asked, then shook her head, “Sorry, I wasn’t listening. These have been on my mind since we met Madarame-sama and Kitagawa-san. Hell, I was thinking about it even during the exam.”

“You aren’t thinking of going, are you?” Ryuji asked. Ann frowned and after a few long seconds shrugged.

“I don’t know,” Ann said. “Madarame-sama is the most famous Modern Japanese artist in the world right now. His work has been featured in everything, from magazines to historical features. He’s even had shows in the United States and France.”

“That exhibit is going to get a lot of attention when it opens,” Akira said.

“Definitely. I wouldn't be surprised if he's all over the news on Sunday.” Ann said, "I also wouldn't be surprised if a lot of hate pieces get written about him. He's still very controversial in some circles.”

“Controversial?” Ryuji repeated as he shifted his weight on his legs, “He’s an old man, how can he be controversial?”
“The Bears from the North isn’t the most well-liked of his pieces,” Akira started, “Madarame alleges he was inspired by the sights and Ainu museums he visited while touring Sapporo and Shiraoi, Hokkaido, but the work got a lot of negative attention from the Ainu Cultural Association. They found the depiction of their people offensive and there was a petition to have it banned from museums up north.”

"...why do you know that?” Ryuji asked. Akira shrugged.

"I read a lot."

“There’s also the disappearance of his most famous work, Sayuri. The case was never solved and the tabloids had fun with that.” Ann added, then crossed her arms, contemplating the positives and negatives of her situation. “The thing is, regardless of controversy, being able to say ‘I worked with Madarame’ or even ‘I worked with Madarame’s most trusted apprentice’ would turn a lot of heads. It’d get my name out there more if my agency approved of it.”

“Yeah, but his apprentice was stalking you for a week!” Ryuji said and Ann crossed her arms thinking it over.

“Which is why I’m saying ‘I don’t know’ instead of ‘yes.’” Ann said, “That guy makes me really uncomfortable. It feels like he has some kind of underlying motivation for approaching me. Like he wants something else….”

“Wants something else…” Akira repeated. Ann did not have to say it for him and Ryuji to know what she was implying.

“You really shouldn’t agree to model for him,” Ryuji said. “Or if you do, you should have one of us come with you just in case.”

Ann thought for a few more moments and then said, “I want to talk to Shiho about it first. She’s probably worried I haven’t gotten back to her since last night. If I decide to go to the art exhibit, will you two come with me?”

“Course we will.” Ryuji said, “Right, Akira?”

“Yeah. We’ll make sure he doesn't try anything.” Akira said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his tickets, “Not like he can keep us out of there now.”

A grin formed on Ryuji’s face and he looked at Ann, “Alright, you let us know if you decide to go or not.”

Ann smiled, “You two are the best. Come here.”

She gave Ryuji a hug and then gave one to Akira, who jumped a bit at the sudden contact, but relaxed and awkwardly returned the hug.

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5/13/2016
Evening
Niijima Apartment

Makoto let out a tired sigh as she opened the door to her apartment and pushed herself and her oversized bag of laundry into the building. After way too much time listening to impatient and angry people, and overhearing the number of ways it was possible to get blood out of someone’s clothes - which she made note of. Who knew Seltzer Water and lemon could do the trick? - she was
ready to call it a day and watch movies for the rest of the night. It was to bad she had many other things to finish up which she was already behind on.

“Why did they have to be late today of all days?”

“Makoto-chan?” A familiar voice got her attention and she felt herself relax when she saw Goro walking down the hallway. He was holding a box. He looked at her, a little confused, “Are you okay?”

Makoto frowned at his presence. It was unlike Goro to visit on a weekday. He had work in the morning and classes in the evening. “Goro, what are you doing here?” She asked. He shrugged. “Slow day at the office and teacher canceled class.” He explained, “Can I come in?”

Between Goro volunteering to clean the living area and Makoto putting her and her sister’s clothes away, she was able to finish the household chores at a reasonable hour. She looked at her phone and frowned. “No response from sis.” She said. She had texted her sister the moment she got out of school to ask what she wanted for dinner.

“It’s possible she’s busy,” Goro said, opening the fridge and pulling the box he had brought with him out of it. “I wasn’t sure if you already had dinner made or not, but I thought I’d bring this, just as a congratulations for the end of exams. I’ll be busy tomorrow, so I can’t give it to you then.”

He laid the box in front of her and Makoto undid the ribbon and pulled off the top. Inside was a mix of some of her favorite small foods. “This is very kind of you Goro.”

“There’s enough here to actually work as dinner if you want.”

“For the two of us…” Makoto started, “I’m not against it, but I really should make something after in case my sister comes home.”

“I can help if you want.”

Makoto’s reaction was what he expected, a look that could only be described as horror. “Absolutely not. You’ll burn down the building.” She paused, “You can help me with the rice.”

“Seriously?” Goro asked, then sighed. He was always put on rice duty. Makoto reached into the box and pulled out a cucumber roll and placed it in her mouth. Goro grabbed a rice ball and took a bit out of it. “So, how have your exams been going?”

“They’ve gone well so far.” Makoto said, “I expect I’ll still be at the top of my grade, so sis will be happy.”

“So you don’t think tutoring Kurusu will affect your grades.” Goro said, Makoto looked up at him, confusion on her face as she chewed on her food, “Sorry, I guess I’m just worried because you’ve been spending so much time with him. Not for your grades of course, but you. He does have an assault record after all.”

“Yes, I know.” She said then paused as she finished her second cucumber roll. “So far Kurusu-san has not given me a reason to believe he’ll hurt someone. In truth after what happened with Kamoshida, my opinion of him has been...different.”

Goro stopped and swallowed what was in his mouth. “Different how?”

“Well in truth a lot about Kurusu’s story is beginning not to make much sense, though that could
just be because I don’t know the whole thing, just the official statement.” Makoto said, “He assaulted someone, but stood up against a man who was assaulted and sexually harassed his peers. He’s been pegged as a delinquent, but his grades, for the most part, are far above average. And despite the rumors surrounding him, from the times I’ve spoken to him he doesn’t seem like he could deliberately hurt a person. To be honest he comes off as more meek and nervous than dangerous.”

Goro thought over Makoto’s statements and nodded. "I can see where you’re coming from but may I play devil's advocate?" He asked. Makoto nodded, “It's possible some of Kurusu's behavior is deliberate. Him helping with Kamoshida could be to temper a guilty conscious or because he holds himself to certain standards. Not all criminals are created equal after all and there are many who would beat a man alive for sexually assaulting minors. As for grades, even good students are capable of horrible actions."

"...yes that's true." Even Makoto had to admit 'good grades' did not necessarily mean 'good person.' There were many terrible people that were highly intelligent.

"Just the other day we had to arrest a student at Kosei High for drug trafficking,“ Goro explained. Makoto looked at him in surprise.

“Drug trafficking?”

Goro nodded, “A truly horrible incident. That kid’s life is essentially ruined because of one mistake that it’s obvious he regrets. But that’s another story, my point is that someone that seems normal, even innocent, can have skeletons in their closet. Some can even be a horrible people on the inside..."

“You're right,” Makoto replied and thought over her words before arguing, "but it also means the opposite is true. Someone that may be seen as...trouble for others can be a perfectly fine individual with the right care and direction,” She paused and looked Goro in the eye, “Am I not wrong?”

A grin formed on Goro's face, “We're not talking about Kurusu right now are we,” He said. Makoto smirked at him, “Yes, you are right though. Sometimes a person just needs someone, like a friend with an aloof but caring older sister to make them realize they have some worth.”

“I want to get to know Kurusu better.” Makoto said, “We’re considering doing weekly study sessions, so we’ll see.”

“Well, I won’t stop you, but if he tries anything-”

“He won’t,” Makoto said, her tone becoming sharp. “If he does, I’ll send him to the hospital.”

Goro laughed, “I don’t doubt that. But please Makoto, no matter what happens, be careful. I don’t want to hear you got hurt because you were reckless.”

Makoto took in his words and nodded her head. “I promise I’ll be careful around Kurusu-san. Now, are you gonna have that roll?”

Goro shook his head and let Makoto take another cucumber roll. He grabbed a second rice ball and took a bite. Despite Makoto trying to assure him she wouldn’t do anything dangerous, he felt uneasy. He made a mental note about paying a visit a certain café when he had the time. He wanted to talk to a certain teenager.

He also was not against having a really good cup of coffee.
“So let me get this straight.” Shiho said, as Ann “You didn't come to the hospital yesterday because you were hatching a plan to catch this guy who's been stalking you for a week?”

“I'm sorry I didn't tell you about it. I didn't want you to worry, what with everything else you're dealing with.”

“No, that's fine. I understand that part.” Shiho held her hand up to assure Ann. “You did have me worried but I'm glad you're okay and that Sakamoto-san and Kurusu-san were there with you.” She took a deep breath and let it out, “What I don't understand is that you're going to model for this guy. The guy who stalked you.”

“I haven't said yes, I just told him I'd think about it.” Ann told her, “And believe me if he weren't Madarame-sama's apprentice I wouldn't even be considering it.”

“But you are because he's the apprentice of a famous person?”

Ann hesitated to answer but finally did. "Okay, yeah, pretty much." She said. Shiho sighed and shook her head. "I know, I know, it's a dumb reason but a chance to work with a famous Japanese artist, especially with what it could do for my career, is almost too good to pass up."

Shiho frowned. She understood Ann's train of thought fine, but that did not mean she liked it.

“Well, if you decide you want to model for him, I'll support you, but I really don’t think this is a good idea, Ann.”

“I don't think so too, but still...” Ann trailed off. She frowned and leaned over so she was resting her elbows on Shiho's bed. “I think what I'm going to do is, I'll go to the art exhibit and see if this whole thing would really be worth my time. Even if I do want to work with Kitagawa, I'd need to contact my agency for approval since they own the rights to my image. I don't think they'll have much of a problem since its Madarame, but who knows.”

Shiho stared at Ann, surprised by her answer, but for a different reason. She laughed and Ann jumped in surprise, "What?"

"Sorry." She said, "It's just funny."

"What's funny?" Ann asked, confused.

"That you're so serious about this." Shiho said, "When it comes to your modeling I never hear you think about it like this. You usually talk about it like 'just showing up and moving for the camera.' You don't even exercise or watch your weight like other models."

Ann tried to laugh off Shiho's comment, though felt her face turn red from embarrassment, “I-I'm just lucky is all. Though now that I think about it my bras are getting a little…” She trailed off as she glanced down at her chest. She blinked a few times in surprise, “Shit, did they get bigger again?”

“And the mystery of where all that sugar you eat goes has been solved.”
“At least it doesn’t go to my stomach,” Ann said. The two girls laughed and Ann was the first to recover, “But you really think I’m taking this more seriously than my other jobs?”

“You're thinking about it more than you normally would.”

“Am I? Well, I guess it’s because it’s different. I get this feeling modeling for an artist is different from modeling for a magazine.” Ann hummed for a second, "I learned from my parents that in the industry models usually have a short shelf life. It doesn't matter how talented you are, or if you still got looks. Once you turn twenty-one you’re considered too old for the industry.”

"I remember you mentioning that. Is that why you've always considered modeling to be 'just a hobby'?”

"Yeah more or less. I mean what's the point of really getting into it if I'm gonna be shown the door just as I'm entering the adult world?"

“I kinda get it, but there's nothing stopping you from still working in the industry. Or are cameramen and choreographers not allowed be older than twenty-one either?”

Ann made a face, resting her head on her palm as she looked at Shiho. “They don't need to worry about their age, just being up to date on trends.” She sighed, "But honestly, I don't really want to think about it after high school right now. I know, college is something to think of, but after? Who knows.”

“Maybe it’s time to start thinking about it?” Shiho suggested. Ann mulled it over.

“Maybe? But do I really need to? I mean I’m only sixteen, what if what I want now isn’t what I want in the future?” She said. “Anyway, enough about my stuff. Didn’t you say the doctor had some good news for you?”

Shiho knew why Ann was changing the subject but decided to play along with her, “I did. I’ll be beginning strength training on Monday.”

“Really? That’s wonderful!” Ann said. A smile on her face. The two spent a little longer with each other, but when Shiho’s parents came to visit she excused herself from the room. Once she closed the door behind her she shook her head.

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5/14/2016 (Saturday)
Afternoon
Shujin Academy

“Alright, times up. Put your pencils down and your hands under your desks.”

Akira sighed in relief and he did as their teacher instructed. After a long week, exams were over and he never wanted to look at an answer sheet or write another essay again. Or at least until finals in July. He waited patiently as the teacher picked up the exam booklets and then exited the room. Once the door was shut, the room descended into chaos, with students jumping out of their seats and talking to one another. A few grabbed their things and rushed out of the room. Ann turned around and gave Akira a grin.

“Finally it’s over.” She said. Akira gave a small nod, “So, how do you think you did?”

He gave a small shrug, “I think I knew most of the answers, so I should be okay. You?”
Ann had a grin on her face, “I think my English score will make up for the rest of my classes.” She said.

Akira gave Ann a small smile then looked up when he realized someone was approaching them. His eyes narrowed as he recognized the person and he looked down at his desk and began gathering his things. Ann noticed the change in demeanor and turned around to see Mishima standing near them. His head was down and he was looking at them as though wanting to start a conversation, but not sure how to start it. Ann looked at Akira who seemed to have decided Mishima did not exist. She sighed and decided to at least acknowledge the teenager’s presence.

“Hey, Mishima-san.” She said, catching Mishima by surprise.

“Oh, hey, Takamaki-san.” He said, “So, uh, how do you think you guys did on exams?”

“Fine, you?”

“Yeah. Fine.” Mishima repeated and looked at Akira, who still had not acknowledged his presence. “Uh, Kurusu-san?”

Akira stood up and slung his bag over his shoulder. He then left the room. Ann and Mishima watched him leave and then Ann jumped to her feet. “Uh, I should probably get going. Got a possible job coming up and need to get prepared for it.”

“O-Oh...okay…” Mishima’s mumbles were barely heard as Ann picked up her bag and left the room. She looked around the hallway and saw Akira going down the steps. She followed him and saw him leaning against the wall halfway down the stairs.

“Still not in the mood to talk to Mishima huh.”

“No, not really,” Akira said. He still had that urge to punch Mishima in the face every time he saw him. He and Ann looked up and continued down the stairs when they saw a pack of students coming downstairs. They stopped in the lobby.

“Hey, haven’t Sakamoto, Kusuru, and Takamaki, been hanging out a lot lately?”

“Well, birds of a feather and all that.”

“Kurusu and Takamaki look good together huh?”

“No way, she’s totally out of his league.”

"I don’t think she’d want to date a criminal after Kamoshida anyway.”

“I see the school’s gotten over Kamoshida,” Akira muttered as he sent Ryuji a text telling his friend he and Ann were waiting on the first floor of the school. He joined them after a minute, stretching out his neck. “Man, why’d you guys take off?”

“Mishima sighting.” Ann said, “So how you think you did?”

“About as good as I expected.” Ryuji groaned. “Can we talk about something else? Like did you decide if you’re going to the art exhibit or not?”
Ann nodded, “I talked to Shiho and thought it over a lot last night. I think regardless of whether I want to model for Kitagawa or not I do want to at least see the exhibit.” She explained, then grinned, "It sounds like it'd be worthwhile, and going to a fancy art show has this really mature vibe to it, you know?"

“Should be an experience. It’s not often you can get into something like this for free.” Akira said.

“An experience in boredom if you ask me,” Ryuji said. “And we’re gonna stand out. Something like this is normally for those high-up rich types.”

“I don’t think it’ll be that big of a deal.” Ann said, then smirked, “But if you’re worried about standing out, we can always get you a cheap suit somewhere.”

“Uh uh, no way. I’d rather stand out then try to blend in.”

“How about you Akira? I bet you’d look pretty stunning in a suit.”

Akira glanced at her, not sure how to respond to her statement at first. “I think I'll pass. Where is the exhibit anyway?”

“At the National Museum of Modern Art.” Ann said, looking at the ticket, “It’s not hard to find, but as always the problem if finding the right line at the station.”

Akira checked the location on his phone’s GPS. He had to change from one line to another and neither of them he recognized at all. He continued to look at his phone, the Tokyo subway station was a baffling maze. "Maybe I should meet you guys in Shibuya. I'd rather not get lost trying to figure out how to get there."

“Don’t blame ya. I’ve lived here all my life and I still get lost now and again.” Ryuji told him. Ann nodded in agreement. “Alright let's meet at Station Square around nine. Sound fair?”

“Yeah, alarm already gets me up at eight on Sunday anyway,” Akira said, moving his bag a bit. Morgana poked his head out and glared at Akira, purring in annoyance. Ryuji sighed and Ann let out a small laugh.

The two guys said their goodbye’s to Ann, who wanted to head home and relax now that exams were over. Akira let a small yawn escape his lips, between studying with Makoto, the exams, and even Golden Week, it hit him he had little time to relax by himself. His first thought was to head back to the cafe and lay down for a nice long nap. That thought, however, was interrupted when Ryuji spoke up.

“Hey, got a minute man?” He asked.

“What’s up?”

Akira had not wanted to go running around the school when Ryuji asked him if he wanted to join him for a 'post exam workout', but somehow he found himself in the locker room, changing into his gym clothes and going outside into the courtyard with his friend. He could not help but notice how enthusiastic Ryuji looked about running.

“Alright, I think we should just do some light jogging around the school. I’ll probably push a little harder, but you should pace yourself so you don’t get sick or something.”

Akira nodded and the two jogged around the school. After two laps Akira slowed into a walk for
one last lap and then stopped back in the courtyard. It took Ryuji a few more laps before he finally slowed down. “Oh man...” Akira could tell from those two words that Ryuji was, besides out of breath, unhappy with his performance, “My legs are really tight. So stiff...”

Akira got up from his seat and offered Ryuji some water. “Wanna take a cooldown walk?”

“Yeah sure.”

They did so, going across the perimeter of the school. Ryuji was quiet for a large chunk of it, only speaking up when they rounded the end of the walk. “Dammit, I knew it’d take time to get back into form, but it’s embarrassing how bad I am now.”

“You’ll get there.”

“Hope so,” Ryuji muttered as he took a drink of water. “It’s just so hard to look at. Not even a year ago I was training for nationals, but if I kept track of my times now I’d be the laughing stock of the track team.”

The two stopped in the courtyard. Ryuji looked around a small strange smile on his face. “Doing all this brings back memories though. Back when the Shujin Track Team was a name that got colleges attention. Back before Kamoshida took over and ruined everything.” Ryuji explained.

Akira was silent as he went on, “I don’t regret doing what I did, punching him like that, but at the same time I kinda feel bad about it.”

Akira frowned. “Why?”

“Well, I wasn’t the only casualty of Kamoshida’s wrath. You remember that story I told you right?”

Akira’s frown faded, replaced with a more sympathetic and understanding look. “Right, your teammates also got it from him.”

Ryuji nodded, “Because I got mouthy and attacked Kamoshida, he used it as an excuse to disband the track team. So the other guys started treating me like I was a traitor.”

“That’s-” Akira started but Ryuji interrupted him.

“It’s okay. I mean, a lot of them were hoping track would get them a scholarship to college, and some of them are not from the best homes, so I guess I can’t blame them for being angry.” Ryuji said, “But it still sucks. Since Kamoshida’s specialty was volleyball I’m pretty sure he did it on purpose. Found who he thought was the weak link and used them - well, me - as a reason to get rid of the track team.”

“They should be mad at Kamoshida, not yo,” Akira said. Ryuji chuckled.

“Yeah, I know. But you saw how Kamoshida is, it’s just easier to blame the guy who got his leg broken,” Ryuji paused for a moment. “You know it’s weird, I feel like I should be more angry about what happened, but I dunno, for some reason I’m not. I guess, even though I want to run with the guys again, a part of me has moved on from it. I got what I wanted, and that was I wanted Kamoshida gone.”

“So you don’t want to rejoin the track team?” Akira asked. Ryuji shrugged.

“I really don’t know man. I think at this point I just want to better myself, starting with my leg, and getting a job. Hopefully, I hear from Beef Bowl soon about starting...” He stopped, “It’s weird, to
think this all started because I hoped getting a scholarship to make things easier for my mom.”

“You really care about her don’t you.”

“Yeah. It really is just the two of us.” Ryuji said. Then a grin crossed his face. “Alright, no more of this stuck crap, let's do some.”

“What the hell you doing here?”

Ryuji was cut off by another voice and turned around to see three other students in the courtyard. They were wearing their gym clothes and Akira could see from the looks on their faces they were not happy to see either of them. Ryuji took a step back in surprise when they approached. “N-Nakaoka….Takeishi…” He stammered then tried to put a smile on his face, “Wow, this is a surprise, long time no see huh?”

“Long time no see? Is that really all you have to say after all the bullshit you pulled?” The teenager, Nakaoka, repeated. Ryuji’s eyes widened a little as he realized his poor word choice. “Saw you and this guy running from the window. You think you can grovel back to the track team by taking our spot for practice?”

“Huh? Wait what do you mean ‘your spot?’” Ryuji asked. He looked at Akira, who took a step back, putting his hands in his pockets to make himself look a little smaller.

“We don’t have a time to practice or even a locker room anymore,” Takeishi said. “All because you had to open your big mouth to Kamoshida.”

Ryuji looked down, not saying anything. “What’s wrong? Got nothing to say?” Nakaoka asked, “Keeping your mouth shut, too bad you learned that after you got us screwed over.”

“Leave him alone.”

The three looked at Akira, who raised his head, hands still in his pockets. Nakaoko glared at him, “What did you say?”

Akira repeated himself, this time his voice sterner, “I said, leave him alone. We came here to cool off after exams, not to fight.”

Nakaoka looked him over and laughed, “You think this is a fight?” He asked then frowned, “Wait a minute, you're the transfer student with the assault record.” For a split second he sounded nervous, then regained his composure as he looked between Ryuji and Akira, then focused on Ryuji, “So, this is the type of company you keep now. Even I thought you had more class than to hang out with a criminal.”

Akira winced and looked down, trying to hide his face behind his glasses and hair.

“Leave him alone man,” Ryuji said, his voice was calm and even. “Look, you want us to leave, we’ll leave. Don’t need to go insulting the guy. Come on Akira let’s get out of here.”

Akira nodded and followed Ryuji as the two walked off the grass. He stopped when he heard one of the boys speak up. “How long you think until Ryuji slugs him too? Heard his dad had the same temper.”

Ryuji tensed up a bit but kept walking. Once the two were back inside the school Ryuji let out a loud and frustrated growl. “Goddammit.” There was some silence, Akira took his glasses off for a moment to rub his eyes. “Sorry you had to hear all that.”
“Not your fault.” Akira said, “I guess I just met your former team mates.”

“Yeah. Wish he hadn’t brought up my dad. I probably would have sluged him too if we weren’t already leaving.” Ryuji said. Akira was silent, but could not help but notice how much of a sore subject his friend’s father was. “You still got some free time? I wanna get something to eat.”

5/14/2016 (Saturday)
After School
Shibuya: Big Bang Burger

Not much was said between Ryuji and Akira while they took the train into Shibuya, and they were both quiet when they got to Big Bang Burger. The earth burgers the two ordered were half eaten, Akira had his hands folded in his lap as Ryuji dipped his fries in ketchup. The mood had dampened since they left the school. Finally, Ryuji spoke up, “I still feel like I should have sluged him.” He said. Akira looked at him.

“Probably a good thing you didn’t.”

“I know...” Ryuji said, “Man, I keep thinking that I’m over the shit with my dad, but then something like this happens and I just feel so angry.” He sighed, “Sorry, I probably sound like I’m whining, huh.”

“No, you don’t.” Akira said, then after some hesitation added, “I get what it’s like to hate your dad.”

“Really? What did yours do?” Ryuji asked. Akira shook his head.

“It’s dumb, don’t worry about it.”

“Come on, can’t be that dumb.”

Akira thought it over a bit, “Okay. Since you’ve shared your story, it’s only fair I share mine.” He said, “I have my dad and my mom. My dad works for this mid-sized company, my mom used to be a part-time history professor at a college a town over. We aren’t really hurting for money. My mom is sick and has been in and out of the hospital for as long as I can remember. But, things were mostly fine until her health took a turn for the worst about three or four years ago.”

Ryuji nodded to let Akira know he was listening. Akira pushed some of his hair out of his face, took a deep breath, and then let it out. “At first everything was mostly the same. Mom had to quit her job, the upstairs master bedroom became occupied more often, but the days went on like they always did. I took on more responsibilities at home, mostly cooking dinner and cleaning the house after school. Then at some point, I don’t know when, dad started coming home later. I didn’t think much about it at first because fourteen-year-old me just thought he was working late help pay the medical bills.”

“Wouldn’t insurance cover hospital stuff?”

“It doesn’t cover everything and bills add up after a while.” Akira explained, “Eventually, he went from working late, to sometimes not coming home at all, and would call to make excuses about business meetings running late and staying overnight at a hotel because he needed to get to work early. I ended up being mom’s main caretaker since we can’t afford a live-in nurse.

“One night after we had dinner, mom suggested I bring something to dad. So I put what was
leftover in a box and took the bus to his work. I got there and saw him in the office.” A pained look crossed his face as his grip on his pants tightened. “He wasn’t working.”

“I’ve seen enough of mom’s drama’s to know where this is going. He’s seeing someone else.” Ryuji said. Akira nodded. “Effin’ hell. That’s messed up.”

“Not as bad as your dad.”

“-no that’s still pretty bad. Anyone who would cheat and ditch their wife and son is a piece of shit.” Ryuji cut him off. Akira was silent, but after a little bit nodded in agreement. Ryuji was right.

“Does he know you saw him?”

“Probably.” Akira said, pushing his glasses up a bit with his finger, “I told mom, but she just told me not to bring it up again.” He sighed, “I hate that he’s never around, but I can’t stand seeing his face the few times he’s home. It just feels like mom and I are an inconvenience to him and he’s only paying the medical expenses out of obligation.”

“It’s bullshit. It sounds like he flaked out because things got ‘too hard’.” Ryuji said. Akira was quiet as his friend’s voice raised, but then he calmed down. “Why are there so many shitty parents in the world?”

Akira had no answer. He just shrugged and took another bite out of his half-eaten burger. Big Bang Burgers did not taste good once they cooled off. He forced himself to swallow and pushed his food away. “Thanks for listening.”

“You listened when I told you about my old man, only fair I do the same for you,” Ryuji told him. Akira gave Ryuji a small smile. He felt like he was becoming closer to his friend. “It’s kinda scary though, how out of all the things we have in common, shitty fathers is one of them.”

Akira found himself nodding in agreement, “Yeah, it is.”

5/14/2016 (Saturday)
Evening
Cafe Leblanc

“So, you got any plans tomorrow?”

Akira looked up when Sojiro asked the question. Both he and Futaba were working on their homework, Wakaba was on her laptop, a frown on her face. What she was working on, Akira had no idea. “My friends and I are going to the Madarame Art Exhibit.”

Sojiro stared at him in disbelief, and Wakaba looked up from her laptop. “Madarame? That’s quite a big name.” She explained with that amused tone she always seemed to have.

“Yeah, too big for your limited income,” Sojiro said as he lit a cigarette for himself. Futaba and Wakaba gave him a disapproving look that was either unnoticed or just outright ignored. “How’d you get tickets to a show like that?”

“It’s complicated, but, the other day…” He started and explained, leaving at certain details such as the stalker incident. When he finished the two were staring at him. “I swear I’m telling the truth.”

“I don’t get what the big deal is,” Futaba said. Wakaba cleared her throat.

“Madarame is the famous Japanese artist we saw on TV the other day Futaba.” She explained.
Futaba gave her a confused look. Wakaba sighed, “The old geezer with the beard and traditional robes.”

“Oh him. So… he's famous for what again?”

Again, Wakaba sighed but decided to turn her attention away from her daughter’s lack of interest and her attention to the tickets Akira pulled out of his pocket. “You’ve got quite a lucky streak if you got free tickets to Madarame’s art exhibit. Those are expensive.”

“I guess there are perks to being friends with a model,” Akira said, trying to sound like he was joking, but it sounded sour on his tongue. The only reason they even got tickets was because his model friend had been stalked by the artist's apprentice. “He gave Ann two tickets, and me two, still not sure what I should do with the second one.”

“Save it for a rainy day.” Sojiro suggested. “Give it to someone at school. Actually, take Futaba with you-”

Futaba’s eyes bugged out. “WHAT?!”

“-she needs to get out more anyway.” Sojiro finished. Futaba slammed her hands on the table and jumped to her feet. Wakaba grabbed her arm and pulled her back down, not even looking up from her laptop.

“No leaving the table until you’re done your homework.” She said. Futaba pouted and Akira decided that maybe inviting Futaba along was not such a good idea.

“Did you want to go Isshiki-sama?” He asked. Wakaba looked up at him but then grinned in amusement.

“How nice of you to ask.” She said, “But that’s not possible for me, I have multiple projects I need to finish and papers to send to my clients.”

"You're working Sunday again?" Sojiro asked. Wakaba grinned at him.

"Someone needs to bring money into this house."

Akira decided to stay quiet and his eyes drifted to Futaba who glanced at him, then looked down at her homework. Then back at Akira. Then to her homework again. Wakaba joined in the staring, giving her daughter an expectant look. After several seconds Futaba let out a loud sigh.

“Alright fine I’ll go! You don’t have to keep bugging me about it.” She said. Wakaba clapped her hands together.

“Excellent. And so you don’t spend the whole time with your head in the clouds...I’m going to prepare a homework assignment for you.”

“But-” Futaba tried to protest, but Wakaba opened a new tab on her laptop and held a hand out so Futaba could not reach for the keyboard and try to close the document. She typed the entire assignment with one hand, saved it, and then clicked ‘print.’

“There, once we get home we’ll go over the assignment.”

“But mom, I don’t want to do homework on Sunday.”

“It’ll be due Tuesday.”
“But your still making me do part of it tomorrow!”

Wakaba grinned at her daughter and then looked at Akira, “Please keep an eye on her while you're out.” She said, “Oh and also, don’t forget your umbrellas, I hear it’s supposed to rain tomorrow. Wouldn’t want to become a drenched rat while on your way to the museum.”

Akira nodded as he went back to his homework, then looked up when he saw Futaba glaring at him. “What?”

“Just so you know, this is your fault.” She said, punctuation every word. Akira stared at her. How was this whole thing his fault? He decided not to ask and went back to his homework. Sojiro sighed and shook his head.

It was getting late when Wakaba and Futaba left. Akira closed his final textbook and put it in his bag. Morgana was, for a change, not hanging out in it. Sojiro was finishing putting things away. “You gonna be free in the evening?”


“Better. I’m gonna teach you how to make a Sakura-style coffee.” He said. “Make sure you and Futaba are home by six, I’ll show you the ropes, maybe even have it with dinner if it comes out decent.”

Akira found himself smiling. He doubted he would be able to drink a lot of the coffee because of his medication, but the thought of making coffee after seeing Sojiro do it whenever he helped in the cafe did pique his interests. The little he tried had always been delicious, “Sure, sounds good.”

“Great.” Sojiro said, “Make sure you’re home on time or I’ll make you clean the entire restaurant.”

“We’ll be back on time, promise,” Akira said, rolling his eyes.

Once the Isshiki’s left and Sojiro closed the store, Akira went upstairs. He dropped his back on the table near the stairs, changed into his pajamas, and took his medication. Morgana lifted his head as Akira sat down on the bed. “Okay, I need to be up early so make sure you do what you usually do, okay?”

Morgana blinked and laid his head back down. Akira laid down next to him and read some more of Medjed’s Menace - Futaba was more than willing to give it back to him. She actually sounded like she hated it - before falling sound asleep.
The Painter's Anger

Chapter Notes

Update: Many thanks to Vivvav who DMed me some really bad errors I missed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

5/15/2016 (Sunday/Rainy)
Early Morning
National Art Museum

“Hey, what’s that line for?”

“Man look at that crowd. Are they all here for the museum?”

“Ugh I wish I could go, but it’s so expensive.”

While most of the crowd around the National Modern Art Museum devolved into indistinct chattering, Akira could make out a few people talking about the exhibit. Some were excited, many were annoyed by the price, and a few people either did not care or did not see it as a big deal. Akira looked down at Futaba who was crossing her arms, a green hoodie she had dragged out of her closet hiding her face. Had it not been for the homework assignment her mother had given her, she would definitely not be walking the streets with Akira, Ryuji, and Ann from the train station to the museum.

"So should have ditched you guys for the arcade." She muttered as she stood under Akira's umbrella. "I could have easily found a painting on the internet to write about."

"Kinda get the feeling your mom would know if you didn't go to the museum," Akira said. Futaba opened her mouth to retort, paused for a moment, then closed it. Then opened it again.

"I hate that you're right."

"Still, would be nice if they would start letting us in." Ryuji said with a sigh as he looked at the crowd, "And damn do we stand out."

Akira looked at the growing line. His friend's statement was true; he, Ryuji, and Futaba stood out like sore thumbs. Only Ann was dressed in attire that looked like it could pass for the type of demographic the exhibit was targeting; Japan’s upper class. However shortly after Ryuji's complaint, the clock struck ten in the morning and the line began to move.

Once at the entrance Akira gave his and Futaba's tickets to the attendant who took one look at him and then Futaba before shrugging and letting them in. He then took Ann’s, nodded at her, then looked at Ryuji. He gave her a questioning look. “Is something wrong sir?” Ann asked. The attendant shook his head.
“No, nothing miss. You two enjoy the exhibit.” He said. Ryuji grumbled a bit as they entered. He knew exactly what the attendant was thinking.

The light in the museum was not the harsh white Akira expected. Instead, the lights had been dimmed to a warm orange. The paintings had been arranged so none of them were overshadowed by another piece. The ambiance looked to be set up to make all the patrons feel welcome and relaxed. Akira could not help but notice how crowded it was, but he was not surprised. City museums got a lot more attention than museums in the countryside.

Ann looked around at the sight and turned to them with a grin on her face. “Never thought I’d ever go to one of these things. Doesn’t going to a high-class art exhibit make you feel more like an adult?”

The other three looked at each other. “Meh,” Futaba said with a shrug. Ann pouted. Ryuji sighed and shrugged.

“Let’s just get this over with. It's pretty obvious we won't be welcome here.” Ryuji said. Akira nodded in agreement, putting his hands in his pockets. Morgana poked his head out for a second before dropping back into the bag. “Where is that Kitagawa guy anyway?”

As he asked the question he got his answer. Yusuke pushed himself through the crowd and walked up to them. Seeing Ann brought a smile to his face, “Takamaki-san, you came!” He said. He then looked at the others, his grin faltering a bit. “I see you brought your friends.”

“Well, you gave us extra tickets,” Ann said as a wide grin formed on Ryuji’s

“Hope you don’t mind us crashing the party.” Ryuji said. Yusuke gave him a sneer then tried hard to recompose himself as he looked at Akira and Futaba.

“Well, at least most decent folk are here. Though I haven’t seen you before.” He said, eyes falling on Futaba. The girl looked up at him, then took a step back.

“This is Futaba Isshiki, a friend,” Akira said. “She has to do a school project on Madarame’s art.”

The information caught Yusuke by surprise. "Is that so?" He asked.

“‘M supposed to write an essay about some of his paintings,” Futaba muttered. "You're his apprentice, right? You got any suggestions?"

"Well, I'd rather you experienced and wrote about whatever piece captured your eye." Yusuke paused, then a grin formed on his face, "But if I could make a suggestion, several of Madarame’s more classical works are on the far side of the exhibit. One of them is a portrait of one of Japan's more influential prime ministers. Another is a loving interpretation of a poignant scene from the musical 'Les Miserable'. There’s also -”

“Okaycoolthanks,” Futaba said and grabbed Akira’s arm. “Let’s go before he keeps talking!”

“S-see you guys later.” Akira stammered as he was dragged off by Futaba to the far right of the museum. He freed his hand from Futaba’s grip before following after her. Ryuji, Ann, and Yusuke watched them, then Yusuke brought his attention back to Ann.

“Well then Takamaki-san, shall I show you around the exhibit? I’d also like to discuss the portrait I’d like to paint of you.”

“Uh...let’s take things one step at a time,” Ann told him. She glanced at Ryuji who nodded to her.
She then turned back to Yusuke with a smile on her face. “Alright, let’s go!”

Yusuke was beaming as he led her away. Ann turned back quick to Ryuji and gave him a small nod. Ryuji returned it, he was supposed to keep his eye on them from a distance. He followed for a few seconds then stopped when he saw Ichiryusai Madarame himself speaking to a reporter, a cameraman filming the interview. He frowned as he saw the smile on the old man’s face.

He did not like that smile. It seemed too happy.

“We continue to be amazed by your imagination Madarame-sama.” The reporter stated, “Could you tell us the secret to your inspiration? I'm sure our viewers would love a peek into the mind of such a great artist.”

Ryuji frowned and took a step closer so he could listen as Madarame answered the question. “Well, that is quite hard to put into words. Inspiration can come from many things. Sometimes it is tangible, a walk through the park and seeing the sakura blossoms bloom. Other times its spur of the moment, naturally welling up from within my heart, like bubbles rising one after another in a spring.”

“Naturally you say?”

“What I always believed is that it's important is to distance oneself from the world. I believe the phrase is ‘live in the world, but not of the world’, it's very easy to be distracted by money or the need for material items. Standing apart from what is expected of us I feel allows us to be inspired to see beauty for what it really is.”

“I see...so emptying your mind gives rise to true beauty. Is that what you're saying?” The reporter asked.

"That is one way to understand it." Madarame said, then smiled, "Of course I could just be a rambling old man spouting outdated nonsense, you never know with us artistic types."

He laughed and the woman joined him, sounding confused and a little uncomfortable. "W-well, they do say artistic types bounce to their own drums." She managed to say.

Ryuji rolled his eyes and muttered to himself as he walked away. Madarame's words sounded fake on his ears and even he was sure the reporter had noticed something was a little off. He kept walking until he found Ann and Yusuke again and hid back in the crowd, looking up at one of the paintings. He frowned as he looked at it and then another one nearby.

"Something's not right..." He muttered to himself.

Akira and Futaba looked at each portrait, the former wondering which one the latter was gonna settle on writing her essay on. They finally stopped at one of the paintings Yusuke had mentioned, the one of a portrait of a former Japanese Prime Minister. Futaba read the brief description and made a small humming noise. She tilted her head and rested her hands on her back, a small frown on her face. She looked like she was inspecting it, but then looked up at him. “So, what do you make of it?”

“Uh, well…” Akira started then stopped and looked around. There were a lot of people in the part of the museum they were in. He put his hands in his pockets and kept his head down. Futaba blinked a few times then put a hand on his jacket sleeve.

