Persona 5: Rouge

by necroalx

Summary

What would happen if the infamous boy with a record transferred to Shujin academy was actually living under a fake name? Ren Amamiya is forced to confront himself and find a meaning in his rebellious ambitions. Lots of fan theories used. Past games and characters referenced.

Notes

Following Atlus re-release trend. This story tries to add more plot elements to the already outstanding main story using LOTS of fan theories and some headcanons. Going as far as to tying up previous games events to the main P5 story.
Prologue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Persona 5 is owned by Atlus.

All characters and names are used only for creative purposes.

This story is a work of fiction.

Similarities between characters or events to persons living or dead in your world are purely coincidental.

The world is not as it should be.

It’s filled with distortion,

Vice and depravity rule over the faceless,

“Ruin” can no longer be avoided.

Those who oppose fate and desire change

From time to time, they were referred as “Tricksters”. 
Now is the time for them to rise against the abyss of distortion.

The alarm was ringing across the building.

The vices of the modern world in the lower levels were being interrupted by the uproar.

Uncertainty fills the atmosphere and it's demonstrated by the faces of people who are constantly looking above their heads, waiting for a punishment that's about to befall them.

“Huh?”

“There’s something here!”

A man that was back pedaling his steps is pushed aside by a man in black, as he looks to the rooftops, he signals the men beside him to move to different directions.

The place he was looking at…

A figure quickly rushed through the chandeliers of the casino, as if he was being pulled by a strange force, with catlike agility, that figure jumped again and again through the structures that were holding the roof and lights, the people were getting more and more nervous.

“Good now get running!”

A boyish voice said.

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Through the crowd another figure landed, white pants and black boots, neck-long brown hair turned his back to the agglomeration of people who were looking up.

“This is our only chance!”

He claimed before running to the door in front of him.

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A room full of machinery.

There, two juvenile figures were running away from two black suited guards.

One of the runners was wearing a white collar and a dark blue outfit with light blue gloves, the other one a had a glowing green figure wearing a black body suit, with their faces covered in the shadows.

They stop their march on a corner.

“Stay calm, you can get away now”

The girl says with her hand over her ear.

The guards were closing in…

Both get out of their hiding in unison.
The guards aim their weapons at them, they’re about to give a warning command.

But as soon as they aim their guns at them a smirk splits the girls mouth, followed by a bright light and smoke... They’re gone.

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Steps are heard through the halls full of graffiti.

At another side of the building, a shadowy figure of a woman wearing a black and blue body suit with spiky shoulder pads is poking out of a wall.

“We’ll retrieve the briefcase on our end.”

After that claim the girl proceeds to run towards a door close by, she’s out.

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Back on the roofs of the main hall, the initial coated figure is moving on through the glass ceiling over the gambling machines. He enters the ducts and again and goes back to the metal steps.

“Hey… Up there!”

“He’s here. Move in immediately.”

The figure is fully visible now, a boy wearing a black coat, holding a white briefcase. He has a white mask, frizzy hair, and a big smirk on his face.

“…suspects… not… confirmed… hold your… positions…”

He hears a distorted communication.

“What was that?!”

He hears the voice of the girl leading his way.

“Don’t worry about us. Just concentrate on getting away Joker.”

said the boyish voice again.

Stylish.

Aesthetically perfect.

Every jump that followed was intentionally looking to attract more looks and calls for a nosey heed, and most importantly, for the guards that were standing on his way.

“You won’t get away!”

The eyes through the white mask are looking for another exit, only to find more figures reaching closer…

A couple of guards are covering his exit, and two more are getting closer from the side. Since he landed from the roofs to a balcony, he's surrounded by the guards who entered the scene from a higher ground.
Suddenly a figure lands behind him, it's another casino guard.

He was following him through the roofs no he finally seems to have cached his trail.

He looks at him without losing his calm.

Suddenly the guard starts to tremble, the same thing with the two guards closing his way off the front door. Their bodies start to shudder as well, as if being possessed. Or more likely, as if they were morphing and melting at the same time.

“Take ’em down, Joker!”

A smirk

“Heh”

Black chains and blue fire start forming behind the boy’s figure.

“Ravage them!”

PERSONA 5: ROUGE

Security Alert level 99%

“He’s not alone, find them and kill them all!”

That was what the man in a suit in the security cameras room was shouting through his phone.

-Glass shattering-

The phantom boy comes out through the giant glasswork window spinning midair as if he was less heavy than a feather and as agile as a cat.

“Huh. What a show off”

Claimed a girly voice.

“You’re so reckless, you know that?”

Noted another easygoing female voice.

As he was getting close to the floor, the boy started to roll in the air while shrinking his body in a fetal position so he could land by the top of his toes, then proceed to roll down until he could regain his balance to reduce the speed of the fall.

He stays there on his knees, the remaining glass falls short after his perfect landing.

He can now proceed to the next stage of his plan, or so he thought.

Lights, blinding lights and stepping noises

The phantom… Joker, is surrounded by hundreds of special tactical police officers with cars and guns aiming only to him.

‘This bad, huh?’
“These readings. Huh? An ambush?”

“It can’t be”

“What happened?”

“Joker, can you handle this?”

“Joker!”

“Oh no!”

He can hear the cries of his comrades while looking for a way out, an escape route.

So far he, always managed to get what he wanted.

No matter the obstacles presented to him, since the day he stepped foot on this city… The phantom... Joker, always got away with his hands full and his objectives fulfilled.

But not this time.

This time, he was the pray, this time they all have been waiting to put their hands on him.

To take him down.

There is no escape route, there is no way to talk his way out of this. He’s completely surrounded. But that doesn’t mean he won’t try.

“CAPTURE HIM!”

He ran to his right side, there is a ladder that way. A fire exit that leads at the top roof he knows so well.

As he starts running, 80 police officers run after him.

The rest stay on position waiting for any chance to open fire, resistance to arrest has been confirmed.

The target is now on his way to the roof as he sees the chance to jump to the fire escape ladder on the side of the building.

But they weren’t shooting, they were aiming but they wouldn’t open fire.

The objective was obvious.

Taking him down was not the real goal here. To these men, he was the source of everything that was wrong with society these last months.

No. More accurately, he was the source of the lack of faith from the general public for the law enforcer organizations.

This guy who was running away from a crowd of police officers was the cause of such disruption. He was such a pain for them that every single one of them wanted to make him pay.

For that they should take him into custody, and make him feel the consequences of defying the law in a society abided by it.

Even so…
This is going well enough, his incredible agility seems to be paying off.

Days of training and an exceptional extra source of stamina and strength gives him the advantage against a bunch of adult police officers that even if they were trained to handle situations like this. They don’t have the speed and youth of the young masked criminal, besides the obvious plus of the source of his agility, he had the edge over them.

But even so, the only way for them to catch him would be….

“Huh?”

As Joker looks up he finds out that a boot is coming to his direction, he has no time to react. Was he foolish to think he was getting away with it?

He falls. On the top of the ladder several more police officers were waiting for him, there was no escape....

The Phantom was finally cuffed, every single one of the 80 police officers that were following him before surrounded him as soon as he touched the floor.

His fall was rough, normally he would have a bunch of broken bones because of it.

But his incredible resistance allowed him to endure it.

Although he did get hurt, the swatting team who were cuffing him didn't bother to spare an effort to be gentle during the arrest. After all he was trying to make a mock of the police once again.

“Suspect secured”

A dark figure closes by.

An law officer wearing a business suit.

No, he’s not a police officer anymore… Joker and this man knew each other, but the man in a suit was playing dumb…

He wasn’t the man he used to know anymore…

“Didn’t expected to find some kid. You have your team mate to thank for this,”

The man grabs him by the hair, as to reinforce the arrest and show a little more dominance towards him.

“You were sold out”

“…”

The boy closed his eyes, showing his resignation.

Day of reckoning: The phantom thief.

The screams and hits were heard through the empty halls of the police station underground.

A lone guard was nervously sweating as he tried his best to filter the screams of agony from the
teenager inside the room.

"GIVE IT UP"

"Ugh"

...

"Sign here, it's a confession under your name"

The voices paused... he could clearly understand what was going on, it was all this boy’s fault.

All the animosity the police had to deal with these past months, the mistrust of the common citizens, and most importantly, those paranormal events that lead to tragedy last month.

"...

"I see"

"I need your hands to sing, but..."

"Argh"

"I wouldn't mind if you end up losing a leg!"

The guard could hear the elevator’s ring as somebody else had arrived to the scene.

"We're going to make you understand, that one must take full responsibility for their actions..."

After a brief silence a man in a suit came out of the room accompanied by a couple of other police detectives.

He was fixing his tie and had a smirk on his face.

"Keep your post, now we just have to wait for a couple of hours..."

His tone changed and a grin was showing on his face.

"Before the transfer"

He said that and then turned around after hearing footsteps closing by, it was the sound of high heels hitting the ground of the silent uniform hall. The sound came from an elegant woman on her mid 20's, wearing a black business suit, she had gray-blonde hair and a serious look on her pale but overly good-looking face.

“Sae Nijima”

“Director Kamiya”

“I thought I told you that you were out of this case”

“What you did was assign me as the new probation officer for this boy’s sentence.”

She takes out a file from her purse and shows it to the tall man.

“The only thing I’m doing now is fulfilling my duties as such. Besides, I'm still a district prosecutor, and the last person assigned to this case.”
“Fulfilling your duties, Huh? if that was the case, you wouldn’t have allowed any of this to happen, at the very least you would have known better”

She lets out a gentle but controlled sigh.
“With all due respect sir, the same can also be said of you…”

The animadversion was evident by looking at their incriminating stares, the guard and the detectives that were looking at the two exemplar agents of the law found themselves wordless as they awaited for a resolution in silence.

“Tch. Very well, you’ll have your talk. Although it’s not really your place to do so at this stage. You have one hour and 30 minutes, probably a little more if the transport for prison get’s delayed”

As if a weight was let out of her shoulders, she sighs in relief.

