Makoto's Lies

by PixieRed

Summary

Makoto is an elegant, refined young lady with purely logical reasons for her actions that don't involve personal desires for love or justice.

A in-game Makoto POV shipfic focusing on her relationship with the protagonist and her early discovery of a certain palace.

Cross-posted from FFnet.

My thanks to the kind folks curating the TVTropes page for this fic (Spoilers!)

Notes

Hello everyone! Quick note: At least eight sources have said the beginning of this fic is hard to get through. I've considered deleting the first few chapters, but before taking that drastic step, I'm going to try guiding the reader to what they want first:

In a nutshell, this is a shipfic from Makoto's point of view that tries to remain (mostly) canon compliant. As such, I preserve in-game dialogue (with some skipping/summarizing) when I cover in-game scenes with Makoto's thoughts and interpretations highlighted. Before Makoto joins the PTs, there's not a lot of wiggle room for meaningful new scenes. This means in early chapters the in-game scenes are more frequent and it's not all that shippy as Makoto and Ren are odds. If that's not your thing, I recommend starting at one of these chapters:

Chapter 4 - After the night of Makoto's awakening, all new scenes
Chapter 5 - Elaborates on early shiptease scenes and is where Makoto first learns of the Casino Palace.

This work is cross-posted from FFnet. I'm new and experimenting with AO3, trying to understand both the interface and the culture. Please let me know if I'm running afoul of any social norms.
I can't implicate Amamiya until I have evidence.

Makoto looked up over the thick manga anthology, making sure Amamiya Ren was still in her sights. The principal had been pressing her hard and increasingly frequently to discover what ties Shujin Academy might have to the Phantom Thieves. Approaching it from the assumption that the Phantom Thieves were indeed Shujin students, it wasn't hard to deduce that the delinquents Kamoshida threatened with expulsion and the best friend of Suzui Shiho, all of whom had started hanging out together just before Kamoshida's confession, might be involved. This deduction was, surely, not enough for Principal Kobayakawa though. Surely. This merited further investigation.

A passerby headed the opposite direction slammed into Makoto's shoulder. Central Street Shibuya was a busy place. Makoto briefly regret chasing Amamiya's group off the roof. They would have been so much easier to keep an eye on there. If the group was meeting elsewhere, she had not been able to catch them in the act. The venture was really cutting into her study time. The principal had also been pressuring Makoto to score first place regionally on the next mock exam and she worried Sis was disappointed with her constant second place.

However, Makoto needed evidence first and thus studying was relegated to late into the night. Keeping an eye on the suspects came first. Mishima Yuuki went directly home after school and had not been with the group on the roof. He was likely not a phantom thief. Sakamoto Ryuji stayed a little later, sometimes going running with Amamiya. Takamaki Ann frequented the shops at Shibuya station, sometimes hanging out with Amamiya and sometimes going to visit Suzui at the hospital. Amamiya was a little more varied in his afternoon wanderings and thus required more attention, so Makoto told herself.

When Makoto followed him in Shibuya, Amamiya did a variety of things—visit the bookstore, study at the diner, work at the convenience store, pick up some snacks. It was all so very normal. While rather reserved, a look exacerbated by the hair and glasses covering his eyes, he seemed to have a warmth about him and people seemed to find him quite charming. He got along well with his coworkers and the wait staff at the diner put up with his lonely drink orders. The only odd thing was that he often went to a corner down an alley and just seemed to stare off into space for a bit. At first Makoto thought he might be contacting someone but she didn't see any sign of movement or anyone else in the area.

One last thing of note, Amamiya carried around a surprisingly well-behaved cat in his bag at all times, including at school. This was certainly against the rules, but no evidence of phantom thievery and well, Makoto worried what might happen to the cat if this was discovered. Could he really be that bad a guy if he was taking such good care of a cat? Clearly Makoto would have to keep following him to be sure.

The frequent trips to Shibuya did give Makoto the opportunity to warn other Shujin students she came across about possible dangers in the area, though she had doubts how many were taking her seriously. It was what little she could do though. Principal Kobayakawa had quickly shut down conversation on the matter and emphasized that she focus on the Phantom Thieves.

Though Makoto was keeping a close eye on Amamiya, she had no idea what he might be doing in the evening. She always returned home in time to make dinner for Sis. Makoto liked maintaining
their apartment and doing the household chores, not only did it let her help out Sis, but it was also the little time she had to just think.

"Uh, Niijima-senpai?"

Makoto looked up from her manga. Amamiya Ren, thick black voluminous hair atop thick black glasses frames, was looking down at her. His eyes were open just a little wider than normal and his lips slightly parted.

"A-Amamiya-kun," Makoto struggled to find her carefully-constructed Student Council President voice. She was glad Sis wasn't around to hear her fail all working-womankind. "It's surprising to run into you here. Are you meeting up with Sakamoto and Takamaki today?"

Makoto tried to wander into the crowd again, small talk finished. Amamiya was undaunted, keeping pace with her and looking expectant.

"W-well," Why was her commanding Student Council President not coming out? "I-I need to pick up a few items at Rocinante. If you'll excuse me."

Amamiya said nothing, but stopped walking with her. As she turned away, she thought she briefly saw an amused smile form of his face but by the time she worked up the nerve to turn around again, he was gone.

Makoto recalled being transfixed on the large screen showing Madarame Ichiryusai's confession. All of a sudden, the Kamoshida case went from 'strange occurrence' to 'strange pattern.' Moreover, all of a sudden Principal Kobayakawa went from simmer to boil. He was panicking about having the school associated with something that now went beyond its gates.

The principal had gone so far as to post flyers around the school, urging students to present their problems to the student council. The rest of the student council was not pleased. Had Makoto just given Principal Kobayakawa names a month ago, her fellow council members wouldn't be in this situation now. She had assured the rest of the student council she would take care of the new requests on her own.

There were a lot of requests, but most concerning were the ones indicating that indeed students were falling prey to scams in Shibuya. She had urged one student, Iida, to go to the police but he refused, telling her his parents would be targeted if he spoke up and swearing her to secrecy. A few days later she found herself back in the principal's office, being told in no uncertain terms that any scamming problem she would have to handle on her own as the Phantom Thieves took precedent. Makoto wasn't sure what the principal expected her to do. What would Sis have done? (Other than solved it, easily, of course.) Principal Kobayakawa seemed to believe she could solve both the Shibuya scams and the Phantom Thieves in one fell swoop.

It was as if there were few paths open to Makoto, as if she was standing on a narrow path surrounded by sheer drops, as if every person she talked to made more and more of the ground crumble away around her, made the wind gust more harshly, made it more and more likely she would fall. There were so few moves she was permitted to take and such a great distance she had to cover. She had to be responsible. She had to be demure. She had to be smart. She had to be accommodating. She had to avoid offending anyone. She had to somehow make everything work out.

Sighing, Makoto decided to head to the courtyard for some fresh air, refocusing herself on the Phantom Thieves. It would have been hard to believe high school students would take an interest in
Madarame had Makoto not spotted Amamiya, Sakamoto, and Takamaki together with Kitagawa Yusuke, Madarame's current pupil.

"Let's see him do it then!" Sakamoto's voice pierced Makoto's thoughts the moment she left the building. She jammed her hand into her bag, fumbling to find her phone. Scanning her screen she somehow located the recording app and hit play. "If someone else could help 'em, we wouldn't be doing' stuff as the Phantom Thieves to start with!"

Takamaki walked right past Makoto, seemingly not noticing she was there.

"We can't let the cops scare us outta bein' phantom thieves," Sakamoto's argument continued.

Makoto stared at her phone in disbelief as Sakamoto and Takamaki continued talking. Her heart was beating fast. Takamaki mentioned something about ...a palace? Makoto shook her head. This wasn't the time. A photo. She needed a photo to go with her recording. She would have to come up with some excuse. She took a deep breath, stepped out from behind the wall, and snapped the picture.

Calm down. Be like Sis. Cool and collected. In control. Elegant and refined. Politeness as a blade. The model student. What other students should aspire to be. "You three seem to be having so much fun, I'm a little jealous."

"Are you snoopin' on us again?" There was an edge to Sakamoto's voice, but he kept it calm and quiet. "We said before, we don't know nothin'."

Don't let Sakamoto intimidate you. Find out what you need to know. "Why do you think I'm here to question you? Could it be that you're hiding something? My ears are always open to the troubles of my peers, you know."

"You're really that hungry for a good letter of recommendation? ...Of course you are." Takamaki jumped in, punctuating her sentences with annoyed sighs. She accentuated the hard consonants as she spoke. "Nobody would take on your annoying job if they weren't."

"What's that supposed to mean...?" Makoto narrowed her eyebrows.

"You're student council president, right?" Ann took a few steps forward, her eyes narrowing as well. "Wouldn't you have known about Kamoshida?"

The implication dragged at Makoto's gut. Kamoshida? People thought she turned a blind eye to Kamoshida? "Of course not! He seemed like an honestly good teacher... until that day..."

"Oh, but you always take the teacher's side," Takamaki drew out her words so her sarcasm would not be missed. "That's what a good council president does, right?"

"Then... how about you? What did you do for your friend? You were much closer to her than I was, so how did you help?" Makoto's voice became louder, harsher with each word. Seeing the tears bead up in the corners of Takamaki's eyes, she immediately regretted it. It hadn't been a fair question, and Makoto knew it.

"There wasn't any way to help!" Takamaki balled her hands into fists and stomped one of her feet in Makoto's direction. She paused. "By myself... I couldn't do anything for her!"

Makoto grappled to find her refined student council president voice. "There's no need to shout."

"If those Phantom Thieves are out there helpin' people... I'd root for 'em, no questions asked," Sakamoto spoke next, drawing Makoto's attention away from Takamaki. "They've gotta be more
dependable than *some* people I know."

"Just make sure you show up to your classes, all right?" Makoto mumbled the first piece of student-council-president speak that came to her head and high-tailed it away, something she should have done way earlier. She shouldn't have prodded. What good did that do? Sakamoto and Takamaki had been intense. Not only that, Makoto hadn't even been able to bring herself to meet Amamiya's eyes.

Once safely across the courtyard, Makoto looked down at her phone. There was no question now, she definitely had evidence. Now what?

Chapter End Notes

But seriously, where was Makoto standing to be able to record Ryuji without Ann noticing her when she entered scene? It's not like she's a master of stealth.

Edited 2018/06/03 based on comments from AO3 user NierVille and FFnet user Ganheim.

Want to SKIP Ahead? I've listed some waypoints below based on feedback from reviews/comments/messages.

Where Makoto is finally a member of the Phantom Thieves, a chapter with all new scenes: Chapter 4

Where the in-game shiptease scenes start in earnest and at the end things start to diverge: Chapter 5

Where Makoto starts acting on the secret she's keeping from the Phantom Thieves: Chapter 7 (includes brief plot summary of what was skipped chapter pre-note)

Added 2017/12/24: This story is based on the original Persona 5 game released in North America. It does not (purposefully) incorporate anything from the subsequent anime or games featuring the characters, as most were unknown to the author at the time of writing. On 2017/12/24, the protagonist's name was announced as Amamiya Ren (incl. in the P5D trailer) instead of Kurusu Akira. I've changed most of them, but there may be some bugs to work out and many comments will reflect the old name.
It's not that I believe in the phantom thieves, it's just my job as student council president to resolve student issues.

Makoto hid a yawn behind her hand. She had been up late, thinking about the Phantom Thieves. Her other hand was in her bag, squeezing her phone full of evidence. She hadn't made it to Principal Kobayakawa's office the day before. She had been too busy studying for today's mock exam, she told herself. It was a good thing too, she had come to the realization that the principal would certainly want her to handle student issues, certainly he would. It was clear she couldn't go to the principal without trying to manage the situation herself. It just wouldn't be responsible.

The previous night during dinner she caught a re-run of the show the second years had participated in, with Akechi Goro discussing the Phantom Thieves. One of the audience members, Makoto's ears perked up as it sounded like Amamiya, had defended them. Makoto was curious, but Sis had told her to focus on her studies. Makoto wanted to make sure Sis didn't have to worry and so she kept most of her school activities to herself.

Still, Makoto kept drifting back over everything she knew about the Phantom Thieves, from Kamoshida, to Madarame, to the allegedly fulfilled requests on the "Phan-Site." Were the Phantom Thieves really in the wrong? What would Dad have thought?

In her month of research, Makoto had found little to suggest Amamiya or his friends were bad people. In fact, despite the principal outright telling her he had some trouble with the law, Amamiya seemed like an upstanding student. He had one of the highest marks in his year at midterms. He read voraciously and returned his library books on time.

Makoto chastised herself. Just because someone did well on exams, was well-liked by those around him, and was... handsome... didn't mean he...

"You're Sae-san's younger sister, correct? May I talk to you for a moment?" Akechi Goro called from behind Makoto. She always placed a distant second to him on exams. Makoto was slowly closing the gap each time—but honestly she wasn't sure she could ever be first. Akechi's scores were so high it was as if he knew all the questions in advance. Despite this, and despite the fact that he seemed to be close with her Sis, they had never met. It was surprising he recognized her.

"Is it about the Phantom Thieves, Akechi-kun?" Makoto smiled. It was best to appear smart, even if she was only in second.

"...You're quite perceptive," Akechi smiled back. Did he have to beat her at smiling too? He proceeded to probe her for information about the Kamoshida and Madarame cases. Though, somehow the conversation shifted to him only talking about himself. It seemed academic to him as he went to a different school, removed from the people involved... and yet, it was as if he knew she had also been investigating. Akechi was sharp, it was no wonder Sis...

"...I'm only using my natural-born talents for the sake of serving the world," Akechi sighed. "Don't you think the same about yourself too?"

"I..." Makoto thought back to the evidence on her phone. Just what was she doing?
"Oh, that's surprising. So you're just the good-girl type of pushover," Disappointment and disdain seemed to drip from Akechi's voice, so unlike the Akechi who showed up on television. "Looks like it's starting soon. See you later. Give Sae-san my regards."

Makoto envisioned it again: the narrow strip of ground amongst the cliff faces, crumbling away at her feet. "Why does everyone get on my case...?"

During the exam, Makoto's thoughts kept drifting back to Akechi's words. She really was just the good-girl type of pushover. She had never once changed the principal's mind in their discussions. She could never get away with any bending of the rules, like the other students seemed to. She couldn't even get away with saying 'no.' She scored well on exams, but that was meaningless, just another task in which she could be a good girl. Was that the limit of what she could attain? She tried to envision something else and only saw the narrow crumbling path.

Makoto shook her head and cursed herself for wallowing in self pity. She had to focus on the exam. After that, she had to do something about the Shibuya scams and the Phantom Thieves.

Ms. Kawakami was fortunately in the faculty office when Makoto dropped in the next day at lunch. Making a habit of clutching her cell phone of evidence in her bag, Makoto was resolved to confront Amamiya and find out just what was going on. It could be that there was a perfectly logical explanation for all of this and there would be no need for serious repercussions. Perhaps she could even help out, as student council president, of course.

Makoto made her way to Ms. Kawakami's desk. As usual, the Japanese teacher was looking tired and dejected, resting her chin on one hand while marking papers with the other.

"Hello Ms. Kawakami," Makoto began. "Could you please ask Amamiya-kun to come to the student council office after school today?"

Ms. Kawakami's eyes briefly went wide. She lifted her head off her hand and turned towards Makoto. "A-Amamiya-kun?"

"Y-yes?" Makoto wasn't sure what kind of a response Ms. Kawakami was looking for. She had expected Ms. Kawakami might utter a complaint under her breath, accept, and dismiss her—not question her.

"Has he said something?" Ms. Kawakami looked at Makoto, her brows narrowed and yet her eyes large. She began asking questions rapidly. "Is something wrong? Is it something about a teacher?"

"Well, not exactly," Makoto wasn't sure what kind of a response Ms. Kawakami was looking for. "We're of course still soliciting information regarding Mr. Kamoshida, but—"

"Oh Mr. Kamoshida! Of course," Ms. Kawakami laughed a little too loud and put on a bright, somewhat forced, smile. She then turned away, putting her head back on her hand. She waved Makoto off with the other, pen still in hand, her usual disinterested voice and expression returning. "Yeah, I'll tell him."

Makoto paced around the student council room. Knowing she was the last person Sakamoto or Takamaki wanted to speak with, she had asked Ms. Kawakami to send Amamiya. This was a student issue and it was her job as student council president to take these things head on, even if they were difficult. She leaned against the table and rehearsed her speech in her head again.

Amamiya was surprisingly prompt.
"Ah, earlier than expected..." Makoto began, segueing into her prepared words. "Have a seat. I'll get straight to the point. Mr. Kamoshida and Madarame. Won't you tell me the truth behind the Phantom Thieves incidents?"

Amamiya raised his head, looking Makoto directly in the eyes, but saying nothing.

"Can't answer that? Ah of course. There's no way you would admit to such things," Makoto pressed on, imagining she was Sis. She took her cell phone out. "Have a listen."

Sakamoto and Takamaki's words from Saturday floated between Makoto and Amamiya.

"What could all this mean?" Makoto continued. She felt like she was really channeling Sis now. "Was it blackmail? Hypnosis? How do you corner someone into making them confess? Won't you tell me how you did it?"

As Makoto continued her diatribe, she found herself looking through Amamiya rather than into his eyes. She was in the zone and she didn't want anything to break it. However, she was soon interrupted by Amamiya's cell phone. As he took it out of his bag, Makoto noticed it was Sakamoto. She smiled knowingly. "Go ahead."

Sakamoto's voice carried, urging Amamiya to meet up at the Phantom Thieves' usual spot. Amamiya quickly ended the call, the first time Makoto had seen him the least bit flustered. She briefly thought it was kind of cute before assuring herself she was just feeling relieved to have the upper hand for once.

"As loud as always..." Makoto mused, back in her student council president voice. "But his timing's perfect. I'd like everyone else to hear this as well. Won't you take me to your friends?"

Makoto pressed her bag into her chest with both arms, trying to be as small as possible. When she had asked Amamiya to take her to the Phantom Thieves meeting, she had assumed it would be somewhere around the school. She didn't realize they would be taking the trains during the commute rush. It wasn't until they were on the train she realized he wasn't just taking her to some hidden corner of Aoyama-Itchome station. He should have said something.

Amamiya was standing close, only Makoto's bag between them, one of his hands gripping a hang ring, the other hovering near the side of her shoulder, occasionally steadying her when the train swayed since she had nothing to hold onto. Neither said anything. Both tried to look away from each other. It was... awkward.

Sakamoto's phone call had been fortuitous, but Makoto realized she hadn't exactly planned for this. She rushed through possible scenarios in her head, all the while trying to hide her growing blush from Amamiya.

Makoto followed Amamiya to an accessway in Shibuya Station. She hadn't expected the Phantom Thieves to meet in plain sight. She wasn't sure if it was stupid or she was stupid for not grasping its audacious brilliance.

It was not a surprise that Sakamoto and Takamaki were not happy to see her. Though it made perfect sense, Makoto had not, however, been prepared to see how much their expressions fell from when they first spotted Amamiya to when they finally noticed her.

"Sakamoto Ryuji. Takamaki Ann. And you're Kitagawa-kun, correct?" Makoto summoned her elegant and refined student council president voice. "Second-year at Kosei High and former pupil of
Madarame? I wanted to ask you all about this."

After letting the recording play through again, Makoto proceeded.

"An extremely similar technique was used for both Kamoshida and Madarame while those affected by their acts were just coincidentally meeting up... How could that not raise suspicions?" Makoto found herself accidentally chastising them rather than interrogating.

"What do you intend to do? Have you come just to say you're going to report us?" Kitagawa seemed unimpressed by Makoto's argument. Worse still, she realized she wasn't yet sure of the answer.

"I bet someone told you to find us," Takamaki started. She was shaking in anger. "The school can't have ties to criminals, after all! And yet they turn a blind eye when it comes to suicide and sexual harassment. Those adults are just using you. I feel sorry for you."

"I... I know," Makoto said quietly. Takamaki's words stung. It was just like Akechi had said as well. Makoto realized she needed to get out of there, and fast, before...

"Huh?" Takamaki's eyes widened.

"That's why I would like you to verify the justice you speak of," Makoto spoke as evenly as she could while her brain screamed at her to leave. "I'm the only one who knows about you. If you prove what you're doing is just, I'll erase this. There is someone whose heart I'd like you to change."

Makoto ended the conversation as quickly as she could, making plans to discuss things further after school the following day on the roof (no awkward train ride needed). She then left the group as quick as walking gracefully would allow, quite nearly getting on the wrong train home.

Having managed to snag a seat on the correct train, Makoto rested with her bag on her knees, burying her forehead in her hands atop the handle. She hoped no one on the train noticed her. What had she just done? She had mused about making a request of the Phantom Thieves but she knew it was wrong and yet she had just gone ahead and done it. Catastrophes like this were why she always needed to plan things out. Never mind the walking the narrow path, she was now hanging off the edge of the cliff.

Makoto walked swiftly from the principal's office to the student council room. She wasn't sure how long she could fake her in-control student council president expression. Only now had the principal showed concern about the Shibuya scams affecting the students, but that wasn't the way he told it. Makoto had endured his lecture, quietly, just as she was supposed to, just like Sis always said.

"Don't waste your energy when there is little chance for change," Sis had told her once upon a time. "Instead work until you're in a position of authority yourself."

Sis was right, as always. It didn't matter anyway. The principal would think what he would think... and the other students he mentioned, the ones that didn't like her, they would as well. She just had to accept their words and do what she could.

The Phantom Thieves had (begrudgingly) taken Makoto's request a few days before. Makoto felt at least that exchange had gone well. She wondered if they were making any progress.

Given the situation, it was clear Makoto needed Amamiya' contact information. She headed to the faculty office to access the student records. The teachers were used to seeing her there and paid her no mind. Still, she found herself constantly glancing over her shoulder to see if anyone was watching. It was silly, she had a perfectly legitimate reason to be there. She was working on
something for the principal.

Once Makoto found Amamiya’s file, she quickly copied down the work and home numbers of his guardian, Sakura Sojiro. She found it mildly odd that he didn't list a mobile number, but she would work with what she had. She was about to put the file back, but then realized having gone through all the trouble, perhaps she should read the rest of it... for clues, about the Phantom Thieves.

"Ah, Niijima-kun." It was Mr. Hiruta, the biology teacher. Makoto felt like she must have jumped 10 centimeters. She quickly stuffed the file back into its place and flipped to another one at random. "Do you need something?"

"J-just checking up on a few things for Principal Kobayakawa," Makoto said, forcing a broad smile. "...aaaand I'm done, but thank for your offer Mr. Hiruta."

"Always," said Mr. Hiruta. "Please say hello to your sister for me."

"I-I will," said Makoto, already making haste for the door. "Have a nice day."

Makoto once again found herself seeking refuge in the student council room. Once safely inside, she took a deep breath and input Sakura-san's work number into her phone. It rang twice before being answered.

"Cafe LeBlanc," a gruff voice answered.

Makoto was a bit surprised at the tone, but pressed on, feeling like her nerve was already crumbling. "Hello. This is Niijima Makoto from Shujin Academy. Is this Sakura Sojiro-san?"

"Yes," Sakura responded promptly. "That boy's not in trouble is he?"

"Well, n-no," Makoto said. "I'm just the student council president. It's just that um... I have something of his! ...he dropped it you see. So I was wondering if I could maybe get his cell phone number? I-I don't have it."

"Oh," Sakura sounded relieved. There was more kindness in his voice. "One moment, let me find it."

Makoto heard rustling through the line. She supposed Sakura was one of those old fashioned types who didn't use a cell phone. Surprising in this day and age.

"Ah here it is," Sakura sounded much more kind. "Ready?"

She took down the number carefully as Sakura gave it to her. "Thank you. Sakura-san."

"It's not a problem. You sound like a good kid."

Makoto hung up, input the number into her phone, and stared at it. She didn't feel like a good kid.

After staring a few more seconds, Makoto started pacing back and forth in the student council office, trying to figure out what to send.

"Hi, this is Niijima. Any progress to report?" Makoto typed into her phone, hovering over the send button. Straight and to the point. It was a wonder it took her twenty minutes to craft.

Makoto sighed and moved held her thumb against the delete button, watching the text vanish. No, she thought, this is weird.
Rather than contact Amamiya, Makoto decided to first see for herself about the matters in Shibuya. She wandered around Central Street, not sure what to do. Iida's recollection of how he had first been recruited by the mafia was lacking the details necessary to find out who was at the root of it. She briefly stopped outside the bookshop and considered buying another manga anthology so she could follow anyone who looked suspicious, but she decided against it. Perhaps it was better to act as a mark. The mafia was looking for nondescript students and she was pretty well nondescript.

It turned out, being nondescript was rather boring. Makoto walked from one end of Central Street to the other. She stopped at the various stores and pretended to window-shop. Without a clear goal, Makoto grew restless. Maybe she didn't seem typical enough? She thought about the other students. How to be typical?

Sakamoto tended to slouch. The second year had surprisingly bad posture for a member of the track team. Makoto tried to mimic the position but instantly felt ridiculous. Resuming her normal position she looked around briefly. It seemed as though no one had noticed. Maybe it wasn't such a good plan.

Searching for a student to observe, Makoto spotted Amamiya. He was hard to read as always, but he seemed focused, much like he had been when he had accepted her request on the roof. While the warmth she had observed before she had confronted the Phantom Thieves was gone, Makoto still felt a thin sliver of relief. The Phantom Thieves were working on the case.

Amamiya headed into an alleyway. Makoto followed. She was curious about their status.

"Have you made any progress towards finding the boss?"

Amamiya looked as though he was about to answer, but instead briefly shifted his head and eyes, signalling someone was behind her.

"Hey, you two got some time?" a man's voice followed shortly thereafter. "I have a great job for you."

Makoto turned. The man who approached them wasn't too much older. He dressed in a loud patterned shirt. He seemed to be trying to appear friendly but still looked suspicious. Of course, thought Makoto. Iida has been approached when he was with Nishiyama. Perhaps pairing up was the key.

"It's real easy. Guess you could call it a delivery job," the man continued. "You're high schoolers, yeah? Don't you want something more than just your allowances?"

"Hmm..." said Makoto. "By delivery, do you mean that of suspicious materials?"

"Heh, you're a funny girl," the man was unfazed.

"So you won't answer me? Then I was right..."

"Eh?" The man approached her. "What's up with you anyways? Why're you asking all these questions, huh?"

"Hey," Amamiya interjected. His voice was even but had a quality to it that left no room for argument. "Why don't you back off?"

"Oh..." Makoto turned towards Amamiya. She was used to this behavior from delinquents at school. It had never occurred to her that someone might stand up for her.
"It was all a joke," the man indeed backed off. "Why would I get worked up over some dumb kids? Seeya!"

"U-um, if you don't want to deal with us, we could always go see your boss ourselves," Makoto didn't want to give up yet.

"You're really gonna say that knowing who he is?" the man's eyes opened wide and his lips curled as if he were trying not to laugh. "Heh, no way I believe that. Welp, I'm outta here. You guys are annoying me."

After the man stalked off, Makoto turned to Amamiya. "I'm pretty sure he's part of the mafia we're looking for, but I don't have proof. I tried to trick him into saying something, but he dodged all the traps I was laying down."

Makoto frowned. They were right back where they started. She quickly replayed the conversation in her head again, hoping to notice a missed clue. Then she recalled Amamiya stepping in.

"By the way... thanks for standing up for me," Makoto said hesitantly. She briefly thought about bringing up his phone number as she was feeling a little guilty about it, but thought better of it and left.

Surprisingly, Sis was already home when Makoto arrived. Not surprisingly, she was engrossed in her work. Makoto decided not to interrupt her and headed directly to the kitchen to start dinner. She looked at the ingredients in the refrigerator. It was already getting late so it would have to be something quick. Swiftly she prepared the vegetables and lightly seasoned the meat. She started a simple sauce simmering on the stove.

Makoto placed her cell phone on the counter, using it as a clock and timer. She couldn't help but think of the two burning items contained on that cell—the recording of the Phantom Thieves and Amamiya's illicitly gained number.

Maybe I should just erase it, Makoto thought briefly, but decided that would be like trying to cover up what she had done. She decided she better handle it soon. She took a deep breath and called.

Maybe he wouldn't notice?

"Amamiya-kun? This is Niijima, Niijima Makoto. Thanks. For Earlier."

"How did you get my number?" He definitely noticed.

"...I dug it up. I realize I'm apologizing after the fact but... It just didn't feel right, keeping it from you, so... that's all, bye."

I sound like an idiot, thought Makoto as she hung up.

It had been several days since Makoto saw Amamiya or the rest of his group. She hoped they were having more success than she was. Iida made it sound like he had precious little time before the mafia took things to the next level. It was unclear how many other students were in this predicament. They were running out of time.

Makoto was also finding it harder and harder to run interference with Principal Kobayakawa. He was calling her in every day and furthermore, he had contacted Sis, suggesting there was a problem. The last thing she wanted to do was make problems for Sis. Makoto wished the principal would just listen to what she had to say, rather than assume there was a problem at home if she wasn't saying
what he wanted to hear. One would think a good record would give a student some slack, but apparently not too good a record.

No one else approached Makoto when she attempted to make another contact in Shibuya. Perhaps she did need another person. Maybe she should just go to the police, despite her promise to Iida.

When Makoto was a child, she had infinite faith in the police. Her Dad was out there fighting for justice, an endeavor that would eventually cost him his life.

"I want to be a policeman like you Daddy!" a young Makoto exclaimed. "I'll protect everybody and fight for justice!"

_Her father chuckled and smiled with pride. "I'm sure you will."

"I can't wait until I can help too!"

"You don't have to be a police officer to help others Makoto," her father knelt down to look her in the eyes. "Every one of us needs to do what we can. There are a great many people out there and only so many police officers."

Makoto frowned. Concepts like 'right' and 'good' had seemed so simple back then. Young Makoto believed any evil could be taken to the police and dealt with. Present Makoto was finding real life more complicated.

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Dinner was a quiet affair. Makoto assumed Sis was lost in thought about work. Both of them had always been a bit cerebral. Lately, they barely spoke. Dinner was one of the few opportunities.

"I've been thinking lately. About those Phantom Thieves, I mean. If Dad were still alive..." Makoto tried reaching out, but noticed Sis jerk, ever so slightly, at the mention of Dad. This was a bad idea. "Sorry, I... I shouldn't bring this up while we're eating."

"It's OK. Keep going." Sis hated showing any sign of weakness.

"I just wonder if he would've been on their side... That's all..." Makoto's brain screamed to stop, knowing that no good could come of this, but for some reason she pressed on.

"The only reason you have time to think about that is because you depend on someone else," Sis was matter-of-fact.

"That's not--"

"You don't have to do a single thing, and you're provided with food, clothes, a home... I've had no time to think of such ridiculous thoughts." The comments came rapid-fire. Sis was an extremely talented prosecutor after all. Each word came out with increasing force and increasing agitation. "Would Dad have been happy with them? I don't care. He died upholding some lofty sense of righteousness, leaving all his responsibilities on us."

"A-All I was trying to say was--" Makoto's attempts to backpedal were quickly cut off.

"Isn't it about time you grew up and acknowledge our situation!?" Sis was _yelling_. "Right now, you're useless to me. All you do is eat away at my life."

Makoto's eyes widened. Was this what Sis had been thinking the whole time?

"Sorry, that was uncalled for. I'm just... really tired," Sis said quietly. "I'll be eating dinner out from
Neither Makoto nor her sister said anything for the remainder of the evening. When she finished eating, Makoto went straight to bed. She lay staring at the ceiling. Sis hated her. Sis wasn't even going to have dinner with her anymore. Makoto once again envisioned the narrow path surrounded by steep drops, only this time it wasn't a path anymore, but a lonely pedestal—the ground before her had finally crumbled as well.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Lies: I'm going to write about all of the adorkable lies Makoto uses to get closer to the protagonist! It will be humorous. I can write humor. *sees the narrative leads right into Makoto's not-so-humorous introduction to the Phantom Thieves* ...oh, oops. Maybe this should have been drabbles.

Edited 2018/06/03 to incorporate comments made by NieRville on AO3 and Ganheim on FFnet. Thank you!

Edited 2018/08/23 to incorporate feedback from AdvisingQueen on Twitter. Thank you!

Edited 2019/06/16 to fix a typo pointed out by Strawberry Rat. Thank you!
I'm fine.

Makoto disabled her alarm the minute before it was to go off. She couldn't remember if she had actually ever fallen asleep. Maybe part of the previous night was just her dreaming of staring at the ceiling, replaying her sisters words over and over again. Whichever, it didn't matter. It was time for school and she didn't feel like sleeping anyway. One rough night wasn't going to impair her, she was perfectly capable of taking on the day. Perfectly. There were things to do. Makoto was resolved to overcome her weaknesses and be a contributing, useful, member of society. What would Sis say if Makoto let a few words get her down?

What would Sis say...

Makoto shook her head and put the thought out of her mind.

The school day went by like one of those train rides where one ends up at their destination with no recollection of making all the transfers. Even Makoto's as-of-late near-daily trip to the principal's office didn't seem remarkable. Makoto felt a sense of self-satisfaction. There might be a few setbacks, but she was handling things with responsibility and grace, like an adult.

Makoto's next stop was Shibuya. She was still at a loss with how to help Iida, but at least she could keep an eye on the mafia lackeys. Over the past few days she had gotten a good idea of their patterns. They were much easier to keep track of than Amamiya. All she had had to do was window shop in Central Street and several would pass through over the course of an afternoon. Makoto was especially looking out for any interactions they had with Shujin students, allowing her to follow up with the students immediately and prevent more victims.

Upon arriving at Shibuya Station, Makoto's first order of business was checking the Phantom Thieves' meeting spot. She hadn't seen them since the first time Amamiya took her there. It might not actually be their meeting spot, but it didn't hurt to check.

It was good fortune—this time, the Phantom Thieves were there.

"If only we could contact the real Kaneshiro," Makoto overheard Kitagawa say as she approached the group. Kaneshiro. Had they found the boss?

"What do you want?" Takamaki punctuated the hard consonants, narrowing her eyes at Makoto.

"Nothing in particular," Makoto answered, internally congratulating herself for not letting Takamaki's tone get to her. She was the graceful and responsible and completely okay student council president after all. "I just saw you all together here."

"That so?" Sakamoto shifted just a hair towards Takamaki and raised his chin slightly.

"You seem to be having quite a bit of trouble," Makoto remarked.

"So you're here to check up on us?" Takamaki questioned her. "You may be the student council president, but when it comes to what we do, you're useless."
"Useless..." Makoto repeated. Why had she chosen that word?

*Is that all I am? Useless?*

Makoto was vaguely aware that Kitagawa and Takamaki were saying something but she didn't really hear them. Instead, she once again found herself dwelling on her sister's words from the night before.

"*You're useless to me. All you do is eat away at my life.*"

There had to be something more Makoto could do. Something useful. Then Sis...

"So you wish to get in contact with Kaneshiro," Makoto had an idea. She turned to Amamiya, feeling that if anyone would reason with her, it was him. "That is what you were just discussing, weren't you? It seemed you just need to find out where he is."

"Something like that," Amamiya's gaze was neutral, as if he was waiting for what Makoto would do next.

"Hey, you don't gotta answer her honestly!" Sakamoto broke in before Amamiya said anymore.

"Fine," Makoto had all she needed to know anyway. Resolved, she looked Amamiya straight in the eye. "I'll help you meet Kaneshiro."

Makoto pivoted and walked as fast as she could down to Central Street, not looking back. She had a mission. If meeting Kaneshiro was what was needed to solve things, she would see it done.

Central Street was crowded, but it didn't take Makoto long to spot one of the mafia, no Kaneshiro's, operatives. She knew where to look. When two of the Kaneshiro's men turned into an alleyway, a man in a black suit with a red shirt and one in a black and gold track suit, she decided it was time to take action.

*I have to do this.*

First, Makoto called Amamiya, she needed a way to make sure he got the information about Kaneshiro's location.

"Hello?" Makoto spoke quickly when Amamiya picked up. "It's me... Nijima Makoto. Just stay on the phone and listen. Make sure you record the call as well."

Having secured a line with Amamiya, Makoto put the volume to the lowest setting and stepped into the alley. She approached the two men directly. "Do you guys know Kaneshiro?"

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It had taken more negotiating than Makoto had anticipated, but she was finally on her way (hopefully) to Kaneshiro's location. She tried to get the men to slip up and tell her where they were going, but her persistent questions were once again dodged. They were indeed well-trained. Without being obvious, she kept an eye on the road and committed the route to memory.

Makoto clutched her phone in one hand, covering the speaker but leaving the microphone open to pick up anything the men might say. At the same time, Makoto was trying to avoid letting the men find out she was streaming their words to Amamiya. For the most part the men ignored her, but she couldn't risk being too obvious about her plans.

When the car stopped, one of the men yanked Makoto out of the car by her upper arm. She had just enough time to see the sign on the entranceway before being shoved along.
"Vault Etheria, huh?" Makoto said loudly, hoping it was being picked up by her phone. "Is this club where Kaneshiro is?"

The men continued to push Makoto into the club, ignoring her questioning. The establishment wasn't open for business yet, it still being early evening.

"Looks like there's no one here at this hour," Makoto tried to provide what information she could in case Amamiya and the others were still listening. She wasn't sure exactly how much the Phantom Thieves needed.

There wasn't much time to take in the scenery before Makoto found herself in a private lounge area. The man with the loud shirt from the other day was there, as well as two people she didn't recognize—a man in a purple suit jacket and a woman in a mini skirt.

"Hey Boss, this is the chick from a few days ago," said the man in the loud shirt. "The one who was askin' all them weird questions."

So this was Kaneshiro. Makoto just had to stall as long as possible so the Phantom Thieves could get what they needed and change his heart.

"So this club, Vault Etheria, is where you've been hiding Kaneshiro?" Makoto repeated the location. "We need to discuss your scamming of students."

Makoto felt a weight on her shoulder. One of the Kaneshiro's goons, the man in a black suit, was leaning on her. "I don't think you know what you're here for girly."

Kaneshiro made eye contact with the man and then gave a terse nod. The man leaned down harder as he reached for Makoto's arm. She quickly ducked under him, throwing him off balance. With her free hand, she grabbed his wrist instead and redirected his momentum toward the man in the loud shirt. She then spun towards the man in the black track suit, but he was gone.

The next thing Makoto knew, she was on the floor, her chest screaming from the impact. As she coughed and choked, the man in the track suit gained hold of her wrists. She struggled to no avail as he had her pinned to the floor. He leaned down close, his cigarette smell nauseating her. "Know a little about fightin' do ya?" his tone had a hint of amusement at first but it changed to menacing by his next sentence. "So do we."

"Don't damage the goods." It was a voice Makoto didn't recognize. Kaneshiro. "These 'good girl' types are popular with the clientele."

"This one seems 'specially uptight," the man in the track suit ran his free hand down Makoto's upper arm. "Maybe she needs some help calming down."

Panic flooded through Makoto's system. She suddenly realized just what kind of situation she was in. She had not thought this through. She was trapped. She was alone. Kaneshiro's heart wasn't changing.

Makoto recalled all of the things Sis had told her about the mafia.

All of the things Sis had told her...

Sis was always right...

She couldn't even...
"Hey, what's this?" The man in the loud shirt cut through Makoto's thoughts. Her cheek pressed into the floor, away from the lounge seating, she couldn't see much of what was going on. A hand picked up her cell phone off the floor. "Looks like she was tryin' to call for help."

Makoto continued to struggle, not knowing what the men were up to. Finally, Kaneshiro started speaking. "So... you're seriously the student council president of Shujin. You know what happens to anyone who snaps at me, don't you? So, whose number is this? Your boyfriend?"

It was then that the Phantom Thieves burst into the room. For a brief moment, Makoto thought they would steal Kaneshiro's heart. Instead, both Kaneshiro's and Amamiya's groups were audibly surprised. Several voices started talking at once. Eventually, Kaneshiro's voice cut through the din. "Ohh, I get it. You got followed, you dumb shits!"

Makoto was worried Kaneshiro's men were about to get violent, but instead, Kaneshiro scaled back his tone and started talking about ...shopping? Not being able to see, Makoto wasn't quite sure what was going on at first, but it was starting to sound like he was extorting them. A bright flash followed. "Come on, you all look so tense," Kaneshiro mused. "I think I'll call it... Debauchery of Minors at a Club. So, can I send this to your school?"

"That's-" Makoto began. The man in the track suit pressed her down more forcefully.

"Oh, damn, I got booze and cigs in the shot! Maybe some drugs too? Ahh... This is so hilarious. I feed on dumbshits like you," Kaneshiro taunted them. "Understand, pretty little student council president?"

Kaneshiro continued to lay down the terms of his blackmail. Makoto felt her heart sink. If the Phantom Thieves could do something, they would have. Did she really think they could change his heart? What had she gotten all of them into?

Eventually, Kaneshiro dismissed them. The man in the track suit released Makoto and she slowly brought herself to her feet. The other man, the one she had thrown, put an arm around her shoulders roughly, his other arm holding a large bottle of alcohol. "Hey boss, I wanna pic with the high schooler."

Makoto could only look down in shame.

The walk from the club was gloomy. No one said anything. When the group got close enough to the station that parting seemed imminent, Makoto summoned up her courage to speak.

"I'm so sorry... I didn't mean to drag you in like this... I was stupid..." Makoto wanted to make her sincerity clear but not descend into excuses. However, soon she found herself talking about being useless, her father, and Sis. She apologized to Takamaki for the things she had said and worse yet, the things she had allowed to happen. For some reason everything was just spilling out, she couldn't control it. Yet, the Phantom Thieves didn't spurn her, they were... kind.

"You didn't have a place to belong either..." Kitagawa said, his words slow and even. "Isn't that right?"

"Me either...?"

"We won't let anyone fall victim again," Takamaki said with conviction. "Now, what should we do from here?"
"I'll do something about the money!" Makoto quickly interjected. She wanted to leave no doubt that she fully intended to take responsibility. "So can we please just drop the case with Kaneshiro?"

"No can do. We're all caught up in this," Sakamoto grinned. "If only we could do something about that bank..."

"Bank?" Makoto wondered if she had missed something.

Suddenly Amamiya's cat jumped out of his bag and started meowing, commanding everyone's attention.

Then, the Phantom Thieves started talking back to the cat, as if they were carrying on a conversation.

Makoto wondered if there was something terribly wrong with her.

"I see. The reason why we couldn't enter before was because we weren't considered his customers..." Kitagawa seemed to be pondering the cat's words.


"She risked her life doing something so reckless. At the very least, she has the right to know," Kitagawa remarked before turning to Makoto. "Won't you come with us?"

What followed was an(other) awkward train ride, this time back to Shibuya. It was late enough that the crowds weren't an issue, though there were still plenty of salarymen in the car. While they said little given the lack of privacy on the train, the group, especially Takamaki, seemed to be babying her. Takamaki sat next to her and would beam a reassuring smile whenever Makoto looked up at her. Makoto felt embarrassed but at the same time grateful. The Phantom Thieves really were good people.

From Shibuya Station, Makoto followed the group to a deserted alley off of Central Street. Once there, Amamiya took out his cell phone and spoke into it. Makoto felt a strange sensation, like something was pulling at her heart. Everything seemed to distort, like she was looking at the world through swirling heat waves, until Makoto found herself somewhere different and yet still the same.

Shibuya looked cast in an unnatural green. The shops were closed, their displays replaced by messy volumes of cash. Large yen notes flitted from the sky. The people were gone, but in their place were ATMs with spindly arms and legs. There was something disturbing and sickly about it all.

Makoto followed the group back to Central Street, in awe of the sights around her. She wondered what they had done. She turned to the group and discovered she hadn't been following her schoolmates at all. Makoto's eyes went wide and she felt her pulse spike—she wasn't good with surprises and she was terribly afraid of ghosts. Her ears filled with the sound of her own heart beat. "A kitsune?!"

"It's Fox." It sounded like Kitagawa. Makoto tried to focus on what was being said but it was hard to hear over the thumping inside her chest.

"Be quiet," a small creature with a big head spoke. "The shadows are going to notice us."

"A monster cat!?" Makoto managed to blurt out. There would be no focusing on what was going on.

"I'm not!" the creature proclaimed indignantly.
"That's Morgana, the cat that was in Ren's bag. This is what happens when we come here." Takamaki's voice. Makoto reminded herself she wasn't really alone.

Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves, Makoto tried to force herself to stop shaking. Then, she took a second look at the beings she had followed. It made the most sense that they would still be the Phantom Thieves. They were talking to her but she was too distracted to parse the words. However, with their familiar voices, she found herself calming down.

Looking again from the assumption that they were indeed the Phantom Thieves, she could match the masked phantoms to the Shujin students she had arrived with. They dressed strangely and all wore masks, but it was clearly them. The monster cat, rather Morgana, was still strange and otherworldly, but also had a cheerful mascot-like aspect to him.

Once Makoto had calmed down, the group explained that they were in a place formed of Kaneshiro's twisted desires and cognition. Makoto would have preferred they told her in advance, but realized she wouldn't have believed it until she saw it. Kaneshiro saw all of Shibuya as his own personal bank and the people in it as ATMs, hence the creatures she had seen earlier. The bank floated above the borough, as Kaneshiro saw himself untouchable. However, having become a customer of that bank meant Makoto could enter... and the Phantom Thieves with her.

Makoto walked to the end of "Central Street" and looked up at the floating fortress of a bank. Casting aside her doubts, she began walking towards it. She was going to enter the bank and bring the Phantom Thieves to Kaneshiro. It would be no different than what she intended in the real world. As she stepped forward, the bank descended and a ramp appeared. She didn't look back.

The bank was a massive building with soaring ceilings and huge rooms. It had a classic aesthetic to it that would almost be beautiful if not for desperate ATM-people being abused and the garish golden piggy banks and other needless displays of opulence.

The group was met by hulking guards, dressed in something akin to police riot gear with strange metal masks over their faces. With some insistence, Makoto was able to convince them to set up a meeting with the bank president, presumably Kaneshiro. The group was allowed into a back area and led to a small room with a pyramid of cash on the table.

Kaneshiro's voice came over the intercom. "Unauthorized entry, property damage, and other disturbances. That comes to three million yen in total. You're here regarding that, correct, Miss Beautiful President?"

The 'beautiful' taunt unnerved Makoto. She knew he was reducing her to an object. Kaneshiro, or rather his 'shadow' as the group had warned Makoto, appeared on an old stye monitor in the room. The shadow was grotesque, with an unnatural violet pallor and glowing yellow eyes. He had slicked back hair and a small mustache and wore a white three piece suit. "It must be quite tough gathering so much money. I'd be willing to give you a loan, you know. The interest rate is ten percent a day."

Having let the bad deal hang in the air, Kaneshiro continued. "There's no need to be alarmed. I have a more manageable option for people like you."

"That was your plan from the beginning, wasn't it?" Makoto internally cursed herself for falling into his trap.

"Quite the impressive insight... Nijima-san. ...Or should I say, the younger sister of the beautiful prosecutor, Nijima Sae?"

Makoto felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. He was after Sis. Of course. All sorts of criminals like
Kaneshiro had it out for her. Makoto had given him the means to get to her.

Kaneshiro continued to deride Makoto, but the Phantom Thieves stood up for her and threatened him, or rather his treasure, right back. Kaneshiro was unfazed. "Don't make me laugh, you petty thieves. My citadel has the highest security installed in it."

On cue, the security guards suddenly appeared, like magic, in splash of black and pink. On Kaneshiro's command, they transformed, melting into pools of red and black before reconstituting into giant red oni, as if right out of a storybook. Makoto instinctively recoiled but at the same time was mesmerized, trying to make sense of what she was seeing and understand the enemy. Suddenly, she felt someone yank her behind the table, a flutter of black rushing past her towards the giants. It was Amamiya. He gave Morgana a look. "Mona."


It was terrifying and absurd. Makoto watched as the Phantom Thieves fought the demons. Amamiya acrobatically danced around the monsters, making expert slashes with a large knife. Sakamoto was a brawler, weakening his opponent first with a kick and following up with a bat to bludgeon them. Kitagawa was the picture of a traditional swordsman, wielding his katana with quick grace. Takamaki lashed at the enemies with a whip at first, but then stepped back, letting the boys keep the enemies at bay. The ghost of another monster, a strange pink woman in a dress, appeared to follow Takamaki, mimicking her actions. Suddenly, there was fire.

Indeed Aikido paled in comparison.

Unfortunately, Kaneshiro's demons were exceedingly tough. Just as the Phantom Thieves were able to take down the monsters, more would appear. Makoto cringed every time one of demons managed to connect. Could the Phantom Thieves really outlast this assault?

"What the—There's no end to them. Have they really been hired with money...?!
" The cat was thinking the same thing as yet another wave of oni appeared. "We're in trouble at this rate! Let's run!"

Makoto and Morgana fled the room, the rest of the Phantom Thieves behind them. Fortunately the giant demons weren't nearly as fast.

"Why did the security guards turn into monsters!?
" without the fight to distract her, Makoto let her questions loose. "And what were those supernatural powers?! Could those have been the Personas you mentioned?"

"Does now really look like the time to be asking that?!
" was the cat's exasperated response. "We need to retreat! Makoto, make sure you don't get separated from us!"

Makoto simply nodded and kept running, but just as the group was about to reach the exit, more security guards appeared before them. They stopped short of the doors. Dread swept over Makoto. The Phantom Thieves were already winded and even they looked apprehensive.

"You seem to be in quite a pickle..." Kaneshiro spoke from behind them, in person this time, more guards in tow. They were surrounded.

Kaneshiro had the upper hand and he knew it. He approached them slowly. "Managing a bank is tough—that's why I make it a case to kill troublesome customers. Having one impertinent brat disappear is enough to set an example in that other world."
"Please, stop!" It was a feeble plea, but Makoto didn't know what else to do. Kaneshiro was going to kill them all. She wanted to do something but was frustratingly powerless... ineffectual... useless.

"I'll eliminate the others besides my goods. You've no need to worry," Kaneshiro mocked her. "Your sister is quite a beauty though. I'll make sure to make her my personal slave. Once I get bored, I'll just sell her off. Oh, poor Sis... she could've been successful, if only her younger sister wasn't so dumb."

"My sister has nothing to do with this!" Makoto felt her insides twisting in a knot at the mention of her sister. It was the second time Kaneshiro had done so in as many conversations. She wanted to be sick. She had to stop him somehow, redirect him, anything. The thought of him touching Sis...

"Then you better start taking customers tomorrow. All you gotta do is endure it and do as you're told."

"Endure it... Do as I'm told..." It was the bitter kind of funny. That was what Makoto had always done, to the best of her abilities. Why did it always come to that? Authority figure or criminal, it was all the same.

No, this one was different.

This one was worse.

This one wanted to hurt Sis...

How. Dare. He.

"I've been listening to you go on and on...Shut your damn mouth, you money-grubbing asshole!"

It felt like time had stopped. Was everyone so shocked she stood up for herself, or was it only her own surprise that made it seem that way?

Somewhere, somehow both far away and from the back of her head at the same time, Makoto heard a voice.

*Have you decided to tread the path of strife...?*

"Yes..." Being obedient. Pleasing people. What a coward she had been. Everything seemed so clear now. "Come to me."

*Very well, Let us proceed with our contract at once.*

Makoto felt an immense pressure well from within her, like someone had beat a gong inside her head and the sound waves were to burst through her skull, through her skin.

*...I am thou, thou art I...*

The pain was all encompassing. Makoto couldn't retain her composure. She felt herself starting to convulse, drool forming at the corners of her mouth.

*...You have finally found your own justice...*

Refusing to back down, Makoto fought to steady herself. Instead, she would move forward, one step at a time. She forced her body to take that next step, feeling as though the sheer weight of what was inside her would crack the world beneath her.

*...Please...*
Makoto reached for the mask upon her face. It had always been there, hadn't it? She ripped it off and felt her face burn and blood trickling down it. Pain throbbed but at the same time all the pressure released—a cleansing purge.

...Never lose sight of it again...

Being atop Johanna seemed the most natural thing in the world. When Makoto looked up, the crumbling path she had walked was gone. As far as she could see there was wide open road.

Makoto knees still felt wobbly as she stood in the Phantom Thieves' hideout in Shibuya station. Her schoolmates were animatedly discussing her persona and her new role in their group. She was surprised how quickly they took to her considering a few hours ago they were at odds. She was equally surprised to find herself excited and hopeful about joining them. It felt like she could finally do something meaningful and despite her lingering doubts, it was incredible feeling accepted.

"Anyways, let's begin our operation tomorrow!" Sakamoto was still full of energy.

"First, we need to secure a route to the Treasure like always," Takamaki informed Makoto.

"You guys are finally starting to get used to this," Morgana looked about as proud as a cat could. Makoto was still getting used to talking with a cat. It helped that the cat was perhaps her biggest supporter.

"I'll be waiting for the call to meet up," Makoto began gathering her things.

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" Takamaki asked. "I was dead tired after the first time I went to the Metaverse."

"Yeah I was completely beat," Sakamoto chimed in. "My mom's workin' late tonight. We take the same line. It's no trouble."

"I'll be fine." Makoto still didn't want to be a bother.

"I didn't need anyone to take me home," Kitagawa stated. He looked bored.

"You were already at home!" Takamaki rolled her eyes and stomped her foot for emphasis.

"Come on, you're probably only a few stops past mine," Sakamoto told Makoto. "And you looked like death before you ran off to Kaneshiro's club."

"Ryuji! You can't say that to a girl!" Takamaki's tone was chastising, but she gave Sakamoto an approving smile. He responded with a goofy half grin before looking away and rubbing the back of his neck.

"Well then, looks like it's settled," Morgana said.

The group said their goodbyes for the evening. Makoto's gaze briefly lingered on Amamiya, who had barely said anything to her. He was the leader and while he hadn't objected to her inclusion, he hadn't exactly agreed to it either. Realizing she was probably staring too long, Makoto turned away. It was best left for another time.

Sakamoto and Makoto were the only members who shared a line. It was late enough that they had an entire car to themselves. Makoto was thankful to be sitting down again.

"Even now you're sittin' prim and proper," Sakamoto shook his head as he sat down as well, leaving
an empty seat between them. He stretched out his legs across the car and leaned back with his hands behind his head. "Man your persona is sweet. Can you let me ride?"

"I... I don't know," Makoto's brow furrowed. There was a lot to learn. She paused. "Hey... about before, I really want to apologi-"

"You did already." Sakamoto looked uncomfortable.

"Then I want to thank you," Makoto turned away. "I guess I just don't understand how all of you can so quickly forgive. After I said those things to Takamaki—"

"We didn't know you were bein' pushed around either. Ann... you really scared Ann. She doesn't want another Shi—well, you should take it up with her," Sakamoto continued to look up at the ceiling.

"What about Amamiya? He didn't say much. Is my joining you guys really okay?"

Sakamoto's lips flattened for a moment. "You've probably heard the rumors about Ren, right? He keeps a low profile because of his record. He doesn't have much leeway because he's on probation. It would be a real problem if you turned us in."

Makoto looked down at the tips of her shoes. "I see."

"Give it time, you're not the only one. Yusuke threatened to go to the police if Ann didn't pose naked for him."

"What!?" Makoto turned to Sakamoto.

"Actually, he's still after her about that..." Sakamoto pressed his lips together as folds appeared between his eyebrows.

"That's not okay! Doesn't that bother you?"

"Eh... that's just Yusuke. He's weird. Ann can handle it." Sakamoto let his eyes shift to the side, looking at Makoto. "Why would it bother me?"

"Aren't you—" Before Makoto could finished her question, she realized that Sakamoto didn't seem to know. She decided not to broach the topic. "Nevermind."

When they arrived at the station, Sakamoto walked Makoto to her apartment and introduced her to the group chat before rushing off, not even having the chance to come inside for tea. She hoped she hadn't put him out. Despite his outward appearance, he was a really nice guy.

Makoto sat down on the living room couch and checked said group chat. She tried once more to apologize to the group, but Sakamoto had quickly put a stop to it. Makoto put her phone down. The events of the day continued to replay in her mind. She was a Phantom Thief now.

The next morning Makoto awoke to sunlight streaming into the living room. She must have drifted off. One of her arms held a large floppy Buchimaru. The other gripped the top of a blanket. Makoto's lip trembled before turning into a smile. Sis...
Oh Ren, doing his Sailormoon thing collecting lonely elemental friends and following a black cat.

I struggled with this chapter. The story wasn't very flexible and yet it all had to get done. I tried to elide what I could. Next chapter has barely any in-game scenes.

The two hour visual novel/cut scenes in the game where the only decision where you had control was whether to save each night before bedtime were some of the most frustrating elements of the design for me. I think all of this has given birth to particularly brain-eating plot bunny offering plot freedom. Uh oh.

Updated 2018/06/19 with some light editing in response to feedback from Ganheim on FFnet and NieRville on AO3. I still don't think this chapter is quite there, but it's a little better.
I'm only watching Ren because it's my duty as the Phantom Thieves' advisor.

Makoto waited by the student council office for Ama—no, Ren, and the others. She had timed her morning to meet Ren at Shibuya Station before school. As the newly appointed Phantom Thieves advisor, she absolutely needed to get up to speed on how the team worked and how she could support the leader. Absolutely. She had approached Ren at the platform, eager to go to Kaneshiro's palace and put the whole mess behind her. He had said they would meet up at their hideout after school, but she needed some gear, so they would go to a store he knew first.

The entire school day had seemed to drag on. Makoto caught herself checking the time on her phone often. She had met up with Ann for lunch and the two had made amends. Makoto was also now on a first name basis with the group.

"Ready?" Ren asked as he approached.

"Where are the others?" Makoto looked towards the stairwell, surprised to see Ren come alone.

"We'll meet up with them later," Ren explained. "The shop is pretty small and Iwai-san prefers not to draw attention."

"Iwai-san?"

"He's the owner. Come on."

Makoto and Ren made their way out of the school and headed toward Aoyama-Itchome station. As they walked down the street, Makoto spoke. "Look, I wanted to apologize... I didn't know about your circu-"

"You've apologized several times now," Ren exhaled slowly with his lips closed. "Is this for my benefit or for yours?"

"Oh," Makoto paused. "Sorry, I-"

Ren chuckled. "There it is again."

Makoto stopped talking, pressing her lips together. Ren didn't seem to mind but Makoto couldn't help but feel awkward. Thankfully Ren's expression seemed to have softened since the week before, perhaps because she wasn't threatening to turn them all in anymore. He didn't need to keep the secret around her anymore either.

The pair boarded the next train headed for Shibuya. It was crowded as usual. Ren gripped one of the hand rings while Makoto held a pole. She searched for something to say to take her mind off of how close they were standing. "Why didn't you guys just make me have a change of heart?"

"That never occurred to us." Ren was staring out the window.

"Why?"

"Probably because it didn't seem like you would have a Palace," Ren turned to Makoto. "But also..."
taking hearts for personal gain is a line we don't want to cross."

Makoto felt somehow relieved that Ren and the others had never suspected her of having a Palace. However... "By stealing Kaneshiro's heart, won't we be benefiting?"

"We will..." Ren's tone remained even. He returned to gazing at the window. "But once we found out what Kaneshiro was doing we would have gone after him anyway. This just changes the timeline."

From Shibuya Station, Makoto followed Ren to an Airsoft enthusiast shop in an alley off Central Street. Ren encouraged Makoto to find a model gun that suited her while he spoke to the owner about body armor and gun modifications.

The store offered a wide variety of models. Not knowing much about guns, Makoto found it overwhelming. She got out her phone and started searching for definitions of terminology and guidance on choosing the model most effective for the kind of uses she would have.

As Makoto browsed along the display cases, an old-style six shooter caught her eye. They were completely impractical of course, but seeing them reminded Makoto of the old cop shows and westerns she had watched as a child. She would run around the apartment pretending to be a police officer fighting bad guys. Pyu pyu!

Makoto heard a stifled laugh. She looked up to find Ren trying to hide a smile behind one of his hands. She felt her cheeks redden. Had she said that out loud?

"So," said Ren, leaning over her to look in the display case. "You like this one?"

"It's nostalgic. It reminds me of heroes from my childhood," Makoto focused on her memories rather than her embarrassment. She pressed two fingers to the glass. "But it's impractical—I should pick something with higher specs."

"No this one should be good!" Morgana popped out of Ren's bag. Makoto hopped in surprise. She had forgotten he was there. "It's the cognition that matters. Since you associate this gun with heroes, it will be strong."

"Really?" Makoto looked at the cat.

"I'm sure of it!"

Makoto smiled. She felt like she might start tearing up.

"What's wrong?" asked Ren.

"Oh. It's just... it's nice to get something I want rather than..." Makoto re-thought her sentence, having trouble putting what she was feeling into words. "For so long, there's only been one path I had to take. Now, all that's changed."

Ren smiled. There was something relaxing and kind about it. "Let's see about getting you that revolver."

Makoto fished around in her bag for her wallet, then looked at the price tag. Nice models were expensive. She rarely carried around that much money. She looked back to Ren, but before she could say anything, he spoke. "Don't worry, I'll get it."

"Oh. I-I'll pay you back."
"This is business."

"It's all money we get from the Metaverse anyway," said Morgana.

"How does that work?" asked Makoto.

"The shadows carry money."

"What? ...Why? How?"

"I don't know."

Ren finished making the purchases and Makoto became the prouder-than-she-thought-she'd-be owner of a model revolver. She tried to thank Ren, but he shut down her repeated gratitude just about as quickly as he did her apologies.

When Makoto, Ren, and Morgana approached their hideout in Shibuya Station, Ann, Ryuji, and Yusuke were waiting for them. Ann had her hands on her hips. "...sure she feels useful, got it?"

"What's this about?" Makoto asked as she walked up.

"Oh, nothing! Are you ready to go to Kaneshiro's palace?"

"So what am I to be called?" asked Makoto once the group entered the Metaverse. "You all were using code names, weren't you?"

Ryuji, Yusuke, and Ann all made suggestions, but none of them felt right to Makoto. She turned to Ren. Despite his flamboyant coat, pointy shoes, and bright red gloves, he managed to look serious. This was business after all. He took no time in responding, speaking evenly as if the answer was obvious and required no extra thought or fanfare.

"Queen."

"Queen..." Makoto smiled. The chess piece able to move freely in all directions. "It has a nice ring to it. I like it. Let's go with that."

The group proceeded into the bank, having to take an alternate route as the doors she had damaged the day before were inoperative. Makoto was still surprised the team was willing to listen to her, given it was essentially her first day as a Phantom Thief. While they were willing to take her direction, there was still a lot she had to learn. Morgana stayed close to teach her while Ren led the rest of the team. Makoto had been eager to fight, but Morgana had insisted she take it slow.

"Palaces are about endurance," Morgana had said. "The power you showed last time isn't sustainable."

Thus, Makoto worked on balancing her use of Johanna with her Aikido. She tried to support the team as she could, but her contributions weren't nearly as fluid. The others worked together seamlessly with little verbal communication. It wasn't uncommon to see Ren knock a group of enemies off their feet and then with a look or a tag, Ryuji or Ann would knock back the rest, until the enemies were surrounded. Then, all together, they would finish the enemies off, each member knowing what their job was. Makoto couldn't help but stare at their displays of skill and coordination in wonder.

As she watched the veteran Phantom Thieves fight, Makoto thought about how different each
member was when they were in the Metaverse. Instead of being a sullen delinquent, Ryuji's affable side came through. It was what he must have been like as captain of the track team, someone everyone wanted to be friends with. Ann was also much more outgoing and playful. If she behaved that way in the real world, people would probably assume things about her that were unfair. Makoto may have been one of those people. In the Metaverse, Ann need not worry about such things.

Most of all, Makoto watched Ren. In the real world he was quiet, serious, and unobtrusive. In the Metaverse, he was forward, confident, magnetic. He walked the line of arrogance with a touch of the maniacal, taunting and intimidating enemies, but to his teammates his expression was easygoing, refreshing, and reassuring. He seemed to shine so brightly.

"Impressive, huh?" Morgana spoke.

"Yes," Makoto snapped her head to face the cat. She had been staring. "And... different... than how they are outside."

"Really?" Morgana turned from Makoto to watch the others again. "I don't think they're too different. Maybe you need to get to know them better."

"Yes," Makoto's eyes found their way to her boots. "You're probably right."

Morgana sighed contently, a broad smile taking over his face. "They make such wonderful Phantom Thieves! The confidence and style they have is a form of cognition too. Like their persona, that gives them power."

Makoto frowned. "I don't think I can be like them."

"Oh? Why not?"

"I can't see myself as a flashy thief," Makoto shook her head. "That's just not me."

"Don't you want to be?"

Makoto considered Morgana's question. It would be nice to be so... for lack of a better word... cool, like Ren and Ann, but every time Makoto tried to envision herself that way, it just felt wrong. It might be fun to give it a try, but Makoto felt like she would be losing what made her herself if she was like that always. She made an apologetic expression. "I guess the problem is I don't."

"Then what do you want to be? Anything."

Makoto brought her hand to her chin. She wanted to be strong, self-sufficient, a positive force in the world. She wanted to help others. These were all things the Phantom Thieves did, so she wondered what the problem was. Anything, huh? Letting her arms drop to her side, she grazed her new revolver. Ah. She smiled, embarrassed by her own answer. "A hero of justice."

"Then be that!"

"Is it okay?"

"It's more than okay! You'll be stronger for it. Trust me."

Makoto looked at Morgana for a moment and then took a deep breath and gave him a short nod. A hero of justice it was.

Morgana's recommendation seemed to be working. Makoto trained with renewed focus. She felt
tough and her punches seemed to do more damage. She wasn't sure if it was because she had been holding back before, when she didn't see herself as a hero of justice, or if it was really an effect of the cognition.

The Phantom Thieves made their way through the nonsensical maze of rooms that made up the bank. As Morgana had told her, the shadows carried yen, an important fact for the cat as he seemed the most interested in gathering cash and treasure. Makoto wasn't sure where he carried it all.

Most of the shadows they faced took the form of mythical beings Makoto recognized, many of them gods. They were apparently facets of something, perhaps an idea, coming from the "sea of souls." That's what they said when Ren was able to awaken them from their vengeful state. Ren, or rather Joker, drew everyone to him, even shadows. Makoto recognized she felt a strong desire to be accepted by him coupled with a belief that she would be. She figured the awakened shadows must feel the same way.

Perhaps shadows took the forms of gods because of some group cognition of humanity. In that case, maybe the yen they carried were offerings, stemming from group conscience of the population. Makoto decided to check out some books on mythology when she got back to the real world.

The Phantom Thieves continued to be very supportive, perhaps too supportive. They encouraged and complimented nearly every suggestion Makoto made. There were some challenges Makoto was sure Ren would be able to solve himself, but he didn't. After Ann and Ryuji thanked her again for getting through one of Kaneshiro's traps, Makoto decided to bring it up. Just as she opened her mouth, she was stopped by Ren's hushed voice. "Just let them."

"Hm?"

"Just accept their good will," Ren said standing next to each other, keeping his voice low. "It makes them feel better and you could learn to take a compliment. You don't have to object."

Makoto opened her mouth, about to object, and then closed it. Ren smiled. Makoto wondered how he was able to make smug look so attractive.

The group descended into a giant circular room filled with safe-deposit boxes. Seeing the room from above through the glass elevator, Makoto thought it looked a bit like a lock. She mentally rotated some of the walls of boxes. Could this be another security mechanism? She would have to test some things out first.

The vault room indeed could be reconfigured, but each rotation itself was locked by a security code. Every time the group would input a code, the voice of Kaneshiro echoed. It wasn't a menacing voice like when she had first come to the Palace, instead it was sad. It painted the picture of an insecure man who became obsessed with money at any means in hopes to overcome his own fears about himself. If these thoughts were the present Kaneshiro's, it didn't seem to be working.

Makoto wondered if at some level Kaneshiro wanted his treasure stolen. He wanted to be saved. Why else would there be a route to the treasure at all? Sure, they had changed his cognition to access the bank in the first place, but shadow Kaneshiro could have taken further measures. Instead, every barrier had some way around. Why would pages of Kaneshiro's journal be scattered about? Who would have done that? It would have to be Kaneshiro.

"You look apprehensive. You should be resting," Ren stood beside Makoto. She didn't remember having stood up from the table at the center of the safe room. She looked around the room. Yusuke was explaining to Ann how the entire Palace lacked artistic quality. Ryuji and Morgana were arguing over the last 1Up.
"I was just wondering why we're able to reach the treasure," Makoto didn't meet Ren's gaze. "Why does the palace allow it?"

"Palaces are formed from distortions," Ren also continued to watch the others. "They don't make sense."

"Listening to the voice of Kaneshiro's heart."

"You think he wants to change?" Ren turned to Makoto.

"On some level. I don't know, maybe this is just to reconcile what we're doing for myself," Makoto looked down. She brought a hand over her chest. "Though... I suppose even then we would be taking away something... important... about working through it himself."

"Perhaps," Ren turned back to the others. "I don't think it's a bad thing to have help though."

"You're right but... this may go too far. It's just."

"It was easier before you had the ability to do something about it, wasn't it?" Ren's eyes met Makoto's as she turned to him. Even though his mask, they looked clear.

"Yes." That was exactly it. The choice of what to do or not do and the consequences of that choice were very different now.

"If I have the power to help those in desperate situations and I don't, is that okay?" Ren stood up taller than before, surveying the room. His lips pursed. There was an edge to his voice. "Why is his journey of self discovery more important? I decided it wasn't. You should decide before you go further."

It didn't take Makoto long to decide. In fact, she had long since decided, from before she first entered the Metaverse. Now she just had to acknowledge and bear the consequences.

Makoto boarded the train, all of her thoughts on the large stack of calling cards in her bag. Kosei High School had an extensive collection of equipment and space for students of the arts, enough that she and Yusuke had been able to print the cards in secret. Makoto had taken basic precautions to clear the printer memory—cybersecurity had been lacking in the group—but she knew they were taking a risk. Yusuke had offered to hand paint them all, but Makoto considered it even more of a forensic risk than the printer history and ink lots.

Being late into the evening, the trains were fairly empty. Makoto met Ryuji on the train and began going over the plan, using the map app on Ryuji's phone as a visual aid. Having spent quite a bit of time watching Kaneshiro's men, Makoto knew exactly where the cards should be placed such that they would get to Kaneshiro. Furthermore, she also knew where the security cameras were. She had seen Kaneshiro's men avoid them. Ryuji needed only to put up his hood and follow her route to place the cards.

The one unknown factor was in Makoto's plan was the police presence. Her job was to make sure they didn't notice Ryuji.

Makoto had wanted to ask Ren to hang the cards because she had the most confidence in him, but with his record it was too great a risk. Yusuke had dorm curfew and Ann stood out too much. Ryuji was the natural second choice. Though he hadn't been careful enough when she initially gained evidence of the Phantom Thieves, Ryuji had gotten a lot better and inside the Palace, he was as good at using cover as anyone.
The two parted ways as they exited the train. Makoto pretended to shop near the entrance of the bookstore, keeping an eye on the rest of the street. She wasn't sure if her inability to see Ryuji was something she should worry or celebrate given the mission.

Makoto noticed two police officers turn down Central Street. Ryuji probably needed a few more minutes. She decided to approach them. As she did, she realized she recognized them.

"Harada-san, Sakai-san, it's good to see you again."

"Ah! Nijima-san's daughter... Makoto-chan was it?" Harada smiled. It seemed... awkward. Makoto remembered the way all of her father's colleagues had looked at her at the funeral.

"You have a good memory."

"You've grown into a fine young woman," said Sakai. "Are you keeping out of trouble?"

If only they knew.

Makoto didn't think she could become more surprised by the Metaverse, but the operation to steal Kaneshiro's treasure was much more intense than she had been prepared for. The whole bank seemed to quake with the panic their calling card had brought. The shadows were jumpy and aggressive as the team traversed the infiltration route.

Kaneshiro's shadow had transformed into a giant fly-like creature. He attacked them with a piggy bank that must have been five stories tall. When the Phantom Thieves managed to best him and take his treasure, the entire palace started to crumble around them. Makoto had been warned, but hearing about running for one's life and doing it were different things, especially because as the only one with a license, the team had put her in the driver's seat of the getaway vehicle.

The getaway vehicle was Morgana, in minibus form. That might have been the weirdest part. The scariest part was when she, along with Morgana, drove the group off the top of the floating bank.

Makoto lay in bed, reliving the events of the day. Just as she was drifting off, her phone rang.

"Nijima-san?" Makoto recognized the voice. It was Kaneshiro. It was difficult to hear him. It sounded like he was outside, somewhere windy. Though his tone was contrite, Makoto still felt on edge. "I most humbly apologize... the debt, consider it void. I've deleted the photos. You don't have to worry anymore."

Though Kaneshiro was telling her everything she wanted to hear, Makoto didn't feel relieved. She was being contacted directly by a very disturbing man. She didn't know what to say. She didn't know what he would do.

"I'm going to give myself up to your sister," Kaneshiro continued. Makoto still didn't like him mentioning Sis. "It's the least I can do for her."

"My sis-"

"You don't want her to know huh? I'll keep your details out of it. I'll destroy all the evidence."

Makoto heard Kaneshiro grunt, the sound slowly fading away. The last thing she heard was a splash. Did he...?

There was no sleep from that point on. Makoto lay awake the entire night, wondering what
Kaneshiro had done and thinking hard about the consequences she had pledged to bear.

It was four in the morning when Sis arrived home. Had Kaneshiro done anything to her? So as not to make Sis worry, She pretended like she was just getting an early start to the day, a really early start.

"Welcome home Sis." Makoto stood by the dining table, wanting to catch her sister as soon as possible.

"Oh, Makoto," Sis turned, still gripping the straps of her purse. "You're awake?"

"I have some student council business."

"This early?"

"What about you Sis?" Makoto continued to stand, hands clasped in front of her. "You're usually not out this late."

"I didn't mean to be, but a gangster we've been after for some time turned himself in," Sis sighed. She put a hand on one of the dining chairs. "I had to take statements and direct the crime scene teams. I'm only here to change clothes. We have a lot of evidence to sift through. The burner phones alone will take days."

Burner phones. Makoto let out a breath she didn't know she was holding. Kaneshiro was alive. That splash must have been Kaneshiro throwing a phone into the river—and the evidence of his contacting her with it. Sis wouldn't find out.

"Why did he turn himself in?" Makoto asked. It would be useful to know how much he said. His shadow had spoken of someone else using the Metaverse.

"I don't know, but the Phantom Thieves left calling cards all over Shibuya. It may be related to the psychotic breakdowns. Hopefully, over the next few days..." Sae's words trailed off.

"Can I make you some coffee?"

"No time. I should get going."

Though Makoto and her sister were on opposite sides, Makoto felt a little disappointed that Sis didn't have more time. Had she not been awake, she probably would not have seen Sis at all. In a matter of minutes, Sis had put on a fresh pantsuit, brushed her hair, and left.

Having verified that Kaneshiro was in custody, Makoto tried to go back to sleep, but it was so close to her normal waking time that she found herself repeatedly getting up to have her phone tell her only ten minutes had passed since last she checked. Restless, she realized she needed to tell the others about the new developments. Using the group chat would be the most efficient, but she decided to call Ren instead. She hated to admit it, but she just really needed to hear a familiar voice. She didn't admit which voice she really wanted to hear.

Chapter End Notes

You know, I will be more upset if they choose a different name for Akira in the anime than for the previous games. I was okay with Yu over Souji. I'm still attached to Minato. I am very attached to Akira.
Edit 2017/12/24: Ren has conquered my general fear of what the new name could be. I've decided to update it throughout the fic.
It's just a coincidence that broadening my horizons involves date-like activities.

Destinyland, art museums, touring the Meiji shrine, boats at the park, shopping in Jinbocho... Makoto thought about what it would be like doing all of these with Ren, as friends of course. She didn't want him to get the wrong idea though. This was purely about finding her true self, which in turn would make her a better Phantom Thief. Purely. It made sense to start off with something safe, hence the arcade. She had seen Ren and Ryuji go there before.

Makoto had made a pact with Johanna, that she would discard her false self. It seemed so clear at the time, but on reflection, Makoto wasn't sure what lay beneath. What was false and what was real? The other students seemed to have a clear idea and were all the stronger for it. Makoto was only 'good at school' and that was a skill only useful in school. She had to catch up to the other students and look beyond the school gates. One day, she would leave school after all. Makoto had thus decided to try activities popular with the other students. Being a novice, she needed help from someone well-versed in these matters, hence Ren, who seemed to be good at everything.

The Phantom Thieves had some free time. Though Kaneshiro had turned himself in, the team was cautious on declaring victory. The true test would be what Kaneshiro chose to do come the extortion deadline. However, there was nothing more they could do but go back to their normal lives and wait. Exams were still a ways away. It was a good time to be exploring normal high school life.

Ren often spent time with the other Phantom Thieves after school. This had been clear from Makoto's earlier investigation. Hopefully this meant he would be willing to take the time to help her out. She wouldn't consider his time lightly though. She had been performing her due diligence in researching possible outings. It was convenient that the manga anthologies she had once used to mask her investigation had articles on popular attractions and activities. Makoto made a list of normal high school things she should try. She also learned that "Gun About" was popular in arcades. She researched further, reading up on Gun About strategies. No reason to go unprepared after all. Furthermore, it wouldn't hurt if she were able to impress Ren.

Makoto paced around her living room, going over scenarios in her head. She had to make the purpose of the outing clear to Ren. She didn't want him to think she was wasting his time. She practiced pieces of her script. "The student council must be responsible for understanding the student body they serve..."

"...believe I've been handling my position as student council president with ease as well," Makoto explained to Ren. The vending machines in the Shujin Academy courtyard offered some privacy, at least more so than the third floor hallway. Though Makoto had prepared what she was going to say, she found herself worrying how it could be misinterpreted now that Ren was watching. "A-And I don't mean that in a boasting way, that's simply how I've thought about it."

"Now that I'm a member of this team, I want to do everything I can to help you all. All my studying up to this point has kept me quite narrow-minded. I think..." Makoto had planned to be thorough but to the point. Though she had practiced, she was tripping over her words. "I-I will need to broaden my horizons somewhat."
If Ren thought her weird, he wasn't making it obvious. If anything, he was being rather supportive of her train of thought.

"...But I don't even know where people like to go for fun... It would be nice to have a grasp of such concepts. Plus, the student council must be responsible for understanding the student body they serve, right?" Makoto cringed internally. Was this reminding him of how she had been investigating them? "I-I don't mean that in a surveillance way, I just want to know them as people."

"Now, back to the topic at hand..." Makoto quickly changed the subject, putting the ball in Ren's court while she re-grouped. "Where do people usually go for fun?"

Ren seemed to contemplate the question for a moment before answering. "Karaoke."

Putting the ball in Ren's court had been a bad move. Makoto was a terrible singer. While it was true she had never gone out karaoke and it was indeed something normal students did, no one needed to hear her sing. She grasped for an excuse. "Karaoke hm? My friends have taken me there a few times... I-if possible, I'd like to go somewhere I'm a little less familiar with..."

Makoto paused for a moment, trying to make her next words sound as spontaneous and natural as possible. "How about an arcade? I've never actually been to one. Do you think you could take me?"

"Sure, let's go now," said Ren.

"Thank goodness..." It had worked. Makoto felt some of the tenseness in her shoulders dissipate. "I think I would have been totally lost in there had I gone by myself."

During the train ride, Makoto mentally went over everything she had learned about Gun About. She was getting used to taking the train with Ren, even when it was crowded. After a few rounds of Kaneshiro's palace, she was starting to feel a sense of belonging. It helped when she kept herself distracted though. She was still standing very close to a handsome boy. Makoto quickly reminded herself of the trade offs between the Gun About starter guns.

It was a short walk from Shibuya Station to the arcade on Central Street. Shibuya was crowded as usual. Makoto kept close behind Ren as they made their way there.

The arcade itself was darker than Makoto had imagined. It made sense given all of the screens, but also accentuated the lights and colors being generated by the games. The arcade was also much louder than expected. The games produced a cacophony of background music, voice acting, and sound effects. In turn, the people spoke with raised voices, making it difficult to hear what anyone was saying.

The machines were tightly packed, forming a veritable maze. Fortunately, Gun About was large and instantly recognizable with its gun controllers. Things were going as planned. "Hey, over there... You play by aiming the gun at the screen, right? That actually seems somewhere realistic."

"Want to try it?"

"I-if it's okay with you?" Makoto wondered if she was coming off bossy. She couldn't stray from the plan now though. "Do you think you could teach me?"

"Sure." Ren had a way of smiling that made everything seem like it was going to be okay.

Makoto smiled broadly in return. With her script complete, she was now free to enjoy herself. She was excited about just having fun. Was this what it was like for normal high school students?
Ren walked over to the *Gun About* cabinet and pulled the plastic guns from the bin, handing one to Makoto before slipping a couple 100 yen coins into the machine. He navigated the game's menus by firing at various choices, selecting a cooperative mode before reaching the gun selection screen.

"Everything is controlled by shooting. Start by selecting the type of gun you want. The ones on the bottom are stronger, but have lower accuracy and can hold fewer bullets. You reload by shooting off screen, but there's a cool down time."

Makoto nodded, pretending she had not read the instructions online at least five times. She selected one of the guns favored by people on the message boards.

The game started on the easiest level. To Makoto's surprise and embarrassment, she was having trouble hitting all but the easiest enemies, the ones that took up nearly the entire screen. It was *not* as easy as the message boards led her to believe. She couldn't even start to use the strategies posted there.

Despite Makoto's difficulties, the pair made it to the next stage. It was the beginner level after all. At the screen between stages, Makoto slowly turned to Ren, afraid what his expression might be. He was already looking over at her with that silent neutral expression he often wore. Near simultaneously, both opened their mouths to speak and stopped when they saw the other do the same. They paused again.

"Shooting from the hip might work over there," Ren said after the pause. "You don't need to here. Why don't you try keeping your arm extended?"

"L-like this?" Makoto held the controller out in front of her.

"Yeah, like that," Ren pointed to a plastic nub sticking out of his controller. "Aim through here."

Makoto tried to copy Ren's stance. "Like this?"

"Close." Ren approached her, his hands reaching out to her arm. "May I?"

"S-sure."

Ren adjusted Makoto's arm position, slightly raising her upper arm and lowering her forearm. Makoto watched Ren consider his handiwork. He walked around her, leaning down to her height and looking towards the screen. His expression was serious, professional, and calm. Feeling her face heat up, Makoto was thankful the arcade was dark. She reminded herself to commit the position to memory so she could re-create it on her own, but her mind kept wandering.

"Try it like this," Ren said. Makoto gave a confirmatory nod and Ren walked back to his side. "Whenever you're ready."

Makoto pulled the trigger of the controller and the two began the next round. This time Makoto was able to hit most of the targets and even got one of the harder ones. When the stage ended, she jumped triumphantly. "I did it!"

Ren's eyes briefly shifted from side to side to where the other patrons were. He turned and smiled politely at Makoto.

"Next round!" Makoto aimed the controller at the screen again. "I'm going to get those targets behind the crates!"

Makoto and Ren continued to advance in *Gun About*, with the help of a few more 100 yen coins. Makoto was eager to improve her skills and see the next thing the game was going to throw at them.
She was surprised how immersive the game was. She found herself dodging the enemies shown on screen, as if their bullets could hit her. "Huh? No way! Aaah!"

The next time the pair ran out of lives, Makoto realized she had no idea what time it was. She looked at her phone. "Ah. It's getting late."

"Let's stop here," said Ren.

"So this is how it is," Makoto reflected on the game. "I wonder if I could apply some of the techniques I learned here during battle."

"That just might work," said Ren. He sounded polite but not enthusiastic.

Makoto let the matter drop, her thoughts returning to the game's entertainment value. She could definitely see how people could spend so much time on it. The urge to play one more round, to see if she could go farther and explore more, continued to nag at her. It wasn't just that though. Spending the time with another, a friend perhaps, had made it more than just a game. She used to think it odd that people would spend time with each other staring at a screen and doing little conversing, but now it made sense.

"You know, it may only be a little bit, but I think I'm starting to understand how people pass time," Makoto said as the two began to leave the arcade. "Interesting. I would've never even thought about coming here before."

"I..." Makoto started, but realized whatever she was going to say was probably ill-advised. She returned to the scenarios she had prepared. "Hey, do you think you could help me out again later? I might be able to give the team more ideas if I can gain increased knowledge outside of my studies."

Ren had this one expression that always made Makoto feel relieved. It wasn't quite a smile but the way his face relaxed was gentle and inviting. "I look forward to it."

Sometimes it's the little things one needs to hear. Makoto smiled, lightly biting the inside of her lip to stop it from trembling. "I need to live up to your expectations now that I've taken up your time. Perhaps it won't be immediately... but I'm sure I can be of use."

Ren parted his lips as if to say something, but then halted, appearing distracted. Makoto worried she had said something out of line. She changed the subject to some student council business she had been mulling over. "By the way, you went to the red-light district when you were chasing after Kaneshiro, right? I'd like to go there as well."

Makoto's thoughts caught up to her words.

"No! N-not for my own purposes... " Makoto blurted out. She re-started her explanation. "I recently got a report that one of our students was spotted there. I'm skeptical, but I'd like to confirm firsthand for myself."

"Did you want to go together?"

"I-if it's not too much trouble. It's just I don't know the area and."

"It's not too much trouble."

"Great!" Makoto smiled. "Well, it's getting late. Let's go home. See you..."
Makoto and Ren entered the Shinjuku red-light district. She had asked him to change out of his Shujin uniform, not wanting their uniforms seen in such a place. Ren wore an open white button-up shirt over a simple black tee and jeans. Makoto envied how stylish he made simple classics look. She wore a conservative blouse over black leggings.

"There are so many people here," Makoto observed. "I guess this really is the biggest red-light district in Asia, huh. Apparently this place was a hotbed for criminals and illegal immigrants before they installed surveillance cameras... I heard there were quite a few brothels as well."

"You're very well informed."

"Well, I heard a great deal about it from my father... This is the first time I've actually been here myself though."
The pair split up, looking for Shujin students and asking if anyone had seen any. Makoto had suggested the split to cover more ground.

"Excuse me, have you seen any students in black and red plaid skirts or trousers?" Makoto asked a middle-aged woman tending a small gift shop. The woman did not recall any students in that uniform. Makoto's conversations with the next few shopkeepers went the same way. So far, so good. As Makoto made her way to the next shop, a man in a pale blue suit approached her.

"Hey there, are you an actress?"

"No," Makoto eyed the man curiously. No one had ever asked that before.

"Have you considered it?" the man smiled and presented a business card. "My agency is always looking for fresh talent. We could get you set up with some head shots right away."

Makoto's eyes narrowed. "And how much would these head shots cost? Have you been approaching students in black and red plaid uniforms?"

"I approach women of particular beauty. I don't pay attention to their clothes." The man didn't seem bothered by Makoto's tone. "Yes, there are some setup fees, but we have... other... options available as well. I may be able to get you fast-tracked."

The man moved to put his arm around Makoto's shoulder, as if to lead her somewhere. Makoto shrugged the man off.

"No thank you," Makoto's words dripped with ice.

The man's expression dropped. "Hey, hey, don't get so full of yourself. I was just offering you an opportunity."

As the man walked a few paces down the street and approached his next mark, Makoto noticed Ren looking at her from across the street. She made an 'X' symbol by crossing her forearms, indicating she had no luck yet. Ren nodded—he must not have found anything either. Makoto motioned that she was continuing down her side of the street.

"Princess... you look like you're working hard, why not take a break?" A handsome and well-dressed, though flashy, man stepped in Makoto's path. He motioned to the club he was standing near. "I make wonderful mixed drinks."

"I'm fine, thank you," Makoto raised an open palm before her, taking a small step back. "But have you seen any students in black and red plaid uniforms?"
"I would never approach students."

"I'm sure," Makoto said flatly, bypassing the man.

Makoto managed to speak to another two shopkeepers before being stopped again, this time by a thin middle-aged man in an expensive-looking suit with an even more expensive-looking watch. His eyes were darting side to side.

The man stepped in close and spoke softly. "You're a high schooler aren't you? Are you hungry? I'm looking for a... companion... for dinner tonight. I can make it worth your while. Perhaps there's something you've been saving for?"

"N-no thank you," Makoto took a swift step past the man, hurrying on her way. Of all the men that had approached her so far, he was the one she could most easily have taken in a fight and he was the one most likely to have kept an eye on high school students. However, something about him, about the whole situation, made her uncomfortable ...and a bit sad. She looked back, verifying the man was where she had left him. While doing so, she collided with another person.

"Oh! I'm so sorry." Makoto said as she turned and looked up. It was Ren.

"Is everything alright?" Ren looked down at her, seeming to search her face.

"Y-yes. Sorry, I just got distracted. Are you all done?"

"Not yet. I just wanted to check in," Ren said while looking away from Makoto, as if he was examining one of the business signs. He turned back to her. "No one recalls any students so far. Have you found anything?"

"Thankfully no, but let's keep looking."

"Maybe we should go together."

"We have too much ground to cover."

Ren returned to his side of the street. Makoto visited a few more shops and brushed off a few more men. She turned down an alley and immediately noticed a security company running some kind of promotion with a big black and white mascot character. She was about to turn back, not wanting to put Shujin on the company's radar, when she heard a voice. "Strange. You seem to be my enemy, though we haven't met."

It was a soft voice, but it had an otherworldly quality that penetrated the ambient noise. Makoto turned to see a small woman with bleached hair. She was clad in purple and sitting at a folding table, Tarot cards before her. A fortune teller. If it was a ploy, it was one Makoto couldn't discern. Against her better judgement, she approached the fortune teller. "Excuse me?"

"I don't sense evil from you though," the wisp of a woman looked perplexed. "Care to have your fortune read? Perhaps we can sort this out."

At face value it seemed like a hook, but Makoto couldn't help feeling it wasn't. Normally she would never consider having her fortune read, but after discovering the Metaverse it didn't seem so farfetched anymore. Still, Makoto wasn't ready to believe just any person on the street, in the red-light district no less. "No thank you... but have you seen any high school students in uniforms with white tops and black and red plaid bottoms?"

"I have not. If you're searching for someone my readings can be helpful."
"No... no one in particular. Thank you for your time," Makoto turned to leave.

"Egyptian gods. You should start your spiritual studies there," the woman stated, starting to mutter to herself more than speak to Makoto. "How odd, things like this usually only come so clearly when he's around..."

Makoto was momentarily surprised that the fortune teller seemed to know about her desire to study the spiritual forms taken by shadows. She reminded herself that vague broadly-applicable statements were how fortune tellers fooled the unsuspecting. She shook her head as if to clear the needless thought and continued on her way.

Back on the main street, Makoto approached several more shopkeepers, clerks, and promoters. None remembered seeing a Shujin-like uniform. Makoto was also approached by several more men with less-than-enticing opportunities, but she had gotten better at extracting herself from those conversations while still asking about student sightings. Feeling confident, she even approached a few of them herself for her investigation.

Makoto noticed a tall, muscular-looking man in a dark purple polyester suit and sunglasses standing outside of a nondescript entrance. She wasn't sure what kind of store it was. She walked up to him. "Excuse me, have you seen students wearing black and red plaid uniforms? Do any work here?"

"I can't recall," the man stroked his chin and appeared to be considering her question. He shifted and took a few steps. Smiling slyly, he turned to her again. "But you know, I have a few open positions, if you were to come work for me, you could check yourself. You could even start tonight."

"That's a generous offer, but I'm not looking for a job," Makoto started to walk away, but the man took a few more steps, blocking her.

"At least consider it," the man said, leaning down over her. Makoto took a step back, discovering brick behind her. Somehow she had gotten turned around. The man very obviously looked her up and down. "All you really have to do is show up and wear a cute dress. I pay well. I'm sure we have something that fits."

"No thank you," Makoto said firmly as she squared her feet. She once again attempted to walk past the man. He once again attempted to step in her way, but this time she was faster—fast enough that she was nearly thrown off balance when he grabbed her wrist. Her body jerked back. "Hey!"