“Breathe.” She said, getting his attention “In through your nose, hold for seven seconds, and out
your mouth. Pretend they're just NPCs, not important, non-playable characters.”

Akira stared at her then closed his eyes and took a breath in his nose and out his mouth. He could feel himself becoming a little steadier as he took in another breath, held it, then let it out. He opened his eyes and looked at Futaba.

“Sojiro says you're like me. Or sort of like me,” she explained. “I don’t like being around people, so going to places scares me sometimes. I’m better now that I’m out of school than I was in it though.”

"I take it you didn't like school."

"No. But I think no one likes being bullied." She paused then looked at him, a grin on her face “But that’s enough backstory for now. What’s most important is finishing this quest... And I have no idea how I’m going to get a full two pages out of this picture.”

Akira looked at the painting, then pulled out his phone. “Well if I’m right…” He started, then trailed off as he brought up his search results, “Ah, yeah. Here, it says this man was the one who modernized Tokyo’s railway system.”

“Oh, so he’s the reason it’s all FUBAR?” Futaba asked. Akira raised an eyebrow, then mentally spelled out the acronym.

“Probably?” He answered. Futaba hummed again, putting a finger to her lips as thoughts went through her head. Akira then felt his phone vibrate and took it out of his pocket. Ryuji had sent him a text message.

**Ryuji:**

*The eagle has landed.*
*I repeat the eagle has landed.*

Akira stared at the message and typed the only thing he could think of.

**Akira:**

*What?*

**Ryuji:**

*Dude you need to watch more movies.*
*Anyway, I’m watching Ann and Yusuke.*
*He hasn’t tried anything. At least not yet.*

*I also heard Madarame giving an interview*
*and ugh, makes me sick just listening to*
*his voice. He sounds like one of those*
*bullshit high mighty types.*

Akira read the message and was about to ask what Madarame said to set Ryuji off when he realized Futaba was staring at him. “Something up?” She asked. Akira shook his head and put his phone away.

“No, it’s nothing.” He said, “I think I wanna look at more of the exhibit, wanna come?”

Futaba gave him a look that showed she really did not want to but shrugged. “‘Kay.” She said and followed him.
The paintings were awe-inspiring. Ann found herself gazing at them for far longer than even she expected herself too. There was something about each of them that captured her eye, whether it was the strokes - some meticulous, some deliberately careless - or the colors. Every one of the pieces had a beauty to it that she found hard to describe. “I never realized there were so many styles of Japanese art.” She said.

“Usually one concentrates on their own style. However, Sensei is a master of multiple styles. He created all of these by himself.” Yusuke explained. Ann nodded as she continued to look at the paintings. She took another step and stopped at one of them.

A frown then crossed his face. Many of them were beautiful and easy on the eyes, but she could not help but feel something was off about them. Why was it that the cat in one of the portraits had sad eyes? Why did the corsage in another look like the petals were wilting?

Another painting caught her attention and she approached it. It was a forest bathed in red light like a fire was burning in the distance. “This piece here is very beautiful.”

“...This one?” Yusuke asked taking a few steps closer. She looked at him and nodded.

“There’s something about it that grabs my attention. The greens and browns mixed with red, it’s like a forest bathed in the sunset...or...” She stopped and looked back at it. “My friend Shiho understands art better than I do, but this painting feels like it was made in anger. It’s like...I can sense a strong frustration from it.”

Had she turned around at that moment she would have seen a particular look in Yusuke’s eye. However, she did hear him sound like he choked up a bit. “Is something wrong?”

Yusuke composed himself quick, “No. I’m just...it’s impressive how well you can read into the emotions of this artwork.” He said, “Come with me, I’m sure there are pieces you’ll like far more than this one. There are far better pieces than this one.”

He turned and began down to another part of the exhibit. Ann watched him, a frown on her face. Something about Yusuke’s demeanor had changed. She looked behind her to see Ryuji close by, pretending to look at something when it was obvious he was watching the two of them. She gave him a small nod and followed Yusuke. She pulled her phone out.

Ann:
Where’s Akira?

Ryuji:
Stuck with Futaba.

Akira:
Sorry guys.
But I think Futaba’s almost
done looking at the exhibit.

I’ll be over in a bit.

Ann:
Good, when we’re done here, we should go
something to talk.

Something about all this doesn’t feel right.
And not in the way I thought it would be.

**Ryuji:**
What do you mean?

“Excuse me miss.” Ann looked up to see a security guard approaching her. “I apologize but we can’t have people on their phones in the exhibit. It’s just to avoid people taking photographs.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Ann said and pocketed her phone. She then hurried after Yusuke, who was stopped when Madarame approached him.

“There you are Yusuke. I need to speak to you about the end of the exhibit.” He said then looked at Ann, surprised to see her, but at the same time pleased, “Ah, young Takamaki-san. Are you enjoying the exhibit?”

Ann smiled, “Yeah- I mean, it’s beautiful. I can feel the passion in each piece. And Yusuke has been a very good guide through it.”

“You’re sensing something from the artwork...that brings me much satisfaction,” Madarame said, a smile on his face that seemed a little too curved upward. “By the way, have you taken Yusuke’s offer under more consideration?”

“Oh, right…I’ve been thinking about it. I wanted to see the exhibit before making my decision” she explained. They seemed nice, but something was off. She nodded to herself, “I’m interested. Actually, it would be nice to model for an artist for a change. I’ll contact my agency and see if they’ll give the okay for it.”

“That’s right, you are a part-time model,” Madarame said. Ann nodded, she was not surprised he would know about her modeling. "I hope your agency allows us to use your image,” Madarame said then turned to the entrance. There was a commotion going on, a reporter in jeans and a black shirt was speaking to some security. “Ah, please excuse me. Yusuke, make sure young Takamaki-san enjoys the rest of the exhibit.”

“Yes, of course, Sensei,” Yusuke said, his tone formal. Ann watched as Madarame left them and then grinned as she followed Yusuke through the rest of the exhibit.

Ann, Futaba, Akira, and Ryuji left the museum after a few hours of looking around. Ann reemphasized to Yusuke that she would contact her modeling agency as soon as possible and got Yusuke’s cell number so she could let him know if they agreed to it. The four then said their goodbyes and hurried down the street to get out of the pouring rain. Yusuke watched them leave, a frown on his face.

“I see youth is as lively as ever,” Madarame said, getting Yusuke’s attention. “Makes me yearn for my days as a teenager. And the girl, she is quite lovely.”

“Yes, she is.” Yusuke said, “I believe she will be perfect for the piece. But of course, you get the final say Sensei.”

There was a small silence, then a strange smile formed on Madarame's face, "I agree. She's a beauty that will capture the eye of many."
"Then I hope her agency lets me paint her."

"I hope so as well. You only have three more weeks, remember."

Yusuke nodded. He had three weeks to create his latest masterpiece…

Futaba had wanted hot chocolate after they left the museum, so once they got back to Shibuya, Ann took them to a nearby cafe. Akira recognized the place almost immediately, it was the same cafe she had taken him to when he first came to the city. The four sat at one of the tables and Akira put his bag between himself and Futaba, giving Morgana the okay to poke his head out of his backpack.

The cat grumbled, unamused. Whether it was because he was getting tired of staying in Akira’s bag or because of all the rain, Akira was not sure but guessed it was some combination of the two.

“Mmm, hot chocolate,” Futaba said, putting the cup to her lips. She put it down, “Yeah, Sojiro’s is definitely better.”

Akira took a sip of his drink and put his hand on his cat when Morgana tried to put his face in the cup. “No. Chocolate’s bad for cats.”

Morgana let out an annoyed meow. Akira shushed him. That just made Morgana meow again.

“Lucky us it’s Sunday,” Ryuji muttered looking around. The cafe was, to their relief, too crowded for anyone to notice or care that Akira was harboring a cat with him. He turned his attention to Ann, “So what’re your thoughts about this Kitagawa guy?”

“Honestly? Not sure. After talking to him I’m pretty sure at this point, the only thing he wants to do is use me as a model for his artwork.” Ann said, “But there’s something about this whole thing that feels very off. It’s not just Kitagawa, but also Madarame, and the artwork as well.”

“The artwork?” Akira asked. Futaba brought up her phone and began typing something.

“What do you mean?” Ryuji asked, "Sure, there were some sad looking pieces, but it’s art. How would it be off?”

“It’s just, something about a lot of the pieces seemed like they were made by someone who was hurting or frustrated.” Ann said, “And there was this one piece I saw, that looked like a forest on fire. It was like it was painted in anger or frustration.”

“But isn’t art supposed to convey emotion?” Akira said.

“It was more Kitagawa’s reaction to it.” Ann said, “I’m not sure why, but when I commented on it, he seemed to take it personally.”

Akira fell quiet, looking at his cup of hot chocolate. He was not sure what to think of Ann’s statement. Since Yusuke was Madarame’s apprentice, it was not impossible he was involved in or assisted his instructor with some of his work, but would that make him take a comment on it so personally. Morgana meowed and Akira smiled at him and began scratching the cat's head.
"You still aren't getting hot chocolate." He said. The cat glared at him. Ann then spoke up as though she had just finalized her decision.

"Okay, I’m going to contact my agent about the job. It's Sunday so I might not hear back from them until tomorrow or Tuesday."

"If they give the okay, do you want us to come with you?" Ryuji asked, “You know, just in case something goes wrong.”

Ann nodded, “Yeah good idea.”

Futaba picked up her drink and drank it down. “So if you're gonna model for this guy, what are you gonna have to do?” She asked.

"No idea, but I can come up with a few guesses," Ann said.

"What if he asks you to pose nude for him? Don't some artists practice with nude models?"

The three fell silent and Ann's fingers twitched. A terrifying, painful grin formed on her face. "I....doubt it'll come to that."

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5/15/2016  
Evening  
Cafe Leblanc

“-it is expected to clear up and be sunny for the next few days. Back to you Taro.”

“Thank you. But I will say here and now, that while the rain may have kept many of us indoors, it did not slow down the lines outside the National Art Museum, did it Sayaka.”

"Yes, even with the weather, the grand opening of Ichiryusai Madarame was one of the most successful in the last five years. The Museum has even gone as far to suggest-"

The news was playing in the background as Akira watched Sojiro brewing coffee. “Now, there are three factors that determine the flavor of a cup of coffee: grind, heat, and time.” He explained. Akira nodded as he listened. Sojiro had told him that he prided himself on making his coffee without a standard coffee maker. It took a bit more time and a little more water than usual, however, he claimed it made the flavor better. Akira was inclined to agree with him just from the few times he’d tried Sojiro’s coffee and waited patiently as Sojiro poured the finished drink in a cup.

“Now you remember the grind we used right?”

“Yeah, it was medium-fine,” Akira said. Sojiro nodded and handed it to him.

“Give it a try. It’s decaf.” He said. Akira took the cup and took a small sip. It was rich and had a slightly acidic taste to it.

“It’s good.” Akira said, “How did you get so good at making coffee, Sakura-san?”

“Same way you get good at anything, you practice.” Sojiro said, “But I'll admit it right here, the genius behind my brews is Wakaba.”
“Isshiki-sama?”

A grin crossed Sojiro's face. “The secret to capturing a girl’s heart is to be able to brew a good cup of coffee. At least that’s what my father told me. So one morning, I made her some coffee and brought it into work. She thought it was pretty good and asked for the recipe. I gave it to her, then a few days later she approached me with a ‘scientifically modified’ version of it. Which I tried.”

He shook his head and chuckled, “That woman was and still is completely out of my league.”

Akira took another long drink of his coffee, taking in the taste. The flavor was relaxing. “You and Wakaba worked together?”

“In the same building, but not the same branch. But that doesn't matter anymore. I’m retired and she helps part-time for another company.” Sojiro shook his head and redirected the conversation back to coffee, ”Now, I know you can’t drink a lot because of your meds, but most of my customers prefer regular coffee, so you need to at least know-”

The door opened and Sojiro cut himself off to greet whoever stepped into the cafe. He paused and Akira frowned as he saw a familiar face. Goro Akechi greeted them with a smile and a wave. “Hello.” He said, then seeing their faces his smile dropped, “Oh, uh, is the cafe supposed to be closed? I know it’s late, but the door was unlocked so…”

“No, we’re still open.” Sojiro said. There was a sigh in his voice that made it obvious he had been hoping no one else would show up tonight. Akechi took a seat at the table. “What will it be?”

“Just the house blend, please,” Akechi said. Sojiro nodded and Akira looked at him. “Are you helping him again today Kurusu-san?”

“Sakura-san is teaching me how to make coffee.” He said. His answer caught Akechi’s interest and a small smile crossed his face.

“Really. That sounds like fun. Will you be making my order then?”

“No. If he did, it’ll be bland and tasteless, kid needs to practice first.” Sojiro said. Akira frowned, a little insulted. He stepped back and watched as Sojiro put together Akechi’s order and pushed the coffee towards him.

“Thank you,” Akechi said, lifting the cup to his lips and taking a sip. “As excellent as before. I need to make a note to make this place one of my regular stops. Maybe one day you’ll make me coffee Kurusu-san.”

“Well when that happens, I hope my coffee is just as good as Sakura-sans,” Akira said. Sojiro grumbled something that expressed his doubts about Akira’s claim. Akechi smiled.

“I’m more than willing to taste-test your coffee in the future.” He said, then his smile dropped, “But I’m afraid I didn’t come here for small talk. I wanted to discuss something with you that, for me, is rather important.”

Akira frowned and waited for Akechi to say something. “What is it?”

“It's regarding your interactions with my friend Makoto-chan,” Akechi said.

“Let me guess, you’re gonna tell me to stay away from her.”

“I admit I did want to say that but I know that won’t be possible.” Akechi said, “But I want you to
understand something. Makoto-chan is someone I greatly care about. She helped me during a
difficult time in my life and she and her sister made me who I am today. She’s stern but caring, and
she has a strong sense of justice. She wouldn’t approach you if she did not think it was the right
thing to do.”

“Or if she had something to gain from it.”

Akechi gave him a half-smile. “Its true Makoto-chan has to do a lot of things she’s not comfortable
with to win over her sister and adult peers, but do you really think a college recommendation is the
only reason offered to help you with your exams, Kurusu?”

Akira was quiet as he remembered Makoto emphasizing it as a ‘partial-motivation’ and then
seemed more concerned with his general well-being, than the actual recommendation. “So if you
aren’t here to tell me to stay away from her, why are you here?”

“Just to warn you that if you do anything to hurt her—”

“Stop, right there,” Akira said, cutting Akechi off. He pushed his glasses up and rubbed the bridge
of his nose. “I know where this is going. You’re going to threaten to report me if I hurt Niijima-
senpai. Fine, add it to the long list of worries I already have, but I can tell you right now, regardless
of what you think, regardless of what my record makes you think, I would never hurt her, or
anyone.”

“Including the kid that leaked your record?” Akechi asked. Akira huffed.

“Yes, including him.” Even though punching Mishima’s face was still tempting. Akechi smiled.

“You’re far more courteous than I expected.” Akechi said, “You know, you’d be surprised at how
a simple statement can tell a lot about a person. You claim you’d never hurt someone, yet you have
an assault charge on your record. Which is the truth?”

Akira scowled at him. Akechi’s blinked a little too fast but gave no reaction beyond that. He took
another sip of his coffee, “This is delicious. Again my hat's off to the owner.”

“The owner would appreciate it if you stopped interrogating the help,” Sojiro said. Akira looked at
him, feeling a little relieved Sojiro was speaking up. Akechi nodded and chuckled.

“Sorry. I guess when it comes to my perceived sister, I’m a bit overprotective.” Akechi said,
“Though I think Makoto would do more to you if you tried to hurt her then I would. She’s scary
when she’s angry.”

Akira felt his hands twitch, then shook his head. He pulled off his apron and put it on the counter.
“I’m heading out.”

Sojiro looked at him as he crossed to the far side of the cafe and grabbed his bag. “Where are you
going?”

“For a walk.” He said, “I need some air.”

He needed to leave the cafe before he did something he knew he would regret. He heard Morgana
meow from his bag, but ignored it, along with the question he knew was coming, and went out the
door. He took a few steps and then stopped, took a deep breath, and then let it out. Just being away
from Akechi made him feel a little better. Morgana meowed again getting his attention. "I'm fine,
just...you ever wanna deck someone, but know you can't?"
Morgana blinked then meowed again and Akira smiled as he brought up his head to pet his cat's head. "Well, let's go somewhere. It's Sunday so maybe the church is still open. How about it?"

Morgana purred and dropped back in Akira's bag. The teenager continued down the street, his mood feeling a little better as he entered the train station and got on the train.

Chapter End Notes

Well, here we are, the museum and the start of the Madarame arc. I'm excited to see where things go, but unfortunately I do have some news that I need to get off my chest. To put it simply I've had a very rough month. Between issues at work, and doing 6/7 day work weeks because I was helping at another store, I've pretty much hit burnout hard - getting this chapter out was almost an exercise in futility. Likewise, February is usually a rough month for me in general, so because of this I've decided it would be best for me to take the month off.

One Year on Probation will resume on March 6th with the regular Tuesday updates. Thank you so much to everyone who has been sticking with me in this fic. It's been an insane ride exploring this game on 'realism mode', but I'm loving every moment of it. Take care!
I'M BACK. Well, sort of. I'm doing a bit better, but still running a bit slow. For the time being, I'm gonna stick to bi-weekly updates, since that should keep the stress levels down a bit. We'll see later if I can get back to a weekly schedule or not XD

As always enjoy and it's good to be back.

5/15/2016 (Sunday/Cloudy)
Evening
Kanda - Church

Visiting the church in Kanda was going to be a regular thing. Akira had that feeling when he stepped inside the building and found that urge he had to punch Akechi in the face leaving him. The atmosphere was relaxing, the ceiling lights soft, and everyone was quiet and minding their own business. Akira greeted the pastor and the older man smiled as he recognized him, and motioned for him to take a seat. The young teenager looked around then took a seat in the pew closest to the front. He put his bag down next to him and Morgana popping his head out. The cat meowed in a way that Akira noted sounded like he was asking a question.

"You can’t wander around, but just having your head out should be fine.” He whispered. Morgana meowed again and Akira put his hand on the cats head, a smile on his face. He laughed a little, then stopped as he felt eyes on him. Someone was staring at him. He looked behind himself to see a familiar face. It was the girl from last week, he recognized her less from her dress and straight hair and more from the shogi board in front of her. His calm became replaced with some slight unease. “Sorry. Am I bothering you?”

The girl paused as though considering his question then shook her head. “I just couldn't help but notice your cat.” She said, “You’re the same boy from last week. It’s not often I see people bring their pets to church.”

The girl projected a professional, yet calm aura. Her voice was soft, she was not judging him, just making an observation. She seemed nice and friendly, if somewhat cold. Akira adjusted himself so he could comfortably look at her, then glanced down at the shogi board. A small smirk crossed his face. “It’s not often I see someone my age playing Shogi in a church.”

“Probably because there aren’t that many churches. Or people my age attending church. Or people my age playing Shogi at that.”

"And yet there is one and I'm looking at her," Akira said. The girl stared at him, and for a second Akira thought that maybe he had said something wrong.

Then she smiled. "I practice my game here, with permission from Pastor Fukumoto of course. It’s difficult for me to find a place to practice in private without attracting attention, and home is not an option either.”
Akira nodded, wondering for a brief moment why home 'not an option', but deciding not to ask. He guessed it was a personal issue, and it would be rude of him to pry since he was a stranger. Instead, he looked at the board, then back at her. “Are you against having a practice partner?”

The girl blinked, a little surprised, “You play?”

“Not really, but I can learn,” Akira said. For some reason, she laughed a little.

“Well, I can't say if I'm much of a teacher, but if you’re interested I’m willing to show you some of the basics.” She said, “My name is Hifumi Togo. I’m a second-year student at Kosei High.”

“Akira Kurusu. Shujin Academy.” He said, then paused as he realized he recognized the name of her high school, “Did you say Kosei High?”

"Yes.” She said then with some unease asked, "Why?"

“Uh, well…” He trailed off and after some hesitation just decided to be direct, “Do you know someone named Yusuke Kitagawa?”

“Kitagawa-san? Yes, he’s in my cla-” She paused, her mouth snapped shut and after a few seconds she sighed and an annoyed look crossed her face, “I’m not even going to ask how you learned his name, I already have an idea. What did he do this time?”

Akira's eyes widened, taken back by the sudden change in demeanor. That was not a reaction he expected, “Ah, well….” He explained how he met Yusuke and by the time he finished Hifumi was shaking her head, her annoyance mixed with embarrassment. Apparently, Yusuke’s penchant for following people and not realizing he was creeping them out was a common enough occurrence he had a reputation for it at the school.

“I apologize if he scared your friend,” Hifumi said.

“It’s not your fault.”

“Yes, but I can’t help but feel a little second-hand embarrassment since I attend the same school.” Hifumi said, her face turning a shade of pink for a brief moment, “Fortunately, Kitagawa-san is mostly harmless. If he says he wants to paint a portrait of your friend, that’s all he plans to do.”

“Yes.”

“Really.”

“Yes. Actually, I have posed for him for one of his pieces.” She brought a hand up to her face, resting her thumb and finger on her chin. “He explained he wanted to ‘capture the ferocity of a Shogi Master in her natural habitat.’ Over the top and a bit pretentious I admit, but once it was done it was done. I never saw the painting again after our sessions, but I recall it being very lovely. Kitagawa-san is very good at capturing beauty in most anything.”

Akira nodded and made a mental note to tell Ryuji and Ann was Hifumi just told them. He changed the subject, “So that Shogi match.”

“Oh yes.” Hifumi said, “Let us set up the pieces, then you shall see the ferocity of the Togo Army.”

Akira stared at her dumbfounded. Her demeanor had changed from friendly to commanding, like a general leading an army to war. Akira helped her arrange all the pieces in their proper positions and the game began.
He was eviscerated in less than ten minutes.

5/16/2016 (Monday/Sunny)
Morning
Shujin Academy

“So, I sent a message to my agent and he said he would notify his boss about the job,” Ann said. The three were in the second-floor hallway between their classrooms. Akira leaned against the wall, hiding somewhat between Ann and Ryuji as the group talked about their current plans.

“How long until he gets back to you?” Ryuji asked. Ann shrugged.

“Hopefully by the end of the day. If he gives the okay I’ll text Kitagawa to let him know we can arrange a time to meet up.” Ann said then looked at Akira, “You think what that girl told you last night was true? About Kitagawa's apparent bad habit?”

“Well if it is it’d explain why he didn’t seem to realize he was stalking you.” Ryuji grumbled, “But either way I still don’t like him.”

“Can’t blame you.” Akira said, "But if what Togo-san said is true, then the worst we can expect from Kitagawa is him insisting on creating the perfect painting.”

He still was not sure how much of he wanted to take Hifumi's word. He kept it to himself but if he was to be honest, she came off as a little odd as well. His Shogi match against her had been...louder than he anticipated at least. He was not sure if it was a Kosei High thing or not. When he got home from the church he looked up the school and outside of it being a Catholic School he did not find anything particularly odd about it. Catholic school's - while a bit uncommon - were not a rare sight in parts of Tokyo.

“I hope she's right. Still, that name sounds familiar.” Ann's voice snapped him out of his thoughts. "Wait I remember now!"

“Huh?”

"Remember what?” Ryuji asked.

“Hifumi Togo. She was in a couple of magazines recently. She was called the 'Upcoming Shogi Queen' or something. I didn't really read it, not that interested in Shogi.” Ann explained then grinned and poked Akira in the shoulder making him jump a little, "Still if she's that big of a deal it must be pretty cool you got to play Shogi with a soon-to-be celebrity."

"I guess..." He muttered. He actually was not sure how to respond to Ann's prodding. Not that she cared, and to his relief, she stopped teasing him. “Anyway, Shiho told me she starts physical therapy today. I was gonna and give her some support. You guys wanna come?”

“Of course! Do you really have to ask at this point?” Ryuji said. Akira nodded.

“It’d be nice to see Suzui-san again.” He said. Ann grinned at both of them.

“Thanks.”

The bell rang signaling the beginning of class. The three agreed to meet in the courtyard for lunch and then in the lobby at the end of the school day to go to the hospital. Akira and Ann
entered their classroom and Akira took a seat at his desk. He looked down at his school bag to see Morgana had curled up and was snoozing between two of his textbooks. He pulled one out and half listened as Kawakami told them the usually weekly morning announcements.

5/16/2016 (Monday/Sunny)
After School
Aoyama-Itchome Hospital

Left foot first, right foot second. It sounded easy. It looked easy. It should have been easy. Walking was supposed to be second nature, something she did every day since she was a toddler, and something that should have come back to her the moment she was able to put her feet off the ground. Yet her legs were shaking like they were cold as she tried to keep her balance on her crutches and for a split second, she wondered if she had ever taken a step in her life.

Shiho looked over to the other side of the room to see Ann, Sakamoto, and Kurusu waiting on the far side for her therapy session to finish. She had been happy to hear they were coming, but now that they were in the room watching her - at least Ann and Sakamoto were, Kurusu was reading a book - she wished they had not come at all. She was almost scared to make that first step.

“Do you want me to go over everything again Suzui-san?” A voice got her attention. The woman who was supposed to be helping her get back on her feet was standing in front of her, a concerned look on her face. “I know this is probably intimidating but-”

“No. I-it’s fine.” She said looking down at her legs. She could feel her hands shaking as she tightened her grip on her crutches. “I...I think I’m ready.”

“Okay. Now, remember. Start slow.”

She nodded and took her first step. Immediately she felt her weight shift violently, her legs unable to support her weight. She gasped and she thought she heard Ann shout before the therapist grabbed her and steadied her. “Easy. I’m right here.”

She helped Shiho get back to her feet and the young girl took a deep breath in and let it out. Careful and slow, she took another step forward, and almost lost her balance, but with help from her physical therapist managed to stay straight. She took another step, using the crutches to aid. She stopped after a few more steps, gasping for air.

Why was it so hard to do something that for most of her life seemed so simple? She took another step, feeling her legs shake under her weight. Then another and her legs gave out.

“Shiho!” Ann cried out.

Shiho’s therapist caught her and motioned for someone to get the young girl’s wheelchair. She then helped her sit down. Shiho took a few deep breaths and hunched over. She could feel herself shivering, yet she could also feel sweat dripping down her face and back. She put her hands on her legs and shook her head.

“I think that’s enough for today. We’ll make note of the progress we made this session and continue-”

Shiho stopped listening as her therapist spoke to a nurse, who then grabbed the handles on her
wheelchair and began moving her over to the exit of the room. Ann hurried over. “Shiho, are you okay?” She asked. Shiho looked up at her, then back down at her hands.

“She’s probably just tired.” The nurse explained. “This kind of rehabilitation is physically and mentally demanding, I’d recommend she rest for a little while.”

“C-can I talk to her for a bit? I’ll take her back to the room myself. Promise.” Ann said. The nurse gave her a questionable look.

“I insist-”

“It’s fine.” Shiho said, “Ann’s my best friend, I’ll be okay with her.”

The nurse sighed, and the others could not help but notice she seemed annoyed. “Very well.” She said with a shrug and excused herself from the scene. Ann knelt down so she was a little closer to Shiho, and Ryuji and Akira exchanged looks. Morgana popped his head out of his bag and seeing no one else was around, climbed up into Akira’s arms.

“So, uh, Suzui-san. You feeling okay?” Ryuji asked. Shiho shook her head.

“Shiho?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I can do this. Being in that hospital bed is bad enough, but being in here just reminds me how much I lost. I can’t walk. I can’t go to school.” She said, her hands balling up, “I can’t play volleyball anymore... even with him arrested, he still won.”

“Shiho, that’s not true.” Ann said, “Yes, Kamoshida hurt you, but you know something? You’re still here.” Shiho looked up at her, “You’re still alive. You came back to us, to me. And you’ll beat this just like you beat the odds before.”

“Ann’s right.” Akira said, “You’re very strong Shiho...probably one of the strongest people I’ve met so far...”

His words got her attention, but she only sighed, “Thank you, but I don’t feel it right now,”

“It’s only the first day, doesn’t this stuff take time?” Ryuji asked, “You’ll get there. Hell, I bet you’ll be back on your feet and ready for the beach by summer.”

Shiho looked at him, then away. “I appreciate the encouragement Sakamoto, but I don’t want to get my hopes up.” She said. Ryuji was quiet, and he looked at Akira, who took a step back, not sure what to say or do in the situation. Ann gave Shiho a sympathetic look, but there was a noticeable struggle on her face as she tried to think of what to say.

“Shiho, just remember, no matter what happens, we’re here for you,” Ann told her, hoping it was the right thing to say. “And you will be able to walk again. Ryuji’s right, it’s only day one. You were great out there and you’re only going to get better with time.”

Shiho was silent as she listened to her friend. If she was honest with herself, she did not feel like she did ‘great’. Almost collapsing on the ground after taking a few short steps in her mind was not great. However, Ann and Ryuji were right, it was only day one. She had no idea what the next day would bring or even the next week.

She just needed to keep working. “You’re right. I can do this. It’ll be hard, but I have to.” She said looking at them. A new light of determination shown in her eyes. “I can’t let Kamoshida win. That bastard isn’t going to take my life away from me.” She then sighed, “But I have to admit, I'm still a
little scared.”

“It’s okay to be scared Shiho,” Ann said. “Look, why don’t we take you back to your room so you can rest.”

She nodded. “Okay. I do feel a little tired.”

Ann got up and walked behind the wheelchair. It took a second for her to figure out how to move it without startling her friend, but once all set, the four went down the hallway of the hospital and back to Shiho’s room. Akira opened the door and waited for the others to go inside, before following after and then closing it behind them. He watched as Ann and Ryuji helped Shiho get back into bed.

“So, how much longer you think you’ll be in the hospital Suzui?” Ryuji asked. Shiho frowned.

“I’m not sure.” She said, “I’m hoping not too much longer, I miss my actual bed. This one isn’t the greatest.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Ann said. Akira put his hands on the mattress.

“It’s thinner than the mattress I sleep on.” He muttered.

“It needs to be thin so it can move, but sometimes I feel like I’m sleeping on rocks,” Shiho said, rolling her eyes. She then looked up at Ann, “By the way, you three went to that art exhibit right?”

“Huh? Oh right the Madarame exhibit.” Ann muttered. The three took their seats around Shiho’s bed - Morgana climbed onto Akira’s lap - and told her what they could about the exhibit as well as what they could see about Madarame and Yusuke. When they finished she was frowning.

“I still don’t like the idea, but it does sound better than what you described the other day,” Shiho said. “Did you hear from your agency yet?”

“Not yet. Still-” Ann was cut off by the sound of her phone vibrating. She pulled it out of her coat pocket and looked at it. She shook her head, a little amused, then answered the phone, “Hello? Oh, hey Taro. Uh huh...uh huh....really....yeah I can do that. What time? Okay sure. Oh, what about...really? Okay cool, I’ll let him know. Yeah, bye.”

Ann ended the call. “Looks like I got the okay to let Kitagawa-san do the painting.”

“Better let him know then,” Ryuji said. Ann nodded and began sending a text message. Akira looked down at Morgana, a frown forming on his face. He then looked up.

“Ann, are you sure you want to do this?” He asked, getting her attention. She frowned, a serious look on her face. She then nodded.

"Yeah, I'm sure.” She said. Akira could not help but notice the look on Shiho's face as Ann put together her text message and hit send. She still seemed skeptical on whether Ann modeling was a good idea or not. The fact that Ann let out a breath like she had just dropped a heavy weight, did not seem to make her feel better.

“Alright, I guess now I just wait for him to-” her phone vibrated in her hand, “-respond.” She looked at it, her eyes widened as she saw several text messages appear at once, almost like he was hitting send after every sentence. “Geeze, complete your damn thought before you hit send.”

“Ugh, I hate it when people do that,” Ryuji muttered. Akira shook his head, scratching Morgana’s
ear when the cat nudged his arm. Ann rolled her eyes and waited for the flurry of messages to stop. When they did she finally looked at them.

“He certainly doesn’t waste any time,” Ann said. Akira got out of his seat and, still holding Morgana, walked over to Ann so he could get a look at her phone. He winced at the texts, which seemed somewhat disjointed like he was typing as he was thinking. However, one thing was obvious:

“This guy really wants to do that painting.”

“And as soon as possible” Ann said. “While I would ideally want you to come to my residence right away, I understand sudden appointments for a woman of your stature’- what the hell?”

“Is he insulting you, or complimenting you?” Shiho asked, unsure what to make of the wording. None of them had an answer.

“Anyway, it looks like he wants to meet up tomorrow.” Ann said, “I have a shoot after school, maybe we could go after it?”

“That might be difficult.” Ryuji said, “I got the job at Beef Bowl and I have orientation tomorrow.”

“My follow-up with Dr. Takemi is tomorrow.” Akira added, “And I wouldn’t be surprised if once I got back to the cafe Sakura-san wanted to me to help out.”

“You’re guardian’s really taking advantage of that free help.”

"I do the dishes, I keep my cat." Morgana let out a loud meow which made Akira jump and cover the cat's mouth with his hand, "Shush, we don't want anyone to hear you."

He moved his hand and Morgana meowed again, this time a bit quieter. He sounded annoyed.

“Damn furball's gonna get us in trouble someday," Ryuji mumbled as Akira gave them all an apologetic look and circled around to sit back in his seat, "Anyway, doesn't look like tomorrow's any good. What about the day after, on the 18th? I've got no plans."

If he helped Sojiro in the cafe tomorrow, he might be able to get away with not helping the day after. "Should be okay.” Akira finally said. With that word, Ann nodded and messaged Yusuke.

There was a long pause, but she got her reply. “Of course. I should not have assumed you didn't already have prior arrangements..." She trailed off but groaned and rolled her eyes then looked at them. “He says the 18th is good, but there's one condition.”

She held the phone up for them to see the screen, “He gave me this address. He said he was hoping tomorrow would be better because we could just do the painting at Kosei High. On Wednesday he needs to ‘watch the residence’ because Madarama will be at the exhibit.”

“So he's watching Madarame's place?” Ryuji asked.

"Sounds like it," Ann said. Akira frowned and typed the address into his phone. He got a match after a few seconds.

"Says it's about a fifteen-minute walk from the station." He slid his thumb and finger across the screen to zoom in on the map. The area was part of the city but looked a bit more remote. If he had to guess it was some kind of designated residential district. "So after school then?"
“Yeah, we'll go straight after. The sooner this is done the better.” Ann told them.

“I wish I could go with you, Ann,” Shiho spoke up. She sounded a little sad and angry. “I wanna meet this guy and give him a piece of my mind.”

“We’ll give him a piece for you,” Ryuji said a grin on his face. "Don't worry, the guy won't know what hit him if he tries to mess with her."

"No, he should know what hits him." Shiho told him, "Preferably a fist to his face, but you can get creative if you want."

5/16/2016 (Monday/Sunny)
After School
Central Street - Public Gym

Makoto frowned as she closed the locker she had rented out at the gym. Despite having locked it, someone managed to break in and steal the soap she used when she showered. She was not happy to have to change into her clothes while still soaked in sweat, especially with the weather beginning to become warmer. Still, she powered through it, changed back into her school uniform, put her headband back on and took her leave from the gym.

She was walking the street, the crowd as noisy as ever, and looking at her phone. News about the Madarame exhibit was on the front page, including information about his career as a modern Japanese artist. A small smile crossed her face as she read about the exhibit. She had to admit the idea of going to an art exhibit had a mature and adult feel to it. It would be tempting if it weren't so expensive. Her sister was strict with their budget.

“Hey, you looking for a well paying job?"

“New DVDs available for rent!"

Makoto entered the DVD rental store and returned the movie she had rented out and began to browse the store's selection. Goro had mentioned wanting to watch an anime the other night and she offered to see if it was available. She double checked what it was called and moved over to the right section to see if it was available. To her dismay, after several minutes she found herself coming up empty.

Makoto:
Doesn't look like it's here.

She got a reply within seconds.

Goro:
Really? That's surprising.
I thought the release date was today...

Makoto:
Maybe it won't be available to rent until much later.

Goro:
Hmm...well that's fine I can.
I'll check if it's online when I get home.
There's a few places I know I can look...

Makoto sighed and shook her head, then exited the store, continuing down the street, blending into the crowd of business suits and school uniforms. She was considering where she should study, or if she should just return home for the evening when a sign caught her attention. She looked up to see the familiar sign of a pet store that she passed by on her way to the train station. She normally didn't think much of it, but seeing it she took a few steps forward and looked in through the glass.

She put her hand to her chin. Most of the stuff on display appeared to be for dogs, but she went inside anyway. She wondered if they had any cat toys...
There was a quiet tension throughout classroom 2-D. Some students were talking nervously while others were trying to focus on last-minute homework so they could avoid thinking about it. Akira and Ann were sharing their lunch, the former also trying to read to get his mind off the inevitable. Easier said than done with Ann talking to him as well, an amused look on her face.

“You sure you want to eat with your book open like that?” She asked. Akira looked at her as he popped some sticky rice in his mouth and then turned to the next page.

“I feel like reading.”

“You always feel like reading.”

“Yes?”

“And it never bores you?”


“Ryuji wasn’t kidding when he said you were a bookworm,” Ann said.

“Actually Ryuji calls me a nerd, but he only reads manga so pot, kettle,” Akira said, his face unchanging as he flipped to the next page. He frowned as he stared at the text and muttered something under his breath. Ann finished her cookies and leaned over to try and see what he was looking at.

“So what are you reading anyway?” She asked. Akira looked up at her and closed the book to show her the cover. Ann read it, eyes widening as she saw the cover was covered in red roses, “The Alluring Dancer. I think I’ve seen that in the library. Did you rent it out?”

“No, I don’t want to be accused of theft again.” Akira muttered, shaking his head, “I found this lying around in the attic.”

"So how is it?"

Akira paused trying to come up with a good answer and just settled on, "It’s kinda weird. It’s apparently a Japanese reinterpretation of a French Opera that is based on a French novel. Written in 1846."

Ann's eyes widened a little, "Oh wow that story has some history then. But what's weird about it?"

Maybe weird was the wrong word, Akira tried to think of a better one and then just decided to turn to a specific page and show it to Ann. His friend's reaction was almost comical, her mouth hung open as she stared at the text. "What the? What's with all the French?"

"Yeah...it's really difficult to read," Akira said. French was scattered everywhere in the book and while Akira had been using his phone to translate some words, it was a tedious process that was
taking far too much time. He stared at the text then looked back up at Ann, "Do you speak French?"

The question caught her off guard, then she laughed. "Sorry, nope! I can help you with English and
Finnish, but you're on your own with French."

Akira sighed and went back to using his phone. He popped a small piece of chicken into his mouth. After a few seconds of staring at his phone's translation of an entire sentence, he shut the book and
rubbed his temples. He should probably give up and just look for a copy of the original Carmen.