“Thank you, sir.”

The Police officers step aside and let the tall woman enter the room behind them.

"She's really a handful to the very end..."

Kamiya said before turning to the police officer behind him.

"Let her know when her time is up, I'll tell your commissioner how things are going now"

"Yes sir!"

With that the suited man starts leaving the scene.

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“So, it’s really you…”

The boy looks over the woman, he was sitting with his elbows resting on the table and one of his hands covering his face, he had a gloomy look on his face, as she gets closer and takes seat in front of him with a somewhat sad look on her face, she takes her time to take a good look at him.

Bruises on the face, and the cuffs scars showing over his wrists, as an evidence of him being manhandled and dragged around, probably even shoved to the floor, as she looks at the small drops of blood on the room's floor.

“I wonder… Had I accepted to be your probation officer from the start…-”

“…”

Her words only meet a hurtful silence from the boy, he wasn’t going to raise his head, as if he was embarrassed of the bruises the policemen let on his face before she entered.

“Those bastards.”

Even so, he notices that the woman eventually finds out by just looking around the room, the boy takes a look beside the table to notice a syringe lying on the floor.

The woman in front of him presented herself as a prosecutor to those officers, but even so, those men didn’t bother to hide the evidence, as if his wounds wouldn’t be enough evidence of torture, he knows they could have just alleged that he was resisting the arrest.
But maybe, that syringe was let lying on that spot, for a very specific reason.

To send a message to him, or to whoever was meant to enter this room next.

“We have time, not as much as I would’ve wanted, but I need you to listen, most importantly, I need to know...”

She gets closer to the boy, trying to make him look at her with a concerned look on her face.

“But first. You realize what the situation is, right?”

“The camera was probably plugged the whole time, but they still can do whatever they want, even after I pulled so many strings to get in here, they can still get back and do whatever they want to you at any time, and I can’t do anything to stop them.”

“...”

“So, what I’m doing right now, is giving you a chance, I must ask you to answer my questions.”

“Chance?”

The boy said, shaking his head and moving his hand to cover part of his face again, his eyes meet hers for a moment.

The prosecutor was always wondering what the motives behind this boys actions were, even before finding out about his real identity, but right now, she had a very precise query.

‘Can he really answer my questions in this state?’

“What do you want to know, Nijima-san?”

Her doubts were meeting with a satisfactory answer for the first time.

She calmly got closer to him as to look straight into his eyes, a technique that invades private space that is usually used to intimidate people into giving honest answers.

But not this time, the voice that came from her the moment after was soft and somewhat begging.

“I want to know exactly what happened, from the very beginning. I know all about your supposed parents, how your father works overseas and his past working with government organizations, that’s at least as far I can know, I also know they were an influence to your arrive to this city, but more importantly they couldn’t do anything else for you, is that right?.”

The boy doesn’t react to the prosecutor bringing up the situation with his parents.

He doesn’t really seem to mind it at all, but then again his hair covered his eyes as he lowers his head a little, his state of mind can barely be read through the eyes of the prosecutor in front of him.

His parents, what would they think if they know he was under arrest? ...Again

**Aria of the soul**

“Tell me Ren-kun...”
This is truly an unjust game

Another voice was filling the room...

“Tell me everything”

The chances of winning are almost none

Or was it coming from his head?

"from the very beginning"

Was he hallucinating?

“Please”

Please...

---"Shibuya, reaching Shibuya"-----

He woke up!

Prologue End

Note:
Update 21/02/2018: More grammatical errors fixed, sorry about that.
Update 01/11/2018: Welp. First of all happy new year, second, Persona 5 anime has been announced with a release date by the time of this update, even going as far as the main character canon name being published.
The thing is, the protagonist name is kinda of a big deal in this story, and I certainly really liked the name Akira Kurusu. Yet as you can see from the end of chapter 1, the name becomes an important plot point, but considering the story path I was trying to set up from the very beginning, the name Ren Amamiya actually became somewhat more relevant to me after finding out the meaning behind it. (Look it up, it’s certainly quite a fitting name.) So I decided to go along with that name instead, since its more promising for the story I’m trying to write here, regardless of the first intention of this fic was making use of an interesting fan theory, this is an obvious not canon story, and since it began publishing before the Anime began its broadcasting, there’s no purpose on going for that road, yet the amount of sub plots and fan theories I had in my head (with scenes developed and written down already) by the time of the announcement, I decided to
continue this story, trying to keep it as true to the main game story as I could while using those arguments and speculations to continue it given how much time I was investing on it.

And finally, I've been told these chapters kinda drag on a little too much sometimes, given the amount of verbatim I chose to use for certain scenes. Because of that, I decided to fix some of those dragging scenes and try to be as concise and to the point as I could, I'll probably even fix more of those eventually. But the reason I chose to do that in the first place was because I wanted to expand the characters personalities and motives as much as I could during those specific events during the game, you know, characterization, so I'll probably keep doing a little of those, but not as much when it comes to the same dialogues in the future, and I also decided to split the original chapters dividing them into two parts each, more than anything, I did it having the reader's time and patience in mind, I apologize for those long reading sessions and I hope you continue following this story.

And if there's anything else you feel I should change, please let me know, your feedback really helps me as someone who aspires to be a proper writer.
The White Mask Part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The white mask Part 1

Day of reckoning: The phantom thief. 01

Police Department building – Interrogation room

“What was your goal?”
The young silver haired prosecutor proceeded with her questioning.

Sae Niijima was sitting in the dark interrogation room inside Tokyo’s police station.

In front of her, it was this young bruised kid. He was captured, tortured, and now he is being interrogated.

The effects of the truth serum may be affecting his mind right now, but he has enough coherence left to understand what she’s saying.

“Why did you caused such an incident”
The face of the prosecutor was torn between sorrow and disappointment.

She was aware of this kid rebellous behavior. But she would have never thought that this boy would cause such disarray in the entire country.

“I didn’t think it was a prank from the get go, but I couldn’t assemble a case for prosecution.”
The young prosecutor wondered about all the connections, all the events that leaded to this scenario. She couldn’t put all the pieces together.

She needed a confession. She needed this kid to make sense out of the case she was working so hard to solve during the past months.

“It’s because I couldn’t figure out the method behind it.”

Sae folded her arms.

The boy was holding his forehead with his bruised right hand.

“Of course you couldn’t.”

He sounded somewhat sad while talking to her.

This encounter was getting them both into an uncomfortable situation.

“Niijima-san, you didn’t know everything about my parents… You only knew what my file said about the Amamiyas, right?”

This was surprising.
The boy she knows as Ren Amamiya inquired her about her investigation.

It was true that she only had a short report about this boy life before arriving to Tokyo.

A report that’s provided by the court, and she needed to move some favors to get that file.

“... That’s right. What about it?”

After a brief silence she conceded an answer.

The boy closed his eyes, took a deep breath and apologized.

“I’m sorry, but there was no way you could’ve known then.”

She only got a cryptic response again.

It was obvious she was getting tired of these types of answers.

“… Then, tell me. What does that have to do with everything else?”

She tried to get closer to him from the other side of the table, putting her hands on her laps. Almost sounding friendlier.

In reality, she was desperate for an answer.

This boy’s family, his record and his past apart from this folder. All that was a complete mystery for her.

“There’s no way I could be convinced of such…. “World”, just by reading the reports…”

But Sae Niijima tried to go straight to the point.

Such a “world”…

The reports claimed the boy had been making some extraordinary acrobatics. He was capable of doing super human jumps until his clothing morphed after his capture. Leaving him only with his current school uniform he was wearing right now.

But there was something else about the place of his capture…

“When and where did you find out about that 'world'? How is it even possible to steal another’s heart? Tell me.”

She rained questions on him.

Niijima wanted specifics.

The effects of the drug injected to the boy vary depending of each person's biology.

His reaction wasn't very promising, that's why the police decided to add the torture element to their interrogation. Besides the mere amusement of that such an activity entitled.

“In your first day in Tokyo, there was a terrible train accident. You remember it, don’t you?”

She thought she could help him to reorganize his thoughts by bringing up those events.

“I assume you know of the uproar that the general public calls the ‘psychotic breakdowns incidents’, 
Those accidents were of great significance. Sae was building her case around those specific incidents. Studying them, investigating everyone involved.

Every single one of them.

“I might.”

The sarcasm in his voice was evident.

After a moment Sae flinches showing her discomfort.

“You say it like it’s none of your business.”

She had a sardonic answer of her own. Niijima wasn’t mad, but she was getting annoyed.

It was possible for her to cope with this kid’s wit if that meant she could get her way out of it.

“It was all over the news, and one of the victims included a teacher at your high school. I’ve no doubt you heard about it.”

With that she relaxed her back on her seat again. The boy had to account for everything that happened those days.

From her perspective, there was no way he wasn’t involved after all.

“On that day… were you still an ‘ordinary’ student?”

‘Ordinary’ The boy thought, nothing about his circumstances were ordinary.

“…”

Sae shakes her head.

“Let me change the question. You transferred to Shujin Academy, correct?”

The boy nods

The young prosecutor fixes her hair and continues.

“An ordinary prep school that could be found in any city…. That’s what it should’ve been.”

‘How it should’ve been huh?’

For some reason those words annoyed the boy, he closed his eyes and fixed the tuft of hair going down his forehead.

“What happened around that time? Tell me everything, truthfully.”

His head hurt… but he starts to remember… All began with a dream….

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“‘You’re held captive.’”
“A prisoner of fate to a future that has been sealed in advance.”
“This is truly an unjust game… Your chances of winning are almost none.”
“But if my voice is reaching you. There may yet be a possibility open to you…”
“I beg you. Please overcome this game… And save the world…”

"This is the last stop of this line. Please transfer to..."