"Come now, don't be like that," the man tightened his grip, his other arm turning her toward the door. Strangely he was still all smiles. "It's easy money, nothing shady. Come inside. You'll see. We can discuss it over drinks."

"Let me go," Makoto tugged, trying to free her arm, all the while losing ground as she and the man inched closer to the entrance to his business. Her movements ineffective, she began to plan something more aggressive. In her mental scenarios, she had only used Aikido against someone more cartoonishly menacing in a situation where she was alone, not a slick smiling man in the midst of a crowd who had no problem with what he was doing. The fact that no one around her seemed bothered made her doubt herself. Was she overreacting? No... surely-

"She told you to let her go."

The man, and Makoto with him, stopped. Ren was gripping the man's wrist, his knuckles white. He stared unflinchingly into the man's eyes.

"This is none of your business kid," the man squared his chest, stepping in towards Ren and staring
down at him, a reminder that he was taller and more built. Still, Makoto noticed the man's arm twitching ever so slightly and his hand letting up a bit on her own wrist.

If Ren was intimidated, he didn't show it. "Let. Her. Go."

"Hmph. Fine." The man unclenched his hand at once, freeing Makoto. She brought her other hand over her wrist tenderly. Once she had stepped out of the man's range, Ren let go of the man's wrist. He stumbled backwards, losing his balance and falling on his backside. "That hurt. I could sue you know."

It was only for a moment, but Makoto saw Ren's adamant expression drop. His eyes widened and his lips parted. He grabbed Makoto's other wrist. "We have to go."

Makoto stumbled for the first few paces as Ren led her, arm first, through the crowd. When they were far enough away that it was unlikely the man could find them, Ren stopped, dropping Makoto's arm.

"Did we lose him?" Makoto tried to verify. Her heart beat fast and she was short of breath. Ren's lips were pressed together. His eyes slightly wider than normal. Makoto didn't know what to make of it. Words tumbled out of her mouth. "That guy was so persistent...He must have been a scout for a hostess club. He mentioned how 'his girls' get paid a lot to wear cute dresses... All I wanted was to ask if any Shujin students worked there... but he nearly dragged me inside with him. If you hadn't been there to rescue me, I-"

"That was dangerous," Ren cut her off. He seemed irritated.

"For him maybe. I thought I was going to have to knock him out," Makoto balled her hand into a fist. Ren frowned. His eyes became more set. He stepped towards Makoto, looking like he was about to say something. His expression worried her. She continued talking, trying to both say all she wanted and to avoid whatever Ren was about to say. "I'm glad nobody had to get hurt though. I guess that's how they do it... I've learned something new today. Thanks again. It seems you have a knack for helping me out. I hope I can do the same for you someday."

Ren had opened his mouth, presumably to interrupt her, but he paused. Makoto wasn't sure what had distracted him, but took the opportunity to press on. "That aside... Even though this is a shopping district, there are absolutely no students around here. And definitely no Shujin students... though I guess they wouldn't come in uniform either way."

Just as she spoke, a Shujin student, in uniform, appeared on the other side of the street. She had her hair in a side ponytail with a large pink bow, a popular look with many high school girls lately. She entered a business, The After School Salon.

"That was!" Makoto started. "I used to be in the same class as her! But why is she here?"

Makoto waited outside the Shibuya theatre. She was treating Ren to a film that had recently come out, as a 'thank you' for his help with the Shinjuku matter, of course. The student they had seen, Eiko, turned out to be in no trouble at all, thankfully. In fact, she and Makoto had become friends. Ren had put a lot of time into the student council matter and for that Makoto was grateful. 

*Like a Dragon.* Makoto had been anticipating the movie's release for some time. She hoped Ren would be interested—it had gotten quite a bit of buzz. Several other people clearly were as there was already a line forming. Makoto was glad she had gotten there early.

It wasn't long before Ren arrived, jogging up to her. Makoto realized he must have thought he was
late. "Sorry, I got here a bit early. I've been looking forward to this for some time. Th-That is, a famous director was responsible for this movie. Who wouldn't want to see it?"

Ren grinned, like he knew something she didn't.

"Why are you looking at me like that? ...Let's go inside already!"

Despite the line, the pair were able to snag good seats. The film was riveting. Makoto forgot to check if Ren was having a good time. However, after the movie ended, they discussed the various plot points and techniques used in the film. Ren must have enjoyed it to some extent to be talking with her about it in such detail. Makoto supposed she shouldn't be surprised Ren had such a good knowledge of cinema. He was good at a lot of things.

"Um..." Makoto hesitated. "Do you think it's weird if a girl likes movies like this?"

"Not at all."

"R-Really?" Makoto could barely contain her smile. "Thanks... I think this is the first time I've been told that."

Shortly after the two parted ways, Makoto saw Eiko in the theatre hallway with a group of friends. Upon making eye contact, Eiko said something to the other girls before running over to Makoto.

"I cauuuuught you," Eiko was bubbly. "You are dating!"

"N-no," started Makoto. "We were just here as friends. I told you, we're just friends."

"Mmhmm," Eiko's sarcasm was evident.

Makoto waited as the cashier processed her purchase: several books on various mythologies. She had already read what the Shujin library had to offer. While its coverage of their personas was surprisingly good, there were a lot of holes when it came to the mythology in general, especially from foreign cultures. Makoto supposed such books wouldn't exactly help students with their studies.

As she exited the bookstore, Makoto noticed Ren and Ann together down the street. They looked like they were enjoying each other's company. She instinctively ducked behind a vending machine, feeling like she shouldn't be there. When the pair started heading down the street, away from her, Makoto decided to head in the opposite direction, towards the station. She walked a few paces before deciding again she was being silly. She might as well continue shopping. If she happened to see where they were going, so be it.

Ren and Ann stopped further down the street, meeting some men who appeared to be professional photographers and a pretty older woman. Had Ann taken Ren to work with her? Makoto imagined what Ren might look like modeling clothing for a fashion magazine. She felt her face warm. She picked out one of her purchases, a book on ancient Egyptian gods, and hid behind it.

Ann began having an animated conversation with the other woman. Ren was standing off to the side, watching Ann as the photographers worked on setting up the shoot. Makoto wondered what Ren's feelings were towards Ann. She was the most beautiful person Makoto had ever met in real life and she was both lively and kind. Who wouldn't like her? Ryuji clearly had feelings for her. She was the focus of Yusuke's attention. Even the cat regarded her romantically. Did Ren as well? Makoto felt something unsettling in the pit of her stomach.

From her distance away, Makoto couldn't tell much about what was happening at the photo shoot.
There were few other stores she wanted to visit, but since it was a nice day, she figured she might as well start reading the books she had bought. She sat on one of the short walls outside of a business and began learning about the gods of ancient Egypt, occasionally looking up to see Ann and the other woman posing. Though the book Makoto was reading seemed well written enough, she often found herself having to re-read sentences, not having truly processed them the first time.

"Ah, Niijima-san. Surprising we should run into each other." It was Akechi. "This is an odd spot to read."

"I'm trying to get out more," said Makoto. She hoped it was a sufficient but dull enough answer that he would be on his way.

"Me too. It's my duty as a detective to be aware of my surroundings." Akechi leaned over, pulling a book from Makoto's shopping bag. "Mythology hm? Not very helpful for exams."

Makoto forced a polite smile. She had lost much of the distance she had gained on Akechi in the last mock exam. She refused to let him know it bothered her. "Yes, well, I would like to broaden my horizons."

"An interesting topic to start with."

"Who said I'm only starting here?"

"Ah, well, you have me there." He perused the books in her stack. "Not a bad selection."

"I'm glad you approve," Makoto let a hint of sarcasm through. She immediately regretted it. Akechi didn't seem to notice though, he was gazing down the street. Makoto followed his gaze. The photo shoot was wrapping up. Ren and Ann had already left.

"Well, I should be going," Akechi's smile would have been right at home in that photo shoot. "I wouldn't want to keep Sae-san waiting."

Akechi waved a goodbye and headed towards the station. Once his back was turned, Makoto frowned. Akechi probably saw Sis more than she did these days.

"Was that Akechi Goro?" Recognizing Ren's voice, Makoto spun her head around. How long had he known she was there?

"Ren! I thought you were with-" Makoto caught herself. "I didn't know you were here."

Ren smiled. It was somewhere between polite and mischievous. Makoto wondered if Ren's parents had an Ren-expression-to-Japanese translator.

"Oh! And yes, that was Akechi," Makoto responded to Ren's question. She frowned slightly. "He works with my sister."

"You should be careful around him," Ren's expression had turned serious. "We have reason to believe he can understand Morgana."

"What?!"

"Shh... not here. I'll tell you more later."

July 9th. It was supposed to be the day Makoto paid Kaneshiro three million yen. Instead, it was the day Kaneshiro's arrest became public. Interest in the Phantom Thieves and their popularity received a
significant boost. The team was understandably excited, wanting to plan a celebration. Makoto hated to be a downer, but had to remind them school came first, what with exams starting soon. The last thing she needed was for the principal to scrutinize the members of the Phantom Thieves.

Principal Kobayakawa was not happy about the situation, especially given the report Makoto had submitted that outlined her reasons why she was giving up the Phantom Thieves investigation. He kept Makoto after school. He threatened her chances at getting into prestigious colleges. However, Makoto was done being strung along in such a fashion. She felt free.

Sis arrived home late that night, which was still earlier than the previous nights. Makoto turned from her position on the couch, regarding her sister. "You look tired... Is everything OK?"

"Don't worry about me. How about you, Makoto? Have you been keeping up with your studies?"

"Yes, of course." And some other things... Makoto thought about all she had been doing to broaden her horizons. Against her better judgment, she voiced a small doubt. "Though... what is the point of studying?"

"...What do you mean?" Sis regarded Makoto, her eyes narrowing.

"I was just wondering what will be waiting for me at the end..." Makoto regret not having fully formed her thoughts before she began speaking. She struggled to put them into words. "Even if I manage to push through tough entrance exams, I'm still thrust into a competitive society."

"What else is there besides success? Don't ask me such childish questions." It was clear from Sis's tone that she was not amused. Makoto's old self wouldn't have asked in the first place. Her evolving self had to be more honest with who she was, even if Sis thought it was childish.

Makoto didn't need to pick a fight however. She changed the subject, gesturing to the television. "Isn't this the man the Phantom Thieves sent a calling card for? The one who confessed all his crimes."

"Even the police couldn't figure out why. It really... was out of nowhere." Sis sounded annoyed. "This would only make sense if his personality changed... but that would be impossible."

"Why does it matter? The police still caught him in the end, right?"

"I had plans set for a promotion, but no one can take credit for his arrest now with that confession. ...Not that a child would understand." With that, Sis stalked off to her room. Makoto's suspicions were correct. Sis was indeed working on the Kaneshiro case, in addition to the Phantom Thieves case.

"Promotion..." Makoto murmured to herself. What about justice? "You've changed, Sis."

Makoto took out her phone and unlocked the screen. She stared at it, hesitating. Finally, she pressed the icon of the strange app. She whispered. "Niijima Sae."

Chapter End Notes

If Morgana was formed of the hope of humanity, does that mean the hope of humanity is to date Ann?
I'm only keeping Sis's palace a secret from the others until I have more information.

Makoto stared across the dark subway station, barely registering the phantoms of people she didn't know board cars that raced to a place she could not reach. It was her first trip to the Metaverse since discovering Sis had a palace. Makoto had made peace with the morality of stealing hearts back when they dealt with Kaneshiro. She had gone so far as to submit a report arguing there were no flaws in the Phantom Thieves' justice. However, all her questions, all her doubts rushed back to the surface of her thoughts once the prospect of stealing Sis' heart became very real. Makoto hoped it was something she just didn't understand yet. She needed to learn more about the Metaverse. She needed to learn more about palaces. She needed to learn more about Sis. Until then, Makoto would keep her discovery to herself. Once she found out more, she would gladly tell the rest of the team. Gladly.

It was only her second time in Mementos and Makoto sensed it would always feel as familiar and as foreign as it felt right then. Morgana strongly believed that his memories would return if they explored far enough into Mementos, but to do so, the Phantom Thieves needed more notoriety. Makoto had initially been concerned with some of her teammates' interest in fame, Ryuji's especially, but it made sense being for Morgana's sake. The team was looking for its next target. Taking on Sis would indeed garner headlines. It was all the more reason to keep her discovery to herself.

"You seem restless," Ren stood next to her on the platform. Makoto wasn't sure when he had left the seating area where their teammates were congregated.

"I guess I'm still getting used to this place." It wasn't exactly a lie. Makoto shivered thinking about the dark cavernous tunnels, the grotesque veins of red and twisted train tracks they followed, and the haunting faces of the masks worn by the shadows that lurked. She was relieved she was among friends, had plenty to keep herself distracted, and had a firm belief she could actually do something about the monsters that lurked within. Still, she wasn't sure how she might react if somebody's palace turned out to be a haunted house. She shivered again.

"You're doing well."

Makoto looked up at Ren and smiled. The primary goals of exploring Mementos were to help Morgana remember his past and help people in need by stealing distorted desires that had not yet manifested into palaces but were causing harm nonetheless. A secondary goal was improving the team through training and resource gathering. Makoto had worked hard—her punches hit harder, her spells were getting stronger, her interactions with teammates in battle were more smooth, and her mythological research was paying off. However, it wasn't only in fighting shadows directly, she was also coming into her role as advisor, planning out the next moves with Ren and Morgana from safe rooms or even their hideout. Reminded of this, Makoto spoke. "How are the others?"

"Not as energetic as when we began, but they say they feel good," Ren paused. "I think we'll be able to locate Oyamada."

"And how do you feel?" Part of Makoto's advisor role was saving Ren from himself. His ability to commune with multiple personae gave him great versatility, but exercising that versatility in service of the team translated into exertion beyond what the others contributed. He was not only playing his part, but covering for what others couldn't do.

Ren rotated his shoulders, stretching his upper back. "I'm fine."
"Joker."

"I'll perk up with some coffee. It'll last long enough to steal Oyamada's heart."

Makoto simply stared up at him, waiting.

"We're so close. Morgana senses him nearby."

Makoto continued to look at him, not saying anything.

"Look, if we don't act, Miya-chan might not be the only victim. We have to do this."

Makoto's expression broke. She sighed. Ren was right. It was a little risky given the team's condition, but the alternative was unconscionable. "Let the others take the lead. There's nothing in this area we can't handle. Save it for Oyamada and our escape. I'll take point on healing. Morgana will focus on offense. First sign of trouble, we pull back. We can't save anyone if we're dead."

"Yes Queen." Ren flashed a confident grin. He pulled his gloves tight and spun in the direction of the escalators down, his duster flaring behind him. "Let's do this."

Ann wasn't even dressed yet when Makoto arrived at her apartment. The blonde girl was in a tank top and shorts, scrubbing make up off her face with a hand towel as she opened the door. As soon as Makoto stepped inside, Ann ran back into the dwelling. "Sorry I'm running late! I got called in for a last minute job!"

"Pardon my intrusion..." Makoto slipped out of her geta and entered the apartment. It was a small studio. To Makoto's understanding, Ann lived alone because her parents worked overseas. Ann kept the place mostly tidy, not up to Sis' standards, but well above average. The only area that really stood out was Ann's closet, which was stuffed with clothing. It didn't help that Ann was furiously pulling things out and tossing them on the bed.

"Ah! Here it is!" Ann pulled out a blue yukata covered in bright flowers. It reminded Makoto of a clear summer day, much like its owner. Ann finally looked back at Makoto. "Oh! what a pretty yukata! Phantom Thieves pride right?"

"Thank you." Makoto's yukata was white and covered in poppies. She supposed the red and black flower was indeed the Phantom Thieves' colors. Makoto had picked out the yukata a few years back. She liked the flower and she found white clothing elegant.

It shouldn't have surprised Makoto how quickly Ann was able to change. The girl was a professional after all. Before she knew it, Ann was re-tying her hair in the mirror. Makoto noticed a calendar with the day's date circled several times in pen and fireworks drawn in. Magazine clippings of girls in yukata were spread across the vanity. Ann sighed as she pulled her second twin tail through the tie one last time. "I really wanted to do something special with it, but there's no time now."

"You look lovely."

Ann turned and flashed a brilliant smile. "Thanks!"

Makoto had some trouble keeping up with Ann as the two rushed out of the apartment towards the train station. Apparently among Ann's many skills was the ability to move fast in geta.

The station was crowded. Makoto and Ann crammed onto a train. It was packed full, similar to normal commute times. There were several other woman in yukata.
Shibuya station was not as crowded, likely because people were already pouring onto the streets. This made it easier to spot the boys. They were in the planned upon spot.

"There they are," said Ann. "Oh! Ren's not wearing his glasses. He looks good."

"I like the glasses," Makoto said softly. Ann raised an eyebrow at her.

The boys were chatting with two women in yukata, both sporting hairstyles similar to the ones Makoto had seen in Ann's magazine clippings. Makoto and Ann were getting close enough that they could hear the conversation.

"C'mon, let's go together," one of the women, wearing a soft pink yukata, directed to Yusuke. "Do you happen to be a model? You look great in that yukata."

"Waitin' around's a pain, so can we just go with these chicks?" Ryuji asked Ren. Makoto heard Ann take a sharp intake of breath. She turned to look at her friend. Ann was pressing her lips together tightly, her brow furrowed. Makoto couldn't help but think it would be nice if Ann had feelings for Ryuji, but she was probably just mad at him for abandoning them so easily.

"No way." Ren sighed.

"We'll both apologize to the others later!" Ryuji argued.

"That's enough," Yusuke cut off the women fawning over him. His voice was raised and his words brief and punctuated. "You're disgracing your yukata. You should be more aware of your womanhood."

Taken aback, blushing, in embarrassment probably, the two women rushed off as fast as their tiny little geta steps allowed them. Makoto felt sorry for them. Yusuke really lived in a different time and perhaps on a different planet.

"How could you!?” Ryuji directed at Yusuke, slumping.

"Why don't you go after them then?" Ann's geta clopped loudly on the station floor as she and Makoto reached the others. Her tone was challenging.

"So those are the kinds of girls you like, Ryuji," Makoto mused, trying to make their displeasure known with ribbing. She didn't want the celebration to start with a fight.

"Uh, well... That's..." Ryuji stumbled over his words.

"Hey, it's gonna get crowded if we don't get going," Ann said. The rest of the group followed her out of the station, Ryuji lagging behind.

The streets of Shibuya were even more crowded than the trains had been. The police directed the group to a cordoned off area. Most of their view was obstructed by commercial buildings. Makoto stood between Ren and Yusuke, watching the fireworks that made it high enough into the air. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ann strain to see more, going so far as to hop for a taller view. Ann must have really been looking forward to the event.

The crowd began to murmur. Makoto watched as people starting looking around. Then it hit her, quite literally—a rain drop. She frowned. "Why now?"

People began to disperse from Shibuya. If getting there had been bad, leaving would be worse. There were lines of umbrellas coming out of the station. The team managed to find a little cover
under a convenience store awning, but by that point were pretty well drenched. Makoto felt a cool breeze on the exposed part of her the back of her neck, likely wafting from someone entering the convenience store. It transformed into a sense of being watched. She looked up, briefly making eye contact with Ren whose eyes darted away. Ryuji and Yusuke didn't notice her, their sights still focused on one spot. Ann was wringing out water from her yukata, revealing more of her bare legs than she probably realized. "Ann..."

"Yeah?" Ann looked up. Makoto motioned to the rest of their party. By then, all three boys were standing straight, very obviously not looking. Ann huffed. "Come on!"

"Looks like you need help..." Ryuji tested the waters.

"Then why don't you go buy me a towel already, huh!?"

Makoto sighed. While her two teammates argued, she noticed a girl their age getting into an expensive black car, flanked by men in suits and sunglasses. The girl looked familiar. Was there anyone that wealthy at their school?

"Makoto?"

"Hm?" Makoto turned and noticed Ann, Ryuji, and Yusuke were no longer beside her and Ren was at the door to the convenience store. "Oh."

While they weren't being rained on anymore, the combination of air conditioning and wet clothes wasn't exactly pleasant. With so many wet people inside, the humidity permeated indoors.

"Ack..." Ryuji surveyed the store. "We're just tryin' to get outta the rain, but look how crowded it is...'"

"I guess everyone had the same idea..." Ann remarked. "My feet hurt... It's cold... The festival's been cancelled... This sucks..."

"We made such a commotion with the public, and this is what we get?" Ryuji complained. "Laaame."

The group started discussing possible next targets that would make more impact with the public. Makoto thought about Sis and didn't say anything.

Makoto whispered an apology to Sakura Sojiro-san, wherever he was, as the team entered his house. She had a hunch that Alibaba, the hacker that had messaged Ren offering to help with Medjed, in return for stealing the heart of Sakura Futaba was none other than Futaba herself. After all, if Alibaba were to verify the change of heart, they would have to be close by.

Ren said Sakura-san, his guardian, had been cagey about the subject of Futaba. Ren had confided in Makoto that there was also some sort of government official coming around LeBlanc, pressuring Sakura-san about something that seemed to involve cognitive psience. It was suspicious.

Makoto bit her lip as she took off her shoes and proceeded further into the house. She was concerned about the matters regarding Futaba but she couldn't say she wasn't partially spurred on by Medjed's latest threat—a massive cyber-attack on all Japanese citizens if the Phantom Thieves didn't reveal their identities in a month's time. She called out into the home, her voice not as loud as it should have been. "Hello, sir?"

"I hope he didn't pass out or something... I mean, he is kinda old, ain't he?" Ryuji hunched his
shoulders over, following Makoto just past the entryway.

"I'm a bit worried," Ann remarked as she followed as well. The narrow hallway was becoming crowded. "Should we go in and check on him?"

"Please excuse us..." Makoto tried calling again, having trouble forcing herself to project. As the team filtered in, she crept further and further down the hall.

A bright flash of light filled Makoto's vision and then took the house lights with it. The crash of thunder followed quickly ...and then a scream ...and another. Makoto froze. "A scream!? What was that!?"

"H-How should I know?" It was Morgana. He was not reassuring.

Next came a heavy thump. Makoto felt her heart tighten. "Did you hear that!?"

Makoto vaguely heard Ryuji and Ann arguing in the background. She reminded herself that his meant she wasn't alone. She reminded herself that ghosts weren't real. She reminded herself there was no such thing as a haunted house.

"Could it be Alibaba...? I mean, Futaba?" Morgana asked, his voice not far. Makoto heard footsteps shortly thereafter. Were those her friends? Were they abandoning her? Or did the footsteps belong to something else? Something worse?

Makoto told herself to remain calm. She was the oldest after all. She had led them in there. She should be able to reason through things. If Morgana was close by, then Ren must be as well. Makoto wasn't sure whether dying of embarrassment or being disemboweled by vengeful spirits would be worse. The next creak of the house answered her question.

"Um, sorry... Can I hold your hand?" Makoto gathered all that remained of her dignity, trying to sound not nearly as afraid as she was. As the others filtered away, Ren waited for her. Makoto took that as enough of a response. She latched onto Ren's upper arm, pressing herself close. Ren stiffened. With little space between them, Makoto could sense his heartbeat accelerate as he swallowed hard. Makoto's mind raced. If even Ren was scared, then...

The pair slowly moved back towards the entrance. Even if Ren was also afraid, Makoto found the warmth emanating from him comforting. He was real, alive. At the moment, she wasn't certain the same was true about anything else.

Ren came to a sudden halt a few steps later. Makoto gasped as she lurched into him.

"I can sense someone's presence..." Yusuke's voice carried through the air. Why did he have to say it like that?

"Who is it...?" Makoto whipped her head from side to side, searching. Her eyes were only starting to adjust. She could barely make out shapes in the darkness. Her breath quickened. "Who's there...!?"

Makoto tried to make sense of the shapes in the dark. She told herself they were only furnishings... but what if she was wrong? What if there were demons hiding amongst them and anyone who had ever found evidence had died before they could tell? What if Sakura Futaba was actually a vengeful spirit, haunting Sakura-san and would kill them all? What if that's why he didn't want to talk about it? What if-

"I can't take this anymore! I'm leaving!" Makoto declared, by this point her chest heaving several times a second. Her head felt funny. She tried to take a step, but her knees gave out on her. She slid
down Ren's arm. "N-No... My legs won't move..."

Sensing something behind her, Makoto turned her head. Long straight hair and giant white holes where eyes should be stared back at her. Whatever it was, it turned toward her, as if to suck her soul out and into its gaping white voids. The house once again filled with a flash of lightning. Makoto screamed with the thunder. She had to get away. She momentarily let go of Ren but stumbled, her legs still weak. What little she could see seemed to shift before her. Everything seemed to be moving in odd directions. She crumpled onto the floor.

"Alibaba! Futaba!" Ann called. "Hey! C'mon, where are you!? You're a hacker, right? Just show yourself!"

Makoto grappled in the dark, finding Ren once again and holding onto his leg for dear life. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry! Please save me Sis..."

Sis... Sis always saved her.

——

Young Makoto clung to the door frame of the living room. Thunder crashed. She closed her eyes tightly and tried her hardest to be quiet, to not bother Sis. She knew the thunder was harmless, that their building had lightning rods and those protected them ...but what if theirs was broken? ...what if their building was damaged in some other way? ...what if monsters came out in the thunder? ...ones that wanted even more than your bellybutton?

"...no Sosuke it's not that, my Dad works late, someone has to watch Makoto."

"...yes every night. If I know in advance-"

"...no one wants to go out more than—Sosuke? Sosuke?!" Sis put down the phone. Her head dropped and she sighed. Then she froze. She slowly turned her head toward Makoto. "Makoto? What are you doing up? Go back to bed."

Makoto opened her mouth, but before she could get anything out, there was another crash of thunder. Makoto jumped and shut her mouth. She clung to the door frame and shook her head wide-eyed.

"Go back to bed."

Makoto remained attached to the door frame. Her breaths came short and fast.

"Come on Makoto, I have to study. It's just thunder. We've been over this."

"B-b-b-but," Makoto spoke between heaves. "W-w-what if."

"Shh, shh," Sis knelt down and stroked Makoto's hair. Eventually Makoto's breaths evened out. "You have to stop overthinking everything."

"I can't," Makoto frowned. She tentatively reached out a small hand, grabbing Sis's shirt. She quickly did the same with the other, moving between the door frame and Sis as if the space in between were dangerous. "Can I stay with you?"

Sis sighed, her face stern for a few moments before breaking into a gentle smile. "Okay, but just for a little."
Makoto climbed onto the chair next to the one Sis always used. She perched over the table, looking curiously as Sis's textbooks. They were filled with characters Makoto didn't know yet, even though she was the best reader in Caterpillar Group. There weren't any pictures. She turned towards Sis. "What's this?"

"This is a book about theories of justice."

"A whole book on justice? But why? Don't you just have to follow the rules?"

"It's very complicated Makoto. We have to think very hard and seriously about it," Sis replied. Makoto looked at the book skeptically. "You'll understand when you're older."

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Makoto had fallen asleep in Sis's lap many times while the older girl studied for exams. She had always felt safe. Sis had cared so much about justice back then... but now she had a palace. Sis couldn't be a bad person, could she?

"Are you OK, Futaba!?" Sakura-san's voice brought Makoto out of her head and into the present.

"Crap, he's home!" Ryuji exclaimed. Makoto heard the sounds of several footsteps. She told herself they belonged to her friends. However, they could belong to the possessed, scrambling on all fours. They could belong to the parade of a hundred demons. They could be-

Makoto's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a door being slid open with great force followed by a few uncontrolled stomp, as if someone was stumbling.

"Who the hell are you!? Don't move! You hear me!?!" It was Sakura-san. His shouts varied in directions, indicating he was likely darting his head in all directions, searching for them. Finally, he returned to a normal volume, catching his breath as he spoke. "You...? What're you doing in my house?"

Makoto opened her eyes and turned. She squinted at a spotlight shining in her direction. "Ah..."

"You're..."

Makoto remembered she was in Sakura-san's house. Sakura-san was right there. All thoughts of ghosts vanished. All thoughts of authority figures and etiquette returned. Now she was scared in a different way. "Oh... G-Good... evening, sir... We... didn't mean.. to intrude..."

"Niijima-san," Sakura-san turned off the light. It had destroyed Makoto's night vision, but she could tell that he seemed to be examining them. "Wait... are you two dating?"

Makoto shook her head vigorously, blurt out a response without thinking. "W-We're j-just friends!"

"Friends nowadays get that close to each other...?"

Makoto immediately disengaged from Ren. The entire ordeal... her panic, her childishness... started to play on repeat in her head. She felt her face becoming flush. What would Ren think of her now? Was he offended by Sakura-san's misconception? Did he think her foolish? Makoto rose to a standing position. Ren looked over at her. Not meeting his gaze, she stared at her feet. "That's not it! This, um... Things happened... and..."

Ann and the others entered the hallway from an adjacent room. Makoto was thankful for the
distraction. She continued to keep her eyes firmly planted on her feet. Nothing was going well.

"You kids are here too...!?" Sakura-san turned to the rest of the team.

"Um, we brought you some sushi, but nobody answered when we rang the bell..." Ann explained. "The door was unlocked too. We could hear the TV though, so we got worried you might have passed out or something..."

"The door was unlocked?" Sakura-san seemed genuinely concerned. "...I do that sometimes. Guess I'm getting old."

While Sakura-san spoke to Ann, Makoto remembered why they had come in the first place. They still needed to find out about Futaba. She had things to do. Makoto took a deep breath and summoned her composure. "Um, excuse me. There's something we'd like to ask."

The next day, the Phantom Thieves met up in Ren's room, their new hideout. The previous night had been long, but in the end, they had cleared up many things regarding Sakura Futaba, the elite hacker who wanted her heart changed.

"It looks like Futaba was listening in on Leblanc," Morgana reported, having slipped into Futaba's room.

"But why would she want to listen in on the cafe?" Ann wondered.

"I have no idea," said Morgana.

"Anyway, we found out that Futaba has a Palace..." Ann continued. "But can someone who isn't evil have one?"

"That doesn't matter," Morgana explained. "A Palace is the materialization of distorted cognitions brought about by strong desires... That's all."

Makoto hoped that applied to Sis too. However, she couldn't help but look at the facts. The situations were different. "She's so young though... The pain she's gone through must be the cause of her distortion."

"According to the chief's story, Futaba has auditory and visual hallucinations, right? There's a chance those are related to some important memories she's holding," Morgana hypothesized. "It's hard to explain... but those memories may have been warped by the distortions."

"Basically we just gotta steal her Treasure, right?" Ryuji asked.

"Well, yeah."

"So do we all agree about taking on Futaba's Palace?" Ann motioned.

"She's asked us to do so. I don't think that part is an issue," said Makoto. It was another difference between Futaba and Sis. Makoto tried to put her ruminations over Sis' palace aside. There was a girl asking for their help. It was selfish of her to be so focused on Sis. "If we heal Futaba's heart, it will not only help Sakura-san, but she can then assist us with Medjed."
Chapter Notes

Summary thus far: The Phantom Thieves have recently stolen Kaneshiro's Treasure and fulfilled the requirements to enter Futaba's Palace. Suspicious of her sister's reaction to Kaneshiro's confession, Makoto whispers her name into the Meta-Nav app and it comes up a hit. She decides to keep it a secret, telling herself she needs more information first. Also, to help in her team advisory role, she starts reading up on mythology. Ren notices her talking to Akechi about it in Shibuya and tells her Akechi was able to understand Morgana at the television station.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I always act cautiously.

Futaba's palace was very different from Kaneshiro's. Even starting from just outside Futaba's room, the Phantom Thieves had to travel a long distance by Morgana-bus to the pyramid at the heart of Futaba's distortion. While Kaneshiro's palace had been surrounded by a warped version of night-time Shibuya filled with subservient ATM-people, Futaba had constructed a completely foreign town under a bright sun with bandits that worked against her. Stranger still, Shadow Futaba alternated between helping them and trying to kill them. The team had to be cautious. Fortunately, Makoto was exceedingly cautious. Exceedingly. She was confident she would be of use in these matters.

Kaneshiro, Futaba, Mementos... Makoto wondered how Sis's palace compared.

With large doors blocking their ascent, the Phantom Thieves had no choice but to find an alternate route. Their exploration, as well one of Futaba's trap doors, led them below ground. They traversed a maze of ledges and stairways, eventually coming across a shadow blocking their path. Unlike the others, it was firm in its position. There was no chance to ambush it. As their other options had been exhausted, they decided they had to take it head on.

"This one's strong," Morgana warned.

Ryuji stretched his dominant shoulder, rotating his arm around and cracking his neck. "He doesn't look so big... well, maybe to a shrimp like you."

"I'm not a shrimp!"

"Sorry, cat."

"I am definitely not a cat!"

Ryuji's lips turned upward in a smug smile before he dashed off towards the shadow. Makoto followed close behind him, knuckles at the ready. The shadow burst into a red and black ooze, emerging as a giant coffin. She shivered as the coffin's lid creaked open enough for a wizened black hand to beckon from it. An odd sensation passed over Makoto, as if she were being swept over by an invisible wave. She momentarily could not see. When her vision returned, she was looking up at the coffin. It had grown much larger. The ground shook as it walked itself forward in a series of stomps with its foot-end. It would easily crush them.
Makoto turned to Ryuji to re-group, only to discover that next to her was a giant human-sized rat wearing what looked like Ryuji's skull mask. Makoto jumped. Rattled, she started running away from the coffin and the giant rat monster, her feet and hands pushing off the ground.

*Wait, why am I running on all fours?*

Putting sufficient distance between the monsters and herself, Makoto paused before a giant golden urn, a jumbo-sized version of the ones Ren had been looting. She looked at her warped reflection in the polished gold of the cylindrical base. What looked back at her was a rat wearing her iron mask. It wasn't the coffin that got bigger but-

A strong gust of wind followed by a deafening thud caught Makoto's attention. She looked back towards the shadow. It had been knocked down. Ren and Morgana were standing back to back, each with an arm outstretched in the direction of the coffin. Yusuke leapt towards the coffin's feet, moving as if he was being poured into every stance he took. He drew his katana, making clean slices through its body. Ann dug a heel into the head of the coffin and leaned in to keep it pinned to the ground while it tried to right itself. The coffin was tough, but the team was able to destroy it.

As the dust settled, Morgana approached rat-Ryuji, his eyes shining and his smile showing off his fangs. "Who's a shrimp now!?"

Morgana gave chase to Ryuji, the transformed track star barely keeping out of the cat's grasp. Makoto watched Ryuji scamper across the room. Suddenly, she felt a pair of hands around her... waist... for lack of a better word... and she was hoisted into the air. She waggled her arms and legs impotently. The swiftness of the movement made her feel queasy. She was brought to a sudden stop, finding herself staring up at Yusuke from his chest level. Ren and Ann were walking up behind him.

"Mouse-koto," Yusuke said with a little chuckle. He then lifted his chin and burst out into a deep-voiced, almost maniacal, laugh. He seemed to be the only one who found it funny.

They were supposed to use code names. Makoto put her hands on her hips to admonish Yusuke's lack of discretion. At least, Makoto tried to put her hands on her hips. She found her arms didn't work the way they used to. Furthermore, her lecture came out as a series of squeaks. This only seemed to amuse Yusuke more.

Ren was conversing with one of his persona, Ame no Uzume. As he pointed towards Makoto, the persona closed her eyes and shook her head.

Ann crouched down to Makoto's level. She was biting her lip, trying to smile, but her lips kept falling. She reached towards Makoto's head as if to pet her but hesitated, eventually withdrawing her hand altogether. It was as if Makoto carried the plague. Makoto briefly felt insulted but then stopped to wonder if she did indeed carry the plague.

Yusuke started moving his arms up and down, as if he were testing rat-Makoto's weight. He swung her from side to side a few times as well. Makoto thought she was either going to be sick or flung somewhere or both. She wasn't particularly afraid of heights but Yusuke seemed to be doing his best to make her afraid. He looked over to the area where Morgana and Ryuji were running in circles.

"Yes... yes, this will work out. A delightful twist on Van Gogh's *Two Rats.*"

Of course Yusuke would only be interested in painting her when she was an icky rat.

"Panther, stop Mona before he kills Skull. Fox, don't shake her. She doesn't seem to like that," Ren said as he approached to Yusuke. Makoto took the opportunity to wriggle out of Yusuke's grasp. She jumped over to Ren, landing on his chest. Her little mouse heart beating quickly, she gripped Ren's
Makoto continued to chase rat-Ryuji while Ann in turn chased him. Makoto’s vision suddenly went blurry and she felt a wave rush over her. When she could see again, Ryuji was back to normal. Whatever it was, it must have worn off. Ryuji stood firm as Morgana ran into his shins, bouncing right off. Now it was Ryuji's turn to flash an menacing toothy grin. His right hand made a fist and his left rubbed it in preparation. Ryuji was about to take chase when Ann chastised him. "Skull!"

If Ryuji changed back then... Makoto wiggled her toes. They were in boots! They were touching ground! She looked to the side and saw her hands, human hands, gripping Ren's shirt. She looked up and saw Ren smiling down at her. His arms were raised slightly, hovering around her like he didn't know where to put them. He looked amused. It was reassuring. He spoke. "Hi."

"Hi," Makoto smiled sheepishly. She slowly lifted her head from his chest and let go of Ren's clothing, righting herself while continuing to look at him, his smile.

"A pity," Yusuke's comment brought both Makoto and Ren's attention back to the group.

"I for one like bein' human," Ryuji said in a huff, stretching his limbs. "I was worried we'd be stuck like that forever."

"We're too vulnerable as mice," Makoto said. "We'll have to come up with some new strategies to deal with this development."

Makoto sat on a bench in the small grassy area between the courthouse where Sis worked and its surrounding fence. Her nose was in her notebook, within it her culled list of possible forms Sis's palace might take. She hoped passersby would pay her no mind. Makoto's goals for the outing were only to determine Sis's keywords and take a brief look at the palace. She wouldn't be going inside. She wouldn't be encountering any shadows. In the off-chance she did, she was confident she could out-run them with Johanna. It would be fine.

Her phone sitting in her lap, Makoto began to test keywords. It didn't take her long. CASINO. Sis saw the courthouse as a casino, a place of competition and random chance. Makoto frowned. It was night time in Sis's distorted version of the world. Aside from the grandiose casino which stretched high into the sky and emitted colorful lights from every window and sign, the world was relatively undistorted. The nearby buildings were true to life. The cognitive people milling outside were indistinguishable from real ones.

Makoto approached the velvet rope separating the main entrance to the casino from the side of the building where she had entered. She was still wearing her normal clothes—Sis's cognition didn't recognize her as a threat. Makoto was thankful it was summer break and she wasn't clad in a school uniform.

"Hey, this is no place for children," a bouncer met Makoto at the rope.

"I-I'm sorry. I was just curious," Makoto apologized and quickly backed away. The last thing she wanted to do was alert Sis to her presence. She wondered how she could possibly fool Sis's cognition into thinking she was older. Sis thought her a child. It would be difficult.

Makoto was able to watch some of the cognitive people from a distance, even overhear a few. It seemed like the people weren't being mistreated. Then again, Makoto knew that was what she wanted to see. They were at a casino after all. The odds were stacked against the clientele by pure
Recognizing that she couldn’t approach, much less enter, the casino, Makoto instead began to explore the surrounding area. As she took a closer look at the rest of the city, she verified that indeed the buildings and stores were impeccable facsimiles of the real thing. Kaneshiro’s Shibuya had replaced all stores with empty spaces stuffed with money. They functioned like cardboard cut-outs, not really part of the world. While most of the shops Makoto passed in Sis’s distortion were closed for the night, she could still peek into the windows and see each one had its own unique things for sale.

Makoto found herself walking to one place she knew would be open—the police station. She was a bit worried about entering it at first, but figured she was far enough away from the core of the distortion that it would be safe. Makoto slipped inside the station, various excuses prepared for her presence. However, the people inside, officers and civilians alike, did not seem to notice her. Perhaps this far away from the treasure, she didn’t register.

The police station was largely as Makoto remembered it. She hadn’t visited since Dad died, but other than newer cell phones on a few of the desks, not much seemed different. Weaving through the rows of desks, she found the one that once belonged to her father. The desk was tidy. She checked the nameplate. Niijima. Her lips parted. She frantically tugged at the drawers. Locked. Of course. Dad was careful. Sis would know that as well as her. Makoto searched her bag for lock picks. None. She would have to come back later. She had already been in the Metaverse much longer than she intended.

Makoto turned away from Dad’s desk. It was time to go. She bit her lip. The first step was the hardest.

As she made her way to the outskirts of the casino, Makoto briefly considered going home. Surely the trains between the courthouse and their apartment worked. However, she decided against it. She didn’t want to meet her cognitive self. She wasn’t sure if it was concern for Sis’s privacy or just fear.

Makoto exited the Metaverse just outside the casino. She squinted, unprepared for the sudden brightness. Somehow returning to the real world was always more disorienting than leaving it.

"Niijama-san, what are you doing here?" Makoto’s vision came into focus to see Akechi making quick strides in her direction. She mentally admonished herself. It was summer break, she should have known he was even more likely to be with Sis. She would have to be more careful in the future. Akechi was already suspicious.

"Akechi-kun..." Before Makoto could make up an excuse, she saw Sis exiting the courthouse. It didn’t take long for her to notice them.

"Makoto! What are you doing here!" If Akechi had moved fast, Sis had moved faster, even in heels. The two looked natural, comfortable with each other. Makoto tried to keep her teeth from clenching. If it turned out to be true that Akechi could enter the Metaverse, she really didn’t want him around Sis.

"I’m working on an essay for school," Makoto replied. "I wanted to look up some-"

"Makoto it’s dangerous to come here by yourself," Sis sighed...then her eyes narrows and her lips curled into a devious-looking grin. It was a smile Makoto recognized well. Makoto would have been happy to see it, evidence that Sis was just being Sis, had she not known it was directed at her. Sis’s smile only broadened. "Akechi-kun, could you escort my sister to the station?"
"Of course, Sae-san," Akechi smiled, tilting his head. Picture perfect. Makoto wondered if any of his smiles ever looked real. "A rain check on that sushi then."

Makoto looked over at her sister. How often did she take Akechi out for sushi? Sis smiled enigmatically. "I don't remember agreeing to that."

Sis's heels made clacking sounds as she walked off in the direction of the police station.

"Well," Akechi offering his arm. "Shall we?"

Makoto looked over at her sister's retreating back once more, willing daggers to fly from her eyes. She then turned her attention to Akechi, offered a modest smile, and put her hand up to decline his more formal escort. Akechi shrugged, still smiling, and followed her out of the courthouse gates.

A group of girls in uniforms Makoto didn't recognize were just outside. As Akechi emerged behind her, they started calling to him. Makoto quickened her pace, hoping his fans wouldn't associate her with him. Her respite was brief. She soon heard the sound of Akechi's loafers jogging up behind her.

"You're so diligent in your school work, even during break," Akechi mused as he dropped to a more casual, if brisk, pace next to Makoto. "I wish I had the time, but I've been so busy lately with the investigation and the TV appearances."

"That sounds difficult," Makoto said politely.

"So, tell me about your relationship with Amamiya-kun. I find him fascinating." As Akechi brought up Ren, Makoto stumbled. It was a small misstep, but not unnoticed. "Careful there."

"We're friends," Makoto said, not turning to meet Akechi's eyes. He was probing her. She didn't intend to give him anything of use.

"You have a lot of second years as friends."

"My role as student council president means I meet students of all years," Makoto reminded herself to use her student council president voice.

"Shujin is lucky to have such an attentive student council."

"We try." Short with no openings. The station was not far. When they were just close enough that an average person might consider them 'at the station,' Makoto turned to Akechi. "Thank you for escorting me. I'll be going now."

"It's been a pleasant conversation," Akechi said brightly. "Be careful on your way home. Don't do anything to make Sae-san worry."

Makoto and Ren arrived at the Shinjuku red light district. Earlier in the day, Eiko had approached Makoto for monetary help. Apparently her boyfriend, the host Tsukasa, had broken an expensive bottle of sake and Eiko was helping him pay for its replacement. It sounded like a scam. Makoto had tried to make Eiko see this. It had not gone well.

Don't accuse him of that stuff! You don't have any proof!

Makoto was determined to find proof before Eiko's next shift ended. When Makoto refused to help pay for the bottle, Eiko had suggested she could earn the money by going out on dates with customers after work. Makoto felt her heart drop just thinking about it. She had to do something and
Please, Makoto. You're the only person I can trust.

Further investigating Tsukasa was not what Eiko had in mind when she begged for help. However, Makoto knew she was only deserving of Eiko's trust because she was willing to do what was right, even if it wouldn't win her any friends. She just hoped it wouldn't lose her any friends.

Tsukasa is all I have! You can't take him from me!

"I'm sorry Eiko," Makoto whispered. She couldn't just let Eiko become one of those love-struck girls who falls in with a criminal. Makoto looked up, surveying the streets. As before, there were promoters out in force. Recalling the last time she had conducted an investigation in the area, Makoto was glad Ren could come with her.

The leader of the Phantom Thieves had time. The team was couldn't advance in Futaba's palace just yet. Though everyone wanted to help Futaba as fast as possible, they needed to change Futaba's cognition of the impenetrability of her bedroom without being caught by Sakura-san. They were waiting for such an opportunity. Ren had been keeping close watch on his guardian's schedule. Though they had already crafted the calling card, they were holding off on approaching Futaba until Ren gave the go ahead.

Makoto thought about the voices and artwork in Futaba's palace, tormenting Futaba about her mother's death. It was heartbreaking. Futaba had faced it all alone. If not for Sis, Makoto would have been all alone when Dad died. If not for Sis, would she have turned out like Futaba? Was Sis tormented by similar distortions? Makoto put the thought out of her head. She had to focus on Eiko.

"I believe some of the promoters around here may know something," Makoto told Ren. "As my father always said, finding evidence takes serious legwork."

Ren nodded. "We should be able to get through them pretty quickly if it's just the promoters. We don't need to split up."

"Right."

Ren took the lead on talking to the promoters. Most of them didn't know Tsukasa and were only interested in selling them something. However, eventually they found someone. He told them that Tsukasa was well known for this scam and indeed eventually the victims were forced to sell their bodies. It had happened to one of the man's friends. When Makoto and Ren explained to the man why they were asking, he agreed to talk to Eiko if it came to it.

Makoto and Ren proceeded to the entrance of The After School Salon and waited for Eiko. Makoto hoped her friend would listen to them, but if not, she had one more idea. She pulled out her phone and brought up her message log with Tsukasa. She rolled her eyes seeing he had sent her eight texts since she last looked. Most of his messages were mindless, poorly-spelled small talk, but buried among them were questions about her sister, her living situation, her relationship status. Tsukasa was craftier than he let on.

"I'll b 5 mins late 2day, bb." Makoto typed the message into her phone, adding several emojis. She hit send.

A few minutes later Eiko emerged from The After School Salon. She moved sluggishly. Her eyes looked dull. When she finally recognized Makoto, her eyes narrowed. "What do you want?"

"Eiko..." Makoto thought it best to be firm and to the point. "Your "boyfriend" is infamous around
here for tricking girls into debt, then forcing them to sell themselves. Moreover, he's probably doing it in conjunction with a criminal gang. You need to get out of there."

"...You seriously came all the way here to tell me that?" There was a rumbling undercurrent to Eiko's voice. She took a sharp breath. When next she spoke, it wasn't nearly as restrained. "Ugh, get out of here, Makoto! I've had enough of your lying bullshit!"

Makoto recoiled. She had expected Eiko wouldn't be happy, but she hadn't been emotionally prepared for the consequences. Instinctively she began to detail all of her evidence, hoping her friend would see there was no room for mistakes. Eiko only became more angry.

They were interrupted by Tsukasa's arrival. Eiko ran over to him, her previously raised voice taking on a cuter tone. "They were saying some bad stuff about you, honey. Like how you get girls into debt and then force 'em to sell themselves... They're lying to me, right?"

"Huh? You believe that crap?" Tsukasa's response was quick and smooth. "Listen to me: Nothing like that's happenin' here. I'd never lie to you, princess."

"It's always "princess" with you." Makoto's eyes narrowed at the man. She didn't mean to summon her Sis-voice, knowing it would drive Eiko away and yet, she just couldn't help it. "Why don't you ever call her by her real name, Tsukasa? Or are there too many princesses in your life to remember?"

"Tsukasa...?" Eiko questioned her boyfriend. Her eyes were wide and her mouth slack. Maybe Makoto's arguments were getting through after all.

Tsukasa chuckled, unfazed. "What're you freakin' out for? You just texted me, remember? I could never forget you, Makoto."

There it was. The mistake Makoto was hoping for. Both Eiko and Ren looked suitably shocked.

"I knew it," Makoto's voice dripped with acid. "I'm the one who texted you. Admit it. Every girl you get money from is your princess, right? You can't even remember names anymore."

Finally, she had absolute proof.

However, it wasn't enough.

"B-But... you tricked him!" Eiko protested. "What would you know about love, huh? Tsukasa's all I have! Just leave me alone, bitch!"

A loud clap echoed over the din of the Shinjuku red light district. Makoto's open hand was raised in the air. A red mark was appearing on Eiko's cheek. The words rushed out of Makoto's mouth. "Wake up! You already know the truth, you just don't want to believe it! Stop lying to yourself!"

Eiko stared at Makoto for a moment and then turned to Tsukasa. She looked into his eyes and then turned away from all three of them and started sobbing. "Tsukasa is the only one who cares about me... Nobody else asks me about my day, or how work is going... Nobody else treats me like I'm special..."

Taking a deep breath, Eiko turned back to Makoto. "A perfect girl who lives up to everyone's expectations could never know how I feel! Stop trying to feed me your honor student bullshit!"

"This has nothing to do with being an honor student," Makoto said before turning to Tsukasa. "As for you... apologize to Eiko! And stay away from her from now on!"
"You're really startin' to annoy me with this shit, you bitch!" Tsukasa dropped his slick tone. "Don't think I'll go easy on you 'cause you're a chick. I'm gonna teach you a lesson you won't forget."

Tsukasa stalked towards Makoto, but she didn't back down. She stepped in, taking a strong stance. "I dare you!"

Before Makoto could do anything, Ren stepped between her and Tsukasa. As he spoke, he walked forward and Tsukasa matched his movements in reverse, looking nervous. "Get. away. from. her."

Makoto found herself ...annoyed. Why did Tsukasa take Ren seriously and not her? She walked right back up to Tsukasa. "I come from a long line of police officers. If you really want to start something, be my guest."

"Wh-What?" Tsukasa looked at her, his eyes wide open for the first time. He snarled. "Dammit... I'll remember this!"

Makoto watched as Tsukasa ran off. "He wasn't so tough after all."

"This sucks!" Eiko ran back into the After School Salon. Makoto reached an arm in her direction, but knew it would take time... at best. Before she could dwell too much on it, she started hearing murmurs about what happened. She was suddenly very aware of the gazes of the people around them.

"We should get out of here," Ren motioned to Makoto. She nodded and looked back towards Eiko's workplace one last time before following Ren. The last thing they needed, Ren especially, was the kind of attention that drew law enforcement. They needed to lay low. Makoto followed Ren into the recessed entrance of a nearby bar called Crossroads.

Ren knocked on the door. It followed some rhythm Makoto didn't recognize. A large woman in a kimono answered the door. She regarded them curiously, raising an eyebrow at Ren, but let them in without saying anything. As they sat at the bar, the woman put out two glasses of water. Ren must have noticed Makoto's questioning expression. "I work here part time."

Makoto let out a small laugh. This had all started when they went looking for Shujin students working in the red light district. She hadn't realized she was searching with one the whole time. She sighed and looked down. She had lost her composure and acted irrationally, violently. "I can't believe I actually hit one of my friends..."

"It looked like it hurt," Ren's expression was serious, irritated even.

"What's wrong?"

Ren opened his mouth, sitting up straighter, but stopped before he said anything. He tried again twice more, seeming to get a little more frustrated each time.

Makoto thought it better to move on. "I hope we've driven Tsukasa off once and for all. I shouldn't have slapped Eiko, but if he comes around again I'll-"

"This. This is what's wrong," Ren stated. He began speaking urgently. "You're so reckless. You charge into things and think knowing some martial arts is going to protect you. This isn't the Metaverse. You-"

"You think I can't hold my own against that-"

"What if he had a knife?"
"I know how to disarm-"

"What if he had back up?"

"I'm not afraid of a bunch of hosts-"

"You should be. He's associated with a criminal gang. How well did that work out for you with Kaneshiro?"

Makoto paused, remembering being pinned to the dirty carpet at Kaneshiro's club, the gang taunting her. Her skin crawled. It was a mistake—but that didn't mean she was helpless. It didn't mean she was reckless. She thought things through more than anyone she knew. How could he think her reckless? She felt her face becoming flush. Just what did Ren think of her? "I-I'm perfectly capable-"

"I'm not doubting-"

"My father-"

"Your father was a trained professional and even so he was killed." Ren brought his hand over his mouth as soon as he said it. Makoto was instantly on her feet, her eyes wide, her hands balled into fists at her sides, shaking. Ren's gaze shifted from Makoto to some spot on the floor.

"I-I have to go." Makoto spun on her heels and took a step. Her stride increased for the next step and the next step. She was all but running by the time she reached the exit.

"Makoto! Wait!"

Makoto stopped halfway through the door. She turned her head back towards Ren, though her eyes didn't meet his. She spoke quietly. "Some of the people from before are still out there. We better leave separately."

As fast as she could walk, Makoto made her way to the station, blowing past several men in suits who tried to get her attention. She hadn't told Ren about her father's death for him to... for him to...

Makoto paced along the train platform. When the train arrived, she got in and continued to pace. Was she really being reckless? Dad had made sure both she and Sis were prepared to defend themselves and others. Dad had led by example. If she couldn't do the same, then what use was she?

Before Makoto knew it, she was standing in the police station, the one in Sis's palace. She looked down at the desk in front of her... her father's desk. She sat down in his chair and pulled her knees close to her chest.

Chapter End Notes

I suppose "Mouse-koto" doesn't work in Japanese... maybe "Seito Kaichuu"?

Next update may take a while due to Liquid Mercury drop rates. Why can't the eternal lock pick carry in NG?

Originally posted 2017/9/9

Updated 2018/6/24 with feedback from NieRville on AO3.
It's not that I'm avoiding anything, it's that Futaba needs us right now.

When Ren sent the message that Sakura-san's schedule aligned with the Phantom Thieves' mission to change Futaba's cognition, Makoto immediately rushed off to Yongen-jaya. During the hours she had spent in Sis's version of police headquarters, she had prepared and practiced the points she had wanted to make the previous day in Shinjuku. She hoped to get to their hideout, also known as the half of the Café Leblanc attic in which Ren lived, before the others so she could square things away. However, Yusuke was already there when she arrived. He had been spending a lot of time at Leblanc during summer break and was presently snacking away. Makoto wondered if he wasn't being fed outside of the time he spent with Ren. It was a mix of disappointment and relief seeing him there. Makoto told herself it was for the best. Futaba needed their undivided attention. She would eventually bring things up with Ren. Eventually.

"Hi." Makoto tried to smile naturally. She stood at the top of the stairs, lingering her gaze on Yusuke at first. When she finally brought herself to look at Ren, she hoped he didn't notice her delay.

"Hi," Ren replied. He parted his lips as if to say something else, but simply closed them and returned the smile.

Yusuke managed a barely audible grunt. Makoto wasn't sure if it was an acknowledgement of her or if he was just mumbling to himself about his latest painting.

Makoto took her usual spot on the couch, next to Ren's chair at the table which he had dragged in from the other side of the attic. She took a few study materials out of her bag and began to work. It was normal for her to do a few practice problems while waiting for the others. Though she had become decidedly less grade-focused, there was another mock exam scheduled right after summer break and she didn't want Sis to worry. Sis had enough troubles.

Spending idle time at the hideout with the others had been a quiet highlight of summer break. Makoto was happy to be comfortable enough with everyone to just enjoy the company, even if no one said anything. Silences didn't feel awkward—at least they didn't until now. Makoto wasn't making much progress in her work. Instead she found herself mulling over what Ren had said the day before and glancing up at him often, expecting, perhaps hoping, that he would be looking back. He seemed especially transfixed on his phone.

While Makoto very much was not completing two problems, Ann and Ryuji clambered up the stairs. The group left for Sakura-san's house shortly thereafter. Like before, Makoto took the lead in coaxing Futaba through her bedroom, and then closet, door, though it was Ann and Ryuji who eventually convinced her to show herself. It must have taken Futaba a lot of courage to do so. She was shaking when she presented herself and her heart to the group. She looked very confused when everyone simply walked out of her room to head towards the palace.

The infiltration route the Phantom Thieves had secured was straight and direct with no shadows. The downside was that it was a pyramid's worth of stairs. Makoto struggled to keep up with Ren and Ryuji who were racing on ahead. The last thing she wanted was to seem less capable. She wished she had spent less time in Sis's palace the previous day. She hadn't done anything strenuous in there, but with the time distortion of the Metaverse, the day had been long.
Futaba's treasure was not behind the giant version of Futaba's bedroom door. Makoto had only Kaneshiro's palace to compare to, but the others seemed surprised to find more labyrinth. Like everything in Futaba's palace, it wouldn't be straightforward.

The Phantom Thieves didn't miss another beat though. Ren raced towards the first shadow he saw, a blur of black coattails. When he reached within a hair's breadth of it, he back-flipped onto its shoulders and tore off its mask. As the shadow transformed, Ren gave a short laugh and grinned. He taunted the enemy, letting it jab at him several times, each failing to connect. Finally he knocked the shadow down with a well-timed spell.

*Show off. Now who's being reckless?*

Light on his feet, Ren moved onto the next shadow, tearing off its mask to expose its true nature. Like many shadows, this one brought forth brethren. Ren stepped back, knowing without looking that Ryuji was right behind him. As the first of the shadows rushed Ren, its face connected with the powerful swing of Ryuji's bat. Makoto followed Ryuji, delivering a sequence of kicks to the shadow's midsection and finishing with a hard right punch. Her hand met with resistance at first but broke through, the shadow evaporating around her arm.

"Nice one Queen!" Ann shouted and she caught up to the rest of them, setting the remaining shadows ablaze.

Morgana waited a beat and then brought forth a powerful wind spell, trading the flames for gusts strong enough to cut. With the shadows cool enough to touch, the team attacked in unison, making short work of the enemies.

By this point, the group knew the shadows that plagued Futaba's palace well. Even with the elevated activity stemming from having delivered Futaba her calling card, the team was able to proceed quickly through the yet unexplored area.

Eventually, the Phantom Thieves made it to the summit of the pyramid. Unlike the rest of the palace, it was poorly lit, the only source of light being a dim green glow that emanated from the patterns on the floor. The final room was empty save for a large stone coffin. As Ryuji approached the coffin in search of Futaba's treasure, a loud thud shook the building and a screaming sound could be heard. Suddenly sunlight streamed into the pyramid. Makoto looked up, her eyes having trouble adjusting to the brightness.

A giant bloodshot eye appeared. It blocked the light enough to reveal a giant hole in the pyramid ceiling. A booming voice sounded. "Fuuutaaaaabaaa!

"Is that a shadow?" Makoto tried to make sense of what she was seeing. "No... then..."

"It's not Futaba!" Yusuke called.

Large stones began crashing down. Whatever it was was destroying the palace with them inside of it. Soon little remained of ceiling and a huge sphinx hovered before the Phantom Thieves. It began flapping its wings, generating powerful gusts. Makoto held her arm up to protect her eyes. She fought against the wind, trying to maintain her position.

"If it's not a shadow, then what is it!?" Ryuji shouted.

"It's a cognition!" Morgana answered.

"How can that be!?!" Makoto asked, still shielding her face. She could feel herself slipping across the floor, pushed back by the beating of the sphinx's wings.
"Hey, look out!"

As Ryuji yelled to her, Makoto lifted her head. A large boulder consumed her field of view. Before she could entirely register what she was seeing, she felt a sharp impact and was on the ground. It didn't hurt as much as it should have. In fact, it felt warm, comfortable. Makoto opened her eyes. Ren was next to her, his dominant arm wrapped around her. She looked up at him as he helped her to her feet, his hand on her back, guiding and lifting her. She expected to see some sort of cocky smirk—he had just pulled off a daring move after all—but instead he seemed to be searching her, his lips parted as if to question her. She had seen it before, back in Shinjuku, the first time they went-

"Here it comes!" Ryuji yelled. Makoto refocused her attention, turning towards the sphinx. It wasn't the time to be picking apart Ren's expressions.

The monster mostly circled in the air around them, out of their reach. Gunshots barely scratches it. Even the teams' personae could barely do it damage. If they ran back inside, it would probably bring the whole structure down on them. Whenever they ventured towards the ledge, it came crashing down with great force. Makoto and Morgana had just healed Ryuji from the last time the monster swiped at him when it came down again, beating its wings and sending them sliding across the ground.

Ryuji lifted himself to his feet. "The hell!? We ain't doin' shit to it!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Makoto spotted someone moving. It was Futaba. "Huh? Futaba!? You came into your cognitive world!?"

Futaba mumbled affirmatively. She took a few cautious steps from the stairwell onto the remnants of the room, but suddenly collapsed onto her knees, holding her head in one hand. "No... It's my fault... It's my fault that Mom..."

Makoto rushed over to Futaba, kneeling beside her.

The beast screeched. "That's right! You killed me!"

"Wait, is that her mother!?!" Yusuke asked.

"Futaba's desires and guilt must've distorted her cognition of her," Morgana explained.

The monster continued to lay into Futaba, wishing she hadn't been born, wishing she could have spent more time on her work, threatening to kill her. Futaba buried her head deeper into both hands and started shaking and grunting. Makoto wondered if it was an effect of entering her own cognition. She stroked the girl's back, trying to comfort her to no avail. Makoto began putting the pieces together. "So because she thinks she killed her mother... and because she thinks she deserves to die... Futaba gave birth to a Palace where her mother wants her dead...?"

Ann keyed off of Makoto's reasoning. "Futaba-chan, look! There's no way that monster is your mother! It's just an illusion you created!"

Futaba continued to struggle. "Mom... I... I..."

At the corner of the room, Futaba's shadow appeared. "Futaba Sakura! Remember!"

The shadow approached Futaba and simply stared down at her as she continued to grip her head, obviously in pain. The Phantom Thieves maintained their positions surrounding her, protecting her, from the sphinx. The monstrous cognition seemed content to yell at Futaba for the time being and not attack them.
Futaba's convulsions came to a sudden stop, as if she had gotten distracted from them. She brought herself to her feet. For a moment she seemed fine. Then she grasped her head again. Finally she looked up at the sphinx. "There's no way you're my mom!"

Futaba's shadow rose into the sky and vanished into a bright light, emerging as a flying saucer. Arms and light emerged from its base, grabbing Futaba and lifting her inside. Makoto looked on, not sure what to make of it.

"I'm okay!" Futaba's voice carried, projected by the UFO. "Please, help me!"

What could only be described as a ghost of Futaba's mother appeared after the group had vanquished the sphinx. She was translucent but human and appeared much kinder than the monster Futaba's cognition had conjured. If Futaba's mother could appear in Futaba's palace, then could Dad appear in-

"Thank you for choosing to remember the real me," Futaba's mother spoke.

"I'm sorry for being so selfish. Mom..." Futaba clasped her arms behind her back. She began walking towards it.

"Don't come over here," the spirit warned. "This isn't where you're supposed to be, is it?"

"But I finally got to see you again..." Futaba lowered her head. She brought her hands before her chest and looked up. "Um, I... I love you, Mom..."

"I love you too, Futaba." The spirit smiled and faded into orbs of light. The young girl watched as they rose and vanished.

Futaba turned back toward the group. Makoto was expecting her to burst into tears, but instead her tone was nonchalant. "Oh, right, Medjed."

"Where are you going?" Makoto asked as Futaba started walking away.

"Home. I know how to use the Nav now."

Makoto hoped Futaba's exit from the palace went better than the rest of theirs. This one was even worse than Kaneshiro's as it not only involved some desperation driving but also a mad dash before it. After what seemed to be the longest drive of her life, Makoto was surprised to find herself and the others alive and well outside of Café Leblanc.

Their commotion seemed to have alerted Sakura-san. He appeared at the door. "...Hm? What're you guys doing out here?"

After watching her teammates struggle to find works, Makoto spoke up. "Ah, yes! We came all this way, so how about we enjoy some coffee?"

"Oh! That's a great idea!" Ann played along.

"I'm not thirsty though." Yusuke did not play along. Makoto walked over and gave him a quick jab in the side. The noise he made sounded painful. She hadn't realized he would be so fragile.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Makoto continued with her charade, drawing attention from Yusuke. "I have some business to take care of, so you guys go on ahead."
"Oh-Okay, gotcha!" Ann responded in kind. She lead Yusuke and Ryuji in for coffee.

Makoto turned to Ren. "Let's go see Futaba."

Ren nodded and the two took off for the Sakura residence. As they walked in silence, Makoto considered bringing up the day before. She wondered if that would be self-absorbed of her. Futaba was their priority. She shouldn't be bringing up other things. It could wait.

After a couple of minutes, Ren started talking. "Hey, about what I said ye-

"Futaba!" Morgana's exclaimed, jumping out of Ren's bag. Makoto looked up to see the small girl slumped outside her the gate of her house. Morgana was already by her side. Makoto rushed over. A few quick strides later and she was kneeling next to Futaba.

"Futaba...? Can you hear me? Please, say something!" Makoto pleaded. She couldn't contain her panic or her guilt. She thought all they were doing was stealing distorted desires. Kaneshiro had been well enough to turn himself in after they had stolen his treasure. What had they done to Futaba? "Please... Could this be our fault? Is it because we defeated her monstrous mother...?"

"No, that was nothing more than a cognitive being created in her mind," Morgana said with conviction. "Destroying it wouldn't cause memory loss or put a physical burden on her..."

"What should we do?" Makoto turned to Ren.

"Hey, don't you know a doctor?" Morgana offered.

"You do?" Makoto asked, a relieved smile forming. "Can you contact them?"

Ren nodded, taking out his cell phone and typing out a message.

"We should get her inside," said Morgana.

Makoto looked over at the door. "Is it open?"

"Leave it to me!" Morgana quickly ran under the gates, en route to find a way in.

After Ren finished typing his message, Makoto spotted him as he lifted Futaba into his arms. The small girl couldn't have weighed more than 40kg wet. By the time they reached the door to Sakurasan's house, Morgana had it unlocked. Makoto held the doors as Ren carried Futaba back to her room, laying her in her bed. The three Phantom Thieves looked down at Futaba, no one saying anything.

It wasn't long before a steady knock came from the door. Ren gave Makoto a brief look at left the room to answer it. She continued watching Futaba, at the very least, confirming she was still breathing. Makoto didn't know what else she should be looking for. Futaba had asked for their help, but had never really understood what exactly the Phantom Thieves would do. Was it fair to accept her request?

If the Phantom Thieves stole Sis's treasure, would this be the result?

"So you just found her like that?" Footsteps and a woman's voice heralded Ren's return.

Makoto wasn't sure who she had been expecting, but it wasn't the doctor that stood before her. The first thing Makoto noticed was that the woman had dyed her hair bright blue. She wore a stylish dress to match. Her strappy platform shoes looked difficult to walk in. If not for the white lab coat,
the doctor would have been right at home at some sort of alternative rock concert.

The woman must have noticed Makoto's stare. She raised an eyebrow and smirked at Makoto before kneeling by Futaba's bedside and beginning her examination. Makoto looked on, analyzing every expression the doctor made, wondering what it meant for Futaba.

"A house call is going to cost you, you know," the doctor said, turning to Ren as she rose to her feet.

Makoto jumped. She wondered if they had collected enough yen from the palace to cover it. "How much will it be?"

"That was a joke," the woman grinned, her pupils shifting to Makoto.

"Oh." Makoto felt more embarrassed than she thought she should. It occurred to her she might have interrupted something between the doctor and Ren. They seemed to know each other fairly well. It wasn't the time to worry about such things though. "So, um... how is her condition?"

"Her pulse, breathing, temperature, and blood pressure are all normal. No ocular abnormalities either. I'm not sure why, but it seems this girl is in some kind of light stupor. Furthermore, she lacks muscle for her age. I doubt she has much stamina either."

"I see," Makoto acknowledged. She lowered her voice, speaking to the others. "The rebound from her awakening was too strong..."

"There may have been too many abnormal circumstances..." Morgana added.

"We simply cannot keep quiet about this. We should let Sakura-san know," Makoto stated. There was risk involved with telling Sakura-san, but he was Futaba's guardian and had a right to know.

Ren agreed and left to fetch Sakura-san. Morgana followed him, concerned about framing things to keep the Phantom Thieves secret. Makoto stayed with the doctor to watch over Futaba.

"Um, I'm sorry for not introducing myself sooner. I'm Niijima Makoto," Makoto gave a brief bow. "Thank you for making the time to come out here."

"Takemi Tae. I run the clinic a few blocks from here," the doctor smiled with the same amused expression she had used before. "That guinea pig has been very helpful to my research, so it's no trouble."

"...guinea pig?"

"Ah, it's nothing..." Takemi-san seemed to laugh to herself. "So. Are you his girlfriend?"

"Who? Ren? N-no! We're just friends," Makoto raised her hands before her chest, fanning out her fingers. "We go to the same school."

"I see..." Takemi-san laughed again and mumbled softly. "What am I doing?"

It wasn't long before Ren returned with not only Sakura-san, but the rest of the Phantom Thieves as well. Takemi-san relayed her professional opinion to Sakura-san, making some suggestions about diet and exercise and what to do should Futaba not revive within the next few days. She then packed up her equipment and left, giving Ren a hard slap on the back on her way out.

Everyone was quiet. Makoto wasn't sure what to say, but she felt Sakura-san deserved an explanation. "Um... About Futaba..."
"Hm?" Sakura-san looked back. His face was more relaxed than Makoto expected. "Why do you guys look so down?"

"Futaba-chan's condition..." Ann started.

"What, this? It happens every so often," Sakura-san smiled at them. Makoto wasn't sure if he meant it or was just trying to make them feel better. "I think it happens 'cause she doesn't get enough exercise. I'll make sure she gets plenty of rest."

Despite Sakura-san's reassurances, he still closed Leblanc to watch over Futaba. The Phantom Thieves left, heading for the train station.

"Man, I'm beat!" said Ryuji as they made their way through the backstreets.

"Tell me about it," Ann said as she stretched her arms. "I'm going right home to sleep."

"Hey," Ren's voice was just above a whisper. He was right next to Makoto. She hadn't notice him approach. "We need to talk."

"Ah..." Makoto halted in her tracks. The others continued down the street.

"Look, about yesterday-"

"What about yesterday?" Morgana popped out of Ren's bag. Ren gave Morgana a hard look. The cat jerked and then jumped down onto the street. "Eheh... I think I'll scout around for a bit."

After Morgana disappeared into the maze of buildings, Ren turned to face Makoto. As she went over all the arguments she wanted to make, she felt a strong urge to bolt welling up from deep in her stomach. Ren must have noticed because the moment she took a step backwards, he grabbed her wrist. He spoke softly but his grip was tight. "Just wait. I'm sorry I brought your father's death into things yesterday. It was inconsiderate. However, my point still stands."

Makoto pulled her arm away. Ren let it go easily.

"I..." Everything Makoto had planned on saying seemed weak on further consideration. Makoto was vaguely aware that she was too tired to be having this conversation and yet for some reason she wanted to prolong it. "What do you expect me to do? I can't just cower when-"

"I'm not asking you to," Ren brought his hands up to Makoto's upper arms but stopped before touching her. He returned his arms to his sides and sighed. "I'm asking you to avoid situations you might have to fight your way out of. I know you can come up with better."

Makoto tried to suppress her smile. She looked away and sucked in her bottom lip. When Ren said it like that, it was hard to say no.

Ren brought a hand to Makoto's chin and led her gaze back to him. She put up a little resistance, not wanting him to see her expression, but also curious as to his own. Ren was smiling gently. "You really can't take a compliment."

Makoto lifted her chin from Ren's hand and shook her head. No, she couldn't.

"So... can you please not take any unnecessary risks?"

"I'll try."
Makoto walked through the hallways of Sis's cognitive police headquarters, looking into every room along the way, hoping that each one would house Sis's cognition of Dad. None of them did.

A few days later, Makoto met up with Ren in Jinbocho. She needed help searching through the stacks of books and magazines for any information about cognitive psience. It seemed as though Futaba's mother had been researching the topic, but her work had mysteriously vanished. Makoto wanted to be prepared when Futaba awoke.

As the pair traveled from store to store, looking for bound academic journals that might contain articles on cognitive psience, Makoto couldn't help but stop to admire some of the old tomes one could only find in a place like Jinbocho. She smiled. The disorganized stacks meant to maximize books per space somehow evoked wonder. There was something comforting about the smell of musty old books.

Atop a high shelf, Makoto spotted an older edition of *The Woman in White*. She had heard the translation wasn't as accurate as the more modern editions, but was a work of art in its own use of language. She had wanted to read it for a long time. On her toes, she reached for the book, her fingertips falling short. She stretched more, trying to at least nudge the book or the ones around it.

Another hand grabbed the book by its spine. Makoto had been so focused on it, she hadn't noticed Ren come up behind her. She followed his hand down to his wrist and then down his arm that was stretched up right next to her face. She followed his arm to his shoulder and finally back up to his face. Turned around she realized just how close he was standing. By this point, he was holding the book up, his lips forming a triumphant smile.

"I saw it first. It's mine," Makoto blurted out. She wasn't exactly sure why.

Ren's eyebrows rose. He raised his arm and the book with it higher. He brought his other hand to his chin as if he was contemplating something. "Yes but... you see, I am a thief."

"Give it," Makoto tried to speak sternly but the corners of her mouth were curling upward. She reached ineffectually for the book as Ren held it above her.

"You know," Ren pondered idly as Makoto failed to reach the book. He glanced up at the book. "I don't think there's anything about cognitive psience in here."

"Come on, give it back," Makoto braced one hand on Ren's chest for balance and leverage. Her reaching was augmented with short hops.

Makoto must have leaned a little too hard on Ren as she felt him starting to stagger backward. Instinctively, she grabbed his shirt, pulling him forward. It was an over-correction. Makoto fell back into the bookshelf, taking Ren with her. The impact caused the books to dislodge themselves. Ren managed to get his forearm across the shelf above Makoto’s head, preventing those books from falling. His other arm was wrapped around her waist. Makoto cringed as some of the other books hit him. Pressed into Ren and underneath the canopy made by his body, Makoto went unscathed.

"A-are you okay?" Makoto asked when it seemed like things had settled.

"Yeah," Ren nodded, still hunched over her.

"Sorry about that," Makoto cast her eyes down. "I-"

"Hey! What are you doing!?" the shopkeeper, an elderly gentleman, had appeared in the aisle.
Ren immediately took a large step back from Makoto. She turned to the shopkeeper. "We're terribly sorry sir! We'll clean it up right away."

Makoto and Ren started to re-shelve the fallen books. Fortunately, they all seemed in good condition. The shopkeeper watched them from the end of the aisle, appearing quite steamed. Ren looked at the shopkeeper, then turned away, looking over to Makoto instead. He smiled. Then the hint of a laugh escaped his closed lips. Makoto couldn't help but do the same in response. Soon, she was giggling softly. She tried to hide it from the shopkeeper.

The pair managed to clean up the mess between fits of smirks and chuckles every time they turned to each other. Despite his very apparent dim view of them, the shopkeeper sold Makoto *The Woman in White*. Book in hand, Makoto followed Ren out of the store.

"I do hope we find something..." Makoto looked around, eyes adjusting to the daylight. "If only we could understand it more in depth. Maybe we could solve the mystery of the Metaverse. It would make traversing it easier for us too."

"...Oh." A traditionally beautiful girl with long dark hair stopped, looking at Ren. "Um, hello. Um... Goodbye." The girl turned to leave. Makoto felt sympathetic. Her greeting probably would have been equally awkward. She called after the girl. "Excuse me, please wait! Was there something you wanted to say to him?"

"Oh no, nothing in particular..." The girl spun to face them once more. "I was just surprised to see him here. I didn't mean to intrude between you two."

"No need to be so considerate," Makoto said, her people-pleasing tendencies kicking in. "He's just carrying my books for me."

Ren stood up straighter. His lips parted and his brow furrowed. Makoto was curious, but thought it best to continue with the social norms. "...Is she a friend of yours?"

"She's my shogi master," Ren said evenly.

"The professional shogi player you had mentioned before?" As Ren nodded, Makoto looked at the girl in awe. Ren had been taking lessons from her to help the Phantom Thieves. Makoto also wanted to learn. "Pardon me for asking... Could you teach me some strategies?"

"Oh? Sure, if you'd like," the girl replied.

Makoto listened as the girl, who introduced herself as Togo Hifumi, explained a variety of tactics. She asked several questions of the shogi pro as well. Some of the strategies couldn't be directly applied, especially the ones that involved sacrificing pieces, but Makoto felt being introduced to them was at least expanding her lines of thought.

After some time, Makoto felt a light bop on her head. Both she and Hifumi looked up to see Ren. He was holding one end of *The Woman in White*, the other rested on Makoto's head. Makoto rooted around in her bag with her hand. No book. When had he slipped it from her bag?

"Seems you two are getting along," Ren smiled. His other hand was holding a bag from a store they hadn't visited. Had he wandered off while they were talking?

"Oh, I'm sorry," Makoto looked down for a moment before turning to Ren. "What she was saying was so interesting, I lost track of time. ...Did you find anything?"
Ren shook his head.

"Ah..." Makoto knew it was a long shot, but hoped they would have found something.

"I better be going," Hifumi glanced at the two of them. "My mother will scold me if I stay out too long."

"Oh. Thank you for all your help," said Makoto, raising her hand in a modest wave.

"It was my pleasure." Hifumi bowed slightly and walked back towards the station.

"We should get back too," said Makoto as she watched Hifumi's back disappear into the crowd. She clasped her hands together. "Um... we still have some time though, could you teach me to make lock picks?"

Ren looked down at Makoto. "Why?"

"I want to do more to help," Makoto relayed her rehearsed answer.

"You don't have to-"

"I want to."

Ren ran his free hand through his hair. "I'm working on something that will make lock picks unnecessary, but there are other tools we could craft."

"Oh um... o-okay," Makoto's mind raced before landing on a solution. "I haven't really made things before though. Wouldn't starting with lock picks be easiest? They look fairly simple."

"Let's see what Morgana thinks," Ren answered. He raised his hand, palm up, extending his fingers. "I need to get back. Maybe after Futaba gets better."

"Oh," Makoto realized she was being selfish. Ren needed to return so that Sakura-san could have a break and check on Futaba. "How is Sakura-san?"

"He maintains we shouldn't worry, that Futaba is just like this sometimes, but he seems just a little more tired each day," Ren pursed his lips.

Makoto looked down, frowning. "What can we do?"

"That's the problem. We can't."

"And what about you?" Makoto tilted her head, examining Ren's face. "How are you doing? I mean, he's your guardian-"

"He's not taking it out on me."

"No, that's not what I meant," Makoto shook her head. "I mean, he clearly means a lot to you."

Ren paused, looking at Makoto. His lips parted. He spoke. "He does."

"I can't say it doesn't bother me," Ren continued, starting to walk towards the station. Makoto followed him. "But for now, all I can do is support him and wait... Futaba is strong. She'll be okay."

Makoto entered Café Leblanc, wondering how Futaba was doing. To everyone's relief, the girl had
woken up and quashed "Medjed," catapulting the Phantom Thieves to widespread popularity which Makoto still wasn't prepared for.

Futaba could be an incredible asset to the Phantom Thieves. She was truly smart. Makoto had always been praised for her intelligence and good grades, but all she was really doing was following instructions. Futaba had skills Makoto couldn't imagine and she had done it all without the rails of school. However, the small girl was also a shut-in for the most part. While she was now accepting other people enough to seek treatment, the team hoped to help things along in their own way. Makoto had put together a plan of social activities, all leading up to a beach trip at the end of summer break that Ann and Ryuji would not stop texting about.

The first two days of the plan had gone increasingly well. In fact, it seemed that Futaba was coming out of her shell with just about everyone but Makoto. The girl showed no interest in anything Makoto said. She told herself it was probably for the best. She didn't know how to be a normal high school girl either.

"Ah, Niijima-san," Sakura-san greeted Makoto as she entered. He nodded towards the staircase.
"Ren's upstairs."

"How did things go today?"

"Not bad. Not bad at all," Sakura-san smiled kindly. He shouted towards the stairs. "Ren! I'm sending Niijima-san up!"

Ren was placing an extra stool at his work desk when Makoto ascended the stairs. He must have dug it out of the half of the attic that was still Leblanc storage.

"Pardon my intrusion," Makoto said as she walked into Ren's room.

"Have a seat," Ren offered.

Makoto sat down next to Ren. The desk didn't afford much room. After a few exchanges of polite apologies for accidentally brushing up against one another, the two settled into the reality that they would be working shoulder to shoulder. Makoto tried not to think about it too hard.

"So, you want to know how to make infiltration tools?" Morgana strutted across the desk, looking quite full of himself.

"Yes, please teach me," Makoto bowed her head. "I don't have any experience, so please be patient with me."

Makoto paid close attention as Morgana explained the basics and Ren demonstrated. They made it seem so easy. Makoto did not find it so easy. She fumbled threading the silk yarn through the tin clasps. Ren had to repeat the demonstration twice more. However, after breaking several clasps, she was finally successful in making a lock pick.

"I did it!" Makoto perked up. "Um... sorry for being slow."

"Don't be silly," said Morgana. "You got it faster than Becky."

"Becky?" Makoto asked.

Ren shot Morgana a stern look and then responded. "She's a contractor we sometimes hire. Don't worry, she's trustworthy."
"Oh," said Makoto. She thought better not to press. She had another mission after all. "Well, let me try making another to make sure I've learned it."

"Makoto is so diligent," said Morgana. "After that, we'll try vanish balls."

By the end of the night, Makoto had made two lock picks and one suspect vanish ball... more of a vanish lump really. Still, sitting side by side with Ren, making infiltration tools, was surprisingly relaxing.

"Well, it's late," said Makoto. She began to pack up her things. "Once again, thank you taking the time to teach me."

"Come again and I'll teach you how to make stealthanol!" Morgana's enthusiasm had not waned. "I'd like that." Makoto got up and began walking towards the stairs.

"Let me see you to the station," Ren rose.

Makoto's first impulse was to tell Ren that it was unnecessary and that she knew the way, but she refrained. "Thank you."

Sakura-san had already closed up shop and left by the time the pair descended the stairs. Morgana stayed behind in Ren's room. Outside, it was still quite warm despite being so late. After locking up Leblanc from the outside, Ren spoke. "There's something you should know."

"Eh? What's wrong?" Makoto looked up at Ren.

"That investigator, the one that was threatening Sojiro last month... I think it was your sister."

"What? How...?"

"Something Sojiro said after Futaba woke up... that the woman was involved in the Phantom Thieves case."

Makoto eyes fell but she really wasn't seeing anything. She searched her memory of all of her interactions with Sis, hoping to find something to refute Ren's theory, but only coming up with evidence, albeit circumstantial, to support it. She felt like she was being punched in the stomach. "I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault," Ren stopped. Makoto stopped a few steps later, when she realized he was no longer following. She turned back to him. He looked her directly in the eyes and repeated himself. "It's not your fault. ...I just thought you should know before the others found out."

"Ah... yes, thank you." Makoto's mind continued to play out possibilities. With Medjed taken care of and their popularity on the rise, the Phantom Thieves were looking for a new target. This could be the reason they directed their attention Sis's way. Makoto didn't want that happening, even if that meant...

"Are you going to be okay?" Ren took a few steps closer.

"I'm fine, really." said Makoto, summoning her professional voice. She resumed walking towards the station. "It was just a bit of a surprise. I appreciate being told."

"Futaba's doing much better now," said Ren as he caught up to Makoto and began walking alongside her. "It's not much of a threat anymore."
"That's a relief," Makoto said in her natural voice. It was good things weren't heading towards a confrontation, but it was still a symptom of a palace-sized problem.

The pair entered Yongen-jaya station. Makoto came to a stop, just outside the ticket-taking machines. "Thank you for indulging my request. I learned a lot."

"It was fun," Ren said with an easy-going smile.

"I thought so too," Makoto returned the smile. She met his eyes, looking for just a little too long. The sound of a training approaching the station interrupted her. "Well... I better go."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight." Makoto made her way through the gates. The train had its doors open already by the time she got to them. She boarded it. As the doors closed, she looked back through their windows. Ren was standing where she left him, watching her. She offered a small wave as the train pulled away.

Chapter End Notes

Have you noticed Ren sleeps with his phone in his pocket? That seems uncomfortable and bad for the phone. Is this something people do in real life?
I know better than to compare myself to others.

Going out shopping with Ann put Makoto in the strange position of being both extremely visible and invisible at the same time. Makoto took notice of all the heads turning to look at Ann. The pair were stopped by several young men who tried ineffectually to hit on Ann. For the most part, they didn't even seem to notice Makoto was there. Occasionally, a pair of men would approach, one of them chatting up Makoto, but she could see his eyes drift over to Ann. At the same time, Makoto caught whispers, complete strangers talking about how fake Ann's body and make up were and how stuck up she clearly was. Though Makoto knew on an intellectual level how tough this must be on Ann, she shouldn't help but daydream about what it might be like to be so... desirable. Her mind wandered back to parting ways with Ren the night before.

Makoto shook the thought out of her head. She should be focusing on how to support Ann. She would do what she could to mitigate the burden and chase off bad actors, like she should have in the past with Kamoshida.

Ann led Makoto into a shop, claiming it was the best one for swimsuits this season. All the shops looked the same to Makoto, but she trusted Ann's judgement. It helped that Ann's agency had a discount at this shop.

"Okay, I'll pick out something for Futaba," said Ann. She raised her hand towards the racks. "You go ahead and pick out one for yourself."

"I already have a swimsuit."

Ann crossed her arms and pursed her lips. "Is it your school swimsuit?"

Makoto squinted slightly. "Yes... how did you know?"

"I've heard about the hand cream you use," said Ann. Makoto recalled Eiko's diatribe on lotions and frowned. Eiko wasn't returning her texts. Makoto tried not to dwell. Ann kept speaking. "You can't wear that unflattering sack to the beach. Go buy a real swimsuit."

"It's perfectly serviceable," said Makoto. She sighed. "My sister supports me. I have to be conservative with her money. She won't let me take a part time job."

"Ren gave me plenty of money," said Ann. "So don't worry about that."

"I can't use team money on a swimsuit."

"Why not? We're doing it for Futaba."

"We decided to help Futaba. I don't need that kind of help. This is money we need to be saving for equipment and medicine."

"Oh come on, for all we know Ren is spending it on fortune tellers and escorts."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Look," Ann's arms were still crossed. She leaned back slightly, tapping her foot. "Some men have school swimsuit fetishes. Do you want them ogling you?"
"Seriously?!

"Seriously."

"I-I'll have a look around."

"Good," Ann smiled broadly and bounced off to the racks.

Makoto looked around the store, holding the shoulder strap of her bag with one hand. The overwhelming majority of styles were two-piece. Makoto was unused to showing so much skin. As she approached the racks, she discovered swimsuits were more expensive than anticipated. Sis would much rather have her buy one than attract creeps with swimsuit fetishes, she was sure, but Makoto still didn't feel all that comfortable spending so much on something she wouldn't wear that often.

After passing up several designs, Makoto came across a white two-piece with a full coverage halter top and a skirted bottom. It seemed more covering than the rest and it was on the more affordable end. She took one in her size off the rack.

Just as Makoto was turning towards the changing rooms, Ann appeared before her, holding out a tiny yellow and orange ruffled bikini. In her other hand were several more hangers with swimsuits. "Tada! This will be perfect for Futaba. The ruffles will enhance her shape."

"Are you sure it will fit?" asked Makoto. She brought her free hand to her chin. "I know she struggles with crowds, but maybe we should have brought her."

"I'm positive. Her shadow didn't leave much to the imagination. By the way, I also found something for you!" Ann thrust out a skimpy bandeau ring bikini in garnet red. "This color will look great with your skin tone."

"Oh," said Makoto. She held up the white two-piece. "I already found something."

"Ah, well that's..." Ann's smile reminded Makoto of the time she got turned into a rat. "Well why don't you go try them both on and see."

Ann herded Makoto towards the fitting rooms. Makoto stepped inside and secured the curtain. She took a closer look at the bikini Ann had picked. Though it had decidedly less fabric than the white one, it somehow cost three times as much. She tried on the white one. Granted it was a two-piece, Makoto felt it wasn't too far outside of her comfort zone. She then tried on the red one. To Makoto's surprise, she really liked the way she looked in it. She found herself admiring elements of her figure and making poses in the mirror. She wondered if Ren would-"Makoto! I think this is the one! What do you think?!" Ann called over.

Makoto peeked her head out from behind the curtain. Ann was wearing a string bikini with a tropical floral print. She was stunning. Makoto thought she had a good idea of Ann's figure from her skin-tight Metaverse outfit, but she was wrong. Ann was well beyond her estimates. She had unbelievable proportions along with flawless skin and muscle tone. The bikini let it all shine through. Makoto stood slack-jawed for a moment. "...it's perfect."

"Isn't it?!" Ann grinned broadly. "The pattern is perfect for the school trip!"

The school trip. Ann and that bikini would be spending five days in Hawaii with Ren and the other second years. "You should definitely get it."

Makoto stepped back from the curtain and looked at herself in the mirror again. She frowned and
zeroed in on a few areas of her figure that could use some improvement. It didn't look as good on her as she thought initially. She took off the swimsuit, changing back into her normal clothes. She gave it one last look on the hanger before putting the white suit in front of it and exiting the fitting room.

"So, what did you think of the red one?" Ann was waiting.

"It wasn't my style."

"There's a lot of people here... Are you OK, Futaba?" Makoto asked, sitting on a folding lounge chair under a large beach umbrella with Morgana. The boys had managed to secure a spot at the beach for all of them. Ren, Yusuke, and Futaba had claimed their own folding chairs. Ann and Ryuji sat on the beach blanket. Ryuji kept glancing over at Ann and then quickly looking away. Makoto found herself sympathizing. She had been around her classmates in swimsuits before, but none of her classmates worked out as much as Ryuji and Ren. When Makoto started overthinking things, which was frequently, she had trouble knowing where to look.

"I'm fine," Futaba replied, a slight waver to her voice. "You guys are here."

"It's almost lunchtime," said Ann. The team had gotten a late start and it had taken some time to coax Futaba out of the changing area.

"I'll go get some stuff for us," Ryuji said, springing up and heading for the food vendors. Ren followed shortly thereafter. Makoto and the others took in the scenery while they waited.

Ren and Ryuji returned with arms full of greasy beach food and soon the team was happily munching away. Makoto picked at the items, trying to find something remotely healthy. Futaba's instant noodles were starting to look good.

"What's up Makoto?" Ryuji took note. "You ain't eatin' much."

"Oh, um..."

"Not feelin' well or something?" Ryuji continued. He seemed concerned. Ren and Yusuke turned towards her.

"You just don't get it, do you Ryuji? When a girl's in a swimsuit, she wants to look as slim as possible," Morgana went right out and said it. By now everyone was looking at her. Ren was right there. Makoto didn't meet anyone's eyes. Instead she silently wished she could quietly become part of the furniture.

"Still, you're worrying too much," Morgana pressed on. "Did you make sure to eat breakfast?"

Makoto crossed her arms around her waist, hoping to hide it from everyone's vision. She prayed Morgana didn't also ask about dinner the night before.

"Mona lacks tact," Futaba observed through a sigh.

"So, whadda we do now?" Surprisingly, Ryuji seemed to take the cue to change the subject. He smiled broadly. "Should we play some beach volleyball?"

"Oh, sorry. Us girls already made plans to ride a banana boat," said Ann.

"We could only rent a three-person one. Sorry," Makoto added. She was truly sorry but at the same time she was happy to be escaping the boys for a while and taking her embarrassment with her.
"Wait... Then what about us?" Ryuji frowned.