"I need a break."

Ann gave him a sympathetic look.

"Yeah, probably a good-" She started but was cut off when the door to the classroom flew open. Everyone in the classroom stopped what they were doing and looked at the student who was not standing in the classroom. He gasped for breath, then shouted:

"There up! Exam scores are up."

There was a brief silence, then chaos broke through the classroom. Half the students jumped their feet and rushed out of the room, almost crushing the poor student that made the announcement in the process. Others began praying for good grades then hurried out. A few stayed around either uninterested or too scared of seeing their scores. Akira and Ann looked at each other, trying to decide which group they were in.

"Wanna take a look?" She asked. Akira hesitated, but nodded and got up from his seat. He put his hands in his pockets and followed Ann out of the classroom. He was not going to deny that he felt nervous. Even with Makoto's tutoring, there was a part of him worried that he had done something wrong and gotten poor scores.

The two reached the main floor of the school to see the large crowd of students trying to find their names on the results sheet. Ryuji was also there. He grinned when he saw the two of them. "Ready to see how good and bad we did?" He asked.

"Not really," Akira said. He winced as he felt someone bump into him, but didn't speak up. Ann glared at the underclassman but then turned her attention to Akira.

"Come on I'm sure you did fine. You were studying with the smartest girl in the school after all."

She had a point. The three got closer to the crowd to check their scores.

"Damn. I am so dead."

"Thank god, my allowance is saved!"

"No surprise Nijima-senpai got the highest score."

"She always gets the best scores..."

"Sweet, top of the class!"

Akira started at the bottom of the list and almost immediately saw Ryuji's name. He was not dead last, but not exactly high on the list. Ryuji's reaction appeared to be a sigh and a shrug.

"Nother score I'm not telling mom about...."
Ann was slightly above average, somewhere in the middle. He noticed Mishima’s name was just above hers. His eyes moved higher on the list and when he found it, his eyes widened. He pulled off his glasses and rubbed his eyes then put them back on to double check. He was not seeing things. His name was right where he thought he saw it.

#4: Akira Kurusu

“Dude check it out, you’re in the top five,” Ryuji said, shaking Akira out of his stupor with a friendly jab on the shoulder. “Congrats, guess all that studying paid off.”

“Y-yeah...I guess.” He was not sure what else to say. He was in the top five. Makoto would get the college recommendation she had been hoping for, but more importantly, for him, it meant that he could call home and give his mother some good news. He jumped when he felt someone shake his shoulder.

“You okay?” Ryuji asked.

Akira blinked and shook his head to get him back to reality. "Yeah just surprised." He said, then laughed a little, "Can't believe I did so well."

“Congrats Akira,” Ann said, “We should do something to celebrate surviving exams. Not today, but this weekend.”

“Oh yeah, blow my first paycheck on a post-exam celebration!” Ryuji said a grin on his face. Then it dropped as realization hit him, “Wait, I don’t get paid until next week. Dammit!”

“Don’t worry about it Ryuji I’m sure we’ll figure something out,” Ann said. “Maybe a small party at Leblanc? Or we can go to Karaoke on Sunday, that’d be a lot of fun. I’ll pay for it!”

Akira shook his head, “No absolutely not. I’m not getting caught singing, ever.” He said. Ann laughed and gave him a light punch on his shoulder.

“Come on, tone-deaf singing is half the fun of Karaoke.”

“Yeah, exactly,” Ryuji told him. Akira sighed, “But if you wanna do something else, I might have an idea for the two of us.”


“Can’t tell ya, guys only thing.”

“Ugh dammit.”

Akira rolled his eyes, but he was not going to let Ryuji’s vague and possibly horrible ideas for a post-exam party bother him. He did well on his exams, he had good news for his mom, and he had friends already planning celebratory high jinx that may end up embarrassing him against his will. And he was perfectly okay with that. He followed them back to the stairwell and paused for a second when he saw Makoto checking her scores.

He needed to make sure to give her a proper thank you at some point.

Top of the class again. Makoto nodded to herself as she saw her name at the top of the third year students list. She was not surprised, as per the usual she spent so much time studying and preparing for college, it was to be expected. Though considering she had spent a good chunk of her time also
tutoring Akira Kurusu there was a nice satisfaction in seeing her name still at the top of the list. And his in the fourth slot of his grade. She smiled and took a picture of her name on the board and sent a text to Goro.

**Makoto:**

*See? Nothing to worry about.*

She put her phone in her pocket just in time to see one of the teachers come up to her. “Niijima-san, the Principal wants to speak to you.” Ms. Chouno said. Makoto sighed, she expected he would want to see her, but not immediately after results were posted. She thanked Ms. Chouno and hurried to the principal’s office.

Once she stepped into the room, Principal Kobayakawa did not waste any time. “Niijima-san, I’m correct in assuming you saw the exam scores.” He said. There was a grin on his face and Makoto could not help but notice it felt a little slimy.

“I did.”

“Top of your class again! I suppose it’s stating the obvious, but as always you are the pinnacle of what can come out of Shujin Academy.” He said. “And you’re work with Kurusu is impressive. I admit I did not expect him, even with your help, to do as well as he did on his exams.”

“T-thank you, sir.” Makoto said, “But if I’m to be honest, Kurusu-san would not have done as well as he did had he not been invested in his own studies. He should be complimented for his work just as much as I am for helping him.”

“Yes, yes.” Principal Kobayakawa said, his tone dismissive. Makoto frowned, not liking it. “Now I suppose at this point you are expecting your college recommendation and I assure you, you will have it. There are several schools that are interested in you for your academics and work ethic. Have you decided where you plan to attend college?”

Makoto kept her eyes on the principal then shook her head, “No sir. I’m afraid I’m at an impasse regarding my continued education.”

The principal stared at her, his smile twitching, “Oh?”

“It’s just…” She paused. How was she supposed to say ‘she had no idea what to do’ and not make it seem like she was a small child. “I’m still unsure what college would be best for me, especially with the current economic climate. What if the one I choose ultimately prevents me from getting a desirable career?”

Principal Kobayakawa sighed and shook his head, “Niijima-san, your sister is a public prosecutor. Once you have a decent college education, her connections will secure you a well-paying career. You don’t need to worry about if your future, provided you don’t do anything to ruin your chances of getting into college.” He said. Makoto was quiet. In many ways Kobayakawa was right, but there was something itching in the back of her mind that had been since the beginning of the year. What was the point in investing in the future if she did not have any long-term goals to reach for?

She kept the thought to herself but she found herself questioning how much her studies would help her in the real world. Was college a requirement? Goro was taking night classes at a university, but at the same time, he was technically a high school drop out and only taking those classes so he could get the paperwork confirming he met Japan’s education requirements. Sure it put him at odds
with parts of society, but in Makoto's opinion, her friend was far more ahead in life than she was.

“Now, what is your first choice college?” Kobayakawa asked, snapping Makoto out of her thoughts
“I can assure you that I can write a personalized letter and you’ll be guaranteed to get it.”

Makoto frowned. She had no answer to that question. “Could we put writing the recommendation
on hold for the time being?” She asked, “I just wanna make sure I make the right decision.”

He frowned, “Absolutely, but remember you need to have everything together by the end of the
year.” He said.

“T-thank you, sir.” She said, “Please excuse me.”

She turned and hurried out the door. She took a deep breath and let it out. She was not going to let
this little confrontation ruin her day. She was, as always, the top of her class and she was sure her
sister would be pleased. Likewise, Akira had done well on his exams. She wanted to personally
congratulate him for doing so well.

Her thoughts shifted to a small package that was hiding in her desk and wondered what she was
going to do with it. She had a feeling school would keep him busy, and it would be better to meet
with him after school. Perhaps at the cafe he lived at. Maybe he was going straight home. Or he
could have been going out with friends to celebrate.

The thought made her pause, another coming to mind. She wondered if her sister would be home or
if she would be working late. Maybe she would be interested in going out to get a nice dinner like
they normally would do after her exams. Then she remembered the mess that was trying to get the
two together even for her birthday. A frown formed on her face. Sure Sae had apologized but that
did not change the fact the memories made her a little mad.

The bell ringing got her attention. Lunch was over, it was time to return to class.

Classes in the afternoon continued as normal, but once school let out and Makoto finished cleaning
the classroom, she left hurried to the train station. Before she knew it, she was stopping in Yongen-
Jaya and walking the streets of the tightly woven together town. She found Leblanc in little time
but found herself standing outside, wondering if maybe she was making a mistake, before steadying
her nerves and opening the door. The bell rang getting Sojiro Sakura's attention. He was working
on a crossword puzzle.

“Welcome.” He said. He sounded a little surprised, but also pleased to see her, “You hear to see
Akira?”

Makoto blinked. “Yes. I wanted to congratulate him on doing well on his exams.”

Sojiro chuckled. “He’s out right now. Doctor's appointment. Nothing serious, just a check-up.” He
explained. Makoto nodded, “If you want, you can wait for him. He should be back within the
hour.”

“Oh, thank you.” She said. She looked over at the booths, all of them were open, then sat at the
booth in the middle of the cafe. She then took out one of her textbooks. If she was going to be
waiting, she might as well get her homework finished. She set to work on it, then after a few
minutes felt a presence hovering over her. Then Sojiro placed a cup of coffee next to her textbooks.
She stared at it. “Huh?”

“Try it. I remember you didn't like how bitter the cup your friend ordered was. This one has more
sugar, and cream.” He said. Makoto stared at the cup of coffee, before taking it and putting it to her lips, tasting the drink.

It was warm, but not too warm. There was a distinct sweetness she found herself liking and maybe it was just her imagination but something about the cream reminded her a little of ice cream. She thought for a second, then took another long sip of it. She then put the cup down. “This is good, thank you.”

He chuckled, “I thought you’d like it. Consider it on me.” He said. Makoto thanked him again as she took another gulp of the warm drink.

“You make all your coffee from scratch,” She said noticing the large assortment of jars lining the wall. “That must be a lot of work. Does Kurusu-san help you in the cafe at all?”

“I started putting him to work this month. Coffee’s a little beyond him, but someday he’ll make something serviceable.” He said, “That reminds me, your friend was in the shop earlier this week. He was quite antagonistic to the kid.”

Makoto frowned, her grip on her coffee cup tightening. “Really? I’ll have to talk to him then.” She sighed. “I apologize if he caused any trouble.”

“Sounds like he was more playing the overprotective big brother.” Sojiro said, “I don’t really mind it, but I don’t want there to be issues for my regulars. Long as the two go at it out of my cafe they can bicker with each other all they want.”

“I see…” Makoto muttered. She was not completely certain how to respond to Sojiro’s statement, but it did not seem like she needed too. He went back to the counter and picked up a newspaper to continue his crossword puzzle. Makoto continued her homework for a little longer, then after contemplation pulled out her phone when she saw a text from Goro.

Goro:

Congrats. I guess I had nothing to worry about after all.

She rolled her eyes and replied.

Makoto:

I told you.

You also didn’t need to antagonize the student I was tutoring.

There was a long pause. Some dots appeared on the screen to indicate Goro was typing and then disappeared altogether. Makoto sighed and resumed her homework.
Akira took a deep breath in as instructed, held it, then when told to, let it out. “Good. And again.” Takemi instructed as she moved her stethoscope to a different spot on his chest.

“Is this really necessary?” He asked.

“Yes. I am a doctor after all.” Takemi said, “The less you complain the sooner it’ll be over.”

Akira sighed and followed Takemi’s instructions. She finished with the stethoscope and then took his blood pressure and did all the other little things she claimed she was required to do, before settling on the topic of his visit. “So, you’ve been on your medication for two weeks now. How have you been feeling?”

The question took Akira a bit of time to answer, but he did. “A little better.” He said, “I’ve been taking it every night like you instructed. They leave me pretty tired in the morning, but I’m usually pretty good once I get to school.” He paused then added, "I still hate the crowds in the city and the train, but I think I'm starting to get used to it."

"I see, that's good." A smile formed on Takami's face, "And your nervousness?"

"Still kinda there, but I don't feel like I'm freezing up."

“So no panic attacks since you started your treatment?” She said. Akira nodded. “That’s good news. And you’re adjusting to the city? Have you gone out anywhere?”

He nodded. He was adjusting a little bit. “I’ve been to the park and out around the city with my friends. We went to an art museum recently. I’ve been to the church you recommended.”

“Good. I take it you’ve met Pastor Fukumoto.”

“Yeah, he spoke highly of you.” Akira said. Takemi chuckled.

“Of course he did.” She adjusted herself in her swivel chair. “Well, it’s good to hear you’re improving. I’m going to keep you on your medication for the time being, but we should see about finding you a proper therapist. I’m sure they'll have the same ideas I do, but it's good to see a professional.”

Akira’s smile dropped and seeing the change in demeanor made Takemi frown. Morgana looked up and made a noise as he climbed onto Akira’s lap. Akira put a hand on the cats back. “I’m not sure I want to see a therapist.” He said, “I’ve read up a bit and I’m worried what will happen if the wrong people found out about it. I already have enough problems, having it on my record I’m seeing a therapist for anxiety is just gonna make more people think I’m crazy.”

“I see. And you have an assault on your record. Regardless of whether or not you did the crime, you already have the stigma on you.” Takemi said, “I understand your concern, however, I’m against the idea of you not receiving professional help.”

“Can’t you just treat me? You’re a professional.”

Takemi chuckled, "While you're technically right, and I have enough understanding of your condition to give you basic treatment, I’m not the doctor you will need to see in the long run. You would be better off seeking professional help,” she explained. Akira looked down at Morgana, and Takemi watched as he continued to pet his cat. At least he was not squeezing the poor animal. Then after a few seconds, sighed, “Alright.”

He looked up at her as she turned back to her desk and stood up. She opened a cabinet and pulled
something out. “I’ll continue to treat you, at least for the time being, until we can find someone who can help you that you feel comfortable with. But on one condition.”

“What is it?”

Takemi filled a small cup with a liquid and handed it to him. “I need you to drink this.”

Akira stared at the cup. Morgana’s head popped up and the cat leaned over to sniff it. His hair stood on up and he meowed in disapproval before hoping off Akira’s lap and turned his back to the concoction. Akira stared at his cat and should have taken that as a cue to refuse the liquid. Instead he took it and looked at it. It was a strange red liquid that seemed to have something black swirling in it and the odor was the opposite of inviting. He frowned and looked at Takemi, “What is it?”

“Some medication I’m working on. Don’t worry, it won’t conflict with what you’re taking. It might still kill you though.” Akira stared at her horrified. “That was a joke. Your sense of humor is lacking for a teenager. So, how about it?”

Akira looked down at the medicine, then back at Takemi. “I drink this, and you keep treating me.”

“If you’re still alive after,” Takemi said. Again Akira stared at her horrified. Takemi rolled her eyes, "That was also a joke."

Right. Of course, it was a joke. Not that he could tell with how straight-laced her face was. Akira sighed and looked at the...'medication.'

Why did he have a feeling something terrible was going to happen? He shook that thought from his head and took a deep breath before drinking the entire thing. He swallowed and broke into a cough.

It was the most disgusting thing he had ever drunk in his life. He coughed again then wiped his mouth. He could still taste it, even as Takemi took his hand and put her fingers against his wrist to check his pulse. He coughed a few more times and after a few seconds settled down a bit. Takemi made a small humming noise then wrote down some notes.

“That wasn’t so bad.” She said, “So how do you feel?”

Akira said nothing, frowning at the question for a few seconds before answering. He looked at his hands, then moved his legs a little. He moved his head and stretched out his neck. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. He could still feel his toes. “I feel fine.”

“You sure?”

He nodded and then promptly passed out.

Akira let out a groan as he opened his eyes to see the room was too bright and Morgana’s tongue licking his fingers felt a little too rough. His head was pounding, and when he reached up to put a hand to it, he noticed his forehead felt a little cold. He blinked and let his eyes close for a few seconds longer before opening them again. The room was blurry. Why could he not see straight?

“Here.”

A voice caught Akira’s attention and he took the glasses from the hand in question. He put them on and looked around, slowly realizing he was still in Takemi’s medical clinic which brought him right back to what had just happened who knows how many minutes ago. “Welcome back to Tokyo. I trust your trip was enjoyable.”
Akira stared at her, then realized he had a horrible headache. "What the hell just happened?"

"You passed out," Takemi said, pointedly. "Unexpected actually. Does it really taste that bad?"

Akira blinked slowly. Was that why his head hurt? "Did anything happen while I was out?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. You did say a few things I won’t repeat just to save some embarrassment.” She explained then a smirk formed on her face, “Though I must say, I didn’t think a kid your age would be such a cake eater.”

Akira froze and his face turned red. He stumbled on his words before finding his voice. “What?!”

“Here, I recorded our interview for medical purposes.” Takemi said, handing him a small recorder and a pair of earbuds. He put them in his ear and listened to the interview he apparently conducted despite not remembering any of it. He listened and listened, and his face became a darker shade of red as he found himself hearing him say things he would never ever say out loud to any woman.

He caught a quick glance at Takemi’s legs as well as the sight of her cleavage when she leaned over and immediately looked away. An amused grin crossed her face, “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. Legally I can’t and it’d be morally wrong to do so anyway.” She was still grinning as he looked at her horrified. “But I do appreciate the compliments.”

“Can I go now?” Akira asked, begging her to say yes. Sensing that he had suffered enough mortification, Takemi pointed to the door. He did not waste any time. He got to his feet, grabbed Morgana and hurried to the door.

“See you next month!” Takemi shouted. He slammed the door behind him and Takemi stayed silent before chuckling to herself and setting to work. Embarrassing the poor boy aside, he was the perfect guinea pig to test her latest medication. She wrote down all her notes and deleted the interview.

Akira tried to compose himself enough so his face was not as red as he walked to the cafe. At some point, Morgana wormed himself out of his arms and hurried down the street. Akira guessed he was going to see Futaba. He was fine with that, especially since he had decided once he got into the attic he was going to lie down and attempt to expunge his experience in the clinic and what he just listened to himself say from his brain.

He opened the door of the cafe and stepped inside.

“There you are!” Sojiro said, as Akira closed the door. “Where have you been? An appointment with Takemi shouldn’t take two hours.”

Akira stared at him. He was gone for that long? He looked at the time on his phone and cursed himself for not realizing how late it was. “Sorry.” He muttered. Sojiro pointed to one of the booths.

“You should apologize to her. A real man doesn’t keep a girl waiting kid.” Sojiro said and Akira looked at him confused before turning to the booth in question. He took a few steps forward and looked in it to see Makoto staring up at him. She seemed just as perplexed as he did, but he was the one who stepped back.

“Niijima-sempai?” He asked. “What are you doing here?”

“Uh, well…” She started then trailed off. She hurriedly closed her textbook. “I wanted to speak to you about exams. And congratulate you on doing so well on them. You did….very well on them.”
Akira blinked a few times, not sure how to respond. “Uh, thanks. I wouldn’t have if you didn’t help me.” He muttered. Right now he wished Morgana was around so he could have a reason to excuse himself. He saw Makoto had her school stuff out. “Even after exams you still studying.”

Her face turned red, “It’s better to get it out of the way now so I don’t need to do it later.” She said. Akira chuckled.

“True.” He said, asked, "I do have some homework to finish. Uh, can you help me?"

There was a silence but Makoto nodded. Sojiro shook his head and decided to get started on dinner. He had a feeling he would be making food for one more.

“This is delicious.”

Makoto took another bite of her curry. Now that she was in the shop and enjoying herself she found the food was much more to her liking than she expected. She swallowed and clicked her tongue on her lips. "I can taste a slight hint of apple. The sweetness just as an undercurrent under the spices...I might want to try making this at home.”

Sojiro had a grin on his face. "Well, you'll have to figure it out by taste. That's recipe's a family secret." He said. Makoto smiled.

"I'd be happy to take up that challenge." She said.

Sojiro chuckled then hung up his apron and put on his jacket. “I’m heading out for the night. Dishes are on you kid, so make sure you clean the store before bed.”

Akira nodded and continued to eat his dinner, barely hearing the door close behind him. He shoveled the food into his mouth as he scribbled notes in his notebook. Makoto shook her head. He was going to get his books dirty and she was tempted to say something but forced herself not too.

“I don't think I've had curry quite like this.” Makoto said, "It got an authentic taste to it."

“Honestly, Sakura-san makes the best curry I've had in a long time,” Akira told her.

Makoto nodded in agreement. This was indeed the best curry she had ever tasted. She wondered if her sister would like it too. As the two finished dinner, and then their homework, the two fell into an awkward silence. Akira felt his finger twitch and tap the table, and he wondered if maybe he should ask Makoto if she wanted to leave and offer to walk her back to the train station.

“I wanted to give you something.” She said, reaching into her bag. “It’s more for your cat than you, but I thought you might like it all the same.”

She pulled a small, poorly wrapped item out of her back and pushed it over to his side of the table. Akira picked it up and pulled off the wrapping to find a small toy inside it. It was a fuzzy white mouse with an overly long tail. A frown formed on his face and he brought the mouse up to his nose.

“There’s no catnip if that’s what you're wondering,” Makoto explained. Akira smiled and put the toy mouse in his bag.

“Thanks. I bet Morgana will love it.” He said.

“I hope you’re right.” There was a pause, then Makoto spoke again. “So, I know this is none of my
business, but have you told her yet?”

The question caught him a little off guard, but he kept that hidden and instead looked away. He had a feeling it would come up. “I haven’t.” He said, and in truth, a part of him was not sure he wanted too. He looked at Makoto then pulled out his phone. "I should now though, so I don't forget."

He unlocked his screen and brought up his contacts. He searched for his home phone number and stopped as he stared at it. He had not spoken to his parents since he reached Tokyo a month and a half away. He looked up at Makoto, who was waiting patiently for him. He took a deep breath in and let it out.

He pressed the green call button and put his phone to his ear. He could hear it buzzing, and felt his chest tighten as he waited. And waited. And waited.

He heard the phone pick up. Then he heard a voice on the other end and it made his stomach turn. Not out of fear, but anger. “Oh. Hi dad.” He said. Makoto watched, realizing this was the first time Akira mentioned a father. “Yeah, it’s been fine here. Can you put mom on the phone? I want to talk to her.”

A paused and Akira frowned. “I just said why. We got our exam results in and-” He stopped and listened, then his eyes widened and his face lost its color.

He jumped to his feet and Makoto stood up. “Kurusu-san?”

He didn’t answer, he just hurried upstairs. Makoto followed after, stopping at the bottom steps before climbing them.

“When did this happen? What? Why didn’t you tell me?” She reached the top of the stairs to see Akira spin in a circle, hand moving his bangs out of his face for a second before going slack. “No right? I’m her son, your son! I have every right to know if she’s in the hospital, it’s you who-” He stopped talking as he tapped his foot and listened to the other line. “Yeah uh huh….okay….”

His voice had quieted down but his anger had not even come close to subsiding. “Fine. Can you at least tell her about my exams? Number four in my grade. No, I’m not lying. Just because -” He stopped and became very quiet, keeping his phone as he listened to someone talking to him. His fist clenched, “Uh...right. Yeah...yeah, you care so much... I gotta go. Bye.”

He pulled his phone away from ear and Makoto could hear another voice coming from it before Akira ended the call. He stood stark still, but Makoto could see his hands were shaking, and his jaw clenched as his face scrunched up. She took a step forward, "Kurusu-san?"

Akira threw his phone and it slammed into the wall.
The Shack

Chapter Notes

Due to changes in my schedule at work (that have actually been implemented for awhile), I'm now going to update on Thursdays instead of Tuesdays. Sorry for the change anyone who might be confused ^^;

Also huge thanks to everyone for supporting this work for up to 30 chapters. It's been an amazing ride and honestly, I did not expect to keep going as long as I have. Here's to the future for P5 <3

5/17/2016 (Tuesday)
Early Evening
Cafe Leblanc

The bang from Akira’s phone hitting the wall was loud and echoed through the attic. It dropped on the floor, and the room became too quiet to be comfortable. Akira was still, gazing at where his phone landed. Makoto looked at it as well. The back had popped off, and the screen was scratched from the landing, but it did not appear to be broken. She turned her attention back to Akira and took a cautious step forward. When he did not react, she moved closer.

“Kurusu-san?” She asked. She put a hand on his shoulder. His shoulders became tense, taking in a sharp breath, then choked a little. She looked at his face and saw tears were rolling down his cheek. “Kurusu-san...”

"I..." He started, then looked at her. His face was pale. "I-I need some time alone."

He pulled her hand off his shoulder and moved over to the bed. He sat down, and his head dropped, hiding his eyes behind his hair. Makoto watched him, hesitant, unsure whether she should say anything or not. She took a step forward and he held up a hand.

“Nijima-san.” He started, then dropped his hand to his lap, “I’m okay.”

He was not okay. He ran his fingers through his hair and then dropped his head to hide his eyes.

"I just need to get my thoughts together. I’ll see you at school tomorrow, okay?"

Makoto looked him over, a small frown on her face. Akira was not okay. It was obvious whatever news he got had upset him, but it was also obvious he was not comfortable talking about it. Much as she wanted to ask him about it, she knew it was not her place to pry.

“Alright, I’ll see you at school.”

Unsure what else to say Makoto started for the staircase. She glanced up to see Akira take off his glasses and lie down on his bed. She walked down the stairs and back into the cafe.

Their plates and coffee cups were still sitting on the booth table and there were several in the sink.
Sojiro had told Akira to clean the cafe before turning in for the night. That was before he called home though. She turned to the stairs, then brought her full attention to the kitchen.

She walked over to the booth and picked up the dishes. She then went over to the sink and turned on the water. She checked the cabinets for soap and upon not finding any made her way to the bathroom on the off chance it was there. To her relief, it was lying on the floor next to a mop and an empty bucket that looked like it needed to be cleaned out. She had to admit, she was not surprised Sojiro would keep the dish soap away from where the food was prepared.

She poured some soap into the water and began to set to work. She cleaned the plates and cups one at a time and put them on the counter to dry.

Makoto was not sure how long she spent on the dishes, but she was almost finished when she heard footsteps coming from the attic, then the stairs. She turned when she saw Akira enter the kitchen. His eyes were red and a bit bloodshot, his hair looked more messy than normal. His eyes widened a bit when he noticed her but didn't say anything. Instead, his shoulders dropped and he grabbed a spare cleaning cloth and started cleaning the booths. Makoto watched him, then went finishing off the dishes.

They continued to clean in silence. When she finished the dishes, Makoto grabbed a spare rag and began wiping down the counter. After she finished, she sighed and checked the clock on the wall. It was getting late. She wondered if her sister was home and waiting for her. Or maybe Goro had messaged her and was wondering where she was. She checked her phone and found she had no text messages.

In hindsight, it was more likely her sister was working late again. She put her phone back in her pocket and looked up as Akira tossed the rag on the counter and sat down. He sighed, hunched over. He looked tired, his fingers tapping the wooden counter. Makoto finished her cleaning and put the rag away.

"That should do it." She said. Akira was quiet. "Is there anything else that needs to be done."

Akira sighed and straightened. "Trash needs to be taken out. I'll get to it." He muttered, then looked up at her, "I thought you were going home."

He did not sound mad, but he sounded tired and even a little surprised she was still in the cafe.

"I will. Once everything is done anyway," she said.

Akira shook her head. "You don't have to-"

"I know I don't." She said, "But you seemed pretty upset, and I don't think you want to get in trouble with Sakura-san for not cleaning the cafe."

It would not be the first time she needed to help clean for someone in distress either. She kept that to herself. Akira looked at her and gave her a crooked smile.

"You're full of surprises." He said then after some hesitation continued talking, "My dad told me mom is in the hospital."

Makoto stared at him. She had not expected him to just hand over that detail. "I'm sorry to hear. Is she..." she stopped herself. No, she could not be okay if she was in the hospital, "What happened?"

Akira sighed and shook his head, "Nothing different from the norm." He muttered, "She's not doing well right now and I guess with no one to help her out regularly she got worse."
Makoto frowned. Those words told her far more than he probably wanted to let on. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Me too." He sighed and looked at her, "I want to think that maybe this will be the one time my dad's gonna step up, but I doubt it." He shook his head, then realized who he was talking to, "Sorry, you probably don't want to hear this."

"I'm still here, aren't I?" Makoto pointed out getting his attention. She was still there, just listening to him.

"Yeah. But it's late." Akira said. He wasn't sure how comfortable he felt spilling his guts out to his upperclassman who he still wasn't sure how friendly he was with. He looked around the cafe. "This place looks pretty good. Thanks for the help."

"You're welcome Kurusu-san."

He smiled again. Makoto found his face looked nicer with a smile on his face. He seemed more like an ordinary teenager. He stood up from his seat. "Let me walk you to the train station."

"You don't have to do that Kurusu-san."

"I insist," Akira told her and Makoto watched him before smiling and nodding to him. She grabbed her coat and the two put on their shoes. Akira grabbed the key to Leblanc and opened the door, motioning for her to go first.

He locked the cafe and walked with her to the train station in comfortable silence.

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5/18/2016 (Wednesday)
Lunchtime
Shujin Academy Rooftop

"Whoa seriously?" Ryuji asked. Akira nodded, he had just finished telling his two friends the news about his mom.

"No wonder you looked so down this morning." Ann said, "Are you gonna be okay? And your mom?"

"I'll be fine. Mom should be okay too," Akira said, "I feel like I should be worse but, Nijima-senpai was with me for most of the evening. We didn't talk about it much, but having some company helped me feel a little better."

Ann and Ryuji exchanged looks, then turned to him. "Why were you with Nijima-senpai?" Ryuji asked.

"She came over to give Morgana a present." He explained. He reached into his bag and pulled out the small white mouse. Morgana leaned over to sniff the mouse and then meowed loudly, a grin on his cat face. Akira tossed it on the ground and Morgana lunged for it, batting it with his paws. Akira then took a few more bites of his lunch. "After, we had dinner and did homework together."

He looked up to see his two friends staring at him, Ann, in particular, giving him an amused look, "What?" He asked then tried to change the subject, "Can we not talk about this? I don't want to think about home right now."

"Uh, can I at least say something?" Ryuji asked. Akira looked at him but motioned for him to go
ahead, “If your mom’s not doing so well, maybe you should go home and visit. She’s probably just as worried about you as you are about her.”

Akira wanted to say he couldn’t because of his probation but stopped himself. He was required to stay in the city and attend school, school trip being the exception if he stayed on good behavior. However, there was nothing that said he could not ask to return home for a brief visit. Especially if it was because of a sick family member. “I’ll ask Sakura-san about it, see if he can ask my probationary office. Maybe they’ll let me go back for a few days or something as some ‘family emergency’ visit or something. I don’t know.”

“I hope so.”

“...I hope so too.” Akira muttered. They all fell silent for a little while, then heard the sound of someone coming up the stairs. Akira’s first thought was Makoto had spotted them and wanted to get them off the roof (again). He had not actually seen her yet at Shujin. It wasn’t like she blended into the crowd, her bright red eyes he could spot even from the other end of a hallway. Maybe he just missed her when he came in in the morning.

For some reason that disappointed him. He was not quite sure why though.

“Oh, hello there!” A voice got his attention and it was definitely not Makoto. It was Haru, the friendly demeanor gave her away before Akira even looked at her.


“I just wanted to take a look at my plants.” She explained, then as she looked at the planters, frowned. “Oh, that’s not good. They should be bigger by now.”

The small buds Haru had planted seemed to have only grown a bit. One of them did not look a healthy color either. “Maybe they aren’t getting enough sunlight?” Ryuji asked.

“Maybe. I should probably move them...” She muttered and walked around the roof, moving a bit closer to the edge. She frowned. She had kept them away from the corner just because of the construction, but if it was delayed. She turned to the others. “Could you guys help me move the planters over here?”

“Sure.”

Ryuji was the first to his feet. Akira and Ann put their food down and got up to help too. It did not take long to move all the planters, and they weren’t that heavy, but they felt like they were going to give out underneath them because of the plastic. Once placed in their new spot, Haru picked up the watering can she had nearby and began to water them. “That should do it...” She said. “Thanks, guys. Hopefully, this little fix will help them grow better.”

“Hope so,” Ann said. “Hey, when they bloom you think I could have one or two? To give to a friend of mine?”

“Sure!” Haru said a smile on her face, “So what are you guys doing up here anyway?”

“Nothing much. Just talking ‘bout stuff.” Ryuji said, “It’s quiet and no one usually bugs us up here.”

“Yeah.” Akira said, “It’s nice not hearing everyone constantly talking about you.”

“Hmm?” Haru asked, “What do you mean Kurusu-san?”
“You know...the rumors.” He muttered. Ryuji frowned and it took a few second for Haru to think and realize what Akira was talking about. When she did, her eyes lit up and she looked down contemplating her words.

“Oh, those. Sorry, I've been so busy with stuff I haven't really paid much attention to them. The few I did hear were kinda weird anyway,” Haru said, “And to be honest after meeting you on Golden Week and talking to you guys on and off, I don't think they paint a proper picture. I admit I've been on the receiving end of Shujin's rumor mill myself because of my family. It's not fun being stuck with that, so when I hear new stories my first thought is they aren't real."

"Unfortunately some of them are," Ann said looking down. Haru nodded.

"Yes, that's true." She said, "Maybe if Shujin wasn't so bad with its gossip then real problems would actually be noticed."

"Yeah but the chances of that happening?"

"Unlikely," Ryuji said leaning back.

Akira looked down at his cat when he patted the mouse close to Haru's shoe. She smiled and looked at him, "Your pet is really cute Kurusu-san." She said.

He smiled, "You can just call me Akira if you want."

"You're sure?"

"You insist we call you Haru." He said. "And it's nice to know there are more people out there that don't believe everything they hear at Shujin."

"Oh, so that's how it is." Haru said, laughing a little, "Alright, Akira it is then."

"Oh, you can call me by my first name too," Ann said.

"Yeah same here," Ryuji said, a grin on his face. Haru laughed and agreed to it.

5/18/2016
After School
Shibuya

Akira, Ann, and Ryuji got off the train and walked through the bustling and busy streets of the station. Akira readjusted his bag as he tried to stay close to the other two, who willingly moving a bit slower for him to keep up. They walked to a part of the station he hadn’t been to yet and stopped as they came out to the skybridge. He looked out the window and his eyes widened as he saw the people on the street. He was so high up the people looked like clumps of ants.

“Are we still in the train station?” He asked out loud. He was not asking anyone in particular, but he still got Ann and Ryuji’s attention.

“You say something?” Ryuji asked. Akira shook his head. Looking around he answered his own question, but it still seemed weird to him. Just another thing in the city he needed to get used too.

“Nah, don't worry about it.” He said. "It's just really high up."

"Yeah, don't look down if you don't like heights." Ryuji chuckled at his comment, which left Akira
rolling his eyes before following Ann across the walkway. They crossed to the next building and exited, going down the street. The conversation was light, mostly Ryuji and Ann talking while Akira had the occasional comment or two, as they left the main portion of the city and found themselves where most of the residential buildings were. Ann checked her phone and led them down the correct street, stopping in her steps a few minutes later. She looked at her GPS then looked up at the building they were now in front of.

Her face twisted into one of concern and confusion. She checked her GPS again, even retyping in the address just in case she put it in wrong the first time. Ryuji’s jaw dropped and Akira raised an eyebrow at the sight.

“Is this it?” He asked.

“Looks like it,” Ann said.

The building in question did not look like a standard city house. It did not look like any kind of modern home, not even one out in the countryside. It looked more like a shack that would not be out of place near the beach or a lake. The three looked at each other. “You sure this is the right place Ann?” Ryuji asked.

“This is the address Kitagawa gave me.” Ann said, then frowned, ”Something about this definitely is not right.”

“Maybe we should go home then?” Akira suggested. In his opinion leaving sounded like the best option, but Ann had the final say. She thought it over, then crossed the street and walked up to the door of the building. She noticed the door handle was a bit rusted and loose. If it was pulled too hard it might fall off. She checked for a nameplate and found a small one with the name ‘Madarame’ written on it. That gave the location some legitimacy, but now she was wondering what a famous artist like Madarame would be doing living in a run-down looking place. She could feel a red flag going off in her mind, but after some hesitation knocked on the door.

She waited for a few seconds, apprehension crossing her face, as silence filled the air. After a minute with no response, she knocked again, louder. This time they heard a noise. It sounded like rushed footsteps, and then the sound of something being knocked over and shattering on the ground. The three looked at each other and Ann faced forward as the door opened. Yusuke was the one to greet them, looking startled, but then a grin formed on his face. Ann could not help but notice that he looked not just happy, but relieved.

“You came!” He said, then his smile dropped as he looked behind her. “You brought friends.” He sounded less than pleased.

“I hope that's not a problem.” She said.

Yusuke’s eyes moved between them. He was mostly indifferent to Akira’s presence, but his eyebrow twitched at the sight of Ryuji.

“No, it's fine.” He said, “I just hoped that our session would be one-on-one.”

“Come on man, you stalked her for about a week. You can't blame her for wanting some backup.” Ryuji spat out. Akira sighed. Why did he have a feeling that if something went wrong it would be because a fight broke out between Yusuke and Ryuji? He wanted to say something but instead brought his attention to the grass. The lawn looked like it had not been cut in months.

“Fine, I suppose it can’t be helped.” Yusuke's voice got his attention, ”Please, all of you, come in.
This is actually a good time. Madarame-sensei is at the exhibit so we’ll be able to work undisturbed.”

Yusuke lead them into the house and Akira found himself looking around. He could not help but notice how dirty the place looked.

“Do you live here by yourself Kitagawa-san?” He asked. Yusuke shook his head.

“No. This is Madarame’s residence. I live here with him.” Yusuke explained. Akira's attention turned to the room they had just stepped into. The interior of the ‘house’ or 'shake', he still was not sure what to call the place, looked better than the outside, but the place still looked pretty poor. It was not what he would call clean. There were dishes drying on the counter, but the table looked like it was covered in bits of dried paint. The walls were decorated with artwork.

“Were these also done by Madarame?” Ann asked getting Yusuke’s attention. He looked at the paintings and a pained expression crossed his face.

“They were gifts left by former apprentices.” He said. The words sounded like they were stuck in his throat.

“So more people have apprenticed under Madarame.”

“Yes. It’s normal for a master to have a handful of students.”

“So where are the rest of them?” Ryuji asked looking around. Yusuke frowned.

“Some completed their training, others left,” Yusuke said. He then changed the subject before any of them had a chance to ask more questions. “Please Takamaki-san, this way. You two as well.”

The three followed Yusuke down the hall to a set of stairs. On the way, Ann stopped as they passed a painting to get a look at it. She frowned as she stared at it. The image was like a forest bathed in soft light. She had never seen it before, and yet at the same time, there was an air of familiarity she could not describe. She tilted her head, then checked the corners for a signature. She found a name just barely legible in the bottom right.