The young boy wakes up. He was sitting in a train surrounded by strange and unknown faces.
The boy has frizzy black hair and is wearing typewriter like glasses.
He rocks some plaid fabric pants and a buttoned black blazer over a white turtleneck.
A number two is visible over the logo in his blazer, meaning that the boy is a 2nd year in high school.
There, he’s been looking at his phone since he woke up in the long distance train he was riding.
After checking the time, he begins to navigate through his chats, erasing them one by one.
????: "Get back soon"
????: "Take care, don't forget our deal"
"7-1Chat" - delete
He stops at the last one he received.
Dad: "This is Sojiro's-san number. Be sure to say hi to Kamiya-san. Take care."
"..."
-delete-

**New beginnings**

The boy arrived to the Shibuya station by foot after getting down from his last train.
From this day he is going to live in Tokyo, the most populated city in the world.
The navigation app on his phone shows the lines leading to Yongen-jaya.
That means first he has to go through the station square, in the middle of the most crowded ward of Tokyo.
There are approximately 221,000 people living in Shibuya, a district that is part of a city with more than 13,000,000 people.
This overwhelms the boy’s hometown bustle, a regular seaside city.

He goes a few blocks ahead. Arriving to the main Shibuya interception that connects to the central street and the station square.

He can use the Yongen line next, but on his way he finds himself wondering how long it would take for him to get lost.

“Right now? In this station?”

“Did you hear about it, right?”

"Like there's a lot of those lately! there was just another psychotic breakdown just the other day right?"

While walking through the interception, he hears a female voice near a food stand in the station square.

They were two female students wearing blue jackets and blue plaid fabric skirts, he can’t identify the school logo. But they seem to be from an art school since they were also carrying each a poster tube bag.

“A site does that…? I mean c'mon.”

'Psychotic breakdown...’ The boy ponders about the meaning behind of those words.

The thought of a person loosing self-control. Attacking or hurting complete strangers, it feels like if it was taken out of some western horror movie.

He passed by the mumbling girls. He could also read the articles on the newspaper stands near the two students

*The news about tax increase, rise in psychotic breakdowns---*

*'Nothing but dangerous articles... Shibuya is that dangerous?’The town boy couldn’t help but wonder about the dangers of daily life in a capital city.

“Isn’t it scary?”

“But you’re kidding right? A mental shutdown?”

“It’s the truth”

“You really love all that occult stuff don’t you?”

He hears the innocent conversation between the two high school girls with a hint of curiosity.

His attention is brought back to his phone, since he closed the navigation app without realizing it.

‘Dammit’

A twitch of frustration, it didn’t took long, he was already lost.

'So many people'

Looking up at the city lights, he realizes he was in the middle of a big interception where hundreds of
people were crossing the streets.

When did he got here?

He tried to open his navigation app again. But this time he notices a new weird application was showing itself on his phone.

‘This wasn’t here before’

He clicks on it out of pure curiosity.

The sea of people around him was saturating his awareness.

The boy wasn’t used to such agglomeration of people in his hometown.

But this was japan after all. There are people everywhere you look.

The kid remained calm and continued his walk. Until he noticed the weird app had spread out to cover the entire screen of his phone.

It looked like a weird red eye with black patterns.

The screen glowed while he tried stopping the app from taking over his phone.

“What the… Huh?”

A chill ran down his spine.

There were no words that could describe the feeling of isolation he felt right after touching his phone one last time.

After his attention dispersed towards his surroundings, he saw what looked like a spike coming out of the floor.

It was so sudden that he jumped back.

The spike suddenly disappeared. But instead two more came out near him, one on his right and another one behind him.

‘What’s going on? Why am I the only one-’

Then he noticed it. The spikes were appearing and disappearing around him. But what gave was giving him pause was… that he was the only one moving.

The people around him, they were frozen where they stood.

Not a single soul was moving, not even breathing.

This wasn’t a dream.

He could still feel everything, the wind, the smell and the heat of daylight, but there was something he could not identify.

An intimate feeling he could not welcome.

He didn’t know where it came from, but it closing by.
He hears a voice and immediately starts looking through the crowd.

The boy knows that the voice came from somewhere near him, even he was the only one moving. Something was speaking directly at him.

Finally his gaze stops at the middle of the interception. He found a light coming from between the group of people right in front of him, as if mirroring his own position, there was another boy with the same uniform he was wearing... but his gaze was directed at the floor instead.

His frizzy hair covered his eyes.

The boy in front of him didn't say a word, but the voice definitely came from him.

The shadowy figure of himself was now looking at him.

There was no mistake... the source of the voice wasn't that kid standing in front of him, but it came from within himself.

He looked exactly like him, but he wasn't wearing glasses and his eyes were a burning light yellow and black tone. And he was wearing a disturbing smile the whole time.

It was a scary sight, he couldn't move a muscle.

It was so familiar and so terrifying at the same time.

The strange boy starts to consume into a blue flame that came from his feet.

His form morphed from the flames and wings arose from the fire.

The flames rose to the air and vanished on the skies of Tokyo.

The people around him started moving again, as if nothing had happened.

Nobody stopped to notice his change of peace, nobody even realized he was standing there.

This was the daily life in Shibuya.

'A hallucination?'

He clenches his fist. He couldn't understand what was that all about, but he felt like he failed to do something at that time.

'I'm not that tired.'

He sighs while lurking through his phone again.

That strange app was still there, he wondered if it had anything to do with what he saw. He dragged the app down the recycle bin in his phone and deleted it.

He had to find his way towards his new home. There was no point on dwelling about it until he can rest bellow a new roof.

The boy continued walking through the station.
Making his way to the Yongen-jaya residential district.

**A place to be**

The “open” sign on the door of the small café shop invited anyone who wanted a peaceful and quiet afternoon.

The people inside were having snacks or the house coffee before heading to their homes to end their days.

There was a board saying “curry and house blend” with an accessible price written on it.

Two men were each reading different newspapers.

One was sitting on the bar with an apron and the other one was a black haired man in a business suit. He was wearing semi-transparent sunglasses.

There is also an old couple watching the news while enjoying each a cup of coffee.

“A public transit bus was driven down an opposing lane with its customers still in!”

Only the old couple bothered to actually hear the news on the tv.

“This is too much, how long until people can have some peace in this country?”

Said the old husband.

While the broadcast news kept on their reporting, the door bells rang as it opened from the outside.

The young boy wearing a peculiar school uniform entered the café to find a serene scene.

“What could be going on? Didn’t something similar happen the other day?”

The concerned old wife spoke to her husband who took a look at the barista who was still solving his puzzles

“Hmph. Vertical is…”

The man who seems to be past his 40’s notices the teenage that was standing in front of him with a stoic expression.

“Oh right.”

He says with surprise.

“He did say it was today…”

The old couple finishes their coffee and leaves their table.

The barista smiles at them before confronting the kid

“So you’re…”

Before he could name the boy, a voice interrupts their introduction.
The man in a black suit that until then was giving his back to both the Barista and the boy while sitting on his booth speaks the boy’s name.

He puts his newspaper down and turns around to greet the young boy, not before drinking his last sip of coffee.

“I apologize.”

Said the man.

"I was supposed to pick you up from the station, but I realized I would’ve minimized the time it took you to get here if you found your way on your own… as you can see on the news, transit here in Tokyo has been quite a mess these days.”

The man signals back at the tv, which was reporting a traffic jam near their area.

“…”

Ren, the school boy whose hair looked like he got off from a roller coaster bowed to greet the man in black.

But even with his tousled appearance, he didn’t seem to bother about this man’s blunt attitude.

“I’m Kamiya, Officer Jirou Kamiya, I’m your probation officer. But more importantly, I’m a very busy man…”

“I’m taking care of your case because of… well to put it shortly, your father.”

Amamiya remains quiet.

He felt a weird stir after taking a look at this man.

This man was something more than a police officer.

“I know…”

The cold gaze of Kamiya didn’t show any kind of sympathy, he’s used to deal with criminals after all.

“Good, that facilitates things. This man right here, he’s Sojiro Sakura, he’ll be taking care of you”

The young boy shifts his gaze towards the barista wearing a pink shirt and white pants and an apron.

“Hello, Sakura-san, please take care of me”

The boy leans as he greets the old man.

“Right”

Sakura was still learning the boy’s reactions and behavior.

“Anyway, since you’re already here, there are just a couple things I want make clear to you.”

Kamiya takes a quick look to his wrist watch before he proceeding.
“First, don’t call for me. You have Sakura san to cover for all your basic needs. Only call if it’s absolutely necessary, like if you’re about to die or something like that… Still, it’s not my job to care about you.”

He says while scratching the back of his head.

“Only to make sure you are where you’re supposed to be during your curfew. Second, always be at home before 11 PM. I'll come to check on you at least once a month, I’ll probably let you or Sakura know beforehand. That’s all.”

The man takes off his sunglasses to clean them before continuing the conversation.

“Anyway it took you long enough to get here, my time is up. I must return to my duties, I trust you have everything from here?”

Kamiya turns around towards Sakura, attempting to finish the conversation before taking off.

“Yes, it'll be 500 yen tho.”

Said Sakura with a smirk on his face.

“Heh, I wasn’t going home without paying. Here.”

After paying, he takes the briefcase that was lying on the table and gives Ren one last advice.

“Anyway there’s no need to remind you about your documents and your transfer, right?”

A bemused Sojiro looks at the boy who was only reciting short words after every question.

“...No”

Amamiya only needed one word to keep the conversation going this time.

“Good. See ya then. Sakura-san”

The man takes off and leaves the two alone.

Sojiro takes another look at the boy.

“I was wondering what kind of unruly kid would show up, so you’re the guy huh?”

Ren remained silent and not displaying kind of emotion.

This only raised Sojiro’s guard though.

“Follow me”

The coffee owner signals the boy as he heads towards some stairs a few steps after the bar and the toilet door.

The attic room was awfully dusty.

There were boxes, books and even a bicycle lying around.

This was essentially an oversized dumpster.

Something that looks like a bunch of wood boxes was holding a mattress. The wood floor seems to
be resistant but it’s so dirty that you can hardly notice the cracks between the unions. Sakura turns towards Ren and notices he was starting to cringe at the sight of the room.