"Keep an eye on our stuff," Ann made an exaggerated smile.

The three girls took off for the docks. Futaba sang a meaningless chant of 'Banana! Banana!' along the way.

Even with their reservation, the line for the banana boats was long. Ann and Makoto stood in it, taking turns chasing after Futaba when she ran too far away. The novelty of everything at the beach seemed to distract the younger girl from the fact that there were people everywhere.

Fewer men seemed to bother Ann at the beach than when they went out shopping. Makoto wondered if it was because they were more intimidating in a group of three than a group of two.

Both Ann and Futaba seemed to enjoy the banana boat ride. Ann sat in front, most of the time her arms raised towards the sky, enjoying every wave they went over. Futaba was sandwiched between them in the middle. Makoto grabbed onto her waist tight from behind, worrying that one of smaller girl's many distractions might cause her to be swept off.

After the ride, Futaba was still singing her makeshift banana song to herself. As the girls neared the team's spot, she ran forward. "Mooooonaaa~"

Before Makoto and Ann could follow Futaba, they were approached by two men, one with bleached hair, the other without. They had nicely done haircuts, even tans, and wore expensive-looking watches with their swim trunks. The latter spoke, looking at Ann. "Hey there. Haven't seen you around before. You're the prettiest person on this beach. We'd love to show you and your friend around."

"We're fine, thank you," said Ann.

"You don't know what you're missing," the man replied. "We know some exclusive spots."

"We're doing fine on our own, thank you," Ann said with a bit more edge in her voice.

"It will be our treat," the second man said. There was a smoothness to his voice that was unsettling. "We won't be stingy."

"We're here with friends," Makoto said, her tone blunt, hoping it would make them move on.

"C'mon, don't lie to us, baby," the other man said. "How about you come for a nice cruise on our boat?"

"There's going to be a party too. Tons of celebrities and industry people will be coming along," added the first man.

"Are you even listening to us!?" Ann didn't hesitate to grit her teeth and speak forcefully.

Makoto supposed Ann really didn't need her help. While she was pondering what to do next, Ren, Ryuji, and Yusuke arrived. Yusuke was holding a live lobster in each hand. Before Makoto could ask about them, Ryuji spoke. "Sorry 'bout the wait."

"Huh, so you were serious about being here with friends," said the first man.

"That's what we've been saying from the start!" Ann rolled her eyes and made an exaggerated sigh.

"Don't you find it boring spending your time with kids like them?"
"It's far more interesting than anything involving you two," Makoto's retort came out a bit stronger than she had intended. Her eyes briefly shifted to Ren. Old habits were hard to break.

"What was that?" The second man took a step towards Makoto.

"Hey, let's just let the children have fun with fellow children," said the first man, de-escalating the situation. "We'll be going now!"

"What creeps!" Ann exclaimed.

Makoto turned to Ryuji and Ren. "Thanks for coming in like that. Those guys just wouldn't stop pester ing us."

"You did well to hold them off," Ren said. Makoto hoped his smile meant approval, not that she needed his approval or anything.

"To be honest, I was nearly at my wits end."

"Ooooh! Are those lobsters? One in each hand!?" Futaba came running up, Morgana following her. Everyone stared at her and Yusuke for a moment.

Ryuji turned away from the weirdos. "So, ready for volleyball?"

Someone had set up a net not far from the Phantom Thieves' umbrella which was probably the reason Ryuji had the idea in the first place. The group quickly agreed it would be Ann and Ryuji versus Makoto and Ren. They would play to fifteen points.

As they played, Makoto looked over to Futaba from time to time. Their newest member laid on her stomach on the beach blanket, idly kicking her legs and watching the lobsters move about. When one of the lobsters tried to move out of her reach, she would pick it up, turn it around, and let it go again. Yusuke was sitting in one of the folding chairs, sketching.

During the match, Makoto mostly set up Ren's spikes. She was about as fast as he was when it came to retrieving the ball and she could hit hard, but she couldn't jump nearly as impressively as he could. Makoto watched in wonder at one particular leap at the net. Ren seemed to fly through the air with an inhuman grace.

The ball hit the sand ten centimeters to Ryuji's left. He was still staring up at the place Ren had been. Perhaps he had been impressed with that one as well.

"Ryuji! What are you doing?!" Ann all but tackled him and was soon mock punching him in the side. Ryuji and Ann had both been going to the net and they made a strong team. That last point had tied the match.

The two teams remained neck and neck as the score inched up. Neither team wanted to lose. It felt like everyone was moving faster, jumping higher, hitting harder. Both Ren and Ryuji began grinning, showing off—more to each other than anyone else. Though Makoto was the shortest of the four, even she went for some close-fisted strikes at the net.

"Whoa, look at them!"

"Are they some kind of professional group?"

"That kid just did a flip!"
A crowd had gathered. Makoto frowned. This kind of attention was not good. "Um... maybe we should stop."

"Ryuji! Smooth out the sides a little more. Makoto! Make your walls one centimeter higher," Yusuke ordered as he looked through a frame made by his fingers.

Futaba had suggested making a sand castle for the lobsters. The idea had quickly morphed into a sand Palace. Finally, Yusuke's interest had been piqued and had drawn outlines in the sand for everyone to help him make a sand... art? Makoto wasn't sure. From her position, she could only really see her own small part. The beach had cleared out enough to allow them a rather large patch of sand for the design.

"I don't know what it is either," said Ren, as if reading her mind. He placed a pail of seawater next to her before sitting down to help with the wall-building. "But I'm glad Yusuke is re-gaining his voice as an artist."

"If someone had told me six months ago I would be making serious art, I wouldn't have believed them," Makoto smiled as she mixed some seawater with sand. "Even though I'm just manual labor, this is pretty exciting."

Ren just smiled in response as he shaped the sand wall before him to match the rest of the sculpture thus far.

"It's too bad the ocean will take it so soon," Makoto looked over at the incoming tide.

"Maybe its ephemerality is part of Yusuke's message." 

"Hmm..." Makoto considered the medium and all the facets that came with the sculpture. There was a lot to think about. She hoped she could talk about it with Ren when it was done. She valued having someone her own age she could have intellectual discussions with. "Maybe he's saying something about our trip... do you think we'll finish in time?"

Ren looked up over the sculpture towards the ocean and then around the sculpture to the others. Makoto followed his gaze. Ann and Ryuji were generally working diligently, but had a tendency to pause and play-fight. Futaba had been building with great fervor at first, but soon left to build some sort of sand-pen for the lobsters, mumbling something about an 'Inari dictator.' Though Yusuke was most skilled with paint, his sculpting abilities were far beyond anyone else's and thus he was the most efficient. "We should make it."

"Oh right, you're from a coastal town, right? I guess you have a feel for this."

"A bit. When was the last time you came here?"

"I haven't been since-" Makoto caught herself. "It's been a few years."

Ren opened his mouth as if to start speaking, but refrained and simply nodded.

"Tokyo must be very different," Makoto said as she shaped another section of wall. "How is it, living in the city I mean?"

"Honestly, it was a bit claustrophobic at first. There's so much concrete, so many walls. It felt like a prison," Ren looked up at Makoto. She regretted having asked. They stared at each other for a moment until Ren closed his eyes and dipped his head, a small smiling crossing his face. "I don't know how much of that was just everything that happened. I'm starting to appreciate how much
By the time the sun was setting, almost all of the other beachgoers had left, allowing the Phantom Thieves some quiet time. Makoto sat on the beach having a quiet conversation with Morgana, Ren standing a few steps away. Ann traced circles in the sand. Yusuke was framing the sunset with his fingers while Ryuji sat cross-legged, simply enjoying the view. Futaba was a bit further away, standing by the water, looking across the ocean as the waves came in over her ankles.

"We should probably start heading home," Makoto said as she stood up. It would be good to leave before dark.

"Hey, Futaba!" Ryuji called over as he got up as well. "We're goin' home. Stop standin' around and help us."

Instead of responding, Futaba crouched by the water. Ren walked over to her, Makoto and the others following.

"You know..." Futaba started, her voice soft, quiet. "All this time, I thought that it was my fault that my mom died..."

The youngest of them began to open up. She spoke of her grief and admiration of her mother, how she took the blame for her mother's death, and how she shut herself off from the world.

"I loved my mom," said Futaba, now standing. "I wanted to become like her. How she'd work late into the night. How she'd wake up early and make me a boxed lunch every day. How she'd do her best to further her research. How she'd scold me for peeking at her notes."

Makoto perked up. "It was cognitive psience, wasn't it?"

Rather than respond directly, Futaba turned to Makoto and began to quote her mother's research. "The cognitive world can become distorted through desires. If it becomes distorted, a person begins exhibiting problematic behavior in reality. That cognitive world disappears when you remove its core, and further problematic actions stop."

"That's the Metaverse!" Morgana piped up. "She knew about that?"

"It made no sense back then, but now I understand, after it actually happened to me." said Futaba as she adjusted her glasses. "All I thought about was my mom. I was trapped in a cognitive labyrinth. I couldn't get out of it. There was nothing I could do by myself."

"That's why you asked us to steal your heart?" Ryuji's eyes were wide.

Makoto bit her lip, thinking about Sis' distortion. Was there really no other option than stealing her treasure?

Futaba continued, her voice seemed to gain strength the more she spoke. She engaged more with everyone. She spoke of the sequence of events that led to her approaching the team—her own need to change her heart, but also her annoyance with the fake Medjed and the threats made against Sakura-san.

"Sojiro was being blamed with lies, like abusing me," she looked down, gripping one of her arms. "He was being threatened to spill everything about my mom..."

Makoto frowned. The one threatening Sakura-san was most likely Sis.
"It made me sad, and it hurt," said Futaba. Her voice was once again soft, but she raised her head, her eyes clear. She laced her fingers behind her back. "I thought, I have to save Sojiro. I gotta do something. I didn't think you guys would be taking such risks for me. I didn't think you'd worry about me so much. I'm sorry that I acted like I doubted you guys."

"Do you believe in us now?" Ann asked, smiling.

"Yeah. I can tell. You aren't bad guys," said Futaba, that same nonchalant tone she used in her Palace having returned. What she said next came even more strongly. "That's why I have a request. Let me join your team."

"There's nothin' to join. You're already one of us," said Ryuji. He grinned.

"I'll be honest," Futaba said, raising a single finger. "Changing people's hearts isn't my goal. I want to learn what happened to my mom... The reason why she was killed."

"Killed?" asked Yusuke.

Futaba shared the results of her own investigation. Her mother had written that death in the cognitive world had severe consequences in the real one, consequences that were in line with the circumstances surrounding her demise. That tidbit came from Futaba's memory. Despite her technical prowess, her digital investigation came up blank.

"My mom's research was nowhere to be found. She was killed by someone, and her research was treated like it never existed. I bet it's them... Those adults in the black suits who read the fake suicide note," Futaba spoke with urgency, resentment. She stomped her foot into the sand. "I'll never forgive them."

Having packed up, rinsed off, and changed into normal clothes, the Phantom Thieves boarded their train back to Tokyo. Leaving so late, the train was mostly empty. Ann, Ryuji, Futaba, and Morgana were animatedly talking about all they had done. They had already gotten out snacks and playing cards for the return trip and had turned on all of their seat lights. Morgana sat on Futaba's lap. Ren rounded out the group of four seats. He rested his head on one of his hands, watching Futaba, probably thinking the same thing Makoto was. Thank goodness she was opening up.

Makoto sat across the aisle. She picked a book, another reference on mythology, out of her bag and began reading. Yusuke sat diagonally across from her, next to the window, his long legs stretched full. Makoto wondered if he was still pouting that she made him give away the lobsters.

Half a chapter into her book, Makoto realized the sounds of chatter had died down. She looked up to see everyone had fallen asleep. Ryuji's mouth was wide open, drool falling from the side. His arms were slung over the back of both his and Ann's seats. Ann had fallen asleep leaning into him, a hand planted on his chest. Makoto pitied whoever awoke second. Ren managed to look a little more dignified, leaning against the window with his eyes shut. Futaba's head was tilted to one side and her arm was hanging over the armrest into the aisle. Morgana was curled into a comfy-looking ball of cat atop her seat back. Makoto smiled at the scene before her. The only person missing was Yusuke. He must have gotten up at some point.

Makoto put her book down and retrieved an unused beach towel from one of their bags. She walked over to Futaba and gently moved the small girl's arm into a position that was less likely to cause soreness when she woke up. Makoto then covered her in the towel. It was no blanket, but it would have to do. Next, she began to clean up. Ryuji still had some open snacks on his lap. The inflated beach ball Futaba had carried was rolling around at their feet. The playing cards were precariously
perched between Ren and Futaba. Having gathered the items, Makoto turned off the group's seat lights, leaving the train car lit only by Yusuke's and her own.

Most of the team's bags were stored on racks above the seats. Makoto put the items down and reached for Ryuji's bag, which was across the aisle. It wasn't that high, but it was a bit unwieldy.

"Let me get that," Ren lifted the bag from Makoto's hands and put it on her seat.

Makoto was momentarily startled. Ren had once again snuck up on her. She turned around. Ren's eyes were only half open. He looked as groggy as his hushed voice sounded. She looked up at him. "Thanks. I hope I didn't wake you. You should get some rest."

"You should get some rest. You've been fretting over Futaba all day. You've barely eaten anything," Ren said quietly, probably not wishing to disturb his sleeping teammates. He paused. "Come to Leblanc with me. I'll make curry."

Makoto turned back to Ryuji's bag to hide her blush. She picked up the bag of chips and tightly rolled the top part before putting it away. Internally, she cursed Ryuji and Morgana for embarrassing her at lunch. She wished Ren would just forget. "I have to get home to make dinner for Sis."

Picking up the beach ball and deflating it, Makoto next searched for Futaba's bag. It was a smaller bag they had stashed further down the aisle.

"This isn't your responsibility," said Ren. "The others will clean up after themselves when we get there."

"We can get home faster if I do it now," Makoto said as she walked over to Futaba's bag and reached up for it. "I might as well make myself useful."

Ren seized Makoto's raised wrist, his other arm slipping around her waist. Makoto could feel his chest against her back. He spoke. "Stop."

Instinctively, Makoto adjusted her feet and used her free hand to grasp Ren's shirt near his shoulder. She was milliseconds away from throwing him over her when she stopped short. It wasn't some stranger attacking her from behind; it was Ren. As she stopped her counter move, she felt Ren's body relaxing as well. He exhaled. "R-Ren?"

Makoto waited for a response. Every sound seemed magnified—the machinery of the train, the shaking of the cars, the bells of a crossing signal they rushed past fading into the distance.

"This usefulness calculus you do, stop it."

"What?"

"You're still going on about whether you can be of use, whether what you do is useful... you do it all the time." Speaking just above a whisper, Ren's voice sounded deeper than usual. "You have value beyond your utility to others."

Makoto closed her eyes. She wanted to wrap that statement around herself and leave it at that. However, she couldn't help but poke and prod at it. To some extent, didn't all humans fulfill some use to those around them? Not being particularly charismatic, didn't she have to work harder? Wasn't she making the world a better place by doing so? If she had just been more useful, maybe Sis wouldn't...

"Contributing to the greater good is important to me," Makoto argued.
"And that's one of the things I like about you, but you're taking it to an extreme. Is it really about that anymore? It's like you need a reason to be here. You don't. You're part of this team," Ren's grip on Makoto tightened.

"I..." Makoto tried to unpack all that Ren had said, his points swirling around, making it hard to focus on any one of them.

"Sometimes you can contribute more to the greater good by being honest about what you want." Ren paused, then let Makoto go. She turned to see him take a few steps back. He was looking downward, his eyes still only half open. He seemed to be considering something. Finally, he looked up at Makoto. He took a step forward, placing his hands on her upper arms. "Makoto..."

"Can you return to the position you were in before?" Makoto and Ren both turned their heads to find Yusuke standing in the aisle, holding a pen and a small sketchbook.

Ren released Makoto and marched over to Yusuke, yanking the book from his hands. "Don't sketch people without their permission."

After having flipped through the sketchbook—from what Makoto could see, it was mostly filled with gestural drawings—Ren shoved the book back into Yusuke's hands.

"So..." Yusuke re-opened his book and readied his pen. "The pose?"

Ren looked at Yusuke for a moment and then took the seat next to the one Makoto had been using. He folded his arms, stretched out his legs, tilted his head down and closed his eyes.

Yusuke shrugged and sat in the seat diagonally across from Ren. He seemed to be flipping through his sketchbook, making small notes with his pen.

Makoto finished putting away the deflated beach ball before returning to her own seat across from Yusuke. She looked over at Ren. She wasn't sure if he was already asleep. His eyes appeared restful, not closed too tight. She admired his dark lashes resting upon his cheeks. Tentatively, she reached a hand out, wanting to brush aside a stray lock and run her fingers through his unruly hair. She stopped short, returning instead to her mythology book. She didn't read a single word.

Futaba was as strong an addition to the team as Oracle in the Metaverse as she was as the team's hacker in the real world. With summer coming to a close, the Phantom Thieves took the time to handle requests in Mementos. Their newfound public support allowed them to go even deeper than before. As much as Makoto didn't like Mementos, it was a good thing. The truth about Morgana slept somewhere at the bottom.

Ren didn't say or indicate anything regarding the beach trip. Makoto had gone over his words from the train several times since then as well as the thought he didn't get to finish. Perhaps it was unimportant. Perhaps he had been too sleepy to remember. She considered asking him about it but thought it best not to cause friction.

Makoto turned her thoughts to the mental shutdown incidents. Most of them were directed at people who were unlikely to have Palaces. That meant whoever their adversary was, he probably had access to Mementos. However, with the constantly shifting maze, the chances they would run into him were remote. It would have to be at a Palace.

Among the many requests the team was taking care of was a particularly special one. Mishima Yuuki, the maintainer of the Phan-Site and one of Kamoshida's victims. Ren had told them he had been acting up as of late, suggesting targets with little reason other than his personal preferences.
Instead of fighting Mishima's shadow, the team ended up talking to him and then leaving him be.

"Will that be enough?" Makoto asked Morgana when the team reached the safety of a platform.

"Joker has faith in him. If it's not enough, we'll be back here."

"Do you think someone with a palace could be changed like that? Without stealing their treasure?"

"Hmmm..." Morgana brought a hand to his chin. "It's not impossible, but it's extremely unlikely. If the distortion has progressed that much, they probably won't listen to reason."

"Mmm..." Makoto looked over the train tracks. There had to be another way.

The Phantom Thieves met at their old hideout in Shibuya Station after their first day back at school. It had been a busy day for Makoto as many of the clubs had put off their requests until school started again. It seemed like everyone wanted something. Yusuke and Futaba were waiting for them when they arrived. Apparently Yusuke had picked up Futaba, an act she didn't seem to appreciate.

"Whadda we do now?" Ryuji interrupted Yusuke and Futaba's bickering. It didn't appear to be on purpose however. Instead, he sounded quite excited about the team's next move. "Should we go after another big target?"

"What about the villain in the cognitive world?" Yusuke asked, crossing his arms.

"It's almost certain that this person exists. What's more, they're inducing mental shutdowns..." said Makoto, her eyes narrowing. Whoever was causing the shutdowns should be their biggest concern. They were the only ones who could do anything about it. "We certainly can't turn a blind eye."

"Yeah, but we don't got any clues," Ryuji sighed, scratching his head. He perked right up as he changed the subject back to the team's success. "But! You know, how we're totes popular right now? Everyone at school's talkin' about us, and not a day goes by when you don't hear about it on TV either! We totally made it big, don'tcha think?"

"True," Ann smiled, swaying about in a sort of restrained dance. "The rankings on the Phantom Aficionado Website have been crazy too."

"People are voting around the clock," Futaba said, showing everyone the site's rankings on her laptop.

"If we go after these guys, I'm sure we'll score some big cash at least once!" Ryuji was so excited, Makoto was worried someone would overhear.

"Are you fine with that, Futaba?" Makoto let her frustration come through her voice. Her eyes narrowed even further. She had been uncomfortable with the focus on fame and personal gain from the beginning, but had told herself it was fine if it was for Morgana. Now though, the focus had become even more sharp. It was as if the team was forgetting about the people they affected. People like Sis... "Even though it's related to what happened to your mother?"

"It's not OK!" Futaba exclaimed. She shook her head. "I'm definitely gonna punch that guy...!"

"The culprit forcing mental shutdowns... If you think about it, there's no bigger target than that," Ryuji was unfazed. "If we can change his heart and get a confession outta him, we'll be on top of the world for real. Should we reveal our identities then? I bet chicks are gonna be all over us!"
Ann and Yusuke chimed in, following Ryuji's line of reasoning and latching onto the idea of being famous.

"We're not doing this to stand out you know!" Makoto leaned in, her arm swinging quickly to emphasize her point. She knew she was getting upset. She stopped, reminding herself to remain calm. She had to keep everyone on her side.

Thankfully, Morgana backed her up in his own way. "Being "unknown" is the allure of being a Phantom Thief."

It didn't temper Ryuji's enthusiasm.

"Are there really no clues regarding those mental shutdown cases?" Morgana pondered, ignoring Ryuji. "If I remember right, wasn't the older Niijima sister investigating it?"

"Yes..." Makoto grimaced. "I can pry and ask about it. But she'll just tell me to mind my own business and get angry with me."

"If you can't ask her, wanna just extract that data?" Futaba perked up. "Does she have a personal laptop or something?"

"Don't tell me..."

"I can lend you a storage device with my special gimmick on it. Just stick this baby in, and it'll clone the internal hard drive!" Futaba said proudly.

"Sis does bring her laptop home sometimes. But I'm not comfortable going that far."

"Are you scared of seeing how your sister truly feels?" asked Yusuke.

"No!" Makoto exclaimed, a little too loudly and a little too quickly. "...Of course not."

There was a reasonable chance that hard drive contained information that would point the team to Sis's palace. At the same time, Makoto knew they had to do something about the criminal behind the mental shutdowns. She sighed. There was no good choice. "...Fine, I'll do it."

Makoto looked at her phone. It was just past eight. Futaba's USB drive was burning a hole in her bag. For once, she was relieved that Sis wasn't coming home. Makoto was just about to begin putting away the leftovers when she heard the sound of the door opening.

"Sis, you're home..." Sis just stared at her. Makoto realized it wasn't exactly a welcome greeting. She made more of an effort to be inviting. "I made dinner! Sit down! It'll be out right away."

Makoto brought out a plate and set it on the table in front of her sister, right next to her laptop. Makoto's eyes lingered on the machine a little too long. Though she had already eaten, she sat down across the table.

Sis had a stern expression. Her chopsticks were striking pieces of food with ruthless efficiency. She had been in a mood since the news about Medjed had come out. Sis was under a lot of pressure from her superiors.

It wasn't only the laptop Makoto had to worry about though. Along with Futaba's USB drive, some lock picks were waiting to be used. Though she had taken to entering Sis's palace from the police station rather than the courthouse, she couldn't be sure when it was safe. She had a chance to do a
little digging. "Now that school's back in session, is Akechi-kun still joining you?"

Sis's hand stopped, cube of tofu frozen in midair. She looked at Makoto. "You've been asking about
Akechi-kun often."

"I'm just trying to make small talk. It's interesting that you're mentoring someone famous."

Makoto knew the face Sis was making. It was the "I don't believe you but I'm not going to argue"
face. Sis sighed. "You know Makoto, a lot of girls your age are enamored with Akechi-kun..."

"Right..." Makoto nodded. She was not in the mood to hear her sister explain how popular Akechi
was. Instead, she went over possible ways to get Sis to tell her when Akechi was going to be around
the police station. Surely he had some school activities or make ups or something that would give
Makoto a free afternoon. Though, she supposed she would have heard about those already if they
existed.

"...public image doesn't mean he'll..."

Even though Akechi was on the less popular side since the Medjed news broke, TV appearances
could possibly take him away from Sis as well. Maybe Makoto could ask when the next TV program
he would be on was with the excuse that she wanted to be prepared if he mentioned her school. Did
that seem too contrived?

"...dating in high school is really pointless anyway..."

With a couple of possibilities in mind, Makoto awaited a break in the conversation in which to use
them. As Sis continued with her speech, Makoto thought again back to the train ride home from the
beach. She had been thinking about it a lot lately-

"Makoto! Are you paying attention?"

"Y-yes!" Makoto internally cursed herself for getting caught.

Sis sighed. "Well, I guess you're at that age."

It wasn't long before Sis finished her dinner. She shoved the plate to the side and immediately went
to work on her laptop. Makoto took the dish and washed it. She looked back at her sister from the
kitchen. Turning back, she took out the USB drive and stared at it. She took out her phone and
started typing. "Sis isn't home yet. She may not come back at all tonight."

One positive aspect of the team's interest in their own popularity was that Makoto learned when
Akechi would be on television next. She walked along the desks in Sis's cognitive police station,
lock picks in hand.

The team had pressed Makoto on Sis's data. She had retrieved it, despite her misgivings, and handed
off to Futaba earlier in the day. So far, Futaba hadn't indicated anything negative about Sis. In fact,
the team was impressed with Sis's detective work—piecing together all the connections between the
victims of the mental shutdowns and the beneficiaries of those shutdown events. Futaba said it would
take her the next week to sort through all the data however.

Things had been busy in school as well. A tabloid had run a story, indicating the school
administration had known about Kamoshida and done nothing. The principal had called Makoto in
over it, expecting her to fix it. She supposed things were back to normal on that front and thankfully
she had learned to politely blow him off.
As part of the fallout from the tabloid article, the police would be investigating the school. Makoto was concerned the police presence would threaten the team. It was good that all of them would be in Hawaii. Because the teachers were busy with police interviews, Makoto had been chosen as a last minute replacement chaperone for the trip. She wasn't thrilled to be missing class, but this would keep her close to Ren and the others.

Makoto approached Dad's desk. She verified the nameplate was unchanged. Then she went to work on the drawer lock. While she manipulated the first pick, she told herself not to get her hopes up. Futaba's distortion centered around a strong wish for her mother and thus Futaba's mother appeared. Makoto wasn't sure of the core of Sis's distortion, but was certain Sis understood Dad was gone forever. The existence of Dad's desk was probably an indication of the strength of memories. It didn't mean Dad existed in her cognitive world.

Though not as practiced as Ren, Makoto was able to pick the lock. She opened the filing drawer first. It was full of case files. Makoto flipped through each one. Some she remembered from dinner table conversations. They were largely incomplete. Some of the version dates on the forms reflected the present rather than when the case happened. Likely Sis didn't know the full details and was filling them in with her present knowledge of police practices.

The last file was thick and fully detailed. It concerned the group that most likely had Dad killed. These were Sis's files, not Dad's. Makoto put it aside for the time being.

Inside the smaller drawer were office supplies and several framed photographs of Sis, Makoto, and even their mother. Makoto didn't remember their mother, but she always looked beautiful and kind in photographs. In fact, everyone looked happy in the photos. Makoto sat back in Dad's chair. She wasn't sure exactly what she had been expecting. She had never questioned Dad's love, but it was touching to be reminded of it. She was glad she had gone through the effort. At the same time, she wondered what it meant that all this happiness was locked away in a drawer in Dad's desk.

Makoto was about to look into Sis's file, when she realized there was something missing. Dad's journal should have been in his desk as well. Of course! Dad was probably out on investigation. But where? Makoto tempered her excitement when realization hit her. She ran her hand on top of Sis's file. She needed to be prepared.

It was late when Makoto left Sis's cognitive world. Normally she wouldn't have gone after spending the afternoon with the Phantom Thieves, especially right before a test, but she had to take the Akechi-free opportunities when she got them. Shibuya Station was still busy when Makoto arrived. It was Saturday night after all.

As Makoto headed to her transfer, she noticed Ren out of the corner of her eye. She was about to say hello when she noticed a woman she didn't know hanging on his arm. She ducked behind a pillar. After a few deep breaths, she peered around it, her fingertips curling around the corner, leaning the bare minimum she needed to see. The two appeared to have stopped at a map of the train lines.

"I've been looking forward to our date in Odaiba all week," the woman gushed. "What about you sweetie?"

"Of course," said Ren.

"I have the best boyfriend!"

Ren has a girlfriend.
Makoto didn't know until that instant it was possible to feel so embarrassed when one was alone.

The woman had a funky and laid-back but mature vibe. She didn't look like she was in high school. She had a short layered haircut and wore orange sunglasses on her head though it was nighttime. Her lips were painted a bright red. She dressed casually and spoke loudly. In fact, she seemed a little... drunk?

So this was the kind of girl Ren liked. She wasn't like Makoto at all.

"Niijima-san what are you doing?" Makoto spun to see Akechi standing before her. She covered her mouth to suppress a yelp.

"N-nothing."

Akechi stepped forward and leaned around the pillar for a moment before returning to face Makoto. "It looks like you're spying on Amamiya-kun."

"No, I-I-"

"Oh, then you won't mind if I go tell him you're over here."

Akechi started walking towards Ren. Makoto grabbed his sleeve. Her head was down, hair hanging over the sides of her cheeks. "Don't!"

"Hmm? Curious."

"W-we shouldn't interrupt them."

"Very well. It will be our secret," Akechi sighed and then leaned in toward her. "Consider it a favor."

Makoto held one of her arms and didn't say anything.

"Hmm. What's this expression?" Akechi mused. He lifted her chin and looked at her. Makoto remained quiet. She didn't want to attract attention. "Ah I know. I've seen this on fans before. Had you perhaps been thinking you were somehow special?"

Makoto felt her expression falter. Akechi let go of her.

"To think, Sae-san's sister is such an ordinary girl," Akechi's voice dripped with disappointment. He turned, speaking as he walked off, the back of a black gloved hand waving lazily. "Well, I have to be going. See you at tomorrow's exam. Do feel better."
I'm happy just being Ren's friend.

Makoto went over the city map, her shopping list, and the US currency for the cab fare a third time. She glanced at her phone again. It was still several hours before the shops opened and she could pick the supplies the teachers needed for their morning meeting. Makoto thought jet-lag meant she would want to sleep in, not be awake at odd hours of the morning. She was certainly too tired to get any studying done and she didn't even feel like reading. Instead, she found her thoughts wandering to a familiar place. Would she find Dad at the intersection he had been assassinated? If so, what did that mean about Sis's cognition of Dad? Would it be worse to see a distorted, or perhaps worse, version of Dad or to give up the possibility of seeing him at all? Just the thought of going to that area made Makoto uncomfortable. What if she saw something there she didn't want to see?

Very few people knew about Makoto's father. She couldn't talk with Sis about it. She couldn't reveal Sis's palace to Ren and therefore the Phantom Thieves. Furthermore, she had been feeling uneasy around Ren since discovering his girlfriend. It wasn't like it really changed anything between them but... perhaps it was because Makoto thought they were close enough that Ren would have told her.

Had you perhaps been thinking you were somehow special?

Makoto reminded herself that Ren supported all of his friends. It was one of the things she admired about him. She in turn would continue to support him the best she could. Nothing had changed. She did however need to tell him that she had accidentally found out about the woman he was dating. She didn't need a favor to Akechi hanging over her.

"Takase-kun... I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..." Ms. Kawakami mumbled in her sleep. Makoto looked over to her roommate. There were an odd number of women teachers, so Makoto as student council president had been assigned to room with one. Ms. Kawakami didn't seem to mind though, even suggesting Makoto was an upgrade over Ms. Chouno. There was no Takase among the second years, so Makoto tried to forget what she had heard.

Ms. Kawakami had been sleeping fitfully all night. At first Makoto had been annoyed to have all sorts of organizational work just dumped on her. So much of it should have been done before the trip, tabloid scandal or not. Even simple things like room assignments just hadn't gotten done. However, Ms. Kawakami just seemed so exhausted and when she had changed for an early bedtime, she looked so thin and fragile compared to when Makoto had been a second year student. Makoto had felt guilty for being annoyed.

Makoto's mind drifted back to Sis's palace. She quickly got out her schedule and roll book and began to go over the students on the trip and her meetings for the day.

Being a chaperone involved a lot of work Makoto hadn't previously considered. Though there were no planned activities in which Makoto needed to manage a group of students, there were plenty of other tasks: ensuring all students were accounted for in the morning and evening, seeing that students who had gotten injured or sick were being treated, sorting out hotel issues, and lots and lots of peer counseling. The school trip was fertile ground for romances, break ups, confessions, and all other matters of drama. Makoto supposed it made sense given they had taken a large group of high school students away from their parents and into close quarters. As the days wore on it only got worse. Still, she didn't remember her class being this bad on their class trip. They had only gone to Kyoto though. Hawaii was a new initiative Principal Kobayakawa instituted to make the school look more
Makoto had still managed to carve out some time with her friends though, even Yusuke whose class trip to Los Angeles had gotten waylaid in Hawaii due to a storm. The previous day she had met all of them for lunch and some souvenir shopping. Today was a working lunch squaring away the accounting before the end of the trip.

"Let me finish that," Ms. Kawakami said flatly. Makoto wasn't sure when she had gotten up. The teacher was looking a bit more rested, but Makoto noticed how big her clothes seemed on her. How had she not noticed before?

"It's really alright."

"Go enjoy the beach."

"But-"

"There will be plenty of work tomorrow morning," Ms. Kawakami's tone was disinterested as always. "I can't have you burning out before then."

"What about-"

"I'll handle it. I have my pride as a teacher you know."

Normally Makoto would have felt bad, like she had done something wrong, given Ms. Kawakami's tone. However, Makoto noticed Ms. Kawakami's expression was somehow softer than before. Makoto smiled. "Yes. Thank you Ms. Kawakami."

Makoto had wanted to take a walk along the beach. This late in the day, she supposed her friends would all be busy. Nevertheless, she found herself texting Ren. She figured "broadening her horizons" definitely included gazing at the horizon from a foreign shore after all. It would be no different from any of the other activities she and Ren had done. To Makoto's surprise, Ren was free. She scrambled to change into her swimsuit and head down to the beach.

Upon exiting the hotel, Makoto took a seat on one of the benches at the agreed upon meeting place. Ren caught up to her shortly thereafter.

"Sorry to ask you out here so suddenly," Makoto stood up. "Being a chaperone is more difficult than I expected. I've had a lot of meetings... I honestly wanted to contact you earlier, but this is the first free moment I've had."

"Even if you're busy, I'm glad you could come on the trip with us," Ren smiled. "Shall we?"

Makoto and Ren walked along the tide line, the last reaches of the waves washing over their feet. Ren recounted how he and the others had made it up to Diamond Head, how they had tried bodyboarding, and how they gotten caught in a microburst that seemed to be centered around Yusuke. Makoto elaborated on what she had been up to, thought it was far less interesting.

"I hope you're not overdoing it," Ren said.

"I was brought here to work," Makoto explained. "Ms. Kawakami has taken over for now. Um... I'm actually a little worried about her. She seems really tired lately."

Ren seemed to be considering Makoto's words, but didn't say anything.
"Hey... do you know anyone named Takase?"

"No..." Ren responded, turning to look at Makoto. "Why do you ask?"

"O-oh. No reason," Makoto gazed out over the ocean, coming to a stop. Tokyo was somewhere out there, beyond her field of view.

"What is it?" Ren paused with Makoto, following her focus.

"I was just thinking about how far we are from home. It's kind of amazing. We've seen a lot of fantastical things in the Metaverse, but this..."

"Yeah, it is."

Makoto and Ren both stood silently, looking over the horizon. Eventually Makoto turned to Ren, finding he was also turning to look at her. He wore a soft smile. Ann was right, he did look good without his glasses. Makoto wondered why she was thinking that now of all times.

"Y-you know, I didn't get lunch. Do you mind an early dinner?"

Ren's lips parted briefly and then he smiled again. "Sure."

On one hand, Makoto was proud of herself. Being more adventurous via some garlic shrimp was certainly broadening her horizons. She and Ren had many laughs talking about the strange American Phantom Thieves fan and his food truck. On the other hand, Makoto was feeling very self-conscious about how her breath smelled. As she and Ren walked back towards the hotel, Makoto found herself maintaining a little extra distance between them.

When the sun fell low in the sky, Makoto and Ren found a bench from which to take in the view. The scene before them filled with vibrant pinks, oranges, and yellows. A bright trail of light stretched across the water. "How beautiful..."

"Oh," Makoto had been so transfixed, time had gotten away from her. "It's already so late. My sister would be upset if she saw me laid back like this. We should probably return before it gets dark."

"Let's stay just a little longer," said Ren. "There's something I want you to see."

Makoto waited. The sun slipped beneath the horizon and the sky turned to shades of purple. The people had been dispersing ever since the lifeguards went off duty. With the night, the beach was soon empty. In the soft light of the moon, the sand looked white and pure. The sea was dark but highlighted with reflections.

"Come on," Ren turned to Makoto, motioning his head towards the ocean, offering a hand and a smile.

Makoto took Ren's hand. He led her towards the water and further along the beach. The vegetation behind them blocked some of the lights coming from the resorts.

"What is it?" Makoto asked, a small laugh escaping her lips.

"This," Ren dropped Makoto's hand and lifted both arms before him. Makoto looked up, past his fingertips. Night had come in full and above them the stars were clear and bright. He turned to her. "You haven't really had a chance to see the stars outside the city, have you? I realized, the other day at the beach..."
"No, I haven't." Makoto had rarely left Tokyo and when she had, staying past a night had been even more rare. She thought she understood what a clear night sky was like from planetariums but she was wrong.

"Well, what do you think?"

"It's beautiful... I always thought trading the stars for the city lights was fair but..." It was Makoto's turn to stretch her arms out, as if she could catch the moonlight.

"It's probably too bright to see a shooting star," said Ren as he brought himself to the ground. Makoto followed and soon they were laying in the sand, looking up at the sky. "Come visit, during a new moon."

"I'd like that." In a mere six months, Ren would be returning to his hometown.

"You should see the city at night from our place. My sister is rarely home," Makoto offered. Ren lifted his head slightly, turning to her, his eyes momentarily widened and his lips parted. "So we wouldn't bother her."

Ren closed his eyes and laughed to himself. "It's a deal then."

They returned to looking up at the stars. Makoto found herself enjoying not only the beauty, but also how peaceful and relaxing it was. The wide open sky seemed like it could just swallow up all her worries, like there was something grander. Time didn't seem to matter.

Makoto turned back to Ren. He was already on his side, looking at her, the moonlight reflecting off his eyes and hair. She briefly admired the lines of his nose, his jaw, before meeting his gaze and holding it. He smiled gently, reaching out and sweeping a stray hair off her face, the back of his finger tips brushing her cheek.

*Ren has a girlfriend.*

Makoto quickly got up into a seated position, her knees bent, feet to the side. Ren was soon on his knees as well. He looked at her questioningly.

"Ren... I, um, have a confession to make," Makoto let out a nervous laugh. "I, uh, saw you with your girlfriend the other day."

"What?"

Makoto began to speak rapidly. "I wasn't trying to spy or anything, really, I just happened on by and I understand why you would want to keep it a secret since she's-"

"Wait, slow down," Ren put a hand on Makoto's shoulder. He looked her directly in the eyes. "I don't have a girlfriend."

Ren looked so genuinely confused, Makoto doubted herself... but she had heard them talk about their date, refer to each other as boyfriend and girlfriend. Ren was the leader of the Phantom Thieves. Of course he would be convincing. Makoto felt her insides twist. She thought they were at least close enough that... "Don't you trust me? I won't tell the others if you don't want."

"It's really not-"

"Please," Makoto's voice wavered. She took a moment to compose herself. Ren's eyes were wide open, staring at her.
"I want to be the kind of friend that supports you... the way you always support me," Makoto brought her hand over the one on her shoulder and squeezed it. Ren briefly looked at the hand squeezing his and then back to Makoto. She offered a weak smile. As the statement hung in the air, the awkwardness of the situation started to nag at Makoto. It was time to go. "Oh! It's late. We need to be ready to leave tomorrow."

Ren closed his eyes and sighed. "Let's talk more about this later."

"You can come to me anytime," Makoto said earnestly. It was how things should be.

As Ren rose, Makoto followed, letting go his hand. They walked back to the hotel in silence.

Makoto stood at the front of her class, right near the stage, awaiting the vice principal's words. The students behind her were abuzz with news of Principal Kobayakawa's death. Makoto had learned of it herself the day before, mere hours after returning from Hawaii. The police suspected suicide, but Sis had mentioned behavioral inconsistencies, even suggesting the Phantom Thieves. Makoto had spent the night thinking about the last time she had seen Principal Kobayakawa. He had told her to fix the tabloid situation and she had pretty much blown him off. She didn't like him, but she hadn't wanted him to die. Was there something she could have done? Was he driven to suicide or was there something else, something connected to the Metaverse?

From what Makoto could pick up from the chatter around her, it sounded like the students were glad he was gone. Between them and the Phan-Site, were people really so bloodthirsty? What would they do if they found out about Sis? Makoto turned briefly, looking for a friendly face. She spotted Eiko who gave Makoto a hard stare before turning to her other friends. Makoto frowned.

The rest of the school day passed by in a blur. It didn't hurt that Makoto had nearly a week's worth of catch up to do. The school work was fine, but student council and class representative activities just seemed to pile up when she was away.

After school, the Phantom Thieves met up in Ren's room. The original plan was to hear what Futaba had found with the data from Sis's laptop, but Makoto felt she had to speak up about Principal Kobayakawa first.

Ann had similar concerns. "Could it be that... we're responsible for Principal Kobayakawa's suicide? ...If we hadn't changed Kamoshida's heart, maybe this never would have happened..."

"But then Kamoshida woulda kept doing what he did," said Ryuji.

"There's a lot of opinions online," Futaba remarked. She began quoting them. "It's only natural that he died." "Covering up crimes is wrong."

"The comments I've seen are similar as well," Yusuke added. "Only the Phantom Thieves are on our side!" "I wish the Phantom Thieves would take down the police and the politicians of this country!" "."...It seems like the public would rather believe in us than in the adults."

"This is kinda scary..." said Ann.

"Are we really doing the right thing...?" Makoto wondered aloud.

"I mean, the principal was coverin' stuff up, right?" Ryuji replied. "I guess... he got what was comin' to him."

"That's..." Makoto wanted to argue, but questioned if her fears for Sis were clouding her judgement.
Before Makoto could formulate what to say, Morgana spoke. "Whoa, guys, let's get back on topic. Weren't we going to discuss the data we obtained from Nijjima?"

Futaba elected Yusuke to go over the findings from Sis's laptop. The focus was on Okumara Kunikazu, the president of the corporation behind Big Bang Burger. Okumura Foods benefited heavily from the mental shutdown incidents. Competitors fell to scandals and misfortune. Okumura was also at the top of the Phan-Site rankings. Rumors were abound about the poor way he treated his employees.

"Only one CEO is profiting from these seemingly accidental incidents," Morgana said. "I think it's natural to suspect he's intentionally causing them."

"I get that, but still..." Makoto felt something wasn't quite right, like there were threads, just outside her grasp, waiting to be woven together into something that made sense.

"I already tried putting Okumura's name in the Nav," said Futaba. "He has a Palace for sure."

"That settles it then!" Ryuji exclaimed. "He's totally our next target!"

"Hold on. That doesn't necessarily mean he's evil. If we jump into this too carelessly...," Yusuke started. Makoto had to admit he was one of the more rational members of the team as long as his art wasn't involved...or money...or weather. "Beyond that, this Phantom Thieves fad is... unsettling."

"Yeah... The excitement levels don't feel normal," Ann added. "We might want to let things calm down a bit first..."

"You too, Ann!" Ryuji was incredulous. "You're just gonna go against what people want!?"

What people want... Makoto thought about all the criminals who would like to see Sis taken down. What if they voted on the Phan-Site?

No one said anything. Makoto guessed that most of the team had their misgivings. Had they taken on something too great? At the sight of everyone, even Ryuji seemed to waver. Morgana, however, was not swayed. "What's with all this hesitation? I can't stand this! Even you, Ryuji! You just back down the second someone disagrees with you!"

Soon, Ryuji and Morgana were hurling insults at each other. It was like Morgana was trying to pick a fight. Ren noticed it too. "What's gotten into you?"

"I can take on some small-time target like Okumura on my own," Morgana announced. He proceeded to leave the attic. "...See you."

The student council office was a flurry of activity. The other student council members had gotten little done during Makoto's recent absences. Both Wada and Hasegawa were popping in and out to get forms or signatures which they then shuttled to various clubs and faculty. Makoto was playing catch up, having spent the majority of her time recently with the Phantom Thieves.

When Morgana had left the team to take matters into his own paws, he had recruited Okumura Haru. It had been a busy week tracking Morgana down, discovering Haru's identity, confronting them both Mementos and Okumura's palace, and finally saving Haru from the unwanted advances of her adult fiance. Finally talking things out, they learned that Morgana had thought himself useless to the team. It was ridiculous. Morgana was their mentor and knew more about the Metaverse than anyone. When everything was settled, Morgana had returned and Haru had joined the team.
The affair had left little time to check on Sis's palace, study, or even think. Something about the suddenness of the Phantom Thieves popularity along with Okumura's rise in the Phan-Site poll still didn't sit well with Makoto, though she had seen first hand the way the people, represented by wind-up robots, were being treated in Okumura's space station.

Haru's father's palace was expansive. The Phantom Thieves were making progress, but Morgana estimated they still had quite a bit of ground to cover. Between the school trip, the time they put sorting things out with Morgana, and the subsequent palace infiltration, everyone was falling behind. Real life tugged them all in various directions.

Ren had administrative things regarding the midway point in his probation... and he was probably catching up with his girlfriend too. Ann kept getting called into work due to model no-shows. Ryuji was helping the track team with another suspect coach. Yusuke was feverishly working towards an important art competition. Makoto's student council activities were increasing as the school festival neared. Though their progress in her father's palace was slow, Haru never once complained.

Makoto admired Haru's unassuming strength. She was easy to overlook as just some dainty rich girl, but when she wanted to, she carried herself a certain dominating nobility. She seemed so assured in who she was, enough to play a fantastical heroine of justice with no embarrassment and no boundaries. She was so unlike Makoto. Ever since her persona had taken form, Haru had managed to show everyone just how far cognition could be pushed. However, it was Haru's straightforward attitude towards her father's palace that interested Makoto the most. She wished she could handle Sis's palace so easily. Makoto re-doubled her efforts on the stack of paperwork before her. She wanted to know about how Haru did it and planned to ask after finishing her student council duties for the day.

"Hey." Ren's voice. Makoto looked up to see the leader of the Phantom Thieves standing next to her chair. She had stopped looking up at the people coming through the student council room and thus hadn't noticed him come in.

"Hi," Makoto smiled. "Do you need something?"

"...I'm here to help with the school festival planning."

"Oh," Makoto looked around, making sure Wada and Hasegawa weren't around. She lowered her voice anyway. "That was only to help find Haru."

"Yeah, but without the committee... doesn't that make you short-staffed?" Ren tapped the stack of forms in front of Makoto.

"It'll be-" Just as Makoto started talking, Hasegawa came in. She gave Ren curious look before filing away some forms and taking off again. When she was gone, Makoto continued. "It's really okay. I know everyone's busy. I planned to do this all anyway."

"And that's ridiculous," Ren pulled up a chair next to Makoto. "Here, let me help."

"No, really, it's okay," Makoto looked up at Ren. "You should be... spending time with your girlfriend. I'm sure she misses you."

Ren sighed. "I still don't know what makes you think I have a girlfriend. Almost everyone here thinks I'm a violent delinquent criminal. I had the top score on the last exam and my classmates are still stunned every time I answer a question correctly in class-"

"She isn't-"
"Why are you bringing this up again anyway? What? Are you-" Ren came to a sudden halt. His eyes widened. Makoto swore they sparkled. He started grinning, the corners of his mouth slowly broadening. He gave a small laugh.

"What?"

"Nothing," Ren nearly sang the word. He put his hands on the table and then rose from his chair. Makoto felt unnerved as he kept looking at her with that big goofy grin. "I have to-"

"Niijima-senpai, we need to talk about the script from class 1-C," Wada entered the student council room, waving a large booklet. He looked up at Ren. "Aren't you-?"

"I was just leaving," Ren said, making his way to the door. He looked like he was standing a little taller than normal.

"...Right," Wada looked at him strangely. After Ren left, Wada turned to Makoto. "What's with him?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

After finishing a good chunk of the student council backlog, Makoto ascended the stairs to the roof of Shujin Academy. Haru had received special dispensation to start a small garden up there. When Makoto had asked to talk, Haru had suggested the location. The heiress was on her hands and knees, tending to one of the planters, when Makoto arrived. Fortunately, she hadn't left yet.

"Pardon my intrusion," said Makoto. She looked at everything Haru had set up. "That's an interesting arrangement."

"Yusuke suggested it," Haru smiled. "I kept pestering him until he took out a brush. I plan to frame his original design."

Haru stood up, taking off her gardening gloves and placing them on one of the planters. She had changed into the school's track suit, protecting her expensive sweater and tights. "So what did you want to talk about?"

"I-I just wanted to see how you were doing," said Makoto. "I mean, you've been through a lot lately and-"

"That's very sweet of you!" Haru smiling warmly, her cheeks and eyes scrunching up fully. Even with her eyes near shut, it was as if she could see right through Makoto.

"I'd like to fall in love for real," Haru's eyes were clear. She had a steady and serene expression. After letting the statement hang in the air, she continued. "Because I acknowledged that wish, I can confront the truth of my father's actions, decisions unclouded. It just so happens all of my desires line up. I was only sad back then because I couldn't be true to myself."

"But what about your father? If we steal his heart, he'll probably go to jail. We may find even worse things in his palace." Makoto thought about the mental shutdowns. She thought about how Futaba had not fully understood the deal she had made with the Phantom Thieves.

"I love my father," said Haru. She looked directly at Makoto. "And so I can—no, must—face and accept the things about him I wish weren't true."
Makoto stood outside the police station, clad in black leggings and a blue coat, having changed from her school uniform. Makoto shivered as a gust of wind chilled the air. With Haru's words on her mind, Makoto looked at the Meta-Nav app on her phone. She had practiced the route from the station to the fateful intersection several times in the real world. She was prepared to follow it in the Metaverse. It was time to find Dad.

Having made the journey to the Metaverse several times now, Makoto barely registered the feelings of displacement that came with the change. The biggest indicator she had left the real world for the cognitive one was the shift from the last few hours of daylight to nighttime. However, something was different this time. Makoto realized she wasn't alone.

The one in black.

Upon noticing the dark figure, Makoto quickly crouched at the nearest bit of cover. As much as she hoped it was just a cognition, she knew better. She couldn't see much. She assumed he was male, based on his height. He didn't seem to notice her. Instead, he took off in the direction of Sis's casino, its bright lights casting on the surrounding buildings.

Makoto considered exiting the Metaverse and contacting the others. She hesitated. It meant revealing Sis's palace. The figure was nearly out of sight. She couldn't risk losing him. She had to follow, maintaining as safe a distance as she could until she came up with a plan.

How to protect Sis? Makoto squeezed the vanish ball in her pocket. They would have to find a good place to hide. Makoto wondered if Sis's shadow would stay hidden if she left the Metaverse. She further wondered if protecting Sis's shadow would be enough. There was so little they understood about the one in black.

Makoto raced through the streets of Sis's cognition, taking cover behind fences, buildings, cars... anything she could find. The one in black was fast. Kaneshiro had warned them of his strength. It seemed like a lifetime ago. Makoto hoped that she had made up the difference since.

When Makoto got to the next corner, she could no longer locate the one in black. Her head darted in several directions, hoping to find him, but they all appeared empty. She weighed her choices. She could wait, hoping he would reveal himself, but this assumed he had gone into hiding. If he was already on his way to the casino, she had to catch up to him. Makoto looked at the next building over. She had to keep going.

Makoto dashed towards her next waypoint. As her foot hit the ground, midway through the street, a warm yellow glow started to form around it. She thought she heard the faint sound of a bell. Soon, Makoto was engulfed in a pillar of light, paper seals circling her. Hamaon. Makoto had faced it before. Frozen in light, Makoto knew what was coming—an overwhelming force, a furious command to be gone, that would either pass over her, leaving her unscathed, or strike her full on, unwinstandable. Makoto didn't know how it chose but she pulled all of her hope, her determination, her will to face it. She had to overcome it. She couldn't let the one in black get to Sis.

In an instant the pillar and the seals vanished. Makoto's eyes fell closed as she collapsed towards the ground.
I'm ready to face the truth about Sis.

Makoto felt something akin to a blooming sensation, like she was stretching her back and chest to take in a deep breath of crisp, clean air. However, she knew she wasn't moving. She was too tired. The feeling was pleasant for a moment, but then a pervasive pounding ache rolled in, like being stuck in bed with a particularly strong cold. Bed? Was she in bed? Sleep sounded very, very nice. It would be very nice to sleep forever. That's what she was supposed to be doing, right?

"...panicking. You caught her. I'm reviving her. Just..."

The sound of hushed voices flitted around Makoto. She could make out words, but they evaporated as soon as they were heard. It was like trying to read a book while thinking about something else. The individual words she recognized in passing, but the composed meanings never formed. Maybe she needed to do something? No... No. She wasn't supposed to be here. She should just drift away.

"...give me that look. It was the best course..."

It was warm though. Warm in several ways, like being held and feeling safe. Was she being held? She did feel like she was floating but at the same time secure. Something firm but still soft supporting her, wrapping around her, but she was also bobbing rhythmically. Makoto wondered if she made any sense. Following her own thread of thoughts was difficult.

"...taking so long?"

"Queen struggles with authority in the real world, so a command from..."

There was something important. Makoto tried to remember, but even the fact that there was something important at all seemed to keep breaking free of her grasp, requiring her to catch it again. Why did everything hurt?

"...her down and go find the others. I'll finish healing her."

Makoto felt the grip around her tighten. Was it a grip? It was warm.

"No, I'll heal Queen. You find the others."

"I'm the better healer."

"You're also the one with Nav skills."

"You have a point."

"Stay out of the palace. Any sign of danger, come back immediately."

"Right."

The sounds—voices—stopped for a moment.

"Mona. Be careful."

There was a faint chime of a bell. Had she heard it somewhere before? Makoto felt as though something was spreading through her. It was like taking the first sip of coffee on a cold day when the
warmth feels like its traveling outward through your veins and nerves and you grasp the mug with both hands, contently absorbing more of its heat. The sick feeling was dissipating. It was easier to remember she had something important to do, but what that was remained elusive.

"Come on Makoto. Wake up..." A familiar voice, barely above a whisper.

Makoto tentatively opened her eyes, squinting. It was dark. She opened her eyes a bit further, finding a familiar face framed by equally familiar unruly hair. He was in his school uniform but strangely his glasses were missing. She spoke, her voice sounding more hoarse than expected. "Ren?"

Ren exhaled, closing his eyes. He brought his forehead down, meeting Makoto's. "Thank-"

Makoto lifted her head slightly and Ren seemed to take it as a signal to move out of her way. She looked up at him. Why was he at such an odd angle? She tried to make sense of it. The pale reflections off the buttons of his school jacket caught her eyes first. From there, she slowly made out the situation. He was on one knee, his right arm around her back, his left supporting her legs. Makoto was leaning into him. Her feet were barely grazing the ground. Beyond them, she could make the glint off his glasses as they lay a few meters away. Just what had happened?

It was night. They appeared to be in the middle of a street, but no cars or people were around. Makoto continued to look around. As she turned away from Ren, she came face to face with a human skull. An undead monster. A skeleton clad in robes holding an ominous bell. A faint white mist drifted between her and it. Makoto's eyes widened. Then she screamed.

Makoto jumped out of Ren's arms, soon on her feet, attempting to flee. It was too fast. Dizziness washed over her. Before she could lose her balance, she felt two strong arms steadying her.

"Shhh, shhh, calm down. It's okay. It's okay." Makoto buried her face in Ren's jacket, gripping his lapels with both hands. He placed a hand on her back, his other to the back of her head, stroking it soothingly. "It's just Daisoujou. One of mine. Sorry, I should have realized..."

Makoto tried to slow her breathing rate, tried to force herself to stop trembling, but she kept thinking about that creepy skeleton smile. Think, Makoto. It wasn't an evil spirit, just a persona... but if it was a persona, that meant they were in the Metaverse. Why were they in the Metaverse? What had happened? Makoto thought back, what had she been doing before- Sis!

Makoto's eyes shot open. How could she have forgotten? She pushed Ren to the side. "The one in black! I have to-"

Before she could dash away, Ren grabbed her by the wrist. "Wait. What?!"

"He's here. I have to stop him before-" Makoto twisted her arm, shrugging Ren off. She started running in the direction of the bright lights of Sis's palace.

"What?! You're not even fully healed! Queen!" It didn't take long for Ren to catch up. He overtook her, grabbing both her wrists this time, one in each hand. Ren set his feet apart and firm. Makoto tried to sidestep him, but he used his leverage on her arms to keep her at bay. His speech was labored. "We have to wait for the others. Form a plan. What's gotten into you?"

The others? How long had Makoto been out? The one in black, what if he-? No. The palace still existed. He couldn't have gotten to Sis yet, but how much longer did they have? Makoto struggled against Ren's grip. Whatever force she put in, Ren redirected, their arms darting in various directions as she tried to break free. "Let me go! There's no time!"
"No! This is suicide."

"I didn't want to have to-" Makoto closed her eyes. Ren might be a natural at everything. Joker might perform amazing feats. However, Makoto had a lifetime of training, of experience, on him. If it was hand-to-hand combat, she wouldn't lose. Makoto sent Ren tumbling behind her. She tried to make it gentle. "I'm sorry..."

Makoto raced forward. "Johanna!"

The motorcycle sped in from some point behind Makoto, quickly matching her pace and position. A few strides later and she leapt on. She knew she would be impossible to catch once up to speed.

However, soon Makoto met a strong headwind. She brought her forearm up to protect her eyes. Johanna's wheels spun furiously but made little progress. Makoto raised her head to see Ren drop from Jatayu perhaps ten meters in front of her. The large vulture-like persona then faded away. Makoto regret going easy on Ren.

"Makoto!" Ren yelled, dragging each syllable. His expression was serious. His eyes were wide and set. Blue flames started flaring behind him. His Phantom Thieves outfit flickered over his school uniform. The corners of his mouth started twitching. "Stop this foolishness or I will."

Behind Ren a hazy mist appeared, like Milady before she had taken form, but darker and enormous, much larger than any persona or shadow Makoto had ever seen. As the mists shifted, Makoto thought she might be catching glimpses of multiple pairs of giant black wings, gargantuan metal pauldrons, a mask framed with golden horns, large wrought chains seeming to keep the giant persona at bay—but those images fell into the mist just as fast as they were revealed, leaving Makoto questioning if it was just her mind playing tricks. She wasn't even sure she was seeing the entire thing or just its upper half.

Makoto realized she had never seen Ren's original persona. He would instead partner with personae recruited by freeing shadows of their delusions. Could this be his original persona? It wasn't even fully formed. Whatever it was, it gave off an enormous pressure. Johanna was screaming in Makoto's head, telling her to run. However, as afraid as she was, Makoto couldn't back down. She had to protect Sis.

The pressure, no longer wind but something else entirely, didn't let up. Johanna was starting to lose ground. Ren began walking towards them.

Makoto could feel herself starting to panic, to freeze up. Her legs, her hold on Johanna, felt like they were failing. She tried to push past her terror, telling herself that at the center of the mass headed her way was Ren, her friend, her confidant, the one she- "Y-you wouldn't."

"I already did once," Ren's voice was even. He continued walking. "It was my hamaon that fell you."

It had been Ren? He would go that far? Makoto's lips parted. Her brow furrowed. Her voice wavered. "Why?"

"We thought you were the one in black," Ren said, his voice becoming softer. The maelstrom behind him was dispersing. Mirroring him, Makoto found herself easing up on Johanna. Ren's voice cracked. "It was dark and you were following us and-"

"I was following the one in black..." Makoto said, more to herself than to Ren. She stepped off Johanna, letting her persona fade. She searched her memory. The Shujin Academy uniform was
mostly black. Could that figure really have been...?

"I'm so sorry," Ren grimaced. He had closed the gap between them. He gripped her upper arms tightly and lowered his forehead onto her shoulder. "I never meant..."

Makoto stood straight, only vaguely aware of Ren. If she had been chasing him all along, then what about the one in black? Sis was okay, for now at least. "So... the one in black isn't here..."

"I don't know," Ren took a deep breath and lifted his head. He loosened his grip. "We ended up here somehow. It could be his doing."

The question Makoto should have been asking. What was Ren doing in Sis's cognition? "W-what happened?"

"I'm not sure," Ren was still catching his breath. "I was leaving the police station and suddenly-"

"The police station?"

"For my six month review," said Ren. "Anyway, if you're here too, then the others... we need to find them."

"I was... also at the police station," said Makoto. She considered leaving it at that. Her mind raced through possibilities. The others wouldn't stop until they figured out what had happened. Makoto looked down. "I-I triggered the Meta-Nav app."

"You what?"

"I used the app. You must have been in close enough proximity that-"

"I got that," Ren's eyes were open just a little too wide. "You entered the Metaverse? Alone?"

"I took precautions. You and Yusuke go to Mementos-"

Ren let go of Makoto. He sighed and then started pacing, gesturing with his hands. "The important details being 'and Yusuke' and 'Mementos.' We stay near the entrance. The shadows there run from us these days. This is a palace."

"I've never entered the palace. I've always stuck to safe areas."

"...Never? ...Always?" A mistake. Ren's eyes narrowed. "Makoto, how long has this been going on?"

Makoto hesitated before speaking. "Since July..."

Ren's lips parted. He looked at Makoto incredulously. "...Is this what those lock picks were for? We don't change hearts without a unanimous decision Makoto."

"I had no intention-"

Ren came to a sudden stop. He once again closed the distance with Makoto. He regarded her carefully, speaking slowly. "Who's palace is this?"

Makoto tightened her lips.

"I can go over to the palace right now Makoto and find out for myself." One of Ren's arms was stretched out in the direction of the casino. "You know that."
"...It's my sister's," Makoto looked away, holding one of her arms at the elbow.

Ren's indignant expression dropped. He reached for Makoto but pulled his hand back midway. "You... Has she...?"

"No," Makoto looked up at Ren. "No. My sister is good to me."

"Then...?"

"I think it's... Lately her career... You know, she supports us," Makoto started thinking aloud, hoping to come up with an explanation satisfying to Ren so that he would leave it be, hoping to somehow defend Sis from suspicion. Sis had always been Makoto's idol. She hoped Sis's desires for professional success were just that and the palace was a manifestation of Sis's strong will. However, some of the things Sis had been saying... Makoto tried to push those thoughts out of her mind. She didn't want Ren and the others to target Sis. "I don't really know."

Ren paused. His pupils started darting around like he was following several trains of thought. "Wait. If we had dealt with this back in July, then Sojiro..."

Makoto watched Ren. His face went through a range of expressions, none of them good. Makoto frowned and cast her eyes down. It wasn't hard to tell what he was thinking. "I didn't realize-"

"You must have realized something if you looked for her in the app."

Makoto searched for something to be said in her defense, but nothing came.

Ren sighed. After a few moments, he spoke. "Didn't you promise not to take any unnecessary risks?"

"This is necessary," Makoto set her jaw. The pair locked eyes, neither backing down.

"And just what have you been doing?"

"Exploring, observing, trying to assure myself Sis was okay..." Makoto decided Ren didn't need to know about Dad. She turned away from his gaze. "Trying to understand..."

Ren didn't say anything.

"Please... don't tell the others." Makoto reached for Ren's sleeve. He stepped back, rotating his shoulder away—out of her reach. His expression was grim. Makoto stopped. "I want to find another way."

"I thought you decided back in Kaneshiro's palace that what we were doing was just," Ren's eyes flashed. For a moment, Makoto worried that... that thing... that had appeared behind him would return. "It doesn't apply when it's your sister?"

"I-I don't know. With everything going on-" Looking at Ren unmoved expression, Makoto thought it better not to continue. "There has to be another way. Please. Sis... Sis is all that I have."

Ren's face softened briefly. He sighed and looked away. "I have to think about this."

"Then we...?"

"We have our hands full with Okumura's palace right now. I won't say anything until we're sure Haru is okay. It will give both of us some time to think. I'll figure out how to explain this to Mona."

"Thank you." Makoto tried to offer a smile in return. She wasn't sure it reached her eyes. They had
to change Okumura's heart in less than two weeks to prevent Haru from being shipped off to her pervy fiance's house—it wasn't much time, but it was something.

"Don't think we're finished yet," Ren looked Makoto straight in the eyes. "We'll continue this discussion at another time. Until then, don't come here alone, okay?"

"I-I can't promise that."

"I'm keeping this secret for you Makoto. In return-

"Okay," Makoto said reluctantly. "...okay."

"Good." Ren slowly walked back to where they had started, picking up his glasses along the way. He sat down, back against the wall of the nearest building and feet out in front of him. Ren let his head droop slightly, bringing two of his fingers to his forehead, his other hand by his side, still clutching his glasses.

"Ren...?" Makoto sat down next to him, leaving some space. She wrapped her arms around her legs.

"We wait for Mona. He went looking for the others." Ren looked exhausted, much more so than one would have expected.

"Are you okay?"

"I just found out the teammate I relied on most has been keeping something important from me for months and it hurt someone I care about. Not only that, she's been recklessly exploring the Metaverse on her own," Ren closed his eyes, lightly at first and then tightly, as if his head hurt. Makoto watched his chest rise and fall several times before he spoke again. "Makoto, technically I killed you today. That freaks me out. But I don't know what freaks me out more, that, or the fact that you don't seem to care."

"It wasn't your-"

"That's not the point. If it had been a shadow or the one in black, you would have died. Permanently. Yet, the first thing you do is go charging off again."

"I had to-"

"Just... just let me think Makoto."

"Yes... of course." Makoto rested her chin on her knees. She pondered on Ren's conjugation of 'relied,' occasionally shifting her eyes to check on him. He seemed lost in thought the first few times she looked over, but eventually his face relaxed. It wasn't long before he appeared to have fallen to sleep. Makoto thought back to the ginormous creature that had manifested earlier. She shivered.

What to do in two weeks? Makoto could refuse the exploration of Sis's palace—as Ren had said, the Phantom Thieves required a unanimous decision to change someone's heart. However, she couldn't really call their actions in Okumura's palace, especially the initial ones, the result of a deliberate decision at all. Furthermore, as much as Makoto didn't want to admit it, there were several indications Sis's investigations were going too far and people, people like Futaba and Sakura-san, were being hurt in the process. Was changing Sis's heart the only option? Was it the only *just* thing to do?
I'm perfectly comfortable being on my own.

A gust of wind burst from the tip of Zorro's sword, dispersing a flock, for lack of a better word, of Lilim and giving Ann a clear line of sight to set the Belphegor in the center ablaze. As planned, the combination knocked the shadows out of the sky, allowing the team to make short work of them. Makoto had spent the last several days doing extra reading about the mythical creatures that inhabited Okumura's palace as well as refining the formations the team used to battle them, Ren's words in Sis's cognition playing on repeat in her mind.

Makoto doubted the others could tell anything was different. The division of duties between Ren and herself remained unchanged. Professionally, their interactions were also unchanged. However, to Makoto, something about Ren seemed distant. He seemed to always be talking to someone else. When she saw him in the train station or even when they were at rest in the palace, he was never looking her way. He didn't even notice her. Makoto wondered if it was all just coincidence, just machinations of her own fears. Not knowing for sure, she thought it best to be low key, to address Ren only when necessary.

The team approached another terminal. Futaba's hacker skills were coming in handy as she was able to re-program internal systems in their favor, confusing the robots' schedules and even overdriving large pieces of equipment to failure. At this latest terminal, Futaba quieted the large stampers nearby, forming a makeshift bridge that would allow them to proceed.

The Phantom Thieves dashed across the factory floor, needing to clear the bridge before the stamper came back online. Even in rest position it was a bit of a jump. Makoto got atop the stamper and turned, reaching her arm out to help just as Ren was doing the same. They shouted in unison. "Oracle!"

Ren and Makoto each grabbed hold of one of Futaba's forearms, aiding her onto the machine. As her feet touched the top of the makeshift bridge, Ren pulled harder, yanking Futaba to him. He raised his other arm over her protectively, shooting Makoto a challenging look. Makoto parted her lips and took a step back. Ren's expression softened. He awkwardly looked away.

"Um, guys...?" Futaba glanced between her two teammates.

"Joker! Queen! Hurry!" Morgana called. The three of them ran across the bridge, barely making it over before the pistons resumed.

There was little time to regroup as a regiment of robot workers were waiting for them. Ren dropped Futaba's hand and raced forward, streams of black, grey, and red coming forth to attack the front row of enemies. Not getting the desired response, he quickly switched strategies, iterating through families of skills. Seeing that the others were fully engaged, Makoto stayed back to survey and support. She brought forth Johanna to cast a defensive charm on her comrades.

It was Yusuke's field of ice that eventually brought the robots to their knees, freezing and cracking their joints. The Phantom Thieves easily vanquished them in their immobile state.

After a short elevator ride, the team was fortunate enough to find a safe room. None of their
altercations that afternoon had been particularly difficult. The problem was that there were so many of them. As the team made themselves comfortable, Makoto began to take inventory of the situation. They had been leaning heavily on Ann and Morgana, both who were looking winded. Their ammunition was over half depleted. Ren looked fine, but he had been once again covering every type of need the team might have in battle.

Makoto walked over to Ren and Morgana who were standing around a side table. They appeared to be examining the facility map they had picked up. "How much more is there?"

"Hmmm," Morgana took a few moments. "I think we're getting close... maybe another stretch like that last one?"

"We may want to fall back. We've been asking a lot of you and Panther and our supplies are starting to thin. Even if we find the treasure, we still have to make it back to the entrance."

"I'll take care of the agi and garu skills so Mona and Panther can rest," said Ren.

"You've already done twice as much as everyone else Joker. I rather not take the risk."

Ren looked directly into Makoto's eyes. There was a hint of an edge to his voice. "I wish you'd be half as cautious with yourself as you are with everyone else."

Makoto frowned, unsure how to respond. She sensed the matter wasn't up for discussion.

"Let's break for a little while and then at least take a look at what's ahead," Ren continued. "If it's bad, we'll head back."

"Okay." It was a reasonable plan. "Mona, why don't you encourage everyone to have a snack? Don't forget Oracle, she has to eat something other than instant noodles."

Morgana regarded Makoto for a moment and then looked to Ren who gave a short nod. He turned and made a bee line for Ann. From where they were standing, Makoto could see all of her teammates. She continued to scan for signs of trouble. Though Futaba didn't fight, she tired easily. Ryuji was normally fine but some days his leg would act up. Haru was still relatively new, but seemed in good shape, perhaps due to her gardening efforts.

Makoto turned to Ren. He also appeared to be watching their teammates carefully. His arms were crossed, red gloves resting above the crooks of his elbows. Though she could sense he was still displeased with her, Makoto took the opportunity to address some lingering questions she had. "Joker... what's your original persona like?"

"His name is Arsene," Ren responded, his eyes still fixed over the room. "He's some sort of devil and specializes in curse skills. He encouraged me to trust my own justice and do whatever it takes to see it through."

"Why don't you fight with him?"

"He left..." Ren's tone softened somewhat. "He told me he would return when I reached the end of my fate. I... I think he wants me to learn something by interacting with all of these other personae."

"Oh." Makoto found it curious, but wanted to think more before bothering Ren about it. After all, there was something else she wanted to know first. "What does he look like?"

"His body is a shell formed of cauldron-like metal that houses flames. He has large feathery black wings and wears a red suit and a tall black top hat. I think that's where Ryuji got inspiration for our
The description was unfamiliar. "Is he bigger than normal?"

"No, not particularly." Ren's focus shifted from the room to Makoto, regarding her from the corners of his eyes.

"Then what was that persona you used the other night against Johanna?"

Ren's jaw tightened. The edge returned to his voice. "Jatayu."

"No, the one after Jatayu."

"I didn't use another after Jatayu."

"But..." Makoto started to argue but then decided it was best not to push Ren further. Perhaps that thing she saw wasn't a persona at all. But then what was it? It truly seemed to be connected to Ren in some way.

From the privacy of the student council room, Makoto checked on Sis's palace once more. The mysterious Meta-Nav app confirmed it was still there. Though Makoto would often go more than a week between visits to Sis's palace without giving it a second thought, she couldn't stop thinking about it with its now forbidden status. She rarely saw Sis anymore. There had been something comforting about having another way to be with Sis... and now it was off limits.

Who made Ren lord of the Metaverse anyway? Makoto frowned. She didn't want him to steal Sis's heart. She didn't even like the idea of him entering Sis's cognition in the first place. Furthermore, why hadn't he come to talk to her, like he said he would?

Makoto checked on Sis's palace once more. Still there. She told herself to focus. She should be figuring out a plan, not wasting time. In a sense, things had just gone back to the way they were before she met Ren. She had gotten along just fine back then. Not being able to visit Sis, not spending time with Ren... everything was back to normal.

A jostling of the door caught Makoto's attention. She looked up, hopefully.

"Look who I finally caught!" Hasegawa nearly sang as she entered the room, holding Morgana by the torso. "This little guy has been skulking around all week."

"Eh?" Makoto watched as Morgana struggled in Hasegawa's grasp.

"Let me go!" Morgana exclaimed.

"What a talkative kitty!" Hasegawa smiled broadly as she put Morgana down on the table. "What are you doing here kitty?"

"Yes... what are you doing?" Makoto repeated slowly. "Where is your master?"

"Hmph, I'm the master," Morgana said in a huff. Makoto continued to look at him, not saying anything. He eventually answered her question. "Ren is hanging out with Futaba. When he's with friends, sometimes I go exploring rather than tag along."

"So cute! It's almost like he's really talking to you." Hasegawa started scratching Morgana right under his jaw line. "Who's a cute kitty?"
"I am not a caaaaa-" Morgana began to protest but his words left him. Instead he started to lean into Hasegawa's fingers, tilting further and further.

"I heard rumors last term there was a cat hanging around our school," Hasegawa explained. She smiled triumphantly, continuing to tease Morgana's jaw. "He was tough to catch, but I have three at home. It was only a matter of time."

Just as Morgana was about to fall over, Hasegawa stopped. She stood up. "I'm going to get some milk. Don't let him escape."

"R-right," said Makoto. After Hasegawa was safely out of the room, she spoke. "Go. I'll come up with an excuse."

"It's okay. I wanted to talk about the other day, in your sister's palace..."

"I see..." Makoto pressed her lips together and looked away. The notoriety the Phantom Thieves could gain from stealing the heart of someone like Sis would likely open up more of Mementos. Makoto was sympathetic to Morgana's quest to discover his origins, but not at the cost of Sis. This put them at odds. Morgana's suggestions about Sis's palace thus had an undercurrent to them that made Makoto uncomfortable.

"It's not what you think! ...well, it's not only what you think. As I said before, I think we should explore your sister's palace... but until Okumura has his change of heart and we find out who is behind the mental shutdowns, I want to help you decide what to do—whether it be steal your sister's treasure or find another way. I don't think I'd be satisfied if I didn't at least do that."

Makoto regarded Morgana curiously. She supposed she might feel the same if the situations were reversed. However, she couldn't bring herself to smile. "T-thank you."

"But I also wanted to talk about Ren-"

"I'm back!" Hasegawa re-entered the student council room with a small carton of milk. "Oh is he still whining at you?"

Hasegawa pulled her empty bento out of her bag and poured in the milk.

"Is that really okay for a cat?" asked Makoto.

"I am not a cat," grumbled Morgana. He turned his head up at the bento of milk.

"It will probably be fine for today," said Hasegawa. "I'll bring in something more appropriate next time."

Morgana's eyes shifted back to the bento several times. He continued to avoid it.

Makoto considered objecting. The student council really shouldn't be keeping a cat. What kind of precedent would it set? However, Hasegawa's excitement provided an excellent cover if Morgana was going to be helping Makoto.

Morgana turned to the bento, giving it a few test-licks before he started lapping up the milk with gusto.

"Aww, there he goes," Hasegawa smiled contently. She put her elbows on the table and rested her chin in both hands, watching Morgana. "No need to be wary kitty!"
The buzz of a phone vibrating brought Hasegawa's attention to her bag. She pulled out her phone and looked at the screen. She started speaking at a rapid pace. "Ah! I have to go pick up my brother now! I'll come back for the bento tomorrow! Oh, and Niijima-senpai, I didn't get to the faculty sign-offs, so you could you do it? Sorry!"

Before Makoto could respond, or even blink, Hasegawa was out the door. Makoto sighed and pulled out a binder from one of the bookshelves. She flipped through it, taking out the forms that still needed signatures. She then turned to Morgana, who was just about finishing the milk. "I need to take care of this before the teachers go home."

"I can come with you," said Morgana. "I'm curious to see what you do."

"It's not very interesting."

Morgana wasn't deterred by Makoto's warning. He made his way over to her bag and hopped in. Makoto picked up the small stack of forms and her bag. It would be a quick walk to the faculty office.

"Um, by the way Makoto," Morgana's voice likely didn't stand out due to the background chatter in the halls and the muffling effect of Makoto's bag. Still, Makoto hoped there was no one around with an ear attuned to meows. It was hard for her to gauge how Morgana might sound those who couldn't interpret his voice. "I was the one who urged Ren to use hamaon the other day. He was against it but-"

"I understand," Makoto tried to speak softly and covertly. "Your advice was sound. It doesn't bother me."

"Oh? But ever since then... you sometimes look scared when you see Ren."

"Eh?" Makoto looked up. She briefly thought back to their confrontation, remembering the immense pressure put out by the cloud of mist around Ren. She pushed the memory out of her mind. That was something else. "I guess I just don't know where I stand..."

Makoto grasped the knob of the faculty office door and stepped inside. The office was mostly empty. Makoto wished Hasegawa had done her student council assignment first and her stalking of cats second. Ms. Usami and Mr. Ushimaru were already gone. Mr. Ushimaru's class was proposing a target range that seemed particularly problematic. Fortunately, Ms. Kawakami was still in, but she appeared to be packing her things to leave.

"Good afternoon Ms. Kawakami," Makoto began. "Can I speak to you for a moment about the maid costumes?"

Ms. Kawakami's eyes went wide. "M-maid costumes? I-I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh?" Makoto blushed. She wondered just how many mistakes there were in the festival forms. She mentally kicked herself for not having personally handled all of the festival organization. "I'm terribly sorry. I thought your class was doing a 'Maid Takoyaki' stand for the school festival. There must be some mistake."

"Oooh," Ms. Kawakami said, looking up as if she was thinking. She sighed and frowned. "No, that's right. What's the problem?"

"I just need your signature verifying that you've reviewed the designs and that they're appropriate for school." Makoto offered Ms. Kawakami a form. "Last year we had an issue with another class."
"Just that?" Ms. Kawakami took the form and put it on her desk. She picked out a pen from a cylindrical container of writing implements and signed the form before returning it. As she handed Makoto the sheet of paper, she briefly glanced at the opening of Makoto's bag. "That ca—nevermind. Now if you would please leave... I need to lock up."

"Right. Thank you Ms. Kawakami." Makoto stepped out of the office, relieved. For a moment, she thought Ms. Kawakami had noticed Morgana. She would have to be more careful.

Makoto made her way back to the student council room. She started to once again consider Sis's palace, ready to take advantage of Morgana's expertise. "Morgana... stealing a person's treasure only steals their distortion, right? Why is that?"

"That's my understanding, but I don't know why. Maybe if we explore Mementos further, I'll remember more."

"Hmm," Makoto tried to sound noncommittal. She considered another line of reasoning. "So far, they've always confessed as publicly as possible, with the exception of Kaneshiro who turned himself in. Is the confession really part of the process?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm asking if stealing the treasure leads to a confession or if it's more indirect. Is it really that stealing the treasure leads a person to atone for their actions? Kamoshida could have confessed to the press like Madarame did, but instead he confessed to the school—his victims. Madarame couldn't easily reach all of his victims and thus to do so would need to go public. Kaneshiro, being a criminal, instead sought to turn himself in."

"I suppose that's more or less accurate."

Makoto wondered what form Sis's atonement might take. Sis would certainly seek some form of justice. If anyone could come up with a just solution, it would be Sis. However, Makoto was beginning to doubt her own ability to do. She balled her hand into a fist and brought it in front of her, regarding it curiously.

At the very least, the Phantom Thieves were preventing further harm, but that was only one facet of the outcome. Whatever came after they had been leaving to the palace owners themselves and if her own struggles with Sis's palace had taught her anything, it was difficult to be just when it was personal.

Makoto walked through the hallways of one of Kosei High School's practice buildings, carefully following the instructions Yusuke had given her. Kosei had a much more expansive set of resources for arts students than Shujin Academy did. It would be easy to get lost.

The late afternoon sun cast a warm glow through the windows, enhancing the wood aesthetic of the building. Though some time had passed since classes finished for the day, there were still many students milling about. Makoto must have arrived before club activities ended. Several students were regarding her curiously, probably due to her Shujin uniform.

The Phantom Thieves had recently stolen Okumura's treasure and were waiting for his change of heart. Haru's father had not been behind the mental shutdowns himself, but had made requests that led to them. There hadn't been time for more details. Now it was a waiting game until he was ready to talk. Makoto could sense the worry coming from Haru, her normally sweet and cheerful nature seemed replaced with uncertainty. Makoto wondered if anyone truly understood the consequences of
their decisions during their first palace.

At the very least, Haru did not have to directly fight her father's shadow. Instead, the team had faced countless robots. Makoto could not imagine Sis doing the same. She had sparred with Sis many times over the years, but didn't like the idea of having to truly harm her, even if it was just a shadow.

"I'm sorry, but my mother would never allow it." It was a familiar voice. Makoto looked up to see Togo Hifumi bowing to an open door and then rushing off down the hall. She didn't realize Togo-san was a Kosei student as well. Makoto wished she had time to catch up, but didn't want to be late to meet Yusuke. To her surprise, Yusuke appeared in that same doorway.

"Ah, Makoto," Yusuke said in a detached voice.

"Was that Togo Hifumi just now? Do you know her?"

"We just met the other day. She's not in my class," Yusuke sighed. "I was hoping she would pose for me. She's an ideal beauty, perfect for my next piece. Perhaps even better than Ann—certainly with a much better personality."

"There's nothing wrong with Ann's personality," Makoto said flatly.

"Yeah! Don't go disparaging Lady Ann!" Morgana popped out of Makoto's bag.

"Oh, you're here too?" Yusuke asked, looking at the cat.

"I wanted to see what Yusuke's school was like."

"I see," Yusuke said. He sighed again and grabbed Makoto by the upper arm. "I suppose you'll have to do. I can at least get some studies done."

"What?" Makoto exclaimed as Yusuke began dragging her inside the studio.

"You can disrobe behind that curtain in the corner," Yusuke said, using his free hand to point out the small changing area.

"Absolutely not."

"No?" Yusuke seemed genuinely perplexed at her refusal.

"I swear... it's like your brain leaves when the artist takes over," Makoto grumbled.

"Hmmm, what to do then?" Yusuke asked wistfully.

"Makoto could pose with her clothes on, like Ann did," Morgana suggested. Makoto shot him an angry look. Morgana whispered back to her. "You're not getting his attention until this is settled."

"If that's the best you can do..." Yusuke looked at Makoto.

"It is," Makoto forced out, still feeling cross at Morgana. He had already hopped out of her bag and was exploring the studio.

"Then find a position you can stay in over there," Yusuke pointed to a raised area. Before it stood an easel, a thick pad of paper clamped in place. Makoto sat on the edge of the platform, her back straight and her hands on her knees. "A little more interesting than that please."

Makoto paused, unsure what to do, especially in a skirt. Everything 'interesting' seemed so unnatural
to her. She got up on her knees, like she might sit at tea ceremony, but was unsure how long she could hold the position. She relaxed a bit, resting more on her thighs, letting her calves out to one side and balancing with her opposite hand on the platform, her other hand resting over her skirt. She gave Yusuke a questioning look.

"Very well." Yusuke had since sat down behind the easel. His drawing hand started moving quickly but lightly. Before Makoto knew it, he had already flipped one page of his pad of paper. "So what was it you wanted to see me about?"

"I-"

"Golden Chariot Triad Formation!" A woman's voice pierced through the hallways.

"Tch," Yusuke stood up and closed the door. As he returned to his seat, he spoke. "Sorry about that. I wish the student council would put a stop to whoever that is. Such a vulgar girl..."

Makoto wondered if Kosei High School was just full of weirdos. She began again. "Um, I wanted to ask you about Madarame... what it was like to fight his shadow. If that's okay..."

"Hmm," Yusuke continued to sketch. "Looking back I suppose he was easier than the palace owners we've faced lately. I wonder what that means."

"Well yes," Makoto also found the rising difficulty of their opponents curious. "I meant for you, personally, since he raised you."

"The man who raised me never existed. He was a work of fiction composed by Madarame and my own desires." The movements of Yusuke's drawing arm had become harsh. Makoto could hear the sounds of graphite on paper. With great flourish, Yusuke flipped another sheet over the easel. "The shadow I fought in the palace bore no resemblance to that fiction."

"It didn't bother you at all to slash at him?"

"No. No... we were fighting for our lives anyway," Yusuke's drawing arm paused. "I suppose I may have had some pent up resentment to work through."

"And now...?"

"I don't know."

Makoto looked down, forgetting she was supposed to be holding a pose.

"I don't know if I would be who I am today or where I am without Madarame-sensei," Yusuke continued after a pause. He had started drawing again. His movements seemed slower and more delicate. "It wasn't all bad. I don't know how to reconcile that with what he did."

"Have you visited him since...?"

"The authorities won't let me, at least until his after his trial. They're concerned he still has sway over me."

"Mmm." It made sense. Makoto wondered if the same thing would happen with Sis, but hesitated to probe Yusuke further about the experience. She already felt she was asking a lot from Yusuke emotionally without a sense of how it was affecting him. Yusuke was hard to read. Also, the situations weren't exactly the same. Sis wasn't abusing her like Madarame was with Yusuke or Okumura-san was with Haru.
Yusuke flipped another page on his sketch pad. He started making framing motions with his fingers.

"What was it like after you stole his treasure, but before he confessed?" Makoto asked after several minutes. "Did he act like Kaneshiro or Okumura?"

"Closer to Okumura, from what Haru has told us."

Makoto wondered why there was such a delay. Kaneshiro had reacted near instantaneously, but apparently it was a fluke. Did it take time for the mind to come to terms with all that had happened and formulate a response, even if it generally led to a confession? Was it difficult on the body, even though the others did not awaken to a persona or have health problems like Futaba? "Were you worried?"

"A little. He kept to himself, but I was used to him disappearing for long periods of time, so it wasn't very different." Yusuke was moving his pencil methodically.

"Oh." Makoto wondered how Haru was doing.

The trio didn't speak for some time. Makoto wasn't sure if Morgana was even still in the room. The only sounds were that of Yusuke's pencils against paper and faint music being practiced elsewhere in the building.

"Yusuke..." Makoto began. "Do you ever regret changing Madarame's heart?"

Yusuke looked up at Makoto from his easel. "Never."

Moments later the sound of a cell phone alarm could be heard coming from Yusuke's pocket.

"Ah. I need to start packing up. Another student has the room next." Yusuke began placing his supplies into a moderately-sized case.

Makoto got up from the platform, curious to see what Yusuke had drawn. She was greeted by a page full of sketches of her as a mouse. Of course. She clenched one of her fists.

"I think they would have been better had you been willing to pose nude," Yusuke said. The worst part was that he was being serious.

"We'll never know." Makoto smiled in a way that would probably scare small children. She took a deep breath, reminding herself that Yusuke had been kind enough to indulge her sensitive questions. She took out a bento from her bag. Yusuke never seemed to get enough to eat. At least he would have one healthy meal. "This is for you, as thanks."

Yusuke's eyes shined as he accepted the bento. He lifted the lid briefly. "Hmm."

"Come on Morgana." The cat appeared from seemingly out of no where to hop back in Makoto's bag before she picked it up. "Goodnight Yusuke. Thanks again."

"Bye Yusuke!" Morgana added.

Makoto walked out into the hallway, heading towards the building's exit. Speaking with Yusuke had done little to reassure her, but at least she knew the truth now rather than having to stew in her own suspicions. She hadn't even seen Sis since the incident, much less gotten a chance to try to heal her heart without the Metaverse. All she could do was verify that Sis's palace still existed.

"Come to any conclusions?" Morgana poked his nose out of Makoto's bag.
"No," Makoto hung her head. "Yusuke, Haru... they both needed to oppose their family. Sis is kind..."

"Could it be you're deluding yourself, like Yusuke?"

"Maybe... but I also recognize that lately her investigations have been... aggressive. I think that must be it."

"How bad is it?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe it isn't that bad."

"Huh?" Makoto raised her head, looking at the cat.

"It's like Isshiki Wakaba's research said... the distortion starts affecting the person's actions in the real world. You said your sister has a strong sense of justice, so maybe the distortion hasn't had too much effect yet. Removing it now may prevent her from doing something serious."

Makoto came to a sudden stop. Her heart was racing. She hadn't considered things from that point of view before. She fought a strong desire to enter Sis's palace right then and remove the distortion. No. Based on what Sis had already said, she would likely lose her job anyway. The people around her were just waiting for any little slip up so they could get rid of the upstart woman. Acting meant destroying Sis's career, but not acting could mean something worse. The path forward was becoming clear, but what could be done to mitigate the consequences?

"Is Rumi-chan coming today?" Morgana lightly padded into the student council office and hopped on the table in front of Makoto. The door was propped open for the day with the expectation that many classes and clubs would be dropping by, scrambling to meet the new deadlines for the school festival. While the development gave the cat easy access, it unfortunately gave Makoto little time to research alternative careers for Sis.

"Rumi-chan is it? Should Ann be jealous?" Makoto teased. Morgana had quickly warmed to Hasegawa. It might have had something to do with her bringing in treats like canned tuna.

"Rumi-chan is no Lady Ann buuuuut... she has her charms," Morgana smiled broadly. "So."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but she's out today."

"Ooh," Morgana made his disappointment clear. "Well, I'm going to go for a walk then."

As Morgana hopped off the table and scampered away, Wada entered. He looked pale. "Wasn't that Amamiya's service animal?! He doesn't have it with him? This is bad."

"Service... animal?"

"You know, to keep his violent tendencies at bay."

The rumors seemed to only be getting more ridiculous with time. "Amamiya-kun isn't like-"

"Principal Kobayakawa is gone Niijima-senpai," Wada firmly placed his hand on the table for emphasis. Makoto wondered what had gotten into him. He was usually a better listener, one of the reasons she liked having him on the student council. "You don't have to be saddled with reforming"
him anymore."

"I wasn't."

"Surely you've read the leaked files. He suddenly, randomly attacked that couple. The lady said she was worried she would die. Amamiya is a threat."

"I think there's more to the story."

"This is serious. You should keep clear of Amamiya. He's violent and dangerous. He could kill you."

"That's."

Wada gasped. Makoto followed his line of sight, looking up to see Ren staring at them from the hallway, a copy of Woman in the Dark in one of his hands. His lips were parted and his brow was knit, the corners of his eyebrows cast downward. When their eyes met, he quickly turned, breaking into a brisk walk.

"He's going to kill us now," Wada's eyes were wide. "He is so going to kill us."

"Ren!" Makoto called after him, standing up and rushing past Wada into the hallway. Ren had already disappeared. Makoto swore it was like the boy could teleport sometimes. Where could he have gone?

Ren had once described Tokyo like a prison due to its walls and concrete. Surely he would have gone somewhere open. Where in the school...?

Makoto raced towards the roof, ignoring the curious glances of the other students in the hallway. She burst through the door, letting it swing wide. She first looked towards the planters. No one. Shifting her gaze right, she saw Ren, facing away from her. He was stretching his arms wide and appeared to be taking a deep breath, his face pointed towards the sky. He then sat in one of the haphazardly placed folding chairs and put his head in his hands. His motions looked tired. Makoto stood just past the door, watching him, unsure what to do.