‘Yusuke Kitagawa’

She continues down the hall and followed the guys to the second floor. Ann could not help but notice as they turned a corner that there was a unique looking door with a painted pattern and several locks on it. She almost wanted to ask what was behind it but decided against it. It could be anything, and it was probably private.

They finally stopped at a door and Yusuke pushed it aside to reveal a small room with enough space for a bed, desk, aisle, and a little extra.

“So what's this room for?” Ryuji asked.

“This is my room,” Yusuke said. Ryuji’s eyes widened. Now that he thought of it it did have all the basic necessities of a bedroom. He never thought he’d see the day he was in a bedroom smaller than his though. Yusuke grabbed two stools, one for himself, and another for Ann.

“Please take your seat Takamaki-san.” He said. Ann nodded. He wanted a sitting down pose. She took her seat.

“Anything specific you want me to do?” She asked. Yusuke paused, thinking for a moment before
coming up with an answer.

“I’m looking for an image of pure beauty.” He said, “You should be lost in thought, but with an air of refinement and taste, almost like you’re contemplating the taste of expensive wine. Also, your posture should be sharp, I want to make sure I capture the details of how your clothing folds around you, particularly around your shoulders and chest area.” He paused, then added, "also, take off your uniform jacket, the blazer clashes with your hoodie."

“So a kinda mature sexiness, right?” Ann asked as she took off the school blazer and tossed it aside.

“In fewer words yes.” He said, “Any other questions?”

“How should I have my arms?”

“However you feel best demonstrates your figure.” Yusuke said. Ryuji and Akira glanced at each other. “You two, sit over there.”

At Yusuke’s command, the two sat down on the floor. Yusuke placed his canvas on his aisle as Ann got herself ready. She leaned forward, looking down at her nails. Yusuke nodded in approval, - “yes, perfect” he muttered - and dipped his brush in the paint. He set to work. Ryuji leaned back against the wall.

“So, how long is this gonna take anyway?” Ryuji asked. His answer was silence as Yusuke painted Ann’s portrait. “Uh, hello?”

“Kitagawa?” Ann asked, not moving from her position. Again Yusuke did not say anything, continuing his work, pausing only for a second or two to glance from the canvas to his model or dip his brush in paint.

“I don’t think he can hear us,” Akira said as Morgana stuck his head out of his school bag. Ryuji let out a loud and annoyed sigh and got up.

“I’m gonna try and find the bathroom.”

Akira watched Ryuji leave the room and pulled a book out of his bad, letting Morgana climb onto his lap as he began to read. He then looked up at Yusuke and shook his head. He had a feeling they were going to be in the room for awhile.

Ann was not sure how long she had been holding her position, but she could feel her arms becoming numb. Akira and his cat had dozed off and Ryuji was messing with his phone. Yusuke was still painting, and there was a dissatisfied frown on his face. She wondered if maybe something was wrong.

“Hey, Kitagawa?” She spoke up getting his attention. “Can I take a break?”

Yusuke looked at the time and nodded, “Yes of course. Please, relax.”

Ann got up and stretched. Despite holding a single position for who knows how long, her muscles felt like she had run a mile. Ryuji looked up and put away his phone, then gave Akira a light shake on the shoulder to wake him up. Yusuke frowned as he stared at the painting, then his shoulders dropped.
“It’s no use.” He muttered. Ann raised an eyebrow. “This isn’t working.”

“Was the pose not right?” Ann asked. Yusuke looked up at her and shook his head.

“No, it’s not you.” Yusuke said, “The problem is me. It feels as though I’m failing to grasp your essence.”

Ryuji looked at the painting. “It looks fine to me.” He said. Yusuke snorted.

“Of course someone like you would think that.” He muttered. Ryuji glared at Yusuke and was about to protest when Akira shook his head. Ann leaned over and glanced at the painting. She found herself staring for several long seconds, taking in the detail and color. She was not sure what Yusuke meant by he ‘failed to grasp her essence’, far as she was concerned the painting was marvelous. How he captured the wrinkles on her hood and the sparkle in her eyes was different from how they were captured through a camera lens.

“Ryuji’s right. It’s a great painting.” Ann said, “To be honest you capture me better than most photographers do, that’s impressive.”

A brief smile formed on Yusuke’s face, before being replaced with a grimace. “While I appreciate the compliment, and really I do, I already know this work will not meet Sensei’s expectations. I must alter my approach and come up with a better idea quickly.”

“So you’re gonna look for another model?” Ann asked. Yusuke shook his head and stood up.

“No. Unlike my last model, Madarame has approved me working with you. You have a beauty that is familiar yet foreign enough to appeal to the largest number of masses.” Yusuke said. There was a pause, no one was sure what to say. Akira remembered that only a few days ago Hifumi mentioned having posed for Yusuke’s work at one point. “I promise I will do right by you with my art, just give me a few days to get my thoughts together. May I text you when I’m ready to work with you again?”

“Alright...yeah sure.”

“Thank you,” Yusuke said. The relief in his voice was obvious. Whatever was going on, he seemed desperate to get his work completed. He escorted them down the hall and to the exit. He opened it and motioned for them to step out. “Again, I’ll text you in the next few days.”

“Alright, see you later Kitagawa.”

Yusuke nodded and after some hesitation closed the door behind on them. The three looked at each other and began walking down the street. The three were silent for a long while, then Ann stopped walking and turned to them. She had a frown on her face, and she was thinking intensely. “Ann?” Akira asked. Morgana meowed, he was wrapped in Akira's arms.

“Something about this doesn’t feel right,” Ann said. “I was looking at the paintings around the building, they look like the ones that were in Madarame’s museum.”

“Well he is a famous artist, that’s kinda to be expected,” Ryuji said. Akira frowned and after a few seconds something clicked.

“Didn’t Yusuke say those pieces were made by Madarame’s apprentices?” He asked. The two looked at him and Ryuji’s eyes widened.

“He did?” He asked then thinking it over added, “Wait, yeah you’re right he did. But they look like
the ones in the museum?"

"Yeah and not just like mild similarities, but exactly the same styles." Ann said, "While at the museum I saw a piece that looked like a forest that had splatterings of red, it looked like it was made in anger. There was a similar piece inside that place, the only difference far as I could tell was just what colors were used."

"Come to think of it there was one piece I noticed that looked like one at the exhibit," Ryuji said. "Wait, you don't mean what I think you do, do ya?"

"It could just be a coincidence but if it isn't..." Ann trailed off, thinking it over before nodding to herself. "I want to look into Madarame's relationship with his apprentices. It could just be because of how weird all this has been, but I can't shake this feeling. It's almost like how I felt when Kamoshida was still around."

Ryuji and Akira looked at each other. If Ann was describing how she felt by comparing it to Kamoshida it had to be serious. "What should we be looking for?" Ryuji asked.

She shrugged, "Don't know, but maybe stuff about Madarame's relationship with his apprentices. There successes or failures after they left his tutelage. Any accusations they might have had against him."

Both Akira and Ryuji pulled out their phones. "Well, let's take a look. Guy already has some dirt on him so if there is anything it shouldn't be too hard to find." Ryuji said. He brought up his search engine and typed a few words into the search bar. Akira did as well and found himself greeted by a decent sized list of results.
I've declared war on Italics.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

5/18/2016 (Wednesday)
After School
Shujin Academy

Makoto was working on her homework in the library when she got a text message from her sister.

Sae:
Make sure your home tonight.
I'm bringing dinner.

She stared at the message for longer than she probably should have, a bit surprised by it. After so many weeks of texts from her sister saying she would be home late or not at all it was almost strange to get one from her saying she was going to be home on time. And bringing dinner with her at that. The message made her chest tighten. She wanted to be happy because it meant spending some time together, but there was still a part of her that was skeptical.

Makoto:
Really?

Sae:
Yes?
Why, did you have plans?

Makoto decided not to bring up the fact her sister had not had the best track record in recent weeks. She typed up a different message.

Makoto:
No, I was just thinking about what to make for dinner so hearing your bringing something home surprised me a little.

Should I ask Goro if he wants to join us?

She began putting her things in her backpack and was leaving the library when she felt her phone vibrate again.

Sae:
No just the two of us.
I already asked Goro, but he's
busy with school tonight.

Makoto nodded to herself then after thinking it over let a smile cross her face. Despite any reservations she might have had, she really did just want a nice dinner with her sister.

**Makoto:**
*Okay. I'll see you tonight.*

She hit send and put her phone back in her school bag. She was in a good mood now and did not need any bad news. She climbed down the stairs to the second floor and stopped as she saw some students leaving their classrooms. Her eyes fell on the sign for class 2-D and she walked over to the classroom.

Despite what happened the other night, she had not seen Akira Kurusu for most of the day. She was sure he had been in school though - he was currently Ushimura-sensei's favorite person to complain about and today was no exception. Makoto peered into the classroom and to her disappointment saw neither Akira, no Takamaki inside. If she had to guess, the two had gone home for the afternoon. She guessed if they were not around, Sakamoto had probably left for the day as well.

She sighed. She would need to try and check in with him on another day.

“Senpai?” Makoto was snapped from her thoughts and turned around to see a girl with glasses looking at her. “Did you need something?”

“Oh uh, no. Was just looking for someone.” She said.

“Oh… who? I'm sure whoever it is, I can find them with some... *investigation.*”

Makoto winced. Something about the way the girl said that made her uncomfortable. “No, that's okay. Uh, I'm sure they just left for the day. I'll just speak to them later.” Probably on Saturday during their study session. The girls face fell, but then she shook the concern off.

"Oh, well look since I have your attention, can I talk to you about the assigned budget for the newspaper-”

“I’m sorry I need to get home,” Makoto said and hurried down the hallway to the stairs. The newspaper club member stared at her, mouth hanging open as she tried to recover.

“Okay...I’ll just...leave a request in the request box. Again...”

Makoto hurried down the stairs and after putting her shoes on left the school building. She walked the street to the train station, and once in Shibuya, walked down the busy streets. Her home was thankfully not that far, so she took her time. She glanced at her phone, almost expecting some kind of bad news. Any second she was expecting a message that said ‘sorry, something last minute cropped up and I can't come home after all’ or something similar. She frowned, the grip on her phone tightening before breathing in through her nose and out her mouth to calm down.

It was true Sae had been busy, but when she was the one making the plans she usually followed through. So instead she tried to think about what her sister might be bringing home for dinner. Her immediate thought was Chinese food and after it crossed her mind she found herself entertaining the idea. There was a place that she and her sister used to frequent regularly and while it was not the healthiest food it was certainly the best tasting on a budget.

She really hoped if Sae was getting Chinese that her sister remembered she loved steamed
dumplings...

Makoto stepped into her and her sister's apartment. She tossed her schoolbag on the couch and went into her room. She changed out of her school uniform and into more casual attire before taking her seat next to her bag and pulling out her textbooks. She resumed working on her homework, the television on for some background noise.

She finished her homework and stretched. Then she heard the door open and a familiar voice.

“I’m home.”

Makoto jumped to her feet, a smile on her face as Sae entered the room.

“Hi, Sis!” She said. She smiled as Sae closed the door and saw the brown bag in her hand. Her sister had in fact brought Chinese food with her. "I was hoping that's what you would be bringing home. Guess you're a mind reader.”

The comment got a chuckle out of her sister. "Well, it's not really mind reading, more like an observation. We haven't eaten out in a while so, why not something familiar?" She said, then sighed, "Sorry I'm a little late, it was busier than I thought it would be."

“It's okay. I just did my homework to pass the time.” She said. In truth, she had not even realized how late it was. She did notice how large the bag Sae had was once she put it on the table. “That's a lot of food.”

“I ordered with three people in mind before remembering we wouldn't have three people tonight,” Sae said, a hint of embarrassment on her face. She put her purse on the counter and stretched out her neck. “But that’s fine, it just means there’s also lunch for tomorrow. You like your dumplings steamed right?”

Makoto could not keep the smile off her face. “I’ll set the table, why don’t you get out of your work uniform,” Makoto suggested. She saw Sae hesitate for a second.

“Yes, that sounds like a good idea. Excuse me.” She said. Makoto saw her sister head into the master bedroom and set to work setting the table. She put the plates and silverware in their proper places.

"Hey Makoto!” Sae called from her room. "Do we still have some cans of Second Maid? I’d like to drink that with dinner.”

Makoto opened the fridge and pulled out a can. "Yes, I got some when I went shopping this week.” Makoto told her, "Do you want a glass for it."

"Yes. Thank you."

Makoto got a glass from the cabinet and poured the soda. She left the half-empty can next to it in case her sister wanted more. She then poured herself a glass of sparkling water and placed it next to her seat. With the table set, Makoto then went about laying out the food in a way that would make it easiest for the two of them to reach their favorite things. She paused and stared at the set up once done. Some of the food her sister picked up were things Goro was more likely to eat. She shook her head, a smile on her face, and pulled out her phone. She snapped a picture of the layout and sent him a picture with a message asking if he wanted her to bring anything over tomorrow.

She then turned to take her sister's bag off the counter and stopped when she noticed something sticking out of it. It looked like thin strips of paper. She turned around to check if her sister was
still in her bedroom, then quickly pulled the two strips out. They were tickets to Madarame's Art Exhibit. She frowned, it was true her sister enjoyed art but she would never outright buy tickets to an expensive exhibit.

“What are you looking at?” Her sister asked, getting Makoto’s attention.

“Sorry, I saw them falling out of your bag.” Makoto said, “You got tickets to Madarame's exhibit?”

Sae sighed and rubbed her forehead. “More like had them forced on me. One of the guys at work was going to bring his wife, but now they’re filing for divorce. He dropped them on my desk and told me to find someone to go with. As if I had the time to indulge in the pastime.” She explained. Makoto could not help but noticed how annoyed her sister sounded. Then her face softened as an idea crossed her mind, “Why don’t you take them? Maybe Goro would be interested in going or something.”

Makoto could not help but laugh, “Well Goro does like attending ‘adult’ things. I’ll ask him about it.”

She pulled out her sister’s chair and then crossed the table to take a seat in her usual spot. "This was really nice of you sis. I admit I did not expect it.”

“Well, I thought I owed it to you.” Sae said as she sat down, “I’m really sorry about a few weeks ago. It was wrong of me to break my promise and-”

“Sis, it’s fine.”. It was not quite fine, but she kept her frustrations to herself, “I understand. You’re job’s very important.”

“Not as important as you are. I should have said no or just let the phone ring.” Sae said then after a few seconds sighed, “But I suppose the past is the past.”

“At least now we can spend a little time together.” Makoto said, “Are you home for the night or are you going to be leaving again?”

“I haven't decided yet.” She said, “I still have a few things to do at the office, but I might instead just work here on my laptop. I miss working with the TV on in the background playing something besides the news.”

“You can’t change the channel at work?”

“This new guy tried and got yelled at by one of his older superiors. It was a sight to behold, but one I wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of.” Sae said. There was a hint of a smile on her face. She took a bite of her shrimp and nodded in approval. “As good as I remember. I wonder how they make this so sweet.”

“May I try a piece?” Makoto asked.

“Only if I can have one of your dumplings.”

Makoto chuckled and agreed to the trade. Once the shrimp was on her plate, she stuffed it into her mouth and blinked a few times. The shrimp was flavorful, and she found herself wondering if the restaurant had gotten it in that day. The sweetness she recognized as some kind of sauce they had added mixed the shrimp and vegetables into.

“Hmm, that’s pretty good.” She said. With a little research, she could probably recreate the recipe. Though she had a feeling since she would use less sugar that it would not taste exactly the same.
Sae wiped some of the sauce from her lips with a napkin.

“So, tell me, you got your exam results the other day right?” Makoto nodded, “I trust you did as well as you always do.”

“Yes, I’m still at the top of my class,”

“That’s good. I was a little worried when you got elected student council president. That position leaves you with a lot of responsibility and you don't want anything hindering your chances at getting into a good college.”

“Yes, but it’ll also look very good on my college resumes,” Makoto said. A small smirk formed on Sae’s face.

“You’re thinking ahead, that’s good.” She said, then her smirk dropped, “I take it then you've chosen which college you want to attend?”

Makoto stopped, her chopsticks lightly hitting her plate. The room was silent and the silence told Sae more than enough, “I see. The Principal did tell me you had not specified a school for your college recommendation.”

"When did you hear that?"

"Only the other day." Sae told her, "Though I don't understand what the problem is exactly."

“I’ve just been having trouble thinking of what major to pursue.” Makoto said, “Like what if I go to a college to major in something I don’t like? It would be a waste of time and money, and-”

“What matters most is that you get a job that you can support yourself,” Sae said.

“But what if I don’t like it?” Makoto asked. Sae frowned as she looked at her.

“It doesn’t matter if you like it or not.” Sae said, “What matters is you have the means to support yourself. I’m not going to support you forever you know.”

“I-I know but…”

“Do you think I like my job all the time?” Sae asked, “Do you think I like not always being able to be home with you? Or staying late finishing paperwork because some moron didn’t do it right?”

“N-no, but…”

“Do you think I liked missing your birthday?”

Makoto winced. Sae’s last question had a slight tinge of anger in it, but it subsided when she saw Makoto’s face. “My point is, you shouldn’t be focusing on doing something you like. I mean, yes, you shouldn’t hate it, but in the end what matters the most is that you’re able to support yourself. It’s a difficult world out there, and being a woman you’re going to find yourself working twice as hard for half the credit of your male peers, so you should make sure it's something well paying.” Makoto was stunned silent by her sister's words. She had no idea how to respond to them. “So stop thinking about what you would 'like to do' and more about what will allow you to make it to the end of the day.”

“...if you say so, Sis,” Makoto muttered. In some ways her sister was right, but what was the point in putting so much work into her school and eventually university if she just had no idea where she
wanted to go with her education? Even her sister had motivation when she decided to become a prosecutor. She wanted to pursue justice and preserve the law. Makoto on the other hand…

“Perhaps I should consider studying law like you did.”

Sae raised an eyebrow. “Well it does pay well and you’ll have connections. It’ll be easy for you to get in.” She said, then after a moment added, “And there are several top universities you can go to to get into law school.”

“Maybe I should start looking into them.” Makoto said, “I’m sure with my grades and extracurricular activities I’ll be able to get into a great school.”

“Yes, you should,” Sae said, then paused. “Extracurricular activities?”

Makoto looked up confused and upon seeing her sister’s confusion, Sae shook her head. “Sorry, it might just be me overthinking, but are you doing something besides the student council?”

Makoto hesitated then after a few seconds of contemplation nodded, “Principal Kobayakawa asked me to tutor a student for a little while. He’s a transfer student from the countryside and there were concerns he would struggle to understand the curriculum. Though it seems the tutoring has paid off since he did well on his exams.”

“...I see.” Sae said. A frown formed on his face, "A transfer student to Shujin? That's unusual. Most college prep school's don't take on new students after the year begins, especially one so elite. Wonder why they made an exception."

Makoto put some food in her mouth so she could avoid answering that question. She could not come up with anything that sounded particularly good, and she knew the truth would anger her sister.

"Are you two going to continue these sessions now that exams are over?" Sae asked. Makoto looked at her sister and saw she had that look in her eyes. It was that inquisitive eye that she had developed during her college years.

"Yes, but just once a week. I doubt they'll continue for very long though."

There was a long silence, but eventually, Sae's nodded and went back to her food. "Well, as long as it doesn't affect your own grades it should be fine."

"It won't, I promise."

"And you'll stop if your grades begin to drop right?"

Makoto frowned. "I will."

"Good." Her statement was short and to the point and dinner continued in awkward, uncomfortable, silence for some time before Sae spoke up again. "You understand that I'm only telling you this stuff because I care about you, right?"

Makoto looked up at her. "Of course. Why would you think I don't understand that?"

"It's just..." Sae paused and shook her head, "Nevermind, I guess I'm just tired from the long day."

The silence resumed.
Akira finished drying his hands as Sojiro closed up the shop. Right when he got back to the cafe his legal guardian had asked him to help wash the dishes and wipe the tables. Futaba was visiting, sitting in one of the booths, and playing a game on her laptop. Akira could not help but notice she was exempt from cleaning duty. She had a serious expression on her face as she tapped her mouse in rapid succession.

“Come on kid, time to stop,” Sojiro said. Futaba shushed him and continued to glare at the screen with an intensity that Akira did not want to be on the receiving end of. Sojiro rolled his eyes and reached up to close the laptop.

Futaba grabbed his arm. “You touch, I’ll declare war on your coffee makers.” She said. Sojiro sighed and decided not to interfere with his sort-of-step-daughters intense focus.

“Once you're done, we go home.” He said. Futaba nodded and went back to her game. Akira smiled and took a seat across from her. He unlocked his phone and discovered a slew of text messages from Ann and Ryuji. He had told them he was stuck helping Sojiro in the cafe, so the two would need to start their search without him.

Ryuji:
Seriously this is some messed up shit.

Akira:
Hey, I’m back.

Ryuji:
Oh sweet!

Ann:
Hey, good timing Akira. I found a couple of things a little earlier. Were you able to look at the texts?

Akira:
Only skimmed them. Saw a couple of links, but haven't looked.

He paused. Should he scroll through the conversation and get caught up that way or just ask them to give him a short version? He looked at what was written and saw they had been talking for awhile. He then saw the new message in the chat and tapped the icon to move to the end of the conversation.

Ann:
It's fine, we’ll give you the short version. Ryuji and I kept digging around after you went home and...there's a lot more than we thought there’d be.
Akira:  
A lot? As in?

Ryuji:  
Well, when you look this Madarame guy up, there's a treasure trove of gossip.

First, there’s this story that I found when looking up ‘Madarame Apprentices.’

A link popped up and Akira tapped on it. He was sent to a web page with a news story. He read it over, it was about a man named Natsuhiko Nakanohara. He had been arrested under the allegations of stalking and harassing his girlfriend. The paragraphs highlighted the fact that his motivations were unknown, as well as the fact he held a downtrodden job at a call center. However a line from the news article caught his attention and he read it over twice.

Nakanohara claimed to be he a former apprentice of Madarame.

Akira brought his text messages back up to see Ryuji and Ann had sent more.

Ryuji:  
I found a similar story from a few years ago. A homeless guy accused him of plagiarism.

Ann:  
There’s also this.

Ann sent him another news article. He clicked the link and found himself on an archive site. He read the title of the story:

The Dark Secrets of Madarame’s Masterpieces:  
Exploitation, Ruin, and Death of the Apprentice  
Written By: Ichiko Ohya; Photography: Kayo Murakami

The stories title sounded almost like a tabloid piece, but as Akira read the article he found the piece to be shockingly well written. He felt a little sick reading the detailed information and the depressing tone of the photography did not help either. He closed it out after the fourth paragraph and brought the group chat back up.

Akira:  
Is this story real?

Ann:  
Well, this source is also legit. As in it's a proper publishing house.

The thing is this piece was hard to track down. I could only find it on that archive site.

I checked the actual website itself, but there’s nothing.
Akira:
So, it was redacted?

Ryuji:
I don’t know about that, but it’s safe to say it was removed for some reason.

There was a small silence. Akira wasn’t sure if he should tell Ryuji that was, more or less, what 'redacted' meant. He guessed from Ann’s silence and change of subject she was not sure if she should or not either.

Ann:
I wonder, with all these stories...

Ryuji:
Wonder what?

Ann:
Well, if these stories are true, do you think Madarame is doing this to Yusuke?

Akira:
You mean abusing him?

Ann:
Yeah.
I don’t wanna assume the worst but this is a bit too messed up.

Ryuji:
It’s possible.

But wait, if this story was retracted or whatever, wouldn't that mean that someone was lying or something?

Akira sighed. He wished it could be as simple as that.

Akira:
Not really.

Ryuji:
??

Akira:
The file for my arrest is filled with redacted information.

Ryuji:
Oh, shit.
Ann:
Really?!

Akira:
Yeah. Most of the information about
that guy who got me arrested was
blacked out.

So, it's more likely Madarame threatened
to sue the magazine if they didn't take
this story down.

Ryuji:
And since Madarame's a pretty big deal...

Akira nodded and typed up his next message.

Akira:
We should assume these people
are telling the truth.

Ann:
Yeah, I agree.

Ryuji:
Alright, so what should we do then?
Should we try and figure this out,
or talk to Yusuke or what?

There was a small pause and Akira jumped when he heard Futaba slam her fist on the table. He
looked over at her, eyes wide. She was glaring at her computer. “Stupid King…” She muttered, “I
swear the next time I see him in Akihabara I’ll-“

Knowing she was done playing her game Sojiro and closed Futaba’s laptop. “Hey!”

“Let’s go. You’re mom’s waiting and I still need to buy cigarettes.” Sojiro said. Futaba was
pouting but climbed out of the booth and put her laptop into her bag. Sojiro then turned to Akira,
“Dinner’s already in your fridge, and don’t worry about cleaning up tonight. Cafe’s pretty much
spotless.”

“Okay,” Akira said giving a small nod. He then paused and asked, “Can I try making coffee again
tomorrow?”

Sojiro shrugged, “Don’t see what’s stopping you, you can practice any time the cafe is closed. You
don’t need my permission.”

“Thought you were worried I’d burn the place down,” Akira said a small grin on his face. Sojiro
rolled his eyes.

“Just make sure you clean up if you practice.” He said, “Have a good night.”

“Night Akira,” Futaba said. Akira nodded. Sojiro and Futaba turned to leave, then his legal
guardian stopped.
“Oh, right. I left a message with your parole officer about your mom.” Akira looked up at him. “Obviously haven’t heard anything yet, but I’ll let you know if he gives you the okay to return home to visit her.”

“Okay. Thank you Sakura-san.”

Sojiro nodded and wished him a goodnight again and the two left. Akira could hear Futaba asking questions before the door closed. He then got up and grabbed his dinner and set it on a plate with a bowl of rice. He went upstairs and sat on his bed as he ate dinner, the television playing in the background as he talked to the others on his phone.

**Ann:**
_I think it’d be easier just to talk to Yusuke. Trying to track down all those people will take too much time._

_I’ll send him a text and ask if he wants to meet somewhere?_

**Any ideas?**

Akira frowned and wondered where a good place to meet Yusuke would be.

**Akira:**
_Somewhere public._

**Ryuji:**
_Yes, that way we can all be there._
_Maybe the arcade or something?_

It took a few seconds for Ann to reply back.

**Ann:**
_He might be more willing to talk if he didn’t think you two were there._

**Ryuji:**
_Well there is that restaurant on Central Street._

_Maybe it’s just me but the guy didn’t exactly look like he ate lunch today. Offering him a meal might make him talk._

**Ann:**
_That could work. I can talk to him while you guys listen from another booth._

_Sound good?_

**Ryuji:**
_Yes, let’s do it!_
Akira?

Akira hesitated to answer. He felt a bit of uneasiness in his stomach that at this point was beginning to feel too familiar. Morgana made a small noise and tried to climb over him towards his dinner. Akira pushed the cat back so he didn’t try and steal some rice from him.

Akira:
We aren’t gonna get in any trouble for this, are we?

The silence was long and Akira winced as he wondered if maybe his question was a bad one. He then got a reply.

Ann:
We should be fine, but… if you’re worried about trouble, you don’t have to come with us.

Akira took a deep breath and let it out. It was getting late, and maybe it was just because his medication had begun to wear off but he was starting to think about everything that could go wrong. Morgana snuck past him and accidentally knocked over the bowl of rice. The sound made Akira jump then he shook his head as he pulled Morgana away from the newly made mess. “Come on, knock it off.”

Morgana meowed and shook his face to try and get some of the sticky rice off him. The reaction made Akira smile. “Stupid cat.” He muttered and looked back at his phone. He thought it over for a few seconds and nodded to himself. Everything would be fine. They were just going to ask Yusuke a few questions about some rumors they heard going around. It was not going to be like with Kamoshida, where he was under the threat of expulsion.

Everything would be fine.

Akira:
I’ll come with you guys.

Ann:
You sure?

Akira:
Yeah.
Not like I have anything else to do anyway.

Ryuji:
I gotta rush to Beef Bowl for work after this, so hopefully it won’t take too long.

Akira:
Well if it does, I’ll be there to keep an eye on Ann.

Ann:
Thanks guys ^~
Okay, I’m going to text Yusuke.
Fingers crossed this works.

Akira sighed and put his phone down. He had a feeling tomorrow was going to be a long day. He finished his dinner, cleaned up, then took his medication. He laid on his bed and did some light reading as Morgana curled up next to him. The cat meowed and looked at him. “What? You worried about me?”

Morgana made a lower noise in his throat. “Oh, it’s Ann you’re worried about,” Akira said. Morgana’s head perked up, “Don’t worry, Ann’s gonna be fine. We’ll make sure of that.” He then sighed and laid his head on his pillow. “It is a little strange though.”

She seemed maybe a little to focused on the possibility Yusuke might be being treated poorly by Madarame. If he had to guess it might have been because of what happened to her friend with Kamoshida. Or maybe it was just his imagination. He blinked slowly, his eyes starting to feel heavy, so he closed them and rolled onto his side to go to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

"Why did this day last a chapter and a half?"
"Because it wanted to that's why!"
Akira yawned as he stared out the window of his classroom and at the courtyard below. It was raining. He and his friend's had plans to eat lunch outside, but with the rain, they were instead just going to eat in the classroom. Akira had purchased his lunch on the way to school, so he was waiting for Ann to return from the cafeteria. He was also waiting on Ryuji, who had not shown up yet for whatever reason. He texted earlier mentioning he was going to grab something from his locker but never said what.

Akira turned his attention from the window back to his boxed lunch. Whatever was taking Ryuji so long, he had no idea, but he was getting tired of waiting. Plus Morgana was staring at the box with impatient eyes and Akira was sure his cat was going to figure out how to open it on his own and dive in. He put his lunch on his desk and popped the top off, took a bit of rice, and slipped it under his desk.

"Here." He fed Morgana the small bit of rice. That was when Ryuji made his presence known, starting him in the process.

"Yo!" He shouted, and slid into Ann's seat. "Sorry I took so long."

Immediately Akira could hear people talking. He tried to ignore it and instead focus on his friend. "What took so long?"

“That bastard Ushimaru felt the need to give me the third degree in the hall about my shirt. Don't know why he bothers at this point, he knows I won't wear the button down.” Ryuji said. Akira gave his friend a wry smile.

"Well your not the only one he pegged today." Akira brought his hand up and rubbed his forehead. "He got ya with the chalk, huh?"

"Right in the head." Akira took a decent sized chunk of rice from his lunch and ate it. His eyes then fell on a paper in Ryuji's hand. He couldn't help but notice it was pink. "What's that?"

“That thing I wanted to show you. You remember I said we should do something to celebrate after we got our exam scores, right?” Akira nodded, "Okay well you remember that maid cafe we passed during Golden Week right? The one in Akihabara?"

Akira sighed, somehow he was not surprised by Ryuji bringing that place up. “We’re not going to a maid cafe to celebrate being done with exams."

To his surprise, Ryuji did not groan or complain about him not being fun. Instead, he laughed.

"Relax we aren't." He said, "Look I get it, going to one of those places can be a bit embarrassing if
you get caught by people you know. So I figured, why not bring a maid to us instead?"

"Huh?"

Ryuji shoved the piece of pink paper into Akira's face and having no other options, took it from his friend. He realized quickly that it was a small poster, but the colors made him cringe. It was covered in the brightest shades of pink and red possible and decorated with strawberries and different colored hearts. There was a young woman in a maid outfit, cat ears on her head. Her hand was gesturing to a speech bubble which read:

'Tired after a long day of all work and no play?  
Need someone to take care of the house?  
Or maybe you aren't feeling well  
and need someone to care for you!  

Whatever your needs  
Our Personalized Date Service  
Guarantees a lovely evening with a beautiful maid of your choice.  

Cooking? Cleaning? Your heart's desire is your command, master!'

Akira stared at the poster for a little while longer, then looked at Ryuji. “What the hell is this?”

Again Ryuji laughed. Akira was starting to not trust that laugh. "What do you think it is man? It's a personal maid service. Look the moment I saw this I knew we needed to give it a shot."

Akira frowned at him. There was no way Ryuji could convince him to give this a shot. Absolutely none whatsoever. However, his friend seemed determined to try. He pulled out his phone, "Here check this out. It's the app they have available for the thing."

Ryuji leaned over so Akira could get a better look at the screen. Ryuji brought up the app and once loaded a virtual maid popped up on the screen. She bowed and greeted Ryuji. Her specific words - no voice over, just text to Akira's relief -were 'welcome back master. Please customize me into your ideal servant.'

Akira shifted. "This is weird."

"Yeah it's a bit on the nose, but it's pretty cool once you play around with it," Ryuji told him. Akira gave his friend a skeptical look. "So I think it works almost like an ordering service or something. It lets you pick out what outfit you want the maid to wear. Like, see this black maid outfit? Apparently, that's their default or something, but..."

Ryuji tapped one of the available colors on the screen and in an instant, the black maid outfit changed to a pastel pink. "It looks like there's quite a few costumes. Heck a lot of them aren't even maid themed. And you can even pick the hairstyle and eye color. Then you just type in your address and the girl comes over to," He paused as he read some words at the bottom of the screen, "'heed your beck and call.' Sounds pretty great huh."

"Sounds..." Akira started then stopped. He was not sure how to put his uneasy thoughts into words, but he was pretty sure whatever Ryuji was looking at was not for high schoolers. "I don't know if this is a good idea."

Ryuji’s face dropped, “Oh come on man. Okay yeah, it probably sounds a bit weird. Actually,
"Ryuji, I'm on probation."

"Do you really think your probation officer is gonna care about something like this?" Akira had no answer to that question. "Besides think about it; a night with a personal maid tailored to your likes, who'll do whatever you want? And this thing doesn't ask for any private information, so we can't get in any trouble for it."

Akira stayed quiet. Despite Ryuji's attempts to sell him on the idea, the thought of getting caught up in something he wasn't supposed to be doing made him feel nervous. His hands twitched and he found himself prodding Morgana's nose for something to touch. Seeing Akira still was not sold on the idea, Ryuji lightened up a bit and instead just passed Akira his phone. "Here, why don't you play around with it a little. If you're still not feeling it, we can come up with something else."

Akira stared at Ryuji's phone for a bit before taking it. He looked at the smiling maid on the screen and at each of the options available. It seemed simple enough, just pick and choose what he liked the most. He looked up at Ryuji then back at the screen.

He began to scroll through the costumes. There were several; a kimono, a bunny girl outfit, a secretary costume. There was even a police uniform that made Akira both uncomfortable and positive that whatever he was going through was not intended for use by high school students. He was about to give Ryuji a definite 'no' when he stopped on a costume that got his attention.

It was a white nurses outfit. He blinked and his mouth twitched as he applied the costume. He noticed it had color options and picked the color pink. A small smile crept on his face. "You find something?"

He looked up at Ryuji and then down and shook his head. "Don't lie man, it's all over your face."

Akira tried to glare at his friend over his glasses, a feat that proved difficult with his face flushing a deep shade of red. He looked down at the phone again. He hated to admit it, but he was coming on to the idea of taking part in Ryuji's plan. His eyes dropped to another option near the bottom of the screen. It was an age slider.

"How old you think these women are?" He asked and saw Ryuji shrug out of the corner of his eye. "Who knows. College-age probably, maybe a bit older. Man, that'd be sweet, being able to hit on a college girl and them having no choice but to go along with it! You think college girls are hot too?"

"Y-yeah," Akira mumbled, though he found his thoughts skewing to a few years past college age. He cleared the settings on the app so they returned to there defaults and handed Ryuji back his phone. "Okay, I'm in."

"Sweet!" Ryuji shouted. Akira tried to ignore the fact Ryuji's yelling got half the class looking at them. Some even left the classroom. Ryuji glared at them, but quieted down as he continued. "Okay, if we're going to do this, we need to find a place we can do this, hopefully without spending any extra cash. Oh, how about-"

"We're not doing this at Leblanc." Akira cut Ryuji off before he could even suggest it. He was not going to risk getting in trouble with Sojiro over a dubious maid service.

Ryuji's excitement vanished in an instant. "...Okay, not Leblanc. Dammit, your room would have been perfect too. All that space, plus the kitchen downstairs."
"Why not just do it at your place?"

Ryuji’s eyes widened at the suggested and he shook his head. “Dude, if my mom found out about this, we're both dead.” He let out a huff, “We’ll have to think of something else. Maybe someone here knows of a place we can sneak into that’s not too sketchy or something. I mean, college semesters are wrapping up so there’s gotta be a cheap place to find for a-”

Ryuji stopped talking and Akira looked where he had turned to see Ann enter the classroom. She walked over and crossed her arms. "Ryuji, get out of my seat."

"First come first serve." He said. Ann tapped her foot, glaring at him. The two stared at each other for a long minute, but then Ryuji sighed in defeat and got out of her seat. Ann sat down and looked between them, noticing the abrupt change in atmosphere.

"What were you two talking about?" She asked.

"Uh, not much. Just talking about things. Cats..." Ryuji said in the most casual tone he could manage. Ann gave him a confused look and then turned to Akira, who kept his head down as he fed Morgana another small piece of rice and tried to shush his companion from making too much noise. His face was still a bit red.

“Okay... Look sorry I took so long, but I got something to tell you two.” Ann took out her phone and opened her text messages. “I got a reply from Kitagawa, he said he’d be happy to meet with me after school today. Though he seemed confused about why I wanted to talk to him.”

“What did you tell him?” Ryuji asked.

“I told him I had some questions about his work as Madarame’s apprentice. Nothing serious, just said that if we’re going to be working on this project for awhile we should get to know each other.” Ann said, “He has some stuff he needs to do after school, but he agreed to meet us there around five for dinner.”

“Shit that’s when I gotta get to work,” Ryuji muttered.

“It should still be okay.” Akira said, "We'll be in public, and I can text you if anything happens."

"Yeah, I mean I'm like five minutes away I guess. Hopefully, he doesn’t think you just asked him on a date."

“Believe me I tried to make it as clear as possible it was not one,” Ann said. She picked up a piece of Takoyaki she had gotten from the cafeteria and took a bite out of it. “There’s one other thing. You know those stories that we found last night? Mainly the one that was redacted? Well, I found the reporter’s contact information.”

“For real?”

“Yeah. It wasn't too hard to find her social media page. I wasn’t sure at first if I should, but I sent her an e-mail asking where she got her info about Madarame.”

“You think she'll answer?” Akira asked.

"Don't know. Hopefully she will." Ann said. "I told her I was modeling for Madarame's apprentice. Maybe if she feels like it, she'll have something to tell me."
Ann shrugged. She honestly had no idea.