“This is your room. Hmmm? You want to say something”

Sojiro confronts the boy in an obvious attempt to get a reaction out of him.

“…Cluttered”

Again, a short worded answer.

“Well, then clean it.”

Sakura decided not to look too much into while taking out a cigarette.

“I’ll be leaving after I lock up each day. You’ll be alone at night, but if you do anything stupid; I’ll throw you without a question.”

Admittedly, Ren didn’t bother paying much attention since he was still startled at the state of his new room.

“Now, I got the gist of your situation.”

Sojiro continued as he lights up his cigarette.

“You tried to defend a woman from a drunk man trying to take advantage of her, he got hurt, sued you and you’re here on probation as a result.”

"..."

“That’s what you get for getting involved in the matters between two adults!”

Sojiro said in a preaching tone while holding his chin with one of his hands

“The court ordered you to transfer and move out here, which your parents also approved. In other words they got rid of you for being a pain in the ass.”

Ren didn’t respond and the barista was getting a little annoyed as he started scratching the back of his head.

“If you behave yourself for the year, your probation will be lifted. If you cause any trouble you’ll go to juvie.”

Sojiro was ready to leave the room before turning around one last time.

“I’ll be closing shop soon, take your time and clean this room, then go to sleep, tomorrow will be a long day, I’ll have to take you to Shujin academy.”

“…Shujin?”

Given this boy’s puzzled reaction, Sakura can guess he wasn’t paying attention to the recap of his new life even back at his hometown.

“Shujin Academy, your new school, haven’t you even looked at the logo on the jacked you are wearing?”
Sojiro crossed is arms as he looks at the boy trying to figure out if he’s messing with him.

‘Not really’

Ren didn’t respond again but at least bothered to nod back at the barista.

“There’s rarely a place that’ll accept someone like you, you know.”

Sojiro started warning him about the limitations he has to serve in his behavior.

“Anyway, there is your luggage, I’ll be downstairs.”

Ren was left alone in the room.

After looking around the room, he notices a plant that is scarcely alive. There’s a tool desk, usually it’s used to make furniture repairs and it has a lot of rare tools on it.

‘Unexpectedly useful’

The boy thought, as he didn’t saw Sakura Sojiro as a man that repairs his own damaged furniture. There’s a big table on the other side of the room one that can be used to eat or study if needed.

A big shelf with lots of books and small boxes in it. There’s also a ladder and a fan near it. There’s another table and a smaller shelf near the tool desk. And finally, the bed, that doesn’t look that bad after a closer examination.

‘A very practical room, if I had anything of my own anyway.’

Doing his best to stay positive, he manages to make the room look a little tidier after some cleaning. He had no choice after all. The boy had to stay here the rest of the year.

There was no room on the trains even at these hours.

There are usually a lot of people standing. People are going back home after a long workday, and students were finishing their school day too.

Tomorrow was Sunday, which means he wasn’t going to assist to classes yet.

In morning, Ren will go to Shujin Academy to introduce himself to the principal. So he can start his one year probation on the ironically called Shujin Academy.

"Don't cause any trouble, huh?"

Ren, submerged in his own thoughts while lying on his now cleaner and improvised bed tries to force himself into slumber.

‘Starting tomorrow I’ll have to live up to this name…’

He sighs as he tries to relax.

‘He doesn’t seem that bad, although he’s a bit grumpy’

He remembered, a few months back… those voices are still engraved in his mind.

("Damn brat! I’ll sue")

A bloody face, a woman at the edge of tears, two police man, he was cuffed.
Life was never the same after that.

He could only wonder if he did the right thing, or if he could've done something different to avoid such bad fortune.

‘Heh. Bad luck’

If there was a word that would describe Ren’s situation it would be “bad luck”.

The boy is not superstitious, but he can’t ignore the chain of events that led to that ‘fateful’ day.

He was hurriedly sentenced, and his parents’ lives were also affected after that day.

He was expelled from school, and his life and future as a free man were taken from him.

"It was my entire fault" he was forced to think, he couldn't convince himself that that was the case though.

His father told him that he was "in the wrong place at the wrong time".

So the term “Bad Luck” was a way to look at his circumstances and laugh.

That was all he was able to do at this point.

He looks back at his phone, this time he noticed something else.

The weird eye-like logo that had a star in the middle of it was back again, he thought he deleted it.

‘How creepy’

He deleted the app again while thinking about resetting his phone.

There was no time to worry about such details, tomorrow was a big day.

‘Who wears sunglasses while they’re indoors anyway?’

He had one last thought before falling asleep.

- 

The prison School

The visage of early morning Tokyo was something to behold.

Shujin Academy is located in the Aoyama district.

In front of the entrance, Amamiya and Sakura stood reviewing how his new school life will be from now on.

The middle aged man was wearing a pink shirt a white coat, khaki pants and a fedora.

Amamiya will get his own student card ID.

He'll need it to travel back at Leblanc without needing to pay a fare.
But since it was Sunday, Sakura decided to take the boy to school on his car.

After making clear Sakura doesn’t care about the boy’s daily struggles once again, they head in to meet the principal.

While greeting the principal, Sakura starts signing Ren’s official registration.

Ren takes a look at the large hairless and wide man, Ren looked at him with a cumbersome look. He didn't allow himself to show too much discomfort. He was also being examined by a female teacher.

She had long tousled hair and was wearing a yellow long sleeved T-shirt with a blue jeans skirt that reached her knees.

Her troubled or more likely annoyed expression made him feel uneasy.

“To reiterate, just so we're clear, you will immediately be expelled if you cause any problems.”

The large man, sitting in the Principal of Shujin desk, spoke once more. He had a serious look on his face while speaking to the frizzy haired boy.

‘I should make a list of how many times they recite this’

Amamiya thought without showing any kind of emotion once the lecture continued.

“Honestly I hesitated on accepting someone like you, but there were… circumstances on our side…”

The principal continued.

“You might have done a variety of things in hiding in your hometown, but you’ll have to behave yourself here.”

‘Variety of things, huh?’

The kid doesn’t seem to remember any kind of deviant activities besides taking late night walks during his winter vacations.

“If you’re thrown out of our school, there will be no place left for you to go. Keep that in mind.”

‘That’s three today’

Amamiya remembers Sakura’s warnings before entering the school ground.

“This is the teacher in charge of your class.”

The principal finally introduced the woman besides him.

“I’m Sadayo Kawakami. Here’s your student ID”

Said the young girl unenthusiastically as Ren picks up the card she throws at the principal’s desk.

“Be sure to read the school rules. Any violations will send you straight to the guidance office.”

She says in a monotonous tone.

“And, if by chance you cause any problems, I won’t be able to protect you at all… That IS your promise, yes, principal Kobayakawa?”
Another for the kick you out counter’ Ren thought

At this point, Ren Amamiya’s mind had drifted away from the conversation.

He felt the day was only dragging more and more as the neckless principal continued to show his abundant impeaching language.

Once they abandoned the room, Sakura sighs while muttering to himself.

“They’re treating you like some kind of nuisance... I guess that’s what it means to have a criminal record”

Ren is well aware of this. As soon as he was imprisoned, even if it was for a short while, the authorities made clear to him that his life and his future as a free man were over.

“It turns out your past follow you wherever you go…”

‘I guess he’s right, but still…’

Ren’s past was completely unremarkable. At least it would have been, if it wasn’t for one event.

(‘I’ll take you to court, you’ll regret this!’)

That night. The thought of choosing to make a difference was the one that condemned him to a future of prejudices and disadvantages.

Since then he was constantly being told that he'll never be whoever he wanted to be anymore.

“By the way... If you get expelled I wouldn’t hesitate to kick you out. Got it?”

‘And four.’

“I’ll be caeful”

Ren finally said with a disinterested look on his face.

“Hmph....”

Sakura sighs while looking at the boy. It didn’t pass over him that he wasn’t paying attention for a long time now.

They go on their way out of the school.

Ren notices the teacher from before speaking to a tall man wearing sport clothes.

“It’s going to be a long year’

INTERLUDE / Case 1

The Shibuya train station had hundreds of thousands people wandering around during all hours, all week.

The weekends weren’t the exception. But during the Sunday’s noon, people are usually more
concerned about their personal affairs.

This was the case of one of the lines connecting Shinjuku to Shibuya.

The train was reaching its stop, with about 100 people were aboard.

A hundred more were waiting at the station for the next boarding.

But the train wasn't diminishing it's speed before reaching its usual stop.

What followed was total wreckage.

The passengers were in panic.

A derailment was an absurd concept for this age's technology.

Everyone in Tokyo knew something like this should be impossible. But the dismay overcame.

Meanwhile in the train driver cabin, the man who was operating the machine was alone.

He didn’t seem to be in control of his actions. His eyes were lifeless and black liquid was emanating from his eyes, nose and ears.

Just like his passengers, he couldn’t do anything to stop the incoming tragedy.

The crash was inevitable. And it's heard all around the station.

Those events resounded around the country. The newscast was commenting on the subway accident later that day.

The plinth said “Approximately 80 injured during train derailment“.

Next to the news woman a list of names and number of accidents that had taken place during the last month were shown.

“… According to the police, the engineer’s life was not in danger despite his injuries. After questioning, police are still looking of a plausible motive…”

Inside a big office, two people were watching the SNN news.

A tall silver haired woman was standing in front of a desk.

This was the office of the Director of Special Investigation Unit of District Prosecutors Office.

In other words. This was the office of the man in charge of the Special Investigation Unit that uses both the district prosecutors and police resources to solve grand scale cases.

“It’s of an operating accident and more of a crime of the company and the government.”

The old man spoke his mind to the young prosecutor beside him.

“Site inspectors apparently reported all of this six months ago—the deterioration of the tracks and the ATC.”

The young woman was still paying attention to the TV report as her boss was speaking his mind. This accident was more than just an accident, and there was something that was ticking her off.
“Seems the railway company and the Ministry of Transport both turned a blind eye to the truth. There’s no way they can hide, this will go all the way to the top.”