The sound of the door slamming shut, its old springs finally bringing it back to its rest position, caused Ren to look up and broke Makoto's hesitation. He looked at her as he had back in the student council room before casting his eyes downward again. She rushed over to him, dropping to her knees so that she might see his face beneath his thick tangle of hair.

"Nononono..." Makoto started, speaking urgently. "Not even for an instant, don't start believing them-

"But he's right. I did kill you." Ren continued to look down.

"It's not the same. It was a calculated move. You are not a killer," Makoto put her hands on Ren's knees. She was briefly distracted by the thought that it had been so long since they were that close. She pushed it aside. "Morgana and I both agree it was a sound strategy: You needed to stop the threat and get a better look."

"That expression you made, in that pillar of light..." Ren tilted his head to face Makoto. "I held your lifeless."

"Stop. When we fight shadows-"
"It was different this time. I..."

"You would never have agreed to use hamaon had you not known human targets can be revived," Makoto shook her head, her voice firm. "The Phantom Thieves do not kill. It's been part of the Phantom Thieves longer than I have."

"We fight our way through those palaces. We destroy shadows..."

"I don't have the same communion with shadows that you do, but..." Makoto spoke slowly, choosing her words carefully. "Those shadows are manifestations of an idea, twisted by the distortion of the palace. An idea doesn't die so easily. Not only that, but you take each one inside of you, so it can never truly be destroyed. We're trying to fix the distortion. We only fight shadows because we have to."

"But I enjoy it... when I'm in there, I like taking down enemies." Ren's breaths were heavy. "What if I am really just a violent-"

"I wouldn't follow you if I thought you were violent. None of us would," Makoto cut off the thought as fast as possible. Ren probably faced the accusation, in whispers, every day. Only the dangerously obstinate would never reflect upon the possibility. She wondered how many times he had let it get to him, how many times he had struggled with it alone. She took Ren's face in her hands. "It's the ability to rebel against what's wrong that you like, isn't it?"

"I-"

"You're so giving of yourself. You help people here, in the real world, all the time. You're not violent at all. You're kind and gentle and reassuring and warm and caring... I lo-"

Makoto caught herself, her eyes widening for a moment. She let go of Ren's face, rose to her feet, and took a step back.

Ren broke her gaze, looking instead at some spot on the floor before closing his eyes. He grimaced.

Makoto forced herself to focus. Ren needed a friend. She took a deep breath and stepped in again, as close as the chair would allow her. She embraced Ren, bringing his head to her chest and wrapping her other arm around his upper back.

"It's good you reflect upon your actions and on their claims, but they're wrong," Makoto stated. She squeezed tighter. "I'll tell you that over and over until I'm sure you believe it. If someone calls you violent, I'll refute it ten times over. You've done the right thing, even though it's been hard, and even though it cost you. You've saved-"

"I didn't save her. She went off with him." Makoto could feel the frames of Ren's glasses digging into her. "And I don't know how to save..."

The statement lingered. Ren lifted his arms, encircling Makoto's waist. His grip was tight. A strong gust of October wind caused the fences surrounding them to rattle.

"All we can do is try our best," Makoto said softly. "Don't take the entire weight of the world by yourself. You're doing what you can. It's enough."

"It's not enough."

"It's more than enough." Makoto frowned, thankful Ren couldn't see her face. It wasn't only in the Metaverse that he had been covering for everyone. He had been shouldering the burdens of so many
others in the real world too. It was too much to ask. He had taken on immense responsibilities. She
had not been doing enough to support him. It was her fault he was doubting himself now. She had
done this to him. A sickening feeling was forming in Makoto's chest. "I'm so sorry. Back then... I
was thinking so selfishly. I have a bad habit of acting in the moment... all I could think about was
Sis. I should have realized..."

Makoto let herself trail off, leaving the rest unspoken. Instead, she just continued to hold Ren. She
wasn't sure how long they stayed like that. The warm colors of the nearly set autumn sun gave way
to the bluer cast of dusk. Eventually, Ren took a deep breath and released her. She took the cue to do
the same, stepping back as he stood up. Ren spoke, not looking at her. "I'm going home."

"Mm," Makoto mumbled affirmatively. She watched Ren's back, his bag slung over his shoulder, as
he disappeared through the door. She wondered if she had helped at all. Hopefully he would meet up
with his girlfriend or someone who could do more for him than she could. Makoto felt a twinge of
unease. She would have acted the same for any one of her friends and teammates, but it wasn't only
actions that mattered. It felt wrong, like she had been taking advantage of the situation.

Makoto thought back to what she had almost said. Why did it have to be him? She was just setting
herself up for heartache. There was no way, especially after everything she had done. Makoto
wrapped her hands around her upper arms, realizing without Ren just how cold it was.

Makoto ascended the staircase at the back of Cafe LeBlanc. Ren had summoned the team in
preparation of a Mementos excursion. Apparently there were several new requests to consider.
Makoto hadn't seen Ren since they parted on the roof of Shujin Academy. She reminded herself to
act normal, act professionally. Functionally, nothing had changed and nothing should change. She
couldn't let anyone find out.

To Makoto's surprise, she was the first one to arrive. She mentally kicked herself for rushing over
instead of carefully adding a delay. How was it that Futaba wasn't there already? Ren was adjusting
the position of the table used for their meetings. He looked equally surprised to see her. Though the
chairs were already in place, Morgana was sitting atop the table.

"Are you feeling better?" Makoto asked. Ren looked well, but how much had she missed all the
other times he seemed okay?

"Yeah," Ren tilted his head down and ran one of his hands through his hair. Makoto couldn't make
out Ren's eyes through the glare of his glasses.

"I'm glad," Makoto said quietly.

"You're blocking the stairs," Yusuke said from right behind Makoto. She jumped. She hadn't heard
him come up.

"S-sorry," Makoto quickly made her way to her usual seat on the couch.

Yusuke sat on the bench, his back turned, giving his long legs room to spread out. He put his bag
down beside him and took out the bento Makoto had given him earlier in the week. He turned to her
and slid it across the table. "Thank you. You are skilled."

"I'm relieved to hear you say that." Makoto lifted the bento. It had been well cleaned. She put it in
her bag.

Ren glanced from Makoto to Yusuke and back again, looking confused. He spoke to Makoto, a hint
of playfulness in his otherwise serious expression. "You've never made me a bento."
"You live in a restaurant," Makoto responded. She wasn't sure what to make of Ren's tone.

"I wouldn't mind something other than curry," Ren remarked. He offered an inviting smile. "You wouldn't have to catch me at the station either."

"Actually she delivered it when she came to pose for me the other day," Yusuke said nonchalantly.

Ren's smile dropped. He looked at Morgana questioningly. Whatever expression the cat made back, Makoto couldn't see. Ren turned away, seeming to examine the collection of knick knacks on his bookshelf. He sounded rather disinterested when he spoke next. "I didn't know you were working together."

"Not very well. All he drew were mice," Makoto remembered.

"That was just the last page. To the contrary it turned out better than I expected," said Yusuke. "When put in an uncomfortable situation, your body evokes a certain... fragility... I wonder if I can capture that softness under my brush -"

Ren stood up suddenly. He grabbed Morgana by the torso with both hands, lifting him off the table. His head was down and his face red. "Morgana and I have to have a little chat."

Makoto watched as the pair took off down the stairs. Did he think... no, it wouldn't matter to him.

"Anyway, I wonder if I can communicate your dual nature in a painting. Idiosyncratic gentility from a post-apocalyptic raider. It might work as one of set of pieces with a common theme."

Makoto forced a smile. Yusuke could be so terribly backhanded.

While Ren and Morgana were away, Ann and Ryuji arrived with a plastic bag full of convenience store snacks, much to Yusuke's delight. Haru arrived shortly thereafter, having had to change out of the gym uniform she wore while gardening. When Ren and Morgana returned, Futaba was with them, sheepishly claiming something about a 'raid.'

With all of the Phantom Thieves gathered, Morgana went over the requests and as usual, everyone was in agreement. The group was soon on their way to Shibuya, the entrance to Mementos.

Makoto sat in driver's seat of Morgana, watching Ren and the others fight a group of shadows blocking their path. At the last rest area, Ren had insisted she and Morgana stay back and be prepared if the team had to make a quick escape and needed serious healing. Makoto didn't quite follow the logic. It wasn't like they hadn't been there before. Furthermore, she thought it would be better if at least one of them were in the midst of things. With the Anzu-type shadows being common, Makoto felt her nuclear skills would come in handy. However, Ren was their leader and had final say.

Mementos had only become more creepy the deeper they went. An eerie purple cast permeated the current floor. The train tracks were made of bones. The whispers... voices... that Makoto had told herself were her imagination on the earlier floors could no longer be ignored. Makoto hoped she wasn't letting her fear show. Perhaps that's why Ren had been adamant she not fight. She thought she had hid it well and fought equally well, but perhaps she was been wrong. She frowned and contemplated how she might become more reliable.

Technicolor bubbles briefly lit the tracks. Haru smiled sweetly as the pack of monkey-like shadows hit the floor. It wasn't long before the shadows were no more. Soon everyone was piling back into Morgana.
An impassable barrier with delicate glimmering designs in red awaited them on the next floor. They had trusted Futaba's initial assessment upon entering Mementos, but the barrier made a natural goal while training, especially when they needed to sweep for targets anyway. Makoto's stomach churned. Though the rest of the team was unaware, Makoto knew they were training to fight Sis next. Makoto ran her fingers along one of the threads of red in the door.

"Let's head back," Ren called to the team. "We'll handle the requests we missed on the way down."

Reaching floors where the train tracks were still made of metal, Morgana sensed a nearby target. It didn't take long to find a snarl in Mementos where the tracks spiraled into an ominous glow of red and black. It was unclear if these were seeds of palaces to come or momentary blips in the ever-shifting space of the collective cognition. Makoto drove Morgana and the rest of the team into the distorted pocket of space.

A man, a nondescript adult, stood at the center of the small enclosed area. The Phantom Thieves exited Morgana, allowing their teammate to return to his mascot-like form.

"So that Shadow's the boss of that journalist, Ohya," Morgana informed everyone. "Honjo Shinpei."

"He looks so suspicious," remarked Ryuji. Under the green cast of Mementos, the facsimile of a human looked especially unnerving.

"Well, he is obstructing a news investigation to keep some incident hidden under the rug," Yusuke reminded the team.

"People died in that incident," Makoto added. "He should be ashamed to call himself a journalist."

"We'll have to make him see the truth!" Ann took out her whip. With that, the group started advancing on Honjo's shadow. In turn, the shadow seemed to take notice of them.

"You..." the shadow started. "Are you that kid Ohya's fooling around with?"

All eyes turned to Ren. So this was about Ren's girlfriend. Makoto hadn't really thought about it before—if Ren was dating an adult, of course their relationship would be adult. She felt her face getting warm.

"Dude!" Ryuji grinned broadly. "With that hot reporter chick who was snoopin' around Madarame's place?! That's our leader for ya!"

"Skull!" Ann exclaimed, chastisingly. Makoto just continued to look on, mouth hanging open.

"Joker, this relationship is unbecoming of-" Yusuke started.

"Fox." Ann interrupted. She brought the bottom of her palm to the forehead of her cat mask and groaned.

"Guys..." Two red-gloved hands rose to shoulder height.

"Fufufu," Futaba made an exaggerated laugh and raised her index finger. "We've discovered your elicit affair Joker!"

"Does this mean Joker likes older women?" Haru giggled, lacing her fingers together behind her back.

"Noir, Oracle..." Ann shook her head into her already raised palm.
"Guys... we were just pretend-dating to hide Ohya-san's investigation from this-" Ren cut his sentence short and turned to Makoto who was simultaneously turning towards him. As their eyes met, both mouthed an 'Oh.'

"Hm hm... what's this?" Haru seemed to be amused.

Makoto hoped the relative darkness of Mementos was hiding her blush. She said the first related thing she could think of. "Uh, we... also had to pretend-date..."

"It was to catch a man scamming Shujin students," Ren quickly added. Makoto appreciated the time to compose herself.

"Oooh, so Joker was pretend-two-timing. I am so pretend-shocked and pretend-disappointed," Haru smiled sweetly. She broadened her smile further, lips parting to reveal her teeth. Her eyes opened. "Maybe Queen should pretend-pummel him."

Makoto seized upon the joke, hoping it was diffusing the awkwardness. She summoned her matter-of-fact student council president voice. "Now, now, I have pretend-moved on."

"Is that so?" Ren said quietly, leaning towards Makoto so only she could hear. She could feel the warmth of his breath. "Because you seemed real-jealous."

Makoto felt like all the blood vessels in her face were going to burst. Ren flashed her a confident, mischievous smile. He spun towards the shadow and raised his voice. "Come on everyone, let's do this."

Chapter End Notes

Still feeling pretty new to AO3. I've been thinking a lot lately about this fic has drifted from its first few chapters. Is there anything I can add to the tags/summary/notes to help people get a better idea of what it is?
I'm ready to infiltrate Sis's palace.

Makoto watched as the rest of the Phantom Thieves rushed past her, carried on the steel tracks of the Universe Coaster. Ren and Haru were smiling, Haru clinging to Ren's arm. Yusuke seemed to be contemplating something, probably how to translate it all to art. Futaba, Ann, and Ryuji had their arms high in the air. Makoto swore she could hear Ann's screams over the mechanical sounds of the thrill ride. Makoto had declined the ride, partially because seven was an inconvenient number of potential riders, partially so Morgana wouldn't feel too left out, and partially because she was having trouble being properly celebratory knowing that they would soon be fighting in Sis's palace.

Stealing Sis's heart before anything worse happened was the right move, the best Makoto could do to protect her sister. Makoto knew that... and yet, she couldn't help but feel that by revealing the palace, she would be betraying Sis. At the same time, letting the distortion fester would also be a betrayal. Makoto wished something, anything, would happen to give her more time.

In the intervening days, Makoto had found several jobs that Sis would be qualified for, but it was unclear whether they would be available or whether her sister would be blackballed following her change of heart. However, Makoto would be graduating in a few months. She might be able to support them as an office lady until Sis got back on her feet, especially if she augmented their income with a second job. She briefly thought back to the promoters in Shinjuku. Maybe some of those job offers wouldn't be so bad. Eiko had said her employer didn't make her do anything weird. Of course, it would have to be kept secret though. Makoto frowned. How to moonlight in such a position wasn't exactly something she could learn by studying or asking teachers.

"Looks like they're done!" Morgana announced, lifting his head from the flower bed he had been sniffing. Ren and the others were exiting through the Universe Coaster's turnstiles. "They must've ridden that thing at least four times in a row."

"This is the best!" Futaba twirled, led by her big clunky boots that appeared to weigh more than she did. "Destinyland with NO PEOPLE!"

"Havin' the park to ourselves is amazin'!" Ryuji echoed.

"Fufu... We are the rulers of the kingdom of dreams!" Futaba raised herself on the toe of one boot, right index finger held high in the air. As she came down, she resumed her rapid speech. "Oh oh... I know! Let's get costume pictures!"

"I want to see Lady Ann dressed up..." Morgana said dreamily. He looked up at them with glassy eyes, clearly already half in his imagination.

"Eh... I do this stuff for work all the time," said Ann.

"...Actually, I always wanted to have girlfriends I could do these kinds of things with," Haru said shyly as she brought a couple fingers to her chin. She rocked the ankle of her back foot.

"Then it's settled!" Morgana said happily. He and Futaba were soon heading in the direction of the park's main thoroughfare where at least one such photo stage was available. Haru and Ann followed.
"Aw man, no way am I playin' dress up," Ryuji frowned.

"I think it might be interesting," said Yusuke as he strolled towards the girls. "Maybe I'll find some inspiration."

"Go ahead," Ren said to Makoto, motioning his head in the direction of Futaba and the others. Makoto hadn't noticed he had sidled up beside her. She had been trying her hardest to not stare (noticeably at least) at him all evening and to not pick apart the things he did and see only what she wanted to see. Her ruminations on his actions the past several weeks had only left her confused. He smiled at her. It wasn't helping. "I'll make sure Morgana and Ryuji don't kill each other."

"R-right," Makoto hurried to catch the others, feeling her face get warm.

Futaba was already in the shop by the time Makoto caught up. She briefly looked back, seeing Ren and Ryuji leaning against a railing with full view of the shop's set. Morgana was sitting in front of them, keeping out of sight of the shopkeeper. Futaba began giving orders.

"Ann, you be Sleeping Beauty," Futaba shoved a dress into Ann's hands and another into Makoto's. The shopkeeper, a pretty woman, probably around Sis's age, seemed amused at Futaba's enthusiasm. "Makoto, you be Snow White."

"I'll take this one," Haru giggled as she picked a powder blue dress off the racks.

"I'd rather be a villain," Ann said, raising her eyebrows and flashing an evil smile.

"Nooo... It's more fun when we all match." Futaba all but shoved Ann into the ladies' dressing area. She turned to Yusuke, blushing slightly. "And you have to be a prince."

Yusuke shrugged, putting down the unwieldy mascot costume he had been examining and grabbing an ornate military-esque uniform from the middle of a group of them on the rack.

"Why don't you try the next one?" the shopkeeper said, exchanging hangers with Yusuke. "It will work over your pants."

Makoto changed into her dress with help from Haru lacing up the back. For a general-purpose costume, the fit was surprisingly flattering. Makoto figured that was how they made sales. Ann sat in front of a lighted mirror, taking down her twin tails and affixing a tiara. Makoto and Haru decided to forgo their headpieces.

"I'm surprised Futaba likes this kind of stuff," Makoto watched as Futaba spun around, the jade skirts of her dress floating upwards.

Futaba came to an abrupt stop. She looked at Makoto curiously with a small frown. "Even I like to be girly on occasion."

Makoto didn't respond, embarrassed by her voiced assumption.

"Come on, our camera awaits!" Futaba rushed forward, linking arms with a surprised Makoto and Haru. Ann stood up from the stool she was sitting on, following them.

Yusuke was already in the set piece. It was decorated to look like an opulent ballroom from one of the movies. He was carefully examining the embellishments on the drapery that hung before a fake window. Ren, Ryuji, and Morgana had moved, standing just behind the tripod of a large camera.

"Lady Ann with her hair down..." Morgana's voice couldn't contain his excitement. "So beautiful..."
Ryuji just stared, slack-jawed. Ren seemed amused.

"Hmm. Disappointing," Yusuke said bluntly. "We all look rather pedestrian."

"These are characters from an international conglomerate," Makoto said flatly. "It's to be expected."

Futaba looked at Yusuke and frowned. The artist continued to pick at the set, uninterested in the girls.

Haru put her hand on the smaller girl's shoulder, bending slightly at the knee. "Why don't we take some pictures?"

Futaba nodded vigorously, some affirmative mumbly sounds escaping her throat.

Makoto and Haru flanked Futaba, with Yusuke standing on the other side of Makoto and Ann on the other side of Haru. The shopkeeper took several shots, some serious and some silly. Makoto never knew what face to be making in either type. While Futaba, Haru, and Ann made funny faces at the camera, Makoto starting thinking about how she might bring up Sis's palace with them, how she would frame it, what she would say.

"We should do some romantic photos... have someone dance with the prince!" Haru said over a giggle. Makoto looked over to see that Futaba had dragged Yusuke down to her height for the last photo. Ren seemed to be taking additional pictures with his cell phone. Ryuji was still next to him, looking increasingly uncomfortable. Futaba's eyes were wide at Haru's suggestion. Haru continued. "But who's prince is he?"

"Huh..." Ann looked perplexed, then she laughed. "All the princes look the same, don't they?"

"Then it probably doesn't matter," said Makoto. "He might be from a completely different movie."

"But if we have a pair, shouldn't we get a photo?" asked Haru.

"I wish I could be Lady Ann's prince," Morgana's mumbles were just within earshot. Even with Haru's connections, the team thought it best not to alert the staff to his presence. "Just one photo..."

"Hmm... He has these gold parts on his outfit here," Haru said, pointing to the clasps on Yusuke's jacket. She sounded like she was having fun. "I think that makes him my prince."

"B-but he's wearing black pants," said Futaba. "Doesn't yours wear red?"

As her friends continued to argue, Makoto's eyes wandered towards the big castle at the end of the street, the palace at the center of Destinyland. It was strange to be celebrating in the shadow of it. The very first palace the Phantom Thieves had entered had been a castle. Ann didn't seem bothered by it though. Makoto hadn't ever thought about visiting a casino, but after everything that happened, she was absolutely sure she would never do so.

"Oh! Then he might be Mako-chan's prince!"

"N-no way."

Pondering further on the subject, Makoto couldn't help but note that the gaudy, fake spectacle that was Destinyland was very much like a palace. She wondered what it meant that the collective cognition was an eerie place like Mementos, instead of a big commercial theme park like the one in which she stood. Viewed as a palace, the bright lights of all the shops and attractions took on a sinister cast. The costumed characters and shopkeepers they shared the park with seemed all the more...
perverse. The looping festive themes playing in the background seemed somehow oppressive. Makoto thought back to the loud, glaring lights of Sis's casino, a symptom of the sick manifestation of her sister's distortion. They would be there soon. Everything around Makoto appeared to be distorting. She blinked several times, finding it hard to focus.

"My Lady Queen."

Makoto snapped to attention, noticing Ren kneeling next to her. His head was down with one knee and the opposite arm touching the ground. A small laugh escaped her lips. "Are you a knight?"

Ren lifted his head slightly, his eyes raising to meet hers over his frames. He grinned. "I'm a thief come to steal you away."

With that, Ren grabbed Makoto's wrist, dragging her off the set. He called to the others. "I think Makoto needs to sit down."

Haru and Futaba looked up from the binder they were going over with the shopkeeper and nodded. Ann smiled and waved before returning to making weird one-legged, arms-out poses with Yusuke, which seemed extra weird given she was in a ballgown. The two appeared to be correcting each other's form. Ryuji had taken to reading something on his phone, not noticing them.

Makoto followed Ren as he led her to the large fountain in front of the castle, sitting her down on the edge of it. Fortunately, the center pillar blocked most of the castle's brightest lights. "Stay right there, I'm going to get some water."

Ren returned shortly, twisting open the cap of the bottle he received from the nearest food cart. He handed it to Makoto as he sat down on the fountain ledge next to her. "Are you okay? I was worried you were going to hyperventilate."

Makoto grasped the bottle in both hands. She looked at Ren, lips parting briefly. Instead she just nodded and took a sip from the bottle. She hadn't realized how heavily she had been breathing. Her head felt cloudy.

"What happened?"

"I don't know... I was thinking about the lights and Sis's palace and suddenly everything..."

Ren regarded Makoto with a serious expression.

"Don't worry, I'll tell them," said Makoto. "I've been thinking about how to all evening. I know. We have to stop my sister before it gets any worse. It's just..."

"Don't do it tonight." Ren sighed, running one of his hands through his hair. His lips formed a small, reassuring smile. "We'll handle it next meeting. We're celebrating tonight. For Haru. Try not to think about it right now."

I can't...

"Mmm." Makoto gave a terse, affirmative nod. She took another sip from the water bottle. Ren sat with her, watching as she continued to drink. It was comforting to have him there, even if he didn't say anything. The quiet was welcome. The soothing sound of flowing waters behind them blocked out most of the cacophony of the park. As Makoto finished the water, she looked up at Ren. His expression was calm. "Thank you. I needed that."

Ren simply smiled. Sitting there, alone with Ren, away from the chaos of the team, the bright lights,
and the competing noises, Makoto found herself letting her worries relax their hold. Even though she
didn't have a plan and was unsure, she felt as if she could voice her feelings. "Ren, I-"

"Ready to head back?" Ren stood up abruptly, his expression unreadable. He offered her a hand.
Makoto looked at it, unsure what to think. "Makoto?"

"Y-yes." After a pause, Makoto took Ren's hand, letting him spot her but not meeting his gaze. To
her surprise, he placed her hand in the crook of his arm as she stood.

"Let me escort you my queen," Ren teased. Why did he have to be so confusing?

"Sure..." Makoto cupped her hand around Ren's upper arm.

When the pair returned, Ann was standing outside the set, still in her gown. She held Morgana while
Haru, also still in costume, took pictures with her cell phone. Ryuji watched, looking bored, his arms
folded across his chest. In the fake ballroom, Futaba and Yusuke were having photographs taken by
the shopkeeper.

"Mako-chan! Are you okay?"

"Yes. Sorry about that. I must have locked my knees without thinking."

"It's okay. I think we're done with group photos."

"So, Yusuke ended up being Futaba's prince after all?"

"No. He is from a different movie." Haru let loose a small laugh. "So we're both going to get
dancing pictures."

"Yusuke's being surprisingly accommodating," Makoto noted.

"I may have gently reminded him that it is my party," Haru smiled broadly.

"Hey!" Futaba shouted over from the set. She was leaning backwards, supported at the waist by
Yusuke. One of her arms was waving vigorously. "We're done! Can someone help me out of this
dress?!"

"I will!" Ann shouted back. As she walked past Makoto, Ren, and Haru, Morgana hopped from
Ann's arms to Haru's shoulder.

"It's my turn!" Haru turned towards the set, making her way hastily.

"I wanna see the pictures of me and Lady Ann!" Morgana pointed his nose towards the phone Haru
was still grasping in both hands. Makoto could see his tail was waving back and forth behind Haru's
back.

"I'm going to change back too." Makoto released Ren's upper arm, but before she could slip free, he
brought his other hand over hers, keeping her attached to his arm. She lurched back.

"Makoto."

"Eh?" Makoto turned to face Ren. His eyes didn't meet hers. They were shaded by his hair.

"You..." He paused, then released her. "Nevermind."

"Mmm..." Makoto briefly considered prying, but instead took off for the changing area. When she
had closed half the distance, she looked back over her shoulder. Ren was still watching her go. She quickly turned back and continued on.

Ann was putting her hair back up when Makoto entered the dressing room. Futaba was about to leave but stopped to help Makoto unlace her costume.

"Satisfied?" Makoto asked.

Futaba laughed as if she had gotten away with something. "Yes."

The three girls exited together.

"It's about time! That was so boring," said Ryuji. He held out his phone. "But look at the message boards! They're postin' like crazy about tonight's press conference! Everyone's supportin' us!"

Makoto frowned. She felt her fists balling. "The important thing is saving Haru from that slimeball."

"Sure, but this is damn cool," Ryuji beamed.

"Stop wasting time! Destinyland with no people only happens once!" Futaba argued. She stopped for a moment, appearing to be lost in thought. "Ears! We haven't gotten ears yet! Come on!"

"Alright," Ryuji groaned, following Futaba, Ann and Morgana along with him.

Makoto watched as the others headed to a shop across the cobblestone way. She had looked inside it earlier, finding the pair she wanted wasn't available. "I'll wait here and let Haru and Yusuke know where you've gone."

Ren regarded Makoto for a moment, but then nodded. He strolled towards the hat shop. Futaba was trying on several pairs, but a set of rabbit ears with a small top hat never left her hands. Ryuji was browsing through the spinnable shelves at the front.

"Cat ears are perfect for Lady Ann!" Morgana said when Ann emerged from the back of the store wearing a headband with a green and white polka dot bow.

Soon Futaba, Ryuji, and Ann had "purchased" their ear headbands. It was all being covered by Haru's father's company in truth. The trio started posing as Ren held up his phone.

"What's going on with Futaba and Yusuke?" Haru asked with a smile, strolling up next to Makoto. She hadn't realized that Haru and Yusuke were already done with their photoshoot. Futaba was once again glancing over in the artist's direction. Yusuke was sitting on the edge of a planter, sketching away, oblivious of the world around him.

"Hmm... I think he must remind her of the characters from those manga she reads." Makoto thought back to some of the amateur-drawn books Futaba had excitedly shown her once she found out about Makoto's burgeoning interest in manga. Makoto quickly turned her attention to something else, trying to fight back a growing blush. "I don't think it could work though. Yusuke has a very... rigid... conception of the ideal woman. Futaba is more of a free spirit and... she needs someone more gentle and kind."

"Ah. So someone more like Ren then?" Haru's smile widened. The impromptu ear-headband photoshoot had ended. Futaba had both of her arms wrapped around one of Ren's, tugging him in the direction of a park worker holding a very large tree of cotton candy. Ren was looking down at the girl, smiling genuinely. They looked like they were having fun.
"Y-yes..." Makoto stared at the pair, nursing a twinge of regret. She remembered to act normally. She summoned her advisor voice. "Yes, that would be better for Futaba. I approve."

"Teehee, Mako-chan is like a protective older sister."

"I always wanted a little sister..." Makoto found herself blushing again. She re-tucked a stray hair behind her ear.

"Someone like Futaba?"

"Yes... Futaba is just so cute, but she's also talented and kind and just a little naughty," Makoto smiled briefly, but then cast her eyes down. "Futaba has been through so much. I don't know how she contains it all in that tiny little body. I can't help but want to protect her."

"Perhaps it's Mako-chan who would like to offer herself as Futaba's prince?" Haru beamed her usual smile but as the question lingered her expression fell and a trace of uncertainty seemed to cross her face. Makoto realized she was waiting for an answer.

"I've been told I would 'totally flunk a test about love.'" Makoto offered a weak smile. She watched as Ren laughed while Futaba took a big mouth-filling chomp of cotton candy, their arms still linked. It was time to change the subject. "What about you Haru? Have you ever wanted a sister?"

"I would have liked to have siblings," said Haru. "Futaba is indeed a lot of fun."

Makoto smiled.

"Though ideally..." Haru brought a finger to her lips and looked up as if she was thinking. "I would like a sister who was a little innocent, a little uptight, and a little oblivious—she'd be so much fun to tease!"

"Haru is so imaginative." Makoto's eyes widened. She was impressed.

"Thank you!" Haru smiled sweetly and giggled softly. The two continued to watch the others. Ren ran a finger along Futaba's cheek, removing a pink puff of cotton candy. He then licked it off his finger while Futaba looked on, a light blush crossing her face. Haru mused. "I wonder when she'll realize..."

Makoto's lips parted.

"Hey Mako-chan," Haru started. "What would you do if you and your sister liked the same person? Would you give up or would you fight?"

"Wouldn't it depend more on how the other person feels?"

"Relationships are built by at least two people," Haru said as Futaba began to drag Ren in their direction. Ann, Ryuji, and Morgana followed. Haru turned to Makoto. "Better study hard!"

"Hey guys, let's go to the Haunted Villa!" exclaimed Futaba.


"They should be safe for Mona," Futaba added.

"Finally!" Morgana whined. "It feels like it's been hours."
"I'll stay here." Makoto did not find the thought of the Haunted Villa appealing. "Someone should let the staff know where we are. It looks like they'll be setting up dinner for us soon."

"Are you scared?" Futaba grinned, arching her feet and leaning in to look closer at Makoto's face.

"Come on Makoto, it's for kids," said Ryuji.

"I-I'm sure it is, but someone has to-"

"Hey, let's not force her guys." Ren stood next to Makoto and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"We just want you to have fun Makoto," said Ann.

"I am having fun," Makoto offered a small smile. "Go on. I'll be right here."

Futaba skipped off towards Yusuke and was soon dragging the artist in the direction of the Haunted Villa. Ann, Haru, Ryuji, and Morgana headed directly for the ride. Ren looked over towards the castle where park workers were beginning to set up a dining table. He gave a brief nod to Makoto before catching up with Ann and the others.

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"F-Father...!?" Haru stared into her phone. It was the same thing on all of their screens, an apologetic notice from the broadcasting company, cut in after Okumura had faced the camera, black blood streaming from every orifice, and collapsed. "Mona-chan, what's going on?"

"No..." Morgana's voice sounded weak. "That's impossible!"

"We did everything the same," Ren whispered. His face looked white.

"We followed all the same steps!" Morgana's voice got louder and more frantic. "We made sure we just took the Treasure too..."

"I-I should call home." Haru turned from the table and began typing on her phone.

"This... This isn't our fault... is it?" Ann asked. "It's been OK all four times so far—ever since Kamoshida!"

"If we let the Shadow live, the real person won't undergo mental shutdown... right?" Makoto imagined Sis with black blood streaming down her face. She felt her heart seize.

"That's how it should work..." A hint of uncertainty found its way into Morgana's speech.

"A-Ah..." Futaba mumbled. Her knees were shaking. She seemed barely able to stand. "Th-This is... the same. I remember now... It's just like... what happened to my mom..."

"Dammit! The hell's goin' on here!?"

"I-I have to go... I'll talk to the staff before I leave. Feel free to take your time..." Haru managed to squeak out before running off.

"Haru!" Ann reached after her.

"I'll get in contact with Haru later," said Makoto. The image of Okumura's bleeding face...and sometimes Sis's... kept coming to her. The team. She had to stay focused on the team. "I think we should all return home."
Makoto stood up and put an arm around Futaba. She started directing the trembling girl towards the exit. Futaba was staring blankly into the distance. Makoto was unsure if the small squeaks she made were acknowledgements or evidence of something else entirely going on in Futaba's head.

The others, with the exception of Ren and Morgana, followed, soon overtaking Makoto and Futaba. Ren was looking up at the sky, his unruly locks falling over his glasses. Morgana waited, watching.

"Ren?" Makoto called to him as she maintained forward progress with Futaba.

Ren let out a breath, lowering his head to face Makoto. "I'm coming."

It was a silent walk to Maihama station. When they arrived, Ann and the others were waiting for them on the platform. As they further waited for the train, Makoto heard snippets of conversation from strangers, most talking about the press conference, both about the revelations about Okumura Foods and about Okumura's startling collapse. Makoto kept her head down and held Futaba close.

Once on the train, Makoto sat Futaba down, continuing to hold her. Yusuke sat on the other side of Futaba. Ren stood in front of them, grasping a hand ring. It afforded them some modicum of privacy, for which Makoto was grateful. Ryuji restlessly paced back and forth across the aisle. Ann sat on the other side of Yusuke, not taking her eyes off of Ryuji. No one said anything. The other people on the train continued their gossip.

The Phantom Thieves parted ways at Shibuya station, each heading towards their respective home.

"I'm going to see that Futaba gets home okay," Makoto told Ryuji. Futaba had fallen asleep on the trip from Maihama. Ren was carrying her in his arms. Makoto carried Ren's bag and her own.

"Right," said Ryuji. He lowered his voice. "Keep an eye on him too."

"I will."

As she had done the previous leg, Makoto tried to focus on Futaba and on Ren. She could possibly do something for them. She could not do anything about the bleeding faces that kept haunting her thoughts nor the memories of her own father's death.

Futaba's head rested in Makoto's lap. As before, Ren stood in front of them.

"I hope this is just a normal sleep," Makoto said, recalling the events following Futaba's palace. "We should warn Sakura-san."

Ren's jaw tightened.

"I-I see..." Makoto cast her eyes downward. "Do you want me to not-"

"No... No. It wasn't your fault. I know that, but..." Ren managed. "Sojiro is one of the few people who gave me a second chance and Futaba... When it comes to them I guess I'm-"

"I understand." The last thing Makoto wanted to do was push Ren, especially given everything that had just happened.

"I'm grateful you're coming with me," Ren said firmly. Makoto smiled weakly in return.

The walk from Yongen-jaya station to Sakura-san's house was uneventful. It was getting late enough that the streets had started to clear out. Only the few bars and a used goods shop remained open. An elderly shopkeeper eyed Makoto and Ren as they walked by.
Sakura-san came to the door quickly when they knocked. His eyes widened for a moment and even as they came to rest, he bore a curious expression.

"W-We were at Destinyland and-" Makoto started.

"Destinyland?" Sakura-san's eyes once again widened before narrowing. Makoto got the sense he was regarding them with suspicion.

"It was reserved for a corporate event that got cancelled. Haru brought us," Makoto explained.

"Um... we were watching the press conference and... and... she said it reminded her of her mother dying and-"

"Let's get her to bed," Sakura-san interrupted gruffly.

Makoto slipped off her shoes in Sakura-san's entrance way. Ren was already into the house, carrying Futaba to her room. Sakura-san behind him. Ren laid Futaba down in her bed and then retrieved his bag from Makoto. Morgana hopped out, landing on the bed next to Futaba.

"I'm going to watch over her for a bit... make sure nothing Metaverse-related happens," said Morgana. "I'll catch up."

"That cat..." Sakura-san looked even more suspicious of them. He sighed and scratched the back of his head. "Well... I guess she is rather fond of him."

"Um... we're really sorry," Makoto said, not meeting Sakura-san's eyes.

"Why? Is it your fault?"

Makoto wasn't sure. She continued to glance down towards her feet. Was it their fault? Surely it was the one in black... but the timing... and Ren and the others seemed to think...

"We better get to the station," Ren said, putting an arm around Makoto and leading her out of the room. "See you tomorrow."

"Goodnight Sakura-san," Makoto said over her shoulder.

Once they had left Sakura-san's house, Ren let go of Makoto's shoulder. She followed a couple paces behind him, mulling over the night's events. As they passed by LeBlanc, she stopped. The street was lit dimly by the lights from LeBlanc and the nearby bar.

"Ren..."

Ren stopped. He turned back towards her and closed the distance. The two stood in front of the entrance to LeBlanc.

"This isn't your fault. You know that... right?" Makoto looked into Ren's eyes, hoping for some sort of confirmation. "This has to be the one in black... it's just like all the other cases."

"But we..."

Makoto shook her head. "I know... but something... something seems... off. I don't know what it is yet, but regardless... you didn't do this. I'm sure of it."

You're not a killer. Makoto thought the words best left unsaid.

"I'm... I'm worried about you," Makoto brought her hand to Ren's cheek. He closed his eyes and
pressed into it. Makoto shifted her gaze away. "After that press conference... I'm sure my sister won't be coming home tonight. I-I could stay..."

Ren's eyes snapped open. He looked down at Makoto. There was tension around his eyes, his lips. Makoto wasn't sure if he was contemplating it or just searching for the right words. An eternity seemed to pass. Makoto wondered if she was pressuring him. She decided to remove the social burden.

"I-I didn't think this through," Makoto said hastily, removing her hand from Ren's face. She laughed nervously. "I mean... Morgana is with you and I don't have my nightslip or a toothbrush and you don't have an extra bed and, and..."

Makoto stopped to breathe. "You'll be okay?"

Ren nodded.

"I-I better get to the station." Makoto began briskly walking towards Yongen-jaya station. She berated herself for being foolish... and selfish. Ren had Morgana. She was the one that didn't want to be alone. Ren had enough to worry about without her problems.

Neither Makoto nor Ren said anything the rest of the way to the station. Ren waited on the platform with Makoto. The trains didn't come as frequently so late at night. Makoto checked on Ren from the corner of her eye. She couldn't read his expression. However he might feel, there was nothing else she could do. Her thoughts drifted next to Haru. She wondered if she should try calling. She thought back to when she found out about Dad, trying to remember what she would have wanted.

Sis...

...but as far as Makoto knew, Haru didn't have anyone.

Makoto's thoughts were interrupted by the train approaching. The doors opened to an empty car. Makoto walked inside. When she got to the middle of the aisle, she turned towards Ren. As the doors began to close, she offered a small wave before turning her attention back to the rows of empty seats before her. Choosing one of those seats seemed strangely difficult.

The sound of two quick thumps startled Makoto. She turned towards the sound to see Ren standing next to her. Behind him, the train car doors were just finishing closing. She looked up at him. "R-Ren?"

"If you're going to make that face..." Ren gripped one of the train car poles with one hand, his other wrapping around Makoto's waist, drawing her in. "You... you also lost-"

"Mmm." Makoto didn't want to hear the rest of the sentence. She rested her head against Ren and closed her eyes. "W-what about Morgana? Won't he be worried?"

"Yes." Ren sighed. He let go of the pole and took out his phone. He started tapping at it with his free hand. "When we get to Shibuya, I'll..."

"Right." Makoto didn't want to monopolize too much of Ren's time.

"Don't worry about your sister's palace or any of that right now. There's so much we don't know. I'll call everyone together after school tomorrow."

Sis's palace... Makoto had wanted a reason to avoid it, wished for a reason, but this... this wasn't what she wanted. A bitter, acidic taste welled up in the back of her throat. She fought it back down.
Ren's hold on her tightened.

The pair exited the train at Shibuya station. Ren walked with Makoto toward her connection. There were still several people around, though much fewer than more standard times of day. They seemed to be keeping to themselves at least, rather than discussing the Okumura press conference.

"Will you be okay?" Ren asked.

"Yes." Makoto took a deep breath.

As they walked, the sign for the platform towards Kasumigaseki caught Makoto's attention. Dad...

Makoto felt an arm across her back, encouraging her forward. It was Ren's. She hadn't realized she had stopped. She looked over at him. He didn't meet her gaze. He seemed to have increased in pace. Makoto had to focus to keep up.

"Hey! Guys!" Ryuji's voice echoed through the near-empty station.

"Ryuji!" Makoto quickly spotted their teammate. "What are you still doing here?"

Ryuji jogged up to Ren and Makoto where they had stopped.

"I was at Protein Lovers. I had to work out some of this... this..." Ryuji looked down and clenched his fists. He took a deep breath and looked up again. "Goin' home Makoto?"

"Mm."

"Me too. We can go together."

"I'd like that." Makoto turned to Ren. "T-thanks... for..."

"It's no problem."

Makoto and Ryuji parted ways with Ren, who headed back towards the Yongen-jaya train. After a few steps, Makoto glanced over her shoulder to check on him. Ren appeared to be walking normally. She hoped he would reach Morgana soon.

As Makoto and Ryuji reached the turnstiles, Makoto realized something was missing. "Ah... Ryuji, did you forget your gym bag?"

"Oh... uh..." Ryuji put both his hands in his pockets. "I have a locker at Protein Lovers."

"Oh."

The pair continued to the platform. They were lucky as a train soon arrived.

"How's he doin'?" Ryuji asked as they sat down in an otherwise empty train car. "He's been actin' weird for like, weeks, now. And this..."

"I don't know..." Makoto looked down towards her knees. "At least Morgana will be with him."

"I s'pose that cat's good for somethin'..." Ryuji gave a brief laugh. The joke failed to land. He shifted his position in his seat. "Y'know... it was me an' Ren who decided to steal Kamoshida's heart despite the chance he could die. Ann wasn't even with us back then. We knew the risks an' still we-"

"I don't think it was us," Makoto said, much more firmly than she felt. "Okumura was about to reveal
the source of the mental shutdowns. There's something else going on..."

"I hope you're right... Ann's really upset. There was a moment... she considered killin' Kamoshida, y'know?" Ryuji continued to fidget in his seat.

"But she didn't. She wouldn't." Makoto had not known, but it didn't matter. "We need to figure out what happened. Until then there's nothing we can do."

Ryuji grunted. He pounded his fist on the empty seat beside him.

Makoto changed the subject. "Which stop are you again?"

"Oh... uh, I was gonna see you to your door," Ryuji said, shifting his position yet again. "My mom's got the late shift. It's just the two of us."

"Thank you." Makoto remembered Ryuji telling her and the others how his abusive, alcoholic father walked out on them. She knew it wasn't the time to be prying and yet she couldn't stop herself. "Um, Ryuji... did you ever consider changing your father's heart?"

Ryuji came to a complete stop. He turned his head and looked straight at Makoto.

"I-I'm sorry! That was inconsiderate of me. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"Naw... it's okay. Been thinkin' about it a lot lately anyway." Ryuji sighed, leaning back with his arms behind his neck, staring into the ceiling. "I checked. He ain't in there. Dunno if that means he's dead or left the city or what. But I was relieved... I don't want to change his heart."

"Eh?"

"I don't want him back in our lives. I don't want his apology. I don't want my Mom to have to remember. She... she still loves him." Ryuji choked on the last few words. He ran one of his hands through his hair before resting them both on his thighs, hunching over. He grimaced. "An' so do I."

"Ryuji..." Makoto put her hand over one of his.

"Sorry. This is a bit heavy," a pained smile formed on Ryuji's face. "Him leavin' us back then was the best thing. You can't save some people from themselves... an' sometimes you gotta cut them out of your life before they take you with them. His leavin' did that for us. I dunno if I woulda learned it fast 'nough on my own."

Ryuji sighed again.

"Learnin' you can't change people..." Ryuji lifted his head, once again staring into the ceiling. "An' now it turns out you can. I dunno. Maybe I'm sacrificin' the love of my Mom's life for my own fear. It's not like there weren't good times."

Ryuji again pounded his fist on the empty seat next to it. "Dammit!"

Neither Makoto nor Ryuji said anything for several seconds.

"Heh. Not much of a hero, am I?" Ryuji turned to face Makoto.

"No... no that's not true," Makoto squeezed Ryuji's hand. "You can't be expected to-

"Yeah. Findin' that boundary is somethin' everyone has to do for themselves... an' that's why I worry about our leader," Ryuji clenched his hands tighter. "I think he's runnin' into stuff even he can't
solve. Like tonight. He has to let some of it go."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Linkin-Phoenix on FFnet for some edit help!
I'm ready to infiltrate Sis's palace.

Makoto felt a tug on the sleeve of her kimono. Futaba was gripping it tightly. Makoto thought the smaller girl should have stayed home, but Futaba insisted on coming. Sakura-san had not argued—he simply gave her some money to buy a black dress. The kimono she wore during her mother's funeral had apparently been sold by her uncle. The rest of the team wore their school uniforms, observing the school guidelines strictly for once, out of respect. Makoto hadn't seen Yusuke wear the Kosei jacket before. His sleeves seemed several centimeters too short.

The group sat far in the back so as not to ruffle the feathers of the adults, Okumura's important associates. It served a dual purpose. The public saw the Phantom Thieves as killers. All their prior actions were considered merely cover for their later murders. The team thought it best not to attract attention.

Haru seemed so very far away across the crowd of mourners. It was as if she might be swallowed up by the sea of onlookers before her. Makoto remembered the view from that vantage point well. She frowned. It was frustrating that Haru was so far out of reach and so very alone.

The day after their fateful Destinyland party, Haru had questioned the team about the death of Principal Kobayakawa. Apparently a calling card had been found among his effects. The list of things the Phantom Thieves were being blamed for kept growing. Additionally, Haru had informed them that Sis was handling the case directly. Makoto feared what her sister might do.

Throughout the rest of the week, the death of Haru's father hung over the Phantom Thieves, unspoken but ever present. Makoto tried to keep herself busy taking care of Haru's school needs and double down on school festival preparation. She had wanted to check up on Haru and Ren as well but the staff at Haru's house wouldn't let her past the front gate and Ren had been leaving school quickly and turned down her offer to study. At the very least, Futaba seemed healthy. Left on her own, Makoto's thoughts cycled through the image of Okumura's bleeding face, the state of Sis's palace, and the curious and instantaneous turnabout of public opinion.

With everything going on, midterms had been a thankful respite.

Once midterms were behind them, the Phantom Thieves, including Haru who had just returned to school, gathered in Ren's attic at the behest of Futaba. She explained to them the results of her cyberforensic analysis over the past week, revealing a problem of a greater scale than they had imagined.
"...I think I'm starting to see the big picture," Makoto said from her seat on the couch. Her loosely closed hands were resting on her skirt. Ann sat next to her with Haru and Yusuke seated in chairs around the table. Ren hovered next to Haru. "Both Medjed's provocation and the tampering of the website brought attention to us as a result. On top of that, our reason for targeting Okumura was influenced by the public and the rankings... The perfect timing, and the perfect target. If both of these had been set up..."

"...It would all make sense," Yusuke finished the thought.

"So, the culprit was planning to put the blame on us from the start!?" Ann exclaimed. The others appeared to be equally unnerved. "No way..."

"This is all hypothetical," said Makoto. "We lack any hard evidence."

"But if all your deductions happen to be correct..." Morgana followed the thread from his perch on Ren's bed. Ryuji sat next to him, crossed legged. "That would mean we've been playing right into their hand for the past two months or so..."

"Hey... you think we're fallin' into another trap, even at this very moment?" There was fear in Ryuji's voice.

"Calm down," Ren broke his silence. Their leader's reticence that afternoon made the things he chose to say carry all the more weight.

"Yeah. This doesn't mean that we've lost yet," Morgana backed up Ren.

"Even if this is the action of a meticulous enemy, we'll just have to get back at them," Makoto concurred. "We need to find clues... No matter what."

Makoto looked around the room. Morgana was bright-eyed as always, but the rest of the team had cast down expressions. They didn't know what to do. Ren seemed calm, but serious. Makoto's eyes met his. She didn't look away. Ren's lips parted. He had gotten her message. She took a deep breath.

"My sister doesn't bring her laptop home anymore, but there might be another option. She has a palace," Makoto heard a few gasps. She avoided meeting any of her teammates' shocked faces. "Her cognition is extremely detailed. If we were to explore it..."

"...we might gain access to current police intelligence," Yusuke said grimly.

"Yes," Makoto said quietly. *I'm betraying Sis.*

"How can you be so sure?"

"I've been there..." Makoto focused on an empty spot on the table. "It's centered around the courthouse in Kasumigaseki. I haven't been in the palace proper, but I have been in the area surrounding it. I was able to enter the police station. There may be other potential targets as well."

"There may be clues inside the palace too," Morgana added what Makoto had been hesitant to voice.

"Yes... my sister's behavior has been... erratic," Makoto shifted her eyes, searching for the right words. "She's been under a lot of pressure at work. It wouldn't be surprising if we could learn something about the case inside."

Makoto paused, listening carefully for a response from the others. She was finding it difficult to hear over the pounding of her heart. She gathered herself as best she could and faced her friends. "We
may even need to change her heart."

"And what is it you believe she's doing?" asked Yusuke.

"It's highly likely she was the one threatening Sakura-san this summer," Makoto struggled to speak evenly. "In the past, something like that would have been unthinkable. There might be more."

Futaba looked at Makoto wide-eyed. She spoke slowly. "...How long has she had a palace?"

"At least since the day Kaneshiro's confession became public," Makoto fought her instinct to lower her head. She needed to face Futaba squarely. "I'm so sorry. I should have-"

"Ah." Futaba blinked twice and then pivoted towards the stairs. She walked out without saying another word.

"Fu-"

"Let her be," Ren said softly. He turned towards the bed. "Morgana."

"Right." Morgana hopped off the bed and scampered across the room and down the stairs.

Makoto stared across the table, vaguely towards the empty spot where Futaba had stood. She dropped her head, looking down at the edges of her uniform skirt. "...I'm sorry I didn't tell all of you sooner."

No one said anything. It felt like forever. Makoto looked up. "S-so?"

"I dunno Makoto..." Ryuji frowned, scratching his head. "I ain't exactly fired up about goin' into another palace after... y'know..."

"Ryuji!" Ann chastised.

"It's alright," Haru's voice betrayed only a hint of sadness, a testament to her upbringing. She turned to Makoto. "Are you sure?"

"I've thought this through," Makoto summoned her student council president voice. She held her head straight. "My sister's palace may hold the clues we need and we must stop her before her distortion progresses. So please..."

Haru shook her head. "We don't want to do anything you're clearly not comfortable with."

"Why do you think that?" Makoto regarded Haru curiously.

"Because Mako-chan," Haru's gaze was clear. She made a motion with her head towards Makoto's lap. "You're shaking."

Makoto looked down towards her hands, now balled into tight fists, trembling. She hadn't noticed her own fingernails digging deeply into the skin of her palms. She relaxed them. "Ah."

Ann placed a hand over one of Makoto's fists.

"It's true I have some reservations, but I thought about it a lot and if we don't change my sister's heart, she could-

"You think highly of your sister, don't you?" Ann asked plainly, her question taking Makoto by surprise. She bore a gentle smile.
"Mm." Makoto nodded.

Ann shifted her gaze down. "I often think... if only I had believed more, trusted more, in Shiho, then... then I-"

"Ann..." Ryuji interrupted, standing up. Ann looked at him, took a deep breath, and nodded.

"Have faith in your sister," Ann looked directly at Makoto. "We've trusted in your judgement this far. We'll trust in that faith."

"But what about-?"

"We haven't exhausted our options yet," said Yusuke. "Futaba has leads. Haru has direct access. You can still approach your sister outside of the Metaverse."

"Mm." Yusuke's words made sense. Makoto turned to Ren. His serious expression gave away little.

"Yusuke's right. We need to understand what's going on, but exploring the palace should be our last resort," said Ren. "It's too dangerous to enter it now."

"Then it's settled!" Ann flashed a big smile at Makoto and gave her hand a squeeze. Ann's acting still needed some practice, but Makoto appreciated the sentiment nonetheless.

"T-thank you."

"Will you be alright Mako-chan?" Haru tilted her head to one side.

"I will," Makoto squared her shoulders. She should be taking care of Haru, not the other way around. "We should check on Futaba though."

"I'll do it," Ren took a step forward, bringing himself even with Haru.

"We all want to make sure she's okay," said Ann.

"Morgana would have returned if it was urgent," Ren said calmly. "Let's not overwhelm her."

Shortly thereafter, the Phantom Thieves began gathering their belongings and helping Ren put away the added furniture. Makoto turned to Ann. "Go on without me. I... I need to properly apologize to Futaba."

Ann opened her mouth as if to say something, but then just nodded and made her way towards the first floor of LeBlanc. Soon Ren and Makoto were alone.

"I'd like to talk to Futaba," Makoto stated, standing up from her position on the couch. "If the situation is bad, I won't even enter her room."

Ren nodded, briefly closing his eyes as he did. Makoto started turning to leave, but stopped when she noticed Ren wasn't following her. Meeting her eyes, he spoke. "You once said your sister was all you have. Do you see that's not true now? You have all of us. You have..."

Makoto waited for Ren to finish his sentence, but no words came. However, there was no way the team could replace Sis. They were friends, but they all had their own lives. She couldn't go to them like she used to with Sis. "It's not the same."

"No. No it's not." Ren reached out his hand towards Makoto's face, but let it drop. "I'm asking you to rely on us more."
"I..." Makoto dropped her gaze downwards. "I don't want to be a burden."

"You're not," Ren sighed. "Do you see Haru as burden? Futaba?"

"No, of course not!" Makoto looked directly at Ren.

"Then..." Ren looked back at Makoto, squinting slightly for a moment. He gave a small, tired laugh.

"What?"

"It's nothing, just something Ryuji said..." Ren shook his head. "Come on, we should go check on Futaba."

Makoto and Ren made their way to Futaba's room. Sakura-san had simply raised an eyebrow at them and granted when they let him know their plans. Morgana must have seen to it that the front door of the residence remained unlocked. Ren knocked softly on Futaba's bedroom door. Nothing. He knocked again, this time with more force. "Futaba. It's me."

Morgana's shouting carried through the door. "Hey! Pay attention! Ren's here."

"Eh?" In contrast, Futaba's confused voice was barely audible. She raised it. "C-come in."

Ren opened the door. Futaba was sitting at her computer, hands on the headphones resting around her neck. She looked... perfectly normal. Makoto cautiously peered around the door frame. "I hope you don't mind the intrusion."

When Futaba shook her head, Makoto followed Ren into the room. "Are you okay?"

Futaba looked at Makoto. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well you left rather abruptly," Makoto lowered her eyes. "I thought you were upset about my sister and her palace and my-"

"Ah...yeah..." Futaba turned away, giving Makoto her profile. She brought a hand over her heart. "When you first said it was her, it really hurt..."

"I'm truly sorry Futaba. I should have-"

"It's not Makoto's fault," Futaba stated. "Kaneshiro's confession went public in July. I've been going back through the recordings. Your sister has been coming to LeBlanc at least since May."

"She was threatening Sakura-san in May?" This was worse than Makoto had thought. "Why didn't you-"

"Well... no," Futaba brought her knees to her chest, feet resting on the edge of her chair. She began picking at the fuzz on her seat cushion. "It only really got bad in late July... but there would have been barely enough time to change her heart between Kaneshiro's confession and then... it's not Makoto's fault."

Makoto shook her head. "It doesn't matter. The exact timing doesn't matter. I should have brought it up then. I was too scared of what I might learn—I was being selfish and because of that-"

"But I don't want to resent Makoto!" Futaba turned, facing Makoto head on.

"You don't have to," Ren said calmly.
Makoto smiled. Futaba really was something. Makoto walked over to Futaba, patting the smaller girl on the head as Sis would do for her. "You really are a kind person."

Futaba looked up at Makoto, blushing. She seemed almost in awe. Her somewhat surprised expression slowly morphed into an awkward smile.

"So," Makoto took a deep breath. "Let me formally ask for your forgiveness."

"Forgiveness granted!" Futaba nodded, her face determined.

"T-thanks," Makoto thought it best to stop talking, lest the tears welling in her eyes escape.

"It's really amazing," Morgana remarked after a few seconds of silence. "Futaba has recordings of LeBlanc that go back really far."

"It's just the downstairs, right?" Ren seemed nervous.

"Yeah. It took me a few days to discover and chain together enough devices to do it. Sojiro might be a technophobe, but-

"I believe he prefers the term 'traditionalist.'"

"But anything new is fair game. Those things have like no security! Anyway, if I wanted to listen to you, I would just use your phone," Futaba said nonchalantly. Ren looked even more uncomfortable. "Relax, I only did when you went to Hawaii and that was because Mona missed you."

"It was your idea!" the cat exclaimed.

"Poor Mona, he was really lonely."

"I was not!"

Futaba started toying with Morgana's cheeks. The cat looked quite annoyed. She then turned back to Ren. "Don't worry. I can only listen to one thing at a time."

"Why do you listen in on LeBlanc?" Makoto asked, having regained her composure.

"When Sojiro is alone, he sometimes hums to himself." Futaba made a content smile. She wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked slowly. "It's comforting."

The warmth created by Futaba and Sakura-san was remarkable. How could Sis have threatened it? "Um, Futaba... would you let me listen to the recordings?"

Makoto sat at the dining table, finishing up an assignment. She had the television on in the background, listening for anything the team might need to be aware of. It had been a rough two days. Sis had fully taken over the Phantom Thieves investigation. She worked quickly and efficiently—the very next day, the entirety of the Shujin student body had been interrogated by police detectives. Would they be in this situation had they stolen her heart back in July? Makoto recalled the recording of her sister's voice, threatening to have Futaba removed from Sakura-san. It was troubling.

"In response to the police identifying the Phantom Thieves as primary suspects, Akechi Goro had this to say."

Makoto's ears perked up. Earlier in the day, the team had counted the students' votes for the school festival's special guest. Akechi won by a landslide.
"Even though my opinion has been met with criticism, I've held fast that the Phantom Thieves are not just. However... I believe the recent series of suspicious deaths is unrelated to their actions."

The public was certain the Phantom Thieves were murderers. Of all people, Makoto had not expected it would be Akechi who was defending them.

"Tch. I didn't expect he would share that opinion with the press," Sis was standing across the table. Makoto hadn't heard her come in. She looked exhausted. If it was like the last few days, she was only stopping by for a change of clothes and sometimes a quick shower.

"Welcome home Sis!" Maybe today would be different. "Would you like me to warm up some dinner?"

"No. No time," Sis looked at her watch and disappeared into her room. Makoto sighed.

Akechi must have also discussed the theory he was proposing on television with Sis. Could it be the one in black was yet another party? Had they been so clouded by their reaction to Akechi's prior comments that they had not considered the possibility? Akechi had access to the investigation. He could also be a valuable source of information...

"I would like to express that immediately linking them to this case is far too hasty. There are still many questions to be answered here... It feels as though there is more to this."

There was something strange about the way Akechi uttered that last sentence. Was he trying to contact the Phantom Thieves? Makoto didn't like the idea of approaching him, but they were running out of both options and time. A brief glance at the group chat showed that even Futaba was hitting dead ends. The students of Shujin wanted to hear Akechi talk about the Phantom Thieves. Perhaps this was an opportunity to make some headway.

Makoto looked at her phone. It was the day before the festival, two days before the panel, and no word from Akechi on whether he would accept her invitation.

The school was abuzz with last minute preparations for the festival. Students hurried through the halls with all manners of craft supplies, costumes, and decorations. Wada was in the student council room managing the inevitable last minute conflicts. It was an unenviable job and thus Makoto was on her way to relieve him.

"Do you think they'll really get Akechi Goro?" a group of students were speaking to each other near the windows. Makoto usually tuned them out, but her heightened focus on Akechi made them hard to ignore. "Like everyone I know voted for him."

"Pfft, no way," said a second student. "We're probably going to get someone lame."

"Festival starts tomorrow and no word," a third student added. "Little miss perfect Niijima is really slipping."

"Heh, she's probably panicking," the second student spoke again. "There's nothing she can do and with Kobayakawa dead she has to claw her way into the good graces of a new letter writer."

"Serves that stuck up goody two-shoes right," said the third student. "You know she's just the teachers' toady. She's never cared about us students. She must think she's better than-"

"Hey! That's not true. Makoto works really hard for us." It was Eiko. Makoto looked on in shock. It had been months since they last spoke. "Yeah she's a little awkward, but she's trying her best ...just
like you and me."

"Uh guys..." It was the first student. "She's standing right there."

Makoto hadn't realized she had stopped in the middle of the hallway. The other students quickly dispersed, leaving only Eiko.

"Um, hi... Makoto..." Eiko bit her lip. "Can we talk?"

Makoto and Eiko headed to the roof. With festival preparations in full swing, its quasi-off-limits status made it one of the few quiet places in the school.

"I'm sorry Makoto," Eiko said as she knelt down, examining Haru's planters. "I shouldn't have called you a bitch and I shouldn't have shut you out. I was so angry but even after I calmed down, just looking at you reminded me of the whole mess."

"I'm sorry too Eiko," Makoto lowered her eyes. "I should have been more sensitive to your situation and I definitely shouldn't have hit you. It was wrong of me."

Eiko nodded. She started running her fingers over the leaves of a growing plant. "I wanted so badly for things to work out with Tsukasa. I had our whole future planned. I think... I think I just really didn't want to face the uncertainty of what to do next. Unlike you, I'm not really good at anything."

"That's not true-"

Eiko stood up. "Seriously, I only receive praise for my job... and we all know they're not exactly interested in my skills."

"I thought they weren't making you do anything weird!"

"They're not, but do you those men really come by just to talk to me?"

"I... I think that might be a big part of it," Makoto looked Eiko straight in the eye. "They have a lot of choices and you're good with people. I've read that's a lot of it. You know, there are many careers that capitalize on those abilities."

"Huh..." Eiko appeared to be considering it. Eventually, she looked back up at Makoto. "Anyway, I just wanted to thank you, for caring. Sorry it took me so long. I guess I just needed time."

Makoto hesitated. She wasn't sure what the protocol was in this kind of situation. "Um, does that mean we can-

"Of course silly," Eiko smiled broadly.

"Good. I missed you."

"I missed you too," Eiko chuckled softly before making a more serious expression. "By the way, you broke up with your boyfriend recently, didn't you? I see him looking at you sometimes... he looks a little sad."

"We were never dating," Makoto once again cast her eyes down. "I'm sorry—since you just assumed, I ran with that to dig up more information about Tsukasa. I'm really sorry for deceiving you."

"Oh... but do you want to be?"
"Huh?"

"Do you want to be dating him?"

Makoto paused. A small smile formed on her lips. "Yes."

"Then why don't you ask him?"

"He's going through some hard times right now... and I... I think I made it worse."

Eiko took Makoto's hands in hers. "Cheer up. Sometimes these things just need time."

"I hope so."

Akechi stood by the LeBlanc bar, facing the Phantom Thieves. Makoto shared a booth with Ryuji, Haru, and Ann. Futaba sat in the neighboring booth, hunching over the backrests separating them. Ren leaned against the divider between the two booths, standing between Makoto and Akechi, Morgana with him. Yusuke was in a similar position on the other end of the booth. Sakura-san, having discovered their identities the night before, was allowing them to continue to operate out of his shop.

For Makoto to say the school festival had gone poorly was an understatement. Akechi had completely outmaneuvered her. He charmed the crowd and then at the height of their support, faked an urgent matter so he could meet with her and the others. He revealed not only evidence of their activities, but that he held the Metaverse app as well. He claimed to have discovered the other world at Okumura Foods headquarters and even to have had a run-in with the one in black. However, he also made a show of being shocked to understand Morgana, not realizing the team had caught him overhearing the cat all the way back in May. He wasn't to be trusted.

Makoto wasn't certain what Akechi had planned, but she had a few theories. It meant that in prepping the team earlier, she couldn't get into specifics. Their general outline was to follow along with what Akechi proposed, treat him as one of their own, and try their best not to give him any new information. Akechi had video evidence on them already and was wielding it as a cudgel. They had to wait for their chance to, as Ren said, turn the tables.

The extent of Akechi's knowledge was unclear, making it difficult to safely hide anything. If they were caught withholding information, it would be that much harder to work their way out of whatever he had in store. Makoto thought it best that the team not offer anything, but otherwise act as their normal selves. Anything else would be a gamble and a charade they could not keep up.

Akechi recited the machinations against them—the arrest warrant, the bounty, the press. He painted a desperate picture of Sis, going so far as to suggest she would fake evidence to close the case. "I'll be blunt. I'm thinking of triggering a change of heart in Sae-san. I've already discovered that she has a palace."

Makoto shifted her gaze from Akechi to the edges of her skirt. She had feared he would say that. The thought of him entering her sister's cognition sickened her. If only she hadn't invited him to the school festival.

No one said anything for several moments. Haru must have remembered that Sis's palace should have been a shock to them and despite Makoto's earlier warning, she voiced that emotion. "Huh? Really...?"

If Akechi noticed, he hid it well. Instead, he continued conversing with the team, adamant that Sis
and the entirety of law enforcement would go to any lengths to secure a conviction and quell public outrage. "My objective is to find the true culprit. That must be the case for all of you too. However, the current situation is extremely bad."

"If worst comes to worst, someone unrelated will be set up as the culprit, huh...?" Yusuke clarified Akechi's claims.

"Our only solution to this is to make Sae-san come to her senses. If she's in her right mind, she can stop this situation. Her sense of justice wouldn't allow it," Akechi stated confidently. Makoto never liked the air of authority he took on when it came to her sister. She held her crossed-arms against her chest closer, feeling a strong urge to flee, to find Sis. "The truth will be covered up, and an innocent civilian's life will be destroyed... I can't allow such a thing to happen. My own ethics won't stand for it. And changing Sae-san's heart will be to protect her as well."

Makoto's eyes went wide. She uncrossed her arms and looked up at Akechi. She didn't like where he was going. "How do you mean?"

"If the true culprit were to learn that she's responsible for the investigation... what would happen? I'm certain they'll aim for her life. She's the perfect target to place blame on the Phantom Thieves," Akechi said matter-of-factly. Makoto felt her stomach drop. Akechi put a voice to all of her fears. "So how about it? Will you agree to my plan?"

"Even though you're particular about being just, you're willing to get your hands dirty?" Yusuke asked.

"It can't be helped in order to ascertain the truth. There is also one more merit in changing Sae-san's heart. It will become a warning not to mess with us. They can't go public if someone in the investigation has a change of heart. It'd show their corruption. All that's left from there is for me to discover the identity of the true culprit."

Makoto struggled to contain her anger. Akechi didn't really care about protecting Sis, this was all about his image and his place as detective prince. He spoke so noble and heroic, but he had been lying to them the whole time. Furthermore, if he was the one behind the mental shutdowns, the psychotic breakdowns, the murders... then all of his showboating was also an oblique threat on Sis's life. Makoto reminded herself to play it cool. They needed to lull Akechi into a false sense of security. However, she couldn't help cutting his grandstanding short. "You're going to tell us to announce our disbandment once the real culprit is arrested... aren't you?"

"As expected from a Niijima," Akechi remained smooth as ever. "So, what do you say? I don't think it's a bad deal for either of us."

"Makoto..." Ryuji started. He was asking for the team. "What's your take on all this?"

"It's a well-made plan," Makoto said, crossing her arms in front of her again. They had no choice but to continue playing along. "It even takes putting an end to our team into consideration."

"I'm flattered to hear that." Makoto hated how much Akechi seemed to be enjoying this.

"Why are you willing to do all this, Akechi-kun?" asked Haru. "Why do you seek justice?"

"Because of sickening human beings..." A hint of something sinister carried in Akechi's voice. A slip. Nice work, Haru. It was soon replaced by a tone that invited sympathy. "Yes. My contempt for such people drives my sense of justice. It isn't some grand reason like society's sake or some lofty ideal. It's simply an absurd grudge... and extremely personal."
"Dude..."

"You know, doesn't he remind you of us...?" Ann was following the plan.

"True..." Ren played along.

"Yeah..." Ann continued. "Like how some disgusting adult pissed him off."

"We're similar, hm...? Maybe that's why I thought that I could ask this of you all... Won't you cooperate with me on the mission to change Sae-san's heart?"

"We will," Ren said evenly.

No. Don't...

"Mako-chan..."

"I'm okay," Makoto remembered to relax, thanks to Haru's interruption. She uncrossed her arms, resting them on her skirt. The only way to protect Sis was to play along, be convincing, and not get caught in a lie. "I never brought it up until now... but the reason I joined the Phantom Thieves is... because I wanted to change my sister's heart. I was hoping it'd never come to pass though. I've also known for quite some time that she has a palace."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Ann continued the deception.

"It was too selfish of a reason... Though, I was too scared to look any further into it on my own..."

"Why don't we try going there now to scope the place out? A lot of this will be new to me, so I'd like to get myself accustomed to it too."

Akechi's suggestion brought everything into focus. They were really going to do this. Akechi, Ren, all of them were going to enter Sis's cognition. They were going steal Sis's heart. Every cell in Makoto's body screamed at her to resist, to escape. She fought to contain it. "I'm sorry. I actually have plans today..."

Makoto watched as all of her teammates looked at her with confusion. She was the one who said they should follow along and now she just couldn't make herself do it. She needed to get away, to think.

"I see," said Akechi. "That's unfortunate."

"Will you tell your sister about this?" asked Haru.

"Of course not. It's just..."

"You seem awfully evasive today," stated Yusuke. "Is something the matter?"

The team was clearly providing the opportunity for Makoto to give them some direction, some indication of what was going on. She didn't have any, nor did she want to. All of them were trying to steal Sis's heart. "I just can't make time today."

"Let's call it a day then and resume this tomorrow," Akechi conceded.

"I'm sorry, everyone." Makoto rushed out the door, hoping to make it on a train before the others could catch up. She slipped through crowds of people both in Yongen-jaya and later in Shibuya, only looking forward. Before she knew it, she was staring up at the large police building in
Kasumigaseki. Its looming presence in the setting sun made it seem all the more tall and foreboding. *Sis...*

*Dad...*

Tomorrow, Makoto would have to face the reality of the situation. The Phantom Thieves would be infiltrating Sis's palace. This was her last chance to find Dad. No, it wasn't really Dad. It would be Sis's cognition of Dad. He could, and most likely would, be a twisted distortion or worse, a mangled body lying in the asphalt. Searching for Dad had been a frivolous endeavor. If only she had spent that time coming up with a way to save Sis. And yet...

Dad or not, it was also Makoto's last chance to enter Sis's palace, Sis's world, not as a Phantom Thief, but as herself.

Makoto took out her phone. Her hand was shaking so much that she had to try three times just to unlock the screen. From there, her tapping continued frantically until there was only one button left to push. She looked up from the phone to the police station, to the direction of Dad's murder, and finally to the courthouse. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and hit send.

"There's something I still have to do. Will you help me?"
He's only a cognition.

Makoto looked over the platform where the train from Shibuya would be arriving. Ren's first message had simply said, "Finishing up some things with Futaba, wait for me." His second, "Are you still there? Just stepped on train. Wait for me." His third, "Are you there? Caught connection in Shibuya. Wait for me." Makoto waited in Kasumigaseki station, where it was warm, failing to get any reading done.

It was hard to concentrate. Makoto went over how she might react in a variety of scenarios. She had prepared a list of things she would talk about if Dad was as she remembered him. It was a familiar script, one she had been polishing since the day they brought down Futaba's palace. She wasn't entirely comfortable having Ren there, but figured he would graciously step back if she asked.

There was also the possibility that she would find the crime scene—that they would be perpetually too late—or even that they would find nothing at all. In fact, in some ways, given Sis's cognition, these were much more likely scenarios. Makoto would have to apologize to Ren in that case and not do anything that might worry him.

Finally, there was the possibility that Dad might not be as she remembered and instead embody the worst traits Sis had ever painted on him. Makoto knew there was still some resentment there. Dad was a touchy subject. In that case, the most useful course of action would be to learn what she could from that facsimile of her father. It might provide her the insight she needed to figure out how to help Sis. She had trouble imagining how a distorted, twisted cognition of Dad might act, making it difficult to plan ahead.

Makoto reminded herself that the most likely outcome was nothing. She knew this, so much so that it seemed silly of her to take up so much of Ren's time.

A train arrived. Based on when Ren left Shibuya Station, it would be his. Makoto scanned the doors, looking for him. She saw him emerge from the opening straight in front of her, slipping between people to make his way to the front and turning his head from side to side, searching. Once he made his way out of the small surge of people exiting the train, he saw her. As he was rushing to meet her, she in turn walked to intercept him, speech prepared.

"I'm really sorry to be calling you out so late at-"

Ren grabbed Makoto, embracing her in a big bear hug, holding her tightly to him. She could hear him breathing heavily. "I was worried you were going to do something stupid."

"Um..." Makoto frowned, not sure how to respond.

When his breathing evened out, Ren let go of Makoto. He took a step back and put his hands on her shoulders. "So what is it?"

"I want to go into my sister's cognition," Makoto started. She held one of her hands in the other, looking down at them. "Just one last time, before..."

Makoto didn't feel like finishing the sentence. She looked up at Ren. He didn't seem surprised. She
paused, wondering if he would try to talk her out of it. He didn't. Instead, he gave a simple, serious nod.

"There's actually another thing..." Makoto continued. "Do you remember the cognition of Futaba's mom from her palace?"

"The sphinx?" Ren eyes narrowed slightly.

"No, the one after that. The real one."

"Makoto..." Ren's lips remained parted.

"I want to find my sister's cognition of Dad." Ren grit his teeth and winced slightly enough that Makoto almost missed it. She pressed on. "I know... I just really want to see him again."

"Makoto, whatever you find in there isn't real."

"I know that. I do. But-"

"What if he isn't like you remember him? What if he's a monster, like the sphinx?"

"I've considered that possibility as well," Makoto shifted her gaze away. "In that case, finding him may help us understand Sis's distortion. We could use that knowledge in the palace."

Ren sighed. "And what makes you think you'll find him?"

"I found his desk in the police station," Makoto turned back to Ren. "I searched it—that's what the lock picks were for—but his notebook is missing. He must be out on a case."

"Then he could be anywhere in the district."

"No. I also found a case file. It's about his... murder," Makoto took a breath. "It appears to be my sister's. I... I think he's at that intersection where-"

Ren's eyes widened. "Makoto... you don't want to see that."

"He might be out there investigating."

"Makoto..."

"This is my sister's cognition. He doesn't have to be-"

"Makoto don't do this."

"I know," Makoto looked Ren in the eyes. "I know this is unlikely to work but... but if I don't try, I'll always regret it."

Ren didn't say anything. He let go of Makoto, taking a few steps away from her and running a hand through his hair. He took a deep breath. Finally, he turned back to her. "Okay."

"Great!" Makoto eyes grew big as she smiled broadly. "We'll enter by the police station and then-"

"The police station?" Ren grimaced. "Why not go there directly?"

"It's easier through the Metaverse and..." Makoto shifted her eyes, a small frown forming. "I want to make sure Sis's palace hasn't..."
"I understand."

Makoto led Ren out of Kasumigaseki station to a secluded area just outside the police station. "Niijima Sae. Courthouse. Casino."

The world shifted. The few people and vehicles out in the street vanished. The near-darkness of real nighttime was replaced with a glow coming from the direction of Sis's casino. Makoto wasn't sure whether the casino had gotten larger and brighter since her last visit, nearly a month ago, or if it was just the adjustment of entering at night instead of the afternoon.

Ren also focused in the direction of the casino, his jaw clenched. He looked back to the police station and then along the outlines of buildings, as if he were tracing a route. His eyes eventually locked some place between the police station and the casino.

"Ren?"

Ren jerked. He turned to Makoto. "Just keeping an eye out."

Makoto and Ren started heading towards the location where Dad was killed. Not only had it been a month since Makoto entered her sister's cognition, but also since she had last practiced the route in the real world. "Sorry, it's a bit of a walk. I'm not actually sure the extent of my sister's cognition. Another reason not to go there directly."

As the pair got further away from the palace, the city became darker and darker. Makoto wondered if the edges of Sis's cognition would be an endless maze or a void or something else entirely. Surely... surely, the intersection was in the bounds of Sis's cognition. Ren continued to scan their surroundings, tension appearing around his eyes, as if he were straining to see something. It was an expression he often made inside palaces.

The further they got along Makoto's planned route, the faster she found herself moving. Ren seemed to have no trouble keeping up. Their speed, their silence—it was almost like an infiltration, but there were no shadows, no treasures, only darkness. Normally, Makoto would have found it unsettling, but she didn't have time to think about it. Furthermore, she couldn't face Dad still afraid of the dark.

Makoto focused on the upcoming junction. Just one more turn, then one more block, then... Makoto went over everything again, all the possibilities. She wanted to be prepared for anything. Turning the corner, Makoto surveyed the intersection. While she couldn't see much from that distance, there were no flashing lights, nothing that looked like an ambulance or a police car. She let out a breath. That nixed one possibility. Her gait accelerated from a run to a sprint.

Arriving at the intersection, Makoto found herself face to face with... nothing. The intersection was completely empty. She looked side to side, searching, but no one was there. The only sounds were those of the last of Ren's strides, coming to a halt a few meters behind her. She could hear his winded breaths between the sounds of her own.

Had she miscalculated? Was there somewhere else were Dad would be working? Somewhere else Sis would place Dad?

No. There wasn't. Of course. Of course Sis would understand that Dad was...

Don't cry.

It was okay. Makoto had prepared for this. She had always known this was a highly likely possibility.
Makoto spun around, fast enough her skirt flared before coming to rest. Ren had his hands on his legs, still panting. He raised his head to look at her. She gave a broad tight-lipped smile, squeezing her eyes and lacing her fingers behind her back. She forced a nervous laugh. "I-I guess he's not here, but I'm satisfied that I tried."

Dad, where are you? Why aren't you here?

Makoto breathed in sharply through her nose, as if doing so would bring everything back inside. She lifted her head, staring into the sky. She opened her eyes wide, hoping they would dry out. She had been so foolish.

Don't cry.

Makoto took another deep breath and faced Ren again, once again forcing the largest smile she could muster. She fought her lips, which were refusing to hold. Her voice seemed to raise in pitch with each word. "W-well, I'm, um, really sorry for wasting your time."

Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry.

Makoto heard the sound of a bag dropping and then felt a hand on her shoulder. Ren. She looked up, opening her eyes slightly. All she saw was a blur of water, the excess of which spilled over her lower lids forming streams down her cheeks. She felt her eyebrows, her lips give.

Stop it. Stop crying. It's not too late.

"E-excuse me. I..." Makoto lifted an arm, wiping her tears away with the back of her hand. Even though they kept falling, she lifted the other to do the same. Ren caught her wrist and then the other.

"Just... let it out." Ren placed both her forearms on his chest and pulled her in closer, a hand gently bringing her head to his shoulder. Against his firm hold, Makoto realized how much and how erratically she was shaking. She clutched his uniform jacket and buried her face, making what she was sure was a mess.

"Y-your j-jacket-"

"Don't worry about it."

"I-I j-just really-" Words caught in Makoto's throat. Everything was coming out accented by squeaks and whimpers.

"I know." Ren spoke softly.

Makoto cried. She cried until she thought she had run out of tears. She tried to concentrate on the rise and fall of Ren's chest, the evenness of his heartbeat, the warmth of the bottom of his palm on her neck where his fingers ran through her hair. She felt as if she could match his pace at times, but then she would turn her thoughts to Dad, to Sis, and she would start heaving anew. It was as though she would never be able to stop.

Time passed, Makoto wasn't sure how long. Ren shifted his hand along her jawline, tilting her head up to face him. By this point, her breathing had calmed and the flow of tears slowed. Her eyes felt both dry and wet at the same time. Ren regarded her with a serious expression. "We should go somewhere less exposed. Is that alright?"
Makoto nodded. "The police station... I want to..."

"Okay." Ren looked hesitant, but agreed nonetheless. He let go of Makoto and began walking back towards his bag. "First, water."

Ren twisted the cap off a bottle of Udagawa Water and handed it to Makoto. She downed the drink in three long swigs, realizing just how dehydrated she was. It was too late however. Her head had already started throbbing. The tear-soaked patches of her blouse, now exposed to open air, clung to her skin. She shivered, bringing her hands to her upper arms.

"Use this." Ren placed his school uniform jacket on her shoulders. Unlike many students, he wore his suspenders over his turtleneck just as the school handbook dictated. Makoto grasped the jacket openings with her hands, pulling them across her chest, wrapping herself in the garment. The empty sleeves dangled at her sides.

The pair began walking back. Ren continued to eye their surroundings suspiciously. Makoto briefly thought she should do the same, but whenever she tried to focus on the task, her mind just felt clouded and empty.

When they arrived at the police station, Makoto led Ren to Dad's desk. She slipped off her shoes and curled up in Dad's chair. From the cocoon of Ren's jacket, she reached out, running her fingertips over her father's nameplate. "I don't understand... his notebook is missing. Sis wouldn't have forgotten it. Why wasn't he...?"

"I don't know," Makoto ineffectually dried her eyes with the sleeves of Ren's jacket. "Sis asked after it, several times, but they wouldn't let us have it because it might contain confidential police matters."

"Evidence storage?"

"Hmm... Sis would have access..." Makoto reached for the case file. Ren's hand covered hers.

"Are you sure you want to look at that right now?"

Makoto took a deep breath. There was only now. "I am."

The quality of the photo paper made it easy enough to avoid most of the gruesome pictures. Makoto soon found the index of evidence. She ran her finger along the list, stopping at the notebook. Right next to it was a single word: **missing**. It had been circled in red pen and adorned with two question marks. The ballpoint had left indentations. Sis must have been frustrated. It wasn't hard to guess that the notebook had likely been destroyed, either by accident or as part of a cover up.

"It's missing." Makoto shook her head. "I suppose my sister's cognition is accurate... I just thought... that since his desk is here, surely his notebook..."

"It means a lot to you..."

"It was always with him," Makoto imagined Dad hard at work. He was her first hero of justice.

"And it sounds like it means a lot to your sister..."

Makoto's eyes widened. She instinctively turned in the direction of the courthouse, though she couldn't see it through the police station walls. Sis's treasure...
"Of course." Makoto turned back to the desk. She closed the case file and sighed before returning it to the drawer. "I should have done this months ago. I just got so caught up..."

Makoto stared at the empty desk. She had been so very foolish. Though... if the journal was Sis's treasure, why wasn't Dad here? Tears started beading at the corners of her eyes once again. She squeezed them shut. Dad was the seed of Sis's distortion. Why had Sis manifested a palace, but she had not? The answer came quickly. Because I had Sis.

"...Um, were those... baby photos?" a hint of a grin formed on Ren's face. He pressed his lips together firmly, evening them out.

"Huh?"

"...in the drawer."

"Oh... yes. Family photos." Makoto wiped her eyes and re-opened the drawer. She paused, looking around the office. Most desks had at least one framed photograph sitting among the files, desk lamps, and office supplies. She had been so focused on the nameplates, she hadn't noticed it before. It was usually a family portrait, sometimes a set of frames, one for each child. A few had single photographs, often a girlfriend or young wife. Makoto wondered if Sis had any photos on her desk...

"Makoto?"

"R-right." Makoto gathered up the frames into a stack and began laying out each one on the desk. She smiled looking over them and spoke as she placed each one. "This is me winning my first Aikido tournament. This is from when Sis graduated from college and this is when she turned twenty. This one is me in middle school. This is my mother. This... this is the last picture taken of all four of us."

Ren picked up the Aikido photo. In it, Dad had hoisted Makoto up on his shoulder. She was holding up her ribbon for the camera. Ren smiled. "You were formidable even back then, huh?"

"Well," Makoto folded her arms across her chest and looked away. "There weren't many participants in my age group and most of them weren't very good at following directions."

Ren's expression turned more serious when he put down the Aikido photo and briefly glanced over the photos of Sis. Makoto had verified her voice in Futaba's recordings, but she supposed it was another thing to have visual confirmation. Ren picked up the middle school photo next. He glanced at Makoto and then back to the photo and then back to Makoto again, repeating the motion several times, smirking.

"W-what?"

"Nothing... it's just very you."

"S-stop looking at me like that. You're making me nervous." Makoto squinted at the photo. It seemed perfectly normal to her. Still, even through the redness of her face, she couldn't help but smile at how amused Ren seemed.

Ren chuckled softly, still smirking. He leaned over from his perch on the desk. "It's good to see you smiling again."

Makoto realized her tears had stopped. She felt her eyes start to get wet again, so she quickly shifted her focus, thinking about things she had to get done for the next day at school. She figured she could at least distract herself enough to make it home. It didn't feel quite as raw anymore. She slipped Ren's
jacket off of her shoulders and held it out to him, looking directly into his eyes. "Ren... Thank you... for coming out here. I know it hasn't been pleasant and you don't approve-"

"I was relieved to get your message," Ren wrapped his hand over Makoto's outstretched one. "I want to be here. I'd hate for you to face this alone."

Ren brought his other hand to Makoto's face, drawing her closer while simultaneously leaning further in. He was staring at her intently, his lips slightly parted. Makoto felt as though there were so many things she wanted to say but none of them seemed to coalesce into concrete thoughts, much less words. Did Ren feel the same? They held still, until finally Ren turned away from her, removing his hand from her cheek and using it to take back his jacket.

"You need sleep... and more water," Ren said, still not looking at Makoto. "Tomorrow..."

"Tomorrow," Makoto repeated in acknowledgement. Sis...

Ren hopped down from the desk and began putting his jacket back on, his back to Makoto. "If you're not ready, we can go without you. I'll make up some excuse."

"No," Makoto said firmly. She looked towards the hem of her skirt. Then, she looked up, waiting for Ren to meet her before she spoke again. "Honestly, I'm uncomfortable at the thought of any of you here. This is all part of my sister. It's like you're invading something precious. I can't leave Sis alone."

"Then will you...?"

"I don't know. I think... I need to see her palace for myself," Makoto shifted her gaze away. "I think things might become more clear then."

"All of us are with you Makoto. We'll figure something out," Ren lifted one of Makoto's hands. She turned back to him, trying to make some sort of affirming motion, but she worried he was making a promise he wouldn't be able to keep. "And if you need anything, anything at all, please come to me. I really am thankful you invited me here today."

Makoto nodded. She looked up at Ren. "Um, I'd like to be alone for a bit."

Ren paused, clearly uncertain about the idea. His gaze followed Makoto's other hand as she placed it on the desk. He stared at it for a moment before turning his attention back. "I'll be in the next room over. If anything happens-"

"I will."

After Ren disappeared, Makoto closed her eyes and tried to clear her thoughts. She wanted to be able to somehow absorb the air around her, cognizant that everything she perceived at that moment was created by Sis. It would be the last time.

Slowly, Makoto opened her eyes. She looked at the nameplate on the desk, brought her hands together, and bowed her head.

Dad... I've missed you. I refer to the example you set often. It continues to guide me, more with each passing day.

I am healthy and I am doing well in school. I have a great group of friends and I have someone I like now. He's talented and conscientious, gentle and kind. I haven't told him how I feel yet, but I'm glad you could meet him.
Sis is working hard. You would be very proud. I'll take care of Sis from now on, so please don't worry.

Makoto stood up, placing both hands on the desk. It was still covered in photos. She arranged them neatly, standing up each frame so they would all be visible when seated. She closed her eyes and exhaled.

Goodbye, Dad.

Makoto turned, opening her eyes to look over the rows of desks. Each painted an eerie picture of an easy, charmed life. She took a deep breath.

I will definitely save you, Sis.

Chapter End Notes

From the moment Makoto found her father's desk, we were always heading to this conclusion. Now that we're here, I am a little sad I couldn't play around with all the different things she could have found at that intersection. Each one would make its own interesting scene and fall out (e.g., an epic motorcycle gunfight versus distortion Dad). However, there could only be one.

My thanks to all of you who have made it this far. It has been a process and interacting with you has been really helpful and energizing.
That's not my sister.

Despite it being quite late by the time she left Sis's cognition, Makoto awoke at her usual time, a few minutes before her alarm. It wasn't enough sleep but at least she felt alert enough to get something done. Still, fantasies of a nap in the student council room at lunch flitted through her mind. Getting caught was too big a risk however. She couldn't draw any attention to herself, none of them could. Makoto was about to disable her alarm when she realized she wasn't alone. The warmth of another hand holding hers had felt so comfortable, she hadn't noticed.

Makoto turned to see Sis's head planted not too far from her own. She had fallen asleep sitting on the floor, hunched over the bed, still in one of her pantsuits. Makoto must have jerked in her excitement, as Sis's eyes were soon fluttering open.

"What time is it?" Sis said groggily, slipping her hand away and sitting upright, her eyes still half closed.

"Sis... what are you-?"

"Oh." Sis looked around the room, seeming to finally recognize where she was. She stood up and smoothed out her hair, her business-like aura returning. "I need to get to the office."

Makoto choked down a whimper. Sis was so close and yet...

"Can I make you breakfast? Coffee?" Makoto asked quickly. "If... if there's something bothering you... I may not be able to do much, but I'll listen. I'll be your sounding board. If-"

"Don't worry yourself," Sis looked down and Makoto and smiled briefly before resuming her stern, professional expression, a firm message that she did not want to be pushed. The investigation had been a dangerous subject as of late. Makoto tried to hide a frown. There really was no getting to her through conventional means.

As Sis made her way to the door, she put her hand on the frame and turned back to Makoto. "Is... is everything alright? You aren't in any trouble, are you?"

"Yes Sis." Don't make Sis worry. "Why?"

"I just got the strangest feeling last night that..." Sis shook her head. "It's nothing. Nevermind."

The school day went by all too quickly. The Phantom Thieves packed on the train to meet up with Akechi at the courthouse. Yusuke and Futaba had joined the Shujin students at Shibuya station—Yusuke having escorted Futaba from Yongen-jaya. It seemed Kosei High School was generous with their policies regarding studio classes, allowing the artist to slip out early. Makoto was grateful Yusuke was in the presence of mind to remember Futaba rather than have the girl brave the busy trains alone.

The Phantom Thieves huddled around Futaba, trying to shield her from the crowd. It also afforded them one last meeting before entering Sis's palace. Makoto stood between Haru and Ryuji, Yusuke
directly across from her. Ren was on the other side of Haru. Makoto had been avoiding him, not sure what to say after everything that had happened the night before. He had been perfectly understanding, but she still regret losing her composure. She wondered if he thought less of her now.

"We continue playing just as before," Makoto said, focusing herself on team business. "We've accepted Akechi's proposal and for the time being, he's a Phantom Thief. We treat this like any other palace."

"And just like before, the first visit is reconnaissance only," Ren added. "We assess her distortion... and Akechi's persona."

"Are you going to be alright, Mako-chan?" Haru took Makoto's adjacent hand into hers, squeezing it.

Makoto took a deep breath. "I will be. I can't put off facing this any longer."

"What is your sister's palace anyway?" asked Ryuji.

Makoto's stomach flopped. She closed her eyes, reminding herself she was only putting off the inevitable.

"It's probably best if we don't know," Ann jumped in. "It will make things seem more authentic. Makoto can lead us along if we get stuck."

"Agreed," said Ren.

Akechi was waiting for the group in a shaded area just outside the courthouse. Unprompted, he shared with them the results of his own legwork. Apparently Sis was planning a major operation for November 20th, one which would raid both Shujin Academy and Sakura-san's home.

Makoto found Akechi's pleasant demeanor strange. He usually got under her skin. Was this the charming Akechi everyone else saw? Of course, the others were acting just a little off as well. Futaba, who could barely contain her distaste for Akechi the day before, was praising his good looks, and probably more importantly to her, his phone. Even Ryuji, who was usually good for taking a petty shot at the young detective, was acting friendly.

"Shall we get started?" Akechi asked.

"We need to figure out what Makoto's sis thinks this courthouse is, right?" Ryuji noted.