Akira kept his hand on Morgana’s back as he took a sip of his tea, the contact helping him keep relaxed and focus on what was in front of him. Ann was sitting at the table just a little ways from him, close enough that he could hear her conversation with Yusuke, but far enough away that he would go unnoticed. The idea was simple, he was just going to listen in on the conversation and make sure that Yusuke did not try anything if things got ugly. He took a deep breath and let it out, he wished Ryuji had not needed to go to work. This mini-stakeout would be far easier for him to deal with if he was not on his own.

He looked down at Morgana for a moment and scratched his friend's ears. He could do this. Everything was going to be fine.

“Did you want anything else, young man?” The waitress’ voice got his attention and he smiled and shook his head.

“No, thank you. I’m good for now.” He said. She nodded and walked away. That was when Akira saw Yusuke enter the restaurant. Akira opened the book he had brought with him and pretended to read it. Ann must have stood up or motioned to him because the next thing Akira saw was Yusuke making a beeline for her.

“Forgive my lateness, I spent far more time in my school’s studio than I expected.”

“It’s fine, at least you showed up.” Ann told him. She sat back down and Yusuke took a seat across from her. He frowned as he looked at the table. “Is something wrong?”

“It’s just unusual for me to be invited to a place like this.”

“Really. You don't go out with friends from school?”

“I can't say I have any friends. In fact, I can only think of one person at my school who even speaks to me on a semi-regular basis.” Ann was silent at Yusuke’s words. “Anyhow, is it alright for me to order something from the menu? I’ve neglected to eat lunch today.”

“Sure, it’s on me.”

“I’ll make sure to pick something small then.”

“Pick whatever you want.”

“I thank you, but I wouldn’t want you to spend much on someone like myself.”

Ann raised an eyebrow at his word choice. "Kitagawa, it's fine." She said. Yusuke's eyes appeared to widen a little, and he nodded. "Choose whatever you want, I can cover the cost no problem."

"...I... thank you."

Ann waited as Yusuke searched the menu. Eventually, he ordered some udon noodles from the appetizer section portion of the menu. Ann ordered a desert, along with a fruit smoothie. Once the waitress left, the two fell silent for a long while. Then Yusuke spoke. “So, what was it you wanted
to speak to me about? You wanted to know more about my work as Madarame’s apprentice, yes?”

“Uh, yeah.” Ann said, “It’s just I’ve never really apprenticed for anyone so I was wondering what you do specifically.”

“Well, I suppose it’s not much different from being in school. He gives me instructions and I practice them, much like how you’d do homework based on a teacher’s lesson. However, apprenticing goes a bit further in that relationship. Many times I’ve worked alongside Madarame on various pieces.”

“Really?” Ann asked, “What do you mean but work alongside him?”

“Well, I help Madarame from time to time with his paintings. Sometimes simple things like mixing colors for him, or setting up his canvas.”

“Do you ever paint anything for him? Like for him to use or something?” Ann asked. Yusuke gave her a confused look. Then a frown formed on his face. The wheels turned in his head as a realization struck him.

“Forgive me, but this doesn't have anything to do with the article released the other day, does it?”

Ann’s eyes widened. “W-what are you? I have no i-” She paused when she saw the look on Yusuke’s face, then sighed, “Alright, you got me.”

Yusuke was quiet, simply closing his eyes, keeping a straight face. Akira noticed his shoulders drop, but they perked up quick when his noodles arrived. He thanked the waitress and turned his attention back to Ann. “So that’s what this is about. You should have asked directly.”

Ann took a sip of her smoothie and swallowed. If he was catching on that quick, she might as well come clean. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I wanted to learn more about Madarame's work so I tried doing some research and came across that story about Nakanohara. Then I did a bit of digging and came across some other pieces.” She explained. A look of disappointment crossed Yusuke's face. “Look, I’m not accusing you or Madarame of anything, but considering that I’m modeling for you, I’m just a little concerned.”

Yusuke looked down at his meal, then nodded. “I think I can see why. You’re a model which means that your reputation will be affected by the reputation of those you work with.”

If she were honest Ann had not thought of that. “That’s true I guess, but I was wondering if you were okay actually, Kitagawa.” Her words got his attention. He stared at her, eyes a little wider, mouth opened a bit. “Sorry, maybe it’s just because of what happened at my school, but between how we met, and then those stories, I guess I’m just a bit on edge.”

Akira continued to watch the scene, waiting to see how Yusuke would react. When he next spoke he was quite polite, “I admit you’ve caught me by surprise. You really are a rare light in an otherwise dark world to be concerned for the well-being of someone other than yourself.” He said. “I appreciate the concern, however, I am in fact well cared for under Madarame.

“The accusations against Madarame are mostly from apprentices who were unsatisfied with his tutelage. Some angry that they did not reach the same level of fame he did, some who were ungrateful for the teachings he gave them.” Yusuke said, “It’s a harsh reality, but not all can be satisfied.”

“So you think the accusations are just people trying to smear his name.”
“I’m actually quite positive. Many come to Madarame hoping to receive the secrets to being famous and amassing a large fortune. When you pursue art in that way you do not create real art.” Yusuke paused, “I admit that I am open to making some living off of my work, however it is important for one to pursue art for art’s sake. Being motivated specifically by financial gain merely creates an abomination, a perverse idea of artistry. Even the clueless public can see when art is a facade.”

“Huh…” Ann was not sure what to think of Yusuke’s statements. While she could see, and even to some extent, understand his train of thought, there was a tone to his voice that she did not like. “So, then that’s all it is then? You just help Madarame with your work from time to time?”

“Yes. Of course, I help Madarame with many things in his old age. I was more involved in setting up the exhibit then he was. I made it my duty, to make sure every painting was in the perfect place to be observed.” He frowned, "The museum staff wasn't too pleased with my exuberance I admit."

“You sure you're just his apprentice? Sounds almost like your his second in command."

Yusuke smiled, there was a pride in it that reached his eyes. "Madarame is more than just my teacher. In many ways, he is like a father to me.”

“Really.”

Yusuke nodded, “Yes, he...” He paused and shook his head. He took a bite of his noodles. “No that’s perhaps not an appropriate story...my these noodles look quite delectable.”

Ann tilted her head as Yusuke began to eat the meal in front of him. He ate so hungrily it made her wonder if he missed more than just lunch. She waited until he swallowed before speaking. “So, uh...” she was cut off by him shoving more noodles into his mouth. She watched, taken back by the scene and glanced up to see if Akira was still watching. He was and appeared to be just as taken back by Yusuke's table manners as her.

She decided to wait for Yusuke to finish his meal. When he did he sighed, sounding content and pushed the bowl away. He then stopped as though realizing something, “Forgive me, that was unbecoming of me.”

“Uh, don’t worry about it?”

“Now, you were going to ask something else?” Yusuke started then paused as he took out his phone. He frowned as he saw who was messaging him and then put it away. “Forgive me, Madarame needs me back at his atelier, I must be going now.”

“Oh, sure.” She said. Yusuke got to his feet and then stopped and after some contemplation sat back down. Ann stared at him, confused.

“Is it alright if I ask something before I go?” He asked, “Have I appeased your concerns about Madarame? And are you still interested in being my model for my piece?”

Ann stayed quiet for a moment then nodded. “Yeah, thank you Kitagawa-san. I think I feel more comfortable now.”

The answer seemed to satisfy him so Yusuke got to his feet again. “Well, I shall take my leave. And thank you for the meal, those were the most delicious noodles I’ve had in some time.”

Ann decided not to comment on how that statement concerned her. She said goodbye to Yusuke and watching him leave. Once he was gone, Ann sighed and slumped in her seat. Akira waited
another moment before grabbing his back and moving to Ann's booth.

“So?” Akira asked. Ann frowned and then shook her head.

“Doesn’t feel like I’ve learned anything to put my mind at ease. What do you think?” She asked. Akira glanced down at Yusuke’s now empty bowl.

“I think he liked those noodles far more than a normal person would.” He said pushing the bowl away. Ann stared at the bowl, leaning forward and resting her hands on her chin. "You still think something’s not right.”

“Yes. I mean, okay, I admit that it could just be an overreaction after what happened with Kamoshida, but my gut does make me feel like something is wrong.” Ann said, “You know what I mean? Just that feeling that something is a bit off but you can’t quite place it? Didn’t even have a chance to ask about the paintings we saw in that shack-like house…”

“You really want to pursue this don’t you.”

“Yeah.” Ann said, “I do admit though it’s weird looking into this after he stalked me.”

“It’s cause you care,” Akira said. The comment was simple and it made Ann think.

“Yeah. I guess after what happened to Shiho, just the possibility that someone else is being hurt like she was makes me so mad. I don’t want anything like what happened to her to happen to anyone else.” She looked down at the table and then back up to Akira, “Do you remember that thing I told you when you first came to school?”

“At the cafe.”

“How about I felt about Shiho.” She said. It took a few seconds but Akira nodded. It was so far from his mind that he had almost forgotten about it, “I admit I’m surprised it didn’t bother you.”

Akira looked down at his book, running his fingers across it. “It’s not something I hear a lot, usually no one talks about those things in the countryside.” He said, "But I don't see any reason to be bothered by it. It sounds nice to love someone."

“To be honest, it hurts a bit.” She said, “I don’t know how she would react if I told her. Ryuji thinks I should go ahead and say something-”

"- Ryuji knows?”

“Yeah, he’s known for awhile.” Ann finished, “Anyway, he says I should say something.”

"Are you?"

“Don’t know. I’ve seen enough stories of lost friendships when coming out that I keep thinking about the worst possible scenario.” She sighed, “Used to think that I could go through high school just keeping all those feelings buried and just playing the role of best friend. But after she jumped I keep thinking…”

The two fell quiet. Akira glanced up at her, then back down at his hands. he felt like he should say something, but nothing came to mind. At least nothing that would make her feel better.

"What if, not telling her is worse than telling her?” He asked. She raised an eyebrow. "Sorry it's just...well...it's not the same thing, but I know I wish that my dad would admit he was cheating on
my mom...so maybe she could move past it.”

"You're dad is..." She started then trailed off. Akira looked down. Right, that was only something he really told Ryuji.

"Sorry, forget I said anything." He said. Ann frowned then shook her head.

"Yeah, it's not the same thing.” She said, then let her face relax a bit, "But you are right that sometimes the truth is needed to make things easier and move forward. It's just, I'm scared of that truth. Of losing my best friend because of it. Do you get what I'm saying?”

"I'm trying to." He said. He understood losing friendships, his arrest more or less ended with everyone he knew cutting ties with him. But that a different loss compared to what Ann was talking about. "You're my friend Ann, whatever you decide I'll support you all the way. But...if Suzui-san really is your friend, she'll support you no matter what too. Right?"

"...I like to think that." She said then shook her head and changed the topic, “Anyway, there’s still something about this Madarame thing I don’t like. I want to keep looking into it.” She said then grinned, “I’ll need all the help I can get.”

Akira gave her a weak smile. “Well, if it doesn’t involve the cops I’m happy to help.”

“I promise to make sure nothing is connected to you.” She said. The weak smile stayed on Akira’s face. He was not sure how to take his friend's statement. "And Akira. I don't know what's going on either but, I'm sorry about your mom and dad."

He nodded, "Thank you..."

Chapter End Notes

The working title for this chapter was 'Ryuji's a terrible friend, part 1'
Since AO3 has been having some ongoing problems lately, I'm posting this so it doesn't get eaten by accident. Cause knowing my luck it will.

5/21/2016 (Saturday)
After School
Shujin Academy

Makoto was doing her homework in the student council room when she heard a knock on the door. A small smile crossed her face as she checked the time and then she got up and answered the door. Akira Kurusu was standing in the doorway. “I didn’t think you’d actually show up.”

“Really? I’m heartbroken…” Akira said. Then realizing what he said, felt his face turn red. Makoto stared at him, a bit taken back but the statement, but shrugged it off when Akira managed to find his voice again. “Uh, anyway…I have some questions about my schoolwork. Mainly my math class.”

Makoto nodded. “R-right. Take a seat, let’s go over your notes.”

Makoto stepped out of the way for Akira to come in and the two took seats at the table. He opened his textbook and Makoto looked over his notes. A frown crossed her face as she noticed they looked incomplete. She was sure some of the equations he had written down had additional steps to them. “Alright let’s get to work.”

Once they started on his homework it was easy for her to notice where he made mistakes. They went through one problem at a time, Makoto repeating things he seemed to have trouble understanding. He wrote down everything she told him too, however she could not help but notice that he seemed to be having trouble grasping the core concepts. After much effort, he finished one of his problems and passed his worksheet to her. She shook her head.

“No, that’s still not right.” She said. Akira sighed and moved his bangs out of his face. The frustration was obvious on his face and Makoto had to admit, she was getting a bit frustrated as well. While it was true math was his worst subject he seemed to be having more trouble today than he did during any of there study sessions. “Is everything alright? You seem distracted.”

Akira looked at her, then away from her, “I think I just have a lot on my mind.” He mumbled. He was not lying. Ann and Ryuji were still talking about Madarame and Yusuke. Makoto however, came to a different conclusion.

“Did you hear anything else about your mom?”

Her question was innocent enough, but Akira’s face scrunched up and his grip tightened around his pencil.
“No.” He felt anger swell in his chest but kept his voice even, “Sakura-san told me he sent in a request to my parole officer to visit her. We haven’t heard anything back yet.”

“I see....”

They fell silent. Akira stared at his unfinished homework, running his thumb along the edge of his pencil. The familiar and repetitive motion helped keep him grounded. Makoto watched the motion then studied his face, trying to come up with something to say. She finally settled on asking a simple question. “Do you miss home Kurusu-san?”

He looked at her, caught off guard by her sudden question. Then after thinking about it, shrugged, “A little.” He started, "I'm starting to get a better feel for the city. It probably helps that Ryuji and Ann take me out to a lot of places. There always seems to be someplace new to go or something different to do.”

“That’s good.”

“It makes the days go by fast.” He sighed and rubbed the back of his head, “Maybe a little too fast.”

Makoto stayed silent, letting him try and form his thoughts.

“I miss the quiet and slower pace of the country. And while it’s nice being able to go out into the city and know that no one here will look at me and think of me as anything other than some high schooler, Shujin is...” He trailed off before he could actually say the word. Not that he needed to, Makoto caught on well enough.

“Are your classmates still bothering you?” Makoto asked. Akira gave a small nod, but then added. “It’s been better since Golden Week.” He said, “I think with exams and Kamoshida’s arrest they got bored of talking about me. I still hear it now and again, but with Ryuji and Ann around I’m mostly distracted.”

“That’s good at least. Hopefully, Sakamoto-san and Takamaki-san can keep you in good spirits.” Makoto said, a small smile forming on her face. Akira returned that smile.

“They’re doing a good job so far.” He said then paused, “Have you ever been outside Tokyo Niijima-san?”

“Well, last years school trip was to Sapporo up north, and my father took Sis and I on a weekend trip to Nikko a few years ago. But other than that I can’t say I’ve been outside the city.” She told him. “I do admit, there was a time I was contemplating studying abroad, but my sister was and still is very against it.”

Akira was quiet but nodded to tell Makoto he was still listening. She continued.

“I told her I wanted to study in America, but she shut that down because of concerns about the increase in violence. I didn’t argue, while I thought at the time she might have been overreacting, this was just after my father passed away, so I decided to focus my interests elsewhere.” She paused, “I pretty sure Goro would also worry if I asked him about it now.”

“So you’re no longer interested.”

Makoto shrugged, her eyes becoming downcast. “I’m not sure. It’s a thought that comes by now and again, but it’s much the same as what I’m thinking about when I apply to any other
“Which is?”

“What is the best way for me to prepare for my future,” Makoto said, a frown crossing her face. She closed her eyes and then opened them “I have a confession; I’m not quite sure where what I want to do after high school. I’ve given it a lot of thought, but I feel like…” she paused trying to find the right words, “...have you ever felt like, you were working towards something, but had no idea what it was? That’s kind of how I feel about my studies.”

Akira diverted his eyes, a frown on his face. He was not sure how to respond to Makoto’s words. He wasn’t sure how he felt about them either. A bit angry, or jealous, but also sympathetic. It was a mix he wasn’t sure what to make of. He looked up when Makoto continued.

“My sister keeps telling me that if I just get into a good college, then get a decent job then I’ll be set. But everything about the current economy tells me not to get my hopes to up. And I don’t even know what I want to do with my future.”

Akira took a deep breath and let it out. “I...don’t know what to tell you Niijima-san. Sorry.”

She stared at him surprised. “Oh, no. I’m sorry. I’m not looking for advice. Though I guess I shouldn't be telling you all this to begin with.”

“No, it’s fine.” He said, “I kinda get it. It’s just...well, my situation is different.”

Makoto nodded. Right. Akira had a criminal record and was considered a delinquent. His post high school years were going to be far more complicated than hers. Now she felt a little embarrassed and guilty, about airing her grievances to him. She probably sounded like a spoiled child by comparison. She shook the thoughts out of her mind and tried to refocus on there study session.

“A-anyway, let’s return to this problem-”

A knock on the door cut her off and Makoto had to admit, she never felt so relieved to be interrupted during a study session. She got to her feet and hurried over to the door. When she opened it, she blinked in surprise. Ann was standing in the doorway.

“Takamaki-san?” She asked as Ann poked her head into the door. “Do you need something?”

“Can I talk to Akira? It’s important.” She said. Makoto looked at Akira and nodded for him to leave. Akira pushed his glasses up a bit and got to his feet. He picked up his school bag, Morgana making a small noise before falling back to sleep, and left the room.

Once in the hall, and the door to the student council room closed, Ann pulled out his phone. The hallway was scarce of students. Most were either in the library or had gone home. “You know how I sent that reporter another e-mail? Well, I got a reply last night.”

“You did?”

“Yes, and her words worry me a bit.” Ann entered her e-mails and selected the message, “She said, ‘If you know what’s good for you, you’ll back out of whatever project you're doing with Kitagawa. The kid is harmless, even clueless, but Madarame will ruin you before your twenty.’”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

Ann shook her head, “No it doesn't. But she also answered my question about how to contact Madarame's former apprentices. She didn't say much though, just ‘talk to the homeless’.”

“I don’t wanna sound like a wannabe detective, but she’s probably telling us how she learned everything she did about Madarame. I mean she did write those articles.”

Akira gave his friend a concerned look, “Ann, you’re not going to follow this are you?”

“Akira you should already know the answer to that.” She said, “And I keep telling you if you don’t wanna be involved because of your probation-”

“It’s not that...” He paused when Ann gave him a skeptical look. He sighed, "...okay, it's partially that, but it's not just that. What if this Ohya person is right? What if you get to caught up in something you shouldn't and end up getting hurt?”

“I’ve already been hurt Akira.” Ann said, looking him straight in the eye, “Yes Kamoshida didn’t do to me what he did to Shiho, but he still hurt me. And if I have the chance to help someone escape a man like him, I’m going too.”

Akira sighed. He was not going to be able to talk Ann out of this. And he was going to end up going along with it because if everything turned out to be true he couldn’t just let Yusuke be stuck in his situation, or Ann get in trouble. “Okay, well, where do we start then? How do we get these homeless people to talk to us?”

Ann made a face, her teeth scratching her lower lip, “That I don’t know.” She said, then an idea struck her. “Wait, how about we tell them we're journalists?”

“Ann, we’re high schoolers.”

“...We’re doing an article for the school paper?”

“Why not just tell them the truth?”

The two jumped and Akira turned around to see Makoto standing in the hall. “How long have you been listening?” Ann asked. Makoto's head tilted a bit, an eyebrow raised.

“It wasn’t hard. You don’t have the quietest voice.” She said. Ann glared at her, as Makoto crossed her arms, “What are you two talking about?”

Ann and Akira looked at each other, not sure if they wanted to say anything or not. Ann gave a half answer, “Have you heard the rumors about Ichiryusai Madarame?”

“I have actually. Goro told me about them. You believe they’re true?”

The answer seemed to make Ann more comfortable giving an explanation. “I’m modeling for one of his apprentices, but the whole thing feels very odd. I’d rather not go into details, but I wanna talk to some of his former apprentices. I’m just not sure how I’d approach them.”

Makoto put her fingers to her chin, the gears turning in her head as she tried to come up with an idea. “Well, why not ask them about their paintings? Surely they’d be willing to talk if you inquired about their work. Maybe show them a picture or something.”

“That...actually sounds like a good idea.” Ann said, then realized a problem, “but wait, we’d need to get pictures of the paintings. I know some of them might be on the internet, but probably not most of them. Dammit, we’d need to go back to the museum, but those tickets are expensive.”
“Funny that you mention that,” Makoto said. A devious smile formed on her face, “My Sis just happened to give me two tickets to the museum. As for getting the pictures, I think I know someone who can help...”

Akira and Ann looked at each other as Makoto pulled out her phone. She tapped the screen and brought it to her ear. Whoever she was calling picked up after a few short seconds. “Hello, Goro. I’m not interrupting anything, am I? Oh good, say can I ask you something? You wouldn’t happen to know of a way to take photos in a place that doesn’t allow cell phones, would you?” A pause as Makoto listened to the other end and then her grin widened, “Oh good. In that case, do you want to go to a museum?”

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5/21/2016
After School
Outside Madarame’s Art Exhibit

“Sometimes when I’m in Akihabara, I see a DVD or old game I want but can’t afford.” Goro began his explanation with information neither Akira, nor Ann particularly cared for. They were standing outside the museum, a few yards away so they weren’t noticed. Goro was holding out a pair of what looked to be sunglasses. Perfectly ordinary sunglasses that did not appear to be suspicious in any way shape or form. “So I use these to snap a picture for future reference, so I can...‘acquire’ them on my laptop later.”

“You’re a detective, but also a pirate,” Ann commented. Goro let out a sheepish laugh. “Apprentice actually. I can't exactly say I'm proud but school eats up a lot of money...” He sighed. Both Ann and Akira glanced at each other, not sure what to make of Goro's statement. “Anyway, look in the left corner here," Goro pointed to the spot in question and Akira noticed the texture on the glasses was different, "there’s a small camera. It can hold roughly thirty pictures. It’s not much, but it should be enough to get what you need.”

Ann took the glasses and looked them over. “Uh, no offense but wouldn’t sunglasses be suspicious?”

“Not if you have told them you have sensitive eyes. Technically they can’t argue with you about it legally,” Goro said. He was smiling again. Akira found himself glowering at that smile. The teenager's threats were still pretty fresh in his mind. “I have to admit I’m a bit...uneasy about this. If you don’t mind me asking, what exactly are you planning to do with these pictures?”

“Oh, uh...” Ann stammered, then said the first thing that came to her mind. “I-it’s for my friend. Shiho. She likes art, sometimes does a bit of painting herself and she really wanted to see the exhibit but couldn’t. Because of what happened at school...”

A small frown crossed Makoto’s face. She really did not like that Ann was lying to her friend. However, the answer seemed good enough for Goro, who nodded and shrugged. “I see. You have my sympathies. I promise Makoto-chan and I will make sure to get some good photos.”

“Ye- wait.” Ann paused as she realized what Goro had just said, "What?!"

If a record had been playing, the scratch from when it stopped would have been audible. Ann looked confused. Goro did as well, but for different reasons, “Sorry just, they’re Makoto’s tickets and my glasses. It would make sense for-”
“But I know what photos I want taken and Akira’s gone to the museum with me so he’d also—”

“Please Takamaki-san, it’s hardly fair—”

Makoto sighed as the two tried to talk over each other and looked to Akira, who had taken a few steps back to try and distance himself from the scene. Goro reaching for his camera glasses and Ann pulled her arm back. He was still smiling, but was beginning to lose his patience “You quite stubborn about this for someone who just wants to show a friend a few pictures.”

“She’s my best friend, so I want to—”

“Might I make a suggestion?” Makoto speaking up got their attention. She plucked the glasses from Ann’s fingers. “It’s true they are my tickets, therefore I should be allowed to visit the museum. However one of you needs to come with me so we know what pictures to get.”

Ann smiled, “Yeah, so—”

“Kurusu-san will come with me.”

Another audible silence. “What?!” Ann’s shouting could be heard down the next block. Akira squirmed a bit at the noise.

“Kurusu-san has been waiting quite patiently. I think he might enjoy a peaceful stroll through the museum.” She eyes Akira giving him a cold look. “Right?”

Akira jumped. He had been hoping he would not be dragged into the conversation. “Y-yeah.” He mumbled. Why was it Makoto's eyes could be so warm and yet at the same time so terrifying? He tried to stammer out a coherent sentence. “I-it shouldn't be a problem. I’ll just put my contacts in first...”

Makoto raised an eyebrow. “You’re contacts?”

“My contact lenses? So I can see?”

“To see? Wait, I thought you wore glasses because that thing you told me and Ryuji about,” Ann said, confused. Akira sighed.

"I do..." He wore his glasses because his mom suggested it so he would look less threatening. But that did not change the fact he could barely see two feet in front of him without them.

"So there not just a fashion statement..."

"Akira brought his hand to his forehead. He was starting to feel annoyed and tired. “Can we just get this over with?” He asked. He wanted to go home and take a nap.

No one argued again over who was going to the museum or not. It seemed Makoto's silent furry had them all in agreement. Akechi let him borrow his phone, turning on the app for the camera, and showing him how it worked. Akira than took his glasses off and put it in his glasses case and pulled out another small case from one of the front pockets. Putting them in was easy for the most part, but after not doing it for several months they did feel a bit weird. He blinked a few times to make sure they were in place, before deciding he was ready to go. He then put the sunglasses on and his phone in his pocket.

“Ready?” Makoto asked. He shook his head.
“Not really.” Was his answer, but he needed to do this for Ann. He pulled his bag back on his shoulder and he followed Makoto down the road to the museum. Ann and Goro watched them leave then after a few seconds Ann turned to him.

“So seriously, you’re a detective and a pirate.”

Goro groaned, “Apprentice detective.”

Goro had been right about no one batting an eye at the glasses. The guard hadn't even blinked, just told them was not to take out their phones because photography was forbidden. Akira was grateful Ann had given him a list - along with some shaky sketches - of the paintings she wanted the most. The task ended up being easy.

“I don’t really like that your friend lied to mine.” Makoto said. Akira sighed. He had noticed she seemed annoyed by that.

“Sorry. It’s just, would Goro still have let us borrow these if we told him the truth?”

Makoto glanced at him, “You’d be surprised. Goro has a large amount of contempt for people like Madarame. He’d probably have been perfectly fine with it.”

Akira was quiet as he pressed a button on the phone. He heard the clicking noise that confirmed that the picture was taken. He turned to go to the next picture, but Makoto speaking up made him stop.

“It’s beautiful.” She said, her attention turning to another piece hanging on the wall. “This painting. I can see why Madarame would want to claim it as his own.”

Akira looked back at the painting in question. It was the one Ann was convinced Yusuke had painted. “Yeah. It’s nice. Ann told me that she felt it represented the painter’s anger.”

“I see. Considering the circumstances they were in I can see why they would be angry.” She took a few steps closer. “To think, having hopes and dreams only to be taken advantage of by a terrible man. His apprentices deserve to have some kind of justice.”

Akira looked at her face and saw she looked genuinely angry. He averted his eyes, but after a few seconds took the sunglasses off so he could look directly at her. “They’ll get it. Somehow.” He told her. Makoto looked right at him, trying to search his face. She could not help but notice how clear, but heavy his eyes were without anything to hide them. She then folded her hands in front of herself.

“I hope you’re right.”

5/21/2016
Early Evening
General Store in Shibuya

They were almost surprised how smoothly Goro’s plan worked. Akira and Makoto got all the pictures Ann needed and stayed around for a bit longer just to avoid arousing any suspicion. Once they left the museum they met up with Ann and Goro waiting at a nearby convenience store.
Getting the pictures onto the photo kiosk had been easy, so had been printing them. Once they did so Ann looked through each photo. Some of them were a bit on the blurry side, but not to the point they were unrecognizable. “They’re a bit low res, but they’re recognizable. I’m surprised, you’re really good at keeping your head still Akira.”

Akira made a face, not quite sure how to reply to that statement. Ann shuffled through the rest of the pictures and then stacked them into a pile. “I guess that’s everything.”

“So then they’ll work?” Goro asked. Ann nodded.

“Yeah, these are perfect. I’m sure Shiho will really like them.” She said. They would be great for their investigation. “Thanks for this Akechi-san. You too Nijima-senpai.”

“You’re quite welcome,” Goro said, sounding quite pleased with himself. He checked the time and picked up his bag, “Sorry, I should get back to Shinjuku before it gets dark.”

“I’ll walk you to the train station.” Makoto offered as Akira checked the time on his phone.

“Guess I should get home too.” Akira said, “Got a lot of homework to finish.”

“Oh, that’s right our study session…”

“Sorry I interrupted,” Ann said as Goro got to his feet.

“It’s alright, there's always next week.” Makoto told her, but then turned to Akira, "You going to be fine working on your homework though?"

Akira stretched a bit, "I think I understand it better than before. I'll be fine."

"Well, that's good at least." Makoto then turned her attention to Goro, “Shall we get going?”

“Yes.” Goro then looked at Akira, the smile still on his face, “It was wonderful seeing you again Kurusu-san.”

Akira said nothing. He could not agree with the sentiment, and the smile on Goro’s face just made his blood boil. With Makoto and Goro gone, Ann paid for the photo’s along with the bottles of water they got from the coolers, and the two left the store. On the street, Ann opened the envelope they had put the photos in and pulled one out. “You know, I think Shiho would like to see some of these. I think a part of her is a little jealous I got to see the Madarame museum.”

“Almost twice,” Akira said, putting his hands in his pockets. She laughed a little.

“Yeah, Almost twice.” She said, then after some thought added, “You know, I think after we see Ryuji I’ll head to the hospital and show them to her. We aren’t really gonna start investigating until tomorrow right?”

Ann had a bright smile on her face as the two walked into the Beef Bowl.

5/21/2016
Early Evening
Shibuya Train Station
Goro and Makoto walked the street in silence and it was not until they entered the train station that Goro started up a conversation. “Today was an interesting day wasn’t it.” He said getting her attention.

“I suppose,” Makoto told him, then fell quiet. “I know you want to ask me some questions, but I think you already know what the answers.”

He chuckled. “Kurusu-san’s friend isn’t the greatest liar, though she did almost have me.” He said, then his smile dropped, and a thoughtful look crossed his face, “I wonder why they’re so interested in Madarame’s scandal.”

“It sounds like they're worried about his apprentice.”

“I see. Given what happened at Shujin and her modeling for him, they’re probably sympathetic to his situation. I have to admit, I’m quite curious about the stories myself.” He frowned and looked at her “And if it turns out all those allegations are true, Madarame needs to be brought to justice.”

A small frown formed on Makoto’s face, “What are you thinking of doing, Goro?”

“I’m going to look into this myself.” Goro told her, “There’s plenty of stories about Madarame that it are worth investigating. Too many in fact. There's one tragedy in particular that I come back to now and again. Several years ago he was in the news because one of his apprentices passed away in his home. Supposedly she died of unknown causes, but people found it suspicious that her son was in Madarame’s care around that time.”

“Really.”

“Yes. Madarame refuses to speak about the incident. Whether he’s annoyed by the accusations he was involved with her death or the event is traumatic for him I can’t really say, but it would be a good place to start.” He paused, “I think I’ll start there, see if I can piece some kind of map together. If it turns out this is more than just a few unhappy apprentices who thought they would have the art world and overestimated how saturated it is, then Madarame must be apprehended.”

He then laughed and jumped in excitement as he grabbed Makoto’s hands, “My first real investigation! This is so exciting.”

“Uh…” Makoto stared at her best friend, taken back by his sudden excitement. It took her a few seconds to regain her composure, but when she did, she smiled, “Yes, it is. How about we celebrate with a proper dinner instead of another night of salty ramen?”

Goro nodded, the excited and childish grin never leaving his face as the two got on the train to Shinjuku.
Today was going to be a bad day.

It was the first thought that came to mind when Akira woke up. His head felt heavy, his hair was matted, and Morgana’s meowing sounded louder than a jackhammer. It felt like he had not slept well, which was weird because his medication usually knocked him out pretty good. He rubbed his eyes and looked at Morgana as the cat jumped off his bed and stood next to his food bowl. The cat stared at the empty bowl then turned to Akira and meowed again.

“Alright, just give me a second.” Akira forced himself to his feet and pulled a can of wet food out of his drawer. Once Morgana’s bowl was filled with his breakfast, he went downstairs to get something to eat himself. As always when he climbed down the stairs of the cafe, Sojiro was present making coffee.

“You’re up early.” He said. It was Sunday and minus getting up to feed Morgana, Akira preferred to sleep in on Sunday. The teenager usually wasn’t functional until noon. Akira took a seat at the booth and yawned. “You look like you could use some coffee.”

“Too bad I can’t drink it.” He muttered. Sojiro put two bowls on a tray and pushed them over to Akira. One contained a fried egg on top of rice. The other was some miso soup. “Made by Wakaba. She insisted you have something other than curry for breakfast.”

A small smile crossed Akira’s face as he ate the rice and soup in front of him. “Tell her I said ‘thank you’.”

“Tell her yourself, she and Futaba are gonna come over for dinner tonight,” Sojiro said. Akira nodded and then took out his phone as he double checked his text messages from the other night. “Hey, no phones at breakfast. You’re almost as bad as Futaba.”

“Sorry.” Akira put his phone away, “Was just checking with my friend’s when we were meeting up.”

“So you’re going out again.” He said. Akira noticed a small smile cross his guardian’s face, which vanished as just as quick as it came, “It’s good you’re keeping busy with friends, less of a chance that you’ll get into trouble. Sometimes I wish Futaba would go out and make some friends instead of spending all her time on her computer.”

“Futaba doesn’t have any friends?”
“Not in the area.” Sojiro said, “She’s known this girl named Kana since elementary school, but she moved to some small town up north. Think it was called Inaba or something. They mostly talk through email. I do sometimes hear her talking to other people late at night, but mostly in English, so whoever they are I doubt they’re even in Japan.”

“Is that why Ishiki-san wanted me to take Futaba to the museum?”

“Cause it meant hanging out with some kids her age? More or less.” He chuckled, “You should have seen the look on Wakaba’s face when she read Futaba’s homework assignment. It was...certainly something special.”

“She didn’t care much for the museum.”

"Obviously." Sojiro was smiling again, as he went back to finishing his morning preparations. Akira continued to eat his breakfast. When he finished he got up from his seat and grabbed his dishes. He put them in the sink and grabbed the soap, only to stop when he heard the door open. The morning regulars were ready to begin there day.

“Should have stayed closed a bit longer to finish the curry.” Sojiro muttered then looked at Akira, “Forget about the dishes, I'll take care of them. Get out of here and enjoy your day off.”

Akira nodded and gave Sojiro a small thank you before going upstairs. Morgana pawing at the small cat toy Makoto had gotten him a week ago. The cat swatted the mouse into the wall and lunged for it, bumping his head. Akira watched the scene, amused, then scooped up his cat. “Come on, we’ve got a bit day today.” He said. Morgana meowed in protest but fell quiet when Akira put him in his brown bag. He then pulled out his phone when it started vibrating.

He had a new text from Ann. They were meeting in the arcade on Central Street. “Alright, let’s go.” He pulled his bag over his shoulder and hurried out of the shop.

Ann tapped her foot in annoyance as she checked the time on her phone. “What the heck is taking him so long?” She asked no one, but Akira looked up from his book when she spoke. He checked the time on his phone. It was almost eleven, they had been waiting almost an hour and Ryuji was nowhere in sight.

“Maybe he needed to help his mom with something?” Akira suggested.

"Would've been nice if he told us," Ann said. She tapped the screen on her phone and put it to her ear. Akira guessed she was trying to call him. Not that she needed too, he closed his book when he saw a familiar head of blonde hair in the crowd. He pointed him out to Ann and she looked over. “Finally.”

Ann put her phone back in her pocket as Ryuji hurried over. “Sorry, I’m late. I overslept.” He said. Ann and Akira looked at each other, Akira shaking his head as Ann gave Ryuji a disapproving frown. Ryuji made a small noise as he rolled his eyes, “Come on don’t look at me like that. So what’s our first move?”

“You mean besides waiting for you?” Ann asked, her tone a bit on the lighter side, before becoming more serious. “We need to find out where Madarame’s former apprentices are and see if they’ll tell us about there work. Ohyaa’s email said to ask the homeless so I figured maybe we should split up and look around.”

“Split up?” Akira asked. A worried look crossed his face, which Ann and Ryuji noticed. The idea of splitting up to talk to strangers made him uncomfortable. "Do we really have too?"
“It’d be the best way to cover more ground. Shibuya is pretty large and we only have so many hours to look around.”

Ann was right and Akira knew it, but that did not change the fact he did not feel like splitting off from the two. Ryuji thought for a moment, then spoke up, “Honestly we might not have too. From what I’ve seen most of the homeless hang around in the nearby alleys or in the more run-down corners of the train station. Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky?”

"If that's true..." Ann trailed off thinking over there options. While she did Akira decided just to get to the point.

"Look, I don't know how well I'll be able to find anything on my own. I'd rather stay with one of you." He told them. Ann looked at him and grinned.

"Alright, you can come with me then." She said, "We'll check around here and the square. Ryuji, why don't you look inside the station?"

The group split up. Akira followed Ann as they checked the nearby streets. Ann had taken initiative asking questions, but Akira noticed they kept coming up empty. Most knew about the Madarame exhibit, but the majority did not know anything about his apprentices. The few who did - or claimed they did - pointed them to dead ends. There was one person outside the bookstore that became lost in thought the moment Madarame came up. Another became so angry Akira and Ann needed to excuse themselves and get as far away from them as they could.

“I knew this was going to be tough, but I didn’t think it’d be this bad,” Ann muttered. Akira nodded as he sat down near the entrance to the train station. His hands were shaking and Morgana climbed out of his bag and curled up into his arms to help him calm down. “Hey, I’m going to get us some water.”

Akira nodded and scratched Morgana's head. Ann came back a few seconds later and knelt down next to Akira, giving him one of the water bottles. "Thank you." He said, before unscrewing the cap and drinking from it.

Ann took a large gulp from her own and groaned. “This sucks.” She grumbled, "I knew this was going to take a bit, but I didn't think we'd get chased off by someone.”

“Maybe we should try somewhere else,” Akira suggested, scratching his cat behind his ears. "There could be people by the exhibit that used to work for him."

"Maybe. It'd be a risk for them to go over there, but if you have nothing to lose...." Ann trailed off as she watched the crowd. The faceless masses walked by, ignoring the two as Akira scratched his cat's head and Ann watched them go by. It was as she was watching, however, that someone caught her eye. A young man walked up to the Hachiko statue took a seat on the ground next to it. He opened his bag and pulled out a few things before setting up what Ann realized was a small display. Ann gave Akira a light bump on the shoulder to get his attention. “Look over there.” She pointed out the person in question and Akira looked at her confused.