The SIU director seemed to have already sentenced the culprits of this case before the investigation even started.

It was way too perfect. The face of the young prosecutor seems to be looking for more information to contradict her boss verdict.

But it would be fruitless to try such thing after hearing his mind.

“… Concern is spreading among the general public. Just what could be causing such drastic changes so suddenly…”

The TV broadcast continued. That was it, the young lady thought… a connection.

She needed to find a connection between the incidents.

They were too convenient and perfectly timed one after another. But there wasn’t a clear motive, or even a logical explanation of how they could even come to happen.

“Everything is linked—that’s what you’re thinking, correct?”

Both were still watching the TV.

Both of them understood that there was much going.

The director was seeing through the young lady’s silence, and directed his concern towards her before smiling.

“…Ah well, are you free? You and I haven’t gone for a drink in a while”

He changed the subject with a more friendly tone.

It’s quite normal in Japan for Bosses and employees to go out drinking on after office hours.

But even so, such behaviors are mostly socially “forced” to the youngest employees to please their elders.

It’s not a case of them specifically trying to keep their status and jobs by fulfilling the wishes of their superiors. But it certainly facilitates their lives as underlings for them to remain in their good side.

It’s one of those Japanese culture unwritten social rules.

But even so the young prosecutor had to decline.

“Thank you, sir”

She said with a polite smile on her face.

“But I have another meeting to attend.”

With that she headed out.

-“Are you going to head out now?”
A sunglasses wearing man was speaking to a young boy wearing a light brown blazer and black pants.

The boy’s black gloves tightened the handle of his briefcase.

He had shaggy chin-length brown hair with bangs and reddish-brown eyes that displayed a serene look.

“I would like to, Kamiya-san. But I was asked to meet someone here.”

The young boy was speaking to the black suited officer with a very polite tone.

The man was looking at his watch too as if expecting something.

“I see, so Niijima asked for you again, how lucky are you to hang around such a beauty all the time. No, Akechi-kun?”

The man had a mocking smirk on his face while directing his gaze at the boy.

“It’s nothing like that sir. Niijima-san experience really helps me out with my investigations.”

The well-mannered boy answered.

“Experience, heh. I should warn you about her though… But you’re a smart kid. You’ll figure out by yourself, I’m sure.”

The man didn’t mind Akechi’s politeness, but he was addressing the boy with a much more familiar than before.

The boy was puzzled by Kamiya’s response.

“And what this warning could be about, I wonder.”

The female voice came from upstairs.

They were waiting in a large hall, near the stairs that headed to the SIU directors floor. Niijima Sae was walking down the stairs towards the two male specimens.

‘Men’ She thought.

“Oh, Niijima. I’m so glad to see your face again, are you done sweet-talking to your boss?”

Kamiya’s tone changed to a mockingly one.

His intrusive familiarity with both Akechi and Niijima was getting evasive reactions from both of them, in their own unique ways.

Niijima passed by the sunglasses wearing man while closing her eyes as an attempt to ignore him, and walked towards Akechi instead.

“He’s free now.”

She said to address the conversation, and to end it as she kept walking away.

“I see, well It’s been a pleasure then, Akechi-kun don’t work yourself too much, you’re still too young.”
“Niijima-san please don’t stress the beauty out of yourself either.”

The man waved in a friendly matter before leaving.

Akechi waved his hand back to him to be polite with troubled smiling face the whole time.

But Niijima didn’t bother to turn around.

Instead she immediately started walking her way out of the building after stopping to signal Akechi to follow her.

“Sae-san, did you ask for me? Is it a case?”

Said the composed boy while trying to hide the mild excitement in his voice.

“No, quite, I want your opinion on something.”

She answered without stopping her hike.

“Sure. Your judgment is quite often correct, though.”

The boy said trying to dismiss the whole thing while having something else in mind.

He then got closer to the young prosecutor.

She noticed he had intentions of his own to accept such meeting. The young prosecutor stopped her march to pay attention to his incoming request.

She had no reason to turn around but she was curious of what a boy like Akechi could want.

“Can we discuss this over sushi, perhaps? You’re making a student work late, after all.”

The boy sounded exited, the prosecutor then proceeded with her walk.

‘Food? How childish’

Sae’s mind became aware that the young boy was still in high school after all. Yet she had asked him for an opinion as a colleague, as an equal. But then he proceeds to ask for such a childish compensation.

What actually was bothering her was his speech though... Trying to guilt her into it so she would concede, that’s why she considered him a child.

“Conveyor belt only”

She wasn’t going to concede much. It was his choice to show up after all.

“Aa”

The boy disappointment was evident. Without much delay, he started following her steps again.

Kamiya entered the SIU director's office with a grin on his face, ready to salute his superior.

"How’s everything going sensei?"

Kamiya didn't waste time to loosen up the mood even when speaking to a superior elder.
"Kamiya-san. Will you ever learn to be a little more respectful towards chains of command?"

Kamiya shrugs.

"I'm sorry sensei, but I like to keep things as honest as I can. You know, trust is a valuable thing."

Kamiya takes a moment to notice the news broadcast on the Director's TV.

"The boy was here just a moment ago, but I gotta say, he's pretty chary. I don't think there's a need to keep him under such pressure anymore."

Said Kamiya with a serious face, he was looking at TV instead of the one he was addressing his claim.

The SIU director smiles through his fingers as both his hands are covering part of his mouth while he rests his elbows on the desk.

It seems Kamiya has showed him an opening of sorts.

"My, Kamiya-san, you always had a soft spot for younglings, don’t you?"

Kamiya moved his sight away from the director to the floor and back to the TV.

"..."

The Director took his reaction with a smile before continuing.

"How's that boy you're going to have to check on from now on doing? To think you'll take such a petty commitment while you're on your hunt for a promotion."

At the friendly provocation allowed a smile to come back to Kamiya's face.

"Don't worry about my judgment, sensei. I have my life pretty settled up by now. I even have time for some diversions once in a while."

Kamiya made unrelated gestures with his hands. As if he was making up some kind of salute while signaling up with his index finger.

"You mean unsolicited favors."

Said the director with a sigh.

"You must take care of yourself more than anything in this line of work Kamiya-san. The fact that you're young and don't have any family or close people, doesn't make you invincible. Only forgettable."

Almost sounding like a warning, Kamiya only smiled and decided to take off his sunglasses.

"... Heh. C'mon, I'm not some sort of solitarian your highness. I like to do as much social service as I can. Honestly..."

He gets comfortable by lying down his butt on the edge of the director's desk. While crossing his arms, he suddenly had a serious look on his face.

"Has she figured out?"
He asked
"She most certainly has."

The director remained unchanged while answering the question
"Will she do something?"

Kamiya's posture didn't change while looking down at the old man.
"...."

The silence reigns as they continue to watch the news for a little while.

- "The mental shutdowns, the psychotic breakdown events…"

Both Akechi and Niijima were sitting in a Conveyor belt restaurant.

The woman was folding her arms without touching her food while speaking her concerns.

"These cases were happening for two years by now, but recently the numbers of cases increased frightfully. What could be the reason? Can we really consider this an epidemic?"

Japanese Conveyor restaurants are quite active and food isn’t as tasty as a good gimmick restaurant in the Shinjuku district.

But even so the young boy was enjoying his free meal, although it was nothing new to him.

After taking a bite of some bread and swallowing, he decided to answer.

"The Ministry of Health discarded any sort of contagious infection being present in any of the victims so far."

The young boy was still elegantly cleaning his mouth with a napkin.

"And even if that was the case, it wouldn't be enough to call for a national emergency or a large-scale disaster."

He takes a sip of water after making his statement.

"I'm not about to hand over this investigation to the police Akechi-kun. You should know that by now."

Unchanged, Sae Niijima was looking at her half empty plate while holding her chin with her right hand.

"My apologizes. Although I think that if the SIU were to intervene in such scenario, the police would be a very useful resource if someone like you was in charge of the investigation."

Ignoring Akechi's flattering, Sae took the card in the table so she could pay the dinner bill.

"Akechi-kun, I want you to do some information gathering for me. Could you do that?"

She stopped while standing up and turned back to the young student.
"I'll be your street agent with all pleasure Sae-san. I have to show you my gratitude for the constant nutrition fees."

She took a file from her notebook pad.

"Don't worry, you'll pay me back some day."

The prosecutor handled the file to the young student.

He was still surprised by her response.

"Eh...?"

But his surprise was even greater after reading the paper.

"This is..."

"I'm counting on you."

The woman says nonchalantly.

"Do not bring Kamiya-san into the matter if you can avoid it, you are free to deal with it however you want though. Just try to gather as much information as you can."

The boy returned to his serious polite self from before to answer such request.

"I see... I'll do my best Niijima-san"

The name in the archive said, Futaba Sakura.

Interlude/Out

Stuck

Traffic is jammed.

Tokyo streets were infested with cars and busses sealing the streets, an uncommon sight during these hours.

There Sakura Sojiro was trying to drive himself and the young boy back to his coffee shop.

Unfortunately the traffic wasn't allowing him to keep his temper anymore.

"Ugh. You're taking the train from tomorrow on..."

The old man paused before noticing the boy's stoic self not paying attention to his complaints again. As if it was a self defense mechanism.

"So, how was it? The school, I mean. Think you can manage?"

Sojiro took a quick look towards the boy again, waiting for an answer.
It wasn't like they'll be going anywhere soon, so what else could he do rather than start some small talk.

"Eh, we'll see."

But he wasn't cooperating. Sojiro let out a sigh in frustration.

"Tch, you still have the nerve to say such things, do you even realize the situation you're in?"

From Sojiro's point of view, it seems the boy was gaining a like for getting under his skin. He wondered how he should act to stop such behavior from now on.

"To think you'll re-enroll at a different high school after being expelled once. It's not like anyone will be sympathetic with you."

That's an understatement.

Japan has a very disciplined culture.