Makoto once again reminded herself she had to play along. Not only that, she had to see Sis's palace for herself. "I often hear her call it a place of competition in which she must always win."

"A competition, huh..." Akechi pondered. "That sounds like Sae-san."

The group considered several possibilities, most in the realm of sports. Makoto bit her lip when Futaba realized gambling was an option. Strangely, no one narrowed in on the most obvious answer. Were they waiting for her?

"It must be a 'casino'..." Makoto forced out.

"I definitely see Sae-san in you," Akechi said with a smile. It felt like a punch to the gut. I'm betraying Sis...

The group was soon transported to the Metaverse. Though there were no cognitions in their
immediate vicinity, they approached the casino with caution. Standing right outside, it seemed even brighter than Makoto had observed the night before. It had been months since she had been so close. The casino was near blinding now. More cognitive people seemed to be gathered around it than before. As she mentally took inventory of the palace, Makoto noticed Ren looking outwards at the rest of the city, in the direction of the police station.

"Everywhere else seems to be a normal cityscape," Akechi said as he also followed Ren's gaze.

Yusuke followed. "Isn't that-"

"The police station, yes," Makoto confirmed.

"Our attire hasn't changed..." Akechi remarked. "That must mean we aren't considered threats or hostiles yet."

"Right," said Morgana. "Areas outside her courthouse palace must not be worthy of her attention."

"That reminds me," Makoto decided to lead the conversation away from the police station. "He'll need a code name too."

"...Code name?" Akechi repeated.

"Phantom thieves can't go around usin' their real names, right?" Ryuji explained.

"We pretty much decided them on how we look, didn't we?" said Ann.

As the others started sharing their code names with Akechi, Makoto noticed Haru staring in their direction. Was she wondering about Ren's code name since it didn't match Ann's rule? "What is it, Haru?"

"O-Oh, it's nothing..."

After a bit of negotiation, the team settled on the code name 'Crow,' which Akechi claimed would purposefully contrast with his costume of rebellion. When they entered the palace, entering via the rafters of a large hall, his claims proved true. He wore a bright red Venetian mask and a white dress uniform, similar to that of a Destiny prince. It was adorned with red and gold notions and finished with a short red cape.

"Pfft," Futaba muttered to Makoto as Akechi discussed his clothing with the others. "Inari wore it better."

While the team explained the basics of infiltration to Akechi, Makoto looked over the casino floor. They were too high up to be able to make out any individual conversations. The voices and the sounds of the slot machines, roulette wheels, and dice combined to an impenetrable din. It was dizzying. Makoto reminded herself to breathe. She needed to get closer.

"...need to secure an infiltration route before we send out the calling card," Morgana finished explaining.

"So the calling card wasn't merely for show? It's a necessary step!?'" Akechi was way too excited. He was acting as if it were a game.

"Will you please stop interrupting?" Makoto snapped. A mistake. Ren gave her a look.

"M-My apologies," Akechi looked sincere.
"Well then..." Makoto recomposed herself, eager to move on. "Let's go."

Ren led the team over the hanging fixtures and around the other raised service hallways like the one from which they entered. Unfortunately, the security was too tight. They would need access cards to make further use of the area. Instead, they crawled through an air duct into the central tower of the casino. Just as they emerged, they heard a voice. Sis.

"Welcome," Sis's shadow confidently called out to them. From the space just outside the duct, Makoto could make out a large hat and a gown with a very high slit. Two large men in suits and sunglasses flanked her. "Come on out, you petty thieves."

"She can see us!?!" Ryuji was incredulous.

"You're after the Treasure, are you not? Come on down and I will tell you were it is."

"Wh-What?!" Morgana put his hands on his hips. "We're not going to fall for a trick like that..."

"It's not a lie." The shadow chuckled. She was taunting them. She sounded so cruel. Was this what it was like facing Sis in court? "I only wish to do this fair and square. You aren't going to run, are you...?"

"We should do as she says," said Akechi. "There is no point in hiding any longer."

The Phantom Thieves descended, arriving on the casino floor. Up close, Makoto could see that the slits weren't the only revealing parts of the dress. The front of the gown was mostly mesh. The shadow also sported tattoos and a spiked choker. Her lips were painted black and she wore thick black eye make up. She looked so much like Sis and yet so much not. Sis wouldn't make a face like that.

"That's your sister?" Ryuji asked. "Whoa..."

Makoto's eyes narrowed and she delivered a quick, shallow punch to Ryuji's hip.

"Hrk!"

The guilt took a few moments to catch up with Makoto. She turned to check on Ryuji, her fist still connected to his side. As she looked over, she saw Ann in the same position across from her, making a similar face. The two girls smiled at each other as they slowly withdrew their fists.

The party continued on to approach the shadow, with Ryuji grumbling and rubbing at his hips along the way.

"So you've come." The shadow appeared to be sizing them up. "The Treasure is located on the Manager's Floor, at the highest point of this building."

"Why are you telling us this?" Makoto wondered if Sis's shadow recognized her. If so, she made no acknowledgement of it. Makoto found herself more bothered by it than she expected. She briefly turned to look at Haru, finding the heiress already looking at her. Haru made a firm but supportive expression, pressing her lips and furrowing her brow slightly.

"It's as I said before: I wish to go about this in the fairest manner possible." The shadow kept mentioning fairness, but the way she said it always sounded... distorted. As domineering as the shadow appeared, there was something about her that seemed very, very sick. "First, I ask that you come up to my location. We will continue this there..."
In a flash of light, the shadow and her guards vanished. The group searched, eventually locating her in a glass elevator at the center of the floor. They chased after her, but the elevator car was already ascending out of reach. Their attempts to follow were thwarted by the casino's security system.

"Authentication required. Please insert your member's card."

"Member's card...?" asked Haru.

"Perhaps it bears relation to a player's club of sorts," said Akechi.

As Akechi explained the concept to the rest of the team, Makoto took the opportunity to more carefully examine the casino's patrons. However, she wasn't sure what casino-goers were supposed to be like. Even the ones who lamented their losses seemed to be having fun.

"You sure lost big Harada!"

"Eheh heh, I'll just ask the Chief for overtime. We're golfing buddies. I'll write a few extra tickets, shouldn't be a problem."

Makoto took a second look at the middle-aged men walking by. They had been colleagues of Dad. She hadn't recognized them at first because they weren't in uniform. She scanned the floor for any others she might know. A group of adults, about Sis's age, looked familiar, but she couldn't place them.

"Man I got crushed! Good thing I just got that promotion."

"How'd you manage that? You had like, the lowest sales last quarter."

"Yeah but Boss thinks I have a lot of potential."

Makoto searched her memories, trying to place the cognitions and interpret their behavior. However, she was soon pulled out of her thoughts by a hand on her shoulder. It was Ren. "You okay?"

"Y-yes... sorry."

"C'mon, let's join this player thingy," said Ryuji. Apparently Akechi had finished his lecture.

"I would agree with you," Akechi started. "But..."

As if on cue, a broad-chested waiter in a mask appeared. A shadow.

Akechi made a self-satisfied smile. "As I expected, registration will not be such a simple matter."

The shadow burst into streams of red and black, re-forming as a large bi-pedal leopard man with twin swords. It was likely the Goetia demon Ose. Makoto recalled what she had read about him, mentally preparing a list of likely weaknesses.

"No need to worry. I'll handle this," Akechi took a step toward the shadow. "I need to prove my worth to you, after all."

"I have high expectations," Ren said wryly. He stepped back from his stance and crossed his arms.

"I promise to surpass even such lofty hopes as those." A glowing sword formed in Akechi's hand. "Take them down, Robin Hood!"

The form of Akechi's persona materialized behind him. Robin Hood looked like a cross between a
western superhero and a mech robot. Matching Akechi's costume, he was mostly white, or chrome really, with accents of gold and red. He carried a giant gold bow carved to look like feathery wings. The toy persona... the beam sabre... he really did seem to be approaching this as a game.

Akechi brought his hand to his mask and Robin Hood held out his bow and arrow like a shield. The area around the shadow's feet began to glow and seals began to circle. In a flash of light, the shadow disintegrated. Akechi had bless abilities, and strong ones at that. He turned to Ren and smiled smugly. Ren looked on, not saying anything.

"You're not so bad," Morgana broke the silence.

"And I am capable of much more," Akechi continued to focus on Ren. His quick dismissal of the enemy had hampered the team's assessment of his skills. "Now then, let us deal with the Shadows quickly."

"Wait," said Ann. "Doesn't it sound like we're gonna get ambushed based on what we heard earlier?"

"I agree," Makoto truly wanted to explore further, but it was best they stick to the plan. "I'd like to deal with them as quick as we can... But now that we have an infiltration route, I'd suggest we return for now and prepare."

"Very well," said Akechi. "I trust your experience and judgment."

The group climbed back up to the roof and exited out of the casino. After returning to the real world, they were soon on a train back to Shibuya station. While they had enjoyed a bit of privacy on their way to the courthouse, Akechi was with them on their way back, electing not to stay late at work. Debriefing would need to occur at a later date.

Akechi was visibly excited from his first foray with the Phantom Thieves and stuck by Ren for the entire ride. He seemed to be boasting about the skills of his persona and questioning Ren about how the finer points of Phantom Thieves' methods related to justice.

Yusuke had already taken out a small sketchbook despite the motion of the train. He sat between Futaba and Haru who were quietly watching him work. Ann and Ryuji were on their phones. Makoto vaguely observed everyone while her thoughts drifted between the Sis she had woken up to in the morning and the shadow she had faced in the afternoon.

The team parted ways at Shibuya station as usual. Makoto hadn't gotten very far when she felt a hand on her shoulder. Both she and Ryuji turned to find Akechi.

"Before I forget," Akechi was all smiles. "Everyone's contact information."

"Oh. Right," Makoto took out her phone. As her head swept from her bag back to Akechi, she made eye contact with Futaba, who along with Ren had stopped to watch them. Futaba gave a short nod.

"Before I forget," Akechi was all smiles. "Everyone's contact information."

"Oh. Right," Makoto took out her phone. As her head swept from her bag back to Akechi, she made eye contact with Futaba, who along with Ren had stopped to watch them. Futaba gave a short nod. Confident her hacker friend had created a convincing history and cybertrail for the newly created group chat, Makoto added Akechi. "I added you to our group chat. You should be able to get everyone's numbers from there."

"Splendid!" Akechi beamed. His expression then became serious. He took one of Makoto's hands and leaned closer while placing his other hand over his heart. "I know you're concerned for Sae-san. I am as well. I'll do everything in my power to protect her."

"Th-thanks." Charming Akechi was going to take some getting used to. Makoto almost wanted to believe what he was saying. At least the oddness of the situation made it easier to mask her distaste
for him.

Akechi left shortly thereafter, turning once to smile and wave. When he was a safe enough distance away, Ryuji muttered, "He's definitely up to somethin'."

Makoto nodded.

The train ride home was uneventful. Makoto and Ryuji decided to table discussion of the mission until everyone was together. Ryuji did take a few potshots at Akechi though, which Makoto thoroughly enjoyed. It was petty and immature, she knew, but in the moment it was an appreciated indulgence.

After Ryuji got off the train, Makoto thoughts turned to more serious matters. The shadow she met in the palace bore little resemblance to the sister she knew in reality. Kaneshiro hadn't seemed too different from from his shadow counterpart. Was Sis's shadow how she treated other people in reality? Makoto thought back to Futaba's recordings. They weren't taunting, but they did suggest a rigged system. A casino was by design a rigged system... and Sis was its manager.

Makoto stepped off the train at her station and began walking to her apartment building. The cognitive people in the casino hadn't seemed desperate like those in Kaneshiro and Okumura's respective palaces. Did that mean Sis still had some compassion for people, even if she was taking their money? If allowed to progress, would that change? And what did it mean that several of the people seemed to celebrate their own good fortune in life? Was Sis trying to force a balance in some twisted service of fairness?

Sis wasn't home when Makoto arrived. It was to be expected. Makoto made her way to her sister's room. She grasped the door handle. Pausing, she closed her eyes and breathed deeply. She released the handle, but her hand hovered, lingering. Finally, she turned back, making her way to her own room. It was time to catch up on sleep.

Makoto stared at the ceiling from her bed. Being inside the casino was very different than being in the surrounding cognition. The police station, Dad's desk—those were artifacts of the Sis she recognized. The casino was the realm of one she did not. However, it was all still born of Sis.

Having been so focused on absorbing what she could, Makoto realized she hadn't thought so much about the others' presence while she was in the casino. On reflection, she still didn't like the idea but saving Sis was of tantamount importance. The question was how to do it.

Makoto awoke with no more solutions than when she had drifted off. Sis was sick. Sis was getting worse. The decision Makoto had tried to make earlier kept circling back.

Change her heart before she does something unforgivable.

Sis might become someone Makoto no longer recognized—not the cruel shadow of the palace, but a husk of her former self mired in guilt. Makoto recalled Kamoshida at the school assembly, Madarame projected on the big screens in Shibuya, and Kaneshiro's late night phone call. She supposed understanding the weight of ones actions was just. Accepting the legal consequences of one's actions seemed just as well... but only if the legal system itself was just, and that was increasingly unclear.

Makoto's time with the Phantom Thieves had put it all in doubt... Did the system serve people in need equally? Did it respond to all reports seriously and with care? Were investigations and trials conducted fairly? Once convicted, couldn't the criminals be doing something more? Something constructive? Even greater still, what would it take to fix a corrupt legal system? Changing hearts
wasn't enough if there was no one to take the place of those they deposed. Makoto balled her hand into a fist and regarded it curiously. How was she supposed to be a heroine of justice?

A strange sensation, something akin to a heartbeat, a strong one, echoed inside Makoto. She brought her fist over her chest, shut her eyes tight, and shook her head vigorously. The feeling dissipated. Makoto breathed deeply and renewed her focus to the problem at hand.

There was still only one option. Makoto imagined her sister despondent, the likely result of changing her heart. She hoped Sis could be healed with enough time and enough love. She would do whatever it took. It was her turn to support and care for her sister.

*I will definitely save Sis.*

Makoto once again thought about the others invading her sister's palace. She took another deep breath. It wasn't ideal, but she knew her friends would act in good faith. It would have to be enough. Ren... Ren could do anything. She had to believe. Makoto reached for her phone as she sat up in her bed. She sent Ren a few quick messages, letting him know she had made her decision. He responded immediately.

"Leave it to me."

Makoto wrote back. "I trust you. That's why I ask that you lend me your help."

Makoto stepped out of the Shujin Academy gates. She should have known the school library wouldn't have any books about casinos and gambling, but she would have regret not trying. At least she had gotten some administrative things taken care of for the student council and Mr. Inui had been happy to give her some grading to do. It was good practice for her exams and a welcome distraction. Stopping just outside the gate, Makoto wondered what to do next.

Futaba probably wasn't even awake yet, meaning if the Phantom Thieves were going to Sis's palace, it would be several hours still. Makoto slipped her hands into the opposing sleeves of her blue peacoat, pulling her arms across her chest. The cold reminded her it was but a few days shy of November, a scant three weeks until Sis would act. Makoto stared at the tips of her boots. It would be best to go back home, to make more progress in her mythological studies, but she hesitated as she thought of the empty apartment.

"Makoto."

Makoto looked up. "Ren! What are you doing at school today?"

"I was looking for you," Ren gripped the strap of his bag, his right hand moved to his pocket. Despite the weather, he didn't seem cold wearing only a thin shirt under his blazer. "You always come here when you're anxious."

Makoto wondered if she could suppress a blush by thinking really hard. There was something... comforting... about how well-defined things were at school.

"Your message this morning..." Ren grasped Makoto by her upper arm. He looked her directly in the eyes. "Is that truly what you want? You're not just saying that because-"

"I'm certain," Makoto said as evenly as she could. "What I saw in that palace... I... We... have to save Sis."

Ren didn't move. He continued to stare into Makoto's eyes. She didn't waver. Finally, he released
her, taking a step back. He waited before speaking again. "Okay."

"Thank you," Makoto paused, glancing away for a moment before looking back at Ren. "Are we going to the palace today?"

"Not today."

Makoto frowned. "My sister won't be easy to beat. I know that better than anyone. I want to understand our situation as soon as possible."

"So do I... which is why I asked Futaba to hack Akechi's phone."

Makoto's eyes went wide and then a broad smile formed across her lips. Brilliant. So that was why Futaba had been acting so weird.

"I'm going to wait a few days... see if we can learn anything before we go there next."

Makoto nodded. She brought one of her hands to her chin. They had a few more days to prepare. She wondered what the best use of time would be.

"We have some free time," Ren was apparently thinking along the same lines. "Would you like to visit Chinatown with me?"

"Hmm, Chinatown... I've never been." It would be nice to spend time with Ren, but Makoto knew she should be preparing for Sis's palace.

"You said you wanted to broaden your horizons, right?" Ren smiled.

"True... and I suppose the shops in Chinatown might carry unique medicines and balms."

"And protective charms," Ren quickly added.

Much like model guns, charms and other spiritual items seemed to be effective in the Metaverse. Makoto tried to ignore the fact that Ren didn't need her help—he had an uncanny eye for useful gear, his biology and chemistry grades were on par with hers, and he seemed close with his local doctor. It might be more beneficial if he went alone and she did some research into casinos instead. Makoto was about to suggest as much but hesitated. She supposed her providing a second opinion on whatever medicines or charms they found could be useful. Ren wouldn't ask her otherwise.

"Okay, if you think I can help. You're our leader after all." Makoto smiled politely and began walking towards Aoyama-Itchome station.

Ren closed his eyes and exhaled, a smile forming on his lips. He walked alongside Makoto. They had just gotten past the vending machines when he came to a sudden stop. "No."

Makoto turned to face Ren. He was a few paces behind her, his head tilted down slightly, making it hard to see his eyes between his voluminous hair and the glare on his glasses. His lips were pressed together. The hand in his pocket looked to be balled into a fist. He inhaled deeply through his nose, releasing his hand and pressing his lips more firmly before finally relaxing them. Had she done something wrong?

"I don't want to go with you on team business," Ren lifted his head to meet Makoto's gaze. He spoke firmly. "I'm asking you out. On a date."

Makoto tried to replay Ren's words in her head. Had he just...?
"I like you," Ren's voice softened. "And I think you feel the same way about me."

Makoto stared, mouth agape. She wanted to think carefully about what he was saying but she kept interrupting her own flow of thoughts, racing to the conclusion she knew she wanted.

"I know the timing isn't good. I see what the palace does to you," Ren began to speak more quickly. "Just for today, just while we wait, let's get away. Let's go somewhere and leave it all behind."

Ren stood with his hands at his sides, face serious and unflinching. His chest slowly rose and fell. When he didn't speak further, Makoto realized she still needed to respond.

"U-um, I'm not exactly the most well-versed in these matters, so allow me to confirm this..." Makoto started. She felt her cheeks heating up. If she was jumping to conclusions, she would never be able to face Ren again. "S-Sorry if I'm mistaken, but um... you mean, you l-like like me? By date, d-did you mean a romantic one?"

"Yes," Ren smiled. His body seemed to relax. He closed the distance between them.

"...O-Oh," Makoto looked up at Ren. "Um... You really mean it, right?"

"Yes." Ren's smile broadened.

"Oh." Makoto broke eye contact, turning away slightly. Her face felt hot and yet there something pleasant about it. She shifted her eyes back to Ren. "I-I like you too."

Ren brought a hand to Makoto's face, gently leading her to look at him directly. His smile seemed so warm and inviting. How was it that he was so composed?

"Um... s-so...?"

"I believe I asked you out..." Ren removed his hand, running it through his hair. He gave Makoto a questioning look.

"Oh. R-right. D-do you really think it's okay? The palace... I should-"

"We've been running non-stop for weeks... the investigation, the festival, Akechi, the palace. I need some down time... and I want to share it with you."

Makoto wasn't sure if it was possible to blush on top of a blush, but she could feel her body trying. Relaxing wasn't the first thing she thought of when she considered her first date, but when he asked like that... "O-okay."

"Good," Ren's smiled gently at first but then got a mischievous glint in his eye. Soon his fingers were laced with Makoto's—they were holding hands. Before she could respond, he was leading them to the station.

Makoto struggled to keep up. She felt that the whole world must be staring at them. However, she realized if she didn't focus on her footwork, she was going to stumble. Once she caught up and matched Ren's pace, she checked to see if he was annoyed.

Ren looked down at Makoto and smiled. It wasn't a mischievous. It wasn't even reassuring. He just sincerely looked happy. Makoto hadn't realized until then that he could get even more attractive. He squeezed Makoto's hand. The rest of the way to the station, and even sitting next to each other in the train car, the situation repeated itself. Sometimes it would be Makoto noticing that Ren was looking at her and sometimes it would be her curiously checking on him. After the first few times, Makoto
found herself naturally smiling in return.

When the train arrived in Shibuya, the couple traversed the massive station to make their transfer to Chinatown in Yokohama.

"Hey, is that Yusuke?" Makoto asked, spotting their tall teammate across the underground walkway.

"Probably," Ren didn't stop. If anything, he seemed to walk faster. "He comes here often to people watch."

"Should we say hello?"

"Let's not interrupt him."

Makoto supposed they were only on their first date. Ren might discover he didn't like dating her after all. It was probably a bit premature to mention anything to their friends, much less greet them holding hands.

Ren insisted on paying the train fare. It was the first time he had let go of Makoto since they started their date. She had felt a little silly passing through neighboring turnstiles, hand-in-hand, but there was something amusing and fun about it as well. Standing a few feet away, Makoto wondered if she was supposed to be watching him or politely looking away or something else. Where did people learn these things?

"Look Mommy!" Makoto turned to see a small child pointing at Ren. "It's that strange man from the alley!"

Ren lowered his head and brought his left hand to his hair, blocking his face with his lifted arm. His right found its way to his pocket. Makoto considered asking Ren just what he was doing when he seemed to space out just off of Central Street, but figured that revealing the extent of her... activities... earlier in the year wasn't exactly first date material.

"Don't look honey," the mother used a sharp but hushed voice as she started herding the child away.

"But he was there for hours!" the child continued to speak just a little too loudly. "Why is that Mommy?"

"That's enough," the mother started dragging the child by the wrist.

Once the fare was taken care of, Ren again took Makoto's hand and the pair walked to the platform. Makoto heard the tell-tale sound of her phone buzzing in her bag. She took it out and checked the screen, seeing it was a calendar notification reminding her to buy purple yams at the market. She was about to swipe it out of the way when Ren brought his hand over the phone.

"Let's really leave it all behind." Ren got out his own phone and began swiping.

"What if Futaba-"

"I'll set it to priority-only."

Makoto turned from her phone to Ren. "A-am I also on your priority list?"

Ren grinned, closing his eyes, a breath of a laugh escaping. "Yes."

"Good." Makoto smiled to herself. She found her phone's do-not-disturb settings, but paused before changing them. She looked over at the empty tracks. Was it really okay? What if Sis...? No. Sis was
focused on the Phantom Thieves. That would prevent her distortion from harming anyone else in the meantime. They had until the 20th. That shadow would surely be contained until then. Makoto shivered, remembering the distortion that wore her sister's face.

"Makoto?" Ren leaned forward slightly and turned so that he was in Makoto's line of sight. He let go of her hand, instead bringing his arm around behind her, cupping her upper arm and drawing her closer. As he did, he looked deeply into her eyes, as if to ask if it was okay. When she didn't object, he began to speak. "If you can't-

"N-no," Makoto changed the status on her phone and returned it to her bag. Ren needed to leave it all behind. They both did. "S-sorry, I... I'll leave it, everything, here."

The train arrived soon thereafter, allowing the couple to board. It was even easier to maintain their closeness sitting down. Makoto enjoyed the reassuring feeling of Ren's arm against her own. The train departed, taking them away from Shujin, Mementos, the Phantom Thieves, and her sister's palace. After watching the platform disappear from view, Makoto he turned to Ren, finding him already looking at her. She smiled contently. Today was for the two of them.

Chapter End Notes

Hat tip to FFnet's morfowt on the text message. Indeed, it connected things nicely.

Thanks to NieRville for some feedback on the setting in the first scene.
Lie 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We can leave it all behind.

Arriving in Yokohama following a long underground train ride and keeping their phones stowed, it really was as if Makoto and Ren had left everything behind. The ride from Shibuya had been mostly quiet, in part because Makoto had long since been comfortable traveling with Ren in silence and in part because she wasn't sure what to say. That didn't make for an interesting date. As the pair walked from the station, Makoto intended to rectify the situation.

"Are we going the right way? Hmm... We passed through a blue gate, so I suppose we're in Chinatown now, right?" Makoto immediately regret her babbling. They were surrounded by paper lanterns, serpentine dragons, and Canton smells. Of course they were in Chinatown. Why did she have to be so stupid? She tried changing the subject. "There was something I wanted to try here... Hm, what was it...?"

Makoto raised her hand to her chin. She had a vague sense of shapes and tastes but whatever it was remained just past the edge of her conscious. At this rate, Ren might regret asking her out. She spoke quickly, hoping that putting it to words would help. "Pork buns...? Sesame dumplings...? No, that's not it... Sorry, it's completely slipped my mind..."

Ren smiled. Makoto wondered if he was just being polite.

"Spring rolls?"

"That's it! I don't know why I forgot the name. I know I can get them in Tokyo, but I might as well have an authentic Chinese one here..." Makoto noticed Ren's lips part. Then it hit her. Spring rolls weren't Chinese. He must think her rather ignorant. Why was dating so hard? "Oh, wait... Aren't spring rolls Vietnamese? Sis would get mad at me if I made a mistake like this on an exam-"

Makoto caught herself. Sis. Exams. This was the exact opposite of leaving it all behind.

"You don't have to be so nervous," Ren lifted their joined hands, giving a reassuring squeeze.

"We're on a date. How could I not be?" Makoto bit her lip. "I-I take it you're not?"

"I am... a little," a bashful smile crossed Ren's face. He paused for a moment. "That's what makes it exciting."

Makoto looked at Ren as if he were some sort of alien.

Ren let out a small laugh. "We've been out before Makoto. This is similar... just a little more special."

Makoto took a deep breath and balled her free hand into a fist. "I'll try to-"

Something between a laugh and a sigh escaped Ren's lips. "It's okay. Let's just take it slow. We'll figure it out."

Makoto took a deep breath and tried to assimilate Ren's words.
"I was hoping you'd be able to relax out here," Ren added, running his free hand through his hair. "Is there anything you want to see? What would you do if this weren't a date?"

"Hmm... I guess just experience what's here," Makoto brought her hand back to her chin. "It's easier with a goal. Maybe we should look for spring rolls after all. China and Vietnam are right next to each other."

"Sounds like a plan." Something about Ren's expression was encouraging.

"This is going to be fun." The shift in perspective had helped. Makoto began leading Ren down the street by their linked hands. "If we're going to get lost, we might as well get lost completely. Come on, let's start with that street over there!"

The pair explored the shops of Chinatown. They amused themselves examining the aesthetics of various decorations and baubles, pointing out weird snacks not found in regular convenience stores, and marveling at the street food vendors practicing their craft. It was mostly window shopping, but it was fun. They even found some spring rolls.

Having stopped in a character goods shop, Makoto perused a shelf full of panda-themed items. When she turned around, she discovered Ren was no longer with her. She looked around the shop and then poked her head out, looking up and down the crowded streets. The thing to do in these situations was to stay where you were last seen. Makoto tried to ignore the shopkeeper who was clearly not happy with her blocking of valuable street real estate.

"Makoto!" Ren caught her attention as he maneuvered his way upstream through the crowd. He put a hand on her shoulder. "Sorry about that. I stepped out for a moment and I guess I got swept away."

"It's okay. Did you find anything interesting over there?"

"Actually... I have a gift for you," Ren's gaze shifted away. He seemed strangely serious and a little unsure. He pulled something out of his pocket. Opening his hand, he revealed a simple gold necklace with a small pendant in the shape of... a creepy mask. Makoto tried not to make a face. It was quite intricate, likely Thai in design. She wasn't sure if it was an ogre or a monkey. Either way, it seemed to be of high quality, much more so than the items in the shops they had visited thus far.

"Are you sure? It looks expensive."

"It's fine," Ren paused. He glanced up at her briefly. "I know it's not your style..."

Makoto cringed internally, not meaning to be so ungrateful.

"...but it seems these are considered protective," Ren continued. "I hate to bring this up today, but I think it will help in the Metaverse."

It would be rude to turn down a gift, but the pendant was just unsettling. Makoto suspected her imagination would run wild every time she saw it. Furthermore, jewelry seemed forward for a first date. On the other hand it was her first... No. Makoto unconsciously reached for her revolver, finding only air.

"You could wear it under your clothing," Ren suggested as Makoto failed to answer. Finally, he smiled boyishly, leaning down to make sure he was in her line of sight. "Please?"

"O-okay," Makoto supposed she didn't dislike the idea of the necklace as much as Ren seemed to like it. She also wondered if she was physically incapable of turning down that smile. She made a mental note to work on that. "T-Thank you. It's thoughtful of you."
"Here," Ren unclasped the chain, stepping behind Makoto and centering the pendant in front of her. He re-fastened the necklace and then dropped it inside her turtleneck. The cool metal contrasted with the warm tips of his fingers. Once it fell, he placed his hand where her nape met her shoulders. The motion lightly pressed the chain against her skin. She enjoyed the pressure of his thumb against her muscle. He leaned over, his lips even with her ear. "Thanks for indulging me."

Makoto inhaled and closed her eyes, taking in the warmth of Ren's breath on her ear. It would be nice to just lean back into him and stay that way, but they were in the middle of a crowded tourist area.

Ren walked around to face Makoto. There was something very inviting about the way he looked at her, his gentle smile. He slipped his hand into hers again. "Shall we continue?"

"Mm."

A few more side streets later and the shops were beginning to seem repetitive. The mid-autumn sun hung low in the sky. When the goodwill gate once again came into view, Makoto spoke. "I-I think we've seen everything... perhaps we should head back."

"Is there somewhere else you'd like to go?" Ren asked.

"Aren't you tired?"

"A little... but I don't want to go back yet," Ren stopped, turning to Makoto. He brought his free hand to her cheek. "If you're-"

"I feel the same way," Makoto smiled back at Ren. The two gazed at each other, neither saying anything.

"Excuse me," a tourist stepped around the couple.

"O-oh. Sorry," Makoto broke away, calling after the visitor. She turned back to Ren. Everything she knew about Yokohama rushed through her mind. She searched for something, something date-like, so they wouldn't have to go home. "Uh, um... I've never been to Cosmic World. I think that's near here."

"Then let's go," Ren squeezed Makoto's hand again.

The walk to Cosmic World took the couple along a tree-lined lane by the bay. The autumn leaves combined with the setting sun surrounded them in a warm hue, almost enough to forget the chilly weather. They passed by several small parks and grassy areas. Ren looked at ease in the environment. Makoto wished she could take a picture.

As they neared Cosmic World, the silhouettes of the attractions began to dominate the skyline. Center to these was the giant Ferris wheel, Cosmic Clock 20, the largest in the world back when Sis was born.

It was twilight by the time they were in the amusement park proper. Makoto didn't feel compelled to try any of the rides, but found it entertaining to dissect what they did. Ren seemed to indulge her curiosity. Arriving at the base of the Ferris Wheel, Makoto looked up in awe. Up close it was even more impressive than on their walk over, impressive... and intimidating. She had never ridden one before, let alone one so tall.

"Would you like to ride it?" Ren asked, his grip on her hand growing a little tighter. There was a hint of uncertainty in his voice. He didn't meet her eyes. "We've come all this way."
"Mm." Makoto nodded trepidatiously.

Soon the pair were in their own gondola, rising up above almost every structure around them. Makoto took in the view over the water, locating a few landmarks but mostly just marveling at the picturesque skyline as a whole.

However, as they were lifted higher still, Makoto started thinking about how far they were from the ground and what little separated them from free fall. The slowness of the gondola's motion gave her time to focus on the wheel itself, something she didn't have time for with thrill rides. Her ears latched on to each sound the wheel made. When was the last time the wheel had been serviced? What kind of damage did the rain and pollution do? What would happen if just one bolt gave? How many bolts made up the wheel and in every lot of bolts how many were bad? What about in every lot of steel making up the bolts? What would happen if the entire wheel just disassembled right there?

"Is everything alright?" Ren had turned to look at Makoto.

"I-Is this thing really safe...?" Makoto asked. "I-Is it leaning too far since we're sitting on the same side...?"

"You could cross to the other bench," Ren's mischievous smile had made a return. "Of course, that might cause the car to swing..."

"D-Don't tease me like that!" Makoto looked over at the beam keeping the car ahead of them in place, simultaneously gripping Ren's arm with both hands, as if to anchor herself to their side of the gondola. The sounds of the wheel seemed all the more magnified. "A-A-Actually, I can hear this terrible creaking too..."

While at least Ren seemed to have enjoying himself, Makoto admonished herself for taking what should have been a romantic date staple and making it weird.

"Sorry... I'm not used to things like this. I just started thinking about the view and how far off the ground we are and..." Makoto trailed off. She didn't need to heap her worrying on Ren. "Sorry..."

"It's fine."

"What about you? Do you just take in the sights? Am I weird for getting distracted?"

"No, I think about other things too."

"Oh... like what?"

"Well, just now I was trying to come up with a good way to ask if I could kiss you."

Makoto's eyes went wide. Her lips parted. Her face became hot. The sounds of the creaking Ferris wheel were drowned out by her beating heart. "D-did you? ...Come up with one I mean."

"I don't know," Ren leaned closer, looking deeply into Makoto's eyes. "Did it work?"

"O-oh." Makoto stared for a moment longer. Then her face relaxed into a small smile. "Yes."

Ren took off his glasses with his free hand, placing them on the seat beside him. In the same motion, he then brought his arm around Makoto, his fingers grazing the nape of her neck as he ran them into her hair, leading her to meet him. Makoto thought she would be panicked. She had no idea what to do and yet anticipation pushed away all her fears and worries. All was safe. All was okay. It was just the two of them. Ren stopped short, shifting his gaze from her lips back to her eyes, as if to ask one
last time. Makoto gave a single, shallow nod. As he closed his eyes, she did the same.

Their lips met. Soft. Full. Makoto searched the outlines of Ren's mouth with her own, enjoying the feeling of him doing the same. She hadn't realized a kiss was something one could feel with their whole body, a pleasant excitement pressing outwards from within. She breathed deeply, contently. Her lips parted slightly as she did. She ran them over his, finding hints of wetness in newfound territory. Ren breathed deeply as well. Makoto felt the warmth of his mouth with hers. She felt his arm tremble against her hands.

Ren pulled back. Makoto followed him at first but withdrew when he did not meet her. He stopped at a distance where she could focus on him, revealing that same questioning expression from before. She nodded again, this time smiling broadly. As he leaned in once more, he slipped his other arm from her grasp, bringing his newly freed hand against the small of her back, drawing her closer. This time they met open mouthed, their tongues testing each other, lightly, hesitantly at first. As the kiss deepened, Makoto found herself gripping the front of Ren's blazer, half as an outlet for her excitement, half just wanting to be closer. She reveled in the sensations of his touch, his hands, his lips, his tongue, how they would pull back, running their lips together, tugging as if to finish the kiss only to urgently reunite.

An abrupt change in lighting caused both Makoto and Ren to pull back, immediately looking in opposite directions. Between the two of them they surveyed their surroundings, just as efficiently as if they were on a mission in the Metaverse. Each relaxed as they realized it was only their gondola's return to the bottom of the wheel. A mere three cars separated them from disembarking. Ren let go of Makoto, sliding his hands across her as if to linger just a bit more. She in turn let go of his lapels, bringing her hands to her lap. She sighed, coming to rest in a small smile. "One round is so short..."

Ren nodded.

When their gondola finished its circle, Ren got out first and turned to offer a hand to Makoto. It was unnecessary—the ride was designed for all ages after all—but Makoto enjoyed it nonetheless. It was as if she was special. She took his hand and the two moved out of the way of the line.

The lights of park and the rest of the city swayed in the uneven waters of the bay. It would be nice to just remain where they were, hand in hand, taking in the view. However, Makoto sensed it was getting late. She hadn't planned to be out so long and was unfamiliar with the train schedules. "I-I suppose we should head back."

Ren gave a brief nod, his expression solemn.

"Um, it's not that I want to," Makoto clarified. "It's just that the trains-"

"I know. I don't want you to worry," Ren looked down at Makoto, brushing the back of his fingers across her cheek.

Makoto tried to savor their walk back to the train station, taking in more of the view over the water, the organic shapes of the trees and landscaping, and the simplicity of the grass-covered areas along the waterfront.

The train back to Shibuya was about half full, allowing the couple to find adjacent seats. They hid their adjoined hands between them, not wanting to annoy the other riders. Talking about all they had seen and done that afternoon, the journey went by quickly. Whenever they broached the topic of the Ferris wheel, though sanitized as they were in public, Makoto found it hard to meet Ren's eyes, a gentle warmth finding its way to her cheeks.
Shibuya Station marked not only the end of their date, but the end of their escape. It was hard not to look at the artificially lit corridors and find the world she existed in seemed a little more drab than she remembered. When they got to the point where their routes home diverged, they stopped. Makoto turned to face Ren, their linked hands forming a bridge between them. "I-I had a really nice time. Thank you... for inviting me."

"Thank you for agreeing to come with me," Ren replied. The two continued to look at each other, neither saying anything or making any motion to leave.

"I hope we can do this again some time," Makoto eventually managed.

"I do too."

Makoto briefly closed her eyes. Though she believed she was reading things correctly, it was still a relief to hear. "I-I guess I'll see you tomorrow then."

Ren nodded.

The pair slowly let their fingers slip from each other's grasp, but again, neither turned away.

"Um, I-I'm not really sure how this works," Makoto found it hard to hold her gaze, her eyes glancing down, as if better words would appear on the ground. She forced them up again. "Would it be okay to call you my boyfriend?"

Ren smiled. It was gentle, relaxing—the kind that always made Makoto feel better. "I'd like that."

"Mm." Makoto smiled in return. It was uncontrolled, probably awkward and goofy. She took a step back, finally turning, encouraged by the need to hide her expression. There was a hop in her step as she made her way to her train.

Makoto carved another carrot slice. Once again, it had come out lopsided. She placed the failed attempt into her bento and tried again. The pictures she had found online made it look so easy. She sighed. If Ren hadn't dumped her by Valentine's Day, she was definitely going with something store bought.

"That's a lot of food."

Makoto looked up, quickly putting a hand over the pile of heart-shaped vegetables as she did. Sis was standing at the edge of their small kitchen. She hadn't yet changed for work. Makoto was glad her sister had managed to get some sleep in a real bed. "I'm making one for a friend."

"Who's this friend?" There was a hint of suspicion in Sis's voice.

"One of the second years who helped me on the festival committee." Makoto thought it best not to perturb the status quo with Sis being in such a delicate state. It wasn't really a lie anyway. Sis didn't seem entirely pleased with the answer though. Makoto changed the subject. "I can make one for you too."

"I need to get to the office."

"I'll be quick. I have all the ingredients," Makoto explained. "It would save you time at lunch."

"Well then," Sis made a cryptic smile as she headed back to her room. "Carry on."

Makoto smiled broadly and began preparing Sis's bento in earnest. She briefly considered adding
some of vegetables she had been carving, but Sis would probably just scold her for wasting time. At
the very least, she could make the arrangement nice however. Satisfied with her handiwork, Makoto
placed the lid on the bento. She wrapped it first, keeping it separate from the others, avoiding any
mix ups. It was nice to get to cook for Sis again. When things were like this, it was almost like Sis's
palace didn't exist.

Makoto let two trains heading for Aoyama-Itchome pass as she waited for Ren, holding the bento
she made for him tightly. She hoped she wasn't being one of those clingy girlfriends, but she wanted
to make the most of the brief lull before having to face Sis's palace again. It wasn't long before Ren
approached the platform. He waited by a wall for the next train to come.

"G-good morning," Makoto caught Ren's attention. In that moment she briefly worried she had
imagined the entirety of the previous the day, but his smile reassured her she hadn't. She held out the
bento with both hands. "Um, I made this for you."

Ren seemed somewhat surprised. He looked down at the bento for several seconds.

"W-what?" Makoto asked. "I-I thought you wanted-

"I do... I just wasn't expecting you to. Thanks," Ren's smiled broadly as he accepted the gift. He held
the bento with one hand and ran the other through his hair. "Don't feel you have to make one for me
every day, okay?"

"Oh." Makoto had been so focused on constructing the bento, she hadn't thought that far ahead.
"Mm."

Ren brought a hand to Makoto's upper back, coaxing her towards him. She could feel the tips of his
fingers pressing the chain of her necklace into her skin. They waited together, standing just a little too
close. When the train arrived, Ren took Makoto's hand and they proceeded to board. Makoto heard a
contented sigh from Ren's bag. "Hmm?"

"Don't mind me," Morgana's voice was muffled. "I'm just a fan of young love."

Ren gave Makoto an apologetic look and let go of her hand. Perhaps it was a bit much for school.
Morgana was probably not the only hopeless romantic and who knew what other reactions awaited
them. They crowded onto the train. For once, the commuter traffic was advantageous. Makoto
enjoyed being so close to Ren as they were whisked off to school.

Makoto sorted through the receipts and ledgers from the school festival. The notoriety of the school
seemed to have attracted more than enough people make up for the change in date. Across the board,
classes and circles had done much more volume than previous years, and with the extra volume came
extra bookkeeping. Makoto wondered if she would ever catch up.

It didn't help that Makoto kept getting distracted. It was lunch time. Ren usually ate lunch in the
courtyard with Ryuji and Ann. She wondered if he had opened her bento yet. It took a great deal of
willpower not to peek out a window and spy on him. Did he like the taste of her cooking? Did he
like the presentation or was it too girly for him? She was grateful to have the student council room to
hide in as she felt her face heat up even though she was alone.

The creak of the door opening brought her answer. It was Ren. He was holding the still-wrapped
bento. "I thought you'd be here."

"Is there a problem?" Makoto asked, wide-eyed.
Ren chuckled softly. "Well, my girlfriend made this bento for me and then hid away come lunch time."

"Huh?" Makoto tried to make sense of Ren's response but kept interrupting herself to replay one word. *Girlfriend.*

"I thought we'd have lunch together," Ren said, standing just inside the door.

"Oh. Oh!" Makoto smiled. Dating really was exciting. "Yes. Please sit."

"Why don't we go up to the roof instead?" Ren suggested, not moving from the door. "It's just as private, probably more."

"Mm." Makoto started putting away the paperwork before her. She and Ren departed for the roof a few minutes later, walking side by side. After they turned at the landing, Ren brushed his fingers against hers. They held hands the rest of the way.

It was cloudy and gray out. Still, upon stepping outside, Ren inhaled deeply, tilting his face towards the sky.

Makoto watched, curiously. "You really prefer the outdoors, don't you?"

Ren turned back to Makoto, pausing as if to think. "I've never thought about it. It's just..."

"Just what?"

Ren pressed his lips together and cast his eyes downward. The grip on her hand tightened ever so slightly.

"It's alright," Makoto offered. "Perhaps now's not the-"

"The sky," Ren spoke firmly, turning to look directly into Makoto's eyes. His hold on her hand increased in strength. "I think I'd really miss the sky... if..."

Makoto caught her breath. Of course. She had been so wrapped up in saving Sis, she had barely processed the reality that all of them could be going to jail. The peril the Phantom Thieves were trying to avoid had been so abstract. To Ren, who lived under the threat of prison constantly, since even before discovering the Metaverse, it was a very real and concrete possibility. It wasn't only Sis's investigation either. Every palace must have been an additional risk, an additional toll on him. That he pressed on with what he believed was right despite that fear... Ren was truly amazing.

"I'm sorry," Ren spoke again. Makoto regret being at a loss for words. "I didn't want our lunch to-"

"No. It's fine. I want to be here for you," Makoto interrupted. She looked at him squarely before turning and resting her head on his shoulder. "Just like you are for me. I want you to tell me everything."

"Thank you... maybe another time," Ren whispered. Makoto felt him exhale. She closed her eyes. There was something comforting about rising and falling with his breaths. After a few minutes just like that, Ren spoke again. "I would still like to eat lunch though."

Makoto lifted her head. "R-right!"

The couple created a makeshift bistro set out of the old classroom furniture laying about. Makoto fixated on Ren as he opened the bento. She tried not to make it obvious but thought she noticed his
eyes flicker up to her face for an instant. As he removed the lid, Makoto bit her lip. He looked down at the spread adorned with small carrot and radish slices that were cut into hearts. He paused for a moment, lid still in his hand. He let out a small laugh followed by a big smile. As Ren lifted his head to look up at her, Makoto turned away, certain her face was a red mess. "There's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"I-I'm not embarrassed." Makoto refused to look at Ren until she heard a thud. She turned to discover it was his elbow landing on the table. He was leaning over, holding his forehead in his newly propped up hand, fingers lacing through his hair, snickering. "S-stop that!"

"I can't help it," Ren continued to laugh. "You're just... so cute."

"C-cute?" Makoto regarded Ren suspiciously. She had never been cute. What part of her did he find cute? "I-I'm not really the cute type."

"Oh?" Ren looked up, a bemused look on his face. "What type are you?"

"Mmm..." Makoto hesitated, sensing she was walking into a trap. "I'm more of the elegant type, I think."

"Well, you're that too." That Ren could just say that, with a straight face while looking her directly in the eye, frustrated Makoto for reasons she couldn't quite comprehend. He plucked a carrot heart with his chopsticks and brought it to his lips without breaking his gaze. He followed with a slice of tamagoyaki. "It's good."

Makoto felt the tension in her shoulders dissipate. She put aside Ren's other words for the moment. "I'm glad."

"Now eat," Ren pointed to Makoto's unopened bento.

"Oh." Makoto looked down at her bento. She was vaguely aware she was hungry but at the same time felt very self-conscious. She unwrapped her lunch and began picking at it. While she had tasted everything in the morning, she was relieved to verify that everything was still as expected.

"You sure packed a lot of vegetables," Ren remarked after some time. He was looking down at the paper liners that held the failed carvings. By this point he was mostly through his own lunch. He squinted slightly and then swiftly grabbed a carrot slice from Makoto's bento with his chopsticks. He held it up before him, examining it.

"Hey! Give that back!" Makoto's face had just recovered from their last rejoinder. Why did he have to-

"Hmm," Ren brought his other hand to his chin, smiling knowingly. He continued to inspect the malformed heart. "But it looks like it was originally meant for me."

"T-that one isn't good enough." Makoto looked down towards the edges of her skirt. "This is the first time I tried making them. I-I don't have any cutters and-"

"First time?" Ren's expression changed, his grin briefly replaced with a small self-satisfied smile. He slipped the carrot slice into his mouth and then nimbly stole another.

"H-hey!"

"Your feelings," Ren began, his head tilted down but his eyes looking upward to meet Makoto's. "Even the imperfect ones, I'll accept them all."
Makoto recoiled. It was like Ren's intensity shot right through her and looking at his grin, he seemed to know it. She scrambled to respond. "B-but..."

"You weren't going to eat them all anyway," Ren said, this time absconding with a radish.

"Y-you'll get sick if you-"

"I'll have you know I was one of the first people in Shibuya to complete all rounds of the Big Bang Burger challenge."

"Ew...?"

Ren chuckled. It wasn't long before he somehow managed to eat all of his bento and a sizable portion of Makoto's as well. She looked on in awe. Finishing off the last of the radishes, he spoke. "Thanks for the meal."

Makoto smiled alongside a small nod.

Ren reached his hand over the desk, placing it atop Makoto's. "Let me return the favor. Come to LeBlanc tonight. I'll make curry."

"O-okay. If it won't trouble Sakura-san."

"We might have to wait until the customers are gone," Ren shifted his gaze to the side. "But I wouldn't mind that..."

"Neither would I."

"Then it's a date."

Makoto smiled. It would be their third date in two days. She doubted it was sustainable, but she knew, they both knew, there was little time. One message from Futaba and their responsibilities would be back in full force, so until then, they had to make the most of what they had.

Unfortunately student council responsibilities weren't interested in pausing for Makoto and Ren, nor were Ren's after school commitments. It was late by the time Makoto entered Cafe Leblanc. She hadn't even had time to stop at home and change out of her uniform. Ren had, given he lived above the restaurant. He wore blue jeans and long sleeved shirt, covered in part by a green apron. He stood behind the counter with Sakura-san. The way he smiled at her as she stepped in seemed to wash away whatever apprehension she carried.

Sakura-san looked from Ren to Makoto and back to Ren again. "Heh."

The cafe was already empty. Makoto wasn't sure if she should be disappointed or not.

"Well, I'll be leaving for the night then," Sakura-san smiled. He gave Ren a hard pat on the back before making his way to the door, muttering under his breath. "Just like I taught you..."

"Come in," Ren motioned Makoto with his head towards the back of the restaurant. "Sit down."

"Can I help with anything?" Makoto seated herself at the counter. "I could stir the pot or-"

"Next time," Ren said as he walked around the counter. He placed a hand on Makoto's back, just below her neck. His thumb pressed into her muscle, running back and forth. She leaned back slightly, enjoying the sensation. "This time I just want you to sit back, relax, and let me take care of
Ren slowly removed his hand, brushing along the chain of her necklace as he did. He moved into the kitchen, pulling several ingredients out of the refrigerator and placing them on a cutting board. Makoto watched as he deftly chopped the fruits and vegetables before him, stopping several times to clear the cutting board into the pot. Wielding a knife for cooking was much different than wielding one for fighting shadows. Ren artfully handled both. Though she had been preparing meals for her sister and herself for years, Makoto felt herself outmatched. Ren certainly would have had no problem carving carrot slices into hearts.

As Ren moved throughout the small kitchen, he looked up from time to time, as if to check that Makoto was still watching him. He didn't show off however. This wasn't the Metaverse. He treated the kitchen and all the tools in it with respect. Makoto admired not only his skill but the little things she was just getting to observe, like the slope of his shoulder blades while he worked and the diligent look on his face.

Once the curry and the rice were simmering, Ren cleaned and stored all of the implements that were no longer in use. Having finished tidying up, he returned to the counter. "We have to let it sit for a few more minutes. Would you like some coffee?"

"Not this late," Makoto declined. "It's nice of Sakura-san... to let you use his restaurant like this."

"Sojiro's happy to have me practice," said Ren. "I help out from time to time."

Makoto wondered just how many jobs Ren had. She felt guilty not being employed herself. It was probably best not to dwell. They were on a date after all. Ren turned back to the range to stir the curry.

Once it was done, Ren plated the curry next to a bed of rice, evening out the edges with a dish towel. One plate had a visibly larger portion than the other. He lifted a finished plate in each hand. "Let's use a booth."

Makoto nodded and made her way to the nearest table, sliding into the seat. Ren put the plates down in front of her and then stopped to untie his apron, folding it neatly and placing it on one of the nearby chairs. To Makoto's surprise, Ren then slid next to her rather than onto the bench across. She looked up at him as he centered the plates before them. He smiled boyaishly. She enjoyed the feeling of his shoulder next to hers. It was tempting to just lay her head on him and rest, but dinner came first. "Thank you for the meal."

The curry was warm and comforting with undertones of both spice and sweetness. It was much like its creator. "Mmm... it's delicious."

Makoto ate her fill, savoring not only the meal, but also the knowledge Ren had made it for her as well as the comfort of the quiet evening they were spending together. She hoped her bento had managed to do the same for him. As she finished, she leaned her head against him and slipped her hand into his, thanking her earlier self for sitting on his left side.

"Did you want any more?" Ren asked, still working on the truly amazing amount of food he had put on his plate.

"No, I'm stuffed," said Makoto. She shifted her head slightly against his arm and brought her left hand over, resting it on their already entwined fingers. Makoto once again relaxed with the evenness
of Ren's breaths and even that of his quickened heartbeat. She drew large lazy circles on his hand with her free one. He breathed deeply between bites, often closing his eyes and stretching his shoulders. Even when he finally emptied his plate, the couple continued as they were, neither making any motion to break away.

"I should clean up." Ren said eventually. He loosened his hold on Makoto and she followed, releasing his hand and lifting her head. He picked up both plates as he got up, walking them over to the sink. She followed him out of the booth.

"Do you want any help?" asked Makoto, having stopped at the counter.

"Let me take care of it," Ren replied, placing the dishes in the sink before turning to Makoto. It was as he had said before. Makoto felt foolish having asked again. Ren left the dishes, returning to her side. He smiled as if he knew what she was thinking. "Don't worry about it."

Makoto wasn't sure how to respond, nor was sure what was supposed to happen next. Her eyes briefly found their way to his lips. She wondered if-

"It's late. I better get to the station," Makoto interrupted her own thoughts, trying not to embarrass herself. She found a safe spot on the floor to focus on.

"I'll go with you."

"I'd like that," Makoto looked up again, smiling at Ren. Neither moved from their position.

"We better get going," Ren said after a time. He started walking towards the door.

"Um," Makoto had lifted one of her hands, her fingers outstretched toward Ren. There was a trace of urgency in her voice. He met her eyes. She felt her heart pound in her chest. "Um..."

Ren closed the distance between them again, leaning in towards her. He made a lop-sided grin. "Is there something you want?"

"Kiss me." Makoto lightly tugged on the front of Ren's shirt as she said it. She looked at him with clear, wide eyes. For a moment, she worried over his response, an abstract fear she couldn't quite put to words. However, such thoughts soon were swept away as his hand met the small of her back, drawing her closer, the fingers of his other hand tilting up her chin as he leaned in. She caught a fleeting glance of his grin broadening before his lips met hers.

It started gently as before but this time accelerated much faster. A few light pecks turned to a slow, sensuous drawing out of each others lips. Makoto ventured further, hesitantly exploring the outlines of Ren's mouth. When she noticed the increased pressure from his hand on her back, trying to gather her closer still, she felt all the more confident in proceeding. Ren met her, matching her cadence. It was strange but delightful, a flow of calm somehow cresting in a flutter of excitement. She slid her hands off of his chest, wrapping around him instead, wanting to leave no space between them. He in turn cradled her head, caressing her cheek as his hand moved from her chin. Makoto took a step into their embrace, pressing more of herself against him.

Suddenly, Ren's hands shifted to Makoto's shoulders. He pushed her away, inhaling deeply as he did.

Both were short of breath. Makoto looked at Ren in confusion.

"Sorry," Ren looked sheepish, a dusting of pink crossing his cheeks. "That was getting a little too exciting."
"Is that bad?" Makoto wondered what she had done wrong.

"It's wonderful." Ren exhaled. He seemed to take note of Makoto's wide-eyed stare. "It's just that... I want to take things slow. I'm worried you-"

The sound of the door bursting open interrupted Makoto and Ren. They turned to see Futaba, her voice raised as she walked in. "Ren! We got something! It's-"

"Futaba! Don't inter-" Morgana's cut himself short upon entering the cafe. Ren snatched his apron from the nearby chair. He hastily put it back on, tying the drawstrings behind him.

"Oh," Futaba stopped, looking at Makoto. "I didn't know you were here."

Makoto tilted her head down, as if somehow it would hide her flushed face. She supposed she should be grateful Futaba had been listening to Akechi. She would have to be more careful about what she did in LeBlanc. "I-I stopped by for dinner."

"Oh," Futaba looked confused for a moment but then made a knowing smile. She held one finger up. "Sojiro's recipe is the best, isn't it?"

"It is," Makoto said softly, thinking more about the one who prepared it.

"But Ren never answers his messages when he's eating it," Futaba said with an exaggerated sigh.

Ren scratched the back of his neck in response. He looked over to Makoto. She looked back at him. Futaba's presence meant things were moving forward again. Makoto waited, half trying to resist fate and half trying to make peace with it. Finally, she spoke. "So, what did you discover?"

"It's bad," Futaba said bluntly, her expression becoming serious. "Akechi's gonna kill Ren."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading this chapter and my apologies for the delay. I know it's hard to keep the thread of the story when updates are so infrequent. Work has been all consuming since the week before I posted the last chapter and the near term outlook isn't good, though I did just clear one major deadline yesterday. It usually takes me all weekend (at best) to write a chapter and then another week of evenings to edit it. I no longer have those weekends or evenings and have been fighting to get in a few paragraph here and there. With this chapter I even had a head start. I don't for the next one.

I am committed to finishing this story. While I really wanted to get it done before the anime starts and P5D comes out, that seems unlikely now but I have not abandoned this fic and will try to get the remaining chapters out. I've toyed with the idea updating progress status somewhere but I don't want to trigger this fic being marked as updated. Profile maybe? I started poking around tumblr but don't think it's the right fit.

An additional thanks to everyone who has commented in the past. Related to the above, I don't have as much of a well of emotional energy to draw on when I put my work out there anymore. Whenever I feel like the current chapter/draft is trash or nobody cares, I go back and read through those comments and remember there are readers out there
who have really taken interest in this story and are looking forward to the next chapter.

Originally posted 2018/2/15
Makoto silently listened to Futaba's recording of Akechi conversing with an unknown man. Akechi had finished his report on the team's initial visit to Sis's palace and was in the midst of explaining his plan to capture everyone and kill Ren. Already Makoto's mind was racing through the possibilities, actions they could take to protect their leader, the boy she loved. Death had always been a risk, but the fact that Akechi planned to come at Ren in the real world, where he didn't have his extraordinary strengths to protect him, made the situation seem all the more inescapable. It didn't help that all of her ideas rapidly hit dead ends. Makoto felt her breathing start to accelerate. She tried to suppress it, not wanting to worry Ren.

"...And thus, the dangerous criminal responsible for the mass mental shutdowns shall end his own life," Akechi's voice had a matter-of-fact tone to it. "When he does, you will become a great hero who saved Japan from evil. As will I, of course."

"And what of the others?" the contact asked. Makoto felt Ren's hand twitch in hers. Her eyes shifted from Futaba's screen to Ren's face. There was tension in his jaw, around his eyes.

Futaba was staring intently at the waveforms being displayed on her laptop. It sat on the table by the railing in the attic, the group having adjourned upstairs. Morgana sat on the table, just offset from the machine, watching as well. The couple stood behind the younger girl, her fixation affording them some privacy. Makoto wondered if they should have told Futaba they started dating, but given the gravity of the situation, it seemed an inappropriate time.

"The public need not know how many there are," Akechi suggested. "We can release them after a time. Without their leader, they pose little threat."

"Why not remove the leader in the palace? We have an alternative scenario written setting up the Okumura girl as the mastermind."

"It's risky to take him head-on. His true strength lies dormant. He's only revealed hints of it when pushed." Akechi paused. "However, if the opportunity presents itself, I most certainly will."

"And what of the prosecutor?"

It was Makoto's turn to twitch.

"When we apprehend the Phantom Thieves, we'll simply leave her treasure in her palace. She'll continue as she was, no surprises. Knowing Sae-san, she'll probably want to interrogate the suspect herself, but that will only add authenticity to the timeline of events. She'll witness me there so I can testify later if there are inquiries," Akechi explained. "Furthermore, saving the heart of a beautiful woman will be icing on the cake. The public will eat it up."

"Very well, I will make the arrangements on my end. You're certain they'll be prepared by the proposed date?"

"I've explored Sae-san's palace thoroughly. I'll make sure they get there."
As the recording came to an end, Ren and Makoto let go of each other's hands, just as Futaba and Morgana turned towards them. The group remained silent. It was a lot to take in—the plan to kill Ren, confirmation of Akechi's role in the mental shutdowns, and evidence of a much larger conspiracy that wielded great influence over the justice system. Alone, the thought of Akechi having free reign in Sis's palace unnerved Makoto, but his plans going forward were absolutely chilling.

The matter of the one in black remained unclear as well, though Makoto supposed Kaneshiro could have been using the word "black" metaphorically. The phone call seemed to imply Akechi was the only one who could enter the Metaverse. Makoto turned her focus to Futaba who was staring up at Ren, eyes wide and expectant. "Futaba... are you okay? The one you-

Futaba's eyes narrowed and she tightened her lips. She looked down. "I... I think I always knew it was him... from when you guys told me about the incident at the TV station."

"But-

"I... I remember. Back, before..." Futaba trailed off for a moment, frowning. She blinked several times in rapid succession before swallowing. "I saw a kid at my mom's work. He was scrawny and he dressed poorly and his hair was all mussed up... but he had a strange look in his eyes. He was small, at the time I thought he was my age or younger. I didn't think much of him at the time but this summer I must have realized..."

"Futaba-" Ren started.

"That boy..." Futaba didn't acknowledge Ren. Her eyes started to widen. "At the time I didn't understand why he looked the way he did. But... but after living with my uncle-"

"That's enough. Ren's arms were wrapped around Futaba, holding her close. He was trembling. "Don't... don't think about that."

"Mm," Futaba mumbled affirmatively. She tentatively brought an arm up, grasping Ren's apron as she leaned into him.

Makoto felt a twinge, a sickness, somewhere in her stomach. She looked away, wondering if she was out of place, if she should leave. Time seemed to pass painfully slowly.

"I'm okay. I'm not gonna think about that anymore," Futaba said definitively as she lifted her head, taking a step back from Ren. Her eyes were set. "That man. That other voice. He's gotta be behind those men in the black suits. He's the one we're after."

Ren nodded, shifting his eyes elsewhere as he did. He brought a few fingers to his forehead and grimaced.

"Ren?" Makoto asked. "Is there something-

Ren's eyes met Makoto's. She couldn't read his expression. Eventually he shook his head.

"Hmm," Morgana's tail slowly oscillated behind him. "Indeed that man seems to be directing Akechi, but first we have to protect Ren."

"Yes," Makoto brought her hand to her chin. If the team didn't see the infiltration of Sis's palace through, Akechi would turn them into the police directly, likely leading to the same fake suicide scenario that-"
Makoto looked up at Ren. "But-"

"It's late. You'll miss the last train," Ren paused. "We have a lot to digest. Let's not push it."

Makoto considered objecting once more but saw the logic in Ren's words, especially as his gaze shifted to Futaba. "Mm."

"I'll walk with you back home," Ren said, looking down Futaba as he draped an arm around her narrow shoulders. The smaller girl nodded in response. He turned toward the cat. "Morgana."

"I'll see you to the station Makoto."

"Thank you," Makoto smiled politely at Morgana before looking back to Ren. She didn't want to leave him, especially after everything they had just heard. Her lips parted, though she wasn't sure what to say.

Ren responded with a gentle smile. "It'll be okay."

The group descended the attic stairs and had soon exited Cafe Leblanc. As they were about to part ways, Ren placed a hand on Makoto's wrist. He looked her directly in the eyes. "Message me as soon as you get home. Stay away from the palace."

"Of course."

"Ren's being weird," Futaba said, the last word being swallowed by a small yawn. "Makoto's way too responsible to go to the palace alone."

Makoto sat at her dining room table, furiously scribbling ideas, possibilities, anything that might get the team out of its current predicament, anything that might save Ren. She looked at the list of books she had read on her phone, reminding herself of the content of each, mentally checking if any fact, any plot point, any nugget could help. She jotted down her latest note with others along the same theme. Alongside the clusters of strategies were flow charts, sequences of events as they might be, each one ending in a large "X." Makoto frowned. She wasn't getting anywhere.

Ever since she parted ways with Morgana, Makoto had felt like she was going in circles. If it wasn't plans to thwart Akechi that just would not work, it was fears over Sis being toyed with by whatever faction was behind him, or frustration over how far the corruption reached within the institutions she had trusted, or just unease over the way Ren treated Futaba. As the last point spun through her mind, Makoto laid her pencil down neatly across the page and then brought her hands to the edges of her skirt, balling them into loose fists. Why did she have to be this way? Futaba needed their support.

Makoto glanced at the time. It was late. She could feel the hours creeping up on her, the pages of her notebook seeming more a jumble than anything useful. She felt tired and yet she didn't feel she could sleep. The thought of Ren, walking down that empty hallway, deep underground, so far from the open sky, in handcuffs... the last things he would see. It was just too cruel. The interrogation room they planned to use—Makoto had taken the same walk, freely, when searching for Dad and even then it was gloomy.

However, the hallways Makoto had walked weren't even the real thing. It had been in Sis's palace. *Sis's palace...*

Makoto's lips parted. The police station existed in Sis's palace as well. If Akechi planned to leave Sis's palace intact, surely they could use it to their advantage. But how?
It had been close enough to morning by the time Makoto went to sleep that she had woken up in twenty minute increments, as if her body was overcompensating for her fear she might sleep through her alarm. Eventually she gave up, leaving for school early. She headed directly for the library upon arriving, hoping to find some books that would help her figure out what to do.

The realization she could possibly trick Akechi and the police with Sis's replica of the police station was still her best lead but many questions remained. If they could convince their opponents that they had returned to the real world, perhaps with a fake phone confirmation, how would they actually return to the real world? Furthermore, while Sis's cognition was extremely accurate, there were still differences, like Dad's desk. The police would likely be hiding in the cognitive police station when the Phantom Thieves entered to steal Sis's treasure, giving them time to learn the differences.

Upon entering the library, Makoto was surprised to see Eiko sitting at one of the tables, surrounded by books. Eiko looked up at the sound of the door opening.

"Makoto! Good morning!"

"Good morning," Makoto responded. She pulled a chair out from the same table and took a seat, putting down her school bag. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Well," Eiko let out a nervous laugh. "I was thinking about what you said, about a lot of jobs out there that can use my skills... I recently registered for entrance exams. I know it's late to be start studying, but better late than never, right?"

"That's great," Makoto smiled. "I-I could help you study, if you'd have me."

"I don't know Makoto... you seem really busy lately. Have you been getting enough sleep?" Eiko asked timidly.

"True... but if I don't make time for my frien-"

"It's really okay. I'm learning a lot just studying with Himari and the others," Eiko leaned back in her chair. "I quit my job so I would have more time for it. I'm going all out, so cheer for me."

"I will."

Eiko smiled broadly. "And I'll do the same for you! How are things progressing with that guy?"

"Oh... um, we started going out," Makoto found it strangely difficult to meet Eiko's gaze. "For real this time."

"Oooh. Have you kissed yet?"

"Um..." Makoto felt her face getting hot. She looked around, wondering if anyone else in the library had heard.

Eiko balled her hands in front of her and let out a high-pitched, but restrained squeal.

Before Makoto was able to form more of a response, the sound of the library door caught the attention of both girls. It was Ren. He instantly caught sight of them.

"I guess I'll be going then." Eiko continued to grin brightly. She quickly gathered her books into her bag. As she got up, she leaned over and whispered in Makoto's ear. "It's really hard to see people between the last two rows in the far corner... if you want some privacy."
Makoto’s eyes widened and her mouth opened. She wondered if she could will a bucket of ice to appear so she could cool her face before Ren made his way across the room. Eiko giggled as she left the library, beaming at Ren as she passed him.

“Were you talking about me?” Ren grinned as he took Eiko’s vacated seat.

Though projecting a truly unfair amount of charm as always, Makoto noticed some discoloration around Ren’s eyes. She fought her instinct to hide her face. “Did you have trouble sleeping?”

“Not too much,” Ren said, looking away. He ran a hand up Makoto’s back, stopping when he reached the necklace she wore beneath her blouse. He turned back to her, sliding his hand from then nape of her neck along her jaw line. She raised her head with his fingers. By the time his hand slid away at her chin, she was looking directly at him. His eyes narrowed slightly and he made a small frown. “Not as much as you did.”

“I-I may have overdone it a little,” Makoto tried to offer a humble smile. “It’s just, we don’t have much time. There’s got to be something…”

“We’ll meet with the others tonight and figure this out together,” said Ren. He placed his hand over hers and squeezed. “Rest a little. We’re going to need our Queen.”

Makoto cast her eyes downward. She wasn’t supposed to be making Ren worry. He had enough to worry about. “I’m fine. You shouldn’t worry over me, not when…”

“Hey,” Ren brought his hand back to Makoto’s chin, bringing her back to face him. “I’m not dead yet. We’ve faced life or death situations in the past. We’ll find a way.”

“But this time they’re coming for you in the real world,” Makoto pressed her lips together, for fear they would quiver. “Aren’t you…”

“Oh,” Ren closed his eyes and sighed. “I’ve been contemplating my own mortality as if it were a song stuck in my head.”

Makoto parted her lips, wanting to comfort him, to tell him everything would be okay. She caught herself, realizing not only did she not believe it, Ren knew she didn’t believe it. Even if she were to sound sincere, he would know. She mouthed a silent “Oh” and started thinking about what she could do. “I’m here… if you want someone to talk to…”

Ren opened his eyes. “I don’t want you to worry.”

“I’m going to worry anyway.”

A small laugh escaped Ren’s lips. “I suppose that’s true.”

“Last night, I didn’t want to leave you, after everything…”

“Let’s make up for it tonight,” Ren said softly. “After the meeting.”

“I’d like that.”

Makoto sat down at her usual seat at the table in the student council room, thankful she was able to leave class during a free study session. Along with lunch afterwards, she had a nice, quiet block of time to continue working out a strategy. Taking good notes in class while also trying to figure out how to save Ren had been difficult. However, it had also been a source of inspiration, in particular,
an otherwise rather dry history lecture touched upon river crossing puzzles. Instead of trying to keep
Akechi and the police in the Metaverse, what if they could go back and forth? It had been long since
Makoto felt the transitions herself and apparently neither Ren nor Ryuji had ever been affected, even
their first time. The police were a risk, but Akechi was a seasoned veteran. If they could position
someone near him to active the app, he could be brought to the Metaverse without his knowledge.

It would be better to keep such trips to the Metaverse localized. The less of Sis's cognition they relied
on, the less likely an inconsistency could be discovered. Makoto started writing more possibilities
into her timelines. They could have someone follow Akechi to the interrogation room—though,
getting down there undetected would be difficult. Makoto wondered if cat paws worked on phone
touch screens and if cat voices could trigger the app. If it worked, it would transport both Ren and
Akechi to Sis's palace where the rest of the team would be ready to face him.

There were several issues to consider. First, assuming Akechi was either the one in black or just as
strong, the fight might be one they wouldn't be able to win. Then again, Akechi seemed cautious
when it came to Ren's strength. Makoto briefly thought back to the huge, not-quite-formed persona
from the first time they went into Sis's palace. She shivered. Relying on such a thing would be an
even greater risk.

Second, even if they defeated Akechi, it wasn't like they were willing to kill him... but if they let him
go free, he would just fall back to his initial threat of turning them in. The "scenario" wouldn't be as
perfect, but the result would be the same. They could instead try holding Akechi somewhere in the
real world, but not for the length of time needed for things to cool down. The conspirators seemed to
already be aware of their identities anyway and could come for them without Akechi.

Running remained an option, one they didn't need Sis's palace for, but Akechi and the ones behind
him likely wouldn't stop until they were sure Ren had been eliminated.

...until they were sure Ren had been eliminated.

Makoto felt her heart start to pound. If the true culprits thought they were successful, they would stop
their pursuit. Akechi could pull the trigger in Sis's palace, thinking it was the real world. After he left,
Makoto could revive Ren. It was a grim idea and yet the first she could actually envision working.
She reminded herself to think clearly.

The idea of letting Ren die, even if it was in the Metaverse, even if he could be revived, made
Makoto's stomach churn. It was completely illogical and yet she felt herself rejecting it with all her
might. She shook her head. Maybe it was just the lack of sleep getting to her. She couldn't let
something so silly get in the way of best plan she had so far.

However, what would this plan mean for Ren? Would he be permanently stuck outside society
because he would be legally considered dead? Would he mind? Makoto supposed as long as she
maintained her status, all legal matters, like purchasing a house, could go through her.

Makoto stopped. It had only been two days. What was she thinking? She found herself blushing,
despite being alone.

All legal matters could go through his family, whoever they might be. It wasn't a very good solution
though. He would likely be barred from many careers.

Did he have to be "dead" forever though? If the Phantom Thieves were able to overcome Akechi's
faction, Ren could be safely reinstated. However, said faction was large, powerful, and corrupt. A
dark smile formed on Makoto's lips. It was perhaps the target the Phantom Thieves had always been
looking for.
Another risk was that the plan didn't leave a body in the real world. They could try to impersonate police officers, smuggling out the still-living Ren in a body bag. Makoto drew a line through the idea just as fast as she had written it. That might work in the movies, but seemed unlikely in reality. Perhaps instead they could cause a mix up. Makoto wondered if Futaba could sow enough confusion via her hacking such that several parties would think the other had handled the body. Makoto considered messaging Futaba, but didn't want to tax the girl before the evening's meeting. She would have to ask then. Makoto wondered how Futaba was recovering from the previous night's revelations. Was she even awake yet?

Looking down once again at the flow chart scribbled in her notebook, Makoto exhaled. There were still many details to be worked out, but it was beginning to seem viable. She started jotting down notes next to various steps in the process, indicating which of her teammates might best serve each role, detailing where steps could go wrong and possible backup plans, crossing off ideas that no longer seemed prudent. She tidied up her work thus far, creating a new, easier-to-read version.

Makoto brought her hand up to her lips, pencil still laced through it. Everything looked in order. She tried to think through each step of the plan, but found her mind clinging to just one. Visions of Akechi shooting Ren and Ren subsequently bleeding out kept coming to her. Makoto told herself it would be just like a movie—it wouldn't be real because she would revive Ren. It would be fine. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. It was something she had to do.

The visions didn't go away.

"Oh."

Makoto's eyes reluctantly flitted open. She wanted to just roll over and return to her slumber, but something seemed off. What was it? Did she forget something she had to do for school?

School!

Eyes opening wide, Makoto saw the cases along the wall of the student council room. Her hands explored the cushion beneath her. How had she gotten to the couch? Her eyes darted around, trying to make sense of the situation. She soon found Ren, sitting at the table, small containers of materials like sand, cork, and yarn before him. He was focusing intently on a small sphere-like object in his hands, making adjustments to it with a pair of tweezers. Morgana lay on the table, seeming relaxed but watching Ren work intently.

Strangely, Ren had taken off his jacket. Makoto found herself pondering the athletic fit of his turtleneck a little too long. Her eyes traced the lines of his silhouette. She hadn't noticed the night they had failed to find Dad. As she began to lift herself into a seated position, she discovered the reason for his new style. His jacket had been folded neatly into a makeshift pillow.

When Makoto cleared the arms of the couch, Ren looked up at her. Morgana turned, following Ren's line of sight. The cat spoke. "Ah, you're awake."

"What time is it?"

"A little past two," said Ren.

"Two!?" Makoto gasped. "What about class? We were supposed to be laying low! We... I..."

"It's okay," Ren said calmly, getting up from his seat. He walked over, putting his hand on Makoto's shoulder. She looked up at him curiously. As he sat down, he ran his hand down her arm, finding her fingers, interweaving them with his. He looked over to Morgana and made a slight motion with his
head. The cat hopped down from the desk and ran across the floor, gone before Makoto could figure out just how a cat might escape a closed room. Before she could think on it further, Ren looked up at her once more. "It's alright."

"But-"

"Ms. Kawakami told all of the teachers that you're working on a special project... and that I'm helping."

"Huh?" Ms. Kawakami had certainly seemed healthier and in better spirits since the Phantom Thieves changed the hearts of those two parents who had been extorting her. Was this her way of thanking them? "D-does she know?"

"I think she suspects," Ren scratched the back of his head with his free hand, a soft pink color rising to his cheeks. "She might think it's one-sided on my part though."

Makoto looked down. "Um, I meant about the team..."

"Oh." Ren brought his hand to his face and let free a small chuckle. "She's made insinuations about me, but I've been avoiding confirming them. I don't think she knows about you and the others though. I trust her."

"Oh. Good." Makoto paused. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Since the beginning of lunch at least. You were still holding your pencil. That's dangerous you know. You could poke yourself in the eye that way."

"Why didn't you wake me? I could-"

"Because the last I saw you this tired you confronted a mafia boss," Ren said flatly, a slight edge in his voice.

"But Akechi's plan, it's my responsibility to-"

"No," Ren shook his head. "No it's not. I told you, we'll figure out what to do together, tonight."

"But it's my job to do strategy. If I come unprepared then I'm not-"

"Just wait a sec," Ren interrupted. "What's Ryuji's job?"

"Huh?"

"Ann's?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Yusuke's?"

"Well, he has to make the calling car-"

"My point is no one really has a job. I should have made that clear sooner," Ren sighed, running his free hand through his hair. He looked Makoto directly in her eyes. "You contribute an amazing amount to the team. I've come to rely on it, but you don't have to. The advisory role was a suggestion. We would accept you either way."

"But if I don't, who will?"
"I told you. We all will. There's no one on the team who wouldn't step up when needed."

Makoto considered the statement. Had she been doubting them all along? No, that couldn't be it. She wouldn't be able to come up with good strategies if that were true. Was it? She put it aside, there was something more important. "But if... if you die because I didn't try hard enough-

"It won't be your fault," Ren closed his eyes and slowly opened them again. "It will never have been your fault. This is on them."

"I know, but-

"You're trying your best. I see that."

"But-

"You once told me that was enough—that it was more than enough. Thank you. I really needed to hear it at the time," Ren's expression was unreadable. He shifted his gaze elsewhere before returning to Makoto. "And now you need to hear it."

Makoto turned away, looking down at the edges of her skirt, letting Ren's words sink in. She found herself gripping his hand with just a bit more force.

"It's hard to truly accept there are things outside of your control," Ren said after a time.

"Mm," Makoto murmured wistfully. "Um... T-thank you... for taking care of me."

"Thank you for letting me."

Ren's smile was like being wrapped in a fluffy blanket. Makoto couldn't help but smile in return. He brought a hand to her cheek, tilting her head slightly as he leaned closer. Makoto let her gaze slip momentarily to his lips before returning to his eyes. A strange but pleasant feeling gathered in her chest as he leaned closer still.

Suddenly, Ren turned away, letting his hand drop from her face. Makoto stared, unsure what had gone wrong. Trying to hide the disconcerted expression she was sure she was making, she lowered her head.

"Um..."

"Here," Ren interrupted as he shifting his shoulder under her head, his arm coming to wrap around her. Makoto followed his lead as he coaxed her to lean into him. "Let's... let's just..."

"Mm." Makoto closed her eyes. Whatever it was, now wasn't the time to press Ren. Just being together was comforting. It would be nice to just stay as they were and let the rest of the world disappear for a while.

Makoto awoke to the weight of a cat landing on her. She opened her eyes, finding herself still wrapped in Ren's arm. There was a book in his free hand, held open by his thumb. His head was tilted back, having fallen asleep as well. He stirred to the sound of Morgana's voice.

"Wake up lovebirds! Class is over."

Ren groaned. Makoto sat up, freeing his arm. He protested. "Do I have to?"

"We have to keep up appearances," Makoto said grudgingly.
Standing up from the couch, Ren took both of Makoto's hands in his own. "I'll see you at Leblanc then."

Makoto looked up at Ren, a small smile forming on her lips just looking at his face. "I'll remind the others to stagger their arrival. Moving together might raise Akechi's suspicions."

Ren nodded. He continued to hold Makoto's hands, not moving towards the door. Makoto didn't encourage him. They were still, regarding each other's faces, smiling-

"Okay you two, this was cute yesterday," Morgana huffed. "We have things to do."

The couple let slip each other's hands. Ren palmed Morgana's head, an simultaneous sign of irritation and affection, before packing up the materials that were still laid across the table and putting his jacket back on. Reaching the door to the student council room, he glanced back at Makoto one last time. Before the glance could last too long, Morgana grabbed hold of Ren's blazer with his teeth, pulling in the direction of the exit.

Once Ren and Morgana left, Makoto again took her usual seat in the student council room. Fortunately, it seemed the piles of paperwork left over from the festival were keeping the other student council members away. She decided to go over what she had written once more, finding it easier to focus than in the morning.

After fighting Sis's shadow, they would send a few members to pretend to steal Sis's treasure, thereby leaving Sis's palace intact. Futaba would detect the police presence then, something Akechi had not planned for. Ren would then draw away attention, allowing the rest of the team to escape. Akechi would most likely consider them reasonable losses as long as he was able to catch Ren.

The police would take Ren to the nearby station. Morgana would follow, carrying a phone. The rest of them would split up—a few to convince Akechi they were fleeing the scene while the rest of them would double back to hide in Sis's cognition of the police station.

Sis, as the one in charge of the Phantom Thieves case, would question Ren. Akechi planned to wait until Sis was done and then walk in and "witness" the suicide. However, Morgana would follow him and trigger the app at the door, taking the three of them into the Metaverse. Akechi would kill Ren. When Akechi and Morgana exited the room, they would return to the real world, Akechi none the wiser. Afterwards, Makoto and the others would rush in and revive Ren.

Akechi's entry into the Metaverse would be limited to the interrogation room alone. Sis would have just been inside, so her cognition of it would be perfect, right down to the state of the surveillance cameras or the presence of any in-room guards.

Makoto looked up from her notes.

*The presence of any in-room guards...*

If guards should appear in Sis's cognition, wouldn't Ren as well? Why hadn't she thought of it before? If people appeared in Sis's cognition, then they wouldn't have to let Akechi kill Ren, they could let him kill the cognition instead! Makoto flipped through her notebook, finding her diagrams. As she thought, the hallway provided more than enough space to take Akechi into the Metaverse without Ren.

Makoto leaned back in her chair, turning her head towards the ceiling. She exhaled, feeling her muscles relax. Taking a deep breath, she sat up again, opened her notebook to a blank sheet, and began carefully writing out a new plan.
Makoto was the first to arrive at Cafe Leblanc. Sakura-san waved her upstairs. Akechi was under the belief that they would be using the cafe itself for all of their meetings. Having Sakura-san keep the shop open when they were meeting in secret in the attic was just another precaution. Fortunately, it appeared that Akechi wasn't having them tailed. Perhaps the enemy wanted to limit the number of people involved.

Ren was carrying a couple chairs over to the table when Makoto reached the top of the stairs. He put them down as she walked over to him. He brought a hand to her cheek. "You look well."

"I think I've figured out a plan," Makoto looked up at Ren, her lips curving upward. She turned away, finding some spot on the floor as she brought the back of her thumb before her lips. "M-mostly, that is."

"I can't wait to hear it," Ren said as he brought his other hand to the small of Makoto's back. She pressed her cheek against his hand, enjoying the attention he was giving her.

At the sound of creaking steps, Ren let go of Makoto. They turned to the stairwell, waiting to see who it would be. After the sound of a few more steps, Haru's fluffy locks emerged from the darkness. When she reached the top of the stairs, she looked at the two of them. For just a moment, Makoto thought she saw Haru shift her focus away and frown. However, before she could process the expression, Haru was facing them again, smiling.

"I'm so glad I'm not late. I get to sit on the sofa for once!" Haru's bubbly laughter floated through the air as walked over to the couch and sat down. Ren began arranging the chairs around the table.

"I-I didn't know you-"

"Oh, it's alright Mako-chan."

Before Makoto could protest, there were more footsteps. Yusuke entered, glancing at the empty space where the bench was usually placed before taking a seat next to Haru on the couch. Futaba and Morgana followed shortly thereafter, arguing about whether Futaba had time to play another round of some game. Morgana hopped onto the table. Futaba took one of the chairs, pulling her knees up and putting her hands on her feet. Makoto thought it amusing they were both in essentially the same pose. Ryuji and Ann appeared a few moments later. The team was going to need more coordination with regards to staggering their arrivals.

"So our little trap paid off already?" Ryuji asked as he sat on the edge of Ren's bed.

"Mm," Futaba grunted affirmatively. She took out her phone and played back the recording.

The room was silent once the recording finished. It seemed to hang in the air menacingly. Ren and Futaba, despite having heard it before, appeared pensive. Ren especially seemed to be off somewhere else, even as the team started putting voices to their reactions. Makoto and Morgana took the lead in summarizing, ensuring everyone was on the same page while giving Futaba and Ren some space.

"We gotta take that bastard Akechi down!" Ryuji argued. "Isn't that recording we got enough proof to do it!?"

"No, Akechi is merely a tool. His orders come from elsewhere... The grand mastermind behind this all," Makoto frowned, balling her hand into a fist. That mastermind ordered the deaths of Futaba's mother, Haru's father, and was now coming after Ren. "An unimaginable fiend capable of arranging the murder of a suspect of a police station..."
Makoto paused, reflecting on the state of police force she had admired so greatly as a child. Yusuke finished her thought. "Unless we find out who that is, we will continue being targeted even if we defeat Akechi..."

"But," Haru interjected. "What means do we have of learning his identity?

"We'll have to make Akechi say it," Yusuke stated. "Though once we do, that mastermind will likely eliminate us.

"I think that will be the case eventually regardless of whether or not we learn his identity," Makoto said. "The only reason it hasn't happened yet is because we're an easy target to blame for his crimes. If he realizes that's no longer possible and abandons that plan, he may opt to kill us immediately."

"Dammit." The frustration in Ryuji's voice was evident. "So we don't get a choice but to go with that bastard's suggestion."

"But if we go into the Palace as told," said Ann. "Ren will get arrested and then murdered by Akechi."

"Palace..." Futaba began to mumble. "The Palace..."

"Actually," Makoto started, bringing her hand to her chin. Now that everyone understood, she could explain her idea. "There's something I'd like to say regarding-"

"Aha!" Futaba exclaimed, standing up. "We can use the Palace to our advantage!"

Everyone turned towards Futaba. Makoto looked at the small girl in awe. It had taken her all night to come to that conclusion, but Futaba had come up with it right away.

"There's a way... A way to get past Akechi AND get the mastermind to lay off of us, all while learning his identity," Futaba spoke with determination. "If he wants to kill Ren, why not let him? That is, inside the Palace..."

There really was no limit when it came to Futaba. Makoto confirmed her conjecture. "Yes. We could have him kill the cognitive Ren, all the while believing he killed the real one."

"Yeah, that's it!" Futaba's eyes were wide.

"It seems that's our only option," Makoto tried to push her feelings of inadequacy to the side. "Listen close, everyone. I have a plan for how we can carry this operation out."

Makoto explained the timeline of events, from the sending of the calling card through the fake murder of Ren. While there were several questions, the team seemed to follow. She then proceeded to discuss the risks with the plan and the parts she didn't feel were as fleshed out as they could be.

"Hmm," Futaba had gotten back in her chair. "Misdirecting the operatives will be difficult. If I had access like that, we wouldn't need Akechi to find out who the mastermind is."

"It seems they've been prudent in keeping Akechi’s communications isolated," Yusuke remarked. "What if we stole a body-"

"Ew, no!" Ann exclaimed.

"From a medical school," Yusuke emphasized. "Those bodies are donat-"

"Still no," Ann made an "X" symbol with her arms.
"What about your sister?" Ren looked over at Makoto.

"My sister?" Makoto stared back before casting her eyes down. She held one of her arms with the other. The idea of drawing Sis further into things didn't sit well with her.

"We may not be able to access their network, but couldn't she misdirect them, in person?"

"But why would she...?"

"Because I'll convince her," Ren stated. His tone was so resolute, Makoto wanted to believe him despite her misgivings.

"How?"

"By telling her the truth."

Everyone's mouths were agape. Before they could ask questions, Ren continued. "I'll anonymize your roles as Phantom Thieves. I'll do whatever I can to protect you."

"It's too risky," Makoto said softly. "Right now, Sis is-"

"She's maintained a palace since July and yet we haven't heard of her doing anything other than aggressively investigating us. If I give her the answer she's been searching for..." Ren trailed off.

"He's right." Ryuji held up his phone. "I ain't findin' her on the boards at all."

"Hmm... Hmmmm!" Futaba was once again on her feet. "Having Makoto's sister on our side would mean Morgana doesn't have to follow Akechi down there!"

"How so?" asked Haru.

"I can program Ren's phone to activate the app once it detects Akechi's. All Makoto's sis has to do is bring the phone to him," Futaba grinned. "She usually takes the suspect's phone to interrogations as an intimidation tactic. It was in the files on her laptop."

"She'd also be able to smuggle Ren out of there in the real world!" Ann added.

Makoto bit her lip. She really wanted to believe what Ren and the others were saying about Sis, but she didn't want to take such a large risk. The plan hinged on Ren's ability to convince her, and lately, she was...

"I'll do it," Ren stood up. He put a hand on Makoto's shoulder. She looked up at him, still uncertain.

"We don't have any better ideas right now," Yusuke argued. "We can change the plan if we come up with one."

Makoto nodded. Yusuke was right. She let her head droop, but tried to focus on Ren's hand gripping her. He was always so reassuring. She mentally went through what still needed to be sorted out.

"There's still a lot of assumptions we're making—the radius of the app, the location and lifetime of cognitive people in the Palace..."

"Let me help," said Haru, her decisive stare piercing right through Makoto. "Your sister is still investigating my father's case. I can meet her, at the police station."

"And then we can observe what happens in the palace," said Yusuke.
"Exactly." Haru smiled sweetly. "I could also 'get lost' in the station, near the interrogation room."

"Oooh," Futaba's eyes lit up. "Then we can test my program!"

"Everyone..." Makoto looked around the room.

"This is gonna be great!" Ryuji stood up from the bed. "An' once we reveal our leader is really alive, everyone's gonna be talkin' about us!"

"That's not-"

"No, Ryuji's right," Morgana's eyes shined. "The impact on the Metaverse should be significant. We can use this!"

"We won't let those evil adults have their way!" Ann reaffirmed.

"We should continue with our infiltration," said Ren. "We don't want Akechi getting suspicious. Expect something in the next few days."

"Akechi's focus will likely remain on you," said Yusuke. "Leave the plan preparations to the rest of us."

Ren opened his mouth as if to object, but hesitated.

"Ryuji and I will help draw Akechi's attention," Ann suggested as she turned towards Ren.

"Why me?" asked Ryuji.

"Because you're very good at drawing attention." Ann smiled.

"Okay," said Ren. "Haru, let us know when you can schedule a meeting with Makoto's sister."

"I will."

"Let's adjourn for now then." Ren turned to Futaba and Morgana. "Can you two see everyone off at the station? I have a few things I need to discuss with Makoto."

"Sure," Morgana hopped down from the table. The others began to gather their belongings.

Futaba looked at Ren and Makoto curiously as she slowly started walking towards the stairs. "Wait... are you two dating?"

All pairs of eyes were on Makoto and Ren, save one.

"For like, months now," Yusuke didn't even bother looking up. "Be more observant."

"That's-" Makoto began.

"Shut it Inari."

"We are," Ren said quietly. He let go of Makoto's shoulder, but brought his other hand around her waist, drawing her next to him. He looked down at her and smiled before returning to face the others. "Though, it's only been a few days."

"Oh," Futaba blinked a few times and then laughed nervously. "Eheh heh."

"Whoa," Ryuji looked up at them, eyes wide. He didn't seem to notice Ann staring at him, her brow
furrowed and her lips pressed into a thin line.

"Congratulations!" Haru's eyes became crescents to fit her large smile. "You make a cute couple!"

Makoto found it hard to meet anyone's eyes. She could feel the color coming to her cheeks. She glanced towards Ren, focusing on the sensation of his arm around her. She started to smile.

"Well then, let's give these two some space!" Haru began to hum a bright melody as she started herding everyone else out of the attic.

As their friends disappeared down the stairs, Makoto spoke. "I-I hope this doesn't make things weird."

"It might be a bit awkward for the next few days," Ren said, letting go of Makoto and moving one of the chairs aside. "They'll get used to it quick."

"I don't want us acting differently in the Metaverse," Makoto said. She picked up one of the chairs as Ren lifted the table.

"I agree." Ren walked over to the part of the attic still used for storage, placing the table in its usual resting place. Makoto handed him the chair she was carrying and went to fetch the other.

With everything back in storage, the couple turned to each other, speaking in unison. "Let's keep it a secret from-"

Both Ren and Makoto stopped, waiting for the other to continue. Ren motioned his head, inviting Makoto to go first.

"My sister... right now, I don't know she'll react," Makoto brought a hand to her chest. "It's not just her Palace either—we'll be taking a huge risk telling her everything."

Ren nodded. He shifted his gaze. "Are you okay with the plan? I know your sister-"

"It bothers me," Makoto said. "Putting her into more danger, that is."