“A street vendor?” Akira asked.

“Yeah.” She watched the young man a bit longer. "I just have this feeling. We should talk to him."

She got up and approached vendor. Akira followed her. The young man was still setting up his display, but upon seeing them, mainly Ann, a grin crossed his face.

“Hey there beautiful, what brings a lovely lady like you out here on a fine day?”
Ann did her best to keep from grimacing at the comments and tried to give a charming replay. “Oh, you know. It’s Sunday and who wants to stay inside on such a beautiful day like this?”

“Hopefully not someone as beautiful as you.” The young man winked at her. Akira looked at Ann, who had a forced smile on her face. The man then noticed him, seemed to come to his own conclusions and stammered, “Uh, anyway, what can I help you two with? Here to take a look at my fine works?” He turned his attention back to Ann, "I can tell you have an eye for detail.”

Ann knelt down and took a look at some of the trinkets on display. They were mostly small bracelets with plastic stones that looked like they were hand painted. She picked one up and looked it over, “Oh this is cute!” She said. She played with it in her fingers. It felt cheap, but just looking at the paint and details carved onto the material. Despite the cheap appearance, clear effort had been put into the bracelet.

“You like? Costs about 300 yen.”

“Really!? That’s a steal for something like this!” She feigned shock and put the bracelet back on the stand and looked over the rest of the jewelry. A locket caught her eye and she picked it up. She opened it and a frown crossed her face. There was a small hand painted image inside it. The style was familiar. “This is beautiful.”

“That one's a bit pricier. About 550. But it’s worth it since you can put any picture you want in it.” He glanced at Akira, “Maybe put a pic of you and your guy here in it.”

Akira was quiet, keeping his eyes on Ann to see what she would do or say. She straightened as she continued to examine the locket. “You’re quite talented. Did you hand paint this yourself?”

“Yup. Everything here was hand painted by yours truly, using the best paint I could grab.” He said. Ann straightened and looked at Akira.

“The photos are in the bag right?” She asked. Akira nodded and shifted his bag so Ann could get into it. She found the envelope, pulled it out, and flipped through the pictures before stopping on one of them. “Well, what do we have here...”

“Uh...miss?” The young adult's voice went unheard as Akira and Ann looked over one of the pictures. It was a bit blurry, but it was a match. “Uh, are you gonna pay for that? ‘Cause I got-”

“Of course I am!” Ann said. She let out a forced and awkward laugh, which died down as she became more serious. “This design inside it is very lovely. Can I ask you a question?” She knelt down and held up the picture she and Akira had been looking at. The man’s face paled in shock, his eyes becoming wide. The reaction told her everything she needed, “You wouldn’t have happened to have worked with a famous artist in the past, did you?”

“H-huh?” The young man stammered and suddenly stood up. Then bent over to grab his things. “S-sorry I-I think you got me confused with someone else.”

Akira frowned. The reaction was so extreme it was almost a confirmation. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Sorry, but I don’t know any Madarame.” The moment he spoke he realized he had said too much and stopped. Ann and Akira watched him, and he let out a weak laugh, “You guys didn't mention him, did you.”

“You pretty much gave yourself away,” Ann said, standing back up. The young man let out a sheepish laugh before sighing and shaking his head. “Mind if we ask you some things?”
“Why? You guys don’t work for that reporter, do you? I told her I wanted nothing to do with him anymore after that damned interview,” He paused, “No can’t be, you barely look to be out of high school. So, what do you want?”

A reporter. Ann wondered if he was talking about the reporter she had been in contact with. She decided not to bring it up and instead answer his question. “I’m modeling for one of Madarame’s apprentices and started hearing some pretty scary rumors about the guy. Can you tell me a bit about your time working under him?”

The young adult looked like he was about to protest, but stopped, he then sighed. “Just you? And him?” He looked at Akira.

“And a cat.” Akira moved his arms a bit and Morgana half meowed, half yawned. Having his attention drawn to the furry animal seemed to calm the man in front of them a bit. A nervous, but less tense chuckle broke from the former apprentice’s lips.

“A cat huh? Almost makes it worth my time.”

“I’ll buy the locket and the bracelet if you tell us anything you can,” Ann told him. The young man looked at the two and then the cat and nodded. He then took a seat on a nearby bench, Ann and Akira sitting on a separate one near him.

“I was just starting high school when I met Madarame.” He explained, “I had excelled well in my middle school’s fine arts program, and got into a pretty impressive art school on scholarship. Madarame visited the school expressing interest in seeing the ‘work of the next generation’ and pretty much honed in on my stuff. At first, I thought it was because he liked the detail I put into my paintings. Now though? Honestly, I think it’s just because my style was so different from everyone else he was stealing from.”

“Does he have any other paintings besides this one?” Ann asked, letting him take the picture of his work.

“I think two or three of them are on display in the exhibit. I did over two dozen paintings for the guy. Not all of them have been shown to the public, only the stuff he thinks will really draw a crowd.”

“How long did you apprentice under him?”

“Oh wow uh...I was still apprenticing when I entered college so I think four years?”

"That's quite a while."

The man let out a bitter laugh. “Yeah, well, I’ll say this about Madarame, he does know how to teach and the few lessons he did give were legitimate. He’s like a really good film critic, knows the secrets to making a great film and can even analyze what makes a work succeed or fail, but he doesn’t have the practice to make something on his own. He says a lot of bullshit about ‘art for art’s sake’ and ‘pursuing true beauty’ to give the reporters something to clamor about, but he knows his stuff. Color, perspective... too bad he’s such a lazy ass.

“And we all fell for it. A few simple lessons and suggestions to look at things a bit differently and we were all pawns in his hand. First, he’d work with us, then he’d ask for a small favor here and there, or ask us to help him finish a work. Then the ‘artists block’ story...”

“And before you knew it, he's stealing your work,” Akira concluded.
“Pretty much. It’s like you don’t see it coming, or you do, but you don't realize you've been had until you're staring at your own work but it has his name under it.”

“Amazing he got away with it for so long.” Ann said, “You’d think with everyone living in the same house it would be obvious what was going on.”

“I didn’t say in a house, I was in a two bedroom apartment with two or three other people.” The man explained. Ann and Akira looked at each other then Ann motioned for the young man to keep going. “You know, in hindsight I think we all realized at some point we were being manipulated, but the idea of our art having a seal of approval from someone so famous. We just ignored it.”

Ann nodded thinking over his words. “What happened to the others you lived with?” She asked. The man frowned, quiet as he tried to remember.

“One guy had gotten into an argument with Madarame and stormed out. No idea what happened to him. Another tried to leave on good terms. Didn't work out. He works at McRonalds. I see him now and again when he takes his smoke breaks." He shook his head, "Never mention Madarame to him. He’ll beat the crap out of you.”

Ann and Akira made a note not to bother the person in question.

“As for the last person...” He trailed off and his jaw clenched like he was thinking about a particularly painful memory. He fell quiet like he had become lost for a second. Ann spoke up getting his attention again.

“Have you ever heard of someone named Yusuke Kitagawa?”

He shook his head, "No. And just cause I get the feeling your gonna ask, never heard of Nakanohara either. Probably for the best considering how he turned out.”

"I see..." Ann trailed off. The man sighed.

"I did go to the police after I left. Piece of shit officer did jack to help." Akira did not say it out loud, but a cold look crossed his face. He was not surprised the police did nothing. "And my folks pretty much disowned me for dropping out of college. I got no other skills besides art so I'm stuck selling these things."

Ann’s eyes fell on the small box he had on the ground. She then pulled out some of the photos she took at the museum. “One last thing, I promise. Can you tell us anything more about the art that's up at the exhibit? Like who painted it?”

"I can take a look, but I'll tell you here. Most don't wanna talk about the guy, most just wanna be left alone." Ann moved a little closer and began showing him the pictures. Some of them he shook his head too, however a few he nodded to, recognizing them. He mentioned that one person was on the street, and another he saw a few times who always went off whenever Madarame was mentioned. Ann finished going through the pictures, then pulled another up on her phone, “What about these?”

She showed him pictures she found online and watched his eyes. His eyes widened when she stopped on one of them. His face became solemn as he stared at it.

“The Bears From the North.” He uttered. He looked down, folding his hands in his lap, “ I knew
the girl who painted it.”

“You did?”

He nodded, dropping his head. He rubbed his temples and looked at the statue in front of them. “Her name was Hotone. Madarame scouted her while he was touring in Hokkaido. He said that her work brought a ‘cultural relevance that was needed in modern Japan.’” When he saw Akira and Ann’s confused faces he clarified. “She was Ainu and scouted around the time interest in the culture was increasing in Japan.”

“He wanted to take advantage of that,” Akira said. The young man nodded.

“Hotone was a character. I wouldn’t say she was the most charming girl I ever met but she wasn’t forgettable. She was constantly painting, constantly asking Madarame questions. I think she annoyed him. She had, like all of us, bought into Madarame’s promises of making us famous, but she was pushing for more than that. She wanted to bring pride to her family. And damn, the paintings she put together were beautiful.”

“What were they like?”

"Wild." He said, "She littered her work with color and animals. Especially bears. Bears are important to Ainu culture I guess, so she always tried to work them in somehow. She wanted to carve out her own identity and stand out. I think she worked harder than anyone I saw enter or leave that apartment.”

“She sounds like she had a lot of passion,” Ann said. He nodded, took a deep, struggling, breath and let it out.

“She did. But Madarame kept telling her her work wasn’t ready. She’d get mad, demanding to know when it would be, would rant for hours at dinner the days he wasn’t around about it. But she kept working to prove herself. Then she composed that.” Ann looked back at the portrait on her phone. "She was so proud of it she begged Madarame to it be her introductory piece. He called it a masterpiece.”

“So he took it.”

“took and bastardized it.” The man told her, “I’ve seen the original painting. Madarame took it and made it into this... thing wrote it off as his. Then the controversy flared up with the ACA and Hotone...” He trailed off and Ann noticed his hands had balled up, his nails digging into his palms. She looked at Akira who nodded.

“I think we’ve heard-” The man cut Ann off and continued speaking.

“We had all been ruined or devastated by Madarame. It was normal to just sink into a depression after realizing he screwed you over. Hotone took it harder than anyone. She locked herself in her room and only came out for breakfast or dinner. Then one day she never showed up for dinner so I...one of us tried bringing something to her room. The door wouldn’t open so, we picked the lock and...”

He choked and brought a hand up to his face. Ann and Akira looked at each other and were in agreement. They were done. She tried to put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. Look, it's okay. You don't need to-"

“No, it’s not!” He yelled, making them jump. Akira got to his feet. “If it weren’t for Madarame she’d still be here! She’d still be painting! She’d-” another breath, “-she’d still be here.” The man
let out a harsh breath and looked Ann in the eye, "Believe me when I say this if you know what’s good for you, don’t work with anyone involved with Madarame. He’ll ruin any hopes or dreams you have. You’ll end up on the street like me or worse and goddammit you don’t want that."

"...right..." Ann said. The man shook his head.

"As for this Kitagawa guy, he's probably already fallen into Madarame's trap, but if he's somehow not brainwashed, tell him to get out and find a new skill while he still can. His days in the art world were gone the moment Madarame spoke to him."

After saying that the man got up and began packing his things. Ann turned back to Akira and noticed he had excused himself away from the scene. She got to his feet and followed him to see he was running his fingers through his hair.

“That was more than I wanted to hear.” He said. His voice was low and strained, an understated anger in his throat. “How the hell are people able to get away with this crap?”

Ann stayed quiet, letting Akira vent for the moment and lost in her own thoughts. She was not sure what she expected to hear, but that story had been a lot to digest. She felt numb, then as she looked at the photo on her phone she felt angry. Madarame's most controversial piece was the magnum opus of a young girl that took her own life. Her grip on her phone tightened so hard it began to hurt her hand. She then looked at Akira.

“Call Ryuji, we’re going to talk to Yusuke. Now.”

Yusuke sighed as he stared at his empty canvas. Ann’s image was still ingrained in his mind, however, he could not find the drive he needed to create the painting he was thinking of. He should have requested she come over for another session, but was reluctant to call her. He knew exactly what he needed, but it was a request that he found himself hesitant to make. Every model had a line, and it was always important not to cross it.

He sighed, his brush lightly tapping his pants, paint staining them. He had two weeks as of today to paint his masterpiece. If he failed…he winced and brought his hand to his stomach when he felt it growling. Maybe a small dinner could help focus more on his artwork. There should have been some rice in the cabinet he could heat up and make a meal from. He nodded to himself, yes maybe if he had something in his stomach he could think clearly, the image in his head would become crisper, and he could put it together.

The sound of someone pounding on the door pulled him from his thoughts. He got up and looked down the hall when he heard it again. He did not believe Madarame was expecting visitors, and he knew he wasn’t expecting any. He was about to ignore it and hope it was just a door to door salesman that would leave, but after some contemplation climbed down the stairs.

He opened the door and saw Ann, Akira, and Ryuji standing outside. He blinked, he could not help but notice that they looked upset. “I was not expecting visitors.”

“Well, we weren’t exactly planning to visit,” Ryuji said. Yusuke frowned at Ryuji’s bluntness. The blonde was as pleasant as always.

“Yusuke, we need to talk. It’s important.” Ann said. There was concern in her voice that made his chest tighten. He was not sure why, but his first instinct was to close the door on them. He kept his composure and stepped out of the way so they could come in.

“I hope this won’t take long. Sensei isn’t fond of sudden visitors.”
“Can’t imagine why.” Ryuji said looking at the walls. “How the hell can you live in a place like this? It’s worse than my apartment.”

“Excuse me?”

“Ryuji,” Akira spoke up, hoping his friend would not get them into any trouble. He then turned his attention to Yusuke. “Sorry to show up all of a sudden, but like Ann said, this is important.”

“We think you might be in danger,” Ann told him. Yusuke looked at them perplexed, then it clicked, and a sour look crossed his face.

“This is about those rumors again is it. I told you-”

“We spoke to some of his old apprentices ourselves.” Ann cut him off before he could continue. He stared at her, his eyes wide. “They aren’t just rumors. Many of them are on the streets or working rundown jobs. One of them is dead…”

Dead? Yusuke shook his head, but Ann kept speaking. “You know what we’re saying is true, don’t you. Please, if you know anything-”

“Enough!” He shouted making them all jump. “I said it before and I’ll say it again. It’s true Madarame has had pupils that have been unsuccessful in breaking into the art world, but he has also had many who have done quite well for themselves!”

“Oh yeah, who? Can you name them?” Ryuji asked. Yusuke opened his mouth to answer. Then closed it. He frowned, the other three were silent. Then he shook his head and let out an uneasy laugh. Akira winced, he found he did not like that laugh.

“You can’t possibly tell me you believe street rats over someone who actually works under Madarame.”

“Are you serious?” Ryuji’s raised voice was met with a cold glare by Yusuke, "Kitagawa, do you know how many people have accused Madarame of plagiarism and abuse? It’s not just one or two unsatisfied artists! Even you can’t believe every person attacking Madarame is lying!"

“Of course I can! Surely even a neophyte like yourself knows the horrors of the internet.”

“The hell did you just call me?!”

“Stop!” Akira shouted, getting everyone to stop. Ryuji and Ann stared at him in surprise. Akira took a few deep breaths, the shouting was becoming too much. He tried to keep himself calm as he spoke, “Kitagawa, believe me when I say I know false accusations are terrible and can mess up someone’s life, but everything we’ve learned, and everyone one we’ve talked to, tells us this is true. Madarame is stealing from you, has stolen from others, and is hurting people. You can’t tell me us you haven’t noticed.”

Ryuji looked at his friend and tried to calm down too. “We get you admire the guy, but you don’t seem dumb. You have to have suspected something.” Ryuji added. Akira gave his friend a wary look. He wasn’t sure if it was the best word choice. Yusuke seemed to be on edge having this information thrown at him.

“Kitagawa, we wouldn’t be telling you about this if we weren’t positive something was wrong,” Ann told him. Yusuke had stayed silent, staring at them like a deer in headlights. He was at a loss for words, his mind trying to come up with any rational argument he could to explain away everything the three had just said to him.
He found himself with nothing. His mind blank, as he was slapped with the reality of what the others were telling him. His shoulders drooped. He felt sick to his stomach.

“I’m sorry.” He muttered. Then he pulled out his cell phone. “I’m calling the police.”

“What?!” Ann’s voice echoed through the kitchen. Akira felt the blood drain from his face. He suddenly felt dizzy.

“I’m reporting the three of you for trespassing and harassment. Sensei is already under enough pressure with the exhibit and the media all over him, he doesn’t need three teenagers spreading rumors about him.”

“Whoa there let’s not get rash.” Ryuji said. Yusuke tapped his phone. Akira spoke up, panic running through him.

“Wait! We’ll leave, we won’t bring this up anymore, and we won’t tell anyone. Just please, do not call the police.” He pleaded. Yusuke looked up at him, then the others. Then back at Akira. He could not help but notice the teenager’s body language and demeanor had changed entirely. He thought for a few seconds, then put his arm down.

“Very well. But on one condition.” Yusuke looked at Ann, looked her over top to bottom. “I want you, Takamaki-san to continue to be my model. I’ve been thinking this over for awhile, and admittedly I’ve been hesitant to ask you of this, but I’m running out of time and you three seemed to have forced my hand. I’m sure you won’t object either Takamaki-san, considering the circumstances...”

“You just want to get your painting done, right?” She asked, choosing her words carefully.

“Not just any painting, one that will tantalize the audiences of Madarame’s art exhibit.” He said then smiled, “I will do a nude painting and you will be my canvas!”


“No, out of the question! You got her as your model, isn’t that enough?”

“I have two weeks to complete this painting, and I will not hesitate any longer with this decision.” Yusuke told them, “Ann will pose nude for me for my piece or I will call the police and have you all arrested. What’s it going to be?”

The three stared at each other. Akira put his hand to his head. Why did this keep happening? Why did he have to be right about today?

Chapter End Notes

Oh, well...that happened.

Alright, I got good news for everyone. As of this posting, I’ve more or less fleshed out and managed to complete the Madarame arc and I want to have those chapters posted by the end of the summer because this entire arc has been insanely trying. Seriously I don't know what it is, but it's been a headache to adapt. Fun too, but OMG!

So as of next week, we will be returning to weekly updates. I don't know how long
that'll last, but I have an almost ten-week long backlog to get through and it's just begging to be uploaded! Next chapter will be June 7th (if I remember to post it omg). See you then!
He should have kept his mouth shut. He should have just swallowed his fears and kept his mouth shut. Stayed quiet and let the scene play out.

If he had not stopped Yusuke from calling the police, maybe the teenager would not have blackmailed Ann. But if he hadn’t said anything there was a chance they all could have gotten arrested. That he could have gotten arrested and that would be the end of his probation. The end of his chance at a future. He was curled up in a ball on his bed, one of his hands on Morgana, the other near his head. The sound of buzzing barely broke through his thoughts and his eyes moved to his phone. He picked it up and rolled onto his back. He put on his glasses so he could see the screen.

He had a text message from Ann.

**Ann:**

*Hey, you okay?*

*Please answer, Ryuji's been trying to text you since we left Madarame’s.*

He had? Akira tapped his messages and saw that she was right. Ryuji had sent him a handful of texts in the last few hours. He even had two missed calls. He had not even heard his phone go off until now. He skimmed through them, then tapped the screen to set up a group chat.

**Akira:**

*Hey.*

**Ryuji:**

*Bout damn time!*

**Ann:**

*We were getting worried.*

**Ryuji:**

*Yeah man, why didn’t you pick up?*

**Akira:**

*I didn’t hear my phone.*
There was a pause, and Akira sighed and typed.

**Akira:**
*Sorry I didn’t reply sooner. I kinda fell asleep I think.*

*I’ve been lying on my bed since I got back to Leblanc.*

He saw dots appear near the bottom of the chat, then vanish. Then appear again as someone began typing. A message popped up.

**Ann:**
*You want us to come over? Ryuji and I are still in the main part of the city.*

He stared at the message for a long time. He wanted to say yes. He was scared what they or he might say if he did.

**Akira:**
*No. I’ll see you two at school tomorrow.*

He put his phone back down and turned his head when he felt Morgana begin to move. His cat had noticed his changed his position and was now standing on the bed. “Hey.” He said. Morgana meowed and climbed over him, before settling himself into the crook of Akira’s other arm. Akira watched his pet for a bit and turned back to his phone. He brought up Ann’s name and sent her a private message.

**Akira:**
*I’m sorry.*

He got a response after a few seconds.

**Ann:**
*For what?*

For what? To him, it seemed obvious.

**Akira:**
*The only reason he blackmailed you was cause I spoke out.*

There was a long pause as three dots appeared and disappeared at the bottom of the screen. Then Ann’s reply appeared.

**Ann:**
*It’s not your fault.*

*Honestly, he was probably considering that kind of work. I mean I don’t want to say it, but you know how guys can be. He just used the threat of calling the police on us to his advantage.*
Akira read her reply multiple times. She said it was not his fault, but why did he still feel like he was responsible for the whole thing? Why did it feel like it took Ann to long to answer? Had he not been so worried about his probation maybe Yusuke would never have gotten the idea of blackmail in the first place.

Or maybe she was right and Yusuke blackmailing them after he spoke out was just a poorly timed coincidence. He had no idea. The thought raced through his head and before he knew it he was back at square one. Why could he not stop thinking about it?

His breath hitched and he felt his hands shake. He turned off his phone so he could not keep looking at it and rolled back on his side. He put his hand on Morgana’s head, who meowed and stared at him. “I don’t feel well. My chest hurts.” He muttered. Morgana looked at him, his head tilted, then turned around and jumped off the bed. Akira sighed and closed his eyes, trying to steady his breathing, and steady his nerves.

He grunted and shifted when he felt something hit his head. He cracked an eye open and saw Morgana was back on the bed and had dropped the toy mouse Makoto had given him a few days ago on his face. Akira looked at it, then sighed. “I don’t want to play.”

Morgana picked up the mouse and dropped it on his head again. This second time made him chuckle a little. “Stop it.” He muttered a small smile on his face that faded just as it came. “You’re a stubborn cat.”

Morgana meowed again and jumped off the bed. Akira watched his cat and sat up when he saw Morgana going for the stairs. “What are you-” The cat jumped onto the steps, “Morgana! You’re not allowed downstairs!”

He got to his feet and followed after the cat, who meowed again and continued downward. Akira chased after him and scooped him up before he could reach the bottom steps. “Gotcha.” He muttered, “What’s the hell’s-”

“There you are!” Akira jumped when a familiar voice got his attention and looked up to see Futaba sitting at the counter. Sojiro was pouring coffee into some cups. Wakaba was sitting at her usual table, working on her laptop. “About time you showed up, it’s almost dinner time.”

Akira looked at her confused, “I thought you already ate…” He muttered.

“Futaba insisted on waiting for you,” Sojiro said. “You alright? You didn’t look well when you came home. Don’t look like you’ve improved either.”

His voice became caught in his throat. He tried to answer, but he found himself becoming a bundle of nerves. “I’m…” He started and trailed off. Wakaba glanced up and closed her laptop. “Come here, sit down.” She motioned for him to come over. Akira stood still, hugging Morgana closer to his chest. Seeing the lack of movement, Futaba got out of her seat and grabbed his arm. “Mom says sit down. Come on.” She gave his arm a hard tug, forcing him to take a step forward. He walked slowly, approaching the booth and sitting down in it. He moved closer to the wall so Futaba could sit next to him.

Wakaba was smiling. “Thank you Futaba.” She said, then turned her attention to the teenager across from her. “Now, what’s wrong? Do you want to talk about it?”

Akira’s face scrunched up. He was not sure if he wanted to talk about what happened or not, or even how to word it right if he did. He glanced over to Sojiro. If he said anything about almost
getting the police called on him, he was definitely going to bring up his probation. He did not need to think about it right now.

It was all his fault. All his - he shook his head and mumbled, “Bad day…” His voice was quiet, barely loud enough to be heard. He could feel Wakaba’s eyes on him as he kept his head down to avoid her gaze.

“I see…” She said, contemplating her next words, “It’s okay, sometimes that happens.”

“Yeah.” Futaba spoke up, “Sometimes bad days are normal. That’s when I like to hide under a blanket and watch anime on my laptop. Or when mom makes me take her out to the park.”

“It helps more and you know it,” Wakaba told her. Futaba pouted and puffed air out her nose. Her mom was right, she just did not want to admit it. The woman brought her attention back to Akira, “I can’t help but notice when you’re feeling stressed you hold your cat tighter.” She noticed. Akira looked down at Morgana, who meowed. “Whatever is going on, just remember tomorrow’s another day. A day to start over and do better, okay?”

Akira looked at her, then sighed and nodded. Things would be better. He wanted to believe Wakaba, but his head was racing about everything that could go wrong in the next two weeks. He jumped when he heard Futaba speak up, almost like he had been expecting to be yelled at. “Sojiro! Can we eat now? I’m hungry.”

“Alright alright,” Sojiro said. He turned his attention to Akira, “You look like you need something light, give me a few more minutes, okay?”

He nodded and when dinner was ready, ate little.

Yusuke found himself rubbing his temples before turning his eyes to the blank canvas. He sighed, the day had not gone the way he hoped it would. He could feel his stomach turning at the events of the day. His statement to Ann was horrible and even he knew it.

“Yusuke?” A familiar voice caught his attention. Madarame was home. He should great him, but Yusuke found standing up and having to tell Madarame the bad news about today to be difficult. He only had two weeks left.

Two weeks left...there was no way he could find another model Madarame would approve of in that time.

He went downstairs in time to see Madarame close the door and remove his coat. “Ah, there you are.” He said. Yusuke took the jacket and hung it up for his teacher. “I was beginning to think you had gone out for the evening.”

“Hardly. It would be wrong for me to miss welcoming you home sensei.” Yusuke said, “How was the exhibit?”

“It continues to be busy.” Madarame said, “I must admit, I’m surprised by the number of young people visiting this year. It makes me happy your generation is appreciating the work of an old man like myself.”

“I’m honored to be part of them,” Yusuke said. Madarame had a smile on his face, it was the same one he had whenever he was thinking about something.

“Speaking of, how is my latest work coming along?” He asked. Yusuke stared at him.
“It is going quite well,” Yusuke said.

He was not going to tell Madarame about this afternoon. However, his stonewalled face seemed to give away something was wrong. He saw Madarame’s face change for a second.

“Is there something I should know Yusuke?”

Yusuke felt his heart beat faster, even as he kept a straight face and shook his head. “No, it’s nothing to worry about sensei.” Yusuke replied, “I’m just struggling to capture the color of Takamaki-san’s hair. It’s lovely, but I’m not used to it. I assure you though, you’ll have your piece by the end of the exhibit.”

It took a bit, and Madarame’s gaze was cold for a long while. Then it became warm. And unsettling. “That’s good to hear Yusuke. Now, where’s dinner?”

Yusuke went to the kitchen and began to set to work making Madarame’s dinner. He would have that piece complete before the museum was over. Two weeks. He had to have it finished before the final day. He needed to. But how was he going to do that when he alienated the one person who Madarame approved of?

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5/23/2016 (Monday)
Lunchbreak
Shujin Academy

Lunch on the roof was quiet and uneasy. Ann and Ryuji were looking at their phones, while Akira was staring at a book, not really absorbing any of the words on it. He was tired, even with his medication he felt like he had not slept well. His eyelids kept drooping, the words on the paper blurred to the point of incomprehensible. No one had brought up the incident the other day. Not when they saw each other in the hallway before class, not in the texts when deciding where to have lunch, not when they climbed up to the roof.

Ryuji was the one to break the silence.

“So, what now?” He asked. No one said anything. “...Come on you all must have something to say.”

Akira groaned as he let his head rest in the palm of his hand. His head was pounding. He felt like he was going to be sick.

“Sorry Ryuji, but I’m still wrapping my head around what happened,” Ann said. She sighed, fell quiet, then after several seconds let out a loud groan. “I don’t know what to do! I don’t wanna pose nude!”

Akira winced. If he just kept his mouth shut then Ann would not even be in this situation.

“Maybe you don’t have too,” Ryuji said. “I mean did you hear him? He said he wouldn’t try and call the police until the end of the exhibit. Maybe by that point, it’ll be too late for them to do anything.”

Akira ran his fingers through his head. Ryuji’s statement was doubtful.

“With how important Madarame is, I doubt it. Just because he reports it late doesn't mean they
won’t brush it off.” Ann said. She leaned over and rubbed her temples. She then paused and looked up, “But something about Kitagawa’s threat bothers me. Why wait so long? What’s so important about needing to paint this done by the exhibit?”

More silence and Ryuji looked down at his phone. He brought up the news and paused as he saw an article about the Madarame art museum. He glared at the news story and was tempted to skip over it, but instead clicked on the link and read the article. His eyes widened as he reached a specific passage in the story and he looked at Ann. “Hey, look at this.” He said. Ann leaned over to see the screen. Akira kept his head down but did glance over. “It says here that Madarame is planning to show off his ‘last masterpiece’ at the exhibit.”

“His ‘last masterpiece?’” Ann repeated and swiped Ryuji’s phone.

“Hey!”

Ann looked at the new story, a frown forming on her face. “According to this there’s a rumor Madarame is planning to announce his retirement, and at the end of the exhibit will reveal his latest work.” She paused and her eyes widened, “Wait a minute, could that-”

She fell quiet, a frown formed on Ryuji’s face as he thought the same thing. Akira was the one who voiced their thoughts, “It’s Ann’s portrait.” He said. Ann looked back at her phone, a frown crossing her face.

“I wonder what will happen if Kitagawa doesn't finish it. If what we saw of Madarame’s other apprentices means anything…” Ann found herself trailing off. The people that were homeless, and the man who had been arrested for stalking.

“He must be desperate if he thought blackmailing you was a good idea,” Ryuji told her. Ann grumbled.

“This is bad. I don’t want to pose nude, but I want to help him.”

“I don’t know Ann. I get why you would, but blackmail and threatening to call the police on us? That’s too much, and even if we did try to help, what’s stopping him from still turning us in?”

Akira gasped and stood up, startling the two. His face was pale and his arms were shaking.

“Akira?” He barely heard Ann’s voice.

“Dude you okay?” Ryuji was a little louder and he shook his head. He had no idea how to answer that question. He was not fine, but he did not want to say that. He felt like he was going to have another episode.

“I-I need some air.” He said. It was a poor choice of words, but it was the only thing that came to mind. His head did not feel straight and he needed to get away from the conversation altogether. “Sorry…”

Without waiting for a response, he grabbed his bag - Morgana yelping from the sudden movement, and hurried off the roof, back into the school building. The hallways were packed with students walking by as they went to their homerooms or hurried down the stairs to another classroom to hang out with friends. He stood near the wall, keeping his head low. He could feel some eyes on him, but most appeared to be ignoring him. Or at least pretending too.

It was too noisy. He needed to get somewhere quiet. He started down the hallway, intending to go to the library, then stopped himself. Right. The library at Shujin had not been welcoming to him. Shujin was not welcoming. He only felt comfortable around his friends.
And one other person. Without thinking he continued down the hall and before he knew it he was staring at the door to the student council. His hand shook as he lifted a hand up to knock. His thoughts were at a mile a minute. It was possible she was not even in the room, or that there was a meeting going on and his presence would be unwelcome. Before he realized it he was knocking on the door.

He heard someone on the other side. “One second.” She said and sure enough, after a few seconds the door opened and Akira found himself looking down at a surprised Makoto. “Kurusu-san? Do you need something?”

Yes. However, trying to say that proved to be more difficult than he thought, his voice was caught in his throat. She seemed to notice, just looking him over she could tell something was wrong, “Please come in.” She moved out of the way and so he could come inside.

He heard the door close behind him. It was quiet. No one else was in the room except the two of them. Akira felt the tension in his shoulders relax and he stumbled forward. He put a hand on the table and used the other to place his bag on it. Morgana poked his head out, letting out a small noise as Akira ran his fingers through his hair. “Is everything alright?” He heard her ask. He looked over at her, watching her face. It was hard to tell what she could be thinking, but he could see the concern on her face.

“No…” He stammered and his breathing quickened. His vision spun around and he jumped when he felt a something touch him. He stepped back to see Makoto was now suddenly next to him, and shook his head. “Don’t….” he started, backing away and moving closer to the wall.

Makoto watched him taking in his features. Wide eyes, frightened expression. He had jumped back when she had tried to put a hand on him. “Kurusu-san, it’s okay.” She said.

“No it’s not!” His voice rose and her eyes widened. She watched as his hands twitch and for a split second she saw anger on his face. “It’s not! It’s…” He trailed off, the anger leaving just as it came and replaced with panic. His next words were a whine mixed with a painful sob. “It’s not okay.” He uttered. Makoto watched the scene in front of her, almost unsure what to do. Then Kurusu slumped against the wall and sank onto the floor.

“Kurusu-san…” She said. He did not react to her voice, instead seeming him curl up and hide his head. A meow got her attention and Morgana jumped off the table and hurried over to his side. The cat nudged Akira’s knee and meowed again, trying to elicit some kind of response from his owner. Makoto looked at the cat than at Akira.

She needed to figure out what was going on, but first, she needed to help him out of his stupor. She took a deep breath and let it out. This was not her strong point, but she needed to try. She knelt down in front of him. “Kurusu-san. Kurusu-san can you look at me?” She asked. Akira shook his head and tried to hide his face more. Makoto waited a few seconds before speaking again. “Kurusu-san, I promise whatever happens in this room, stays in this room. Anything you say, it won’t leave here unless you bring it up yourself. Okay? Now please, can you look at me?”

She waited a few seconds, but Akira did move a bit. He looked up at her and she got a good look at his face. He was terribly pale, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He looked like he had not gotten much sleep. Whatever was causing his distress must have been very recent. “Can you take my hands?” She said. She held them out and after some hesitation, Akira took her hands.

He was surprised, there was a roughness to them he did not expect, but at the same time, they had a warmness that was welcoming. He kept his head down, trying to focus on breathing. “Easy, breathe through your nose, let it out through your mouth.” She instructed, her eyes focused on him.
She watched as he did as told, breathing in, holding it, then letting it out. His grip on her fingers loosened a little as he started to settle down.

Morgana chirped and pawed at Akira’s uniform blazer. Makoto took notice. His cat was worried about him. She kept her focus on Akira, who she saw seemed to be calming down a bit. “Can you stand?”

It took a bit of effort, but she was able to get him to come back to his feet and help him back over to the table. He slumped into the seat and Makoto sat down next to him. She looked him over, thinking about the scene she had just witnessed.

His demeanor was completely different from what it had been the other day. Saturday he was quiet but pleasant and friendly. Today he’s behavior was the opposite. Haggard and nervous. He was panicking. It almost reminded her of how he was acting when Kamoshida was around, and when she had first approached him about their tutoring sessions.

He had been on edge then too. He had yelled at her and had slipped into a quiet depression when he was near his friends again. And as she thought it over, an alarm bell rang in her ear. What if he got worse? What if something happened that made him do more than just raise his voice?

A thought crossed her mind. Was it possible he could hurt someone? Is that why he was at Shujin? She shook the thought away for a moment and decided to focus on him for the time being. ‘What ifs’ could wait until later. “Kurusu-san, forgive me if I sound like I’m prying. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want, but I just want to understand what’s going on. Did something happen recently?” She asked.

It took a moment and she watched his reaction. His hand twitched, he tensed up a bit more and avoided her gaze, “...Yesterday was a bad day. I feel like I did something I shouldn’t have, and now a friend of mine is in trouble because of it. I can’t stop thinking that it’s my fault.”

Makoto felt a little relieved by his answer. Her first thought was he got bad news from home. “Did they say anything to imply that?”

“No, but...” He stammered, and Makoto could see thinking about the topic made him uncomfortable, “I keep thinking, what would have happened if I kept my mouth shut. Would things have played out the same way or would they have been worse? I can’t stop thinking about it. And even if they say it’s not my fault, it feels like it is!”

Makoto was quiet as she listened. His statement was vague though she was not sure if he was doing that on purpose or not. “You’re talking about something with Sakamoto-san and Takamaki-san, right?” It took a bit but Akira nodded. “Are you not getting along with them?”

“No we’re fine.” He told her.

“You’re fine.” She repeated. He nodded. “You haven’t gotten into a fight with them?”

He shook his head.

“They haven’t said or done anything to upset you?”

“No.”

“Nothing?”

“No.”
“So everything is okay between the three of you.”

“Yes!” He said, exasperated, “Why are you asking all this?”

“Because you’re here and you obviously need someone to talk to,” Makoto said. Akira stared at her, then looked away.

“I shouldn’t be bothering you.”

“You aren’t bothering me Kurusu-san. I’m more than happy to speak to you about anything.” She said. Akira stared at her, not sure what to say or even how to respond. She smiled at him. “I’ll be the first to admit that I don’t know Sakamoto-san or Takamaki-san very well, but you do. So, do you think if you did something wrong that they would lie to you?”

Akira did not answer at first. He thought about his interactions with them in the month he had known them. How they had stuck with him despite the chaos of the month and then Golden Week. He shook his head, “Ryuji would call me out if I did something stupid. Ann would do the same thing, but probably be a little nicer about it.” He said.

“Then if they keep saying ‘it’s not your fault’, it’s very likely they’re telling the truth,” Makoto told him. Akira stared at her, then thought long and hard about what she said. It should have been so obvious, yet it did not feel like it had clicked with him until now.

“I guess.” He mumbled. Makoto gave him a small smile, then watched as Morgana jumped onto one of the chairs and then onto the table. He meowed and Akira began scratching him behind his ears. The cat mewed again. “Not so loud Mona.” He said, a small smile crossing his face as the cat laid down.

“He seems happy.”

“He likes the toy you gave him by the way.” He told her. His eyes drooped a bit and he sighed. He was beginning to feel a little better, but also more tired. He fell quiet, and folded his hands on the table, then laid his head down. Makoto was taken back by the gesture, but took a chance to reach out to him. She put a hand on his back, and while he did twitch a bit, but then relaxed. His breathing was more even, he felt more at ease. “Thank you.” He muttered, his eyes slipping shut.

Makoto moved her hand away and watched him. She was not planning to let him fall asleep, but they had a few minutes left until lunch. She would give him some time to get himself together, then follow up with him after the school day ended.

At least that was her original plan, but the sound of knocking at the door broke the silence. Akira opened his eyes and straightened, looking behind him. “Wonder who that is.” He muttered, though he already could take a guess. Makoto got up from her seat and went over to the door. She opened it and was not surprised to see Ryuji and Ann standing in front of her.

“Hey, uh…” Ryuji started. Makoto held up a hand and stepped aside so they could see Akira was in the student council room. The two entered and Makoto closed the door behind them. Ryuji had a weak grin on his face, “Somehow had a feeling you’d be here. You alright man?”