Their community is known for not being gentle or permissive towards those who decide to "irresponsibly deviate".

Such is the case of the boy with an assault record.

His circumstances won't matter to anyone else but him. That's why the kid decided to not bother explaining anything after he realized in what situation HE was in. A guy like Sojiro, who seems to be aware of his circumstances and is still giving him a hard time, is more of a reason for him to not even try.

But even so, there's a question that it's been wandering around the kid's mind until now.

"If that's how it's going to be at your school, people might say stuff about me in the future too... What a troublesome kid I've taken in."

At this point, Sakura was unloading his frustrations out in the open. It just happen that the major cause of said inconveniences is sitting right beside him.

Amamiya turned his gaze towards the middle aged man and finally asks.

"Why did you take me in, Sakura-san?"

The Le-Blanc master slowly turned his head away and closed his eyes before answering.

"I was asked to do it by a close friend of mine, I owe him a lot. It just happen that he's a good friend of your parents too. I just... happened to agree too."

'A friend, that could only mean...'

The boy thought at the response, he probably knows who Sakura's talking about.

"He already paid the expenses too. I guess that's the money your parents send me through Toro-san, he is a good client of mine every time he's on town"

'So that was it'.

The name resounded through Amamiya’s mind.
He knew this name pretty well.

His father must have made some calls to get him a place to stay and have someone take care of him. That way they wouldn't have to worry about him living alone at some random apartment.

'Was that a good idea though?'

He wondered to himself.

It seems he only has become a problem for anyone who has to go through the disgrace of interacting with him.

"He told me your father is a salesman, is that right?"

Sojiro tried to keep a conversation going.

"A very bad one."

With a least of words, Amamiya kept on the conversation going by sheer politeness.

"Heh, so you were underprivileged? That's the typical delinquent excuse."

"There are no excuses."

He responded with bated breath.

Sakura looked at the boy for a moment before turning his gaze back to the road.

"If you're going to act all depressed you could just give it up and fulfill your sentence in Juvie, you know?"

Sakura tried to provoke a reaction from the kid some more.

"That's not a good deal."

The boy took the joke with a stoic face.

("… Again, a subway has derailed at Shibuya station, greatly affecting the timetable all across the...")

The radio Newscaster clarified the situation to both passengers.

"Another accident? There have been a lot of those lately."

Sojiro spoke his mind once more.

This was going to continue to be a long evening.

Ren looked outside as the lights streets were starting turn on before letting out a sigh.

'Such luck'

Back at Le-Blanc it was night already, the shop remained closed the whole day on a Sunday.

"Damn. I wasn't able to open the cafe today. To think there'd be that much traffic..."

Both Sojiro and Ren entered the shop.
The boy turned around to see the old man regretting his wasted business day because of him.

"I'm sorry, Sakura-san"

Ren fixed his glasses and bowed a little.

He was still grateful for Sakura deciding to take him to school. After learning about the subway accident, Ren got to wonder if Sojiro’s 'kindness' could have actually save his life today.

"... Well, whatever."

Sojiro accepted the sincerity coming from the young boy.

"Just head upstairs. There's something I need to give to you."

The boy heads up stairs.

After taking a quick look back at his room, he realizes that all the effort he put on cleaning yesterday wasn’t enough.

“Clean” was definitely not something he could name this attic.

There were still some parts that were full of stuff that would only gather dirt. Like a bunch of books in a shelf an a desk, the bicycle seemed broken, and the plant was almost death.

“Talk about a gruesome accident. 80 people were involved”

The voice came from the stairs behind the boy, Sojiro was getting there while looking at his phone.

He was talking about the derailment that occurred early that day.

“This is a diary. Make sure to write your daily activities on it so I can properly report to the officer Kamiya about your activities. This would ease everyone’s work, so don’t lose it.”

Ren was thinking about the “there are no special limitations about what he could do” statement while being under probation.

But he sure wasn’t free to do much anyway, this was just a more sensitive way of keeping him tracked.

“I’m sure you know lying in it won’t do. He would find out.”

Suddenly Sojiro’s phone started ringing.

“Hey, what’s up?”

He turned around to answer.

“I’m about to leave right now. Don’t worry I’ll be there in no time.”

Sojiro’s tone changed into a gentle one, the total opposite of what Ren was used to by now, to his own surprise.

’Probably a woman, I suppose’ The boy thought.

“Uh-huh…. I’ll see you soon” Sojiro said with a smile on his face, and hanged up.
“Well, I’m off. I’ll lock the place up, so do whatever you want for the rest of the night.”

Sojiro turned his attention back on the boy and decided to warn him one more time.

“Oh, but don’t mess up my store. If something goes missing, I’ll hand you right over to the police.”

He barked.

‘Six, I suppose this is the standard record for now.’

Ren Amamiya kept the counting going in his head to keep his immediate memory active.

“You got school tomorrow… You better head off to bed, all right?”

With that, the old man took off. Ren kept looking at the diary, and wondering about his new high school.

‘A prison school, fitting.’

The next day. The boy was boarding his train to school, there were a lot of students with the same uniform.

He wondered if there were a lot of kids of his same high school around his neighborhood.

The car was full, it turns out the rumors he heard about the Tokyo subway were truth.

He remembers how Sakura called him a ‘countryboy’ before taking off early that morning.

There was a lot of whispering. Many people had sleepy faces, but Amamiya was awake.

Sakura served him a dish of curry before he took off. A good gesture from that grumpy old man.

Ren knew Sojiro wasn’t a heartless man, but he realizes he was still frustrated by his presence somehow.

He couldn't blame him.

‘Curry for breakfast though. It was pretty good, so I guess it's ok.’

He wondered if that could be a healthy diet for a teenager.

The train arrived to its last stop. )

He had boarded two lines to get to school, it was quite a draining routine.

‘Rain… Of course it's raining’

Amamiya closed his eyes after witnessing yet another ironic twist of fate.

He woke up earlier than usual that morning. Earlier than he was used to in his old hometown, since the distances were a lot shorter back there.

He got dressed, unplugged his phone and was ready to leave until Sojiro stopped him for a meal before leaving.

Such kind act coming from the man that is constantly threatening him about kicking him out was a welcome change of peace.
He thought that such event could be the start of a new tolerable day. That could be the case, have he only watched the weather forecast before leaving the Café. And thus, he didn’t prepared an umbrella, and why should he?

It was supposed to be a good day, a fresh start. He tried to stay positive, but of course, life wouldn’t let him have such advantage.

_They are wearing the same uniform. That means I'm going the right way_'

Students were running, it was spring, these rains are common during the spring days.

Some cherry blossoms petals were decorating the city, brought to the floor thanks to the rain.

_'A private high school, with a prestigious name, why would they accept somebody like me?_

The boy was sheltering himself under an awning ‘Juneause’ closed store.

His phone started vibrating again.

It was that weird eye app. He didn’t had time to deleted this time though. He got distracted by another person trying to follow him into his dry lair.

To his surprise, it was a very distinct looking girl.

She was wearing a uniform similar to his, but she was wearing red leggings under her skirt and long brown boots.

Under her Shujin blazer she was wearing another white sport jacket with a hood.

She took the wet hood off to reveal her long blonde wavy hair styled in bushy pigtails.

She was really sticking out. Ren noticed her face didn’t have many Asian features. Her bright blue eyes definitely attract attention. She was looking around in frustration, it seems the girl didn’t prepared an umbrella either.

‘…’

‘She’s gorgeous.’ An assured thought 'So there are beauties like this on Shujin too, huh?'

‘Huh?’

The girl turned her gaze towards the boy. He was obviously been staring at her for some time now, enough for her to notice.

He didn’t seem to care about the awkwardness of his actions though, even less by how dumbfounded he looked.

She took a brief look at him, and to be fair, he wasn’t a sore look to the eyes either.

Realizing she was being appreciated by his gaze, she acknowledged it with a gentle smile at him. Before proceeding to completely ignore him.

At that hint Amamiya realized what he was doing, he turned his gaze back at the street.

‘She must be used to be stared at.’
The young boy realized this through her reaction.

Before she could turn her gaze back towards the boy, a car was parking right in front of them.

There, a man with long black unkempt hair and thick eyebrows wearing sport clothing lowered the window of his car to address the young lady.

“Good morning, you want me to give you a ride to school? You’re gonna be late.”

“Uh, sure, thank you”

She answered kindly before getting in the car.

The man then noticed the boy and asked him the same.

“Do you need a lift too?”

Ren was surprised by the offer, even if it was due to sheer politeness.

“No, thank you”

But then, he declined.

The offer was given to the girl first. Which would imply that the girl and that man are somewhat familiar with each other.

Or so the boy thought, until he reached the girl’s expression after getting in the car, she had a sad worried look in her eyes.

Amamiya’s face changed completely after realizing what was going on.

He saw that look before, a look of unwillingness.

He wished it was only his imagination.

But suddenly…

“Dammit… Screw that pervy teacher.”

A boy came out running right in front of him, cursing at the air.

“Pervy teacher?”

*bip*

The App in Ren’s phone reacted as if recording his voice. But he didn’t notice, because of the noisy boy standing in front of him.

The boy in front of him turned around after hearing his question. He was wearing the same uniform as him, but he was way more casual on its looks. More than anything because of a yellow T-shirt under his blazer. He had an obviously bleached yellow hair. The boy looked somewhat vulgar in comparison to the humdrum looks Ren had.

“Who are you?”

Another hostile encounter. The boy stood defiant in front of Ren, his speech patterns were very casual, he was on his guard too.
"You plannin’ on rattin’ me out to Kamoshida?"

Amamiya tilted his head in confusion.

"Kamoshida?"

*bip*

The young blonde boy took a good look at Ren taken aback by his response.

"The teacher, Kamoshida. Quit actin’ like you don’t know him, you’re from shujin, right?"

Amamiya looked at himself, it seems he still isn’t used to the word Shujin (still sounds like "prisoner" to him).

"Shujin. You mean Shujin Academy...? I guess so."