The last twenty-four hours had been a roller coaster. Makoto had gone from being prepared to steal Sis's heart, to being both disappointed and relieved it wouldn't happen, to spearheading a plan that had her sister trying to manipulate corrupt police officers, alone, in their home territory.

"Even if she would approve if she was... if she..." Makoto stopped, taking a deep breath. She started anew. "It wouldn't be right to make that decision for her. But... the others are right, it's the best option we have right now."

"If we get that far," Ren hesitated, prepared for a word that didn't come. "If we get that far, the decision to act will still be hers. It's true we'll be putting her on the spot, but in the end, the choice is hers."

"Mm," Makoto closed her eyes. "I-I guess I'm just..."

"I understand," Ren lightly placed a hand on Makoto's back, leading her to the couch. The pair sat down, Ren running his arm along the backrest of the couch, behind Makoto's head.

"Were you going to say my sister as well?"

Ren shook his head. "Akechi."
"Ah, that makes sense." Akechi was only focused on one of them. It would be harder for Makoto to move freely if he thought she might lead to Ren. Makoto closed her eyes and leaned in a little further, taking a moment to just soak in the warmth of her boyfriend. Opening her eyes again, she spoke. "So, how are you? I feel like we've been wrapped up in my problems all day."

"I may have taken advantage of the distraction," Ren said sheepishly.

"I-is there anything you want do, anything you want to see? You know, just in case..."

"There are lots of things," Ren turned his head up towards the ceiling. "And at the same time, nothing."

"I don't understand."

"I thought about this a lot, over the last day, but all the things I imagined, I imagined them happening in the future. I imagined them being carefree, not clouded by a ticking clock." Ren looked down at Makoto, meeting her gaze. His smile was bittersweet. "I guess you could say, the one thing I want is to live. If I give that my all, then I won't have regrets."

Makoto wasn't sure what to say.

"Anyway, I don't think I'd be satisfied not facing our opponents head on. I was granted these personae to seek what's right." Ren's focus seemed to shift elsewhere, somewhere far away. Eventually, he seemed to notice Makoto was still staring at him. "What?"

"What were you thinking, just now?"

"It's... it's hard to explain."

"That's fine."

Ren seemed to once again wander somewhere distant. When he looked down at Makoto again, he grinned, bringing his arm down from the couch back, drawing Makoto even closer than she already was. She rose and fell as he breathed deeply. She felt his grip tighten as he once again began speaking. "I know the peace I've made is a fragile one. I..."

Makoto's lips parted. She responded with a slow, single nod of her head. Ren loosened his hold on her. In fact, his whole position seemed to relax a little. It was silly of her to think it would be so quick. A significant part of listening was waiting. She brought her arm over herself, her hand coming to rest on his leg, just above his knee. She looked up at him intently and waited.

Chapter End Notes

On one hand, I want to see what the anime does when it comes out, on the other I don't want it to mess with my head-characterizations until this fic is over. Though, hobbling along in my current play-through I am going with lazy/jerk Ren answers wherever possible.

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I'm not going to let the little things get to me.

Makoto waited for Ren to put words to his thoughts. Sitting together on the couch in his room, she leaned against him. Despite the heavy tone of the conversation, it was comforting to be pressed against him, his arm loosely wrapped around her, her far hand resting on his leg. He was gazing in the direction of the star-adorned support beam that crossed the attic ceiling.

"Arsene told me he would return, when my fate reached its conclusion," Ren swallowed. "I don't know what he meant, but I can't help but wonder..."

Makoto pressed her lips together, sealing any gasp or whimper that threatened to escape. It was hard to interpret Arsene's ominous promise in a positive way.

"There's this restless feeling in my chest, like he's stirring. It might just be my imagination."

"Mm." Makoto wasn't sure what to do other than acknowledge Ren's statements.

Ren looked down at Makoto and made a lop-sided smile. There was a glint in his eye. "He might just be eager to rebel against fate."

Why did it always seemed like Ren was the one comforting her?

"It's a good plan," Ren continued, giving Makoto a reassuring squeeze as he uttered the word 'good.'

Makoto looked away. She hoped Ren wasn't holding back on her account. She looked up again. "Our personae come from us, right? Do you think they can really predict the future?"

Ren once again tilted his head towards the rafters, his expression dropping. He breathed. Finally, he turned to Makoto again. He spoke hesitantly but the way he looked into Makoto's eyes was anything but hesitant. "Have... have you ever seen a butterfly..."

"A butterfly?"

Ren made a shallow frown. He continued to stare at Makoto. She wondered if he would say anything more. Focusing again on the stars pasted above him, he took a deep breath and once again began his halting speech. "Sometimes I have this dream... where I'm in some sort of old time prison, in chains, only... only it's not a entirely a drea-"

A loud, high-pitched tone resounded in Makoto's head. She grit her teeth. She squinted, trying to read Ren's moving lips. However, she could make out no words, only the sustained unnatural ringing in her mind. She tried harder. It was important. A prison? Even in his sleep? The tone seemed to only get louder. Makoto's vision started to blur. Her breaths came heavy.

It was becoming hard to think.

The next thing Makoto realized was that Ren was holding both her arms, shaking her. His eyes were wide. He was rapidly moving his lips but she couldn't discern any sound from them.

Makoto looked at Ren curiously as the tone started to subside. Eventually his voice reached her.
"Makoto! Say somethi-"

"Huh? What..."

Ren exhaled. He wrapped his arms around Makoto. "What happened? You looked like you were in pain."

"I..." What had happened? "My ears just started ringing, really badly. It's... it's fine now."

Ren released Makoto. He brought a hand to his chin. "Has this ever happened to you before?"

"No."

Ren's face tightened. He mumbled to himself. "Morgana and Ryuji just get distra-"

The ringing started again. Makoto grimaced, bringing her hands over her ears. Ren stopped talking, looking at her wide-eyed again. He brought his hands to her wrists.

"Is it...?"

Makoto lifted her hands from her ears. "It stopped."

"Maybe you should go home." Ren let go of Makoto and stood up from the couch. "You're still behind on sleep."

"I-I want to hear about your dream," Makoto watched as Ren took a few steps back. "I didn't catch most of it."

"It's not important."

"But-"

"Really, it's nothing," Ren walked back over to Makoto. He offered her his hand. "Come on, I'll take you home."

Makoto took Ren's hand, letting him lead her down the stairs into the cafe proper. He continued his steady pace past the booths. Makoto realized he didn't intend to stop.

"Um," Makoto came to a halt before the couple got to the door, letting her hand slip from Ren's. He turned to her with a questioning expression. She tried not to lose her nerve. "I-I'm still new at this, but isn't there supposed to be a good-bye kiss?"

Ren's expression relaxed into a gentle smile. "There aren't any rules Makoto. We can do what we want."

"Oh." Makoto paused. "Then I-I want a kiss good-bye... if that's okay with you."

Ren's smile broadened. He gathered Makoto in his arms and leaned into her. Their lips met. Makoto felt color coming to her face and along with it something pleasant that seemed radiate from within her. However, before she knew it, it was over. She felt his lips draw back from her, his body pull away.

Makoto was planning to reach for Ren again as she opened her eyes, but he was already offering his hand, his body pointed towards the door. She considered objecting, but she didn't want to push Ren. It had been a long day for both of them. She took his hand and quietly followed him out of the cafe.
Makoto browsed the shelves of the book store on Central Street. Haru was nearby flipping through the indices of various references in the Gardening section. Ren had vanished down his favorite alleyway, his face set when he told them he had an important errand to run. The whole team planned to meet at Shibuya Station later and head together to Sis's palace. Makoto wondered if she could keep a straight face when Akechi joined them at the courthouse.

Running her fingers along the spines on the shelf before her, Makoto found it hard to concentrate. Her intuition told her she wasn't going to find what she was looking for. Her thoughts drifted to Ren. They had taken to eating lunch together every day on the roof. At school they need not worry about keeping up appearances for Akechi. Ren's afternoons and evenings seemed busy. Makoto hadn't realized he knew so many people. It was almost as if he intended to see each one before...

"Ma~Ko~Chan~" Haru sang. She held her neatly wrapped purchases to her chest. Leaning towards Makoto, she smiled broadly, lowered her voice, and waggled her eyebrows. "So how late did you stay last night?"

"Hm, not too late." To Makoto's surprise, Ren had summoned a cab when they had reached Yongen-Jaya Station. He rode with her, but didn't come up to the apartment, in case Sis was home.

"Oh," Haru frowned. "So Ren works quickly."

"Huh?"

"No~thing~" Haru giggled.

Makoto re-shelved the book she had been looking at. Like those before, while it did contain some information about casinos, the focus was on thrifty travel logistics, not about gambling or casinos themselves. Makoto wondered if she would have to go Shinjuku. Her eyes wandered to the section on relationships. Last night had seemed-

Ren walked briskly into the bookstore. His mouth drew a firm line and his eyes were narrowed. The hand by his side was balled into a fist. However, when he reached the girls, his expression softened.

"Ren, are you okay?" Makoto looked up at him, briefly making eye contact with Morgana as well. "What were you doing?"

"It's nothing."

Makoto once again shifted her gaze to Morgana. The cat rolled his shoulders. She assumed that was some sort of shrug.

"Shall we go?" Haru asked as she put her purchase in her bag. She held up her phone, showing Ren and Makoto the group chat screen. "Ann and Ryuji are waiting for all of us near Buchiko. Futaba said she and Yusuke just got on the train."

The four Phantom Thieves exited the book store and walked into the square and over to the Buchiko Statue. As they made their way through the passersby, Makoto first caught sight of Ann, sitting along the edges of the small plaza. The late day sun reflected off her naturally blonde hair. She was leaning against Ryuji, both arms wrapped around one of his, her eyes closed, making the most content smile Makoto had ever seen. She really looked like some sort of angel. If she could make that face on command, she would be an international star in no time.

Ryuji, on the other hand, was sitting up straighter than Makoto thought humanly possible. His skin was but a few shades off of his red shirt. His eyes were wide and his lips were pressed together.
Ren smirked. He placed his bag on the ground next to Makoto, giving her a look she couldn't quite interpret. He then strolled over to Ryuji and sat down, crossing his arms. His smirk grew to a pompous grin. "So... you and Ann, huh?"

Ryuji nodded stiffly. He swallowed, lips still glued together.

"My, Ann is so bold!" Haru said as she brought the tips of her fingers over her mouth.

Makoto thought she heard a whimper coming from Ren's bag.

"Ah! This is perfect!" Yusuke's voice caused Makoto to turn. He was making a frame with his fingers. Futaba was jogging up behind him. He dug out a sketch book and pen from his bag. "Much better than the two of you."

Makoto narrowed her eyes but didn't say anything.

"What's this—oh." Futaba had come to a halt next to Makoto. She looked down at the bag between them. "Oh."

"I suppose we should get going," said Makoto.

"Let's give them a few more minutes," said Haru, lacing her fingers together in front of her heart.

"At least," said Yusuke, scribbling rapidly.

"It feels wrong to just stare at them like this," Makoto didn't look away. She rationalized that she was really just watching her boyfriend.

Ren had shifted position. His legs were crossed, supporting one of his arms which in turn was supporting his head. He looked over at Makoto briefly, making a motion with his head, before continuing to watch Ryuji with an amused expression. She wondered what he was trying to tell her.

Ryuji had not changed position. Makoto wasn't sure if he was even breathing anymore.

"I'm hungry," Futaba stated abruptly. She lifted Ren's bag with both hands. "I'm gonna pick up something in the station. Morgana and I'll wait for you at the old hideout."

Makoto thought it strange that Futaba would be so hungry. She had plenty of access to snacks at home, yet she was willing to brave the station with only Morgana to-

Realization struck.  *Oh. That's what Ren was*-

"I'll escort her," Makoto said quickly as she turned to follow Futaba. It had been so easy to dismiss Morgana's behavior toward Ann because of his cat-form. Futaba was quick to understand. As Makoto caught up to the bespectacled girl, she spoke. "I'll go with you."

"Thanks," Futaba said, not looking up. Morgana was still buried in Ren's bag, not popping his head out as usual.

Makoto stayed close to Futaba as she led them to the collection of food stalls nearby. It was crowded, but other than being a little quieter than normal, Futaba was braving it well. She perused the displays, looking at what was available, eventually coming to a stop over one particular arrangement of sushi in a plastic container. She looked over to the cashier and then back to the display. She brought her thumbnail to her lips and looked again. She started to shake slightly.

"Would you like me to get that?" Makoto asked.
"Mm hm," Futaba mumbled while nodding vigorously.

After making the purchase, Makoto and Futaba retreated to the old accessway hideout. Futaba sat down in the nook formed where the sky bridge met the building. She held Ren's bag in her crossed legs and laid the small container of sushi in front of her. Makoto leaned against the railing on the other side of Futaba, serving as a third wall to the space the younger girl was occupying.

"Next time... next time I'm gonna be able to go down there and make the purchase myself."

"You did well," Makoto offered a soft smile.

Futaba took the plastic lid off of the container. "Come on Mona. I got you sushi. No one's gonna notice."

Makoto thought she might have heard another faint whimper, but otherwise Morgana remained hidden.

Futaba crossed her arms over Ren's bag, pulling it a little closer, indirectly hugging her small friend.

"Mona's probably worried," Futaba said, looking up at Makoto. "Is he going to be left out? Will Ann spend time with him anymore? Is he going to have to go back to being alone?"

Makoto's lips parted. "Futaba..."

"He probably knows he's supposed to be happy for them," Futaba looked back at the sushi. She brought one of her hands into a loose fist over her chest. "But there's this weird feeling in his heart that won't go away and-"

"It's okay," Makoto knelt down, putting a hand on Futaba's shoulder. "It's okay if Morgana isn't ready to be happy for Ann and Ryuji yet. I'm sure he'll get there, just like I'm sure Ann will always make time for Morgana, because each and every one of us is very special to... Ann."

"R-Really?" Futaba looked up at Makoto.

"I'm sure of it." Makoto gave a firm nod.

"Hmph!" Morgana's voice was muffled by Ren's bag. "I'm never going to be happy for them! If only... If only I got my memories back faster..."

Makoto bit her lip. "That's..."

"When I become human again, I'll steal Ann back! You'll see!"

"Spoken like a true Phantom Thief..."

"That's right!" At the very least, Morgana was sounding more like his usual self. Futaba stuck her hands in the bag, undoubtedly toying with the cat's cheeks as she often did. "H-Hey!"

"You're not done eating yet?" Yusuke asked as he approached with Ren and the others. Ann and Ryuji were holding hands. Ann looked like she was having fun. Ryuji looked like it was taking every last brain cell he had to robotically simulate something that functioned like walking. Haru and Ren were barely containing their amusement from behind the new couple. "We're already running late."

"And whose fault is that?" Makoto's eyes narrowed as she stood up, stepping between Yusuke and Futaba. "You're the one who wanted to sketch."
"Well, the situation is easily fixed." In a sweeping motion, Yusuke picked up the container of sushi and seemingly out of no where a pair of disposable wooden chopsticks appeared in his hand. Before Makoto could parse what had happened, he was scarfing down the contents at comic speeds.

"Whoa..." Futaba looked on in awe. When Yusuke finished, she jutted out her arm with a thumbs up. "Nice!"

As he finished, Yusuke abruptly turned in the direction of their train. Futaba stood up, continuing to cradle Ren's bag as trailed behind him. Haru, Ann, and Ryuji followed. Ren waited for Makoto and the pair lingered a few steps behind the others.

"Sorry it took me so long to realize..." Makoto started. "I-I thought since you and Morgana-"

"I'll talk to Morgana when we get home. Right now, I'm the last person he wants to hear it from. Unlike him, I am dating my dream girl." Ren turned to Makoto, raised his eyebrows, and grinned.

Makoto rolled her eyes. "Not even you can pull off that line."

"Is that so?" Ren leaned in closer, his grin widening. Makoto braced herself. She swore the closer they got to an infiltration, the more Ren's Joker side shined through. "Then why are you blushing?"

Despite all that had happened in the few days since the Phantom Thieves were last in Sis's palace, the team kept things professional—for the most part. They worked with a singular goal: thwarting Akechi's plan to murder Ren. Morgana's loud self-confidence betrayed none of his earlier sulking. Ann and Ryuji fulfilled their usual roles, though Makoto thought she caught Ann admiring Ryuji's leather pants from afar. She was doing her best not to ogle Ren.

It was the first Makoto had seen Ren in his Metaverse outfit since they started dating. When they were standing close, he would sometimes slip a hand under her scarf if no one was looking, his fingers lightly grazing the chain of her necklace through her suit. She wondered if they were developing their own couple thing.

Akechi was ushering them through the infiltration, as he had told the other figure in his phone call he would. He directed them straight to the back rooms to find membership cards and further led Futaba to activate them.

The back rooms of Sis's palace were plastered with posters of slogans. It looked more like a city skate park than the orderly but drab office spaces Makoto had been expecting. It was certainly due to Sis's distortion, but what did it mean? Was Sis in some way rebelling against the stuffy constraints of her career?

Membership card in hand, the team rode the elevator to the Members' Floor. They disembarked to discover Sis's shadow waiting for them, flanked by two bodyguards.

"Sis!" Makoto was still unused to thick makeup and revealing dress the shadow wore, but it undeniably looked like her sister. No, it was her sister, a piece of her at least... one they would need to overcome without stealing her treasure.

"You wanna just get this over with right now, huh?" Ryuji addressed the shadow. "That makes this easy. Bring it on."

"Do not speak to me as though you are my equal," the shadow's voice was like Sis's but carried an otherworldly echo. "I am the manager of this casino as well as its number one player. At the moment, you lack the qualifications to fight me."
"It would seem she looks down on us," Yusuke remarked.

"And what if we would like to battle you, no matter what?" Akechi asked.

"I had to win time and time again in order to reach my number one rank. If you want to face me, you must continue to win as well."

Makoto frowned. It was like always. Sis set the standard. Makoto was expected to reach it.

"Do you have the confidence to win?" the shadow taunted them.

Makoto looked up, her eyes meeting the shadow's. "We might just pull the rug out from underneath you if you aren't careful."

"I don't expect much from you," the shadow's words stung more than Makoto wanted to admit. She hoped it didn't show. However, a moment later, a familiar, almost sincere, smile found its way out from under the shadow's wide brim. "But I'll be waiting."

In a flash, the shadow and her lackeys disappeared, again the elevator whisking them out of reach. Makoto watched the elevator car recede while the rest of the team started discussing their inexperience with gambling.

"No need to worry," Akechi was saying as Makoto rejoined the conversation. "Leave this to me."

"You know how to do this?" Makoto asked.

"I'm well-informed on what it takes to win." Too well-informed. Indeed he had planned their route from the start. Makoto was thankful everyone was doing a good job of playing ignorant.

Akechi proceeded to lead them to the exchange, explaining the coin system and how much they needed to win to make it to the next floor. He suggested the system would be rigged and once again encouraged their search of the back rooms to find out how. Just like with the membership cards, he then asked Futaba to use her skills to rig the games in their favor. At one point, he even absconded with Ryuji, returning with a giant sack of coins and no explanation. He was practically dragging the team through the Palace. His impatience was something they could use.

Though Akechi had told his conspirator that he would take every opportunity to kill Ren, nothing out of the ordinary had yet happened on that front, at least not that Makoto had seen. It was hard keeping an eye on him without being obvious. At least his position was easy to follow. If he wasn't practically hanging onto Ren, he seemed to be keen to talk to her about Sis. Every plaintive comment he made about "Sae-san" was a new injury. Makoto didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much it bothered her, but she knew she was doing a poor job of hiding it.

When the team had finally gathered enough coins to obtain a High Limit Floor pass card, they returned to the elevator. A shadow was waiting for them—a giant golden clock with a black marbled face, adorned with three golden wings. Seated atop it was a golden woman in a gown. The shadow was tough, weak to none of their skills, but they managed to eventually whittle it down. Once they were victorious, the voice of Sis's shadow filled the room. It reminded Makoto of Kaneshiro's as they cracked his giant lock of vaults. She concentrated on what the shadow said.

"Criminal trials are but a gamble to be won, and us prosecutors arrange the gambling table. Hence, losses are unacceptable! We must win, even if it has to be on false charges!"

"Are you serious, Sis!?" Makoto shouted. The shadow's words were in line with everything they had seen thus far, but there was something different in hearing it stated. The shadow gave no response.
"Why won't you answer me!?

"Mako-chan..."

"Don't think such a petty trick could defeat me," the shadow ignored Makoto, continuing to address the team's progress. Makoto looked down. "I may have to acknowledge your skills—if you can make it up to the Manager's Floor, that is."

"She thinks the trials which shape the outcomes of people's lives are nothing more than gambles...?" Akechi asked incredulously. "I wish I didn't have to hear that from Sae-san herself."

Makoto wished she didn't have to listen to Akechi's false concern. She reminded herself not to let him get to her but found her hands balling into fists. She had to stop herself. She had a role to play.

She turned to Ren. "Sis is completely distorted! We have to stop her, quickly!"

"Let's save her together," Ren said, his voice even and calming.

"We all feel the same way," Haru added.

The look in their eyes carried the secret way they meant it. Makoto responded with a small smile. She took a deep breath. It was time to move forward.

Makoto, Yusuke, and Futaba walked through the police station, the one in Sis's cognition. Their progress in Sis's Palace proper had been blocked. They surmised they needed to change Sis's cognition by attending a trial in the real world. Akechi had volunteered to use his connections to find such a trial. The team took the opportunity to advance their true plan.

The three Phantom Thieves peered into the meeting rooms, searching for Haru. Only some rooms were in use. Eventually they found the right one. Cognitive Haru was gesturing, talking even, but Makoto could not hear her through the glass. Though Haru was likely still talking to Sis, the shadow wasn't there. Makoto hypothesized shadows rarely left their own Palaces, perhaps due to the distortion. She mentally crossed off another potential problem.

"Should we go in?" asked Futaba.

"Let's not risk it," said Makoto. "The Standard Floor cognitions seemed to notice our presence, even if the Members' Floor ones did not."

"She's amazingly life-like," said Yusuke. After a moment, he spoke again. "Akechi may have been able to use this to listen in on private conversations."

"Perhaps," Makoto brought her hand to her chin. "He may have been spying on Sis's meetings for a long time, using them for his own investigations."

Futaba crossed her arms. "Hmph."

"Anyway, we've confirmed the appearance of a cognition during interrogation," said Yusuke.

"Yes," said Makoto. "Now we wait to see how long she lasts."

"Let's check out the interrogation room," said Futaba. "Noir should be appearing there."

The group walked through the police station. Makoto stopped for a moment when they passed through the area with Dad's desk. From her vantage point across the room, she could see the picture frames were still arranged as she had left them. She pressed her lips together and reminded herself
"Come on!" Futaba grasped one of Makoto's hands with her own, pulling her in the direction she had been walking. The smaller girl followed Makoto's gaze, staring at the desk, her eyes wide. She turned back, yanking even harder. "You're the one who knows where we're going."

"R-right!" When Makoto started moving on her own again, Futaba let her hand drop.

Upon entering the interrogation room, Futaba set up her laptop on the floor and began typing away. "I can't wait to get the results of my program."

Yusuke leaned against the wall near the door, regarding Futaba for a few moments and then scanning the room before speaking. "I see. So we're going to use this place."

"It'll be a gamble," Makoto once again brought a hand to her chin.

"I think it's gonna work," Futaba said positively. "You can't tell a thing."

"Our clothes haven't changed either," said Yusuke, spreading his arms. He paced out the distance between the corner of the room and the table. "Hmm, seems far enough based on our earlier experiments."

"See, I told you."

Yusuke continued looking around. He took out a small sketch book and began drawing the interior. "Could we possibly use those cameras?"

"Unlikely," Makoto shook her head. "Sis has complained before that they're older technology. They're not accessible online. When she wants to see, she has to come down to the station... At least we should be able to track Joker's phone with GPS though. Right, Oracle?"

"Hmmm," Futaba didn't look up from her screen. "We'll see when Noir gets here."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm testing a few things out," Futaba sat up straight and closed her laptop, bringing herself to her feet. "Noir's gonna appear in the hall, right? Let's wait for her there."

No sooner had they left the interrogation room than Futaba was once again on the floor with her laptop. Yusuke and Makoto leaned against the wall at the end of the hallway, giving Haru a wide berth. As Futaba continued to type away at her computer, Yusuke returned to his sketch book and began working as well.

Makoto started going over the plan once more in her head, enumerating what had been resolved and what hadn't. The cognitive police station elements were going surprisingly smoothly, but much of it were items Makoto had already confirmed during her solo visits. The real question was whether Futaba's phone scheme would work. If it did, they still needed to figure out what messages to leave for Sis and how exactly the night would play out, given what the careful observations of the layout Yusuke was mapping. Makoto also needed to find a believable stand-in for Sis's treasure, something that would fool Akechi. Stepping through the plan, it seemed complete, but Makoto couldn't shake the worry that there was something she was forgetting.

The most vital piece of the plan was Ren's ability to convince Sis. Makoto's gaze shifted to the door of the interrogation room. Within it, the fates of the two most important people in her life would be decided. Whatever was to happen was out of her control. She had long since come to the conclusion that even if anything had changed, it wouldn't mean-
that attempting to coach Ren would only make things worse. Unencumbered sincerity was the best approach.

Makoto closed her eyes, remembering Ren's quiet declaration, that he would convince Sis to aid the Phantom Thieves. All she could do was support him until then. She looked into the open hall, recalling the times they had spent together. She unconsciously moved her fingers to her lips. Since the night they formulated the plan, they hadn't-

Haru appeared before them, Morgana at her feet. She had smuggled the cat into the station in her bag. Ren had insisted no one ever be alone in Sis's cognition. Haru held a phone in each hand. She looked between the two and then up at her friends. She smiled brightly. "It worked!"

"Yeah!" Morgana echoed, putting his hands on his hips.

"It really is just like the real world," Haru looked around as she walked towards the others. She held out one of the phones. "Here you go Mako-chan."

Before Makoto could take back her phone, Futaba had managed to hop up, grab it, and get down to her laptop again. She flashed a toothy grin as she drew a cord from her jacket with a flourish and used it to plug the phone into her machine. "One moment please."

Futaba began making various "Aha's" and "Hmm's" as her pupils darted back and forth across her display. Finally, she looked up. "Bad news."

"What do you mean, bad news?!" Morgana exclaimed. "We're here, aren't we?"

"Yes, but there was no doubt my plan would succeed on that front," Futaba said confidently. "However, we're not gonna be able to rely on GPS. Too spotty and inaccurate down here."

"Then how did it work this time?" asked Makoto.

"I also tested Bluetooth and NFC—with those, Joker's phone should be able to detect Akechi's and trigger the Metaverse bookmark automatically. Akechi had Bluetooth on when I nicked his phone earlier. It should be good enough."

Futaba's eidetic memory was once again coming in handy.

"And you're sure he'll leave it on?" asked Yusuke. "He might suspect something."

"I can't be certain but he has no reason to change his settings." Futaba looked up at Yusuke. She raised her eyebrows deviously. "He's underestimating me big time. We had console access to the machine that sets the membership cards. I could have easily spoofed them to bypass nearly every barrier in the Palace. He failed to think big enough."

"Then what's the bad news?" asked Haru.

"I'm gonna recommend we turn Joker's GPS off... and not only that, but any service we're not using, including Wifi and cellular. His phone is the crux of this plan. We can't have it dying on us before it transports Akechi and gets all the messages we plan to send to Makoto's sis."

"...and that means we won't be able to track him after..." Makoto followed Futaba's logic to its conclusion. She felt her insides twisting.

"Right."
The group was silent.

"W-well, it's not like we could do anything, even if we could track him," Makoto fought to maintain a straight face. "We'll just have to be patient."

"We should get back," said Morgana. "The hall was empty when we left the real world but it would be bad if we were caught returning."

"Did my cognitive self appear?" asked Haru. "I want to see her."

"She was there earlier. You'll have to go back and return though," said Makoto. She pointed down the hallway. "You should return to the real world if you go back that way."

"We'll meet up with you guys there then."

Haru and Morgana indeed vanished as they walked down the hall. Makoto and the others followed, staying in the Metaverse as they had entered from outside the police station instead.

Sis's cognition of Haru was still sitting in the meeting room when the team arrived. This time, she wasn't speaking, just sitting quietly.

"It seems the cognition lasts after your sister leaves," said Yusuke.

"This is hopefully enough time..." Makoto calculated.

"I wonder how long she'll last." Yusuke put pen to sketch book, this time drawing Haru instead of schematics.

"That's a good question. Maybe as long as she's on Sis's mind."

Haru and Morgana arrived a few minutes later.

"So that's what your sister thinks of me?" Haru mused.

"I-I hope you're not offended."

"Not at all," Haru smiled. "In fact, she's eerily accurate. ...Can I talk to her?"

"I don't know if that would be a good idea..."

"No?" Yusuke questioned. "I would think this is an excellent chance to learn more about what your sister thinks of us."

"Maybe... but who knows how she would react to seeing her double... and how might that affect Sis."

"So you haven't met your cognitive self either?" Haru looked a little sad.

"No," Makoto lowered her eyes. "My best guess is that Sis's cognition of me would be at home if anywhere. I considered going but... the way everyone has described cognitions before..."

Makoto raised her head, putting her hand on the glass separating the Phantom Thieves from Sis's cognition of Haru. She inhaled.

"I know my own feelings about Sis are complex—too complex to be understood from a cognition. I suspect the same can be said about her feelings about me. I wouldn't want her drawing any"
conclusions if the situations were reversed. I'm already prying so much into Sis's private thoughts. I...

"It's alright." Haru took Makoto's hand, squeezing it. "I came to a similar conclusion... about father..."

Makoto looked over at Haru and squeezed back.

"How about I go?" suggested Futaba. "Your sister's files on me only had old photos, from years ago, before I dyed my hair. She probably wouldn't recognize me."

"Do you know what you'd say?" asked Yusuke.

"N-no..." Futaba looked up at Yusuke and pouted.

"Leave it to me!" proclaimed Morgana as he began walking to the door to the meeting room. "Makoto's sis won't make the connection."

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes I ponder in-universe side one shots. "Ryuji's Misconceptions" to go with this chapter and the last has been on my mind lately. I bet Hifumi would have the best named ones.

Originally posted 2018/03/28

Addendum 2019/03/26 (Wow, almost a year later!) -- I have since written Ryuji's Misconceptions, a first person Ryuji fic that takes place between this chapter and the previous one.
Makoto and Ren sat on a blanket they had smuggled to the Shujin Academy rooftop. They were surrounded by the soaring stems of tomato plants. The couple had pushed the planters containing Haru's surprisingly fast-growing vegetables into a loose oval. While no one had yet interrupted them at lunch, Makoto enjoyed the extra sense of privacy—and of nature. It would be suspicious if Ren were to visit his home so close to Akechi's plan which meant he was relegated to the concrete prison of the city. She hoped Ren could at least enjoy their little makeshift getaway.

Ren cleared his throat. Makoto looked up at him. His face said *You're giving me that look again.* "Tell me more about Morgana's chat with your sister's cognition of Haru."

"Surely you already heard from Morgana," Makoto smiled. He was trying to distract her. "Some... in between his moping and trying to slip jabs at Ryuji under my radar," Ren ran a hand through his hair. "And, you know, Morgana can be... generous... with his descriptions of his exploits."

"He's still taking it pretty hard huh?"

"Yeah... he really thought he had a chance."

"Hm," Makoto cast her eyes down. The cat must have known on some level. He had always picked on Ryuji. She looked up again. "And how is Ryuji?"

"Perfectly normal when Ann's not around," Ren grinned. "In fact, I think he's really come into himself. As for when she is around... well, he's getting there."

"Ann seems happy to wait."

"That she does. She's been humming to herself in class. I don't think she realizes she's doing it. She's driving the girl in the seat in front of her mad."

Makoto chuckled. Ann was such a stream of sunshine. Her classmate probably had little recourse.

"So, the operation yesterday?"

"Like we said in the group chat, mostly a success. As for my Sis's cognition of Haru, we didn't learn much." The team had left the meeting room door ajar when Morgana entered, allowing them all to hear. "Haru said it sounded like the way she behaves around my sister. If she suspects something, it's not making a big impact on her cognition of Haru. I don't know what will happen after the trial though. We need to change Sis's cognition without her getting suspicious in the real world."

"You texted her?" Ren shifted closer to Makoto, moving their empty bento out of the way.

"Yes, I told her my friends were curious," Makoto looked down. "I-I don't think she'll read it. Lately she has so little time... we may have to sit through several sessions."

Ren put his arm around Makoto, gripping her just beneath her shoulder and pulling her closer. She
leaned her head against him, feeling the warmth in his breath as he spoke. "If that's what we have to do, we'll do it."

"T-those things... that her shadow said in the Palace... and Akechi-"

"He's been laying it on thick, hasn't he?"

"You noticed?"

"Everyone noticed," Ren held Makoto a little tighter. "He's just trying to knock you off balance. Akechi... he..."

"He's right though. The things that shadow says-"

"Might not be the things your sister has actually done yet."

"We might find out one way or another in a few hours," Makoto said grimly, worrying her lower lip with her teeth.

"I'll be right there with you," Ren brought his other hand over, squeezing Makoto's. "Even if we can't show it, you're not alone."

Ren let go of Makoto's hand, bringing his own to her cheek and lifting her head towards him. As he leaned in closer, she closed her eyes and focused on the warmth he generated and the adrenaline coursing through her. He kissed her lightly on her forehead before pulling back. By the time she realized, he was already turning away.

"We should get back," Ren said as he started cleaning up their lunch.

"R-right," Makoto brought her hand to her forehead. Ren was affectionate, and yet... She shook her head and began folding the blanket. If she stopped for every worry she couldn't put words to, she would never get anything done. Sis's trial was a scant few hours away. She had to remain focused.

Makoto and Ren parted ways as they turned at the landing of the stairs. There was just enough time left of the lunch recess for Makoto to check on things with the student council. Club room requests were due for the following term and thus even the council members who had been avoiding the school festival bookkeeping were compelled to participate. Everyone had at least one friend with an interest in the allocations.

"...want a nice guy," Wada's voice could be heard through the door as Makoto approached. "But then turn around and date a delinquent!"

Makoto paused before putting her hand on the door pull. Ann and Ryuji had been trying to keep their relationship secret—well, after the first few days anyway—for the sake of Ann's job, but the Shujin rumor mill was strong. Though... come to think of it, had she ever heard Ann actually say they wanted a nice guy? Makoto thought for a moment, coming up blank. She shrugged and entered the student council room.

Hirota was sitting at the table while Wada was standing. It appeared neither Hasegawa nor Sato were in. Both boys turned to look at Makoto.

"Was I interrupting something? Where are the others?"

Wada knit his brow. His lips were turned downward with a hint of a pout. He adjusted his glasses
with a single finger. "I'm leaving."

After Wada brushed past Makoto, she turned to Hirota. He smirked as the door to the student council room slammed shut. "You're cruel, Niijima-san."

"Eh?"

"Don't worry about it." Hirota chuckled. He toyed with one of his long brown locks. "Rumi-chan and Nanami-chan are meeting with the basketball team right now. They want to host a tournament but it would evict the fencing club."

"...and the fencing club is already feeling put upon," Makoto finished.

"Exactly."

Makoto sighed. It was always something.

"By the way," Hirota leaned on the table, smiling at Makoto. "Since they're handling that and Wada-kun just walked out, there's no one to check the draft schedule."

Makoto watched as Hirota slid a binder in her direction. She knew what he was getting at. Why did it have to be now, when the Phantom Thieves were so busy? Really, Hirota should have been the one doing it, but Makoto supposed it would go much faster if it were her and it would be free of errors as well. It was easier than trying to convince him to do it and then dealing with the consequences when he forgot or rushed through it.

"I'll do it tonight."

"Stay close to me," Ren whispered to Makoto as they approached Akechi. He was waiting for them just outside the courtroom where Sis was handling a case regarding a politician's mis-use of public funds.

"This is it," said Akechi. His lips turned downward. "However, after hearing Sae-san in the Palace, I fear what we'll witness."

Makoto's face fell. She didn't meet anyone's stares. It was as if Akechi was speaking her thoughts out loud.

"It pains me to see Sae-san in such a state," Akechi added. He took a few more steps towards Makoto and placed a hand on her shoulder. She looked up. "But we must change her cognition so we can progress."

"Mm," Makoto mumbled affirmatively.

"We should get going," Ann interrupted with a short nervous laugh. "We need to get seats together."

The group entered the courtroom. Despite the profile of the case, there were still seats available. Perhaps most of the press had only stayed for the morning sessions.

Makoto followed Ren into a row of seats, Akechi close behind her.

"W-what?" Akechi's hushed exclamation caused Makoto to turn. In the aisle next to their row, Futaba stood, her hands outstretched. "What was that for?"

"S-sorry," Futaba brought her thumbnail to her lips. Her head was tilted down and she stared up at
Akechi, eyes wide through her glasses. "I-I don't like sitting on the aisle."

"Ah," Akechi smiled kindly. He bowed slightly and motioned Futaba ahead. As the small girl turned away from Akechi and walked towards Makoto, she sported an impish grin.

The trial resumed shortly, but not before Makoto was pretty sure Sis had noticed them. It had been long since she had seen her sister in action. The further Makoto progressed through high school, the more Sis had emphasized she focus on her studies.

Sis had always seemed so strong and powerful in the courtroom with an infinitely sharp wit that cut down opponents. She shined brilliantly and this trial was no different. However, with the shadow's words hanging over them, Makoto wasn't sure what to think anymore.

During a particularly merciless line of questioning, Makoto found herself catching a gasp in her throat. She felt a small hand giving hers a reassuring squeeze, reminding her to loosen her grip on the armrest. She turned to Futaba who pressed her lips together harder, giving Makoto a determined look. She acknowledged the other girl with a weak smile.

When the trial went into recess for the day, the group exited the courtroom. Makoto closed her eyes and exhaled.

"Makoto?" Sis had exited as well and was approaching rapidly. Makoto looked at Ren. He nodded in understanding and turned to the others, ushering them down the hall.

"We'll take care of it," Akechi told Ren, electing to stay as well. Ren stopped, briefly opening his mouth as if to speak, but closed it and gave another brief nod before following the team.

"Sis... I-I didn't mean to interrupt your work," Makoto said once her sister was standing before her. "My friends were curious about the court system... and I wanted to see you. It's been so long."

"I see," Sis's tone revealed nothing. The older woman craned her neck, looking down the hall.

Akechi leaned toward Makoto such that he blocked Sis's view. He put a hand on Makoto's shoulder as he did. The eyes of both Nijima sisters were immediately drawn to that hand. "Please don't be mad at Makoto. It was originally my suggestion and I'm the one who took a little peek at your schedule."

Sis's eyes had narrowed slightly. She worried her lips together, something she often did while thinking. She stepped between the two high school students, forcing Akechi to retract his arm to make space for her. She looked from Akechi to Makoto and back again. "Would you mind giving me a moment with my sister, Akechi-kun?"

"Of course," Akechi closed his eyes as he slowly dipped his head. He turned to Makoto. "I'll see you at the entrance."

Once Akechi was several meters down the hallway, Sis turned back to Makoto. "You've been spending more time with Akechi-kun."

"Not really that much—he was our guest for the school festival. That's when he-"

"School festival hm?" Sis's eyes narrowed further.

"Yes," Makoto hated lying to her sister. "That's when we planned this trip."

Sis sighed and placed a hand on Makoto's shoulder. Her tone softened. "I know hanging out with
your... peers... is attractive right now. I wanted the same when I was your age, but you need to focus on your exams."

"Mm," Makoto acknowledged.

"And though we're not working as closely anymore, Akechi-kun is still quite busy. I see him here often. I don't think he has time to seriously-" Sis paused before restarting. "It's best to leave him alone right now. You wouldn't want to bother him, right?"

"R-right."

"Good." Sis smiled genuinely. She gave Makoto's shoulder a small pat before releasing her. "I have to go back to work... I probably won't be back until late again."

"Yes, Sis."

The shadows had said the maze was 'dimly lit.' Makoto supposed from a shadow's point of view the statement was true. They were pure darkness after all. From her point of view, the team had been tricked. She could barely see a meter in front of her. The maze made Mementos seem cheery and bright in comparison.

Ren led the group along the walls. He had that certain tension around his eyes, like he was concentrating hard on seeing. Makoto also tried harder, but everything still seemed black. Night vision appeared to be yet another one of Ren's many talents.

It didn't help that Makoto kept getting distracted with... distracting herself from the dark. The dark was a large void that she could pour her fears and worries into. It was a delicate balance of forcing herself to breathe evenly, to not shiver, to not show fear while avoiding thinking too hard about the situation she was in. She focused on her responsibilities, turning something she wanted to be able to do into something she had to do. For the most part it worked, but-

Feeling a hand on her shoulder, a yelp bubbled up Makoto's throat. It was muffled by a gloved hand clamping over her mouth. "Shh."

"What was that?" Ren whispered quickly. "Queen?"

"Sorry," Akechi said in a hushed voice. He let go of Makoto. "I didn't mean to startle you. My apologies Nii—Queen. I wanted some clarification on one of our strategies..."

"It's a little late for that," Futaba snapped. "We-"

"Shh," Ren hushed them. "I see a shadow."

Makoto squinted in the direction of Ren's gaze but saw nothing. In a split-second, he had vanished into the nothingness as well. Everyone was still.

"Show me your true form!"

The sounds of ceramic hitting the floor echoed in the dark hallway. A mask emerged from the darkness, bouncing several times before landing at Makoto's feet. She looked up, seeing a faint glow of red. "Everyone!"

The team rushed forward. Makoto could hear the familiar clangs of metal hitting magic. Whatever it was, it could counter their physical attacks. Her suspicions were confirmed when she got close
enough to see Ren. To the uninitiated observer, he seemed fine, but Makoto could tell he was protecting his right side a little more than normal. He brought forth streams of red, black, and gray but they dissipated against the shadow.

The monster had the upper body of a woman with long shaggy black hair, red skin, and long black claws. At her waist was a wide golden carving. From it hung two chains of large decorative ornaments and a long panel hanging between them. Bright white orbs shined where eyes should be. Makoto gulped. Indeed the scariest foes awaited in the dark. This was one she didn't recognize.

"I've been waitin' for this!" Ryuji grinned, his teeth visible despite the low light. "Seiten Taisei!"

Riding upon a storm cloud, the legendary monkey king appeared. He was clad in ornate armor with a golden cape and a mohawk-spiked helm. Lightning obliterated the shadow.

"Skull! You're amazing!" Ann's cheeks were pink enough to be noticeable even in the darkness.

"Eheh heh," Ryuji scratched the back of his head, his face becoming red.

"Cool!" Futaba's eyes were hidden behind her goggles, but Makoto was sure she was as wide-eyed as everyone else. The small girl was instantly next to the new persona, poking around it from all angles.

"You have two personae now?" Yusuke crossed his arms.

"I think it's more like this guy took over. I dunno. I was talkin' to Joker one day and he just..."

"How interesting," Akechi remarked. "There's so much about this world we don't know."

"Queen..." Ren's whisper snapped Makoto to attention. She found her arms wrapped around one of his, her palm hovering over where his wound had been. Behind them Johanna idled, motor running. She had apparently been acting on auto-pilot. "I think it's healed now."

"O-oh." Makoto let go of Ren and let Johanna recede. She felt her face heating up. Ren grinned at her as he walked past, once again taking the lead through the maze.

Makoto pressed a hand against the transparent barrier separating the team from the arena. When they had originally entered the area, Akechi had volunteered Ren as their champion before she could react. Though she knew Ren wouldn't have it any other way, she didn't like how easily Akechi manipulated the situation.

Clearing the maze had been a high—she had never been so happy to see the garish lights of the casino again. However, they were still short the overwhelming majority of coins necessary to advance to the manager's floor, where Sis's Treasure awaited them. As the games on the previous floor were no longer exploitable, they could only move onto the last game. Like every palace before, there was always, for some reason, a route through. This one involved Ren facing shadows, alone. It had been hard to break away from watching his back as he walked down the brightly colored tunnel to face his opponents.

"I expected no less," Akechi said as Ren downed the pair of Ganesha shadows he was matched against. Makoto turned her head slightly, so she could shift her eyes between the arena and the detective prince who had walked up behind her sometime during the first fight. Even right next to her, it was hard to hear him over the shouts of the crowd. He put a hand on her shoulder. "You needn't worry."
"There's more to come," Makoto said grimly.

As if on cue, three Rangda-type shadows, the first ones they had come across in the maze, appeared before Ren. Makoto grit her teeth. They were able to counter his physical attacks and were immune to his curse strengths. The unbalanced nature of the battle had Ren relying on his acrobatics, dodging the attacks coming from all directions. They kept him on the defensive, not giving him time to work with one of his personae.

Makoto felt a hand on her back, working its way up towards her scarf. As she turned to see what Akechi was doing, he moved the hand on her shoulder to her cheek. "What are you-"

"Trying to get you to calm down," Akechi said with the same disingenuous tones he used to wax about Sis. He leaned into her, at the same time continuing to press his hand against her back. "You were holding your breath. You shouldn't worry-"

"I'm fine. I-"

Haru's scream pierced through the crowd. Makoto shoved Akechi off of her and pressed both her hands against the barrier, her eyes wide. She caught sight of Ren. He was on the ground, dust still settling around him, a red glove clutching his side. One of the shadows' hits must have landed. He was looking in their direction. She wondered if he could see them in the crowd or hear their cheers and yells.

"Joker! Look out!" Morgana called.

The three Rangda circled Ren. He propped himself up on his forearm, but instead of foisting himself back to fighting stance, he rolled under one of the shadows, just as another struck the ground where he had fallen. With the striker recovering from her ineffectual attack and the closest one with her back to him, he brought forth Horus before the remaining shadow could close the distance.

The giant bird persona shined too brightly to look at directly. It spread its wings wide and let out a high-pitched caw. The far Rangda was knocked out of the air by a blessed skill as Ren hopped back on his feet. The other two shadows turned to him, but raised their arms, likely blinded by his persona. Though clutching one of his sides, he was still light on his feet, moving constantly to avoid the impaired foes. Horus let forth another strike of light. The grounded shadow vanished into embers. Ren kept up his dance until all three were vanquished.

The final opponent was a single shadow, an extremely large one.

"What in the..." Makoto watched the shadow form. It was a muscular giant clad in gold and carrying a giant hammer. This one she knew instantly. Thor, the God of Thunder. She smiled, feeling the worry flow away from her. A single, slow-moving, behemoth like that didn't stand a chance against Ren.

Makoto stood before the pedestal atop which the glow of Sis's soon-to-be Treasure hovered. Ren's victory at the arena, followed by some trickery with the casino's coin system, had brought them across the scales of justice to the manager's sanctum. She could just make out the silhouette of Dad's notebook floating within. The progression of the Treasure's coherence meant Sis was already aware that her heart was a thing of value and that it was threatened by them, the Phantom Thieves. It was so tempting to reach out to it, to read what it might say.

Whatever you find in there isn't real.

The Treasure loomed. Makoto stared into the heart of the distortion and began thinking about what
the calling card would say, what she would write. Similar to the scales she had crossed to reach the manager’s suite, the palace represented the precarious nature of righteousness in the pursuit of justice, the peril in thinking oneself rational. Dad's death had infused a personal stake into matters, true... but on reflection, Makoto couldn't logically connect it to all that Sis's shadow spoke.

The shadow had claimed of having had to win time and time again. The cognitions seemed to lose with ease. In the real world, Sis...

Just like the amorphous haze before her, Makoto felt the truth beginning to take shape.

The blanket parachuted in the air between Makoto and Ren's arms before coming to rest on the ground between the planters. No one seemed to notice its presence, tucked in with the other items stored at the top of the stairs to the roof. Thus, they were able to continue their picnic lunches. They sat upon the blanket and began unwrapping their bento.

The sky was overcast, at it had been often lately. A storm was close, but not yet there.

Akechi had argued that they wait until just before Sis's operation, to ensure she was in a state where her Treasure would appear. They team knew that in reality he was stalling them not for Sis's operation, which didn't exist, but for his own. Akechi's plan was now a waiting game. The Phantom Thieves' plan was also nearly fully researched and prepared. Makoto thought through the sequence of events over and over again, elaborating what was vague, preparing alternatives if something went wrong, polishing what they already had, and trying to imagine the unexpected. She couldn't shake the feeling she was missing something important. Though she had no shortage of responsibilities to occupy her, time not spent making progress on the plan was worrisome.

The leaves of the tomato plants rattled in a gust of wind. Makoto brought her hands across her chest to brace against the chill. Ren leaned over to her, wrapping his arms around her. He spoke softly.
"We can go inside if it's too cold."

Makoto shook her head. She turned her head toward Ren, wondering how many more moments they had, wondering how many moments he had. He met her gaze, his dark gray eyes somehow warm. They leaned in closer, their noses meeting. Ren's embrace became tighter. Makoto sighed contently. She tilted her chin up and-

"We should eat," Ren said, releasing Makoto.

"Mm," Makoto mumbled as the two parted. She looked down and reminded herself to be supportive and not to push Ren, not to add more stress to their lives, not to rock their fragile new relationship, not to- "Am I bad at kissing?"

"W-what?" Ren's eyes darted from side to side, stopping to look at Makoto along the way. It was as if he was expecting someone else to appear... or he was searching for an escape route. She took his response to mean that she had indeed just blurted out what she thought she had.

"Um, well," Makoto wondered if steam was rising off of her face. She chastised herself for slipping, keeping her eyes firmly planted on her knees. She worried her thumbs against her hands. "N-not since the Ferris wheel have you wanted to... a-and even when I ask y-you seem to hesitate. I mean, I u-understand if-"

"Don't think that," Ren said earnestly. He put his hands on Makoto's shoulders. "Look at me."

Makoto felt as though she was literally fighting her own muscles to meet Ren. She lifted her head. His eyes were clear. He was smiling.
Once Ren had Makoto's attention, he paused. He shook his head, his smile becoming a chuckle. "You're so cute."

"That doesn't make any sense," Makoto knit her brow. "How can that-"

"It just is," Ren looked rather satisfied.

"But-"

"Is." Ren's relaxed adamancy and his sure smile made it hard to doubt him. However...

"You haven't answered my question!"

Ren smirked. Makoto held her stare. He sighed. Pausing, he looked like he was about to start speaking, opening his mouth but then pressing his lips shut again. He repeated the attempt several times, getting no where.

It was enough time that Makoto felt the rush of her initial outburst drain away, replaced by a general unease.

Ren shook his head. "Look..."

Makoto waited.

"If I asked you for anything, anything, right now, would you deny me?"

"Hm?"

"You wouldn't, would you? You'd do anything I ask, because you think I'm going to die," Ren pressed his lips together.

"I don't think you're going to die, I'm just worried-"

"It's the same thing," Ren sighed again.

"So? What are you saying?" Makoto lowered her head again.

"I'm saying if we do... anything... I need to know that you want to be doing it... not out of trying to please me or pity or anything else," Ren lifted Makoto's face by her chin, looking directly into her eyes. There was a dusting of pink across his cheeks. He frowned, shifting his eyes away. "I don't enjoy taking advantage of women who can't say No."

Makoto stared for a moment. She pulled back from Ren's grasp. "Why can't it be both? Why can't it be because I want to but also because I want you to be happy."

"Because then I can't tell-"

"And what about my side of things?" Makoto began to speak more rapidly. "How do I know you're not doing something just to please me? I don't want to take advantage of you either. Isn't a bit... patronizing... to... to-"

"I'm not the one who has trouble saying No to things, Miss President." Ren was firm.

Makoto was so ready to be angry, but she wasn't sure at who. She recognized turning people down did often make her uncomfortable, but it wasn't like she had been in this situation before. It felt so dismissive. She balled her hands into fists on her skirt.
Ren placed his hand over one of hers. His expression softened. Makoto looked at him, finding it harder to stay mad. Instead, she responded with a small, fleeting smile. She reminded herself that the point was to work things out. She took a deep breath. "Does this mean we should wait until..."

"No... though that would be fine too," Ren's said evenly. He took both of Makoto's hands in his. "It means for now I'd prefer you to take the lead and keep taking it, as far you want to go. ...And it means I'm going to want to take things slow, so we both know..."

"Will it always be like this?"

"No," Ren closed his eyes and shook his head. "This is just... a starting point. After..."

Makoto squeezed Ren's hands and nodded so he didn't have to finish his thought.

Ren's expression brightened. "So how's this?"

"A little scary, but..." Makoto smiled. "A little exciting too."

"Good." Ren grinned.

"So... Kiss me...?" Makoto held her breath.

Ren nodded, leaning in. Makoto did the same, eager to test their new understanding. She lifted herself on her knees and slipped her hands from his, bringing them to his face as their lips met. His eyes closed and he inhaled deeply. He was tender, not completely passive as she had feared. He brought his hands to her hips. She sensed the muscles in his upper back relaxing. She felt hers do the same, responding not only to the sensation of his mouth against hers, but the confidence that he was enjoying it too.

The couple nearly forgot to eat lunch.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to TVTropes user Augustus813 for creating a tropes page. I really enjoyed reading what tropes were picked out. I didn't know the term "POV Sequel" until I was pointed to that page. (I don't know how widespread the term is so I'm not yet adding it to the tags.)

Originally Posted 2018/04/12
Lie 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*I'll keep the team safe in Ren's absence.*

Makoto was raised up on her knees atop Ren's couch, making her the taller of the two as her boyfriend sat, feet on the ground but legs shifted towards her. She had one knee in the empty space between his legs. It was a bit precarious but he had a firm hold on her waist. She knew she wouldn't fall. She held his face in her hands, tilted upwards. With each furtive pull of her lips on his the air she breathed in felt somehow fresher, the concerns she carried seemed somehow lighter.

Pulling back, Makoto took in Ren's expression. It was that smile, the one that effortlessly commanded all attention, pushing everything else out of her mind without her noticing. She couldn't help but attempt to mirror it.

"M-May I...?" Makoto waited for the tell-tale feel of a light nod against her hands and the modest shift in Ren's expression. When it came, she leaned down again, planting a small kiss on each of his eyelids as he closed them, followed by a run of light kisses down one of his cheeks. As she approached his jawline, she let her lips part further, leaving little wet spots along his neck moving towards his throat. She leaned further into him, enjoying the sounds of his deep inhalations, the rhythmic motion of his chest.

A feather-light backwards push at her waist caused Makoto to stop. She lifted her head again, looking down at Ren. "T-too much?"

"Enough." Ren smiled plainly. A few moments later, his eyebrows raised... a question of what was to follow.

"You could do the same..." Makoto's eyes wandered to no particular spot on the wall as she brought one of her hands to her face, lightly gripping her lower lip between her thumb and forefinger. When she returned to look at Ren, she saw one of his eyebrows lift further, a small smirk forming. "I-I mean, I want you to."

A wide mischievous grin accompanied by a short triumphant laugh was the response. Ren gave Makoto just enough of a tug to let him guide her back to the couch, her bottom meeting the cushion with one leg still over his thigh. He moved his hands up her back, one stopping midway and another cradling her head, as he leaned over and began teasing her neck starting just behind one of her ears. Her breath caught and a few high-pitched sounds escaped her. As he worked his way to the underside of her chin and then downwards, she regret the high-collared design of Shujin's uniform. She felt more heat as his lips parted further. She brought a hand to his head, leading him closer. There was something... healing... about being pressed together like that, whether or not they were doing anything else.

It dawned on Makoto that whatever they were doing, it might leave a mark. She moved her other hand against Ren's chest. Before she could push, he had already pulled back. He looked her in the eyes as he righted both of them. A wry smile formed as he spoke. "Good."

Makoto disentangled her legs from Ren's, placing both feet on the ground. She gripped the edges of the couch with both hands and stared at the wooden planks of the attic floor. She wondered what she should be doing next. They were silent for just a little too long. Perhaps it was time to go. "Thanks..."
for having me over tonight."

"Thank you for coming on such short notice."

Ren had been busy meeting with others during his afternoons and evenings. It seemed as though he intended to spend some time with each person who had been kind to him in Tokyo, a good-bye that many of them didn't realize was happening. Makoto frowned. With Akechi watching, he couldn't do the same with his friends back home, nor his parents. They were out of time. Tomorrow... tomorrow she would print the calling card.

Makoto had noticed a slight change in Ren as the days passed. His behavior seemed to be more erratic. One moment he would seem completely lost in thought. Another he would be telling her not to worry, that at least he wouldn't be going to jail. Taken apart they were all very "Ren," but he seemed to switch more frequently.

"You're making that face again."

"W-what?" Makoto turned to Ren. His expression was neutral. "S-sorry."

Ren stood up suddenly. He reached for his glasses, which were sitting on the old game system on the table, but stayed his hand before grabbing them. Instead, he walked over to his work table and picked up a small USB drive that was laying next to his laptop. He turned back to Makoto, his hand outstretched, offering her the device.

"This..." Ren looked away. "I made this for my parents."

"Ren..."

"Sojiro has one too," Ren took a deep breath before looking Makoto straight on. "If... if I don't make it... please see that-"

Makoto plucked the drive from Ren's hand before he had to continue. She held it close to her heart. "I will."

Ren gave a small nod. He paused for a moment, staring Makoto directly in her eyes, before beginning to speak again. "Also... Run."

"What?" Makoto knew what Ren meant, but the thought of leaving things unfinished with Sis...

"Get out of the city. Hide." Ren spoke bluntly. "They'll wait before going after the rest of you... but they won't wait for long."

"I... I can't leave Sis," Makoto's eyes were wide. "It's Futaba they're likely to target-"

"First, maybe. She has Sojiro looking out for her. Dr. Takemi as well. Ms. Kawakami has also volunteered."

"Ms. Kawakami? Won't it seem weird for her to be coming to Yongen-jaya?"

"She has... business... in this area often." Ren looked away, idly toying with a lock of hair.

"Oh."

"Anyway, go to Sojiro. He's sharp. He'll help." Ren faced Makoto again. "He'll help all of you escape."
Makoto frowned. "Even if... Even if it comes to that... We can't just give up. We have to continue to fight them. We can't let this continue."

Ren shook his head. "The Palaces have only been getting more dangerous. It's almost as if... as if the whole world is becoming distorted..."

Makoto watched Ren take a few paces back, looking lost in thought. She waited. As much as she wanted to object, she didn't want to interrupt his thoughts. As the seconds ticked by however, she grew restless. "Ren?"

Ren looked up at Makoto, blinking a few times. "Anyway... as I was saying, the Palaces are too dangerous. Not only that, Akechi will-"

"We'll find a way. We've always accepted the risk. It's the right thing to do."

Ren grimaced. It was as if there was a heavy weight upon his shoulders, one beyond what Makoto could understand. He sighed and walked back to Makoto, taking her hands in his. "Makoto, please... I need you to lead the team to safety."

"I..." Makoto broke their gaze. Ren looked so desperate.

"Please... at least until you've established new identities, a stable place to hide," Ren let go of one of Makoto's hands and brought his own to her chin, guiding her back to him. "You can come up with a better strategy from a stronger position. Sojiro, Tae, the others... they'll help."

Makoto breathed in. She started speaking, still having trouble focusing on Ren's eyes. "I can do that but... I can't leave Sis. I'll see everyone to safety, but I have to return to her."

"No," Ren put his hands on Makoto's shoulders. "That's-"

Makoto turned, looking Ren straight on. She spoke with conviction. "Something I have to do."

"Makoto," Ren's voice took on an edge. "You know if-"

"Then don't die." Makoto pressed her lips together, her chin tilting upwards. She felt Ren's fingers recoil. He grit his teeth, taking a step back. She began to regret saying the word. Then... he chuckled.

"Okay," Ren smiled. His chuckle turned to a sigh as he sat down beside Makoto. He lifted one of his arms, bringing it behind her shoulders, his hand coming to rest at her waist. She leaned into him. It was becoming quite natural.

Makoto closed her eyes and focused only on the sensation of being with Ren—the even sound of his heart beating, the warmth emanating from him. It wasn't until Ren spoke again that she realized she hadn't been thinking of anything at all.

"I have one more request..." Ren started sheepishly. Makoto lifted her head, looking up at him. His eyes were barely visible through the thick mess of bangs falling over his face. "Whatever happens... don't carry a grudge against Akechi."

"What?" Makoto instinctively pulled away but Ren's encircling arm remained firm. "What are you-"

"Hear me out-"

"He is trying to kill you," Makoto said slowly, enunciating each word.

"I'm very aware of that."
"He killed Futaba's Mom, Haru's Dad."

"I'm aware of that too."

"Then how can you...?"

"Because he's someone we should save as well. The mental shutdowns, the psychotic breakdowns, orchestrating the failure of businesses—those plans come from the adults behind him. He was younger than Futaba when this started—"

"He was 14. He would know killing is wrong."

"I don't know about that," Ren brought his other hand to Makoto, letting his fingers lightly run down her hair. "Futaba did some digging into his background. I think he may not value the lives of others because no one has ever valued his."

Makoto opened her mouth but shut it again. Murder was something even a small child knew was wrong.

Ren must have seen something in Makoto's expression, because he continued. "Think about it. He doesn't have anyone. He understands people through the Metaverse—but only their distortions, not their strengths. The adults that should have been caring for him, teaching him, are using him as a contract killer."

"He's always on television talking about justice and—"

"Yes, he's shrewd enough to speak the words, but I'm not sure he has any foundation with which to comprehend them. Are you certain you would without your family?"

Makoto tried to imagine the scenario Ren presented. Surely... surely her beliefs originated through reasoning... but what premises did they rest upon? How many of those relied on Dad and Sis? She fought to remember how she thought as a young child but it seemed so foreign. After some time, she looked up at Ren again. "I still don't like—"

"You don't have to. I don't either. I hate it when he-" Ren held Makoto a little closer. "Look, I don't know the extent of what he's up to. That's why I want you to run, all of you."

"And yet, you still..."

"Maybe this request is more for myself..." A mirthless, breathy laugh escaped Ren's lips. "When the time comes... I don't want to lose my own sense of justice."

"I'm sure you won't," Makoto said quietly. Ren was right. Justice was a fragile notion. Sis... Sis was teetering with a Palace born from a grudge.

The thought rang false.

Sis's Palace was about more than their father's death. It may have been seeded there, but it was cultivated by the years that followed... perhaps much like Akechi was-

"He reminds me of you a little."

Ren's words sliced through Makoto, bringing her focus directly to him. She tried to pull away. Her eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"Both of you try so hard to live up to someone else's idea of perfection, as if it's your only way of
being accepted," Ren remained calm. "And you're both so good at projecting it, it's hard for others to notice when you're struggling."

It was hard to be annoyed at Ren when he said things like that. "I..."

"It's no more than that," Ren leaned his head against hers. "Just... just something to keep in mind."

Hunched over in a seat in one of Kosei High School's practice rooms, Makoto gripped the calling card with both hands. She had to remind herself not to press too hard, lest she crumple it before getting it to Sis.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Yusuke asked, still standing next to the equipment he used to produce it.

"Yes." Makoto read over the card once more. She thought back over the years. From the moment they learned of Dad's death, Sis had supported them. Even before then, she had given up much taking care of Makoto. Without Dad, Sis was forced to be a pillar, an unyielding success... something she had to fight every step of the way for while others seemed to obtain it all easily through their connections, their support structures—things Sis didn't have. Makoto had seen it all in the Palace.

It was all too easy to rationalize any behavior when one believed that others were 'cheating' as well. All of those others, the ones who seemingly had it easy... Sis envied them.

Makoto listened as Sis ranted about the Phantom Thieves and the gall they had to send her a calling card. She had known Sis would not be pleased. Her sister was on a hair-trigger when it came to them. Perhaps deep down, she had long suspected she would one day be a target. Makoto frowned. Time and memory had dulled the previous instances in which she had broached the topic. It was taking every bit of energy Makoto had to not only hand her sister the dangerous card, but remain calm in the face of Sis's anger and probe for anything that might aid in their plan.

As Sis made a particularly strong pledge to pry information from the Phantom Thieves, from Ren, in the interrogation room, Makoto thought she could see Sis's shadow in her stead. She swallowed a gasp.

Sis looked at Makoto curiously. The older woman paused. Her voice returned to its normal volume. "I should probably be getting back. It's late, but I should contact the director and let him know about this calling card."

Makoto pressed her lips together, worried what expression she might make.

"I expect things will calm down a little once this case is over," Sis smiled gently, like she used to, before Dad died. "Once that happens... why don't we go on a trip to some hot springs? Just the two of us."

It was everything Makoto would have wanted six months ago. Now... now it might be too late. Makoto opened her eyes as wide as she could, fearing she would start crying if she blinked. "Sis... Um, I-I'm on your side! I won't let anyone do anything to you!"

The smile Sis wore grew broader. She walked over to Makoto and pat her on the head, chuckling. "What an odd girl..."

Makoto shifted her body yet again, in hopes that if she just found the right position, just fixed the
blankets that she hadn't thought were in disarray, just *something*, she would be able to fall asleep. She was used to drifting off thinking about whatever book she had recently read or whatever plans she had for the next day. This time the next day's plan kept her wide awake. All the usual tricks didn't work.

It came in pieces. Sometimes it was rehearsing what she would say to Sis's shadow after they successfully defeated her. Sometimes it was ponderings on what tricks the shadow would pull in battle, what she would be like fighting in that dress. Sometimes it was wanting to message Futaba for reassurance about the hideouts the hacker had anonymously rented, assisted by Haru's fortune. Sometimes it was worry that Ryuji might forget where he had stashed the briefcase. So many little pieces. So many ways it could go wrong.

Most of all, the image of Ren walking down the long hallway underground haunted her. Like watching his back as he traversed the tunnel into the battle arena, she was gripped by a strong sense he would not return.

For Ren to survive, he would need to convince Sis of the truth. She would then need to transport his phone to Akechi and Futaba's program would have to activate when they were far enough from the interrogation room not to affect Ren. Akechi would have to not notice the switch and instead carry out his deadly plan with cognitive versions of Ren and any guards.

They had researched every part of the plan they could, but much was still up to chance. Would Ren's cognitive form or those of the guards fade away too fast? Would Sis's cognitions of the guards respond differently than Akechi expected? Any small variation could tip him off. Makoto reminded herself to trust in Sis's perceptive skill. Everything would be just as reality, fresh in Sis's mind—Ren, the interrogation room, the guards, Akechi...

*Akechi.*

Makoto's eyes shot open. A sinking, nauseating sensation clutched her chest. Why hadn't she realized it before? Sis's cognition would be perfect, *including her cognitive version of Akechi*. The real one would know something was up instantaneously.

Sitting up, Makoto reached for her phone. She didn't have to look at the time to know only Futaba would be awake. It was a fine excuse not to contact Ren, not to disturb him right before they carried out their operation. There was a solution after all. He just wouldn't like it. Makoto tapped on Futaba's contact and began to outline a plan.

Makoto cleaved tightly to Ren, the side of her face pressed closely against his chest, her arms wrapped around his waist. Both of his hands were planted on her back, his hold more forceful than usual. She felt the chain of her necklace digging into her skin. He hadn't said much all day. To an outside observer, he would seem his normal self. It was the sound of heart beating quickly and the weight of his breaths that gave away his stress, his fear.

Two barely picked at bento boxes lay open at their feet. Ren had apologized for not putting her culinary offering to better use. Makoto had told him she expected better next time, emphasizing that there would be one.

"Ren," Makoto pulled far enough back to focus on his face. "I want you to know that-

"Don't." Ren said adamantly. He took a deep breath. "You wouldn't say it if we weren't..."

"Probably not," Makoto acknowledged. Her gaze traced the lines of his face before settling on his
charcoal eyes. "But I would feel it either way."

Ren inhaled deeply, lifting his chin towards the sky and closing his eyes. He pulled Makoto to him once more, holding her firm. When the chimes rang, it was hard to let go.

The Phantom Thieves stood in the center of a giant roulette wheel, its pockets having just been revealed by Sis's shadow. She loomed above them, projected on a gargantuan display. Her ranting had become more raw, more cruel. Makoto hated that her friends were seeing Sis like this.

"A clash of brute strength is simply uncalled for on this stage," the shadow stated.

Ryuji took several steps forward. "No more coins or playin' games! We ain't followin' your damn rules!"

"Oh you will," the shadow responded. "There is no room for negotiation. You will know soon enough."

For a brief instant, Makoto thought she saw something else. She was still in the roulette wheel, but it was different, and at the center was something horrifying. It was like a vision but so fleeting she knew not of what. Did the others see it too? Was it just her mind playing tricks? "What was that...!?"

"Now... come at me!" the shadow yelled.

Makoto cringed, shutting her eyes and lowering her head. It was really time to fight Sis. She felt a hand on her shoulder.

"You'll save her, right?" Akechi's reassurance was surprising. Makoto nodded in response. She couldn't tell if he really was being supportive or if it was a trick and she just wished he was being true.

Sis's shadow started the wheel spinning. They wouldn't only be fighting her directly, but playing a deadly game of chance at the same time.

Even in an evening gown, Sis was a difficult opponent, skilled in blocking and deflecting attacks and able to hit hard on her own. Makoto wasn't sure they had ever sparred on equal terms. Sis had always given her a handicap.

Ann, Yusuke, and even Futaba were all fighting with new personae. The extra help was appreciated as the team was being pounded by poor luck versus the wheel. Poor enough luck that it wasn't long before Morgana and Ren determined that Sis's shadow had rigged the game, inserting glass covers over whatever they bet on.

Morgana slipped away to get a clear shot on the covers while the shadow was distracted by the rest of the team. The next time the wheel spun, he shattered the glass, giving the team their first win and sending Sis's shadow to the ground. The team had her surrounded.

"What was that about fair and square!?" Futaba shouted. "You were totally cheating!"

Sis's shadow grit her teeth in response.

"You coward!" Futaba continued. "What're you so quiet for!? Say something!"

"Shut up..." the shadow's voice began to waver. "SHUT UUUP!"

Pitch black splatters surrounded the scream. From them emerged not the shadow with Sis's face, but
a monster made of metal, wielding a giant sword and a giant gun. It was the kind of fearful creature Makoto might have imagined as a child. All of the Palace rulers before had retained some semblance of a human face, a human form. This one was truly of nightmares.

It roared.

*Save me Sis...*

"S-Sis!?"

*Save me! There's a monster! Sis! Save me!*

"Cheating!?! Unfair?! Silence! This is MY world! If you want a fair fight, then to hell with the game! I'll crush you by force. Fair and square, just as you like!"

*Sis!*

The monster with Sis's distorted voice hit hard. It wasn't as agile at Sis's shadow, but its toughness more than made up for it. Makoto swallowed hard. She had to keep moving. She focused on healing and supporting the others while trying to decipher if there was any sort of reason to the monster's movements, anything they could exploit in battle. Her teammates continued to whittle away it, fluidly trading spaces to assist each other and make contact with their attacks.

There were a motions and stances that were familiar to Makoto, but too difficult to explain in the middle of a chaotic battle. Instead, Makoto stepped in to block or deflect them herself. She was truly facing a manifestation of her sister.

Somehow, the monster only seemed to get stronger as the fight wore on. A powerful skill knocked the entire team to the floor. Ren, being the fastest, struggled to get up as it readied another volley.

An all enveloping storm of black burst from the monster. Futaba screamed. "Noooo!"

Glowing green symbols appeared in a giant circle on the floor. The attack dissipated against a transparent green dome, protecting the team and giving them the opportunity to right themselves.

"O-Oracle! W-was that you?" Ann looked over at the smaller girl.

"I-I think...?" Futaba was panting heavily. She wobbled as she lifted herself from the ground.

"We need to end this now," Ren said, eying their navigator as she took a feeble stance. He dashed towards the monster. Makoto watched as he closed the distance. She reached a hand in his direction.

*Don't...*

In close, the monster's sword was too clumsy for Ren's speed, its gun too large to fire within range. The team must have had almost as much effect on Sis's monster as it had on them. Ren was able to propel himself with a jump off the monster's knee, plunging his knife in a gap right under its spiked helmet. Black, red, and gray streams followed his other hand, flowing onto and along the knife, using it like a lightning rod. Ren then back-flipped away as it dropped its weapons and fell face first onto the floor.

The metal armor faded into the same black splatter it was born from. The wisps of black dispersed like embers from a fire. Sis's shadow remained. She pressed her arms against the ground, bringing herself to a crouched position. "So I've lost..."
Makoto rushed over, kneeling to meet the shadow. "Sis!"

"That's only a shadow," Akechi began. "Why are you so..."

"Quiet!" admonished Ann.

"Makoto...?" For the first time, the shadow seemed to really see her.

"I don't think it's wrong to bring light to evils which can't be judged by law," Makoto told the shadow. "That's all the Phantom Thieves have been try to do too. But these aggressive investigations? Twisting the truth for your own personal gain...?"

Makoto shook her head.

"Please... You have to think back to the feelings you had when you first wanted to be a prosecutor. Think about your justice, Sis."

"My justice..." the shadow repeated.

"Try to remember how you used to be..."

"How I..."

Makoto wasn't sure whether her words would have any affect on her sister, the real one, but she had to try. The bet I'm placing is on you Sis.

"Are you all right...?" Morgana stood next to Makoto, looking up at her.

"I am," Makoto stood up. "Let's go."

"Huh!?" A flurry of activity was visible on Futaba's screens. "Enemy readings! When did they...!? They're gathering outside!"

"For real!? The hell's goin' on!?!"

"Look at those numbers...!"

Futaba, Ryuji, and Yusuke played their parts well.

"We defeated the Palace ruler and even stole the Treasure, yet the Shadows are still restless..." said Morgana. "It doesn't make any sense... What's going on here?"

"There are more coming!?!" Futaba reported. "This'll be dangerous if we don't do something...!"

"We need to go now!" urged Morgana. "Those guys in black suits are almost here. We'll be done for if we get surrounded!"

"A team this large would be discovered immediately. We had best split up for our escape. Although, we'll need someone to act as a decoy..." Makoto said reluctantly, forcing herself to stick to the plan. "...No. That's too dangerous."

"I'll do it," Ren said calmly.

"Joker!?" Makoto wasn't sure if she was truly acting or not. "Are you planning on distracting them by yourself!?"
"Let him do it, Queen," said Ryuji. "He's quiet, but once his mind's made up, he's not gonna take no for an answer."

Everyone said their good-byes. It was unscripted and unlike them but Akechi didn't seem to notice. Makoto couldn't fault them. She felt the same. She turned to Sis's shadow and finally back to Ren. It would be up to the two of them now.

Looking at Ren, perhaps for the last time, everything else seemed to fade away. The bright casino lights. The alarms. The rest of the team. Everything. She wasn't sure how long they stood there, looking at each other, unable to say anything.

"...We'll see you later," Makoto finally managed, turning away from Ren. She shut her eyes tightly and ran.

Makoto ran through her mental checklist. The full team... less Ren... was present and accounted for. Futaba had verified that Akechi's phone was well away from them. Morgana reported no sightings of police along their escape route as they slipped into the recently rented space—one of several Futaba had managed to procure electronically under assumed names. Depending on the amount of heat they were taking, they could spread out among the newly obtained hideouts, distributing their risk and waiting until morning when the commute traffic would allow them to remain hidden under the cover of the crowd.

It seemed that as they had hoped, Akechi's faction was unprepared for the Phantom Thieves noticing the police presence and then splitting up. The police focused their attention solely on Ren. Makoto recalled his flashy exit through the stained glass centerpiece of the casino's main hall, followed by his brutal capture by the police. She hadn't been prepared to see it. How could the organization she trusted, the organization she once believed to be filled with people like Dad, how could so many of them participate in such an act?

"Mako-chan, sit down," Haru's voice came from near the floor. Like most of the team, she was sitting against a wall. The spaces they had rented were unfurnished.

"Yeah Makoto," Ann added. She was sitting against a different wall, Ryuji's arm wrapped over her shoulders. "It'll be safer if we're rested before spreading out."

"Actually... there's been a change of plan," Makoto said grimly as her eyes wandered from teammate to teammate. When she made eye contact with Futaba, the small girl nodded and stood up, taking a place next to her.

"What's this?" asked Yusuke.

"I... I made a mistake," Makoto explained. "I forgot to account for the cognitive version of Akechi. When the real one makes contact with my sister..."

"...a cognitive version of him will appear in the Palace as well... and then the real Akechi will notice," Yusuke finished the thought. "So this is why you asked for those supplies..."

"Exactly," Makoto confirmed. "We need to go back and find my sister's cognition of Akechi and prevent that from happening. Sis mentioned she's seen him around the courthouse lately. We have a good chance of finding him in the casino first."

The group was silent for several moments until Ryuji spoke. "I dunno Makoto... he wouldn't like that y'know... us explorin' the Palace without him."
"I-I know," Makoto looked away. It was why she hadn't told Ren or Morgana or anyone but Futaba until now. It would be too distracting. "I tried to come up with another way... Futaba and I both did, but..."

"We got no idea what happens when you beat the shadow but leave the Treasure," Ryuji continued. "An' with Ren spillin' the beans, who knows what it'll be like in there."

"We also don't want to perturb the Palace lest it affect our existing plan," said Yusuke.

"These are all valid points," said Makoto. "I don't like it either, but the choice is between taking a risk or allowing things to almost definitely march towards failure. I'd rather take the risk."

"Hmmm," Morgana's tail undulated, the tip seemed to snap at the end of each oscillation. "Makoto is right. We have to do something."

There were some murmurs of agreement. Eventually, the entire team assented, reluctant as they were.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do," Makoto stated. "We need someone to keep an eye on Akechi's whereabouts, allowing us to sneak in. However, we need Futaba's navigation skills in the Palace. We also need to keep the group chat active so Akechi doesn't suspect anything. Futaba has created a modified chat client to allow spoofing of all of our accounts as well as tracking of Akechi's phone. Ann: can you put your acting skills to use?"

"Mm," Ann nodded affirmatively. Futaba looked at Makoto for a moment and walked over to Ann, sitting next to her and working on her phone.

"Ryuji, you stay with Ann in case something comes up," Makoto continued. "The rest of us will search the Palace. Futaba, when you're ready."

"Got it."

While Futaba went over her newest apps with Ann, the others continued to rest. Makoto paced back and forth, her hand at her chin, going over ways in which they might be able to contain Akechi's cognition. Thanks to Yusuke they had rope, tape, cords, and other supplies. Perhaps they could hide the cognition deep in the back rooms, near where they had found one of the slot machine control panels. Would the noise alert the guards?

"Hey Makoto," Ryuji was standing right next to her.

"What is it?"

"You don't have to go back there y'know. Maybe you should stay with Ann an' me. We could use the help an' Morgana can handle things inside."

"We prepared for two-person cells," said Makoto. "I know it's not ideal, but it's safer to take the biggest team we can."

Ryuji looked back at Ann for a moment. He took a deep breath. "Then maybe I should go instead. You can handle the police better than I can... if... y'know."

"Ann can handle them," Makoto smiled. It was sweet of Ryuji to offer, but he clearly didn't want to part with Ann. He opened his mouth, possibly to object again. Before he could speak, Makoto continued. "It's my sister. There may be something I know that can help the search. I have to go."
Though it had only been a short time since they were last in Sis's Palace, the broken window had already been boarded over and scaffolding was erected around it. Signs were posted apologizing for the construction. The gambling inside continued.

"There are shadows, but they seem... calm," said Futaba, surrounded by her own projected screens. "Even more calm than before we sent the card."

"That's a relief," said Haru.

Makoto wondered if that meant Sis had already been informed of Ren's capture. Did it also mean Sis's Treasure also reverted back to a glow? She shook her head. She had to remain focused.

"Where do we start?" asked Yusuke. "If your sister believes Akechi belongs here, why haven't we run into him before?"

"She was keeping a close eye on us before," Makoto replied. "Based on Oracle's scan, it seems like that's no longer the case. Perhaps since she was focused on rigging the games against us, she naturally removed any excess elements, like Akechi... or maybe she even recognized him in our party."

"Oracle, can you find him?" Haru asked.

"No go," Futaba let the screens fade. "I can detect if something is a cognition, but I can't search for a particular one."

"My sister mentioned he's still working here. That rules out the High Limit Floor as he doesn't present in court," Makoto brought a gloved hand to her chin. "Since they're not working closely anymore, she's most likely to see him in the shared areas... I think we should stay on the ground floor."

"Unfortunately that's the area we've explored least," said Yusuke.

"Yes, everyone stay close."

The density of slot machines, game tables, and the cognitive patrons helped the group remain hidden as they searched. However, it was a blessing and a curse—the density of cognitions made it that much harder to find the one they were searching for.

As the search wore on, Makoto started to wonder if they would be too late. It was unclear how long Sis would spend with Ren. It had taken time to set up Ann's phone and train her and Ryuji on how to use it. Furthermore, it had been a long day for all of them. The team was beginning to show signs of fatigue, most notably Haru who was less of a night owl than the others.

"Makoto," Akechi's voice caused her to turn. Makoto had not considered the cognition would find them. He was wearing his school uniform, a perfect replica down to his black gloves. Equally accurate was that condescending smile of his. She expected nothing less of Sis. "It's rare you're able to sneak out."

"...Sneak out?" Haru looked between the two curiously.

"Yes... normally Makoto is locked away, studying diligently, as per the manager but, well, she manages to escape from time to time..." Akechi's cognition positioned himself next to Makoto, wrapping an arm around her shoulder, the fingers of his glove threading around the spikes of her gear. He looked down at her with a smile before turning back to the others. "You see, we're in love."
Makoto felt all the color drain out of her system.

Sis thought they were dating. Was there a cognitive version of Makoto herself running around, cavorting, with Akechi?

Makoto's eyes went as wide as they could, as if to let her eyeballs jump out, grow legs, and run screaming. It was as if every single piece of her being was happy to abandon the rest as long as it meant getting as far away from Akechi's cognitive clone as possible. Traitors. All of them. All of her.

Realization seemed to hit the rest of the team just as fast. Haru's cheeks lifted as she hid her mouth behind her hands. Futaba and Morgana were doubled over laughing openly. Yusuke lifted his arms, making a frame with his fingers.

"Ah, this expression! It'll be-

"Fox don't you dare."

"Yes. We can't let the manager find out," Akechi's cognition added. He turned back to Makoto, his eyes wandering over her. "You're so colorful today. I must say, I like it."

"...colorful?"

"Though," the cognition lowered his voice. "I wish you would reconsider on those pictures... everyone else has at least one of their girlfriend. The other girls all send me them willingly... but you... don't you love me?"

"...pictures?"

"You know..." the cognition chuckled. Then he puckered his lips and leaned in. He was met by a hard elbow right below the ribs.

Makoto stumbled out of the cognition's reach.

"What's the meaning of this?" cognitive Akechi's eyes narrowed.

"I-I..."

"Don't be mad at Mako-chan," Haru said, a hint of a melody to her voice. She put her hands on Makoto's shoulders. "You know she's really quite shy."

"I suppose that is true," the cognition's expression softened, the usual smile once again plastered on his face.

"I think she rather meet you somewhere more... private."

"Noir!" Makoto whispered. "What are you...?"

Haru merely smiled broadly in response.

"Ah yes... a suite perhaps?" the cognition offered. His eyebrows raised briefly. "I'm told they're sound proof."

"That would be perfect," Haru continued gripping Makoto's shoulders, peeking out around her to speak with the Akechi clone. A pinkness came to her cheeks. She spoke through a bubbly giggle. "You wouldn't mind if I joined, would you? I'm sure Mako-chan would feel more comfortable... we're very close after all... and well, I do like the tall and slender types. You can handle the both of
us, right?"

The cognition's eyes opened wide and his mouth hung open for a moment before his face seemed to light up. The fake smile he normally wore was replaced with one that actually looked... excited? "I'll reserve one right away."

After speaking with one of the casino workers at a nearby exchange counter, Akechi's cognitive version led the group to one of the suites. Like everything else in Sis's casino, it was garishly decorated. A large poster bed was visible through opened double doors. Plush furniture framed the seating area in the entry room. Above the twelve-person dining table hung a sparkling chandelier. The accents matched the rest of the casino with bright red, green, black, and gold throughout.

"This will do," Haru said brightly.

"It's a bit saturated for my tastes," Yusuke said, again making a frame with his hands. As he walked towards the entryway, Haru stopped him, the tips of her fingers pressing against his face at five separate points.

"No no... this is just me, Mako-chan, and Akechi. The rest of you have to wait outside," Haru admonished. "Mako-chan is shy after all."

"But..." Yusuke was hesitant.

"No buts!"

"The three of you stay by the door in case anything happens," Makoto whispered to the others as Haru nearly dragged Akechi's cognition by the arm into the room. She wasn't quite sure what Haru was up to, but the girl seemed to have a plan. The less everyone saw of her sister's cognition of Akechi, the better anyway. She turned to Futaba and Morgana in particular. "Keep scanning for anything out of place."

"Will do," Futaba responded.

Makoto closed the door behind her as she entered the suite. Haru had already moved one of the dining chairs to the foot of the bed, placing it mere centimeters from the frame. She had set most of the supplies that Yusuke had gathered from school on the vanity across from the bed.

"Now you sit right here," Haru told the cognition. As he seated himself, Haru pressed down on his shoulders, straddling above him once his legs had reached the seat. "Perfect."

"What are we doing?" Akechi's cognition asked, his eyes opened a little wider than normal, the corners of his mouth twitching, as if he was trying to hide his genuine smile behind his fake one.

"Mako-chan is scared because it's her first time-"

"Noir!"

"-so we're going to do two things to help her. First I'm going to guide her and second we're going to tie you up!" Haru pulled out a length of rope from behind her back, one of the items Makoto had asked Yusuke for. "Tada!"

The cognition of Akechi looked at Haru trepidatiously.

"O-oh," Haru appeared disappointed, exaggeratedly so. "Y-you're not new to this too are you? I-I thought for sure the famous detective prince would know all kinds of-"
"I-It's fine," the cognition's voice cracked. "O-of course I am."

"Great!" Haru's eyes formed crescents. She was soon lashing the cognition's arms behind his back and securing the whole assembly to the chair. His ankles came next. By the time she was done, not only was Akechi's cognitive incarnation immobile, but the chair had been further secured to the bed frame. He wouldn't be going anywhere.

"Nice work Noir..." Makoto looked on in awe. "How did you...?"

"Just some things I learned gardening," Haru smiled sweetly.

"G-gardening, you say?"

"Sometimes you just really need a secure knot," Haru nodded.

"I guess there's just one thing left," Makoto picked up the roll of duct tape from the vanity.

"Oh no Mako-chan," Haru placed her hand above Makoto's, an indication she should put down the duct tape. "Let's have some fun first. Don't you want to show Akechi how you really feel?"

"...how I really feel?"

"Yes..." Haru put her hand on Makoto's back, guiding her back to the foot of the bed. "Like this."

Haru's hand dropped from Makoto. When she lifted it again, it was gripping her axe. She swung single handedly, the flat of the axe's double-head hitting Akechi's cognition square in the face.

"Agh!" The cognition stared at Haru in horror. "What-"

"That was for being such a creep to Mako-chan," Haru said matter-of-factly, smiling cutely. She raised her axe again. "And this is for trying to kill Ren."

It was a backhand this time, hitting the cognition off center against his left cheek and bringing the axe back to Haru's left side. The sound of metal bluntly hitting flesh and Akechi's voice grunting on impact punctuated Haru's act.

"This is for the mental shutdowns." Haru's voice was raised. Her smile had dropped, replaced with grit teeth. She brought a second hand to her axe and swung it like a baseball bat.

"This is for Futaba's mother!" Haru's voice was louder still. She was almost snarling. Her eyes were wide. She swung again.

"And this... this..." Haru was breathing heavily. She adjusted her grip and squared her stance. Her eyes were becoming wet. "THIS IS FOR MY FATHER!"

The axe hit with such much force that the ropes holding the chair to the bed strained. Blood trickled from the cognition's nose and the area around it began to turn purple.

"My father made a lot of mistakes... but!" Haru swung again.

"He!"

Another swing.

"Didn't!"
The sound of metal versus flesh.

"Deserve!"

Tears were flowing over Haru's mask and down face.

"To!"

The swings were becoming more and more wild.

"Die!"

Haru's entire body seemed to extend past its limits. Her arms stretched, pulled by the momentum of the large axe. An edge embedded itself in the floor, turning the girl quarter circle from the cognition. Her hat fluttered to the ground. She rolled her shoulders and yanked the axe out of the floor, preparing for another swing.

"Stop!" Makoto gripped the axe handle, just above where Haru held it, impeding the progress of the next swing. She mentally kicked herself for having stood dumbfounded for so long. "T-that's enough."

Haru turned to look at Makoto, her face a wet, red mess. "Let me have this. He's just a cognition! I won't hurt him enough to make him disappear."

"That's not important," Makoto said quickly. She felt her own eyes tearing up. "You're the one who's being hurt.

"Ah," Haru's eyes fell. She let the axe fade. Her tears started coming out in waves, matching her sobs. She turned to Makoto, burying her head in the taller girl's chest.

Makoto led Haru to the couch. The two girls sat together. Makoto wrapped her arms around Haru, patting her on the back as she cried.

"M-my father was k-kind... u-until..."

"The conspiracy found a weakness and exploited it," said Makoto. It was just like they were doing to Sis.

"Y-you must think I-I'm..."

"No. Not at all." How long had Haru been holding all of this in, being the picture of strength demanded of the next head of Okumura Foods? Her shoulders twitched as she wept.

"I-if I j-just hadn't o-opened that d-door..."

"Nononono," Makoto held Haru closely, rocking slowly. "Don't think that. Don't ever think that. If it hadn't been you, Akechi would have found another way to lead us in. We were being set up before we ever met you."

"M-Mako-chan... if we had m-met first... d-do you th-think...?" Haru looked up at Makoto. She smiled sadly before erupting in tears again. "N-never-m-mind."

A groan from the bed caught both of their attentions. Akechi's cognition. "Why are you crying? I'm the one who-

Makoto stood up immediately, taking of her mask so she could give the cognition the full brunt of
her stare. She marched over to him, snatching the roll of duct tape from the vanity along the way.

"W-what are you going to do?"

Makoto ripped a piece of duct tape from the roll suddenly and pressed it against the cognition's mouth. If only she could do the same in real life. The cognition looked relieved she had stopped there. She started back towards Haru but paused. She turned and smiled at the cognition before delivering a swift uppercut to his stomach. "That's for making Haru cry."

Haru's puffy face forced a closed-lipped smile. Her nose was bright red and streams of tears were still falling, but Makoto understood the sentiment. The two sat together for some time. Haru's tears eventually dwindled, allowing the smaller girl to dry her face. Makoto had planned to wait until no evidence of her friend's loss of composure remained, but they were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Are you okay?" Yusuke asked when Makoto opened the room, letting the rest of the party in. "It's been hours."

"O-oh."

"Whoa!" Futaba exclaimed, almost jogging over to Akechi's cognitive form. The cognition squirmed. Muffled sounds could be heard through the duct tape. "You really did a number on him."

"That's our Queen!" There was a little hop to Morgana's step.

"R-right," Makoto looked over at Haru. The other girl immediately turned her face from the others. She supposed it was better this way.

"Now that that's done, we should get going," said Yusuke.

"Is it safe to leave him here?" asked Futuba.

"He won't be going anywhere like that!" said Morgana. "Only Kamoshida was able to reverse a change we made to the Palace and he was the Palace's ruler."

"Yes, Sugimura did not reappear after we vanquished him," said Yusuke.

"I have one more idea that might help," said Makoto.

"Okay," said Futaba. She turned back to the cognition of Akechi. She bent her knee, bringing back one of her heavy boots and kicked the cognition hard in one of his shins before leaning down so her face met his. "Hmph."

The group exited the room, the door locking behind them. Haru stayed close to Makoto, hiding her face beneath her hat.

When they reached the main floor, Makoto walked over to one of the reception desks. She spoke to the shadow behind the counter, once again taking off her mask. "Hello."

"Little sister-sama..." the shadow stood a little straighter. "We did not know you were coming."

"T-that's right," Makoto also stood a little taller, attempting to affect an air of authority. "I have had some trouble with the patron in room 2303. I will take the matter up with my sister. No one is to enter or leave that room until I say so."