“Getting there.” He took another deep breath and let it out. “Sorry I took off like that. Can we not talk about the stuff with...you know. Him? I know it’s important, but after yesterday I think I need some time to get myself together.”

“Yeah of course.” Ann said, “And honestly we need a break from everything. Why don’t we go out somewhere and have fun instead of worrying about this? We can relax, get our heads straight, and
try again tomorrow.”

Ryuji nodded in agreement, “Yeah, we can go to the arcade. Or there’s the bookstore, there’s gotta be something new coming out that caught your eye.”

A faint smile crossed Akira’s face and he looked up at them. “Bookstore sounds good.” He said, then paused and turned his attention back to Makoto. She had been standing there patiently, at a distance. He looked away, then after some thought, turned back to her. “Do you want to join us Niijima-san?”

Her eyes widened and she opened her mouth then closed it. “Me? Uh…” She trailed off, trying to think, “…well I guess I wouldn’t be against it. I don’t have any student council duties after school, but I was planning to go to the gym…”

“The gym?” Ryuji asked, “The one on Central Street?” Makoto nodded and Ann looked at them surprised.

“There’s a gym on Central Street?” She asked. Ryuji gave her a disbelieving look.

“Yeah. It’s right across from the crepe shop.”

“Seriously? Oh man, how could I have not noticed?” Ryuji gave her a questioning look, and her eyes lit up. “That reminds me, I’ve been thinking of working out more often. If I want to get more modeling contracts I’m going to need to be in shape.”

“Work out more often? When do you even work out Ann?”

“I walk to school.” She said, a grin on her face. Ryuji sighed and shook his head, “Oh I know! How about we all go to the gym today? With the four of us, I bet it’d be fun.”

Both Ryuji and Akira exchanged looks. In truth, Akira had mixed feelings about it. His funds were limited and the idea of being in an area with a lot of people made him feel a bit uneasy in his current state. However, he saw Makoto contemplating it, a serious look on her face.

She nodded. “Alright, we’ll meet up after school and head down there.” She said. She had to admit, there was a part of her that was looking forward to it. She hadn’t had company when working out for quite some time.

She could not remember the last time her sister was available to work out with her...

5/23/2016
After School
Central Street Gym

The gym was packed with people and for a brief second, Akira thought that maybe agreeing to the adventure was a bad idea.

“Oh man, this place is bigger than I remember. Looks like they installed some more treadmills.” He said, “Well time to do some warm-ups and get the legs going.”

“My aren’t you enthusiastic,” Ann said looking around. She had no idea what half the equipment did and hoped they had instructions or something. She stopped as she noticed a flyer on hanging up
on one of the support beams. “Hey check it out. Looks like they’re looking for sign-ups for some kickboxing classes later this week.”

“Really? They do that kinda stuff here now?”

“It’s probably to get more money into the gym.” Makoto guessed as Ann turned around and looked at them.

“We should totally sign up, might be fun.”

“Uh, I’ll pass,” Akira said, an uneasy smile on his face.

“I’ll pass too. Between school and work my calendar’s kinda full.” Ryuji said. Ann pouted.

“You two are no fun.” She muttered then looked at Makoto, “What about you Niijima-senpai?”

“Hmmmm...” Makoto started, unsure how to answer. Part of her wanted to say no because she had to study and prepare for her college exams. On the other hand, “...I guess it could be fun. Is it just beginner or do they have an advanced class? Oh, I should warm up and make sure I’m not too rusty.” The three stared at her taken back. Makoto blinked, confused. “What?”

Ryuji was the first to recover. “Uh, nothing, Niijima-senpai. Look I’m gonna warm up on the treadmills. Yo, Akira, wanna join?”

“O-okay,” Akira muttered. He watched the girls for a bit longer and saw Ann sign up for the class before following Ryuji over to the treadmills. His friend jumped on one and after playing with a few options got it moving. Akira watched and looked at the machine.

For some reason, he did not feel like running. Maybe because he was still recovering from his episode earlier. “Come on man, get on,” Ryuji said. Akira shook his head.

“Think I want to look around a bit more.” He said. If Ryuji heard him his friend did not say. Akira put his hands into his gym clothes pockets and decided to walk around. There were many people working out, lifting weights or using machinery the machinery. He noticed Ann was stretching and talking to a woman who then pointed her to an empty spot on a large mat. It looked like she was ready to take part in a Yoga session. He watched for a few moments, then winced as she lost her balance and fell over.

He continued to look around, then found his attention drawn to Makoto. She was stretching and then stepped in front of a punching bag. He watched as she saw him get into a steady stance, then her fist flung forward. The sound of her fist hitting the bag was loud and harsh. She punched it again and it flew back. Another hit, then another.

Akira could not help but stare as he watched. Her punches were precise and there was strength behind each strike. His eyes widened as she moved back and raised her leg, smacking the back with a roundhouse kick. The chain rattled, the bag moving like it was lighter than it probably was. Makoto shook out her hands and rolled her shoulders.

“Slower than last time.” She said just loud enough for him to hear. He took a few steps closer and she turned to him. “Kurusu-san.”

“I think I see why you were asking about advanced classes.” He said. Makoto's face flushed, but a small grin crossed it.

“Unfortunately I don’t think I’d be able to keep up with an advanced class right now. I’m out of
practice.”

“Could have fooled me.”

He took a step closer and Makoto stepped back, “Do you wanna try?”

He looked at the punching bag. “Never used a punching bag before.”

“You know how to form a fist right?” She asked. Akira did so and immediately saw her shake her head, “No that’s no good. You’ll hurt your hand if you try and punch something like that.”

He almost pulled back when she put her hands on his arm but stopped himself. He watched as she moved his thumb so that it was over his fingers. “Better. I know it feels weird, but you’ll get used to it.” She said. Akira looked at his newly formed fist. She then, without prompting, pulled him over so he was in front of the bag. She frowned as she saw his posture and set to work righting it. She reached up and adjusted his shoulders, telling him to keep his weight even and once done nodded in approval. “Good. Now we can try a few practice motions.”

“How do you know this?” He asked almost without thinking. The question caught her off guard, and her face turned a bit red.

“It’s kinda embarrassing in hindsight.” She started, “When I was in elementary school I might have beaten up a boy who tried pulling down my skirt and broke my wrist. My dad signed me up for kickboxing classes after I got my cast off. Said if I’m going to beat up people I should know how to throw a punch without hurting myself.”

Akira stared at her, dumbfounded before finding his voice. “You’re dad sounds like a great guy.”

The statement made her laugh a little, “He certainly was.” She said, “Anyway let’s see what you can do. Try and punch the bag.”

Akira looked at the bag. Somehow it looked larger than it did when Makoto was taking shots at it. He took a deep breath, let it out, winded up and threw his punch.

He immediately recoiled and yelled out in pain, shaking his wrist out as he felt agony run down his arm. “Dammit!” He cursed under his breath and bit down on his lower lip to keep from swearing. He then heard Makoto sigh.

“That wouldn’t have happened if you didn’t break your stance.”

He looked up at her in annoyance and was met with her disapproving frown, her red eyes less like a student and more like a drill sergeant. A small smile crossed his face as he straightened and shook out his hand. “...probably....”

“Yes, probably.” Makoto said, “I also shouldn’t say it, but that wind up was pretty awful. You would be wide open if someone tried to attack you.”

“Is that so…” He mumbled.

“Yes.” She frowned, and after some consideration said, “If you want I can show you what I mean.”

He stopped. “Huh?”

An amused grin formed on her face, “Here, take the same stance again and I’ll show you.”

It took a second but Akira realized what she was asking, “You want me to try and punch you?”
“Yes.”

“I-I can’t do that.” He said. Makoto shook her head.

“You won’t hurt me if that’s what you’re worried about. Go on, it’s just easier to explain if I show you why you shouldn’t leave yourself open.”

Akira really did not like the idea, but Makoto sounded sure of herself and confident. He found himself wondering if maybe instead of worrying about her, he should be more worried about himself. “O-okay…” He said and repeated the same motion he did before.

He did not realize what happened until after the events played out. He threw his punch, Makoto grabbed his wrist and next thing he knew his feet had lost contact with the ground, he flipped over and landed smack on his back. He winced as he felt his muscles tighten, and slowly opened his eyes - he hadn’t even realized he closed them - to see himself staring up at the ceiling lights. “See what I mean now?”

His eyes moved to see Makoto hovering over him. “When you wind up like that you put yourself off balance. Someone who knows what they are doing can easily disarm you and...well look where you are now.”

“Huh…” Was the only thing he could utter as he met her gaze. He wasn’t sure how to feel about the fact that someone a good six inches shorter than him had just knocked him onto his back with little effort. A little embarrassed maybe, but at the same time, he found himself staring in wonder.

He liked seeing her from where he was. Lying on his back, looking up at her. He could not help but notice how bright her eyes were, how her skin had a light sheen of sweat on it from working out. A frown formed on her face. “Are you alright, Kurusu-san?”

Her voice snapped him back to reality and he sat himself up. He stood and nodded. He felt fine, but then her eyes widened. “Oh! That's not good!”

He was confused but then felt something warm drip on his hand. He looked down to see it was covered with red. He blinked and brought his hand up to his face. His nose was bleeding. “O-oh.” His face turned red, but Makoto must not have noticed as she took his arm and hurried for him to sit down on one of the benches.

“Give me a second, I'll be right back.”

Akira nodded and put his hand up to his face. He wasn’t sure whether to be embarrassed or not, but today was not working in his favor. His thoughts shifted for a second to what just happened a few seconds ago. How he felt gazing up at her.

...Maybe it wasn’t all bad.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I'm never posting two major things the same day ever again. But my 1 year anniversary called for it. OMG.

So yeah Chapter 35 also celebrates my One Year Anniversary writing Fanfiction for Persona 5. No lie, never expected this thing to last as long as it did, this fic is officially
the longest work I've ever written. Thank you all for sticking with me for so long. Likewise lots of love for those that started reading this fic, but may have stopped for whatever reason. I hope someday you come back to it.

Also for anyone curious I wrote a new story for my this anniversary titled 'White Day'. The date got messed up on it somehow (and apparently you can't change it for one-shots?), so here's a link for those that might be interested in checking it out: https://archiveofourown.org/works/14858364

Thank you, everyone, for sticking with me. Here's to another wonderful writing year.
The police station was cold, no doubt because of the air conditioning. The building was blasting it so hard that even with his jacket on Goro Akechi found himself shivering. It was the opposite of outside which was getting steadily warmer thanks to the fast approaching summer.

He tried to ignore the cold an instead focus on the task he was assigned. He had to admit, when he had approached his mentor, he honestly did not think he would be given the okay. After the trip to the museum, Goro had done more digging into the allegations against Madarame. He then went to his mentor with his findings. He still remembered the frown on the older man’s face when he made his suggestion, as well as his dismissive laugh. However, after looking his notes over, and taking the time to seriously listen, his mentor gave him the green light to investigate.

“Alright, go ahead.” He had said. He waved a dismissive hand, “Doubt it’ll amount to anything, but sometimes to succeed you gotta fail. And who knows, maybe you’ll find something.”

The words had stung, but he had chosen to keep quiet and simply thank his teacher for giving him the chance. Goro, despite the doubts of his superiors, knew the case had validity. The feeling was right in his gut. He knew when innocents were being taken advantage of by terrible people when he saw it.

Amazing how one's affects how they see the world.

A frown crossed his face. He would not fail in this task. He needed to bring justice to Madarame. He needed to get the man locked up and make him pay for his crimes.

He was snapped out of his thoughts by the security guard speaking to him. “Alright, he’s in here.” He said, then gave Goro a skeptical look. “Not sure what else you can get out of him. Good luck kid.”

Kid. It was a simple word, but it made Goro feel a flash of anger. To him, being called kid and in such a dismissive tone was the adult man’s way of saying he was inferior to him. Goro kept his anger inside, he was not going to make an incident at this point. Instead, he thanked the guard for his (unhelpful) briefing and stepped inside the room. The door slammed shut and the room became silent.

The man Goro found himself looking at could not have been older than his mid to late twenties. His head was down and his hands were handcuffed to the middle of the table. He then looked up when he heard Goro’s footsteps. The look on his face was a man who lost everything. He then stared at him in surprise, then disgust.

“Is this a joke?”

Apparently the man saw him as ‘just a kid’ too. Goro kept his composure. “You are Natsuhiko
Nakanohara, yes?” He asked. Nakanohara looked down and nodded. “I was sent down to ask you a couple of questions.” Goro took a seat and the man chuckled.

“I told them everything already.”

“Yes, after you were arrested you admitted to stalking and harassing your ex-girlfriend.” Goro said, “Now, I’m sure you already know this, but regardless of how you ended up in this situation your actions are unjustified. That being said, there was something in your testimony that caught my attention.”

Nakanohara stared at him as Goro opened up the folder for Nakanohara’s case and read it over. “During your testimony, you were described as ‘attempting to justify your actions by claiming they were caused by another person.”

“Yes and I regret those words.” Nakanohara said, cutting him off, “My ex broke up with me because of my obsessive attitude. I’m angry but having had time to sit in that cell for a few weeks, I don’t blame her. I was just so...angry at the time. That’s no excuse. My actions are my own and I need to be held accountable for them.”

Goro found himself nodding in agreement. “It’s good you understand that.” He said, then put the case file he was holding on the table. “However, I’m not here to see if you’ve ‘learned your lesson’ or anything similar. I’m here because I’m investigating another matter.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your testimony piqued my curiosity, so I did a little digging. That’s also why you’re here.” Goro folded his hands onto the table and looked Nakanohara in the eye. “Tell me about your time as Ichirysai Madarame’s apprentice.”

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5/24/2016 (Tuesday)
After School
Shujin Academy

Makoto was sitting at the student council table, looking over a list of meeting topics the secretary put together the other week, only to be distracted when she heard a knock on the door. She checked the time on her phone. It was almost time for the meeting to begin, but she doubted the staff would actually knock on the door.

“It’s open.” She said. She waited a few seconds, the door opened. Makoto looked up and got to her feet as she saw a familiar face. “Kurusu-san?”

“Hi, Niijima-san.” He said. He sounded a little hesitant, but far more composed than he did the other day. “Sorry, am I bothering you?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m getting ready for today’s student council meeting, but have a few minutes to spare. Is everything alright?” She asked.

“No everything’s fine.” He said. A small smile crossed his face, which became a little red. He looked down, his hair covering his face and eyes for a split second as he tried to compose himself. “I just wanted to thank you for yesterday. I had fun hanging out with you and Ann and Ryuji last night.”
Hearing him say that brought Makoto a little relief. They split up after a little while, and while Akira looked less pale he also had looked pretty worn out. "I’m glad to hear that. Have to admit though I was a little concerned when you got that nose bleed. That normally doesn’t happen..."

"Y-yeah..." In truth, Akira had hoping Makoto would have forgotten about that. It was a piece of embarrassment he was wishing he could have forgotten about. Course thinking about the scene did help him sleep last night...

He glanced up and noticed she was smiling. He tried to think of something else to say. He wracked his brain for a topic, "I think Ann said she was excited about her first kickboxing class."

"That’s good." A frown crossed Makoto’s face, "Hopefully she can handle it. I’ve heard she’s not the most physically active person, course it’s hard to tell given the school’s love of stories."

"That ones true," Akira told her, a brief laugh in his voice. "Maybe you can whip her into shape like Ryuji’s doing to me."

He stopped as he saw Makoto contemplate his words. Her smile turned into a devious smirk, "Perhaps I should. It’s been awhile since I had a workout partner." She looked at him, "I bet I could get Ann running circles around you guys with a bit of training."

"Oh really?" Akira watched Makoto’s face. Her red eyes exuded a stubborn confidence, and he found it hard to force himself not to focus on them. He shifted on his feet, adjusting his bag. "Well, maybe not Ryuji."

"True. Maybe not Ryuji." She said, "But you’re feeling fine?"

"A bit sore, that’s it. Can’t say I’m used to being tossed around like a ragdoll." Not that he hated it but...he watched her face twist into a pout.

"I didn’t toss you like a ragdoll." Akira blinked quickly, as he realized how cute she looked. He shook his head. "I should get going. My friends are waiting downstairs."

"Alright, I should get back to my things then." She said, "It was good seeing you again Kurusu-san. I’m glad you came by to tell me you were doing better."

He nodded and hurried out the door. He closed it and leaned against the wall, letting out a sigh. He was beginning to entertain thoughts he knew he shouldn’t be entertaining. But seeing that pout on her face was...cute. Really cute. And wow did he like it when she threw him on his back the other day...

He shook his head and hurried down the hall, passing by some students that he noticed right away were heading to the student council room.

He overheard one of them complaining about the newspaper club asking for a larger budget, but their voices faded as he climbed down the stairs. He reached the lobby and saw Ann and Ryuji talking. He noticed Ann had a serious expression on her face and as he got closer he could hear what they were saying.

"I don’t know if we should tell him." He heard Ann say, and then Ryuji reply with.

"Well, I get what you mean, but honestly he’s going to notice if we aren’t telling him something. Plus not saying anything might make him worry more."

Akira sighed. He knew right away his friends were talking about him. He walked up to them and
Ryuji smiled. “There you are. What took ya?”

“I went to see Niijima-san for a bit.” He said. He looked between his friends, both of which were smiling. A frown crossed his face, “Something I should know?”

“Uh…” Ann started, then trailed off. The two looked at each other then back to him. “Actually yeah, it’s just…since you were upset yesterday we weren’t sure if-”

“It’s fine.” Akira cut her, getting both their attention, “Considering what’s going on I’d rather know than not know.”

“Told ya,” Ryuji said. Ann gave him a weak smile then pulled her phone out.

“I got a text message from Kitagawa about an hour ago.” She said, “It wasn’t any kind of threat or anything like that, just asked if we could meet up to continue his painting.”

“Did you reply to it?”

Ann shook her head, “I don’t want to. To be honest the message worries me but also makes me mad.” A frown crossed her face, “It’s like he’s pretending that nothing happened or something. I mean I’m a bit sympathetic considering his situation but he’s still-”

Ryuji coughed loudly and both looked at him. It was at that point they realized they were starting to gather a small crowd. “We should probably continue this outside.”

Ann and Akira nodded in agreement, the latter keeping his head low and trying to ignore the whispering of there peers. They left the school and climbed down the stairs. Once a few feet away from the entrance to the building, Ann began to talk again. “Like I said, I feel bad for him, it’s obvious he’s being forced to do this ‘Last Masterpiece’ thing, but I really don’t think I can do this whole nude painting thing.”

Akira and Ryuji looked at each other. “Honestly you shouldn’t.” Akira finally said.

“Gotta agree. And I’ve been thinking about this most of last night, he’s not gonna be able to follow through on this threat.” Ryuji said. The two looked at him.

“What do you mean?” Akira asked. “Didn’t we already agree Madarame’s a big deal-”

“Exactly, but here’s the thing. Madarame can’t know about it.” Ryuji said, “Kitagawa can call the police on us, but if he does they’re going to tell Madarame about it, because he owns the place, and if Madarame asks Kitagawa why he called the police then-”

“He’s gonna find out Kitagawa doesn’t have his painting finished.” Ann realized, her eyes widening. She then smiled, “Damn Ryuji when you really think about it, you really hit a nail on the head. If that’s true then we might not have much to worry about!”

“You sure?” Akira asked. Ryuji shrugged.

“Best thing I can think of.” He paused, a frown forming on his face, “Honestly, I think our biggest concern is less the cops and more Kitagawa stalking Ann again. As his deadline gets closer he’s probably going to become more desperate.”

Akira thought it over. He wanted to refute Ryuji's statement, but now that he had a decent night’s sleep and could think a little clearer he realized something. “You’re probably right.” His turned his attention to Ann. “Should we start walking you home from school?”
“I think I’ll be fine today. I’m going to visit Shiho and then head home after visiting hours. If I think he’s following me I’ll let you guys know, but I don’t think we have to worry about anything for awhile.” Ann told them, then sighed, “But is that really all we can do? Just wait this out?”

“Honestly? Probably.” Ryuji said, there was a bit of regret in his voice, “I mean, I get the situation he’s in. We’ve all kinda been there, but I don’t know if there’s anything we can really do at this point.”

“Not without getting the cops on us,” Akira muttered. The three sighed. They couldn't deny despite the blackmail they were concerned about Yusuke. Though the lengths the teenager had gone through had them unsure if they could or even wanted too. It was as Akira was about to tell the others he needed to get home that a voice got their attention.

“Excuse me.”

He looked up and his eyes widened as he saw a familiar face approach them. “Togo-san?” He said. Sure enough, Hifumi Togo was standing just a foot or two away from them. Ann and Ryuji looked at her, Ryuji looking her over, and then back to their friend.

“Do you know this girl Akira?” Ann asked.

“Y-yeah- we…” He started then trailed off, not sure how to explain. Not that he needed too.

“We attend church together.” Hifumi’s answer was short and to the point.

“Wait, you go to church?” Ryuji asked.

“Yes.” Was Akira's short answer. His face turned a little red, a little embarrassed by Ryuji simply blurtting the question out. Not a lot of people in Japan attended Catholic churches. He focused on the teenager in front of them. “What are you doing here Togo-san.”

“I didn’t see you Sunday evening.” She explained, readjusting how she was holding her school bag, “I didn’t think much at first, I don’t attend every week either, but I had this… uneasy feeling, yesterday. It was strange, but for some reason, I was thinking something had happened to you. So I thought I’d come by after school and see how you were.”

Akira stared at her for several seconds, unsure how to respond at first. She had an uneasy feeling the same day he had a panic attack in the student council room. He wasn’t sure if he should just write that off as a coincidence or not but decided to play dumb. “Sunday was a busy day, and I was really tired so I decided to stay home,” He said, “Sorry if I worried you.”

“Oh…” She said, but she sounded relieved, “In that case, I’m sorry if I’m bothering you and your friends.”

“You aren't bothering us,” Akira said. Ryuji found himself nodding.

“That’s good.” Hifumi glanced at the other two behind him, her smile was friendly yet her face maintaining it’s properness. “Well since I’m here, would you be interested in joining me for tonight's Mass? I’m not sure if it’s your thing, but after we can play a round of Shogi if you’d like.”


“It’s the easiest place for me to practice and I’ve been teaching Kurusu-san how to play.” She gave him a look, “Though so far he isn’t quite keen on practicing. Unless you have been since I last saw you?”
Akira opened his mouth to protest then paused and dropped his head, “No…” The look on Hifumi’s face could only be described as amused.

“I see. Well, then I promise I’ll make our next match tonight as painless as possible.” She said, “I hope to see you tonight Kurusu-san. The service starts at eight if you’re interested. It was nice to meet your friends as well.”

With nothing else to say, Hifumi gave the three of them a respectful bow, turned and walked away. Ann and Ryuji watched her go, and Akira turned to them, his face a little flushed, not sure what to say about the scene. Ryuji was the first to find his voice. “She’s hot. Cold too. Like ice. Ow!”

Ann had punched Ryuji in the shoulder. Akira chuckled, “You should see her when she’s deep into a Shogi match. She can tear you apart.”

“Not surprised. She’s that Shogi girl I’ve been seeing in the magazines.” Ann said, “You gonna go to that Mass thing with her tonight?”

Akira didn’t answer right away. In truth, he wanted to take another evening to himself, and Sojiro had asked him to help around the cafe for a little while. However, he liked talking and playing Shogi with Hifumi, even though he was bad at it. “I’ll think about it. I should get going too.”

“Alright. See ya man.” Ryuji said. Akira said a final goodbye to him and Ann and overheard Ryuji asking if he could join her in hanging out with Shiho. He walked down the street, thinking it over.

He did like his Shogi Matches with Hifumi, even though she kept beating him. He decided as he got on the train, that he would ask Sojiro if he could stop helping him early to go to the church service.

5/24/2016
Evening
Kanda Church

Akira squirmed in his seat as he listened to Pastor Fukumoto’s sermon. The experience felt a little surreal to him, even uncomfortable. He glanced around to see most of the men and women were older than himself and Hifumi. There were a few teenagers, but even they were dressed better than he was. Since he had no formal wear at the moment, he simply went in his school uniform. It was a contrast to his friend's checkered colored dress.

Finally, the sermon ended and everyone stood up and began talking to each other. A few elderly folks approached the pastor to thank him for his service. Hifumi got to her feet and Akira took that as a sign it was alright for him to stand too. “Well, that was expected.” She said. “I’m sorry if it seemed a little long, Pastor Fukumoto has a habit of breaking into tangents. What did you think?”

Akira hesitated, not quite sure how to answer the question. It wasn’t the same as being lectured by a teacher, but there was an authoritarian tone during it that made him unsure exactly what to think of the whole thing. “It was very….spiritual?” He answered. To his relief, Hifumi laughed a bit.

“Well, it was a religious sermon. It would have to be.” She said, “Let’s find somewhere quiet to talk.”

The two walked to the back of the church and took their seats where no one would disturb them. “I
guess I’m just not used to this kind of stuff.” Akira finally admitted.

“You normally don’t attend church do you.”

“Never really gone to any temples much either.” He admitted. “Like usually on the holidays, but never beyond that.”

“I see…” Hifumi said, “So then I’m guessing you don’t believe in any kind of god.”

He gave a small shrug. “I don’t know. I guess I can believe the idea something is there, just not sure what. And I’m not sure I’m open to the idea of giving up my problems to something that I don’t actually know exists or not.”

Hifumi nodded, “I suppose I feel the same way. The concept is difficult to swallow, though I feel I can take comfort in the idea.” She told him, then opened her bag and pulled out her Shogi board. “But enough talk, time for another lesson if you’re interested.”

“Sure.”

He watched as Hifumi set up the board and she motioned for him to make the first move. He did, and she thought it over before making her next one. Then he went again, then she did. As always her style was aggressive. “Can I ask you something Togo-san?” He asked. She nodded, eyes not leaving the board, “Is your family here?”

She shook her head, “My father is spiritual, but my mother is not. And even then they would go to a temple more likely than a church.”

“So how’d you end up here?”

She placed another piece down. “Just being in the right place at the right time. Stories of saviors and gods mostly follow the same path of death and resurrection. I simply found that talking to Pastor Fukumoto helped me work out my struggles than praying or leaving a note at temple. I guess you could say it was not the religion so much as the people who drew me here.”

Akira nodded. He could somewhat understand. He only ended up at the church on Takemi’s suggestion and was even in it now because Hifumi invited him. “I see…”

“Sometimes you need to get away from home for a little while. He noticed my shogi board and offered to play a game. He did not last long, but his kindness is the reason I practice in this church,” She finished explaining and motioned to him. “Speaking of the game, it’s your move.”

Akira looked at the board and frowned. He looked at where his pieces were placed, then hers and made his choice carefully. He placed it on the board and saw Hifumi shake her head. Bad move. “You need to practice outside of church.”

“Maybe when I have the money for a board I will.”

“I have a spare board at home. I’ll give it to you the next time I see you.”

The game ended a few turns later and Hifumi slammed her last piece on the board. A look of annoyance crossed her face. “That was hardly an effort.” She said. “We’re going to play another round, this time I’ll instruct you on capturing properly.”

She began setting the pieces back together and began to instruct him on what to do, then ran him through a practice scenario so and simple techniques. Akira listened patiently. He could not help
but notice how her demeanor changed when talking about Shogi. Her eyes lit up, and her voice had a more noticeable inflection to it. He followed her instructions to the letter and she nodded in approval.

“Good. Now let’s do another game so you understand how to put it into practice. I’ll go easier on you.” She said setting up the board again. Akira watched as she put each piece in its place, a grace to her movements that really did belong to a professional.

“You’re really passionate about this game.” He said getting her attention. Hifumi’s head tilted a little and then she chuckled a bit.

“I suppose you could say ‘like father, like daughter’” she told him. “Now shall we?”

Akira nodded and the two began another game. This time Akira attempted to put into practice what Hifumi had shown him. They played their game as a slower pace, Akira could tell even though Hifumi was going easy on him so he could understand how to play better, she was still determined to win the match. He moved one of his pieces and she pondered her next step, as though wondering if that was a moment for her to take the victory, or if she should make a mistake that he could easily counter.

She took her turn and placed her piece on the board. Akira stared at it and after some thought realized it was a piece that he could counter. He looked over his board and moved the appropriate piece. Hifumi nodded to him. “Yes, that’s exactly how you do it.” She told him, then picked up another piece and placed it on the board. Akira looked at it and realized it was a serious move. He placed his piece where he hoped would be a good spot.

“So you’re dad taught you how to play Shogi?” Akira asked. Hifumi hesitated frowned. “I hope you aren’t trying to distract me with such questions.” She said, her voice sharp enough that Akira was taken back.

“N-no, just trying to make conversation.” He said. Maybe that was a mistake. Hifumi stayed quiet and did not say anything. She then looked at the board and pondered her next move. She looked at Akira, then back at the board.

“Yes, my father is the one who taught me Shogi.” She told him, then placed her piece down and claimed one of Akira’s. “I think I was in elementary school when I first saw him playing and asked if he could teach me. I’ve been is ‘sparring partner’ ever since.”

They moved a few more pieces around and finally Hifumi spoke up. “Is it alright if I ask you something?” She asked. “Do you know if something happened to Kitagawa-san over the weekend?”

Akira stared at her and felt his stomach flip on itself. He really did not want to talk about it, but he knew he needed to give some kind of answer. So he just said, “Their plans fell through.”

The answer seemed to satisfy her.
“I see.” Then she shrugged, “I suppose that’s just how it is. Kitagawa always talks profusely about the difficulties with finding the ‘perfect model’. If plans fell through that’s probably why he was so dejected. I suppose he was hoping not to have to search for another one.”

“You said you posed for him before right?” Akira asked. Hifumi nodded as she slammed a piece hard on the board. The game was over and to the surprise of neither of them, she was the victor.

“I did. It was a lovely painting, and he seemed enthusiastic about it.” Hifumi said, “However when I asked him about it a few days later he said that while he was proud of the work he believed he needed a less ‘traditionally beautiful’ model. It was admittedly a bit heartbreaking to hear, however, I guess artists needs just change on a whim like that.”

Akira said nothing. Knowing what he did, it was more likely Maradarame told Yusuke that Hifumi’s portrait would not gather the desired attention. He did not voice the thought out loud, instead continuing his game until Hifumi won the second round. Once finished he pulled out his phone and checked the time.

“I should get going.” He said. Hifumi nodded in agreement and he helped her clean up their game. They got up from there seats and left the church. It was then he heard some people in the distance.

“Is that...Togo-san?”

“No way the Shogi Queen? What's she doing here?”

“Who’s that she’s with?”

He was sure he heard Hifumi sigh. She looked at him. “I should return home. I get the feeling my father and mother are wondering where I am on a school night.” She said. “Thank you for the game tonight.”

“Sure. Thanks for inviting me out.” Akira said then after some consideration added, “Will I see you Sunday?”

She smiled and nodded, “Sure, I’m always here Sunday evening. Have a good night Kurusu-san.”

With that, she turned and started down the street. Akira watched, then when she was out of sight, turned and walked down the street to the train station.

Chapter End Notes

I'm never overbooking my schedule ever again. RIP me.
“So…."

Akira looked up when Sojiro spoke. It was a quiet evening in the cafe, the only real noise being the coffee makers and the news playing on the television. There had only been one or two customers in the last hour so Sojiro was having him practice making coffee again. “So….?” He repeated as he began to carefully pour the coffee into the cup in front of him. Sojiro had a serious look on his face and it made him wonder if something was wrong.

“...I couldn’t help but notice...you have more female friends than male friends.”

Akira stared at his legal guardian in disbelief. That was what Sojiro was thinking about for the past several minutes? “…is that weird?” He asked and the older man gave an indifferent shrug.

“No, I guess nowadays it isn't. Oh, pay attention.” Sojiro pointed to the cup. Akira looked down and stopped pouring the coffee before the cup could overflow. He reached for the creamer to his right. How much was he supposed to use again? “Though I’m a bit surprised. Considering your record I thought maybe you’d have trouble making friends, but you seem to have hit it off with Sakamoto and Takamaki pretty well. Then there’s that student council president. Didn’t think a girl like that would give you the time of day.”

“Yeah. Me neither…” He muttered. Considering how Shujin’s social circles worked, he probably was the last person who should have been speaking to Makoto on a regular basis. He wondered how long until the school noticed they were spending time together and rumors began flying about. A frown crossed his face as he thought about it more. It was possible rumors were already going around about there study sessions.

He did not like the idea of more rumors. Hopefully, she did not hear them and decide to end their study sessions because of them. He...liked being around her. It was something he was beginning to realize as the days went on.

“So, I’m curious. Which one is cuter?”

Akira's face turned red and he dropped the bottle of creamer on the counter. The white liquid
spilled, making a mess. Sojiro’s amused chuckle just made his face turn an even darker shade of red and he grabbed a few paper towels to clean up the mess. “Why are you asking me that?”

“Because your that age, so you’ve probably thought about it. And I don’t have a son, so I can’t annoy him instead.” The answer made Akira groan as Sojiro smirked. “So, have you thought about it?”

“I don’t know?”

“You don’t know?” Sojiro was not convinced by his half-hearted answer.

“I-I’ve kinda had a lot of other things on my mind. School, exams, my probation, mom.” Possibly being arrested for trespassing on the grounds of a famous artist. He kept that one to himself. He looked up at Sojiro who was continuing to give him a star of suspicion. Akira gave in. “Okay, I have thought about it a bit.

“Knew it,” Sojiro said. A smirk crossed his face. “Man when I was your age, I only really thought about girls. Amazing what little changes when you get older.” He paused, “Though now that I think about it, you could also be into that Sakamoto kid. You hang out with him a lot.”

“Ryuji and I hang out a lot because he drags me everywhere,” Akira said. Sojiro chuckled and nodded.

“Good thing he does. If you had it your way you’d spend your entire probation held up in your room.” He said. Akira had no retort. Sojiro was right and they both knew it. “So let’s see, we have Sakamoto-”

“Sakamoto’s not on the list.”

“Allright, Takamaki, that Nijima girl,” Akira’s hand twitched but he did not drop the creamer again, “then there’s that Togo-san you went to church with last night. She’s gotta be a keeper if she can drag you to something like that. Who else? I thought I heard the name ‘Haru’ at some point.”

“Please stop.”

The older man chuckled. “Gotta be a big deal if you’re on a first name basis with her.”

Akira placed the plastic container on the counter. “I don’t know Haru’s last name.”

He was expecting some kind of response, so when Sojiro didn’t say anything Akira found himself looking at him. He noticed there was a confused, even concerned look on the older man’s face. “Really?” He asked.

“She never mentioned it. She just introduced herself as Haru.” Akira explained.

Sojiro hummed and muttered something under his breath that Akira could not quite hear. The teenager finished making the coffee and gave it a small taste. He frowned as the flavor touched his tongue. He had tried the coffee he was making before and something was definitely off compared to how Sojiro made it. He passed the cup to his guardian. “What do you think?”

Sojiro tried it, taking a long sip, and then shook his head. “Too sweet. This uses vanilla creamer, so you’re gonna wanna use less sugar.” He paused considering his words, “Might want to skip it altogether actually. Unless you’re like Futaba and have a sweet tooth.”

Akira dumped the drink into the sink and grabbed a fresh cup. He set to work trying to recreate the
recipe, only glancing from his work when Sojiro brought the topic back to Haru. “So she introduced herself by her first name and you don’t know her last name?”

“Yeah,” Akira said. Sojiro thought for a second.

“Is this Haru girl a foreigner then?”

“I don’t think so. She looks more Japanese than Ann does anyway.” Akira hoped his answer would appease Sojiro’s questions. Instead, a serious look crossed his face.

“In that case, she’s either really into you,” Akira rolled his eyes, “Or she’s embarrassed about something and doesn't want you to know her family name.”


“Young people…” Sojiro muttered, but a small grin cracked his face, “Family names can give people the right or wrong idea about a person. If you want my guess, she’s probably from a family that’s been in the media recently for all the wrong reasons and doesn’t want you to know about it.” Akira stared at him, unsure how to respond to Sojiro’s statement. “Be careful around her. You don’t want to be dragged into something dangerous. Not with what’s on your record.”

Akira almost wanted to protest but found he had nothing to argue. He had not realized it until Sojiro had said anything, but, he knew next to nothing about Haru. He knew she liked Morgana, she was friendly and liked growing flowers, but that was it. He didn't know her the same way he knew Ryuji and Ann.

The news continued to play in the background as he worked. The latest story was a follow up regarding a labor strike amongst Okumura Foods. There had been an alleged accident at one of the chains and the company was refusing to pay workman’s compensation, the official response being the worker got injured doing tasks ‘not part of his job description’.

Akira tried to ignore the story as he finished his second cup of coffee and handed it to Sojiro. The older man put his lips to the cup and after a few seconds removed it and nodded in approval.

“Better.” He said, a slight smile on his face before doubling back, “Not good enough to sell, but it’s drinkable at least.”

Still, the praise brought a smile to Akira’s face. “Maybe someday I’ll make a cup your regulars will like.”

“Maybe now that you’re learning the basics of coffee you should learn to cook,” Sojiro told him. Akira gave him a confused frown, then remembered since he had moved into the city, he had mainly been eating the meals Sojiro or Wakaba made.

“I can cook.” He said.

“Really?” Sojiro asked, “Why didn’t you say so?”

“I’m not that great at it.”

“Well, we’ll need to fix that.” Sojiro said, “I’ll see if I can find Wakaba’s old recipe book. I’ll teach you the secret to making the perfect Sakura-Isshiki style curry. Bet your folks would love it.”

Akira chuckled a bit. The idea of making Sojiro's curry for his mom sounded good to him. However, the thought made him fall quiet, and his mind wandered to something that had been at
the back of his mind for awhile.

“Sakura-san? Speaking of my parents, did you hear from my probation officer yet?”

The man shook his head, “No. I'll mention it again when I report to your parole officer, but I'll be honest. Don't expect an approval.”

Akira did not tell him, but there was already a part of him thinking that was the case. The sound of a phone ringing shook him from the thought. He knew right away it was not his phone from the ringtone, and the fact Sojiro reached into and pulled his out of his pocket. “Yeah?” He said. A frown crossed his face as he listened on the other end, “Really. Is it….” he trailed off as he listened and nodded, “Alright. Well, the shops been quiet the past few hours. I'll be home soon...no, no I insist.”

He ended the call. “Did something happen?” Akira asked.

“Nothing you need to worry about. Just dealing with a pain in the ass,” Sojiro told him, “I'm going to head out. Clean up and lock the store, alright?”

Akira watched as Sojiro grabbed his things and left the store in a hurry. He thought for a few seconds and while the man appeared to be pretty calm, he also seemed annoyed. He shook his head and started cleaning up.