*bip*

The rain was stopping, the blonde boy was still confused by Ren’s reaction.

"Are you messin’ with me man?"

After a brief silence Ren denies it with his head.

He didn’t know if he was pushing the wrong buttons to this delinquent looking guy. In true, he didn’t care.

It was him the one who started talking to him.

"Wait you're new? I've never seen you before... That would make sense, for you to not know that asshole."

The boy was being quite vulgar again.

But the black haired boy was used to that kind of vocabulary.

He got closer to look at the number on Amamiya's jacket.

"I see you're a second year, we are in the same grade then. Did you really just transfer here?"

Amamiya nodded.

Immediately the blonde kid noticed the rain has stopped.

"Look, It stopped. We should hurry up or we're going to be late."

The boy stopped his march to signal Ren to follow him with his hand.

"C'mon I know a shortcut"

Ren nodded and followed him.

Soon, the two kids were transiting through a dark alley. The short cut the blonde boy mentioned was quite sketchy.

'Now we only need to get mugged to complete my day'
Ren was looking around, waiting for something to jump at him at any moment.

"... but really, to think she would just get into his car like that."

But he got distracted by the blonde boy muttering something to himself.

"Is that teacher that bad?"

He remembered the look on that girls face after getting in the teacher's car. He can't help but to wonder if that girl would be ok if what this blonde boy was telling was true.

"Huh? I mean... yeah, he's quite a tool..."

The boy was dubious while he was speaking. Trying hard not to get distracted.

He also doesn't seem to trust the new guy yet.

Amamiya was too busy following the boy for him to notice that his phone navigation app was still active.

On top of his location in the map, the weird icon from before showed up again, and soon it took over the whole screen.

The blonde boy took out his phone as well, but only to look at the hour.

"He's a pain in the ass. He acts like he's the king of the castle or somethin'.... Damn, it's getting late..."

"Castle...?"

"conditions found"

A voice came from the phone.

Amamiya was about to look down but then...

*Thump thump*

"What the... My head hurts" barked the blonde kid.

A sweet like sensation on their mouths. Breathing became more difficult. Still, the atmosphere became lighter, If walking on air was a feeling, this definitely was it.

'What was that?'

The boy with the black hair was holding his head like the one he was following, wondering what just happened.

They realized something was off after looking up through the alley's exit.

'What is that?'

A huge building. It was broad daylight but the building was so huge that it darkened the whole area, it was an old structure, something that seemed like it was there for a long time, medieval, stone brickwork, there was a wood bridge in the entrance, and the door...
It was as big as small house.

They could see the end of the building while looking up, there was no mistake, they were in front of a medieval castle.

"Wait, how? I'm sure this is the right route. What is this, a TV stage?"

Ren doubted the boy until he started looking around and noticed something

"Look."

"Huh?"

The black haired boy pointed towards a sign. It was the same sign he saw yesterday, it was carved in stone, it said 'Shujin Academy'.

"... What? Is there a festival or something today?"

The blonde boy couldn't comprehend the situation. The structure they were watching wasn't there just a day ago.

Amamiya watched the ominous place in silence.

Nothing seems to be normal anymore, he could hear ominous sounds coming from the inside. He couldn't feel nor see any presence in the area.

No one was walking the street in front of the building, the street was in the middle of a populated area. One that should have a lot of people walking by during these hours.

He put his cell back into his jacket pocket.

"Hey shouldn't we-"

The blonde kid started talking, but it was interrupted by the other young student.

"Let's go."

Amamiya started walking towards the building.

"Huh? Right"

The blonde one started following.

'What am I doing? Am I really going insane? I should go back and call somebody. But... I want to know... Why do these things keep happening to me?'

Although Ren Amamiya mused in his own misgiving thoughts while entering the building. He wouldn't dare to display nothing but a dubious look.

He gulps and decides to open one of the four big doors in the front entrance.

The interior wasn't as ominous as the entrance area.

Candle lights illuminated the room. The well adorned stairs were covered by a big red carpeted as the entire floor. Chandeliers were hanging from the ceiling.

He felt it again. For a couple of seconds, the area changed. A strange pressure sensation, the smell of
ozone. All their senses were affected.

Their eyes saw it as a swift change though. The image of the castle interior was getting blurred. Replaced by a modern aisle, the place was shifting from a school hall and a medieval castle drawing room.

"What is this place? Are we really at school?"

The blonde boy voice echoed through the building.

They stood in the middle of the big hall. The pillars and stairs lead to a second floor that had approximately 6 other doors.

"Who's there?"

A distorted voice came from the halls on the sides.

"What was that?"

The blonde boy was confused, the voice didn't sound human at all. But he suddenly calmed down after realizing the figure that closing by was... A giant metallic walking armor wearing a blue mask.

"Huh? What's with that cosplay? Did I really missed some big festival date or something?"

He looked at his new school mate who was analyzing the armored being from top to bottom.

Of course he couldn't answer his question either.

"H-Hey, What's going on?"

The blonde boy was interrupted by a sudden agglomeration

Amamiya turned around, two more armored beings started approaching them.

They were armed.

Each one had a sword, a big sword, enough to slash them in half have they enough straight to do so.

Such thought was frightening.

He didn't want to stay to find out, he got on his guard trying to find a way to run, meanwhile the blonde Kid started to panic.

"This shit's real!"

As soon as Ren turned his attention back from the boy to a route he realized it was too late.

Two more armored beings were closing by, they were surrounded.

"C-calm down! Time out, man!"

The blonde boy was getting more nervous as he started to see more knights closing by.

"We must run!"

Amamiya yelled.
"R-right"
So they sprinted, towards the two guards that were approaching from the front door.
The door was closed behind them. The glasses wearing kid dodged a swing from one of the armored guards sword.
He was so close to being decapitated that he put his hand over his throat to check.
Meanwhile the blonde boy crashed against the closed door in front of him.
"No good, no good, no good, shit!"
The door was locked.
They were trapped... trapped with these monstrous beings, who only had killing intent and a brutal force as a form of communication.
"Capture them!"
"Ah"
Ren gasped.
The blonde punk was getting on his feet. But Amamiya grabbed him by the collar and pulled him down again.
A sword came swinging by, but fortunately for the troublemaker kid, he fell the other way, ass first to the ground.
"What the-"
He looked at the giant guard crashing his sword against the door.
"What's with these guys? ARGH"
An enormous force crashed down against the blonde boy's back, he felt like a car ran over him.
By the time he tried to look at his school mate, he started running towards the stairs, turning around to signal the boy to follow him.
"Over Here-"
He screamed.
Once again it was too late, they were crashing the boy's arms with their feet to hold him down.
"No!"
The black haired boy screamed, but he wasn't safe either.
He stopped running away and turned back. Full speed he ran towards the one guard that looked like he was going to step over the boy's head.
And then…
He crashed against the guard's back so hard it send it to the ground. The blonde boy’s fate was
changed in that instant.

Amamiya had saved a life. But suddenly he felt a force taking him to the ground.

The two guards that were forcing the blonde boy to the ground got him.

"Hold them!"

Another distorted voice, it came from an upper level.

"My leash! Be glad fiends, the king himself will decide your punishment."

Amamiya tried to escape his hold, but the hands restraining him were too strong. The metal around his arms and shoulders weren't going to give.

He looked upon the source of the new distorted voice ordering these knights.

"...Urgh, huh?"

A man, taller than him, wearing a ridiculous crown.

He was coming down the stairs. The look in his eyes were quite perturbing.

"No one is allowed to do as they please in my castle."

The man said. Amamiya noticed his full appearance. Besides his crown, the man was wearing only a king's cloak, a pink speedo and sandals, nothing else.

He had long black unkempt hair and thick eyebrows, his jawline is broad and square, and his eyes were… bright yellow and black.

The blonde boy slowly regains his composure, and starts looking up at the owner of the hairy legs in front of him.

"Kamoshida?"

The boy recognizes him with a surprised but angry look on his face.

The man with the naked torso and glowing yellow eyes smiles at the piteous state of the boy.

"I thought it was some petty thief, but to think it'd be you Sakamoto."

The "king" had a huge grin on his face while speaking to the boy.

"Kamoshida?"

The new kid wondered if it was really the man from earlier.

"Are you trying to disobey me again? It looks like you haven't learned your lesson after all, huh?"

The man then took a look at the blonde haired boy.

"What the hell are you doing?"

The blonde kid tried to shake himself up but it was quickly subdued by two knights again.

"And you brought a friend this time... because you can't do anything for yourself."
The "king" mocked Sakamoto, there was an obvious personal animosity between these two.

"This ain't funny, you asshole!"

Sakamoto shacked off again in vain.

"Is that how you speak to a king? It seems you don't understand the position you're in at all."

Kamoshida's look turned into a serious accusative one.

"Not only did you sneak into my castle, you committed the crime to insult me-- the King."

The king of the castle was thinking when he brought his right hand over his square chin.

"The punishment for that, is death."

He raises his hand revealing his naked torso and speedo while barking an order for his knights.

"It's time for an execution, get them ready!"

With that, both Amamiya and Sakamoto are brought to their knees by the knights.

"Stop it"

Sakamoto said while looking at the "king" closing by.

His frustration seemed to give him enough adrenaline to perform one last act of defiance.

He got to one knee, and kicked a guard in front of him with enough strength to make it fall on its back.

"Stop messing around you asshole!"

Sakamoto screamed.

"Hold him tight you idiots."

The king barked back.

With that, a huge hand came crashing at the blonde boy's stomach. The metal hand of one of the armored knights put him back on his knees.

"Stop"

Amamiya screamed.

That brought the king’s attention towards him momentarily.

“Oh and you, you were running away earlier right? What a heartless friend you are."

Kamoshida was mocking the kid, Ren was clenching his teeth.

“H-he’s not a friend”

The blonde boy slowly raised his head.

‘Run away!’
He was trying to get Ren out of the situation as his last action.

He was prepared to let himself die if he could get to save him.