"Yes, of course little sister-sama. We'll post security guards right away."
Makoto returned to the others. Haru was still doing her best to make herself small and not draw attention, which was simple enough given that Futaba was lobbing easily deflected insults at Yusuke. "Well... we've done all we can. I hope it's enough."

"Let's go," said Yusuke. "We've been here too long."

Makoto looked back at the casino. There was still so much about Sis she didn't understand. She felt a pair of arms slip around one of hers. "Come on Mako-chan... we need to leave."

Opening her eyes, Makoto blinked several times to adjust to the brightness. As the table came into focus, she remembered she was in the student council room. It had been so late by the time they regrouped after leaving Sis's Palace, the trains had started running again. She had decided to just go directly to school, an excuse not to face the emptiness of their apartment.

After returning to the rented hideout, Haru had summoned a pair of black sedans. Makoto was glad her friend had gone straight home instead of trying to tough things out further. She didn't like the idea of Haru being alone in her state, but they had to maintain appearances. The new head of Okumura Foods had people to meet, even on a Sunday.

Yusuke had ridden in a separate car with Futaba and Morgana to Yongen-jaya, with the intention of taking the trains from there back to his dormitory. Though the small girl was doing better with strangers, she was no doubt spent after the infiltration. It was best not to push things.

Ryuji and Ann had insisted on escorting Makoto to Aoyama-Itchome before heading back to their own homes. Too many cars would have been suspicious.

Makoto checked her phone. It was already late afternoon. There were several check-in messages from the team... but none from Ren. She was about to write her own when she noticed a message from Futaba already verifying her at-school location. The hacker must have done more to her phone than she thought when they were testing the automatic-Nav app for the operation.

Clicking on the Meta-Nav app, Makoto hovered over the search feature, unsure if she wanted an answer.

"Niijima Sae."

Nothing.

Sis's palace was gone.

Makoto's lips parted. She reminded herself it could mean anything. She had known it would be a waiting game.

There was plenty of work to do. Makoto could keep herself occupied. She looked at the student council paperwork before her, trying to will the energy to process them. Instead, she just kept replaying the night before in her head over and over—the monster Sis's shadow had become, Haru's tears, the police tackling Ren. She tried her phone again. Still nothing.

A stray sheet sticking out of one of the binders caught Makoto's eye. She gave it a light tug and it slipped right out, not attached to the rings. It was her guidance form, the one she was supposed to have filled out months ago. She had put it aside in a fit of frustration after Principal Kobayakawa had once again obliquely threatened not to write her a letter of recommendation. It was mostly filled out, but the "future career" section remained blank.
Makoto thought about the past half year, how she had finally broken free from the narrow path set out before her only to find herself lost when faced with the freedom to choose. She was better for it, that she knew, but the uncertainty was a different kind of obstacle, one she had not prepared for.

When Makoto was young, she had wanted to be a police officer, like Dad... the dream of a child who did not know the meaning of what she said. To a child, the police were a bastion of justice. In reality, the police were an organization that mishandled her father's case. They had not once, but twice, abused their power against the person she loved. They were an amorphous, unwieldy entity, fallible as any other, but granted power that demanded they be more... and yet they weren't. Even if Ren survived, even if the Phantom Thieves were able to take the heart of the one at the center of the conspiracy, would anything change? The mastermind would go to jail. The future of the police would rest on whoever took his or her place. Would it be someone who elicited change or would the void be filled by another who would abuse their power?

Makoto picked up her pencil. She hesitated over the form before slowly and deliberately writing her response.

"Police Commissioner."

Makoto stepped off the train at Shibuya Station and began walking to the next platform. It was a mechanical operation. Her head was with Ren. The news had announced his suicide only an hour beforehand. She had listened intently to what she could find and read every article she could download, checking to see if there was some detail, some piece of information, something, that would indicate to her whether or not it was true. She found nothing.

The Meta-Nav app continued to return no match for Sis. Not one for Ren either. It had been worth a try.

The team was supposed to act naturally. They couldn't draw attention to themselves or they would give the conspiracy an excuse to arrest them. At the same time, they had to seem reasonably upset at the loss of their leader, or else Akechi might realize Ren wasn't really dead... assuming he wasn't really dead. Makoto didn't struggle with the latter.

Attempts to distract herself with her class schedule for Monday failed. Makoto's thoughts were filled with only the Palace, the infiltration... and now more than ever, the thought of Ren's last walk through the underground corridor.

Please be alive.

"Ooph."

A familiar voice. Makoto had walked right into him. She looked up. Akechi Goro.

There was a moment of recognition. For just an instant, Akechi looked almost sad to see her, but then his expression turned to a familiar smug smile. His tone carried an arrogance Makoto hadn't heard in a while. "Hello, Nijima-san."

Chapter End Notes

So many things could be done with cognitive Makoto and Sae's Palace... perhaps in
another fic.

Also, I know some of you had designs on the cognitive Akechi punching bag. I had to give this one to Haru… if anyone deserved it, it was her.

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 Edit 2018/05/03: Thanks to MathAtMidnight on FFnet for edit help!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I can forgive Akechi.

There had been a procedure, a plan. Futaba was going to upload her app. The rest of them were to download it and verify Akechi's location before traveling anywhere. Makoto knew the procedure well—it was of her construction. Yet, here she was, face to face with Akechi Goro himself, because she hadn't remembered her own plan.

"A-Akechi-kun..." It was okay. Makoto just had to be herself minus knowledge of Akechi's involvement with the conspiracy. She just had to keep it short and move on. It was perfectly normal for the Nijima Sae's sister to be conversing with Akechi. It wouldn't attract any unwanted attention to the group.

"You're wearing your uniform. On a Sunday?" Akechi leaned in and whispered. "Or is it you're still wearing it?"

"I had business at school," Makoto said quickly, pressing her hands along her skirt as if doing so would take care of the rumples. How was it that Akechi looked as if he hadn't been up all night too? She was about to continue but checked her tone. She had to keep up the charade. Ren had implored her to view Akechi in another light. She drew from that sympathy when next she spoke, slowing down and speaking softly. "Y-you're... you're also wearing your uniform."

"Ah yes... I have a long evening of media appearances to make," Akechi smiled. "In light of recent events."

Makoto dropped eye contact and worried her lower lip. Please be alive. Both of you. Akechi's gaze fell heavy on her. She wasn't sure if he was dissecting her reactions or just enjoying them. She had to keep her head in the game. It was time to go. "I-I should-"

"Truly, I regret his death," Akechi interrupted, his tone softer. Makoto strained to hear him over the din of the station. "I did not expect he would take his own life. It seems he was not willing to face the justice he often spoke-

Makoto's eyes flashed. She grit her teeth and stared hard at Akechi. "There's no way he would-"

"Shh..." Akechi brought a gloved finger to his lips. His other hand moved to Makoto's upper arm. He coaxed her out of the middle of the walkway, towards a dimly lit wall where a pair of vending machines offered some shielding from the eyes of the passersby. After looking over his shoulder, he turned back to her. His grip tightened. "Nijima-san... you're going to have to realize the Amamiya-kun you thought you knew-"

"No," Makoto said firmly. She paused, bringing a hand over her chest. Think. Even if she didn't know the truth, she wouldn't doubt Ren. "You're wrong. All Ren ever wanted to do was help others."

"That's what he wanted you to believe," Akechi's words were terse. "He used you and all of your friends. Why do you think we haven't picked you up yet?"

Makoto knew the truth. Ren as a sole mastermind was a simpler narrative to sell to the public. She
pressed her lips together. She stood a little taller. Her eyes narrowed. "So it was you."

"Of course. Once I figured it out, I couldn't let him murder again."

"He didn't-

"Are you certain?" Akechi let go of Makoto's arm. He brought a gloved hand to his chin. "Surely you realize he could have gone into the Metaverse without you. Any of you could."

"It doesn't matter. Ren risked his life to-

"Wait," Akechi's eyes widened. A smirk formed across his face. "Don't tell me you were actually changing hearts?"

Makoto looked at Akechi curiously. What was he trying to accomplish? What did it mean for the rest of them? "O-of course. Kamoshida, Madarame, Kaneshiro-"

"And how many of those were you actually involved with?"

"Just Kaneshiro, but-

"I thought you would be more astute than this, Nijima-san..." Akechi tilted his head slightly. "Did it not occur to you that Amamiya-kun was working with Kaneshiro the whole time? That the change of heart was just a ruse? Kaneshiro only started targeting your school when he transferred in. Isn't that suspicious?"

"No. Kaneshiro-" Makoto caught herself. Was Akechi testing his story on her? Was he gathering more facts to twist into half-truths? She wasn't prepared for this. "I... I need to get home."

Akechi caught Makoto's wrist as she began walking away. She turned her head back towards him. "Ah. Forgive me. Perhaps this is all too soon. You must still be in shock over his death," Akechi began. He closed the distance with Makoto, once again standing before her. She tugged with her arm but he didn't let go. She hesitated to act more forcefully, not wanting to cause a scene. "As I said before, I do regret it came to that. I saw the crime scene. It was terrible. He put a bullet through an officer and then through his head."

Your bullets. Makoto looked down, imagining the picture Akechi was trying to paint differently. She felt something cold and sharp from her chest. Please be alive...

"Two very messy deaths," Akechi leaned forward, his voice just above a whisper. "We'll have to wait for the autopsy to know whether it was instantaneous or if either bled out. There was a look of shock in his eyes... perhaps it hadn't gone as he had planned."

Makoto felt something swirling in her stomach, threatening to come out. Don't let him get to you.

"Oh, pardon me again. I forgot you're not used to analyzing crime scenes. Really, I didn't mean to upset you." Akechi brought his other hand to the nape of Makoto's neck.

"What are you...?"

"He used to do this, right?" Akechi's fingers brushed over the bump in her blouse where her necklace lay. "Hmm, what's this?"

With a quick turn of his wrist, Akechi slipped a finger down the neck of Makoto's shirt. He hooked the chain of the necklace in the fold of his digits and yanked hard. Makoto instinctively strained her
neck against the motion, the chain biting into her throat. Her hands followed, Akechi's grip on her wrist letting loose as he focused on his other hand. She clawed at the front of her collar, ineffectually trying to gain purchase.

The chain snapped after a few seconds that seemed to last forever. Akechi brought the broken necklace before him, the ornate pendant dangling in the air. His expression was neutral.

Makoto kept one hand on her throat, breathing heavily. A hoarse question escaped her. "What-

"My hand slipped," was the nonchalant reply. It was an answer both knew was an obvious lie. "My apologies."

Akechi looked more closely at the pendant as it hung from his fingers. There was a strange tension around his eyes that reminded Makoto of Ren. She remembered how happy he had seemed when she had accepted it, how easy-going and joyful his smile had been that day, how bright and clear everything had seemed until... Please be alive.

A chuckle from Akechi broke Makoto's rumination. It progressed into his chest, becoming deeper. "What?"

"Nothing," Akechi tempered his laughter. "It's just... not what I expected. It's not exactly your style."

"Give it back," Makoto held out a hand, palm up.

"Don't look at me like that," Akechi's signature smile had returned. He brought the dangling pendant closer to him. "I'll get it fixed for you. It really was my fault."

"It's fine," Makoto's hand didn't waver.

"I couldn't, not after I was the one who broke it." Akechi looked anything but contrite, his knowing smile still aimed right at Makoto. She told herself to drop the matter and leave as she had tried to before, but...

"Just give it back," Makoto reached for the pendant. Akechi lifted it beyond her grasp.

"Please, let me take care of it," Akechi took out his phone with his other hand and began tapping away with his thumb. "Here, I know a place that specializes in fixing these kinds of mement-

Makoto slapped the phone from Akechi's hand, sending it sliding across the floor, spinning along its center. She hoped he didn't catch her wide-eyed expression, that he couldn't hear the pounding of her heart that was drowning out all sounds in her ears. Akechi had gotten serious. There wasn't enough time to run. She hoped she could play it off as a slip while going for the necklace. She brought her hand to her mouth and tried to look surprised. "Oh! Sorry! I hope the screen isn't cracked... I-I'll get it."

"No worries," Akechi's clenched his teeth through his smile. He swung the necklace, opening his raised hand and then shutting it with the pendant in his palm and the broken chain still laced through his fingers. "I can do it."

Both students went for the phone, both a little too quickly. However, Akechi's long arms found it first. He rose once more, phone in hand and well out of Makoto's reach. She took a deep breath. Akechi looked over the screen at her. His eyes narrowed. "Now where were we?"

"Hey! Are you from Shujin Academy!?" A boy jogged up to them. He had a simple haircut and
wore glasses. Akechi and Makoto both turned and stared. On arriving the boy faced Makoto, balling
his hands into fists and bending his knees. He looked at her expectantly.

"Y-yes." Makoto's eyes darted between the boy and Akechi, unsure what would happen.

"That's one of the schools I'm applying to!" So he was a third year in middle school. He must have
recognized the uniform.

"G-good luck?" Makoto offered.

"Hey, can I ask you about Shujin... you know, what it's like there?"

"Um, o-okay."

"Well, I'll be going then," Akechi sighed, putting his phone back in his pocket.

"Oh, I didn't mean to-" the boy started.

"It's quite alright," Akechi smiled. He waved at Makoto, the necklace still weaving through his
fingers. "We'll talk later, Nijima-san."

Makoto watched as links in the chain caught the lights within the station. She reached out her hand
tentatively but withdrew. As Akechi disappeared she exhaled, closed her eyes, and brought her
hands to her upper arms. She breathed heavily, trying to work the adrenaline out of her system.

"Um... are you alright?"

"Oh," Makoto looked over to the boy. "I'm sorry... it's just... I think I lost something precious."

The boy followed Makoto through Shibuya Station, peppering her with questions about what to
study for the Shujin entrance exam, what restrictions there were on clubs following the volleyball
team incidents, and what most graduates went on to do. The questions were not out of the ordinary.
The fact that he was still following her was. She had taken a few detours in hopes that she could
shake him before he learned what line she took, but he showed no signs of stopping.

"I... I should be getting home," Makoto hoped the boy would take the hint.

"Oh," the boy looked down at his feet for a moment before looking up again. "Um... you're friends
with him right? That stuff they're saying on the news... is it...?"

Makoto's lips parted. It was like everything in the past week hit her at the same time, like her chest
was going to burst. She looked down, her voice wavering. "I don't know."

"I see..." the boy looked away as well. After a few moments, he spoke again. "Hey... you don't look
so good. Maybe you shouldn't go home alone..."

"I'm fine." He seemed like a sweet boy and he seemed to know Ren, but it was best to be cautious.
Makoto smiled. "I'm just a little tired. That's all."

"It's not just that..." the boy looked from side to side before he faced Makoto once more. "You look
like you shouldn't be alone right now. My Dad owns a model shop off Central Street. Untouchable.
Maybe you're familiar with it?"

"Ah. That's where I got my revolver," Makoto said as she moved her hand by her hip, searching for
the phantom weapon.
"Revolver..." the boys eyes widened for a moment. He pressed his lips together and balled one of his hands into a fist. "Anyway, I'm sure he wouldn't mind if we dropped by... especially for one of Ren's-

"I have to get home." Sis might return...

"Then let me come with you," the boy took a step forward. "I can make dinner. I cook for my Dad all the time since it's just the two of us."

Just like me and Sis... It was true she didn't want to be alone... but this boy was a stranger. Makoto offered a polite smile. "Then who will cook for your Dad?"

The boy opened his mouth as if to reply but nothing came out. His jaw clamped shut with just a hint of a pout. He shoved his hands in his pockets and began tapping his foot rapidly. He seemed so earnest. It was hard to imagine he was up to something.

"Well then..." Makoto dipped her head as a farewell gesture and began walking away. It was best not to take any risks. She began to envision herself already at home, sitting on the couch awaiting Sis. Please be alive... Makoto stopped mid-step. Perhaps he was right. She turned back to the boy, putting on her biggest smile. "Why don't we make something for him together?"

The boy rose to full height, his eyes wide and his lips framing a large open-mouthed smile. "Yeah!"

Makoto placed a stack of three plates on the counter. Dinner was almost ready. She and the boy, Kaoru he'd insisted, had stopped by a market near the apartment to purchase ingredients and then proceeded to prepare the meal. They swapped quick school night recipes and shared dreams about being able to contribute more to their families once the studying was behind them and the real work began.

Kaoru's father hadn't yet arrived by the time they were done. Makoto only had a vague recollection from the one time she had visited his shop. Ren had been the one who made the purchase.

Ren...

Makoto forced herself to focus. Having Kaoru over had been a pleasant distraction. She couldn't recall the last time she and Sis had had anyone over. However, even worrying about etiquette was preferable to her other thoughts.

A bell brought Makoto to the door. She opened it, finding Kaoru's father. She didn't know exactly who she had been expecting, but it certainly wasn't the man standing before her. It was as if he had stepped right out of her favorite movies. She stared, feeling a heat coming to her face that she hoped didn't show. She ran her fingers through her hair, wondering just how disheveled it was from her earlier nap. Then she remembered to speak. "H-hi! W-welcome to my..."

The rest of the statement came out in mumbles punctuated by nervous laughter. Why did this have to happen now?

"Pardon my intrusion." Even his voice sounded like that of a hero from one of her movies. Kaoru's father, or rather Iwai-san, stepped inside. Makoto shut the door behind him.

"P-please, take a seat," Makoto gestured towards the table. She tried to tell herself everything was just nerves. She also tried to convince herself to stop writing new movies in her head starring her and Kaoru's Dad. Neither attempts were successful.
"Thank you," Iwai-san smiled. Makoto only stared in response, pretty sure her brain was going to stop and she was actually going to die.

"Dad! Don't intimidate her!" Kaoru tugged on Iwai-san's arm with both hands.

The older Iwai looked sheepish. "I didn't think I was..."

"I-I'll go get dinner." The only thing to do was retreat and regroup.

"I'll help!" Kaoru smiled broadly as he let his now-seated father go. Makoto was thankful for the help. She had forgotten she needed to carry three plates instead of two.

Iwai-san was complimentary of their combined effort. Kaoru looked so happy. Makoto tried to focus on the junior Iwai so as not to make a fool of herself. As the meal progressed, Makoto was able to find some stable ground, answering some of Iwai-san's questions about Shujin Academy. It was stuff a parent might worry about like tuition, class trip dues, and bullying. She tried to answer honestly. Despite some of the more difficult responses, Kaoru remained interested in going. Ren certainly had quite the admirer.

Please be-

"Hey Dad, did you know Makoto has been to our shop before?"

"Oh?" Iwai-san looked up at Makoto.

"Only once," Makoto conceded.

"Did you see anything you liked?"

"Yes," a small smile formed on Makoto's lips. "Ren bought me a model revolver."

Iwai-san's eyes opened a little wider. He grinned. "So you're the revolver, huh?"

"Eh?"

"Ren helps out at the shop sometimes."

Just how many jobs did Ren have?

"In return, I've been teaching him how to do mods. He always gets this little smile on his face when he works with the revolvers, like he's-"

"Dad!" Kaoru interrupted. "Don't tell her that!"

Iwai-san raised an eyebrow in his son's direction, his grin only growing.

Makoto imagined the Ren that Iwai-san described. She brought a hand over her chest, her eyes finding some spot on the table that she wasn't really looking at. Just thinking about him, that gentle expression he would sometimes make, made her feel better, but...

"Sorry," Iwai-san rubbed the back of his neck. "I shouldn't have brought him up."

"N-no," Makoto looked up at her guest across the table before looking down again. "I'd rather k-keep memories like this..."

"Sure... but maybe now isn't the time."
Kaoru stood up. "I'll clear the table."

"Ah." Makoto looked at the empty dishes. "T-thank you. I'll make some more tea."

Makoto followed Kaoru back to the kitchen, carrying the other half of the dishes. Sis would be mortified to know she was letting a guest help, but dinner had been a joint effort. Sis...

"Are you okay?" Kaoru asked. "I know my Dad can be a little intimidating sometimes..."

*Intimidatingly hot.*

Makoto cursed the part of frivolous part of her brain. How could she be thinking these things at a time like this? She quickly uttered a response. "Not at all."

"Sorry about all the embarrassing things he said," Kaoru added, an awkward smile crossing his face. "Though honestly, I kind of like it..."

Makoto only smiled in response. Having placed the dishes in the sink, she began filling a tea kettle. When she was done, Kaoru began rinsing the dishes. Between the sound of running water and the focus on her task, Makoto didn't realize the implications of the sound of her front door opening until she heard a sudden slam of something large hitting their glass table.

"WHO ARE YOU!? WHERE IS MY SISTER!?"

Oh no. Makoto and Kaoru rushed into the dining area. There they found Sis holding Iwai-san against the table, his cheek pressed against the glass and one of his arms twisted behind his back.

"Dad!"

"Sis! Stop! I invited him!" Makoto held her hands up before her, motioning them side to side.

Sis turned from Iwai-san to Makoto and back again several times, her eyes narrowing.

"Th-they helped me with Akechi-" Makoto began to explain.

"Akechi?" Sis's eyes narrowed further. However, she eased her hold on Iwai-san. He rose slowly as she stepped between Makoto and Kaoru. The boy rushed over to his father. Sis placed a hand on Makoto's shoulder, gripping tightly.

"Dad! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Iwai-san looked at his son before glancing over at Sis. "She was going easy on me."

With everyone calming down, herself especially, Makoto took a moment to truly realize her sister had returned. *Sis is okay.* She exhaled slowly and looked up, her vision blurred by watery eyes.

Iwai-san turned back to Kaoru. "I think it's time to go."

The young boy nodded.

As the Iwai family approached the door, Sis called after them. "Um... Thank you! ...For taking care of Makoto."

Iwai-san turned and smiled. "It was our pleasure. You and your partner have raised a fine young woman."
"I don't-"

"Oh? Well then-"

"Dad!" Kaoru's eyes were big. He grabbed one of his father's arms and dragged him the rest of the way out the door.

Once the door was shut, Makoto turned to her sister, wrapping both arms around her. All plans of appearing "adult" in front of Sis vanished in a flood of tears. "Sis..."

Sis pat Makoto on her head. She chuckled softly. "And here I was thinking my little sister had changed so much..."

Makoto continued to hold tight, her shoulders rising with her cries.

"That boy told me so many things... about a world inside people's hearts and the amazing feats of my own sister," Sis's voice was soft and kind.

"I-is he...?"

"He's alive."

"O-oh," Makoto felt the tension melting off her shoulders. She pressed her lips together to try to stop herself from crying, but a new flow of tears toppled over her lashes. "Oh..."

Sis let her cry, gently stroking her head.

"He's... he's a little worse for wear," Sis said hesitantly when Makoto calmed down. "They treated him roughly and shot him full of drugs to make him more pliant."

Makoto opened her eyes wide and took a step back from her sister.

"I don't like it either," Sis frowned, her chin jutting out just a bit. "That they would do that to any suspect, much less a teenager..."

"Will he be okay?"

"I think so. He's through the worst of it and though he was clearly struggling, he was able to finish his story," Sis closed her eyes slowly, her gaze having shifted when she re-opened them. She smiled wistfully. "He was trying so hard to keep your identities secret. He fought against the drugs, steadfastly denying your involvement despite having already used your names. I had more than enough to go on. He was so determined despite looking like he would pass out at any moment."

Makoto brought a hand over her lips. Her tears had slowed but she could feel the coolness on her cheeks where they had fallen.

"Honestly, I still don't understand the other world he was describing, but given his state I can't imagine him making it up," Sis looked at Makoto directly. "Is it true?"

Makoto nodded.

"Then I would like to hear more about it. Will you tell me?" Sis's smile was inviting.

Makoto nodded again. She paused for a moment before speaking. "Um... Sis... can I sleep with you tonight? Like we used to?"
Sis tilted her head, still smiling. "Sure."

Makoto sat up in Sis's bed, animatedly describing the cognitive world and the Phantom Thieves' actions within it. Sis seemed to appreciate the more lucid recounting of events. Lying on her side, her head nested in a pillow, Sis watched Makoto gesture through sleepy but attentive eyes. It was reminiscent of how Sis used to indulge her as a child, listening to her banal tales of elementary school life as if were fascinating. Makoto couldn't remember the last time she had had Sis's full attention.

By the time Makoto caught up to present day in her story, Sis's eyes were falling shut longer than they were staying open. While Makoto had been able to nap earlier, Sis had been on her feet all day, carrying out the final parts of the Phantom Thieves' plan. She had only been able to deliver Ren to Sakura-san shortly before coming home.

Makoto was explaining one of Ren's more impressive Metaverse feats when Sis spoke through a yawn. "You really admire him, don't you?"

"I do," Makoto smiled broadly. "He's kind to everyone and he's really smart and he-"

"That's nice..." Sis's words came out slurred. Her eyes were shut. "Just... just promise me you won't get to close to him... okay?"

"But Sis..." Makoto started as her sister rolled over onto her other side. As soft rumble made it clear she was already asleep.

"It's suspicious! That kid was followin' me!" Ryuji's voice carried down the stairs from LeBlanc's attic. Sakura-san had waved Makoto up. The team was gathering, waiting to see Ren again. Talk of the grisly end of the Phantom Thief had filled the school and though Makoto knew the truth, she couldn't shake her apprehensiveness.

"I didn't see any kid," Ann could also be heard as Makoto ascended the steps. Ann and Morgana were sitting on Ren's bed. Ryuji was to their right, sitting on the stool by the work table. Haru and Futaba were on the couch. Only Yusuke was missing.

"Ryuji thinks some elementary schooler is part of the conspiracy," Futaba said, a hint of amusement in her voice.

"They used Akechi didn't they?" Ryuji argued. "Ain't it weird I'd never seen him at the arcade before? Those gun skills were unreal."

"You're just mad he kicked your butt," Futaba teased.

Makoto decided to stay out of the argument. She walked over to Haru, stopping in front of the table which held the small television. Any evidence of her sadness in the Palace was locked away behind a sweet smile. "Are you okay Haru? You had to see Sugimura yesterday, didn't you?"

"The campaign season meeting was large, so it was easy to get away from him there. I actually ended up chatting with a very nice candidate who still supports the Phantom Thieves."
Before Makoto could question further, the group's attention was drawn to the sounds of someone coming up the stairs. It turned out to be Yusuke. Makoto hoped he didn't notice her disappointment.

"You're slow Inari."

"I finally convinced my classmate to pose for me." Somehow Yusuke's grins always looked a little crazed to Makoto.

"N-nude?" Futaba looked at Yusuke more closely.

"Not yet, but surely this is only the beginning," Yusuke's long arms were raised in a broad gesture.


The team continued to chat about what they had done since the infiltration, mostly focusing on the near uniform response from the public regarding Ren's supposed suicide. While they were pleased that their subterfuge had worked, each found it unsettling.

It wasn't long before Sis arrived. The group descended from the attic and Makoto introduced everyone to her real sister. She was relieved that her friends seemed to be able to separate Sis from her shadow. Sis in turn apologized for her actions over the past several months.

The jingling sound of the bells on the door alerted everyone to Ren and Sakura-san's entrance.

"Look who's here."

The team rushed across the cafe at the sight of their leader. As Sis had warned, there were bruises across his face. When Ryuji brought an arm across his back, Makoto noticed Ren suck in air through his teeth.

Ren turned to each of his teammates as they welcomed him back. It hadn't even been two days, but each minute, each second had been felt. When he finally found Makoto, his lips curved into that smile, the one that seemed to reach in and directly heal her heart. It was a little lopsided this time, limited by the swelling in his left cheek, but it was received nonetheless. Ren took a step towards Makoto and she a step towards him.

Promise me you won't get to close to him...

Makoto paused as she remembered her sister's words. She took a step back. Sis had left so early, she hadn't gotten a chance to talk things out. Ren halted as well, his smile fading and his eyes opening wider. This expression reached into her heart as well, but in a completely different way. She tried to motion towards her sister, hoping to explain what was going on. He turned toward one of the others, burying his look of betrayed confusion.

It was late by the time the group left LeBlanc. The Phantom Thieves had explained the circumstances surrounding Ren's apparent death to Sakura-san and the greater plan which led the team to a possible mastermind, "Shido-san." To their surprise, Sakura-san immediately associated the name with a person, the politician Shido Masayoshi. The conjecture passed Sis's analysis. Apparently Shido was someone who had both the power to manipulate the police and would benefit from the mental shutdowns. The team quickly discovered he had a Palace at the Diet Building and planned to meet there the next day to determine the final keyword and plan their next infiltration.

Sis being supportive of the Phantom Thieves targeting Shido's Palace had been another surprise. Makoto thought her sister would object to her involvement, but she seemed to appreciate the team's
efforts, further vowing to help in her own way.

Everyone rode the same train from Yongen-jaya to Shibuya. Haru spent most of the time asking Sis about what Makoto was like as a child. Makoto tried to remind herself that the things she did as a small child did not reflect poorly upon the present her. It was better to let Haru enjoy herself in light of everything. Furthermore, it gave Makoto an opportunity to message Ren and explain that she hadn't yet informed Sis of their status.

Makoto shivered recalling Ren's bruises, the chaffed skin that peeked out of his sleeves, how gingerly he sat down... Morgana had explained that since these were real world injuries, they couldn't be healed by Metaverse means. She told herself Futaba and Sakura-san would take care of him, but it did little to assuage her guilt. The look he had given her earlier was on repeat in her mind.

Ren had stayed quiet while the rest of them explained the plan. He only spoke in response to others, usually with a light quip. It was as if he was keeping his distance from everyone.

The group parted ways at Shibuya with Ryuji escorting Ann along her line and Haru meeting up with a driver. With Yusuke taking a different line, Makoto and Sis were alone on their connection.

"Um, Sis... you're really alright with me exploring the Metaverse?"

"Well... I worry," Sis turned to look at Makoto. She brought a hand to her younger sister's cheek. "But I also see how far you've come into your own. I was so clouded before. I don't want to stand in your way now. I... I know Dad would be proud."

"Sis..." Makoto felt her lips quiver and her eyes moisten. She clenched her teeth together, determined not to cry.

Sis let her hand drop from Makoto's cheek, instead slipping it around her shoulders. Makoto leaned into her sister, her face forming a big-cheeked, close-lipped smile. When she felt it was safe to do so, she tilted her head so she could see Sis's face and broached the other topic.

"Um... About what you said last night... about not getting close to Ren..."

"Ah. Yes... I'm so glad you understand, it makes things a lot easier," Sis exhaled. Makoto opened her mouth, preparing for an objection she couldn't quite form. Instead, Sis continued speaking. "There are some... legal matters... I can't say anything right now, but..."

"I-I see." Sis seemed so relieved. Makoto wondered what her sister was referring to. Perhaps she planned on re-opening Ren's case? Makoto supposed it would be easier to stay objective if they weren't dating. She didn't want to make things harder for her sister, to be one of those people in Sis's way... which meant her relationship with Ren needed remain secret. Only the team knew anyway.

Would Ren understand? Sis wasn't offering any promises, so Makoto didn't want to get his hopes up by telling him. That meant she had to keep secrets from both of them. It was an awkward position, but necessary if it would help Ren. Still, Makoto couldn't help the nagging feeling that there was something more.

Upon arriving home, Makoto drew the bath. She let her sister go first and checked her phone as she waited. Two messages.

The first message was from Futaba. "I think I messed up. I was telling Ren about how you beat up cognitive Akechi and uh... I think maybe I shouldn't have."
The second message was from Ren. "Meet me at LeBlanc tomorrow after school?"

Chapter End Notes

If the Untouchable visit in chapter 4 had gone differently this could have been a story about Makoto's puppy crush and Ren desperately trying to get her attention. (Has anyone written that fic? I would read that fic…)

Anyway… the return of this fic's primary antagonist! Oh no… and she was doing so well.

While researching this chapter, I noticed everyone can use their phone with gloves on. Akechi can do it in the real world. Either that or there's a lot of off-camera taking off and putting on gloves.

Finally, I broke down and started P5A. I'm a little sad it is near completely inaccessible to anyone not already in love with the game.

Thanks again to MathAtMidnight on FFNet for pointing out some errors!

Originally posted 2018/05/22
I can balance Ren and Sis.

Despite being the tall stunner with the golden hair, a person who certainly stood out, it was Ann who found Makoto on the train, not the other way around. The older girl had managed to find a seat despite the afternoon rush. Her bag weighed heavy on her lap as she read one of her latest library finds.

"Hey Makoto," Ann was standing in front of her friend, somehow having navigated through the crowded car. "Are you going to LeBlanc too?"

"Ann..." Makoto looked up from her book. Ann must not have known that she had made plans with Ren. At least, she thought she had. She agreed to his text the night before and he had been quiet since. On one hand, Makoto desired alone time with Ren. On the other, she wasn't looking forward to explaining her actions to him.

"Oh," Ann's friendly smile fell. She raised one of her hands in front of her mouth. "I'm not interrupting anything am I? It's just..."

Ann looked from side to side. She leaned closer.

"It's just he can't go outside looking like that. It'll attract too much attention," Ann used hushed tones. She raised her bag. "But it's nothing make up can't fix."

"Th-that's a good point," Makoto brought one of her hands to her chin. Ann had such a good head for these things. This was indeed important... her conversation with Ren would have to wait. "Does Ren know you're coming?"

"Oh! I forgot to text him!" Ann was just about to reach for her phone when the train arrived at Yongen-Jaya Station. She looked at the doors and then turned back to Makoto, a nervous smile on her face. "I guess it will just have to be a surprise."

The walk from the station to Café LeBlanc was short. Makoto opened the door to discover her sister sitting at the bar, a small cup of coffee sitting on a saucer before her. In the raised chair to her left sat the woman Makoto recognized as Dr. Takemi. She had an elbow on the counter, propping up her head as she spoke to Sis. Sakura-san was further down the shop, seemingly working on a crossword puzzle.

"I've thought about hiring an assistant, but people trained to handle medical records want the benefits only a bigger employer can provide." When Dr. Takemi finished her sentence, she raised her head in recognition of the two girls. "Two of you? That guinea pig..."

"Sis! I didn't know you would be here," Makoto said as her sister followed Dr. Takemi's gaze to them.

"I had some questions for Sakura-san and then I stayed for coffee," Sis smiled at Makoto and then turned to Dr. Takemi. "This is my little sister Makoto and her friend Takamaki Ann-san."

"We've met," Dr. Takemi stood up. "I don't want to interrupt your reunion..."
"You're not. She lives with me."

"Oh?" The doctor raised an eyebrow. "Just the two of you?"

"That's right."

"Well then..." Dr. Takemi smirked. She turned to Makoto and Ann. "I have to be going. As I told Sakura-san, he'll be fine with rest... and he'll have plenty of time for it as I understand. I left some medicine for the swelling and pain."

Makoto and Ann nodded. The doctor waved at Sakura-san who briefly looked up from his crossword to acknowledge her. She took out a business card, scribbling something on the back with a pen pulled from her white lab coat. Finally, she turned to Sis, presenting the card.

"Starting your own practice does mean you have to do a lot of things yourself, but the freedom to always do what you believe is right is worth it. I'd be happy to talk more."

"I'd like that," Sis responded, accepting the card.

"You can also contact me at that number about the case you're working on," Dr. Takemi pointed to the text in the lower right. She then leaned just a little closer. "My personal number is written on the back..."

With that, Dr. Takemi sauntered out of LeBlanc. When she reached the door, she looked back one last time and smiled at Sis before exiting. Sis continued to stare at the door, lips parted. She then looked down at the handwritten number on the back of the card and smiled. "Huh."

After staring at the business card a few more seconds, Sis turned her attention back to Makoto and Ann. "Headed to the Diet Building?"

"Yes," Makoto answered.

"After we help disguise Ren," Ann added, once again lifting her bag.

"Be careful."

"I will Sis."

"Don't worry about dinner. There's still a lot of work to be done... and I don't want them noticing any change in behavior."

Makoto frowned. What Sis was saying made sense, but...

"It's only for a little while," Sis's voice was gentle.

"Actually," Ann interjected. "I was hoping Makoto could come over since we have tomorrow off."

Makoto looked over at Ann. It was the first she'd heard of it.

Sis's eyes narrowed slightly. "Oh?"

Ann brought her free hand behind her head and laughed nervously. "The truth is, I was hoping to get some help studying."

Sis looked over at Makoto. The younger Niijima raised her hands in front of her. "I-I don't mind. It's kind of nice... hanging out and studying with friends."
"Yes, it is." There was hesitation in Sis's voice, but she appeared to be letting the matter go. She stood up from the counter and headed towards the door. "Have fun. And Sakura-san, thanks again."

After Sis was out of sight, Makoto turned once again to Ann. Before she could ask the question, Ann answered. "You wanted some time alone with him, right?"

"O-oh," Makoto stared wide-eyed at Ann. Had Sis been fooled? She turned briefly to Sakura-san and then back, feeling her cheeks grow hot. "Th-thanks."

"Don't worry about it," Ann's eyes formed crescents. "I'm the one intruding right now..."

"It couldn't be helped..." Makoto swallowed a sigh as she started towards the staircase.

Ren was raising himself into a sitting position on the edge of his bed, Morgana close by, when Makoto stepped into the attic. His hair was more wild than normal—likely he had been laying down beforehand. His face was still mottled with purples and reds, though they had faded somewhat from the night before. Unable to attend school, he dressed casually in blue jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. He looked up. It was as if his eyes were boring into her. Somehow the distance from the stairs to the bed seemed long.

"Makoto..." Ren's lips formed a thin line.

"Um," Ann came up behind Makoto. She looked over at Ren. "Hi."

"Lady Ann!" Morgana hopped off the bed and padded over to the girls. He poked his head down the stairs for a moment before turning back to his teammates. His eyes seemed to shine. "Just the two of you?"

"S-sorry...heh... Surprise?" Ann waggled her fingers in a small wave.

Ren's eyes shifted from Makoto to Ann and back again. He knit his brow and frowned.

"Ann realized your bruises will attract too much attention..." Makoto explained.

"Right, but we can hide it with make up!" Ann finished. "I brought the stuff we use for work."

Ren closed his eyes and exhaled. After a few moments he opened them and gave Ann a brief nod. She crossed the room, pulling out the stool by the work table and sitting in front of Ren. As she began taking out various bottles and brushes, setting them beside Ren, Morgana scampered over to one of her ankles. He looked up, watching both of them intently.

Makoto brought a straightened hand before her chest, a silent sign of apology. Ren didn't acknowledge it. She wanted to sit beside him, to hold his hand, but thought better of it. Instead she took a seat on the couch. A small container of pills was on the table in front of the old gaming console, still sealed. Makoto picked it up. "You haven't used these yet?"

Ren shook his head. "I can't afford to be drowsy in Shido's Palace."

"Oh." Makoto looked down at her knees.

Having finished preparing, Ann took Ren's chin in one of her hands. The other held a dollop of foundation. "Now pay attention so you can do this on your own until you're fully healed... you too Morgana."

"Whatever you say Lady Ann!"
Ann proceeded slowly, explaining each action she took. Realizing that neither Ren nor Morgana could do so themselves, Makoto began taking notes on her phone to send to them later. It would probably only show for a few more days, but Ren seemed eager, more so that normal, to take on the Palace. He squirmed in Ann's hands a few times, but for the most part things went smoothly.

"We should get going," Makoto said after Ann was finished. She checked her phone. "I don't see Akechi along our route, but it will be less conspicuous if we leave first."

"Add a hoodie to further hide your face," Ann suggested. She moved her hands behind her back and looked away from Ren. "And um... don't mention this to Ryuji, okay? It would remind him-"

"Right," Ren said evenly. "Thank you."

Ann responded with a small smile before heading down the stairs. As she neared the bottom, Makoto spoke to Ren. "We'll talk after, okay?"

Ren gave a shallow nod. Makoto waited a few more moments, wondering if there was more she should say. He continued to hold her gaze without giving a sense of what he expected. She shifted her eyes away and then turned and left the attic.

Ren burst from the train, taking long swift strides towards LeBlanc. His lips were pressed together. One hand gripped the strap of his bag and the other was balled into a fist by his side. Makoto followed behind with Futaba who was struggling to keep up.

The trip to the Diet Building had not gone well. The Phantom Thieves were at a loss as to the form of Shido's distortion. When they started to attract attention, they decided to adjourn and try again the next day after requesting the advice of Sis and Sakura-san.

Ren let the door to LeBlanc swing wide. Makoto managed to catch it just in time, ensuring that it came to a gentle close. Seeing Sakura-san's less-than-amused expression, she decided to stay back as Futaba joined them at the other end of the restaurant. She didn't want to interrupt a family gathering.

Sakura-san caught Ren by the arm as he tried to pass en route to the stairs. He didn't say anything, only raised an eyebrow at the boy.

"S-sorry..." Ren muttered.

Sakura-san opened his mouth to begin speaking. However, just then the television switched to a news report on Shido Masayoshi. Everyone turned to look. Sakura-san walked over to the set and increased the volume before stepping back so everyone could see.

It was more of the same. Shido appeared a pillar and it seemed only their small group knew of his hypocrisy. Messages on the group chat indicated similar disgust as the rest of the team appeared to also be watching. Makoto listened carefully, hoping for some inspiration about his distortion. None came.

When the segment ended, Ren turned sharply and marched up the stairs to his room. Sakura-san watched, only turning back to the others once he had disappeared. He spoke to Futaba. "Why don't you head back now? I'll catch up."

Futaba looked back at Makoto and then turned again toward Sakura-san and nodded. Makoto stepped out of her way as she exited before walking along the booths towards the attic. Sakura-san met her by the far end of the counter.
"He's going to say some things he'll regret later. Don't take it personally, okay?" Sakura-san folded his arms. "He's been sleeping fitfully... had to check on him several times throughout the day, it sounded so bad."

"Boss should trust me to come get him if something really goes wrong," said Morgana from his perch atop one of the high chairs by the counter.

"Did he just say something?"

"He said he'll come get you if it's bad," Makoto translated.

Sakura-san scratched the back of his head, elbow jutting out in the air. "Futaba said the same thing... I just can't get used to expecting so much out of a cat."

"I'm not a cat!"

"He says he's not a cat."

Sakura-san grinned. "I can't get used to that either."

Morgana's ears twitched.

"Um," Makoto brought her hand to her chin. "Can I borrow a bowl and a towel... something I can use to clean off the make up?"

"Bottom cabinet to the left for the bowl, underneath the counter for the towels," Sakura-san gestured.

"Th-thanks."

"I'll leave a window cracked if something comes up," Sakura-san said to Morgana.

"As if I need help with an infiltration!"

Makoto laughed nervously, deciding she would leave that one untranslated.

"Good night Sakura-san."

"Good night."

After Sakura-san left, Makoto went to work finding the materials she had requested. Upon finding them, she filled the bowl halfway with hot water.

"This should do it," Makoto turned to Morgana. "Um... if you don't mind...?"

"I'm fine here for the time being."

"Thanks."

Makoto carefully carried the bowl up the stairs, the small towel draped over one of her forearms. She watched as the water swished near the edges. Somehow she managed not to spill. When she reached the attic, she found Ren sitting at the edge of his bed, hunched over with his elbows resting on his legs, hands clasped together. He had changed into knits, a black shirt and olive pants.

"Don't you need to go run back to your sister?" Ren looked at Makoto over his hands. There was a wavering edge to his voice.
"I know it's not ideal, but I can't tell my sister yet..." Makoto looked into the bowl, watching the water catch the light as it had yet to still. "Things are a little complicated..."

"When are they not complicated when it comes to her?" The edge in Ren's tone no longer wavered. Makoto took a deep breath. She placed the bowl by the space heater. Perhaps it had been optimistic to think she would be using it so soon.

"It's great, right? You can go visit your favorite place, her Palace." Ren nearly spat that one.

Makoto closed her eyes, reminding herself of how Ren looked earlier in the afternoon.

He's trying to pick a fight. He doesn't know what to do with what he's feeling.

"You were supposed to keep the team safe. You lied to me."

Makoto twitched. On the tip of her tongue was a harshly worded reminder to Ren that he was part of that very team that she was trying to keep safe, that she only agreed to escape with everyone after the plan had failed, which it hadn't.

He's wounded. It's the hurt talking. The frustration... the loneliness... Makoto cringed. That last one was her doing.

From Ren's point of view, perhaps it did seem like a lie. It was regrettable. Makoto drew upon that regret, that sadness about the situation, to face him openly. She spoke as slowly and as calmly as she could, reminding herself with each word she chose. "I made what I thought was the best decision at the time."

A bitter laugh escaped Ren's lips. His hands parted, balling into fists by his thighs. "And the answer was taking everyone into the most dangerous Palace we've seen? So you could have your little beat down on Akechi?"

Patience.

"We didn't fight a single shadow," Makoto kept her voice soft. The edges of her eyes felt heavy. "We came prepared. We stuck to the mission."

"The mission that you kept secret from me. " Ren didn't let up.

"Th-that was wrong of me," Makoto looked at an empty spot on the floor. She breathed deeply before facing him again. "I didn't want to worry you. I'm sorry. I should have trusted you more."

"I should have trusted you less." Ren's tone had been hard enough for Makoto to navigate. This one cut with meaning. She stepped back, rocking towards her newly moved foot. For just a moment his expression softened, but quickly his eyebrows tensed and he continued. "I should have known you would just slide back into recklessly picking needless fights."

Makoto walked over to the couch where she had left her bag earlier in the day, not needing to take it with her to the Diet Building. She unzipped it and took out a small stack of books. She let them go a few millimeters from the work table. The sound of them landing punctuating her action.

"These are the books I've been reading on strategy and tactics," Makoto took out another stack and let them fall on top of the first. "These ones are about leading teams."
Makoto started another pile.

"These are about managing crisis situations."

Another stack landed with a thud.

"These are about covert operations," Makoto watched as Ren eyed the spines. "And it's not just books. I've been observing those around me, including you. I carefully analyzed the situation. I took input from the rest of the team. I know I acted impulsively in the past, but not. this. time."

Ren's focus shifted away from Makoto. He looked like he was searching for the next retort.

He's running out of fuel.

Ren grit his teeth. "Why do you always have to do such risky things?"

"Because sometimes those are the things that must be done," Makoto's voice was just loud enough to reach Ren. She walked over to the bed and sat beside him, placing her hand over his. He didn't pull away. She leaned forward, trying to get a look at his eyes under his hair. "I'm doing my best to mitigate it. I'm only going to get better. I want you to see that."

Ren seemed to finally break at the contact. He looked down at her hand and then back at her face, his expression more sad than angry. He inhaled and pursed his lips, as if trying to summon a fit he no longer had energy for.

Makoto waited.

Ren hesitantly brought his other hand to the back of her head, cupping it as he moved his forehead to meet hers. So close, it was apparent his breathing was labored and he was shaking. After a few more deep breaths, he gripped her upper arms and moved his head to her shoulder.

Makoto exhaled. She lifted one of her hands, running it through his hair in even strokes. She didn't go further, not wanting to aggravate his injuries. She waited until he seemed to have calmed down as much as he could given his state. "It must really hurt."

Ren nodded into Makoto's shoulder. She felt his brow scrunching against her.

"Let's get this make up washed off of you, so you can sleep."

Ren paused, his lips pressed together and his pupils casting from one side to the next. He released Makoto. She walked over to the table with the television, picking up the container of pills. Ren's eyes opened in recognition. She must have forgotten about them. She tossed them to him.

As Ren took the medicine, Makoto retrieved the bowl and towel. The water hadn't yet become cold. It was worth saving if possible. She returned to the bed, picking up the liquid soap Ann had left with the rest of the cosmetics. She sat down, legs drawn up under her, and wet the towel, bringing it to Ren's face. "Let me know if it's too cold or if it hurts..."

Ren nodded. Makoto began dabbing and running the towel along his cheeks as lightly as she could. The white cloth became smeared with flesh tones. Ren's true face emerged, covered in red and purple blotches. There were puffy circles under his eyes. When she was done, she set the bowl down on the floor. Ren seemed to have calmed down even further. Perhaps the medicine had kicked in. Perhaps he could get some rest.

Makoto brought her hand up to Ren's cheek, but paused. She retracted her hand. "You should
sleep."

Ren immediately brought his hand over Makoto's, holding it firm against the bed. He looked up at her, his eyes big and questioning. His lips parted, but a moment later he let his head droop, leaving Makoto with only a view of his long lashes.

"I-I can stay..." Makoto offered.

Ren snapped back, searching her face. He squinted slightly. "Please..."

Makoto nodded. She reminded herself to smile. "I won't leave you."

A little bit of that familiar sparkle returned to Ren's eyes.

Convincing Ren that she was perfectly fine sleeping on the floor had been a brief and much less emotionally charged argument. Makoto noted that doing it any other way would be for pointless social constructs rather than practicality. There wasn't really much difference between the bedding she had retrieved and his mattress, but any extra comfort she wanted him to have given his injuries.

Both sat on the floor spreading out the guest futon. Apparently the boys sometimes spent the night so he had one ready. The mechanics of staying over were dealt with simply enough. The implications were something Makoto was avoiding bringing up.

It wasn't like Makoto planned to do anything that one might consider scandalous. Ren wasn't in any condition even if she wanted to. She knew that. She supposed Ren also knew she knew that, which was why he didn't bring it up either.

"Makoto..." Ren began. The space between his eyebrows tensed. He was frowning. "I'm sorry about earlier. I shouldn't have-"

"It's fine," Makoto interrupted. She mirrored his expression. "I'm sorry I-"

"No it's not fine," Ren said adamantly. "I shouldn't have taken everything out on you. It's not your fault... the police... the Palace..."

"We'll figure out the Palace. If I have to, I'll read an entire dictionary into the phone."

"I don't doubt that..." Ren chuckled before adopting a more serious tone. "I don't know why... this one, more than any of the others..."

"I understand," Makoto's eyes narrowed. Her hands balled into fists. "After all he's done..."

"Yeah... but there's something else..." Ren grimaced. "Something just out of my reach."

"Maybe it will come in the morning."

"Are you telling me to go to bed?" Ren's lips curled into an amused smile.

"I believe I am," Makoto grinned.

"It's early."

"You need it. I'll... I'll get a little reading done first."

Ren looked over at the stacks of books sitting on his work table. "You're studying all of that to help
"Some of them," said Makoto. "The newer ones, the ones about leadership... those are for the future. I... I think I found what I want to do."

"Oh?"

"I want to join the police."

"Like your father?"

"Yes... and no. I want to be the kind of police officer he was—just, dedicated, and kind," Makoto held her hand to her heart, remembering how noble Dad looked when he left for work in the mornings. "However, even more than that, I want the police to be like I remember Dad... not like the ones who are working for Shido, not like the ones who..."

Makoto reached across the bedding, the tips of her fingers just grazing Ren's cheek. He brought his hand up, lacing his fingers through her outstretched ones.

"I'm going to follow the leadership track and head towards police commissioner. That's what I'm preparing for," said Makoto. She was looking directly at Ren and yet through him as well, to a future she was just beginning to envision. "When I get there, and along the way, I'm going to need to be able to foster that place, those people... to create the police I believed in as a child."

Makoto felt something reverberate within her, like a strong heartbeat. She gasped. Ren squeezed her hand and nodded, smiling encouragingly. Did he know? It was like stretching after a long sleep only it wasn't just her muscles, but somehow Johanna too, even though they weren't in the Metaverse. In her mind, Johanna was re-configuring, adjusting herself beyond her bike form. Makoto found herself staring up at a god. The persona pulled back her casing and opened her eyes. Makoto knew her name. "Anat."

Sensing something light moving across her cheek, Makoto awoke from her slumber. She was surprised to find Ren's face across from her own, his hand brushing away a stray hair. They were laying on their sides, facing each other. He was below the covers, she above them. His other hand was intertwined with hers in the space between their heads. Morgana was curled up between them at chest level, the book she had been reading not far from his paw.

How had she gotten here? She remembered holding Ren's hand as he fell asleep, staying with him as she read in case he stirred. She remembered Morgana joining her at some point, strangely enthusiastic about her having gotten him to sleep. She remembered idly running her fingers through his hair, content in seeing his restful expression. The plan had been to eventually adjourn to the floor, but apparently she never made it. Was he okay? Had she bumped one of his wounds?

Ren smiled, looking into Makoto's eyes. He finished brushing aside her hair and then moved his hand along her cheek. "Did I wake you?"

"It's okay..." Makoto bit her lip. "I-I shouldn't be here... crowding your space I mean."

"I like it." Ren leaned in towards Makoto, his eyes briefly shifting to her lips. He stopped abruptly, looking further down and finding he had run into Morgana. The cat shifted but didn't appear to wake up. The parts of Ren's face that weren't already discolored became so.

He was too cute. Makoto smiled. She let go of Ren's hand and began propping herself up. "I should get home and change before everyone gets here."
Ren started to shift under the covers. He looked like he was about to get up as well.

"Rest. It's early yet," Makoto put her feet on the ground but maintained eye contact with Ren. Preparing herself for her next statement, she felt her face become pink as well. "I'll expect you to finish what you were about to do next time we're alone..."

"Diamond Mine," said Haru after taking a deep breath, as if saying it with more force would somehow make it work.

"...No good," Makoto looked down at the Meta-Nav app. Reading out of the dictionary was beginning to look like the only option. Makoto was sitting in one of LeBlanc's booths with Ryuji, Haru, and Ann. Futaba was looking over her shoulder from the neighboring booth. As Sis had joined their brainstorming session, Ren was keeping his distance. Everyone was looking pretty defeated.

"Boss, can you turn the TV on?" Ryuji called over. "Shido might be on it."

"Sure thing," Sojiro pulled a remote out from under the counter.

It wasn't Shido that appeared on screen however, but Akechi. Makoto thought back to their last encounter, where he had very nearly forced her into Mementos. She inhaled sharply. "Akechi Goro...!"

"Him and his stupid, composed face!" Futaba's eyes narrowed and her cheeks puffed.

The voice of the interviewer came through the small TV set's speakers. "...then, was it also your plan when you said they weren't at fault after their popularity declined?"

"That was to catch them off guard," Akechi's smooth manner of speaking was charming the television host. "I could say I applied my profiling knowledge. Once they lost public support, someone they thought was their greatest enemy lent a hand... That's the same strategy used in romance, wouldn't you agree?"

"Why is he being treated as an ace detective of justice!?" Haru let her composed veneer drop. Indeed it was hard to imagine how he had everyone fooled.

The group continued to discuss Akechi's dominance in the media until Yusuke reminded them that Shido was their true target. They went back to discussing what to do about the wall they had hit with the keywords. Recalling their difficulty in finding Futaba's keywords, the group considered asking Shido directly, but no one, not even Sis, had that kind of access. Furthermore, Shido was aware of the Metaverse, making approaching him extra risky.

Distracted by their discussion of Shido, the team didn't notice the increasing noise from outside until Sakura-san pointed it out. "What's with the ruckus outside?"

"Isn't that an election-campaign car?" said Sis.

Now listening carefully, the group made out the announcement. "I apologize for the commotion! I am Masayoshi Shido!"

"Wait, did he just say, Shido!?" Ryuji squirmed in his seat.

"Yeah, he did!" Ann confirmed.

Makoto noticed Morgana twitching out of the corner of her eye. She followed his gaze to Ren, who
looked as though he was experiencing a bad headache. He moved one hand to his face. Though he had been looking better, perhaps he still wasn't up to all of this. She didn't think she could talk him out of it however.

"Man, talk about bein' lucky!" Ryuji was on his feet. "We can go check him out without an appointment now!"

Makoto stepped out of Ryuji's way. Soon he and Haru were out the door. By the time the rest of the team was outside, the two of them were rounding out the alley. Ren followed next. Makoto was about to do so as well when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Too many of us will attract attention," said Yusuke. He shifted his eyes back toward the cafe, tilting his head ever so slightly. Sis. Yusuke's assessment was correct on both counts.

It was evening by the time everyone left LeBlanc. When Ren, Haru, and Ryuji returned from the campaign speech, the group learned that Ren had recognized Shido as the one who initially falsely accused him, the whole reason he had a record and had to transfer to Shujin. The realization re-energized the team. United against Shido, they decided to try again at the Diet Building the next day.

Sis had also explained to them the legal realities of trying to get Ren's conviction overturned. Her analysis did not leave much room for hope. Makoto brought a hand to her chin. If Sis wasn't working on Ren's case, then what was she doing and why didn't she approve of-

Makoto's thoughts were interrupted by the sensation of Ren's hand at the small of her back.

"Let's go upstairs."

"Um... about Shido..." Makoto scrutinized Ren's face. It had clearly been a shock to discover the man behind the incident. Sis's words must have surely been a disappointment as well.

"Thanks but... I need some time to process it on my own first," Ren put a little more pressure on Makoto's back. "Come on."

Makoto nodded, following Ren. He took her hand as they began to ascend, reminding her of how much she already missed their lunchtime meetings. She thought about how his faked death meant he was also limited in movement, separating him from the freedom of the outdoors and its limitless sky.

When they reached the middle of the attic living space, having left Morgana down in the café, Ren pulled Makoto to him. One of his arms wrapped around her waist, his other hand further up her back. He looked down at her, wearing a cocky smile. She had missed that as well. "You wanted me to finish what I started this morning?"

"I-I'm not hurting you am I?" Makoto asked. They were pressed very close, her arms resting on his chest.

"It's fine."

"Then..." Makoto noted the pleasant acceleration of her heartbeat. "Yes."

Makoto craned her neck up as Ren leaned down. Their lips met, full and soft and wet and most of all urgent. Had it really been only a few days? A tightness Makoto hadn't realized she had been holding in her chest seemed to dissipate. Despite all that was happening, all that had happened, at least something, a very important something, was just right.
Ren ran his hand up Makoto's back. She felt his fingers pressing in all the places she stored stress. He brushed against the muscles connecting her shoulders to her neck, back and forth, and-

Suddenly Ren stopped. Makoto couldn't focus on his face, they were still so close. In quick motions, he patted around the back of her neck, as if there was something strange there.

"What's going on?"

Ren stepped back, simultaneously gripping Makoto by her upper arms and shoving her in the opposite direction. He let go, letting his hands fall to his sides. It was hard not to feel rejected, though somehow it was Ren who sounded rejected. "You're not wearing the necklace anymore."

"Akechi stole it," Makoto watched Ren's eyes grow wide. "Right before he-"

"I'll get you another." Ren turned and began walking towards the stairs. "Wait here."

"What? It's too late to go to Yokohama," Makoto caught Ren by the wrist. He sucked in air through his teeth. *The cuffs!* Makoto let go, mentally kicking herself. "S-sorry... but, you don't know if-"

"I only need to go to Shibuya."

"Shibuya? Where...?"

Ren didn't move or say anything for just a little too long. "I got it from one of the street vendors there."

Makoto brought her hand over the spot where the pendant used to fall. She recalled it being higher quality than she would expect from a man selling things out of a briefcase.

"There's one who seems to have an affinity for goods that are powerful in the Metaverse," Ren said slowly. It was as if he had anticipated her question.

Makoto supposed it wasn't the most surprising aspect of the Metaverse. Was this why he spent so much time in that one alley? Was he waiting for this one street vendor? Why did he let her believe he got it in Chinatown?

"You don't know if that vendor is even there today. Even if it's just Shibuya, it's still late," Makoto took a step closer. Ren took a step back. It had been a long day for Ren, one that involved finding the man that changed the trajectory of his life. She didn't want him overdoing it, especially for something that didn't even carry the same memories. "It... it wouldn't be the same anyway."

"I'm sure he's there," Ren once again turned towards the stairs. Makoto stepped in front of him.

"Even if it's the same design, it's not the same one," Makoto put a hand in front of Ren's chest, a few centimeters away, trying to stop him. He looked down at her hand, his brow knit and his lips pressed together. It was strange. "Why are you doing this?"

Ren looked away.

Makoto took a deep breath and reminded herself he wasn't at 100%. It wasn't the only thing that wasn't right though. *Think.* "Ren... just what did that necklace do?"

There was no response.

"Ren."
"It blocks hama attacks."

Makoto sighed, smiling at Ren. "That's... very sweet... but Akechi can use curse skills too... so let's-"

"It wasn't to protect you from Akechi," Ren lifted his head, speaking directly to Makoto. "It was to protect you from me."

Oh.

"I know you already apologized, that you think it's no big deal," the words started rapidly spilling from Ren's mouth. "That it's easy to revive people in the Metaverse, but-

"No. Wait. I... I think I understand now." Makoto took a single step towards Ren. This time, he didn't step back. "When I was trying to come up with a plan, a way to trick Akechi, I considered letting him kill you in the Metaverse and reviving you when he left... but I just couldn't stomach it. I couldn't stand the thought of being part of that... I..."

Makoto hesitantly brought a hand towards his cheek, resting it near his jawline where the skin wasn't discolored or puffy. She opened her eyes wider as if to form an invisible bridge with his. "I think I understand better now. I-I think I can listen better now."

Ren's gaze shifted between Makoto's eyes and the place on her chest where the pendant should have been. His lips trembled. He breathed deeply.

"Let's sit down," Makoto let go of Ren's face, taking his hand instead and leading him to the couch. They sat side by side, their linked hands resting on one of Ren's legs. She tentatively leaned against him, focusing on his reactions for any signs she had found a bruise.

They sat silently. Makoto waited until she felt like their breathing was calm and in synch. "I'll wear another, if you want..."

Ren let go of Makoto's hand. He lifted his arm back around her. He brought his other across. His hands clasped together at her waist. "Stay with me."

Makoto stiffened slightly. There were classes the next day. Sis might come home. There was no longer a ready excuse in Ann. Ren pulled her closer. She answered, her voice just above a whisper. "Okay."

Chapter End Notes

For those of you playing at home, the pendant was shaped like a hua khon.

Originally Posted 06/04/2018 #MakotoMonday
We should be able to work out all our differences.

Ryuji led the way through Shido’s massive cruise ship, Makoto next behind him. Over her time with the Phantom Thieves, he had gotten more and more difficult to keep pace with. To make matters worse, she was fairly certain he considered his current speed rather "leisurely."

Shido’s Palace was huge, much larger than even Okumura's. It was filled with evil adults, or cognitions of them at least. Some of them blurred the line between cognition and shadow. Those were the ones they had to look out for.

The team had traversed grand ballrooms, high class cocktail lounges, and a massive on deck pool. Presently they appeared to be in some sort of maze of hallways and drawing rooms. Makoto wondered if drawing rooms were a common occurrence on cruise ships. It didn't seem likely.

Crossing the threshold of yet another drawing room, Makoto was hit with a sudden bout of something like seasickness, distracting her from-

Oh no.

Makoto stopped. The furniture, the doors... all comically huge. Several body lengths ahead of her stood a giant rat wearing Ryuji's mask. He looked equally unnerved... or at least what Makoto thought an unnerved rat would looked like.

Not this again.

No shadows were detected... so how?

Wait.

Makoto twisted around as quickly as she could, staring back into the hallway from which they had emerged. Yusuke was standing just outside, a wide open-mouthed grin spread across his face. He must have been going through a growth spurt the past half year as he looked much bigger and taller than she remembered from the last time this happened. She swore his eyes were shining through his kitsune mask.

Oh no oh no oh no.

Makoto needed to run, yet she couldn't seem to figure out how. Her heart was beating furiously and yet her body wouldn't budge. She just continued to stare up at Yusuke, unable to move.

"My inspir-RAT-tion!" Yusuke exclaimed, following up with a deep chuckle. He raised his hands, fingers outstretched. Makoto knew what would come next. Her little mouse body shook but her hind paws were stuck firmly in place.

Just as Yusuke lunged for Makoto, Ren lunged for Yusuke. "Hey! Don't-"

The two boys collided, falling forward. In an instant their forms were replaced by rats. They hit the ground tumbling. Before Makoto fully realized what was going on, she was struck in the torso by the
rolling mass of rats. "Squeak!"

Everything was spinning. Makoto felt another impact, again something warm. While it slowed her progress, she still continued to tumble, ineffectually waggling her little mouse limbs and twisting her torso in hopes of gaining purchase. Another wave of nausea passed over her. A low rumbling sound could be heard nearby. She shut her eyes tight, trying to regain her sense of orientation.

Makoto opened her eyes when she was fairly sure she had stopped. Ren, human Ren, was above her, his hands pressed against the rug on either side of her. She realized she was on her back. Their legs were tangled together. He was looking at her, wearing a kind smile. She lifted one of her hands and ran it along his cheek. There was something very calming about him being back to his old self, now that the worst of his injuries were behind him and the team was making progress in stopping Shido.

"Are you okay?" Ren asked. He continued to support himself with his arms, but they were straining. They were pressed very close. He shifted his legs, but couldn't seem to find a better position. His face reddened. "Um... sorry..."

"It's quite alright," Makoto said, her voice sounding lighter than she remembered it. She felt a pleasant warmth reaching her cheeks. She wouldn't mind if later, when they were alone, they-

"No it's not..." Ryuji groaned. Makoto felt something shift below her. Shoulder blades? "You guys are heavy."

"This is pre-PAW-sterous!" Yusuke's voice came from somewhere above, followed by a throaty laugh.

Makoto looked away from Ren. It wasn't just the two of them... Yusuke was splayed on across Ren's lower back at an offset angle, his knees bent allowing his feet to touch the floor. Both he and Ren beneath him shook with the artist's low chuckling. As she dissected the nest of legs, she picked out a knee pad that belonged to Ryuji. She shifted her focus away from their pile, noticing Ann, Futaba, and Morgana running over.

"Ugh, that pun. Go to hell, Inari," Futaba put her hands on her hips and leaned over, attempting to stare down Yusuke. His laughs had yet to subside.

Haru appeared from the entryway and walked over to the group. She tilted her head into one of her hands. "Oh my."

"Noir!" Ann turned to Haru. "Where were you?"

"I noticed a switch in the other room," Haru's eyes made crescents as she smiled.

"That must have been what caused the statue to move," said Futaba. "It seems like people who Shido views as intruders turn into mice near those Shido statues."

"Can we please get a hand?" Ryuji's voice was strained.

"Yes, please," Makoto echoed.

"Are you sure, Mako-chan?" Haru leaned down towards Makoto, her cheeks made plump and rosy by her amused expression. "It looks like you're having a lot of fun..."

Makoto's face exploded in red as Haru giggled softly.
The dining table in the Niijima apartment was set for two. Sis's favorites were already plated and waiting her arrival. It would be the first time Sis was able to have dinner with Makoto since the disappearance of her Palace. It had to be perfect and as far as Makoto could tell, it was. She snapped a picture and sent it to Ren.

A response came near instantaneously. "I'm jealous."

Makoto rolled her eyes and smirked at her phone.

Sis entered a few minutes later. She placed her briefcase down by the door. She looked at Makoto, then to the table, then back to Makoto again and smiled. "I'm home."

"Welcome home!" Makoto nearly hopped as she responded.

The two sisters sat down and began eating. After a few bites, Sis looked up. "I've missed this."

"Is it cooked well?" Makoto leaned in, her eyes darting between Sis and the spread on her plate.

"Just like I remember," Sis's modest smile was encouraging. "That's not all that I meant though."

"O-oh... y-yeah," Makoto tilted her head down and bit down a smile. If she could crystallize Sis's words, her sent feelings, into a keepsake, Makoto would carry it with her always.

When their plates were mostly empty, Sis started speaking again. "How have you been? It seems like you go out more frequently and don't return until it's quite late. A few times I've-"

"Ah... well, exams are coming up and everyone needs help," Makoto mentally kicked herself for being a little too eager. She found enough of a morsel on her plate to feign eating. Though she had prepared explanations, it was always hard to lie to Sis. "And Shido's Palace is much larger than we anticipated, so it's taking more time."

Sis continued to look at Makoto, not saying anything. Makoto reminded herself not to add any extraneous information, not to ramble. That's where Sis would trip people up. It would be hard to keep the truth from Sis. She needed to settle the matter on her own terms first. Makoto was about to transition the subject when Sis moved on.

"Actually, there are rumblings in the department," Sis said in a low voice, as if speaking were dangerous even in their own home. "People are starting to whisper about Boy A's accomplices. I think they're laying the groundwork to come after the rest of you."

Makoto drew in her lips, worrying them against her teeth.

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"They may want to keep the story alive through the election," Sis continued. Her tone was serious. She sat up straight and faced Makoto directly, like she was giving a report. "Or, they may be cleaning up loose ends. Right now, it seems to just be testing the waters. Judging by the way they act around me, they don't seem to be spreading your identities... yet. You may not have until the election."

Makoto was briefly taken aback by Sis's demeanor. Her professional self had always been intimidating. Then, Makoto realized. Sis is treating me as an equal. She in turn sat a little taller and gave a firm nod. "Thank you. I'll pass this along."

Sis returned the nod. She then relaxed her posture. It was still more prim than most people, but Makoto could tell the difference. When she spoke, her voice was softer and more inviting. "And... be careful."
"Always." Makoto closed her eyes and dipped her head as she smiled. It was short-lived though. The uncertainty crept up to her face. Sis was treating her as an equal. She had to tell Sis the truth. "Um, about Ren-

"Even with Shido's confession it will be tough," Sis's tone this time fell somewhere between professional and relaxed. "Given that he's mostly carried out his probation, many judges will consider it an unnecessary burden to conduct another hearing."

Makoto knit her brow. Sis had said the same at Leblanc. Was it too late for Ren? She pushed the thought aside, wanting to settle the matter of their relationship. "Actually Sis-

"I know it's disappointing. It... it isn't just," Sis looked down at her plate and shoved an uneaten clump of rice around with her chopsticks. She took a deliberate breath and faced her little sister again. "Makoto... I'm thinking of leaving the SIU... no, prosecution as a whole... after this case. I want to see Shido's prosecution through, but afterwards I want to go into private practice. Things... well, it will be a little tight at first-"

"Sis..." Makoto smiled. "That's... really great. I'd love to hear more."

Makoto stood before a large pot in Café Leblanc, stirring evenly. Ren was moving throughout the kitchen, preparing the various ingredients that went into said pot. Watching him work was always a treat. He was skillful, handsome, and most of all looked so earnestly happy. Whenever he looked up and their eyes met, she noticed he stood a little taller. She wished she could introduce him to Sis... she had failed to set the record straight once again, getting too wrapped up in Sis's discussion about her big career move. It was so nice to have Sis open up to her, she hadn't wanted to interrupt further.

The issue of the conspiracy's renewed interest in the Phantom Thieves also weighed on Makoto's mind. She had passed along Sis's information in the group chat. It changed little about their plan—Ren was already pushing the team to steal Shido's treasure as soon as possible. The only reason they hadn't gone to the Palace earlier in the day was that they had already gone several days in a row. The risk due to fatigue was deemed too great. Makoto brought her free hand to her chin. It seemed wrong to do nothing in light of Sis's warning.

A pair of arms wrapped around Makoto. Warm. Gentle. Secure. She breathed in deeply, leaning back into Ren's chest. Muscles she didn't know she had tensed relaxed into him. He cupped the hand she was using to grip the wooden spoon, guiding her motions as he spoke. "Like this."

"I know how to stir a pot," Makoto punctuated the statement with a small breath of a laugh.

"Yeah but..." Ren held her closer, his lips finding their way through the curtain of her hair. His words came out garbled against her skin. "Can we pretend that you don't?"

Ren nipped at the zipper pull of her shirt, pulling it down and planting kisses on the freshly exposed skin. Makoto's breath hitched as each one explored a little lower and lingered a little longer than the last. A shot of adrenaline came with each one. It was new territory for the both of them. She nearly let go of the spoon, but Ren's hand closed around hers, keeping it in place. However, they were on the ground floor of LeBlanc. "R-Ren! Th-the windows!"

"They can't see us all the way back here." Ren's mumbled into Makoto's back. His breath felt hot despite her own rushing blood and the heat of the stove. She leaned back into him, wanting more, but kept her shoulders up and tight, her instinct to hide from the potential discovery of someone walking by the café. Unsure what to do or how to respond, a high-pitched whimper escaped her throat. Ren let go of her. "Okay..."
"S-sorry," Makoto stuttered as Ren zipped up her shirt, with his hand this time.

"Don't be." Ren leaned next to Makoto, landing a small peck on her cheek. As he withdrew, he spoke softly. "I should have-

"I l-liked it," Makoto brought her hand up to her neck where Ren had begun. Though she was sure her face was embarrassingly flushed, she turned it towards him, meeting his eyes. "I liked that you did it... but next time upstairs, okay?"

Ren simply grinned in response, small creases forming at the corners of his eyes, and returned to the vegetables he left on the counter.

The time spent cooking went by fast. Soon the couple was sitting in one of the LeBlanc booths, used but mostly empty plates before them. Ren was still finishing the last of his sizable portion. Makoto wondered if it tasted better this time because she got to help, albeit only in the stirring, or because the previous time she had been more nervous. She leaned against Ren's shoulder, clasping his free hand with both of hers, waiting for him to finish.

The couple was interrupted by the sounds of both of their phones vibrating. It could only mean team business. Makoto pulled out hers and read the message out loud. It was Ryuji. He informed everyone that Akechi was on television. Ren walked over to the set, turned it on, and then returned to the booth. Makoto narrowed her eyes as the detective prince vowed to capture the rest of the Phantom Thieves. She wondered how many of them he planned to turn into a spectacle and how many he just meant to quietly kill.

Ren wrapped his arms around Makoto. "The fastest way to stop Akechi is to steal Shido's heart."

"The change of heart will take time... Akechi could use the Metaverse to silence him."

"We won't let that happen," Ren pressed his lips together. He looked down. "It won't be like before..."

"Lingering in a crumbling Palace is dangerous," Makoto shook her head. "And there's still Mementos."

"We've never found a non-distorted person in Mementos." Ren's hold on her tightened and not in a comforting way.

"Hnn." Makoto's mumble was vaguely positive, but non-committal. She thought of all the people entering the trains. Weren't they undistorted? Perhaps they were out of reach... Nothing was done to Kaneshiro after all, but he seemed not to know much of the conspiracy going on at levels above him. She looked over to Ren.

Be angry.

"Without Shido, he may have no need to continue..." Ren returned to watching the boy on the TV screen. "Did your sister mention anything about how they might handle his case?"

"I-I think she's focused on Shido right now." Makoto looked down at the table. She thought back to the conversation Futaba had recorded. Akechi sounded like he cared about his false image and status just as much as Shido did.

Be angry at him for his crimes, for what he's done to all of us.

"I'm worried he might get swept in with the adults... perhaps your sister could..." Ren paused, letting
the sentence hang. It seemed he didn't have a solution either.

*Be angry at him for how's he's treated me. You're my boyfriend, right?*

Makoto drew her shoulders in, crossing her arms over herself. She tried to find the right words, but they all sounded so small and petty.

"Hey," Ren coaxed at her with one of his shoulders. He turned away from the television, looking at her. "Are you alright?"

*But...*

"Y-yeah," Makoto said quietly, continuing to look down. "It's nothing."

Ren leaned forward, into Makoto's line of sight. "What is it?"

"I'm just feeling a little uneasy. That's all." Makoto tried to smile. In retrospect she wasn't sure she actually did. She pulled her arms in closer.

*Why can't you be angry? As angry as I am?*

Ren held Makoto's gaze a little longer. When she didn't say anything, he let go of her and slipped out of the booth. "I have something for you. Wait here."

*But...*

Makoto watched Ren disappear up the stairs into the attic.

*But I love you for being kind, for working so hard to save others...*

Makoto sighed and got up, taking the dishes with her to the sink. Perhaps she couldn't have it both ways. She had her hand on the faucet handle, ready to start washing, when Ren returned. He was carrying a simple lidded box in his hands. He looked at her, his expression reminiscent of the last time he gave her a gift. She absentmindedly brought her hand to where the pendant of her necklace used to fall. However, the box was far too big to-

"It's not a necklace," Ren's eyes dropped from Makoto's face to the box. "I..."

The box seemed to shake in Ren's hands.

"It was wrong of me... I didn't understand what I..." Ren pressed his lips together tightly. He breathed deeply through his nose before facing Makoto once more. His next words were calm and even, his eyes wide open. "This is more befitting my heroine of justice."

Ren pushed the box forward, tilting his head slightly with a sheepish smile. Makoto grasped the lid with both hands, her pinky fingers brushing against Ren's thumbs. She looked at him once more. He nodded, shifting himself closer still.

Makoto lifted the lid. Inside, laying atop a shallow gray pillow, was a model revolver cast in deep red. Light reflected off the sleek metal. Makoto placed the box lid on the counter. She looked at Ren again. He once again nodded. She lifted the revolver out of the box, appreciating its weight, the way it fit in her hand. The unique coloring reminded her not only of childhood heroes, but of Ren, the gloves he wore in the Metaverse. The revolver was of her. The color was of him. Her lips parted. Just holding it made her feel stronger, more confident.

"Do you like it?" Ren swallowed.
Makoto looked up at Ren. "I love it."

Five letters of introduction. Five more pieces of Shido's conspiracy revealed. Some easy enough. Some not so much. Makoto looked over at Haru. The young company president kept her eyes pointed forward as the team raced back towards the treasure.

In fact, everyone was looking forward—which was why it was only Makoto who caught Ren's sudden stop. He spun, his coattails flaring behind him. As Makoto turned to match, she heard the hard twang of something heavy hitting metal.

Akechi Goro, clad in his princely Metaverse garb, was down on one knee. A stylish landing. Their ruse was up. "Long time no see."

The rest of the team had all outpaced Ren and thus were standing behind him after their about face. Akechi looked only at Ren, his lips down-turned, tension through his forehead and around his eyes. Makoto shifted her vision to the others. They appeared as on edge as she felt. The team had never faced Akechi head on.

"Under different circumstances, we could have been great rivals..." Akechi's voice remained smooth. "Or perhaps even friends."

"It's not too late," Ren reached out. Makoto could only see the back of his head, but as inviting as his tone was, she could hear an undercurrent of regret.

Akechi's response was to laugh. It was a cruel laugh. His face contorted. All the times Akechi had antagonized Makoto, he had kept his fake smile. This was different. This was malicious. This was hysterical. This was... weak.

"...And so, your heart is always free. The exact opposite of mine."

Makoto made eye contact with the rest of the team. Ann gave a brief nod. Ryuji furrowed his brow. The others saw it too.

"Akechi!" Makoto called out. He turned to her, pressing the center of his lips together and narrowing his eyes, as if he resented the interruption. "Why are you cooperating with someone like Shido!? Don't you see what this Palace looks like!? His true nature is—"

"Cooperating...? What are you talking about?" Akechi mocked her. "All this is to make Masayoshi Shido... my father... acknowledge me. Then exact revenge on him."

Your father? Acknowledge you?

Akechi's life story spilled from him along with the totality of his vengeful plan. Buried in his scattershot ranting was a recurring idea, a requirement of Shido's acknowledgement. The others interrupted at times but his eyes never left Ren. Did he crave Ren's acknowledgement too?

All this time, he's been-

"I'll tell you about my true power... while you die."

Two shadows appeared beside Akechi, followed by a persona. However, it wasn't Robin Hood, but something more sinister. It was striped in black and white with an eerie red glow. Where Robin Hood had been barrel-chested and strong like a super hero, this one was thin and crooked.
"Even the feeblest existence can gain tremendous power once the chains on its heart are broken."
Akechi's statement was a warning.

Makoto's eyes went wide. Akechi could summon shadows. Akechi could control shadows. Akechi could cause shadows to go berserk.

*Akechi used this power on the shadows of real people!*

"Kill them!"

The shadows, ash-colored versions of Byakko and Cu Chulainn, attacked with tremendous force... but nothing else. It did not take long for the team to vanquish them. The Phantom Thieves looked to each other, confusion evident. Was it some sort of trick?

Akechi's response was a condescending snort. "Of course I didn't expect you to be defeated by them. I wouldn't give up my chance to massacre you with my own two hands!"

Robin Hood's manifestation spurred the team to action. Prometheus formed around Futaba, taking to the air. Makoto and Anat stepped between them and Akechi. Haru and a new persona stepped in front of Makoto, deepening their defense. Haru's guard would allow Makoto to fully focus on healing and protecting their teammates in the fray.

Akechi's true use of Robin Hood was on another level. It almost seemed like the two could act independently. Was this the skill of someone with years of experience?

While his focus remained on Ren—his light sword crashing again and again against Ren's knife—Akechi had no difficulty parrying Yusuke and dodging Ryuji simultaneously. Ann and Morgana were finding their spells blocked or countered by Robin Hood. The unbalanced nature of the fight allowed the persona to use devastating area skills, forcing Haru and Makoto to continuously fortify the team's defenses.

A powerful almighty attack scattered the team. So Akechi was capable of that as well. The detective prince dashed towards Ren, his sword coming down in a powerful strike. Ren managed to lift his knife in time, bracing it with his left hand against the dull side, his crouching position putting him at a disadvantage. He grit his teeth as Akechi put even more force into his blade.

"You really think you're better than me?" Akechi smirked. He pulled something out of his uniform, dangling it before Ren. The gold pendant glistened in the light cast by Robin Hood. Ren knit his eyebrows, his mouth forming a thin line.

Makoto looked around. She had to do something. The rest of the team were still getting to their feet. Robin Hood's attack had hit hard. Morgana and Ryuji had been flung not too far from where she stood. Ann and Yusuke were across the room. "Mona! Switch with me!"

The monster cat lifted his head off the ground and nodded. He ran over, giving Makoto a high-five before taking position between Haru and Prometheus. "I'll protect you Oracle!"

Makoto met up with Ryuji who had just gotten on his feet. He appeared to be shaking off the effects of the megidolaon. Leaning over to hear her speak, he grunted an affirmation, not once taking his eyes off of Ren, Akechi, and further behind them, Ann.

Ren pushed Akechi's light sword away just long enough to tumble out of its range, the blade slashing into the ground where he had been moments before. Akechi turned to follow but Yusuke jumped between them. The two boys had vastly different sword styles but unlike earlier in the fight, Akechi hadn't managed to knock Yusuke back. Similarly, Ann and Hecate were cutting off Robin Hood.
From the way Ann grit her teeth and the sweat dripping from Yusuke's brow, it was clear it wouldn't last long. At least Akechi was starting to appear winded as well. Makoto took the opportunity to get to Ren.

"I have an idea," Makoto opened her hand, revealing a circular wafer with a small cross. She shifted her eyes and tilted her head, directing Ren's attention towards the rest of the area. By the way he set his jaw, she knew he wasn't completely comfortable with the plan. "We know it's safe. I'll do it. You don't have to do anything."

Ren took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "No, let me do it."

"Are you sure?" Makoto reached towards Ren's face, but pulled back.

"Mm," Ren gave a terse nod. "Go."

Makoto nodded as well before she dashed away, taking a wide arc around Akechi and Yusuke. She kept low to the ground, her arms at her side.

"Dominion," Ren called. An angel clad in flowing white and gold vestments carrying golden scales and a thick tome appeared next to him. His gaze remained fixed on Akechi.

Yusuke had apparently heard the call. He briefly shifted his pupils in Ren's direction and then jumped back, clearing the area around the detective prince. Akechi turned to see the persona. He looked at Ren and smirked.

A pillar of light rose from the ground beneath Akechi's feet. Seals swirled around him. Akechi's smirk grew into a laugh. "Is this your answer? You really are stubborn. You know that can't-"

Akechi's eyes went wide and he spun around, right in time for Makoto's fist to connect with the left of his jaw and Ryuji's staff to hit him square across the chest. Akechi fell backward, the seals spinning around him fluttering down as they vanished into the ether. He brought his left arm before him, clutching his ribs. Robin Hood faded.

"I can't believe that worked," Ryuji rested his weapon across his shoulders, his hands curling over the pole at his wrists. "He ain't so smart."

Makoto kept her stance, watching Akechi closely. With Robin Hood no longer a threat, Ann joined the circle around Akechi, holding her whip ready. Yusuke, Haru, Morgana, and even Futaba followed cautiously. Ren walked around the others, coming to a stop right before their foe.

"Damn it..." Akechi muttered through clenched teeth. "I'll kill you... You're all gonna die..."

"Will you please stop?!" Ann's exasperation carried through her voice. "We both hate the same guy! Why do we have to go against each other?"

"This ain't about what Shido says!" Ryuji took a step closer to Ann. "You're your own person!"

Makoto continued to watch Akechi. His expression remained defiant and yet there was something else...

"...You don't really hate Joker, do you?" Morgana's plain manner of speaking contrasted with Ann and Ryuji's earlier approach. "Follow your true feelings... even if you think people hate you or don't want you around, that's-"

Akechi's eyes opened wide though his brows were narrowed. He fumed. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!
Teammates!? Friends!? To hell with that!

Makoto's lips parted. He's trying to pick a fight. He doesn't know what to do with what he's feeling.

"Why am I inferior to you!?” Akechi's chin jutted in Ren's direction. "I was extremely particular about my life, my grades, my public image, so someone would want me around!"

Makoto's eyes widened. He's wounded. It's the hurt talking. The frustration... the loneliness...

"But you... you're just some criminal trash living in an attic!" Akechi's yells sounded like they were straining his throat. "So how...!? How does someone like you have things I don't!?

All this time... was this your true face? Your entire life... everything you aimed to accomplish... lashing out...

A hint of a crease formed between Makoto's brows.

What a waste...

Ren placed a gloved palm against the flood door, staring up as if to ask it to open, to reveal a person Futaba had confirmed was already gone. He looked down at the palm of his other hand. Akechi had slipped through his fingers... through all of their fingers. Despite their past grievances, despite the mask that confirmed he was the one in black, the team truly had not wanted him to die.

You can't save some people from themselves... Ryuji couldn't have predicted the double meaning his words would take.

Perhaps the former track star was thinking the same thing. He walked over to Ren, coming to a stop a couple steps behind him. He reached his hand towards their leader's shoulder, before pulling it back and frowning.

The rest of the team looked to one another, no one knowing what to say.

Ren turned around slowly. He lifted his head. He was barely audible over the sounds of the ship's machinery. "Thank you... for trying to-

Closing his eyes, Ren shook his head. He made another attempt. "Your words..."

"We wouldn't have it any other way." Haru sometimes spoke with a silencing gravity. It reminded Makoto that she was in the presence of the head of one of the largest businesses in Japan. That gravity was much appreciated given the current situation. It commanded even more weight coming from someone who had so recently experienced loss at the hands of Akechi.

"We should go," Makoto nearly swallowed the words. "We're too vulnerable right now. He wanted us to-"

Ren nodded, then looked to Ryuji. "Let's go."

Makoto watched as most of the team headed up the metal stairs, led by Ryuji and Morgana with Futaba bringing up the rear. Ren took a step forward but stopped, turning back again to look at the door. She walked over to him, taking the hand hanging by his side in both of hers. "We have to go."

Ren looked down at their hands and then turned to Makoto. "I..."

"I know," Makoto lifted one of her hands, running it through Ren's hair in even motions. They had
said they would keep infiltrations professional, but she told herself this was a special case. When he still didn't move on his own, she squeezed his hand, slipping her fingers between his and leading him to the stairs. "We can't stay here. It's dangerous. We're already too far from the others."

As Makoto took the first step in the set of stairs, Ren stopped and looked back once again. He raised his mask, allowing him to bring his free hand to the bridge of his nose. He pressed his head down into his fingers. "It's the third time... the third person I failed to-"

"We did what we could," Makoto ran a hand across Ren's cheek, coaxing him to face her. "You couldn't have predicted-"

"That man-"

"I know," Makoto let her words sit longer this time. She tugged at Ren's hand. "Come on. Let's get to a safe room at least."

Ren opened his mouth as if to protest but then simply nodded. He walked alongside Makoto, not letting go of her hand.

Ren held his face in his hands, his mask laying next to him. Makoto sat on his other side. They shared a chaise lounge in the suite-styled safe room. They sat a little too close, her hand on his knee, but no one said anything. Ann, Ryuji, and Morgana were resting in the big plush chairs by the table, quiet for once. Futaba lay on her stomach on one of the beds, typing away on her laptop. Yusuke and Haru sat on the bed across from hers. Haru was staring out the large porthole, watching the sunken city as they floated past. Yusuke held a pen above his open sketchbook but never made contact with the page.

"We were so close..." Ren's voice was muffled by coat cuffs. He lifted his head, placing one of his newly freed hands over Makoto's. "Just a little longer, a little more, and he might have trusted us enough to..."

"That cognition was probably a fail-safe." Makoto's voice was low. Shido's control over his own Palace was remarkable.

"I should have said something more." Ren continued to stare forward, not really looking at anything. "Maybe if we'd been faster-"

"It's not your fault," Makoto said as fast as the words would come out. She turned to him but he didn't meet her gaze.

"I know," Ren sighed. His eyelids drooped a little more. "I know..."

The silence hung long enough to become uncomfortable. Makoto searched for something to say. When Haru's father died, most of the team had been initially been distracted by confusion and surprise. This time everyone could see what had truly transpired. Somehow, it didn't make it easier to find peace.

"You... you never liked him, did you?" Ren sounded more sad than accusatory, but it was a delicate question nonetheless.

"I didn't," Makoto let the statement stand. There was a slight downward turn in Ren's lips.

Sorry Ren. I never had cozy coffee conversations with him like you did. The only Akechi I knew...
Makoto turned away, eyes locked on her knees. She thought back to everything Akechi had revealed to them, about himself, his identity, his actions... it was logical to feel sorry for him but everything he had done, everything he had *chosen* to do... Makoto balled her free hand into a tight fist and grit her teeth.

Ren continued to stare out over the room. His voice was low and direct. "Did you think he couldn't be-"

"I don't know," Makoto let her hand go slack. "So much has happened. Where you are... I'm not there yet. I don't know if I ever will be..."

*Even if Akechi was Shido's victim as well... whenever he was around I...*

"Mm," Ren grunted an acknowledgement.

"But that doesn't mean I don't care about how you feel towards him." Makoto brought her hand across her body, covering Ren's, sandwiching his hand between both of hers. She looked to him, trying to decipher his expression. He turned to her and gave a shallow nod. He opened his mouth but then paused, his eyes shifting away.

After a time, Ren raised his head and looked around the room. Makoto followed, finding everyone was still keeping to themselves. Finally, he stood up. "It's time to move."

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is probably going to be even more late than this one. I have a lot of real life obligations that preclude writing at the moment. My apologies.

Thanks to RyanoftheAbyss for pointing out a typo!
Makoto pored through Ren's notebooks, mentally verifying that the facts and concepts were as she remembered them, double-checking the math. It was hard not to get distracted with Ren himself reading over her shoulder, his arms wrapped around her as she sat in his crossed legs. The attic where he lived was drafty, especially on the bed right next to the windows, but huddled together, a blanket loosely enveloping them, Makoto felt a warmth that permeated more than just her body.

Delivering Ren's schoolwork and giving him feedback on his notes had become routine in the quiet, murky days of December—a convenient excuse for Makoto to visit regularly. She didn't want to leave him alone for too long. An idle mind wandered to dark places, to people who had not been saved. With time and Shido's Palace behind them, he seemed to have come to accept what happened. He was optimistic for the change of heart, enough that he was devoting himself to preparations for his return to school.

"Impeccable as I've come to expect," Makoto snapped the notebook shut and grinned as she turned towards Ren. She could barely make out a bit of his jaw, they were so close, but she could sense him smiling. Shido's shadow recognizing him, apologizing to him, must have meant a lot. He never said anything but-

"I wouldn't want our student council president to waste her time tutoring me when we could be studying other subjects." Makoto could feel the vibrations of Ren's chuckle against her back. She felt a tug at the zipper of her blouse.

Makoto's grin widened as she rolled her eyes. She twisted around and playfully shoved Ren with both hands. He let himself fall back onto his elbows, looking back up at her with a smirk. She leaned over, propping herself with one hand on the bed and clasping the zipper pull of his hoodie between the thumb and forefinger of the other. Looking into his eyes, she softly spoke. "You're not the only one with zippers you know."

Ren raised an eyebrow, his right cheek bunching as his lips raised further. Makoto shifted back a little, his expression throwing her off. She felt color coming to her cheeks. His smirk only increased. Taking it as a challenge, Makoto pursed her lips together and pulled down on the zipper while keeping her eyes locked with Ren's. As the two sides of his hoodie were disconnected, she brought herself up, sitting on her knees and his thighs. She flicked each flap of fabric away from him and stared down at his bare chest. There she lingered, unable to look away.