Whatever it was, it was probably something he didn’t need to worry about.

Wakaba Isshiki was not in any type of distress, but as she read the letter in her hands, it was obvious she was annoyed. She was frowning and tapping her fingers on her thighs in frustration. Futaba was on the couch sitting next to her, a worried look on her face as she glanced up from her laptop. “Is he trying stuff again?” She asked. Wakaba sighed and shook her head.

“Yes, but as always it’s hopefully nothing to worry about,” Wakaba said. Futaba took her laptop off her lap and put it on the coffee table, she then drew her legs closer and hugged her knees.

“Mom, I’m fifteen. You can stop telling me to not worry, you know.” Futaba told her. “And I do, every time Uncle sends one of these letters I keep thinking he’s going to cause trouble for you two again.”

“Well, I can one hundred percent assure you he won’t.” She said, tapping Futaba on the forehead. “I don’t deny that just after my accident things were difficult for the three of us, but it’s been years at this point. Your uncle’s a gambling addict with no case. This is just a scare tactic because he doesn’t understand your mother won’t take his crap lying down anymore.”

Futaba nodded, then looked up when she heard the door close and Sojiro step into the living area. Wakaba sighed and turned around, “You’re home early.”

“Wasn’t going to stay after Futaba called me,” Sojiro told her. He held his hand out and Wakaba gave him the letter. He frowned as he read it and tossed it on the table. “Son of a bitch. You’d think he’d have given up the last time I drilled him.”

Wakaba shrugged, “Unfortunately stubbornness is in the blood of everyone in my family.”

“Surprised you’re so calm.”
“Comes with growing up dealing with him.”

Sojiro grumbled and took off his jacket. He handed it to Futaba. “Hang this for me?”

“Could have just done it yourself,” Futaba muttered, but got up and took the jacket. She walked to the entrance of the house and with there now being a free space on the couch, Sojiro took a seat next to his longtime girlfriend.

“So, don’t suppose you’re gonna do something about this?”

“No. Nothing to really worry about yet.” Wakaba said, “I did consider a restraining order, but technically he hasn't done anything to warrant it outside of the occasional call or letter. At least that's what I'm sure I'll be told.”

Sojiro scoffed. "Probably."

"Truth be told he hasn't really done anything for me to think I need one. I doubt he'll go beyond thinly veiled desperation."

“Wish I had your confidence…." Sojiro muttered, then after a sigh changed the topic, “So, I take it the presentation went well?”

“About as well as it could. Unsurprisingly no accommodations were made for my wheelchair despite the number of times I told them they were needed, but one of the younger interns was willing to give me a hand with the setup.” The cheeky grin on Wakaba’s was met with Sojiro’s defeated headshake. “But what matters most is I got paid for it. We'll have plenty saved over after the bills are paid.”

“Good to hear. Cafe’s been pulling in some profit too.” A grin formed on Sojiro’s face. “Hey, why not this year we plan some kind of trip? I can’t remember the last time we took a vacation.”

“About two years ago, when you opened the cafe as part of your goal to be a full-time father,” Wakaba told him. She leaned back, putting her head on his shoulder, “It's quite amazing how time flies. Here I thought the days after my accident would be slow, but between you, Futaba, Takemi, and our new mouth to feed, the days go by so fast.”

“You don’t have to cook for him you know.”

"He's not living on just your curry.” Wakaba rolled her eyes, "Besides with how he looks I wouldn't be surprised if he skips meals.”

“He doesn’t trust me.”

"Of course dear." Wakaba said, a light laugh in her voice, "I'll say this. Those two deal with more than we did growing up. With the economy still in decline, they’re gonna have a tough time of it.”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

“Yeah,” Futaba said getting their attention as she climbed onto the couch. “Worse comes to worse I’ll just live here ‘til I’m thirty.” Sojiro's sigh was loud but went ignored. "So what was this about a vacation?”

“You’re dad thinks we should take a trip.”

"A trip?" Futaba repeated, a grin forming on her face as her eyes lit up. "Oh, like to a convention or
something? There’s one being held at Makuhari Messe in October. It’s a really big deal, they’re gonna show all the new games and there’s a rumor going around Mintenda is gonna show off their newest console there this year.” She paused and muttered, “It better be good, only thing the RU had for it was Bash Bros.”

Sojiro glanced at Wakaba, it obvious he had only a smattering of an idea what the young girl was talking about. “I remember you mentioning it before, but I thought that con was only for the press?”

She shook her head. “Nope. This one I can register and get a pass for. It’ll be great!”

“It sounds like you’d have fun, but maybe not something we’ll all enjoy. Plus those events are very crowded.” Wakaba pointed out. “How about going up to Fuji again? We haven’t gone in years.”

Hearing that suggestion the young girl’s eyes widened, “Oh you mean to that resort?” Futaba said, “Can I try the hot springs this year? You said I couldn’t before because I wasn’t old enough.”

“Yes, you can,” Wakaba said.

“Yes!” She then paused, “Wait, how am I going to even get around without my glasses? They don’t allow those in the hot springs.”

“Well maybe if you ask nicely they’ll make an exception,” Wakaba said, a grin on her face. Futaba thought it over then looked at both of them as an idea struck her.

“Hey, if we go this summer, can we bring Akira along?”

The question hung in the air for several moments. Wakaba pointed to Sojiro and the two looked at him with expectation. The man looked bewildered, “Why are you asking me?”

“You’re the one in charge of his probation.” Wakaba reminded him, “So Soji?”

He sighed then after thinking it over answered, “If he does well on his mid-terms, he can come with us.”

“Hell yeah!” Futaba shouted and grinned as Wakaba gave her a small pat on the head.

“And there we have it. Now speaking of school, you have homework missy. Up you go.”

Futaba groaned, but jumped to her feet and hurried up the stairs. When she was out of sight, Wakaba let out a sigh and Sojiro wrapped an arm around her. “You’re doing a great job keeping your head straight in all this.”

She let out a small laugh, “You sure? Some days I think I’ve about lost my mind.” She said, “Well I have work to do.”

“No, you’re taking the night off. I’ll take care of the cleanup tonight. You’ve pulled too many late nights to be doing anything else other than enjoying yourself.”

Wakaba shook her head but gave Sojiro a smile. “Well if you insist so much, then I’ll run myself a bath and put on a movie. Get the popcorn ready, you’re joining me.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”
“You see that guy by the train station?”

“Oh yeah, that Parliamentarian guy. I remember him from when I was a kid. Think his name was Toranosuke or something.”

“You mean ‘No-Good Tora’ right?”

“Oh yeah him! Man, that’s a name I never thought I’d hear again.”

Akira was only half listening as he read his book on the train. Politics was something he still did not really care for. He flipped to another page, then looked up when he felt the train slow. He was at his stop, so he folded the page in his book and held onto it as he got up. Morgana was sound asleep in his school bag and at the moment Akira wished he was his cat instead of a teenager on his way to school. He wanted to be in bed still sleeping.

Course it was his own fault for staying up later than usual - the ‘one more chapter’ bug hit him horribly - and in turn taking his medication later than scheduled. He shook his head as he exited the train station and walked the street. As always he followed the crowd of students going to Shujin Academy, keeping to himself. Or he would have if not for someone touching his shoulder and making him jump. He looked to his right to see Ann walking next to him.

“Relax it’s just me.”

“Sorry. Morning.” He said then yawned.

“Still waking up huh. Want some tea? That usually gets me going a bit.” She held out the bottle of ice tea. Akira shook his head and held up a hand.

“I think I’ll be okay. It’s probably just the side effect from my meds.” He said then yawned again. "Hopefully I'll be awake by second period. Ushimaru's teaching."

“Great...but I guess better to get social studies out of the way first and not later. At least we can change into our summer uniforms soon” She paused for a second. “Can’t believe it’s almost June. Month flew by quick huh? The whole week kinda feels like a blur.”

Akira said nothing but nodded in agreement. To think just a few days ago he was spending time with the others at the gym. “By the way when’s your kickboxing class start?”

“Oh, tomorrow night. Actually, I wanted to ask Nijima-senpai for some advice. Considering she has experience with it I thought maybe she could give me some pointers.”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t mind.”
“Yeah. She’s been pretty friendly recently.” Ann said. The two walked in silence for a bit, “So, it’s been two days since Kitagawa texted me. I haven’t replied to him, but he hasn’t messaged me again either. I don’t know whether to take that as a good thing or a bad thing though.”

“Maybe he realized his threat has no backing.”

“Like what Ryuji suggested. I’m starting to be more convinced he’s right...”

The two continued there walk to school. Once inside, and in their classrooms, Akira took his seat. He watched as the others filed in, taking a cursory glance at the window before resting his chin in the palm of his hand. His eyes felt heavy and they closed for a few seconds before snapping open.

“Alright everyone, take your seats it’s time for roll call!” Kawakami said. Akira could not help but notice she sounded tired. She read off the names, as always he raised his hand when she called him, and after looking over some notes, decided to put some information on the board behind her and begin class. At least that appeared to be the intent. Instead, she started rambling about how several essays she received had the exact same or similar wording and began lecturing the class on the consequences of plagiarism.

Akira let out a breath. He had a feeling today was going to be a long day. His eyes were starting to close again when he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He pulled it out and looked at it.

**Ryuji:**

*Hey.*

*Fourth period is your free period right?*

**Akira:**

*Yeah.*

He looked up and saw Kawakami was still lecturing the class. He then looked back at his phone.

**Ryuji:**

*Okay good.*

*Meet me on the first floor.*

*I got something I need to talk to you about.*

*It’s important.*

There was a brief pause, then Ryuji added more.

*It's not serious, but seriously, really important.*

**Akira:**

*What are you talking about?*

**Ryuji:**

*Just meet me by the lockers at fourth period.*

Akira stared at the text not quite sure what to make of Ryuji’s message. He left a short reply, then put his phone away as Kawakami began her Japanese lesson.
The rest of the morning classes droned on and Akira was sure he dozed off in math for a bit because next thing he knew the bell signaling the end was buzzing and his classmates were chatting amongst themselves. It was now fourth period, so he got up from his seat and left his classroom. Ann was texting on her phone, probably talking to Shiho. He walked down to the first floor and sure enough, Ryuji was waiting for him.

“Hey,” Ryuji said than looked around, he had a grin on his face.

“What’s up?” Akira asked looking around. No one seemed to be paying them any mind.

“You’ll see, come on let’s get out of here so no one overhears us.”

Akira raised an eyebrow. Maybe it was just him but Ryuji was acting a bit odd. He followed him out into the school’s courtyard. “Okay, so you remember last week when we looked at that maid service app?”

It took a second for Akira to remember what Ryuji was talking about, but when he did, a grin crossed his face. “Yeah. What about it?”

“Well, I might have found somewhere we can give the thing a test drive, if you get what I’m saying.” He told him.

“Oh really?” Akira asked, his interest piqued.

“Yeah, but…” Ryuji’s grin dropped, “There’s a small catch and I already know you aren’t going to like it.” Akira stared at him confused then heard someone come up behind them. He turned around and came face to face with the last person he wanted to ever talk to in Shujin.


“Can we talk about this later?” He asked. Ryuji gave him an uneasy. Slowly realization hit Akira what Ryuji meant by ‘would not like’ his idea. He shook his head. “No. No!”

“Yeah…” Ryuji said, “Look I was trying to find a place and Mishima overhead me swearing about it. We talked and honestly this is our best shot. Just hear him out and think it over.”

Akira looked at Mishima, then back at Ryuji. He took a breath and let it out. “Fine.”

Mashima winced as Akira glared at him. If the teenager was trying to make him feel uncomfortable, it was working. “So, someone on my apartment floor just moved out. When I overheard Sakamoto mentioning looking for a place...well this wasn’t what I was expecting, but it could still work.” He said then let out an awkward laugh, “I mean it’s kinda small but three kids and a hot maid in there shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Mishima already showed me the place and yeah it looks like we can get away with using it. But we only have a few days before the new tenant moves in. So, how about it?” Ryuji asked.

Akira's glare only softened slightly as he thought it over. He then grabbed Ryuji's jacket.

“Excuse us one second,” Akira told Mishima, then dragged his friend across the courtyard. Once far enough that Mishima could not hear him, Akira spoke up, “Please tell me this is just a really terrible joke.”

“Look I know you don’t like Mishima—”
“‘Don’t like’ is putting it kindly,” Akira told him. “You really expect me to go along with this if he’s involved? He leaked my record.”

“I know, I know, but please, just hear me out,” Ryuji said. Akira’s fist tightened, but he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, counted for a few seconds and let it out. He let his hand relax.

“Fine, let's hear it.” He said. He had to admit, he was almost surprised by his own willingness to listen. A few weeks ago he might have been screaming at his friend.

“I get why you don’t like this. He screwed you over and sold us out to Kamoshida. And yeah that leaves me pretty pissed too, but that’s the thing; everything that happened was because of Kamoshida. Without him around, Mishima really isn’t that bad of a guy.” Ryuji said, “I kinda wanna at least give him a chance. We don’t have to be his friends or anything like that. Besides, it’ll be cheaper to pay for the service if there’s three of us. You and I aren’t exactly loaded.”

“Don’t remind me.” Akira looked back over at Mishima and then Ryuji. He then shrugged, “Alright fine, he can come along. But on one condition.”

“Yeah?”

“I pick the maid.” He said. “Outfit, hairstyle, age. Deal?”

Ryuji considered Akira's ultimatum, but grinned, “Alright sure. I mean, it’s not like you're into anything weird.” He stopped, then thought it over, "...You aren't into anything weird are you?”

Akira blanched at the suggestion. “No!” Maybe. That would depend on Ryuji’s definition of ‘weird’. He pushed his glasses up, his face flushing a bit. Ryuji, to his relief, did not notice.

“Well, alright, let's tell Mishima we're good to go!”

He hurried back to Mishima, who had been playing on his phone to tell him the good news. Or at least what Ryuji saw as good news. Akira was not sure whether he would consider being stuck with Mishima for a few hours to be good news or not. However, he joined up with the two and listened as they discussed when would be a good time to go about their little scheme.

After discussing it for a few minutes and checking Ryuji’s work schedule, they agreed to meet up at the now abandoned apartment the next night.

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5/26/2016 (Thursday)
Evening
Beef Bowl

"Hey, I said I wanted a medium hui guo rou bowl! What the hell is taking so long?"

“It’s coming, I’m working on it,” Ryuji shouted and rolled his eyes. “Geeze it’s like they all think I’m five people.”

“Hey, I want a large beef bowl.”

“Coming right up! One moment!” Ryuji eyed the pork cooking for the first order and once sure it was not going to burn if he looked away from it for a few seconds began working on the second one. Then another person shouted for a medium beef bowl and he found himself groaning in
This was the third time he had been working where not only was it busy, but he had no backup. His boss had more or less thrown him into the lion’s den with nothing but an excuse - lack of budget from corporate - and an apology. Ryuji finished putting together the pork bowl and handed it to the man who had been yelling about it for two minutes. Apparently, the man did not realize wherever he went, pork cooked at the same speed each time.

“I’m filing a complaint!”

“Yeah, you do that…” Ryuji muttered as he went back to work on everyone else's meals. Thankfully the second person was understanding if annoyed by the wait. The third was not and the fourth person was somehow even worse. Ryuji sighed as he handed the last person their food. He hoped the rush hour crowd would go away soon, but he was starting to think the job was just not worth it.

He then looked up to see a man sitting patiently, a serious look on his face. Ryuji tried to put on his best smile. “Hello sir, have you decided on your order?” He asked. The question seemed to snap the man out of his thoughts.

“Oh, yes. I guess I’ll have a large barbecue bowl.”

Ryuji nodded and was relieved he still had some barbecue sauce left over. He began to get to work, “You want chicken or beef?”

“Chicken please.” He said. Ryuji nodded and set to work. He could not help but notice the man staring at him. “You seemed to have a rough time there.”

“Huh?” Ryuji looked up at him, “Oh with all the orders. Yeah, it gets pretty busy, but it makes my shift go by faster.” He tried to smile about it, though in reality, he was just about ready to walk out of the job. But he needed the money, he promised himself that he would cover his own costs so his mother wasn’t paying for everything.

“No one else is scheduled?” He asked, “I’d imagine on a busy day like this someone would at least be called in to help.”

“Nah.” Ryuji frowned. Now that he thought about it and really got a good look at the guy he looked very familiar. He was sure he had seen him somewhere before. “Boss told me we don’t have the budget for another guy. So it’s just me.”

“I see…” He muttered, “Employees being overworked has become a greater issue these days. Hmm…”

Ryuji raised an eyebrow, then blinked when he heard something that smelled like smoke. He looked over to see the chicken was beginning to burn. “Ah, crap!” He set to work moving it. “S-sorry about that!”

“Oh, it’s alright!” The man said. He seemed just as surprised as Ryuji was, he had been in deep thought. Ryuji put together a new order and handed him the bowl. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, sure thing. Uh, please enjoy your meal,” Ryuji said. The man began to eat, and Ryuji checked the time on the wall. To his relief, his shift was almost done. He began to clean up when the man spoke up again.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what's your name?”
Ryuji looked up at him. “Uh, Ryuji Sakamoto sir?”

“Sakamoto…” He trailed off, thinking for several moments, “Well, thank you, Sakamoto. I’ll remember this meeting.”

Ryuji stared at the man, very confused, and then went back to cleaning. After finishing his meal, the man left.

Chapter End Notes

And that wraps up another chapter. Now for the announcement:

Since late last year, I've been working with several people in the P5 fandom to create an insanely huge Persona 5 fanzine and I'm so excited to announce we are nearing completion and have a release date:

The Crimson Compendium will release on July 9th this year and all proceeds will go to the charity The Joyful Heart Foundation.

You can learn more about it here: https://crimsoncomp.tumblr.com/post/175246115039/give-your-heart-the-crimson-compendium

And more information will be coming soon.
Signing up for kickboxing had proven to be a mistake as far as Ann was concerned. She had her first lesson that evening and now that it was over she was ready for the sweet embrace of death. Her muscles were sore, she was covered in sweat, and as she was pretty sure she pulled something from kicking her leg out too far. Ann groaned as she finished putting on her shoes and stood up. She was exhausted. And she had not even had the chance to have a shower either because the rest of them were full.

Somehow she found the strength to get back to her feet and tried to refocus. She needed to stop thinking about how she exhausted after her workout - one she in hindsight was not even close to prepared for - and more about the good things. When she told Shiho about it her friend sounded surprised but was supportive. She wished Ann luck and asked her to show her a few things when she got the chance. Ann smiled at the thought. Hopefully, when Shiho was on her feet, Ann would be able to show her a perfect roundhouse kick.

Or at least one that did not end with her feeling like she got the wires in her leg crossed. Ann grabbed her things and approached the locker room door, only to stop when it opened and another person stood in front of her. Her eyes widened in surprise, then she grinned. “Oh, hey Niijima-san!”

“Takamaki-san?” Makoto asked. She, like Ann, was covered in sweat from her workout, though she seemed noticeably less worn out than Ann did. “W-what are you doing here?”

“It was a lot more intense than I thought.” Ann said, “Pretty sure I pulled a few muscles I didn’t know I had…”

“Well if you aren't used to such an intense workout…”

Ann gave her a sheepish laugh and tried to change the subject. “Anyway, are you heading out soon? After a work out like that, I need to get some sugar in my system. The crepe store is probably still open, you wanna come?”

“Uh well…” Makoto wanted to say no because a sugary treat like what Ann was thinking off wasn't the best idea to have after working out at the gym. However, Ann looked pretty happy to see her and she did remember having fun with her and the others earlier in the week. Makoto nodded and smiled. “That sounds like a good idea. I don’t think I could eat an entire crepe but-”

“That’s cool, we can split a large one then.” Ann cut her off, then got behind her and pushed her a bit forward. “Hurry up and get changed, I’ll meet you by the exit!”
Makoto stumbled a bit, but got her things from her locker and began to change as quick as she could. She had a feeling Ann did not want to wait long. She checked her phone. There was a text from her sister, telling her she would be home late. It was possible she would not be home at all.

Makoto put her phone back down and finished changing, then hurried out of the locker room.

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5/27/2016 (Friday)
Evening
Abandoned Apartment

Ryuji’s gleeful mix of giggling and repressed shouting echoed throughout the small studio apartment. “This is gonna be great! Just think, a maid all to ourselves for... how long does the service last for again?”

“First hour is in the fee, then it’s another thousand yen for every twenty minutes,” Akira said, not looking up from the phone. Ryuji made a noise through his teeth like his breath hitched at the sound of the cost.

“Seriously? Geeze this thing's really expensive. Another thousand just for an extra twenty minutes?”

“Time is money?” Mishima guessed. Ryuji sighed.

“If time was money, I’d be paid way more for the crap I deal with at Beef Bowl.” He shook his head and decided to change the subject. “Anyway, what are we gonna have her do when she gets here? We got the tea and all that crap, but what else you think we can get away with?”

“Oh, how about having her give us massages?” Mishima suggested.

“Oh man, that’s brilliant! What else you got?”

“Oh, well…” Mishima trailed off. "...you got any ideas?"

"Uh..." Ryuji started before falling into awkward silence. Akira looked up at them for a second, then sighed. For a split second, he found himself questioning why he had agreed to take part in as Ryuji called ‘Operation Maidwatch’. Then he looked down at the app on his friend's phone and remembered why. He had been going through the outfits and hairstyles for a little while trying to put together what the app called the ‘perfect maid’ and a small smile formed on his face. He then jumped a bit as Ryuji dropped down next to him and grabbed his shoulder.

“So how’s it looking?” His friend asked. Akira on instinct had pulled the phone away, but then after some hesitation brought it back closer. His face turned a shade of pink as he saw Ryuji look at it. “Dude seriously? I mean, yeah the nurse outfit? Hot. But that’s way too old.”

“It’s not ‘too old.”’ Akira grumbled.

“Dude, she looks about as old as your homeroom teacher. Or your...doctor...” Realization hit Ryuji hard at that moment. "Dude..."

"What?" Akira caught himself to late and he saw Ryuji's eyes widen and then a huge grin form on his face. "Don't."
"You wanna-"

"Don't!"

"You wanna fu-"

"Ryuji!" His face turned bright red and a glare crossed his face as Ryuji broke into a loud laugh. Mishima also laughed, but was more reserved, covering his mouth and trying to keep as quiet as possible. And failing. Akira looked down at the phone in front of him, then looked at Ryuji. "You know I can just walk away..."

"No...please..." Ryuji tried to recompose himself. "Just...damn man I thought you said you weren't into anything weird."

"It's not weird!" Akira shouted. Ryuji's grin somehow became wider. Akira grumbled in annoyance, "Look I said I'd come along if I got to pick the maid. We're going with an older woman, or I'm out, okay?"

Ryuji chuckled again, "Alright fine. Seriously though, and you made fun of me for liking maids. You're in a class all your own man. You do know there's a word for people like you, right?"

Akira was quiet, his ears had turned bright red. He knew what word it was, and he prayed neither of them repeated it. Especially Ryuji. Mishima glanced at the phone, a frown crossing his face. “Well, age opinions aside, I don’t know if going with a nurse outfit is a good idea. Look at the price.”

Both boys looked at him then at Ryuji’s phone, which led to them looking at the cost of there ‘personalized maid’. Ryuji's face turned white as he saw the numbers and looked at Akira, “Tell you what, we'll keep the age if we go back to the default outfit. No way we can afford that.”

Akira nodded and switched back to the default maid outfit - his interest in his friend’s scheme dropping the moment he did - and handed Ryuji back his phone. His friend pressed a few buttons. “Okay, give me you guys part of the cash, I’m gonna pay,” Ryuji told them. The two got on their phones and transferred the appropriate funds to their friend. Ryuji then tapped the checkout icon and put in his payment information. A few seconds later he got a message that he had a new email.

“Alright, payment's gone through, our maid is gonna be here in about...forty-five minutes.”

“In forty-five minutes we will have tea and massages,” Mishima said, a sparkle in his eye as he turned to Akira. “Sounds like a good time, huh Kurusu-san?”

“Yeah, sure,” Akira muttered. Just because he was stuck in the same room with Mishima did not mean he was required to talk to Mishima. He hoped the short and simple answer would be enough for the thorn in his side.

The thorn kept talking. “What do you think you’d want first? I guess the tea would be nice. Warm you up before having that massage, right?”

“Yeah. Sure.” He said, not as enthused as Mishima. “Are we even allowed to use this service? I mean we’re high schoolers.”

“Don’t see why not.” Ryuji said, “I mean it’s not like they offer anything illegal. The website didn’t say anything either.”

“Yeah, now that I think about it the app didn’t say anything either, right?” Mishima asked.
“Nope.” Ryuji shrugged then looked at Akira, “Besides, no offense or anything, but if anyone here needs to get the stress worked out of there muscles, it’s you man.”

“Huh?!” Akira almost backed into the wall in surprise.

“You’re all tense. And with Morgana in your bag all the time, that shoulder’s gotta be killing you. Let whatever old lady we're getting loosen you up a bit. It might even help...well you know.” Ryuji trailed off at the last point, leaving Mashima confused.

“Know what? What’s up?” He asked.

“Uh, nothing you need to worry about.” Was Ryuji’s quick answer as Akira gave him a disapproving scowl. Mishima raised an eyebrow at both of them then asked.

“Okay...so... who’s Morgana?”

Mishima looked between the two of them. An awkward smile crossed Ryuji’s face while Akira decided the best way to answer that question was simply to not answer it at all. He rubbed the back of his neck and made himself comfortable on the floor of the apartment. Mishima looked back and forth between the two of them, a frown on his face.

“Seriously, who's Morgana?”

On cue, a meow came from Akira's bag and Morgana's head popped out. Akira looked at the feline, then up at Mishima. "He's my cat."

Mishima stared at the cat. "Oh wow. I didn't know you had a pet Kurusu-san."

"Yup. I have a cat."

Akira had a feeling it was going to be a very long forty-five minutes.

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5/27/2016 (Friday)
Evening
Crepe Store

Makoto was not sure what to make of the somewhat large, yet thin wrapped pancake with creme in it that was now in her hand. She wasn't sure how she was supposed to eat it without it falling apart either. She looked at Ann, who had gotten herself a medium-sized strawberry filled vanilla crepe, and Makoto a small one.

“Much easier to just have these instead of splitting one,” Ann explained. Makoto nodded and inspected the crepe with a diligent eye.

Crepes were popular in Shibuya so she had seen the shops several times. However, she had never eaten a crepe before and was already skeptical about the amount of sugar that could possibly be in it. She was surprised to find there were a decent number of strawberries stuffed inside it. She was almost expecting it to just be strawberry flavored cream. She looked up at Ann who took a large bite out of hers and then took a small one herself.
She licked the cream off her lips and took in the taste. The strawberries were juicy. The vanilla creme, had a weaker flavor to it than she expected. It as a snack was a bit on the sweet side for her tastes, but she found she enjoyed it. “This isn’t bad.”

“You like it? Good! Ryuji often teases me about my ‘crepe addiction’ or whatever he calls it. Now I have a second opinion.” She paused, “I need to get Akira to try one of these, see what he thinks about it.”

Makoto took another bite, ”You haven’t taken him to one yet?”

"I did one time, but he didn't really eat it. He wasn't having a good day." Ann explained. She noticed a serious look cross Makoto's face. "So, what were you doing at the gym?"

“Oh, I try to work out twice a week. Three times if I have the time.” Makoto explained, “I was busy yesterday, so I figured I should make up for it today.”

“Nice! That’s dedication. Don’t think I could exercise regularly like that.” Ann said. Makoto stared at her, surprised.

“Really? I thought since you're a model, you had a special exercise regimen.”

“Not really. I’ve actually been pretty lucky about that.” Ann told her, “Course I’m sure all this sugar is gonna catch up to me by the time I’m considered ‘too old’ to be a model.”

“Might wanna tackle that now before it catches up to you.”

Ann shrugged. “I’ve thought about it, but I like my cakes and crepes to much.” As though to prove her point she stuffed more of the snack into her mouth. “Besides I’d rafer…”

“Uh, Takamaki-san…” Makoto winced as Ann tried to speak with her mouth full and the blonde seemed to have gotten the hint. She swallowed and cleaned her lips with a nearby napkin before continuing.

“Sorry. Besides, I’d rather use that extra time to do other things. Like play games, or spend time with Shiho.”

“I see…” Makoto hesitated for a second, wondering if it was appropriate to bring up, but as the silence lingered she found herself asking. “How is Suzui-san doing?”

“Shiho is fine for the most part,” Ann told her, eyes downcast at her crepe. “She’s been going to physical therapy and she’s hoping to be out of the hospital soon.”

“That’s good news.”

“Y-yeah…” Ann’s fingers twitched, “It’s been hard for her. I mean, we’re all relieved that Kamoshida is behind bars and can never hurt her again, but their’s her parents, and the recovery itself.”

Makoto stayed quiet, waiting for Ann to continue talking. After a few seconds she did, “Shiho and I were talking after one of her therapy sessions. She told me she was grateful that I had come to watch her during it. Have you ever seen someone need to relearn to walk?”

“I can’t say I have.”

“It’s hard to watch. Shiho told me that each step was agonizing. not painful but, like she needed to
scream at her body to work the way she knew it was supposed to, but it didn’t want to. Then after the session, she’s so exhausted and covered with sweat. She looks like she had the crap beaten out of her or something” Ann lifted a hand up to rub an eye, “I just...I’m sorry...I’m just.....”

Makoto placed her crepe on her napkin and placed her hands on the table. “Take your time.”

Ann nodded trying to come up with the words. “I’m just so mad. At Kamoshida, at the school. The Principal.”

“At me, right?”

“Huh?” Ann said looking up at her, to see Makoto was avoiding her gaze. She sighed, “Yeah. A bit I guess. But, I think that’s just because I was sure you didn’t care. In the end, your argument was the only reason Kawakami-sensei called the police on him. Though I’m sure the fact Akira had the crap beaten out of him kinda helped.”

“Even so, as the student council president, I should have taken the allegations and rumors about Kamoshida seriously. Perhaps a lot of this could have been avoided.” Makoto said, then after some hesitation added, “Or maybe it wouldn’t have. I did try talking to the principal about it at one point-”

“You did?”

“Y-yes. Unfortunately, he brushed my concerns aside.” Makoto said. She remembered the principal’s words very well. Just as important was her job to keep the best interests of the student body it was also her duty to preserve the reputation of the school. So far she hadn't done much of a good job accomplishing either task.

“Principal Kobayakawa is a piece of shit.” Ann’s words got Makoto’s attention, “I'm positive he knew exactly what Kamoshida was doing and did nothing because of his so-called ‘good name’.” Her tone was harsh, but then it softened, “But he’s gone now so, that’s what matters right?”

Makoto found herself smiling. “Yeah. No one needs to worry about Kamoshida ever again.”

“That’s what keeps me going.” Ann said, “I think it’s what’s helping Shiho too. Knowing that even with all the terrible stuff that has happened, that he did, he’ll never be able to hurt her again.”

“I’m sure having you around also helps.”

Ann laughed, her face turning red, “Well, of course it would, I’m her best friend after all.” She said, a grin on her face, “You know Nijima-san, you’re actually pretty okay. We should hang out together more often.”

The statement caught Makoto by surprise, but she nodded. “I’d like that.” Then a smirk crossed her face, “Maybe I can give you a few pointers in kickboxing.”

“Is it true you also studied Aikido? I heard someone mention it at school.” Ann asked. Makoto grinned.

“Yes, I did for awhile actually.” Makoto said, “Do you want me to show you a few things in that too?”

“Sure!” Ann said then winced as she leaned back, “Ugh, maybe after the soreness goes away first. So, how about in a few weeks?”
Makoto sighed, “You’re gonna need to make a consistent workout regimen if you want to avoid being so sore Takamaki-san.”

“Ugh, you sound like my mom.”

“Huh? Sorry, I didn’t-”

Makoto stopped when Ann laughed and she blushed in embarrassment. Still, she was smiling. She wasn’t sure what she expected when she agreed to sweets with Ann, but it was not this. And she had to admit, she quite liked it.

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5/27/2016 (Friday)
Evening
Abandoned Apartment

“Okay so, we have tea and massages and...what else?” Ryuji asked as he looked to Mishima and then down at Akira. They had spent a good chunk of there waiting time trying to come up with ideas for what they could have there maid do.

“Well, we could have her cook something?” Mishima suggested then his face fell, “But we didn’t bring anything to make.”

“We could still get some ramen bowls or something down the street. I think we have time.” Ryuji suggested.

At that moment they heard a knock on the door. Akira put his phone in sleep mode and got to his feet. He felt his body run cold for a second. The other two were silent as well, as though the realization just hit them about what they were in for that night.

“Hello?” A voice said. The three were silent.

“Are you home master?”

“Mmm-master?” Ryuji said, his face turning bright red. He then cleared his throat and tried to speak in the lowest register he could manage. “J-just one moment. I’m uh...getting out of the shower?”

Mishima and Akira exchanged bewildered looks as Ryuji turned to them. His face was beat red and his whole body was stiff. “Okay, one of you answer the door.”

“I...” Ryuji stammered looking between them. Akira could not help but notice his friend lose all his composure. “I can’t. I’m too nervous!”

“You’re nervous? This was your idea.” Mishima shouted. “Come on open the door!”

“You open the door!”

“What? N-no...that’s...” Mishima stepped back a bit, his face pink.

“Uh, Master? I can’t offer my services if you don’t open the door.” The woman’s voice got them looking at the door again and Ryuji and Mishima looking at each other with horrified faces.
“You open it!”

“No, you open it!”

Akira was starting to get annoyed by the arguing. “Would one of you just answer it?” He asked getting the two to stop. They looked at him, then each other then grabbed Akira’s arm. “Huh? Hey!”

“Come on man, you wanna see the maid so badly, you open the door,” Ryuji said and he and Mishima shoved pulled Akira forward, making him almost trip and stumble over his own feet. “Good luck!”

“What? Why me?”

“Well it was you who picked her,” Mishima said. Akira glared at them. At that moment he hated that they had a half decent argument for him to be the one to open the door. Ryuji’s idiotic grin was not helping either.

“Go ahead, we’ll wait over here.” He said, taking a noticeable step towards the closet. Akira glowered at them, and looked away at the door. It was right there. He just needed to walk over to it, put his hand on the handle, and then open it. Easy. No problem. Just something he did every day of his life when he left his room until he ended up having a bedroom with no actual door on it. Nothing to worry about.

He felt like his legs were going to fall off. “I-I can’t.” He muttered. Both Mishima and Ryuji let out collective groans and then Ryuji gave him a reassuring pat on the back.

“Come on man.”

“I’m just nervous.”

“You’re always nervous.” Ryuji’s reply did not make him feel better. “Look you can do this, we’re right here, so don’t worry it’ll be fine.” He smacked Akira on the back making the teenager lurch forward, ”Now don’t let us down.”

“Gee, thanks…” Akira muttered, not pleased or impressed by Ryuji’s pep talk.

“No problem! Now open the door already.”

Akira gave Ryuji one last annoyed look then, trying to steady his nerves as well, walked up to the door. He put his hand to the knob and stopped. He could see his hand shaking, so he gripped the handle tighter. Just open the door and step back as Ryuji and Mishima took over. Easy. He turned the handle and pulled the door open, then froze at the sight of the maid in front of him, who greeted him with a smile, her eyes closed.

“Greetings Master.” She said. She opened them, “You certainly took...your…”

She trailed off as she saw him. Akira felt his face become hot as he recognized who was in the maid outfit. The woman’s face, meanwhile, turned just as red.

“Kawakami-sensei?”

“Kurusu?”

His eyes were not mistaken, he was indeed staring at his homeroom teacher. Wearing a maid outfit.
He blinked a few times just to make sure he was not imagining things. No his homeroom teacher was, in fact, wearing a maid outfit and standing right in front of him. She appeared just as flabbergasted as he was.

“What are you…? Wait I thought I heard someone…” She trailed off, and as the pieces came together, a horrifying look crossed her face. Akira moved out of the way as she stomped into the room and glared at the two in front of her. “Sakamoto!”

“Kawakami-sensei?” Ryuji jumped back in surprise as Mishima attempted to step away and make himself as invisible as possible. “What are you…wait you’re….you….maid….?” He paused, taking the scene in, and said the only thing he could think of, “...shit.”

“I want to say I’m shocked by this, but considering all three of you are at that age…” Kawakami said, her arms crossed, and a strict look on her face that made the three flinch. “Sakamoto, I’m not surprised by this behavior at all and I suppose since you to hang out with him I can’t say I should be surprised by it either Kurusu.”

Akira looked away from the woman in question. The maid outfit was noticeably low cut, so he tried to keep his eyes on the floor. Tried too. Kawakami turned her attention to Mishima, “But Yuuki Mishima, I thought you were better than this. This is really disappointing.”

“I’m sorry Kawakami-sensei…” He muttered. He sounded like he wanted to run away as fast as he could. In truth at this point, Akira wanted nothing more than to go home, hide under his blankets and just pretend the entire evening never happened.

The teacher looked the three of them over and her shoulders dropped, “Alright look, you three aren’t in trouble. I’ll call my boss and tell him it turned out to be a prank. It’s gonna piss him off considering us older ladies don’t get as much work as the college girls, but he’s just gonna have to suck it up.” She sighed and mumbled under her breath. Akira could not help but hear something about a payment. She then glared at them, “Just tell me who the hell told you about this stupid service?”

The three looked at each other. “Told us?” Mishima asked. “Uh well, Ryuji told me about it.”

“Whoa hey, don’t single me out like that!” Ryuji shouted, jumping in fright when Kawakami glared at him. “I found out about it by some ad in Akihabara.”

“An ad?” Kawakami repeated. Her face contorted from thinly-veiled fury to genuine confusion.

“Yeah. Looked into it, downloaded the app for the service and well, here we are.”

Kawakami stared at him as though she did not believe a word Ryuji had just said.

“So, no one told you or you didn’t overhear anyone talking about it?” Kawakami asked, a serious look on her face, “No rumors going around Shujin about a teacher moonlighting?”

“Uh, I haven’t heard anything?” Ryuji said, glancing at the others. Mishima shook his head quickly. Akira slower. “Wait, moonlighting? What’s that?”

“Nevermind.” Kawakami shook her head, “Alright, get out of here you three. You still have school tomorrow. Kurusu, Mishima!” The two looked at her, “If either of you fall asleep in class tomorrow because of this, you’re on classroom duty for the next month. Got it?”

“Y-yes ma’am!” The two boys said in unison before grabbing their bags and hastily leaving the
apartment. Kawakami watched them leave, positive she heard the sound of a cat behind them and decided she was too tired to bother asking about it.

“I’m getting too old for this bullshit.”

Chapter End Notes

No lie I had way to much fun putting this chapter together. But soon...back to plot.

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