By the time Makoto returned her gaze to Ren's face, he was no longer smirking. Instead, his head was turned to the side, his lips were parted slightly and there was an obvious pink flush to his skin. He must have noticed her as his pupils shifted to meet hers, a question of what was to come. It was this moment that Makoto realized she didn't know what was to come. It was unfamiliar territory. Had she just stripped a boy? And then leered at him? She felt her face, her neck, and all the way through her chest getting hot with embarrassment. "S-sor-"

The apology was interrupted by the sound of Ren's laughter. Makoto narrowed her eyes and made an exaggerated frown. It wasn't like he knew what he was doing either. He only seemed to chuckle more. She took a deep breath and smiled at Ren. She leaned over, once again propping herself up on
one hand. Her other hand found its way to his face, nudging him to face her, tracing her fingertips across his lips before meeting them with her own. A light peck followed by a small nibble took the place of questions as they both tried to find their way in. Makoto's chest swelled when they did, the warm, wet sensation both comforting and thrilling, familiar and fantastic. It both rippled over her skin and spread outward from her core.

Makoto's free hand fell from Ren's jaw and began tracing its way down Ren's chest. His skin felt hot against her hand. Her fingers traveled over the bumps and crevices formed by his muscles. When she passed his navel, she felt him inhale sharply. He grasped the wrist of her supporting arm with his nearby hand. She stopped her motion and broke from their kiss. He shifted his legs, adjusting where she pressed against him. He was breathing heavily and his face was all the more flushed. She peered down at him, her eyes large with an unspoken question. He seemed to notice as he smiled broadly.

"I..." Ren began but paused. His eyes wandered as if he was thinking deeply about what to say.

"M-maybe it would be okay if we didn't wait..." Makoto brought her hand up against Ren's cheek. She let herself lean down further, closing the space she had been exploring earlier. Feeling his warmth against hers was always comforting.

They had both agreed that waiting until things were officially settled with Shido would be best, but now Makoto wondered if that was so. The logic had been wanting the timing and well... everything... to be better. Could there ever be a perfect time though? The act itself would be imperfect. It would take some experimentation, just like everything leading up to it, she was sure.

Ren tugged on Makoto's wrist and lifted himself just enough to reach her lips again. Joined, he let himself recede, taking Makoto with him. He nudged her supporting arm further until she let it free and then he lowered himself from his elbows. She wasn't sure of his answer yet, but was confident they would work it out together.

"The one who controlled the hearts of others and gave rise to the countless victims... is myself."

Makoto felt Ren's grip on her hand tighten. She was turned around in one of LeBlanc's booths, facing the small television. Ren was standing next to her, eyes fixed on the screen. The rest of the team, along with Sis and Sakura-san, were also packed into the café, watching.

Though Shido's shadow had confessed and apologized to Ren, they couldn't be sure until now—the real Shido was confessing to everything on national broadcast. It had come too late for the election, his victory just having been announced, but the truth had been revealed. Justice was sure to come swiftly.

Makoto looked up at Ren. He looked down at her. They shared a smile. Finally, things had been set right.

The door to the Niijima home opened with swift precision. From where she stood by the recently set dining table, Makoto recognized the tell-tale sound. It was the first time since her sister's Palace existed. Her hand moved to her phone. She hovered, her fingers grazing it, before squeezing it and letting it go. Things were fine now. There was no need to worry.

Sis emerged from the hallway, a stern expression plain on her face. Makoto was thankful it wasn't directed at her. "Sis... are you okay?"

"No one will agree to testify." Sis took a deep breath, releasing it sharply through her nose. "I knew
his co-conspirators would want to prop him up as long as possible, but I expected at least a few of the underlings would turn. Even the ones who weren't involved are too afraid to even talk to me!"

"Then..." Makoto looked at her sister with wide eyes. "What's going to happen?"

Sis slammed her palm on the table. She sucked in air through her teeth before sitting down. "I don't know. Right now it looks like they're going to decline my petition to try Shido."

"But he confessed," Makoto blinked several times, clutching the back of one of the dining room chairs.

"I've gathered all the evidence I can but it's so little. They're completely stonewalling me. I just don't have access," Sis spoke more softly. She held her forehead with one hand. This time the sigh that escaped her was barely audible. "If... if I had the public behind me, maybe, but there's no support for it. Shido's people are too media savvy. It's only been a few days, but no one seems to care anymore..."

Makoto didn't know what to say. She pulled out the chair she was holding and sat down. Both women looked down at their dinner plates, quietly thinking. Eventually, Sis picked up her chopsticks and started eating. Makoto followed.

When they were nearly finished, Sis spoke. "Amamiya-kun returned to school, didn't he? Second semester exams should be happening about now..."

"Yes. Today was the last day." Makoto thought back to her morning commute. She had helped Ren review. He had missed a lot of class, but he was a quick study. It was so nice having him back, resuming their lunchtime meetings on the roof. She looked down at the remains of dinner and smiled to herself. "Um, actually Sis, about Ren-"

Sis stood up abruptly. Her voice was loud, business-like. "Good. Can you gather everyone together at LeBlanc tomorrow evening?"

"O-okay," Makoto's jaw hung. "Why?"

"I... I need to talk to them," Sis's tone softened. "There are still some things I need to sort out. I'll know for sure tomorrow."

"Okay Sis," Makoto brought her hand to her chest. "Um, about-"

"I need to go back to the office," Sis spun on her heels and headed towards the door. She stopped momentarily, looking over her shoulder at Makoto, offering a pleasant smile. "I have to sort this out by tomorrow night after all, right?"

The final escalators brought the team to a vast cavern lined from floor to ceiling with train platforms. Linked cars extended back, vanishing into tunnels, while people flooded out them, forming queues before small arched entryways that glowed red in the darkness. At the center, through a canopy of giant bones, was a grand door. It also glowed an eerie red, making it seem like a giant angry face ready to swallow them.

Makoto had told herself that the Mementos depths would be even more unsettling than what they had encountered before, but a part of her had clung to the hope that it wouldn't be. She cursed that part of herself as she clenched her teeth and tried to curb her imagination's fearful constructions.

All previous times it had been enough to steal the heart of just one person. Shido had proved it
wouldn't be enough now, though he was in no state to celebrate his victory. The machine behind him had both the full power of the media and the inertia of the status quo. Thus, society's cognition had ignored the truth they had revealed. Changing the heart of even the prime minister-elect was insufficient to achieve the justice they sought. Sis had fought valiantly through official channels but come up short. What remained was to change society's cognition the Phantom Thieves way—by stealing the treasure of Mementos, the Palace formed from the joint cognition of the people.

"I'm with you," Ren whispered as he walked past, leading the team to the door. Makoto tilted her head down to hide the small smile forming as her teammates caught up. She wasn't alone. She had to remember that. It mattered.

Behind the door was a giant pit. Feeding into it were the vines of red that had crept along the walls of prior floors. They plunged down far, beyond their view.

The cognitive people continued to move towards glowing passageways, like insects attracted by the light. The Phantom Thieves took a different route. This was still an infiltration after all.

Hexagonal pillars made up surfaces of the Mementos depths, forming floors, walls, and even stairs. They were deep charcoal in color with the same glimmering red veins of the barriers they had run into earlier.

Coming into a cove of pillars, it was clear there was more. Raised platforms surrounded by iron bars held masses of cognitive people.

"Hm!? What is this place...?" Futaba voiced. "Are those... chains on them? ...Is this a prison!?!"

Makoto shifted her gaze to the cognitions' feet. She thought she saw Ren shudder as he did the same. Each cognitive person was shackled to a large iron ball.

Ren approached one of the mass cells. Makoto kept behind him, watching. He had lived under the threat of jail for so long. Seeing all of those people like this...

"They're saying something..." said Haru.

"C'mon, don't be out there and come on in," one of the cognitions beckoned.

"Don't open the cells, OK?" asked another. "I have no intention of leaving this place..."

Makoto opened her eyes, fighting her desire to remain comfortably asleep. The first thing she noticed was that everything seemed blue—a strangely saturated and bright indigo despite the dim indoor lighting. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again. The blue was still there. She was leaning against a wall in a small, oblong room. How she had managed to sleep standing up, she did not know. The walls were all the same: windowless, upholstered, blue... save for one. To her right, a wall was missing. In its place were iron bars.

Is this a prison?
How did I get here?

Makoto's eyes widened and she stood straight up. The last thing she remembered was turning to Morgana for answers as her friends dissolved into otherworldly embers. Had he? Had Ren?

They had been returned to Shibuya by the Holy Grail, the treasure turned god at the core of Mementos. Giant bones, like the ones adorning their route into the depths, had grown over the city. It
had started raining a strange red liquid. The scene had been sickening and yet the people had carried on without paying notice. What had the god said? That the Phantom Thieves had disappeared from the public cognition and thus they had no place in the fusion with reality it had created. Makoto clawed at her jacket sleeves, remembering the sinking sensation of disappearing, how insignificant all her actions felt as she watched her own hand fade from existence. How had she miscalculated so badly? What had they done to the world?

Turning towards the bars, all Makoto could see was a dark hallway made of large stone blocks. A call for... anyone really... was at the tip of her tongue. She opened her lips but all that escaped was a sigh. She stepped back to the wall, leaning against it once again. There was a tugging feeling that she should be reaching out, gathering intelligence but at the same time an equal pull to just close in on herself. She needed a plan, not just for escaping, but for the Holy Grail as well. It was like a large chasm stood between Makoto and her next step. She drew her arms in more, increasing the pressure on her chest, and frowned.

Footsteps broke Makoto out of her thoughts. How long had it been? She had been getting no where, the same plans spinning in her head. When she ran into a dead end with one idea, she picked another trying to chip away at its flaws only to end up with a more complicated route to the same defeat. The entire time every thought was like fighting the grasp of a vast ocean's undertow. It was all fruitless, wasn't it?

The footsteps came closer. Makoto looked up.

Ren.

Makoto felt a rush in her chest. He was okay. It was him, right? Not an illusion? She squinted into the darkness. No... not Ren...

"Joker!" Makoto pushed back from the wall to greet him. Unlike her, he had regained his Phantom Thief costume. Of course. Of course... Ren could do anything. Makoto was time and time again grateful of that fact. "You're safe...!"

But...

"Why have you remained in your Phantom Thief attire while I am back in regular clothes?" Makoto bit her lip and turned away. "Could this mean that the will of rebellion is no longer within me...?"

Makoto felt heat rising to her face. How could she so easily give up? And yet.. it seemed there was nothing she could do. She returned to her spot against the wall. Her hand squeezed her opposite wrist. She pressed her lips together, furrowing her brow.

"We have to fight that Holy Grail again, correct? Could you imagine defeating it, Joker...?" Makoto gripped her wrist even tighter. She bit down on her lower lip, hard enough she wondered if she could draw blood. "I... No matter which way I approach the subject in my head, nothing points to our victory."

"I don't know..." was Ren's response. Even if it held no answers, or maybe in part because it held no answers, his voice seemed to make it easier to stand up, to keep going. He was doing so. Perhaps Makoto could too. The dragging sensation seemed to slip from her, little by little. She stared at the wall before her, not yet ready to meet his face.

Perhaps... perhaps this wasn't entirely about the Holy Grail.

"I think I finally, genuinely understand the pain my father and sister were burdened with... Victory
against a single criminal is meaningless... The true enemy is society itself." All of Makoto's preparations to reform the police seemed insignificant compared to the scale of what she was truly up against. "I don't know what to do..."

"I'll be here for you."

"Joker..." Makoto met Ren's eyes. They were open and clear, giving her all of his attention. She wasn't in this alone. She looked down, a bashful smile forming. "...You're right. It's a bad habit of mine. The more critical the situation, the less I want to rely on others..."

Makoto stepped forward, took a deep breath, and pressed her lips together. "Even if there is no clear solution, I'll just have to make one... with my own two hands."

Blue flames engulfed Makoto. No heat came. It was more like a strong gust of wind. She stretched her hands, feeling the gloves strain on her fingers. She looked back at Ren, finding the bars to her cell gone. She smiled as she walked to him. He returned her smile, holding firm to her gaze, and spoke. "Let's go."

A small girl with the face of a porcelain doll, Lavenza she called herself, explained the truth behind the Metaverse and all their work as Phantom Thieves. Central to her thesis were the origins of the being known as the Holy Grail and the cruel game it had drawn both Ren and Akechi into. Behind her, seated at a lacquered dark wood table, was an old balding man with a long nose and wild eyes. His said his name was Igor. He referred to the place they were in as the Velvet Room.

Stones paved the large round space. At its center was Igor's desk atop a circular rug of indigo and gold. Fanning out were jail cells. Unlike the room Makoto had come from, even with the upholstered walls, these were what one might fear—thin, ratty bed pads on a hard metal shelves, open toilets, chains. With stone and concrete dividing the cells, the Velvet Room tread somewhere between dungeon and prison.

An old time prison.

Igor and Lavenza had chosen Ren as their champion, setting the events in motion which would lead Ren to Tokyo. Now, armed with the truth of what they were up against, and the backing of Velvet Room residents, including Morgana, the team was better equipped to fight the Holy Grail. If the world was to be returned to its true state, it was up to them.

As the group followed Morgana out, Makoto noticed Ren staring into one of the jail cells across the room. He was squinting. She tried as well but it was hard to make anything out, especially since it was partially obscured by Igor.

"Joker?"

Ren's lips parted, but he shut them and tilted his head in acknowledgement. He turned away and began following the others.

"What was-"

"It's nothing," Ren's eyes fell briefly before he turned to Makoto with the hint of a grin. "Wishful thinking..."

"Oh." Makoto walked alongside Ren. The others were waiting at the top of a long staircase. "Um... you once mentioned dreaming about an old time prison. Is this the place from your dreams?"
"Yes," Ren faced forward, not really looking at their teammates, just the stairs before him. He took a deep breath but said nothing else.

Ren's dreams had all been under the influence of that malevolent god. Given they needed to fight that god while there was still world left to save, it was probably not a good time for questions but... "H-how many times... did you have that dream?"

"Many." Ren seemed to walk faster for several steps but then stopped and turned to Makoto. "It's... complicated."

Makoto stopped as well. "S-sorry."

"It's okay. We'll have time to talk about it after. Definitely," Ren offered his hand. Makoto took it, nodding in agreement, especially at his declaration that there would be an after. They walked the rest of the way side by side.

What remained of the Holy Grail's tower jutted high into the air, creating a stage of sorts surrounded by sky. The setting sun painted the clouds in yellows, oranges, and blues. Before the Phantom Thieves floated a gigantic figure. The God of Control. The chalice form they had once found massive was but a small piece. It was made a sleek shapes both curves and points. Its chrome body reflected and distorted the hues surrounding them. From its mid-section spread wings of chrome and gold. It was crowned with a winged golden halo. While much more abstract in nature, there was something about it—its coloring, its texture, its bas-relief feathers—that reminded Makoto of Robin Hood. If Ren took notice, he didn't show it.

There was something odd though. Despite the enormity of the god before them, Makoto didn't feel as afraid as she thought she should be. There was something very clean, clinical even, about form before her. The team in turn responded with matching precision. No. It was more than that. They had been an excellent team before. Since leaving the Velvet Room, they were acting beyond that. Makoto checked on Ren once more.

This is your doing, isn't it?


Then, everything went white.

Three times. Three times the god brought them to the ground. A wall of magic power that permitted no defense. Three times the they stood back up. The final time, they were not alone. The voices of the people down below carried, chanting for the Phantom Thieves, as if they had been roused by words of the smallest among them. Even the malevolent god had acknowledged Morgana's nature as a being of hope. It had just grossly underestimated what that meant.

The cat turned towards the rest of the team and shouted. "If you've decided to take the world from him, don't compromise your ideals to the very end!"

The team nodded in unison, each readying their stance. Before anyone else could move, Ren brought forth a persona. Makoto felt something well in her chest. Her heart started to race. She looked up. Floating just behind him was a demon in a red suit with a long top hat. Chains whipped around in the air as if they were made of cloth and not iron. Ren had told her about this one before. Arsene.

So this is the one originally of you.
Ren grabbed one of the chains that streamed before him and yanked. It snapped and then burst into flames. Arsene screamed and exploded, sending debris crashing down. Makoto found herself breathing heavily yet unable to move. The rest of the team seemed frozen as well.

"So you have failed to harness the power. No matter how many prayers those foolish masses come together-"

The sky darkened. Makoto's eyes went wide. All sound was dominated by that of blood pumping through her. This terror... there was something familiar...

"What the...!?” Ann's voice barely made it through. Makoto followed her friend's gaze. It descended through the clouds—a demon rivaling the god in size. Three pairs of black wings, feathers giving way to leathery skin stretched taut. Large golden horns shooting forward from a helmet that masked a human-like face. A metal breastplate accented with a red sash.

The two titans faced one another. The team stood between them on what little ground was left.

Makoto wanted to fall to her knees, hide her head, and scream. She felt a hand on her shoulder. Anat. Makoto took a deep breath and loosened her stance. She was right. There was something different this time. This was Ren's persona. Ren's eyes were clear and gentle.

A warm light enveloped Makoto. She felt her wounds, her fatigue, slipping from her. Indeed it felt like Ren. When she opened her eyes again, floating orbs of light were gathering around all of them. She recognized them for what they were and smiled.

Makoto waited just inside the station, shifting her weight from side to side to keep warm, watching the snow hitting the ground just a couple meters from where she stood. Night had fallen quickly and the day had been long. The team, less Morgana who had disappeared with the cognitive world, agreed to rest and then meet at Leblanc the next day to reflect and to celebrate. Makoto knew she should follow the plan—she had made it all the way to the station attempting to do so—but there was so much she wanted to talk about with Ren. It wasn't only that. It was Christmas Eve and they were already in Shibuya. Having a date for Christmas Eve had been a guilty fantasy of hers for some time.

A few minutes later, Makoto located Ren emerging from the crowds of people milling about. He was easy to spot as by this point in the evening most of the passersby were paired off. Though they had not been apart long, Makoto felt a flutter as their eyes met. She knew she was starting to grin like a fool. Ren tilted his head and closed his eyes, gifting her a small smile in return. When he entered the station, she could see his cheeks were flushed from the cold.

"Hi," Makoto's lips broadened as her eyes squeezed together. "I was surprised you were still here."

"I wasn't ready to go back to Sojiro's." Ren was smiling kindly, but Makoto felt there was something off, especially combined with his admission. Had he been lingering near where they had last seen Morgana the entire time?

"It's hard to believe he's really gone, Morgana that is." Makoto pressed the corners of her mouth outward, her cheeks puffing slightly. She found some empty spot on the floor.

"Yeah..." When Makoto turned back, Ren was still looking at her. She had expected him to be looking down as well. His eyebrows puckered as he spoke again. "I'd like to think he was happy, satisfied in knowing who he was and that he saved humanity."

"Mm," Makoto recalled the things Morgana had said as he disappeared with the Metaverse. He had a clarity of purpose she hadn't seen before.
"Shall we?" Ren offered Makoto his arm. She linked hers through his, her hand falling on his forearm. He drew her closer, bringing his forehead to hers. His was still cool from being outside. He stood motionless, breathing evenly.

Despite the winter temperatures still carried by his blazer, there was something warm about being so close. Perhaps it was body heat. Perhaps it was something less tangible. Eyes closed, Makoto basked in whatever it was, but soon she began to worry they might be bothering the other people coming through the station. "Ren?"

"Right." Ren lifted his head and stepped back so they could walk together.

"If you're-"

"It's fine." Ren pat the hand Makoto had rested in the crook of his other arm. "Let's go."

Snow had already begun to pile up on awnings and in corners where people did not tread. Though it continued to fall, it was light enough that few couples seemed deterred. Normally Makoto would advise against being out without an umbrella—the risk of catching a cold too great. However, it was Christmas Eve and she was happy to be with her boyfriend and happy the world continued to exist. It would be okay just this once.

Reaching the shops on Central Street, Makoto enjoyed looking at the holiday lights, decorations, and displays. Had all of this been set up already and she just hadn't noticed? Though the Metaverse was gone, somehow everything seemed more magical now.

After examining several new volumes on sale at the book store, Makoto turned to Ren, finding him staring at her. He had a tired, far away smile on his face but his cheeks lifted as their eyes met.

"I-I'm sorry. Are you bored?" Makoto stammered.

"Not at all." Ren's voice had an inviting timbre. That relaxed confidence assured Makoto he meant what he said.

"Then-"

"I just want to..." Ren closed his eyes and shook his head. "It's nothing."

"No. What is it?" Makoto reached out her hand, laying it on Ren's upper arm.

"I just want to remember all of this. That's all," Ren shrugged shallowly, a small, cryptic smile across his face.

"Y-yeah... me too."

The couple continued to walk down Central Street. Ren stopped abruptly at one of the alleys, the one he often loitered in. Makoto looked around. At the corner stood a dark-skinned foreigner huddling a long-haired cat in his leather jacket. She once again thought about Morgana. She wondered if Ren was thinking the same thing. He was focused down the alley, squinting.

"What is it?" Makoto tugged at Ren's sleeve.

"It's nothing." Ren stopped. He took a deep breath and turned to Makoto. "There used to be a door there."

Ren paused again, watching Makoto. She shifted her weight and worried her lip under the intensity
of his gaze. "A-a door?"

"To the Velvet Room." Ren's lips pressed into a thin a line.

*Oh. So that's why...*

It all made sense. Makoto turned her head, staring down the alley, wondering if they would find it. "What did it look like?"

"Like the cell doors within it, only glowing blue. No one else ever saw it... not even Morgana."

Makoto looked back at Ren. He was still focusing his attention on her. "Why didn't you-"

"I couldn't," Ren looked toward the pavement. Makoto could make out the barest of frowns.

"I see."

It was Makoto's turn to keep a watchful eye on Ren. She didn't recall him ever disappearing when he went into that alley. He would just stand in the corner. Perhaps it was different when cognition and reality weren't fused. "Why did you go there? Why did you spend so much time there?"

*It was a prison...*

Ren raised his head. He grinned at Makoto, his eyebrow lifting.

Makoto's jaw dropped. She felt her face, her neck heating up.

"And how would you know about that, Miss President?" Ren leaned in towards Makoto, the slant in his eyebrows becoming more severe.

"Uh, um... The truth is..."

Makoto bit down on her lip and turned away. No. She squeezed her eyes shut, inhaled deeply, and turned back, looking Ren in the eyes. She started speaking, louder than she had intended, but she kept going lest she lose her nerve. "The truth is that back before I was a Phantom Thief, I-I was looking for evidence... that you and the others were the Phantom Thieves. Um... I was kind of... tailing you."

Makoto could feel herself shaking. She forced herself to maintain eye contact. The time after she stopped speaking seemed to last forever as she awaited Ren's response.

Ren's response was to chuckle, his shoulders bobbing as he laughed. "I know."

"You knew?" Makoto knew the sinking feeling in her chest well. What she didn't know was how severely she could feel it in her cheeks, her arms, her bones too. Whatever it was that was sinking was rapidly being replaced by heat. She wondered if she was going to start sweating.

Ren managed to clamp down on his laughter, his brows even furrowing to an expression akin to sympathy. He seemed to fight against his own cocky grin. "You... you were kind of obvious."

"And you just let me?" Makoto's eyes were wide. Confusion and curiosity were enough of a distraction from her embarrassment that her cheeks began to feel cold against the winter air.

"You seemed harmless enough," Ren shrugged. He brought his hand up, scratching the back of his head. "...And I was kind of hoping you were doing it because you liked me."

"Ah."

Makoto dipped her head and smiled. "I-I guess I kind of was."

Ren brought his hand to Makoto's chin, his curled index finger coaxing her to look at him. He was
wearing that relaxed smile, gentle and honest, the one that always reassured her, the one she probably fell in love with. They shared a small laugh. He offered his hand once again. She took it. Hand-in-hand, they continued their Christmas Eve stroll.

Makoto detected an added note of sweetness to Ren's familiar taste as they kissed. His face was cupped in her hands. He held her firm at her ribs as she knelt on his couch, straddling his thighs. Ren didn't have a strong preference for sweets—the sugar was a remnant of the cream he had brushed off of her nose. She had misjudged the spoonful of Christmas cake she had sampled. It had won their approval and a full cake now waited in the refrigerator the team's party the next day.

The flavor wasn't the only thing that seemed to have carried. There was something lighter, fluffier than usual about Ren's lips, the way he moved his tongue. It was as if he was trying extra hard to be mindful. It had been a long day. Perhaps he didn't want things to get too intense. Makoto thought to question him but before she could think further Ren began to shift. He brought one arm around her back, holding her steady. His free hand ran along her cheek, caressing her face. She inhaled deeply, enjoying his careful ministrations. Having her full attention, she swore she felt his lips tug upwards into a smile.

Makoto uncrossed her arms, placing her hands on her thighs in loosely balled fists. She and Ren had gotten to talking about all they had been through, the palaces, the personae, the Velvet Room... Most recently, she had brought up her concerns regarding her sister's frustrations. She hadn't meant to sour the evening with her anxieties. The Metaverse was in the past. These were present troubles. She told herself she needed to wrap things up before it got even later and her weariness gave way to more voiced worries. "I trust my sister, and... I'm sure she'll do her job well... But, it's a little scary, not knowing what might happen..."

Ren let his head drop. He frowned.

"...What's wrong?" Makoto turned to look at her boyfriend.

"It's nothing," Ren inhaled and shook his head.

It was definitely something. Makoto sighed. She shouldn't have brought it up. It could wait. She brought her hands together, worrying her thumbs against each other. "I-I'm sorry for bringing up such a strange topic. On Christmas Eve, no less..."

Makoto took a quick glance at Ren. His expression was unchanged. She really needed to leave. "I'll be going now."

Ren looked at Makoto, his lips parted as if to say something, but he blinked twice and let his drop. He seemed to have come to a decision when he spoke again. "I'll walk you back."

"...No, I'm fine." Makoto stood up and began walking towards the stairs. She didn't want him walking back alone. It was late. Ren had funneled the will of all humanity through him earlier. He had also lost one of his closest friends. This worrisome feeling, it was probably those concerns...

No...

Makoto paused, bringing her hand to her chin. "Hey... you're keeping something from me, aren't you...?"

The sound of shuffling feet indicated Ren had gotten off the couch. Though he was standing behind her, she found herself curiously afraid to look back. She waited. He didn't say anything. It was better
not to press.

"...Never mind," Makoto conceded. Whatever it was, they could talk about it tomorrow. "Good night."

Chapter End Notes

Life has been keeping me pretty busy. I added a status to my FFN, AO3, and even Twitter profiles with chapter progress notes so there was some indication that I hadn't abandoned fic. I have been working on a few side projects (both P5 and not) which I may post but I've been prioritizing this one. Thank you all for reading!

Originally posted 2018/08/01
Makoto sat at her dining room table, working problems in preparation for entrance exams as she drained a pot of tea. In the past month, with her goal of reforming the police, she had approached her studies with renewed vigor. However, it seemed more surreal somehow now that things were back to normal, now that the Metaverse was gone. It was strange to be planning and doing only normal things. Makoto smiled to herself.

*It's these small, normal things we fought to protect.*

Sis was already gone by the time Makoto had gotten up. While the work of the Phantom Thieves was over, Sis had much left to do. The team had given her sister an opening. Sis was no doubt doing her utmost to take advantage of it and set things right. Makoto wondered if she'd have time to-

The sound of the front door prompted Makoto to look up from her notebook. Though it was a Sunday, meaning Sis likely had fewer if any meetings, Makoto was surprised to see her sister so soon. She wondered if she should have prepared breakfast.

Sis bore a serious expression when she entered the dining nook. It wasn't stern like the one she showed in the courtrooms though. Instead, there was something somber about it, sad even.

"Sis..." Makoto stood up, keeping her eyes locked on her sister. She didn't like the way Sis was looking at her. Something was wrong. "Let me get you some tea."

As Makoto stepped into the kitchen to retrieve another cup, her mind raced through all the possibilities. Was it not enough? Had they failed to change the public's cognition as needed? Or was it something else? Was Sis in some kind of trouble at work?

Sis had taken a seat by the time Makoto returned. She set the cup down before her sister, pouring tea from the kettle she had made for her study session before returning to her own seat.

"D-did it work?" Makoto asked. "The change of heart..."

"It's too early to tell." Sis grasped the cup in both hands. She was likely still cold from being outside.

"D-do you have any time today?" Makoto forced a smile. Perhaps Sis needed cheering up. There was a lot to be excited about after all. She began speaking rapidly. "We're having a party at LeBlanc today. It would be great if you could attend. Ren and I bought a Christmas cake last night and-

"Last night..." Sis repeated. Makoto stopped. A mistake. Sis's expression changed. She tried to decipher what it meant but instead found her mind wandering to an old memory.

Makoto was very small and had wandered out of the apartment unnoticed while Sis was studying. She had wanted to catch the falling snow. Panic had set in when she discovered she couldn't get back into the building. Dad found her shivering and in tears by the door when he got home and had carried her back inside. Sis had said nothing in response to Dad's harsh words, all the while staring at her as she clung to him.

It was strange to be remembering it now...
It wasn't the time. Instead, she needed to finally settle this matter. Makoto closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She opened them again, looking directly at her sister. "Ren and I."

"Amamiya-kun turned himself in this morning." The words came evenly—a statement of fact that at first hearing might sound blunt and emotionless but was chased with an unspoken whisper of regret. Makoto replayed them in her mind again and again, hoping they would somehow change.

They didn't.

"Wh-what?" Makoto's lips formed the beginning of the word several times before her voice followed through. "Why?"

"Because I asked him to."

Makoto felt as if the bottom of her stomach was being pulled down through her. She felt that she would soon follow it through a floor that had given way to an infinite pit. Every moment of doubt from the night before came flooding to her.

"We need a witness, someone familiar with the Metaverse..." Sis continued as Makoto sat, mouth agape. "But Shido's faction is still powerful and there are many others who don't want to lose face to the Phantom Thieves. There would be repercussions. Amamiya-kun already has a record, an obvious target for them to latch onto, but something we can fight-"

"You can't!" Makoto was on her feet. "They'll lock him away! You saw what they did to him before! They'll-"

"Not this time," Sis sat a little straighter, her face set. "It's not much, but I have my people too. We've prepared. I'll be checking on him regularly. One hint of foul play and-

"So you are... you are sending him to prison..." Makoto clutched her blouse where it fell over her heart. Its hurried pace reflected her hurried thoughts. She had to do something.

"Ren is terrified of prison."

"Juvenile hall," Sis corrected. "He's still a minor."

As if it matters... Makoto's eyebrows narrowed. Her lower lip jutted slightly. She balled her other hand into a fist, shaking. The thought of Ren trapped and alone... Makoto loosened her stance. She had to think. There had to be something else. Her eyes darted side to side but not focusing on any one thing.

If anyone else volunteered to testify, the outcome would be just as bad. Furthermore, Ren would never allow it.

There were the scientists on Shido's team... but Sis had exhausted that line of attack.

There was the research itself. Futaba had failed to uncover the files thus far, but with a court order... but that would require testimony first. Sis had likely attempted it already.

"What about the public?" Makoto began to think aloud. She brought her hand from her chest to her chin. "They all saw what happened yesterday. They-

"They had no idea what was going on," Sis folded her arms. Her sentences were like a brick wall. "Nor were they aware of the connection to the mental shutdowns."
Makoto pressed her lips together tightly before opening her mouth to try again. "What if... if-

"It is done Makoto." Sis put more of an edge to her voice.

Makoto glared at her sister. Sis didn't waver. Makoto focused on her breathing, trying to keep her cool. Meeting Sis at anything but her best would not end well. She went through all of her ideas again, hoping to find some strategy, some opportunity, but it just wouldn't come. She let her hand drop from her chin. She closed her eyes and grimaced. When she opened them again, she was ready to speak. "Take me to him."

"No." Sis continued to stare at Makoto, unmoving.

"Why?" Makoto tried to mimic her sister's expression.

"He's doing this to protect the rest of you." There was a softer quality to Sis's voice. She uncrossed her arms. "He's drawing all their attention to himself."

It's just like Ren... Makoto fought a frown. "They must already know who we are. Shido even mentioned Haru-"

"That's true," Sis interrupted. "However, they know one witness is weaker than multiple witnesses. If they go after the rest of you now, you'll definitely testify. It's in their interest to wait and hope you're too scared to come forward. If one of you does, only then do they retaliate—to send a message to those still in hiding."

"Then why can't I visit him?" Makoto pressed her lips together.

"We don't want to spook them into acting before that," Sis put her forearms on the table and leaned forward. "The rest of you have to appear to be laying low."

Makoto looked down at the table, letting everything she had learned sink in. Was there really nothing that could be done? She held her hands in loose fists by her side, twisting her wrists and worrying her thumbs against her fingers. When next she spoke, she didn't look up. "How long? ...How long will he be there?"

"It depends," Sis took a breath. "We will fight on his behalf, but I can't make any promises."

"I see..." The probation. The Phantom Thieves. There were so many angles, so many questions, so-

"Makoto," Sis bore a small smile when Makoto looked up. The skin around her eyes bunched ever so slightly. "I meant it when I told you, all of you, to trust in adults. Let us handle it. It's our responsibility."

"But..."

"That was the deal we made." If was just like Sis to appeal to Makoto's sense of honor.

Makoto knew Sis would honor her end too. She wanted to be angry at her sister, angry for sacrificing Ren to protect her. She hated it. Her lips trembled. If she hadn't been on the team, would Sis-

"It's not your fault." It was even more like Sis to so easily see right through her. Sis stood up, walked around the table, and smoothed Makoto's hair with her hand, like when she was small.

Makoto remained stiff. She wanted to just cling to her sister and believe that everything would be
okay. She wanted to yell at her sister and at Ren for deciding all of this without her. She wanted to run to a legal library and come up with a better solution. She wanted to go to the Metaverse and take everything out on shadows...

The team...

"D-does everyone else know?" Makoto let her body relax a little, as if to invite her sister's response.

"I called his guardian right before I came here," Sis let her hand drop. "It seems he hadn't told him."

"Yeah..." Makoto shifted her gaze down before facing her sister again. "D-did he say anything... leave a message perhaps? For us?"

For me?

"No... he's a fairly reticent person as you know," Sis made a small, sympathetic frown. Makoto didn't even try to hide her look of disappointment. "But when we were discussing it yesterday evening, he made it clear that protecting his teammates was a priority."

Sis didn't have to voice the request. Ren wanted them to stay out of harm's way. "Mm."

Makoto took out her phone and skimmed the group chat. Ann was coordinating last-minute snack shopping. Yusuke was gathering decorations from school. Ryuji was joking about Ren sleeping in. There was no word from Futaba. Makoto considered letting them know but wondered if there could be enough words in text to convey it all. Like her, they would have so many questions. Furthermore, she needed some time of her own to think.

"I... I'm going to LeBlanc," Makoto began tidying her notebooks. "I-I should be there when..."

Sis nodded. "I should get back to work as well."

Makoto put away her study materials and changed into something suitable for the weather. When she was finished, Sis was sitting at the table, forehead in one hand, still nursing her cup of tea.

"I'll be going now," Makoto said as she turned towards the door. She took a few steps and stopped. She looked back at Sis. "This whole time... you knew, didn't you?"

Sis continued to stare into her tea. "I suspected."

"Ah."

As Makoto left the apartment, she faintly heard Sis's request to take care.

On her way to LeBlanc, Makoto alternated between trying to find a substitute solution to Ren's testimony and pondering what she could have done had Ren come to her the night before. Both were pointless endeavors. What was done was done... and yet the 'what ifs' continued to plague her. The rest of the world seemed but a haze.

The sign on LeBlanc's door said 'Closed.' Makoto ran her fingers over it. She knew it would have been left that way purposefully for the party, but now it seemed to be just another reminder that the person she sought was not inside.

Makoto grabbed the handle and pushed the door open, entering the café. Futaba was sitting at the counter, face buried in her arms. Somehow her soft sobs dominated the ambient sounds of TV newscasters and brewing coffee. Sakura-san turned to look at Makoto, his face grim.
"Did you know?" Sakura-san's voice sounded hoarse.

Makoto closed her eyes, dropping her head as she shook it.

"That idiot," Sakura-san muttered. "Leaving a nice girl like you in-

"I... I probably deserved it," Makoto tried to smile. Her lips pressed together and moved but what came of it she knew not. "I kept some important things from him too... thinking it would be for the better. I know it hur-

"We all make mistakes." Sakura-san was better at forcing an encouraging smile. "He's lucky you understand."

Makoto paused, letting the words sink in. If only it were true. She clasped her hands before her chest, frowning as she let her head droop again. "It really hurts."

"I know." The statement hung in the air.

Sakura-san walked along the counter, closer to the door where Makoto stood. He scratched the back of his neck while muttering quietly. "I shouldn't have threatened him with juvie so many times."

"You were doing your job," Makoto kept her voice low, glancing at Futaba before once again facing Sakura-san. "Ren... Ren really respects you."

Sakura-san's response was a kind but tired smile, the skin wrinkling at the corners of his eyes.

"Is she...?" Makoto tilted her head in the direction of Futaba.

"She's been like that since I told her," Sakura-san maintained his smile. "But it's an improvement. I was worried she'd run to her room, shut herself off again."

At least there was that. Makoto took a deep breath and started walking towards Futaba.

"Futaba..." Makoto began, stroking the younger girl's hair.

"S'not fair." Futaba's words were punctuated with sniffles. "We defeated the final boss."

"Yeah..." Makoto said in a breath.

"Why don't you sit down?" Sakura-san offered.

Makoto took the hint. Futaba needed her space. She seated herself in one of the booths, staring at the door. It would still be some time before the others arrived. She began to rehearse in her mind what she would say, but found her thoughts interrupted again by the 'what ifs' and the dead ends they led to. She made a fist with her right hand, raising it and staring at her balled knuckles. She was so powerless.

_She was so useless._

"The Public Prosecutors Office finally decided today to break its long standing silence." Makoto's attention was drawn to the sounds of the television behind her. "It seems there was consensus to try Representative Shido for the countless crimes he confessed."

Sis must have been successful.

"Furthermore, many demands have been made for Representative Shido to resign from his public
position. Nationwide protests have begun-

"I'm surprised so much has changed in just one night. It's pretty impressive," said Sakura-san. Makoto turned to watch him. He inhaled deeply. "But Ren..."

Ren...

"Merry Christmas!" The sounds of the signs jangling against the door accompanied Ryuji's happy excitement. Ann, Haru, and Yusuke were with him. They carried shopping bags filled with supplies for the party.

All the things Makoto thought to say caught in her throat in one big jumble. She found it hard to face the others.

"Huh? Why do you look so down?" Each word Ryuji spoke came slower than the one before. The last of the door signs came to a rest. "What're you cryin' about, Futaba? You guys get in a fight or something?"

"Hey, Ryuji..." Ann's eyes darted between Sakura-san, Futaba, and Makoto.

"What's up with this gloomy vibe?" Ryuji ignored his girlfriend, his words now coming fast. "Where's Ren?"

Makoto raised her head, her lips parted.

"Mako-chan," Haru looked scared. "What's wrong?"

"Um..." Makoto had yet to voice it. She hesitated. Saying it out loud, admitting it, seemed-

"It's OK." Despite his gruff timbre, there was a warmth to Sakura-san's voice, like firewood burning in a hearth. "I'll explain."

Sakura-san motioned with his head towards the rest of the café, a suggestion that Ryuji and the others come in. Makoto shifted further into the booth as they approached. Yusuke grabbed one of the high chairs by the counter, turning it to create a large oval between the booth, Futaba, and Sakura-san. Ryuji looked at Ann before taking the seat next to Makoto.

The Phantom Thieves stared at Sakura-san wide-eyed as he told them of Ren's actions and Sis's explanation of why they were necessary. Everyone remained quiet as Sakura-san spoke, save for a few sniffles from Futaba. Halfway through she lifted herself from the counter and turned to face the others.

Makoto stared down at the table during Sakura-san's recounting. She wondered if the authorities were still interrogating Ren. Surely the memories of his last "interrogation" would be fresh on his mind along with the knowledge that all that awaited him at the end of it was being confined. If the thought of it felt this bad from her perspective, what must it be like for him? She wanted nothing more than to be with him, embrace him, close her eyes and let her head fall against him.

The group was quiet after Sakura-san finished, but soon became vocal with disbelief, confusion, and anger. Makoto answered a few of their questions—they spoke some of the same lines of thought she had played and replayed so many times. Eventually the team caught up with her despair, quickened by the remembrance that they had not only lost Ren, but Morgana as well.

A loud slam caused Makoto to look up. Ann was on her feet, leaning on her hands where they struck the table. "Hey! Morgana'd be ashamed of us sitting around here moping like this! Honestly, I don't
know what we should do... but if we give up, we'll never save Ren!"

Ann...

"Didn't he save all of you!? If we aren't gonna act now, when will we? We gotta do something!"

Makoto smiled. The light, the spark of rebellion, returned to the faces of her friends. Morgana would have been so happy knowing he had spurred such an impassioned speech in Ann. Makoto remembered... she wasn't alone. They could still come up with something yet. She closed her eyes and imagined balling up her feelings of self-doubt, her feelings of uselessness, and placing them aside, acknowledged and tamed for now. She had work to do.

The resulting plan had two avenues of attack. First, the change of cognition. While they didn't have the Metaverse anymore, they could still build support for Ren's case, much like the protests over Shido were continuing to push things forward for his prosecution. The tricky part was that they had to maintain a low profile. It was Ren's wish they stay out of harm's way. That meant they had to spur cognition without drawing attention to themselves.

Fortunately, Mishima Yuuki had stepped up, jumped up even, to help. He and Ann were in the same class, which was useful in coordinating their plan. His social media skills were likely to come in handy too. Once Mishima gained enough mind share, it would be safer for the team to join in.

Ren had several contacts outside of school that they hoped to leverage as well. Futaba still had access to his phone. Using the information therein, the team would meeting with each one to ask for help in spreading the word.

The second part of the plan was to gather evidence of Ren's innocence. It was a delicate matter. There was a chance their actions could legally invalidate their findings. However, they had the freedom and resources to do things the police could not. The authorities probably didn't have a security and information specialist as skilled as Futaba for instance. Another such resource led them to Shinjuku.

Makoto and Ryuji flanked Ann as the three walked from Shinjuku station to Crossroads, a bar favored by the reporter, Ohya Ichiko. Ryuji was doing his best to look tough with an exaggerated scowl and hunched shoulders. Makoto thought he looked rather comical but it seemed to be keeping most people away. It was especially useful as Ann's presence was certainly attracting stares from nearly every man they saw. It couldn't be helped as Ann knew Ohya-san best. With Ryuji at her side, at least the men seemed to go no further than staring.

When they reached Crossroads, Makoto recognized it as the place Ren had taken her after her confrontation with the host who was scamming Eiko. She hesitated, her hand against the door.

"Makoto?" Ryuji leaned in, taking a look at her face.

"O-oh... s-sorry," Makoto stammered. She grabbed the door handle and led the group into the establishment.

Inside, Ohya-san was sitting at the bar, chatting with the woman in the kimono from that time.

"Hiiii!" Ohya-san called, louder than was necessary for the empty bar. She had a big smile. She raised her arm, waving with one hand while the other wrapped around a drink. "Takamaki-chan! Over here!"

This early even?
"Thank you for meeting us," Ann said as the three of them approached.

"Oh!" Ohya-san turned to Ryuji. "I remember you! From the Madarame case."


"So you're all his friends huh?" Ohya-san turned to Makoto next.

"I'm Niijima Makoto. I'm Ren's girlfriend." Makoto stood a little taller. She took a single step forward as she spoke the second sentence. It came out firmer than she had intended.

Ohya-san laughed, a small snort buried among the chuckles. "I see. I see. ...so, you said you wanted to talk to me about him?"

Makoto was thankful that Ann did most of the talking, explaining Ren's incarcerated status and his actions from over a year ago that had led to his original conviction. She went on to relay Ren's importance to the Shido case as well as the team's plan to help clear Ren's name.

"That boy..." the woman behind the counter muttered.

"Hmm..." Ohya-san held her glass around its rim, swirling the drink inside it. Her bubbly smile was gone. She looked up at them with sharp eyes. It was as if she was an entirely different person. "So he was one of Shido's victims too..."

"Yes. We have a genius hacker on our side and are gathering information," Makoto met Ohya-san's serious tone. She closed her eyes. "But we're limited in our movement and lack the experience to do more."

"So you're asking me to do the legwork?" Ohya-san's lip curled to a smirk, but her eyes remained steadfast.

"Please." Makoto dipped her head. "We'll send everything we have through Ann and if you need cash we-"

"I'll take your information but not your money," Ohya-san downed her drink. "The Shido case is important to me... as is that boy."

"And once you're done with those posters, bring some here," the woman behind the bar added. "I have a few regulars who've grown quite attached to him."

"Ah such pretty kimono!" Ann exclaimed as she and Ryuji joined the rest of the team outside Meiji Shrine. Like her teammates waiting for her, she was wearing a kimono for the occasion. It was a bright yet soft pink with camellias outlined with gold embroidery. Ryuji had kept to casual clothing. His eyes would sometimes dart over to Ann but then dart back just as quickly. Makoto wondered if his flushed face was more due to the cold or to his girlfriend.

"They're all from Haru's collection," said Makoto. She and Futaba had gone to Haru's mansion earlier that day to borrow kimono and accessories. Having traveled with Haru since then, Makoto could now recognize the men in suits who were giving the group space but keeping a watchful eye on their employer.

"Just some older ones I hadn't worn in a while. I'm happy they're getting some use," Haru smiled. Her kimono was a silvery-white with an embroidered design of bamboo and plum blossoms rising from the bottom. Makoto wore a deep but muted red with a black contrast, the border of which was
decorated with traditional scenes along a stream. Futaba's was a vibrant green with stylized clouds, moons, and stars in gold and silver thread.

Ann took a closer look. "Really? Because they remind me of this seas-

"We should join the line now that we're all here," Haru clapped her hands together, her smile almost too perfect.

"We should," Makoto looked at Futaba. Though they had avoided New Year's Day, it was still crowded. The younger girl seemed to be doing well though. She next turned her attention to Yusuke who was framing scenes with his fingers. In his finery he was attracting a lot of interest from the other girls milling around the shrine entrance. "Yusuke! We're going!

Ann and Ryuji took the lead while Makoto and Haru stayed back, buffering Futaba from the close quarters of the queue. Yusuke stayed by her side. Makoto looked at the empty space to Futaba's left. She frowned, biting her lower lip.

"We'll get him back," Haru said quietly, not disturbing Futaba and Yusuke.

"I hope so," said Makoto. They had officially launched their counterattack the day before, though Mishima and Ohya-san had already been working for several days prior. The team had meetings with Ren's contacts scheduled throughout the following week. Makoto sighed. "It doesn't seem right to ask so much of others when we can't be out there doing the same."

"I feel the same way," Haru paused before speaking again. "But this is truly the most effective thing we can do right now. Participating directly would jeopardize the plan."

"I know..." Makoto pressed her lips together. "I'll continue to search for more options."

"You're running this operation Mako-chan. It's a lot of people to coordinate." Haru leaned forward and turned to Makoto, her eyes wide open and her lips curling into a small smile.

"I-it's nothing compared to running an international food conglomerate," Makoto couldn't stop herself from grinning, though it was distasteful. She felt herself turning red. "You should really be the one."

"I'm still learning myself," Haru looked up towards the torii marking the entrance to the shrine. "But I have people who mentor and support me."

"Then..." Makoto turned to Haru. "Will you mentor me?

Haru beamed. "I'd love to!"

"I heard," Iwai-san's voice was as deep and smooth as Makoto remembered it. He didn't get up from his seat behind the counter at Untouchable, but looked up at them from under his cap.

"O-oh, um, s-sorry," Makoto thought she heard Haru giggle from behind her. "S-so... a-about-"

"I know some people. They know some people. It's already been made clear that none of these people will be happy if some harm should come to him."

This time Makoto thought she heard Ryuji squeak behind her. Iwai-san's answer wasn't what she was expecting. In fact, it was better. Iwai-san was great... just really, really great.

Makoto realized she was staring when she heard Ann clearing her throat. She brought a hand over
her heart. "Th-thank you. That makes me feel a lot better... all of us."

"Yes, thank you for your time this evening," Haru added. She grabbed Makoto by the upper arm and gave a light tug. "We'll be going now."

As the four Phantom Thieves started exiting the shop, Makoto turned back to Iwai-san once more. "Please give Kaoru-kun my regards."

"Sure thing," Iwai-san grinned. "When your sister has time, why don't the two of you come to our place for dinner?"

"R-right! We'd be delighted," Makoto tensed every muscle in her face in service of a smile. Realizing it probably didn't work, she made a fast retreat out the door and caught up with the others.

"He's not that scary Makoto," said Ryuji as she joined them. He shoved his hands in his pockets. "You don't have to get all red in the face."

Makoto got more red in the face. Haru brought a hand over her mouth, then another hand over that one. The big smile she was covering was clear from her eyes. Makoto turned to see Ann's smirk. On eye contact, her model friend dropped it before sending it Ryuji's way instead.

"You were just as scared!" Ann made a few light jabs at Ryuji's ribs.

Haru giggled before urging the team onwards. "Where are we going next?"

The group had made it back to Central Street. They had already met with Ren's manager at the flower shop in the mall and spoke with a coworker of his from 777. Sometimes it felt as though they could change the public cognition with the people from Ren's numerous jobs alone. Just what did he need the money for?

Makoto forced herself back on task. "The arcade. That's where we're meeting Oda Shinya."

Unlike Iwai-san, none of them knew Oda-san. The name seemed familiar but, well, it was a common name. His profile picture was either several years out of date or perhaps was one of his children.

"Whoa, it's that kid!" Ryuji said as they entered the arcade.

"Huh?" Makoto followed Ryuji's gaze. An small boy with a red baseball cap and a red backpack stood waiting. "Oh, the one from the profile picture."

"No! Well... yes, but I mean, the one who was followin' me around," Ryuji lowered his voice for the last part. "We should get outta here."

"He's just a kid." Ann continued walking, approaching the boy. "Hi there, do you know where we can meet Oda Shinya?"

"That's me," said the boy.

Of course. All the pieces came together. Ren had said he was practicing with a kid who was really good at Gun About. They had faced an Oda Hanae in Mementos. Makoto mentally kicked herself for not remembering. They couldn't ask a child for help. "You're the one Ren was practicing his shooting skills with."

"Oh," said Ryuji, briefly looking at Makoto before turning back to the boy.

"What's going on?" Oda-kun's eyes narrowed as he examined Makoto and her teammates. "You're
friends of his right? Did something happen?"

Makoto bit her lip. Should they tell him? Would it be too upsetting? She tried to formulate how best to respond. Before she could come up with a plan, Ryuji started talking, telling the whole story. The kid seemed to follow along. When Ryuji was finished, the boy stood still, not talking.

"So... he won't be around anymore?" Oda-kun finally asked.

"He'll be back soon!" Ann said quickly, leaning down to Oda-kun's level. The way her brow wrinkled gave away her forced smile. "At least, we hope..."

"We're tryin'a get public support for him," said Ryuji, teeth showing through his grin. "Get enough people so the courts re-open his case an' do it right this time."

"We didn't realize you were so young when we found your number," Makoto looked down. "We were going to ask for your help."

"But don't worry!" Ann waved her open palms in front of her chest. "We're asking lots of people!"

Oda-kun's eyes were raised to meet the team. His lips formed a thin line. He looked over to the nearest Gun About machine. It was displaying the networked high score table. He turned back to the group and adjusted his cap, pulling the brim down. "I think there's something I can do."

"What?" asked Ryuji.

"You'll see," Oda-kun shrugged, grinning. He waved them a good-bye as he began walking to the Gun About machine.

"What a strange boy," remarked Haru, watching the boy's back as he slipped into the crowd surrounding the game. She turned to the others. "Well, one stop left, right?"

"Right," said Makoto. "He wanted to meet at the Beef Bowl you said?"

"That's right!" Haru smiled.

Yoshida Toranosuke, the diet member, was sitting at the counter among the other patrons when the team arrived. Newly elected, it seemed that no one yet recognized him. He looked up and smiled, motioning with his head towards the back. Following his silent command, Makoto and the others soon found themselves in a cramped office.

"Are you sure we're allowed to be here?" Makoto's eyes wandered to the security camera feeds. Yoshida-san was still at the counter, eating his beef bowl.

"It will work itself out," said Haru, still wearing a self-assured smile.

"Why didn't we just meet him at your house?" asked Ann, leaning against the desk, large stacks of paperwork behind her.

"It would make waves if a diet member made a house call to the head of Okumura Foods, would it not?" said Haru. "The same goes for either of our offices. This isn't Okumura Foods business. It's mine."

"But you've met before, right?" Ryuji had begun rifling through the lockers in the back of the room.

"Ryuji, stop that," Makoto admonished. She had moved from the security feeds to looking at the schedules and other notices on the bulletin board.
"We only met once." Haru continued to stand at the center of the room, not disrupting its contents. "And that was at a campaign event before he was elected. I wasn't sure he would be willing to take this meeting. It must be risky."

"I wouldn't dream of not taking it President Okumura," Yoshida-san stood in the doorway. He was a husky man in the later years of his prime. His voice carried a trace of gravelly reverberation, giving it a certain gravitas. He wore a kind expression that showed most in the wrinkles by his eyes. "We all owe that boy. ...Myself especially. I intend to advocate loudly on his behalf."

"Will you be alright?" Haru tilted her head to one side. "Taking such a stance could be scandalous."

"Ren wouldn't want you to jeopardize your position," added Makoto.

"If we give up what's right to protect only ourselves, we invite evil." There was something enticing about the quality of Yoshida-san's voice. Listening to him was like being a small child and absorbing the wisdom of an adult but at the same time being treated with the respect of an equal.

"But what about the long game?" asked Makoto. She loosely balled her fists at her side. "W-What if you could do more good in the future if you stayed quiet now?"

"Indeed, there is always that judgement call," Yoshida-san closed his eyes, opening them again slowly. "And with it, the danger that the imagined future good deed will never be performed."

"In your position, there are so many opportunities." Makoto's fists closed, her nails digging into her palms. She pressed her lips together.

"There are," Yoshida-san gave a brief nod. He put one hand in his pocket, the other lifted before him, reaching out open palmed as he explained. "I've weighed the risks and come to the conclusion that Amamiya-kun is that future good deed... many of them I suspect. The Phantom Thieves are but an opening act."

Makoto looked down, loosening her grip, a smile fighting its way through her worries. "Y-yeah..."

"And that goes for the rest of you as well," Yoshida-san's voice seemed carry into Makoto's bones. Despite its lofty charge, it wasn't a burden. She felt as though his faith alone made changing the world for good all the more attainable.

"Mm!" Ann agreed, smiling broadly.

Ryuji's lips parted into an open-mouth smirk.

Haru dipped her head in a terse nod. "...Will you be alright?"

Yoshida-san smiled. "I've had my fair share of scandals. At least this one will be worthwhile."

Makoto huddled on the blanket she had spread by Haru's planters on the roof. She pulled her knees under her gym uniform track jacket and into her chest. It was windy, making the winter air all the colder.

Lunch was something Makoto frequently took alone. Eiko and her friends were busy cramming for exams. Haru often had company business to attend to. Makoto approached the second years from time to time, but not so often as to arouse suspicions. It was good to catch up with Ann and find out how Ohya-san, Mishima, and even Ms. Kawakami were doing.
This time, Makoto didn't feel like reaching out. She didn't want to intrude on Eiko or be a third wheel to Ryuji and Ann's time together.

*Those are excuses.*

There was nothing left to ask Ann about. Ohya-san, with Futaba's help, had dug up just about everything there was. Articles in Ren's support were being prepared. The grassroots campaign pretty much ran on its own now. Makoto looked at the door back into the building as if she could will it to open. She pressed her lips together and tried to focus on what else she could be doing but at the corners of her thoughts crept the questions of what else she could have done.

"Did you see Ren today?" It was a question Makoto asked every day over dinner. She had given up asking if he had asked about her. She knew the answer was that it was too dangerous.

Sis sighed. "Not today, but you know his parents visit on weekends. If there was anything wrong, I would have heard by now."

"R-right," Makoto looked down at her food. She cordoned off a bite-size portion with her chopsticks, but hesitated in picking it up. It was time to try a new question. Surely the results of Ohya-san's preliminary investigations had reached her sister by now. "Have there been any breakthroughs in the case?"

Sis raised a single eyebrow. For just a moment, the corner of her lip twitched. "No."

"I see." Makoto smiled to herself and continued eating.

"Here's the next batch," Makoto said, gesturing at the stack of flyers on the table in the student council room. Yusuke's designs were everything she could have asked for. It was no wonder they were already on their second run. There was something magnetic about them that drew in the eyes and didn't let go. Hopefully they were connecting with others in the same way.

"Great!" Mishima Yuuki picked up as many as would fit between his fingers and thumbs, shoving them in his school bag before repeating the process. He had been standing on street corners, trying to get the attention and support of passersby, as well as continuing to keep The Phan-Site active.

Eiko took some flyers as well, but far fewer. She had been passing them out at her last-minute cram school. It was surely against the rules, but Eiko's sunny personality and outgoing nature made it easy for her to get away with a little advocacy here and there. It was unclear how much influencing fellow students would help, but if even just one convinced their parents to act, it was worth it.

"Are you sure Eiko?" asked Makoto. "We don't have much time until exams."

"It's just a few more," Eiko responded, her side ponytail swishing as she raised her head with a smile. "Just for some friends here at school."

These were things the team struggled to do, having to lay low. Ryuji had gotten some track team members on board. Ann had talked to the physical therapists working with Shiho, but couldn't risk the attention of bringing it up at her modeling jobs. The bulk of the ground work was being done by Mishima.

"What about you Mishima-kun? You've been out almost every day," Makoto turned to the underclassman.
It's fine," Mishima smiled, blushing slightly with his eyes closed. "I never spent much time studying anyway."

Makoto put her hands on her hips. A disapproving tone came from somewhere in the back of her throat, but she cut it off. The time he was spending now... Mishima had previously used it for volleyball. It wasn't her place to scold him.

Before Makoto could say anything else, the sound of the door opening drew everyone's attention. It was Wada. She followed his bespectacled gaze between the three of them and the stacks of flyers.

"My apologies Wada-ku... no, President Wada," Makoto lowered her head, her lips forming a small smile. "I've gotten a little too accustomed to using the student council room for my personal activities. I guess I can't do that anymore."

Wada walked over to the table, taking a flyer off of the stack. He seemed to stand taller since his election, a gesture to the seriousness in which he took his new role. He looked over the flyer, his expression neutral. "This is about that de—transfer student. I expected as much..."

"Yes." Makoto rested the tips of her fingers on the table, watching Wada for his response.

The skin around Wada's jaw stretched, like he was gritting his teeth. He looked up from the flyer, back at Makoto. His free hand made a fist by his side. "This is something the student council should be organizing."

"Eh?" Makoto blinked.

"He's one of us, isn't he? He may have been sent here unjustly, but he's still one of us." Wada stared directly into Makoto's eyes. His tone was firm. His lips turned down at the corners. He turned to Mishima and lowered his voice. "We owe a lot to the Phantom Thieves, don't we?"

Mishima grinned, his right cheek bunching more than his left. Both boys, along with Eiko, turned back to Makoto. She smiled and closed her eyes. "I'll leave it to you then."

The hallways of the unfamiliar school were crowded with students in varied and unfamiliar uniforms. Makoto squeezed the strap of her bag, mentally going through her exam preparation checklist for the third time. This was it. She took a deep breath.

Makoto thought back upon the past year. Her defiance of Principal Kobayakawa had cost her a letter that would have allowed her to bypass the exam. In retrospect, it was a quiet act of rebellion, one as simple as stepping out of the constraints the adults had set for her. Discovering what was left once the path fell away had been difficult, but she had finally found a sense of direction, one that fueled her focus.

It was strange. Even though she was often distracted with thoughts of Ren, incarcerated and alone due to the failures of the justice system, Makoto's practice scores had been improving. There had been no formal mock exams since she decided to aim for police commissioner, but she wasn't worried about earning her place at her top choice. The goal was what was important and to it there were many paths.

"Aww... I was hoping to see Akechi Goro here!" a whine caught Makoto's attention. The student it came from had bleached hair and was wearing a black blazer and a matching skirt with kick pleats. "Surely this would be his first choice!"

"Maybe he's already in his seat?" a second student wearing the same uniform offered.
"I checked all the rooms!" the first student stomped her foot.

"I'm over Akechi. Where has he been? Holed up studying all this time? Weak. I thought he was supposed to be a genius," said a third student. She pulled out her phone and showed it to the others. "I have a new obsession."

"Oooh who's he?" the first student stared into the phone.

"Hirai Kotaro," the third student said, a knowing smirk betraying that she enjoyed being the center of her group's attention. "Though he's in high school, he's already reporting on crime professionally and helping out with the cases. He's soooo good at explaining stuff and he's way better looking. He…"

Makoto walked away from the group of girls. She didn't want to hear any more.

How quickly the world moved past Akechi Goro. Makoto was one of the few who knew he wouldn't be coming back. There wasn't even anyone to tell of his passing. Perhaps it was a good thing… No one else to worry over where he was, to mourn him when he never returned.

A sinking feeling welled in Makoto's chest. She stopped, balling a hand over it as she looked down, grimacing.

Oh.

Makoto entered LeBlanc to a familiar scene. Sakura-san was behind the bar, crossword puzzle in hand, his body turned just slightly away from the door so he could better check on the television and the brewing coffee. Haru stood by the coffee pots, her eyes half-shut, a small smile on her face. Futaba and Yusuke were at the bar near her, devouring a new dish. From the last remaining bites on their plates, she could pick out colorful vegetables, a signature of Haru's cuisine. Makoto took a deep breath, taking in the scents of coffee and spice.

It had started as a plan to ensure Futaba wouldn't become isolated. Haru began training under Sakura-san. It was once a week at first but she had recently added an extra day. Ann and Ryuji had a regular "date" night that seemed to always end in video games and doing each others' hair. Yusuke was less predictable. Makoto suspected he came in quite frequently once Sakura-san informed him of the extra food Ren was no longer eating. She wondered if Sakura-san was doing it more for Futaba or for himself.

Makoto visited more sporadically. She told herself it was because the team couldn't appear to be gathering too frequently—four of the Phantom Thieves at once was already risky. However, she knew it was more than that. Though it was a familiar place, one filled with friends, the absence of one very important person loomed, marring any sense of comfort she could hope to find.

Ren remained confined in solitary in juvenile hall. Sis insisted he was doing fine, but Makoto wasn't so sure. Would Sis notice if he wasn't? Makoto hadn't noticed he was go-

"Hey Makobo!" Futaba spoke through her last mouthful of Haru's latest creation. "We're almooth rethy!"

"If only you were so gung-ho about your own room," said Sakura-san as he dipped under the counter, rising up again with a plastic bucket full of cleaning supplies. Sundays meant keeping Ren's room in good repair.

"With this many of us it will be short work!" said Haru.
"You guys finish up, I'll start," said Makoto as she lifted the bucket from the counter. She was already on the staircase before anyone could object. The sound of water gushing in the sink, likely Haru doing the dishes, drowned out any further conversation.

Makoto surveyed the room from the top of the staircase. Particles of dust twinkled in the beams of sunlight casting through the windows. The attic seemed to generate more dust than all of the rooms in her apartment combined. It didn't help that Ren had amassed a large number of objects on which it could collect. Makoto smiled to herself. These were artifacts of a Ren free to explore the city and spend time with friends.

As her gaze landed on the couch, Makoto paused, her face falling. It was the last place she had been with Ren, seen him, before he turned himself in. If she had known... if she had known she would have clung to him a little longer, traced his face and burned it into her memory, made absolutely certain he knew how she felt. She found herself balling her hands into tight fists, the bucket rattling due to her shaking hand.

The sounds of multiple people climbing the stairs broke Makoto from her reverie. She stepped into the middle of the room, setting the bucket down. She tied a handkerchief over her hair before picking out a hataki and setting her efforts on Ren's work table. The cloth strips swished against his assortment of UFO catcher prizes.

By the time Makoto had worked her way down from the hutch to the desk proper, the others had spread around the room. Futaba was by the television, grasping a copy of Power Intuition. Haru was dusting the shelves, having paused before an oversized spatula. Yusuke was working on the free-standing souvenirs, his hataki making fluid and graceful motions over a replica of a famous nude statue. No one said anything, seemingly lost in what was before them, the mementos of their missing friend.

Makoto ran her fingers over the neatly stowed tools. It seemed like forever ago she was sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with Ren, learning how to make lock picks, thrilled to have his attention but unable to admit why. A breath of a laugh escaped her lips. She lifted her head, again scanning the room, fleeting memories of Ren, his actions, his mannerisms, echoed in her mind. Her eyes found their way to the couch once more. Suddenly her shoulders, her back, felt cold and unguarded. She wrapped her arms around herself and lowered her head.

"Mako-chan~" Haru called. She was crouched by the lowest shelves. "If you're done, why don't you sit down?"

Makoto blinked as she replayed her friend's words, having merely heard but not processed them the first time. She turned to Haru. "I should start sweeping."

"Inari can do it," Futaba didn't look up from her dusting.

"Hmm?" Yusuke was standing off to the side, examining the placement of the free-standing decorations. They had changed since Makoto last looked over.

"See?" Futaba finally turned to Makoto.

"Come on," Haru placed a hand on Makoto's upper back, guiding her to the couch. With her other hand, she tugged at the handkerchief knot at the nape of Makoto's neck. Soon the cloth was bunched up in Haru's hand. "I'll take this... now you can't work."

Makoto sat down, her feet crossed at the ankles. She stared blankly, vaguely aware of Yusuke's continued attempts to adjust the decorations. When Haru finished with the shelves, she sat down next
to Makoto, drawing her legs under her and wrapping both arms around Makoto's left. Shortly thereafter, Futaba joined them, resting her head on Makoto's right shoulder. The three girls continue to stare over the room. Yusuke began to sweep.

"I miss him," Futaba said quietly, her voice sounding more child-like than normal. She adjusted her position, leaning in further. Haru seemed tighten her grip as well. The sun was low enough now that they would soon need to turn on the lights.

Makoto raised her head, the logo of the Phantom Thieves just visible on the flag that hung above them. "I do too."

"Thanks for coming and helping out," Futaba continued to squirm. "I'm glad you guys are with me."

"Mm." Makoto turned back to Futaba.

"So... Makoto..." Futaba finally came to rest. "We're with you too, okay?"

Chapter End Notes

In "Sae's Lies," one of the prior chapter lies would have definitely been "My sister is not in love that boy."

So... Ren doesn't have a closet or a chest of drawers or a dresser. I suppose he can hang his uniform on those hangers by the window, but has he been dressing himself out of that cardboard box the entire year?

My thanks to TVTropes users Augustus813 and Andrzej and AO3 commenter BusyPerson for their continued contributions to TVTropes for this fic. Reading what you pick out, their classifications, and the reasoning behind them has been a real treat for me. I'm learning so much about tropes.

Announcement: Makoto Niijima Week is September 17 - 24. The prompts are available through the makotoniiijimaweek2018 tumblr (see also makotoweek on twitter). You can do as many or as few as you want and it's not just fics — art, memes, headcanons, vids, edits — contribute in your own way!

I really want to participate this year as I didn't even know about it last year. I probably won't be able to do all the prompts but I've already drafted one. I would like to experiment with style and tone if I have time. I apologize that Makoto Week, along with things ramping up for me at work, will delay the final chapter.
Niijima Makoto paced along the counter of Café Leblanc. Her heart beat heavy in her chest. Sakura-san had already left to retrieve Ren from the juvenile detention center. Only traffic stood in the way of his reunion with the team. Ren had been locked away almost as long as they had been dating. Things were sure to have changed. She worried her bottom lip.

"Argh! The waitin' is killin' me!" Ryuji roughly scratched at his scalp with both hands. He sat in the far booth, elbows on the table, across from his girlfriend Ann.

"And here we were worried it would take too long to change," Haru remarked as she bussed Yusuke's empty coffee cup and saucer. They had decided to change out of their school uniforms, not wanting to remind Ren of all he had missed. After washing the cup, Haru stepped from behind the counter and intercepted Makoto, putting a hand on her shoulder. She whispered. "You're making everyone nervous."

"Oh," Makoto looked at her friend. "R-right."

"Sit with me Makoto!" Futaba hopped down from the seat next to Yusuke's and dragged her over to a booth.

Makoto had a clear view of the door from where they sat. Futaba stayed close beside her. While she rarely said anything about it, the younger girl had a tendency to cling whenever Makoto was feeling anxious. She wasn't sure whose sake it was for.

The group chat had been a flurry of activity when they first got the news. After the initial celebratory burst, they had made plans to be waiting at Leblanc when Ren returned. Futaba had helped coordinate with Sakura-san. However, now that only the wait remained, the team had gone silent.

"Hey guys..." Ryuji started. "Do ya think he like... grew a beard or somethin' while in prison?"

Ann giggled. "Do you think he can?"

"Of course!" Ryuji was quick to respond. "This is our leader we're talkin' about!"

"Spoken by someone who care barely grow eyebrows," Ann's delicate laughter continued to underscore her words.

"I could grow a beard!" Ryuji sounded more offended than one would expect. "An' my eyebrows are fine!"

"No you can't." Though Ann's head was turned, her voice carried her smile. Ryuji's brow was furrowed and his lips pressed together in a small frown. Ann seemed to take note. "But yes, your eyebrows are fine. Every part of you is fine."

"Eheheh..." Ryuji's breathy chuckle faded as his skin grew more pink. He scratched the back of his neck with one hand.

"Just don't get a big head, 'kay?" By the time Ann finished her request, Ryuji's face was completely red. Makoto tried to imagine just what kind of expression Ann must have been making to bring him
to that state.

Perhaps sensing the simmering discomfort or perhaps by chance, Yusuke spoke next. "Maybe I should grow a beard."

"Disallowed!" Futaba's response was instantaneous. She turned to him and brought her arms in front of her in a cross.

"I don't know," Haru mused, a few fingers splayed across her chin and lips. "I think he'd look quite fetching."

Yusuke didn't respond. He merely made motions in the air in front of his chest, as if he were stroking a long beard.

"So what about it Mako-chan?" Haru turned, flashing a smile that was cute at first glance but terrifying to those who knew her. "Surely you know... can Ren grow a beard?"

"Eh?" Makoto sat up straighter. She hadn't really thought about it before. She recalled running her fingers along his jaw, the expression he made when he did so, the-

Futaba snickered. "You're getting red."

Makoto coughed into her hand and lowered her head, her shoulders pulling inward. She could hear a light giggle from Haru as well. It was soon swallowed by the café, leaving the group in silence once again. Makoto tried to think of something to say, to push aside the unease, not just within herself but her teammates. Nothing came.

The light in the café dimmed. Someone was at the door.

Makoto sat up straight, her eyes locked. The door opened. The jingle of the bell was faint, demonstrating practice and a soft touch. There he was, thankfully without bruises. Though, did he look a little thin? His eyes didn't take long to find hers. Whatever had been running ragged in her chest crawled its way up to her throat. She somehow remembered to smile, wave even, though she would later kick herself mentally for how awkward she must have seemed.

Ren smiled back, lingering for a moment before surveying the others. It was something he often did in the Metaverse, a check to make sure everyone was still there. As their leader, he didn't seem different. As her boyfriend, Makoto didn't know.

Futaba, then Ryuji and Ann, followed by the others were on their feet, crowding Ren. Everyone had wanted to see him. Makoto knew he would want to see everyone too, to make sure they were all okay. She hung back. As much as she wanted to know where things stood, this was a team matter first.

"She dropped by after work, but left early. She still has a lot of paperwork to fill out," Makoto explained her sister's absence to Dr. Takemi. The young doctor swirled her cup of coffee before taking a sip and returning it to its saucer on the counter. Makoto continued. "She's still thinking about starting her own practice after her work on the case finishes."

"What's this about your sister?" The two women turned to find Iwai-san. His son, Kaoru, was over at a booth playing cards with Ren, Ryuji, Morgana, and Mishima. Makoto didn't realize she had started staring until Ren looked up, catching her eyes. His lips were parted and his eyes were wide, inviting a response. She waved and squeezed the corners of her mouth, not quite making a smile. His welcome home party hadn't afforded them any alone time.
"Oh," Makoto realized no one had answered yet. Dr. Takemi only narrowed her eyes as she regarded the man. "I was saying she was here earlier, but had to leave."

"A shame," said Iwai-san.

"Y-yes," Makoto turned to Iwai-san, ineffectually trying to will her face not to turn red this time. "She's still quite busy."

"Well, now that I've verified that guinea pig's health, I better go. I also have plenty of paper work," Dr. Takemi pushed away from the counter and took one hard look at Iwai-san before sauntering towards the exit.

"Who's she?" Iwai-san raised an eyebrow as he watched the doctor retreat.

"Ren's doctor," said Makoto.

"It's nice that she could come," Iwai-san said as he turned back to Makoto. She tried looking him in the eye. Then she decided that was weird and shifted her eyes just above to his eyebrows. Then she decided that was also weird and focused on his lips since he was speaking. No. That wasn't good either. Why was this so hard?

"Y-yes," Makoto managed. She swore she heard some familiar chuckles not too far off. "Y-you and Kaoru-kun too. So many of you on such short notice."

Iwai-san grunted in affirmation.

Though it was last minute, many of the people the team had reached out to for help, the people from Ren's phone, had come by. It was fortunate that Sakura-san had prepared quite the feast. Makoto waited and watched as Ren spoke to each of them. It was a wonder he showed no signs of fatigue, smiling genuinely throughout the night. She hoped he understood how loved he was.

The group considered having a second party on Sunday, so even more people could attend, but Ren planned to visit his parents that day and said it would be better if he caught up with everyone individually.

The lull in the conversation seemed to scream at Makoto as the seconds passed. Perhaps she should list the other people who came? Perhaps she should ask about Untouchable? Perhaps she sholud-

"Hey Mako-chan," Haru approached Makoto and Iwai-san. The older girl was briefly startled but thankful for the interruption. "Why don't we talk to Sojiro-san now?"

"G-good idea," said Makoto. She waved a polite good-bye to Iwai-san and followed Haru behind the counter.

Sakura-san appeared to be done cleaning up the leftovers, something he had insisted on doing alone. The boys, less Yusuke, were still playing cards. Futaba had apparently convinced the artist to play games on Ren's old console upstairs. Ann had moved over to the booth adjacent to the boys.

"Sojiro-san?" asked Haru. He was watching Ren and the others from afar.

"What is it?" Sakura-san turned to the girls. Haru looked to Makoto and gave a brief nod, encouraging the other girl to speak.

"Haru and I... our graduation ceremony is in a couple weeks," Makoto explained, holding her hands in front of her stomach and worrying her fingers together. She didn't know him particularly well but
he had quietly supported them over the past few months. He rarely stepped in past that, but she was always thankful for when he did. Haru probably knew him better.

"You want Futaba to come?" Sakura-san sported a knowing grin.

"Yes we do and she's agreed, but we would also really like it if you could come too." Makoto laced her hands together, her fingers pulling against each other.

Sakura-san opened his eyes wide, his eyebrows rising.

"I-I mean, we'd understand if you couldn't," Makoto raised both her hands, palms open. "You have the café to run after all and."

"It would really mean a lot to us if you could attend," Haru interrupted. Her gaze was firm and even. Sakura-san's face relaxed back into a kind smile. Lines appeared at the corners of his eyes. "I'll be there."

It was late by the time the last of the guests left the party. Ryuji was practically prying Mishima off of Ren. The boy cried, loudly, about how worried he had been while Ren was in prison.

"What did he have to drink?" asked Futaba, folding her arms.

"Nothing as far as I could tell!" said Morgana. He was sitting on one of the chairs by the counter. The others gathered around him watching Ren, Ryuji, and Mishima who were by the door.

"Eehhh..." Ann's smile was strained through grit teeth. "Can you imagine what he'll be like when he starts drinking?"

"Ryuji will certainly have a lot to do!" Haru giggled as Mishima moved from crying on Ren's shoulder to Ryuji's.

"Are you going to be able to get him home alright?" Makoto turned to Ann. Mishima lived on her line.

"Yeah, I'm sure he'll calm down on the way to Shibuya," said Ann. "Ryuji will come with us if he's still being like this."

"Looks like they're about done," said Yusuke. Ryuji had managed to get Mishima out the door. "Shall we?"

Ann and Haru followed Yusuke to the entryway, saying their good-byes to Ren before exiting. Futaba looked to Makoto, then to Ren, and finally to Morgana.

"Mona~ come stay with me tonight," said Futaba, putting her hands on her thighs and leaning towards him.

Morgana looked over at Ren. The cat had barely left his roommate's lap all evening. He motioned his head toward the boy. "Maybe for a little. I gotta keep an eye on this guy."

Futaba grabbed the sides of Morgana's face. She spoke as she toyed with the cat. "Do you really like Ren better than me?"

"Of course!" Morgana's response was not entirely convincing as he nuzzled against Futaba's hands.
"We'll see," Futaba picked up the cat and headed home, stopping to hug Ren on her way out.

Ren turned from the door and walked over to where Makoto was waiting. The two stood apart, facing each other. Makoto wanted to reach out, to embrace him, but was unsure of her place. Had things changed when he was in prison? Had he changed? Sis had promised he was okay but she knew little about them. Looking up she didn't find the smile she had come to rely on. His arms remained still at his side. His eyes seemed to search her.

Eventually, Ren took a few small steps forward. His eyes met Makoto's as he opened up his arms for a hug. Makoto nodded, stepping in, her arms wrapping around his waist as his encircled her upper back. It was stiff, perfunctory. Makoto held herself to a polite amount of force. She refrained from leaning further in, not wanting to overstep her bounds.

That restraint was not long-lived.

Ren was okay. He had really returned.

Makoto let out a long breath, closing her eyes, her body relaxing, her arms sinking into him further, and her cheeks pressing into his. She felt his form follow, this time truly pulling her closer. A warm sigh grazed her ear. Held tight, she calmed in the sound of his even breathing and the knowledge that they were okay.

Leaning back, Ren took another look at Makoto. This time his eyes were bright and vivid, his smile genuine and excited. Makoto couldn't help but smile in return. Soon, a hint of mischief crept at the corners of his mouth. He lifted her, still in their embrace, and spun around as he threw his head back and laughed.

Makoto let out a short yelp in surprise.

Ren returned Makoto to her feet, bringing his chin over her shoulder once again, not yet letting go. His tone was soft. "I thought you'd be angry with me..."

Makoto opened her mouth to reply, but Ren started speaking again first.

"I should have told you... I... It all happened so fast and, and... at the time I just wanted our last night to be happy. I'm sorry."

"I was angry... a little bit... at first, but mostly I was afraid for you," Makoto squeezed tighter. "It must have been so scary."

Ren took a deep breath. "For the first few days... and then here and there, when I thought I'd..."

"Mm," Makoto nodded into him, not wanting him to complete his sentence.

"But you know," the warmth returned to Ren's voice. Makoto could sense him smiling. "Your sister's optimism never faulted. And even though we were trying to keep you and the others out of it, she'd find ways of bringing me news."

"Sis..."

"She'd end a meeting saying she had to see her sister off at her exams or help you find old study materials for a friend applying to high school or attend one of your friend's exhibitions."

"I didn't know..." Makoto smiled, biting her lip and letting go of Ren's waist. She brought a loose fist over her chest as he stepped back in turn. His face bore a serene grin and inviting eyes. "Did she say
anything else... about me?"

"Well..." Ren's eyes shifted away. He brought a hand through the back of his hair at the nape of his neck. "She also said that if you're not home by 22:00 tonight, I'll wish I had stayed in prison."

"O-oh," Makoto turned instinctively, as if it would hide the flush taking over her face. "Th-that's..."

Ren brought a curled index finger under Makoto's chin, coaxing her to face him once more. He leaned toward her. "We better make the most of this time."

"Yes," Makoto closed both eyes as she nodded, opening them again as she craned her neck towards Ren.

Their lips met. They wasted no time going deeper, but it was slow and deliberate, as if each wanted to savor every sensation. Ren slipped an arm around Makoto's waist, his other hand tracing along the line of her jaw. She placed both her hands on his back, half to keep him close and half for support. They parted only in brief to breathe, running their faces along each others, the light touch of their noses, their foreheads against one another a bridge between meetings.

This kiss was different than the ones before. While it carried the same rushes of excitement, reaching at times to her toes and urging at her core, its other facet, the soothing one, reached further than the others. Makoto felt the tension slip from her shoulders, as if she could melt into Ren and he into her. More so than ever, she felt truly with him. Their beings, their senses, their souls—all moved together.

Makoto found Ren leaning against the short wooden fence by the water when she arrived at Inokashira Park. The sun was nearly set. It was her first time seeing him that day. Though he was eager to go back to school—apparently keeping up with his studies had not been a problem in prison—even he agreed it was best not to rush things.

They had been so... mindful... about making the most of their time together the night before, she hadn't even thought about whether he had time for Valentine's Day until she got home. A quick message set up their date.

The park was more crowded than usual. They weren't the only couple that had recognized the merits of the park's natural beauty combined with its lack of cost or requirement for reservations. Though she knew it wouldn't be private, Makoto still thought it the best choice. Ren loved the freedom of the outdoors after all and it was the closest place that was the furthest from being like a prison.

Ren stood up, meeting Makoto as she approached. Their hands fit together naturally as they began to walk side-by-side along the river.

"Thank you for coming here today," said Makoto. "I wish I had more time to plan something."

"This is perfect," said Ren, squeezing Makoto's hand as he turned to her. He then raised his head to the sky, taking a deep breath, his chest and shoulders making exaggerated movements. He opened his eyes. The stars had just become visible against the darkening sky.

"I'm glad," Makoto continued to watch him, a small smile forming when she felt he was genuinely relaxing. "How was your day?"

"Good," Ren responded. "Sojiro had me running errands all day. It was nice... getting out."

"Mm," Makoto nodded. Her grip on his hand tightened slightly.
"It's okay," Ren turned to her again. "I'm fine, really."


"I'm taking it slow," Ren reassured her. "I just want to be back for exams. I rather not repeat second year."

"It's okay if you do," Makoto looked back at her boyfriend. "It's perfectly understandable."

"But then I'd be away for two years," Ren offered a slight smile.

Makoto frowned. "You could stay... finish high school at Shujin."

Ren shook his head. "I have to go back. When my parents were visiting... Mom looked so thin and I think Dad's hair's been graying faster. All of you have each other. They need me right now."

I need you.

"Don't look at me like that." Despite the admonishment, Ren's face was open as always. Makoto bit her lip, embarrassed her expression betrayed her. "You have Sae-san and Haru. Futaba has Sojiro and I'm sure Ann, Ryuji, Mishima... everyone will help her start school again."

"I know," Makoto's voice was barely above a whisper. Ren's argument was sound. She would want to be with Sis if their situations were reversed. If only it didn't have to be this way.

"Actually..." Ren stopped a few steps later as he twirled the lock of hair that fell between his eyes. "Could you check in on Sojiro from time to time? You know, make sure he's-"

"I will," Makoto gave a single nod as she looked Ren in the eye.

"Thank you," Ren's smile became a little more broad. He tugged at Makoto's hand. "Shall we?"

"Mm." The pair continued their stroll along the water. Something didn't sit right though. Makoto considered letting the matter drop. It was Valentine's Day after all. However, it was only going to bother her if she didn't. "If your parents need you, then-"

"I'll return. Definitely," Ren looked at Makoto, giving her another reassuring squeeze.

Makoto furrowed her brow. "But what about-"

"It was always the plan for me to leave for university," Ren returned his gaze in front of them as they walked. "It was this... this whole Shido thing they weren't prepared for. Being sent off was hard enough but then with everything recently... They just need some time. To know that I'm okay."

"Are you? ...okay that is," Makoto peered at her boyfriend. She saw his lips part to speak, but pause as his pupils shifted to find her watching. A small breath of a laugh escaped instead.

"I don't know," Ren tilted his head, giving Makoto more of his face. "It's... a lot has happened. But. Even if it's not right yet, I will be okay."

Something akin to a whimper tumbled from Makoto's throat. "Well... um, I'll always be available through voice and we'll talk regularly right? And, I'll visit and-"

"That makes me happy," Ren closed his eyes slowly before opening them and turning to face his girlfriend. "It won't be so bad. It'll be better than-"
"Mm."

At least they would be able to contact each other. She wondered what it would be like. Makoto let her hand slip from Ren's, bringing it in front of her to meet its pair. She kneaded her thumbs together as they walked.

The next few moments passed quietly before Ren spoke again. "Let's... let's not worry about it all yet. I know you don't like the uncertainty but-"

"No... you're right," said Makoto. Her hands fell to her sides. She laced her fingers with Ren's once more. "I also want to make the most of the time we have."

Makoto approached the podium, surveying the student body before her. It would be the last time. The thought tugged at her, one of the many such thoughts pulling in all directions. Graduation brought pride at one's achievements, excitement and fear for the next steps, and mourning at the loss the people she had come to know who would be going their separate ways. Which of the promises to remain as friends would bear fruit? Makoto's gaze landed on Ren, who was standing in line with his class.

Blond twintails were missing from the line up. Ms. Kawakami had let Ann join the audience of parents and family. She sat next to Shiho, the two girls holding hands between them. Between Ann's golden locks and Futaba's bright orange hair, her friends weren't hard to find. Once located, Makoto could make out Yusuke's tall stature, Sakura-san's pink shirt, and most importantly, the familiar form of Sis.

Makoto took a deep breath. The speeches before hers, made by the acting principal and other administrators, were too canned, too stodgy to make but the most oblique of references to all that had occurred in the year past. Her few minutes at the microphone would be different. For one final time, she summoned her student council president voice.

"I look at all of you, gathered here like this at the end of our high school journey, with joy and pride for what you've accomplished and sadness for what will never be again. This waypoint known as graduation is surely always momentous, but for us the more so. It's been a fateful year for us, one where we finally had to face the consequences of allowing our own to suffer," Makoto once again found Shiho in the audience.

"We were forced to face ourselves... and some of us stood up. From Shujin was born the Phantom Thieves," Makoto paused at a wave of murmurs and applause. Some of the teachers tried to calm the students, but to little avail. When they quieted, she continued. "The Phantom Thieves Incident thrust us into the center of a national conspiracy. We weathered it together and when the time came, we rallied together."

Makoto looked to Wada, standing at the front of his class.

"Despite being but students with no real power or authority, we effected change. It wasn't as dramatic as the Phantom Thieves but it saved the life of one." A small smile crossed Makoto's lips as she found Ren. He nodded at her. "It showed that each of us, contributing in our own small way, could accomplish so much. Like the Phantom Thieves, we rebelled against what was wrong, we took on the adults, and we did what was right."

"So what now?" Makoto paused, letting the silence hang with each question. "What do we do moving forward?"
"From now, we cast aside the rails that school set for us. With this graduation, we choose what we do next. We have to find the things beyond the exams, the problems we really want to solve."

"Maybe you want to create spaces that bring people together." Makoto looked to Haru and then to Eiko. "Or to reach out to those who are struggling."

"Maybe you want to advance the bounds of knowledge, of human capabilities," Makoto found Futaba and Yusuke in the audience again. "Or communicate the truths you've fought to comprehend."

"Maybe your dream is to inspire others." Makoto's eyes shifted to Ann and Shihó and finally to Ryuji. "Or maybe your dream is one you've yet to find."

"I was there too," Makoto brought a loose fist over her heart. She looked at Ren. "But recently I looked at the world and thought about what I wished it to be. Then... who I had to become became clear."

"The problems before us... they seem daunting. They're large. They're complex. They're unwieldy. We must keep growing and getting stronger to take on these challenges. To grow we must continue to face who we are and be honest about what we see," Makoto cast her eyes on the podium and her hands gripped its edges. She looked up once more. "But none of us needs to do it alone. Just as we fought these past few months, when we each do what we can, the world changes. For the better. It only takes one person to start."

"But it's even more than that: Despite what we experienced this year, most adults—most people—are good. They're trying to do what's right and they're willing to help if you just ask," Makoto found Sakura-san in the audience and then Sis. "So when you find a goal worth achieving, reach out. You can't truly be giving it all without using the resources you have, without relying on others around you."

Makoto's spoke with urgency, her rising volume a emblem of her spirit, her belief. She looked across all of the students.

"Moving forward, the most important thing we can do is to become the adults we wanted to see, to take action for what is right, and to lift others along with us. This is our charge now." Makoto took a breath. She brought a hand to her chest again, the other cupping over the first. Her voice grew more quiet. "So this is my pledge. Will you do the same? I know we can do it. We've done it before."

It took several moments for the audience to realize Makoto was done. Ren started clapping, then a few others, and finally the rest. It wasn't a great speech, but she had said what she wanted to say as best she could. It wouldn't be the last thing she had to say. It was a start, a beginning. There would be more opportunities. There was still so much to be done.

Makoto took a deep breath, inhaling the crisp March air from atop the Shujin roof, wisps of hair taking flight with the breeze. The congratulations and photos with friends and warm goodbyes were now behind her. This would be her final time escaping to the vegetable-lined hideaway she shared with Ren.

Last times make room for first times. Dad used to say that. As a girl Makoto had been rather fearless in looking ahead. University and her career to follow were among those long-anticipated firsts, but now she couldn't help but hesitate. Time and memories washed over her with the wind.

The sound of the door brought Makoto to the present. She spun, finding Ren.
"Sorry I'm late," he said as he walked toward her, a sheepish grin framing his apology. "Everyone wanted a picture with a Phantom Thief. I kind of miss when they all hated me."

Makoto closed her eyes and smiled, opening them to find Ren had closed the distance between them. As he wrapped his arms around her waist, she brought a hand to his cheek. "I'm glad they finally see some of what I admire so much."

"Yeah, I suppose it's not so bad," the corners of Ren's mouth pulled upwards. He looked around the roof. The tall stalks of Haru's final crop surrounded the couple. "I'm going to miss this."

"Me too." Makoto let her hand drop. She returned Ren's embrace, resting her head on his shoulder. In a scant few weeks he'd be gone. The days passed too quickly. She gripped him a little tighter.

It didn't go unnoticed.

"It'll be okay." Ren ran his hand over Makoto's hair. "We've planned."

In the weeks since he had returned, they had planned. Regular video chats. Alternating visits. An always open IM. At times it was exciting. They fantasized about all of the things they would do together when they would meet. In some ways, it would be easier since their Phantom Thief responsibilities were over. Today though, today was different. Perhaps it was the finality of their time at Shujin that put everything under a somber cast.

"I made plans with my classmates from middle school when we graduated too." Makoto lowered her head further and bit her lip. "I wonder what became of them."

How was it that things that seemed so important at the time could so easily slip away?

"It won't happen with us." Ren spoke with an assuredness that needed not urge, needed not argue, only be uttered as a simple, quiet fact.

"How can you be so sure?" Makoto lifted her head from his shoulder and loosened her grip. Ren followed, allowing her to step back and see his face. It was calm and inviting, like always.

"Because that's the way my love for you is." Ren raised his eyebrows and smiled.

"L-love?" Makoto opened her eyes wide. Her cheeks and nose felt warm.

"Yes." Ren's smile grew. "I love you."

Makoto felt Ren's declaration with every nerve. He waited. She stared, her mouth slightly agape. He looked so completely open and bright.

Ren stepped forward, gathering her again and sealing his statement with a kiss. She let herself collapse into his lips and into his words. There were no proofs or contingencies, only what they had together. The future they reached for was not yet a truth or a lie. It was a pledge.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading this fic. Writing it has been an experience for me and I'm truly amazed and honored to have people who joined me in it.
Makoto's Lies is the first multi-chapter fic I've completed. It's a big milestone for me. I've put some of my own reflections on this project as well as trivia and writing notes as a comment thread on this chapter so that they'll stay with the work, close to the story, but not embedded. It's mainly for me, but it's open to everyone. I've learned a lot along the way.

Once again, my deepest thanks.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!