Or even if that wasn’t the case, even if it was just a pointless show of bravery. Or if he wanted to be alone with this man he obviously despises.

By extension he was asking him to let him there and save himself.

Ren mouth opened as to say something but he couldn’t find the words. For the first time since his trial, he was actually out of comebacks or witty thoughts.

The situation was taking a toll on him, he was in deep trouble. He was struggling to get free, he wanted to do something... anything, to stop the current disgraceful secession of events.

“Hmph. Pathetic scum like you isn’t worth my time.”

Kamoshida turned his attention back to Sakamoto.

“I’ll focus on this one’s execution”

He smiled in satisfaction.

“Take this. Lowly scum.”

He then grabbed the blonde kid by the collar.

His grip was strong enough to get him on his feet. The king then started punching him, one, two, three times, until he dropped back on his knees.

“Useless pests!”

The frizzy haired boy was watching all this without a say, a big long sword was pointing at him the whole time.

Kamoshida then kicked Sakamoto one last time for good measure.

He was left lying on the floor, still conscious, but he was really beat up.

Adding more insult the injury, the king spat on his vulgar prisoner.

"...Hmph. Where’d your energy from earlier go?"

Kamoshida mocked the injured kid, and with a hand gesture he ordered one of the guards to rise the kid up.

And so he did. Like he was some kind of pup, he raised him by the back of his collar and then threw him in front of Kamoshidas feet again.

"A peasant like you isn’t worth beating."

Kamoshida got bored of punishing the kid. He had something else in mind. He took a quick glance at the standing black haired boy and smiled.

He took a step forward, and looked at the disgraceful state of Sakamoto.

"I’ll have you killed right now."
Ren opened his eyes wide, he couldn't believe what such an overindulgence was taking place in front of him.

He reacted with pure impotence.

"Stop it!"

The young boy couldn't allow this anymore.

This wasn't a mere penalty for unruly behavior, this was an unjust beating.

He thought back at how he would have rather be mugged in that alley back then than have to go through all this.

"Hm...?"

The king turned back to see him, he noticed something in Ren's gaze as he walked towards him.

"What...? Don't you dare tell me you don't know who I am."

'Who?'

Ren Amamiya clenched his fist some more.

He beyond frustrated right now.

The idea that someone that was beating them out of pure spite and was trying to make it sound fair, he couldn’t tolerate it.

He and the boy he just meet were about to die because of a whim. And mostly he couldn't tolerate that a man with such a perverted ego could be telling him what to do.

"I don't car-"

But he stopped mid sentence, or more accurately he was stopped by a kick on the stomach.
Kamoshida just kicked him, sending him to the floor between the two guards that were holding him.

"That stupid pretentious look on your eyes irritates me."

Kamoshida had a smirk on his face.

This boy was no match for him either.

"Hold him, after this peasant, it's his turn to die."

He stood up, trying to rush towards the king, but it was to no avail. He was being held against his will once again. The two knights were holding his shoulders and pointing their swords towards his face.

'This can't be happening. This can't be happening. This can't be happening. This can't be happening.'

The boy was desperate, he was trying to free himself again and again, but he only found more and more disability. He wasn't going to be able to help this kid.

"No, I don't wanna die."
The blonde boy muttered.

He saw the young blonde troublemaker lying in the floor as he said these words

‘That time too… I was just trying to help but this is how I ended up… ‘

Amamiya was clenching his fist with great frustration.

It felt like his nails were about to pierce through his palms.

Right in front of him.

Sakamoto was feeling even more powerless than him.

He was clenching his fist in rage while looking at the "King" in front of him grabbing a sword, to terminate him.

He then realized.

'This is my fault'

He thought that. Ren Amamiya was the one who signaled the blonde boy to go inside the castle instead of coming back.

Instead of calling someone. Instead of tempting his nagging bad luck, he had to drag someone else with him.

The blonde boy was confused. He could have easily tried to talk him out of it and come back, get to know him better even.

They could have been friends, but now they're joined by a fate he put over themselves.

They entered a strange building and got caught, now they are about to die… all because of him.

"Argh" Amamiya struggled, he couldn't have it. This couldn't be his fault, he should fix it, he should do something about it.

'This is truly an unjust game.'

He remembered, and he saw it again.

That bright butterfly, the one on his dream during his first day in the city.

He remembered those words.

Everything went dark around him.

He was a sack of boiling rage and helplessness. But he could see it; a butterfly leaving a trail of light and a gentle female voice coming from it.

'Your chances of winning are almost none.'

That was always the case, that was always how he felt life passed through him. That's why he stopped trying to live his life as if it was only his after a while.

'But if my voice is reaching you, there may be a possibility open to you.'
But this time, he looked at it with surprised certainty, the butterfly was right in front of his face. As it was a new chance...

Silence, back in front of the king, the boy was sweating profusely.

Something was odd.

The familiarity. The feeling of isolation he felt since he first saw that other him in the street two days ago, were gone.

"What's the matter...?"

A deep voice. A voice that echoed through his head as if it was trying to hop from inside his skull, and it spoke to him.

"Are you simply going to watch?"

He felt something breaking. He wasn't feeling the pain yet.

But he knew as he looked around to find the source of this voice, that he wouldn't find it with his eyes.

"Have you forsaken him to save yourself?"

That was not, that was not what the black haired kid wanted, it was not?

He wanted to do something he wanted to prevent another regretful event.

Even if there was no future past that choice, he wouldn’t be able to continue his life like nothing happened. He wouldn't die without regrets after letting someone else be murdered in front of him, right?

He felt that there was something, something inside of him telling him to run away, to not care and to not do anything anymore, to preserve himself.

"Death awaits him if you do nothing."

He knew that.

But still, running away was there in the corner of his mind. He shouldn't think that.

He knew shouldn't think that, all he always wanted was a life where HE could be the one to choose what he deserved.

That way he could obtain whatever ambition he had on his own. Yet, even something that should be so meaningless for the rest of the world, it was taken from him.

He could no longer be what he wanted, ever again… or could he?

“Ugh… Help…”

Sakamoto was bleeding from his mouth as he begged someone to stop his punishment. His eyes opened wide after witnessing this.

"Was your previous decision, a mistake then?"
Those images came back to him.

A woman screaming for help on the night.

His hands touching a man's shoulder, the man bleeding from his face, he was cuffed and arrested.

(‘Help’) he can hear female cry in the back of his mind.

What he did that time, what he sacrificed for doing so, what he felt he was doing at the time, could he choose to do that again?

Could he be set to do that again and again even if he could never change the outcome?

That's what normal people call insanity.

To do the same thing, again and again, expecting different results after every try.

But he felt, from the moment he walked into that situation, to the moment he got punished for it.

He felt...

"It wasn't!"

The boy gritted his teeth as he spoke to himself.

He looked back at the scene in front of him.

There, the king was chocking the blonde boy while rising him up with his grip. He had a sword on his hand, ready to turn off his future.

The glasses-wearing teenager started shaking off, trying to free himself from his holds.

But then…

"Very well... I have heeded your resolve."

*Thump thump*

A pain… An incomparable pain.

The pain of something moving under his skin, from inside his body, from inside his brain.

Where did that beat came from? Was it his heart, or was it his mind?

"ARGH"

He screamed in agony.

The pain was unstoppable.

He felt something was trying to get out from the inside of his skull.

Like something moving from inside his brain cortex.

Something was trying to free himself from him.

"Vow to me."
The voice tried to make a deal with him, he felt the pain crushing his consciousness, he felt it but... he actually... wanted it?

"I am thou, thou art I..."

*Thump thump* (it hurts, it hurts)

He was sweating more and more, trying to cope with the pain.

He wanted to resist it, to see what came next.

"Thou who art willing to perform all sacrilegious acts for thine justice!"

*Thump thump*(it hurts, it hurts)

He wanted to hate the world, he wanted to hate those who wronged him, he wanted to pursue them and make them pay for their sins. But mostly, he wanted to have the power, over all of them, so he could take his path... His fate, back.

If he has to go against the entire world to take it back, he would do it without a second thought.

That was what the voice speaking to him wanted.

That was his other self...

"Call upon my name, and release thy rage!"

*Thump thump*(it hurts, it hurts)

Selfish, relentless, reckless and ruthless...

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAGH" a scream, the last scream of despair, that was him.

The one he couldn't allow himself to be, the one he created in order to cope.

That was the kid who screamed, at the sight of his own self being torn apart, after such a painful realization, he was turning into something he couldn't accept, but...

"Show the strength of thy will to ascertain all of thine own..."

He couldn't let it be, he couldn't force himself to look away from that path anymore...

He slowly raised his gaze.

And a determined look monopolized his face...

"...though thou be chained to hell itself!"

He accepted it, he... The boy in the attic, the boy with the nerdy glasses, the boy with cynical views, the boy with the terrible luck, was just a mask after all.

The consequences were his own from now on.

"Die"

The king spoke one last time to the blonde almost unconscious kid in front of him.
"Enough of this bullshit!"

The black haired boy's tone completely changed.

He had raised his voice volume, and the shyness of his speech was completely gone. His voice had a presence of its own, and his face looked like he was about to burst into a raging rampage.

"What was that...?"

The voice surprised the king, he wasn't taking the boy seriously. He spoke like peasant after all, but his tone right now... It was unforgivable.

He let Sakamoto go from his grip.

"You desire to be killed first then...? Fine!"

The king was angry, his face showed it, he made a signal

Boom

A giant shield smashed over the boy's face.

His glasses flew out from the impact.

But he was still standing.

His face turned sideways, his gaze directed towards the floor, there a drip of blood hit the floor.

It came from his face, but...

As soon as he raised his gaze towards the king, he realized something was off.

His line of sight was not complete, because there was something else on his face where his glasses used to be.

He reached out with his hands, he felt something, something was covering his face, it was a white mask.

The white mask coated part of his face, the eyes and brows and part of his nose.

He knew that that wasn't supposed to be there, he didn't need it, not right now.

That mask, as he touched it, he realized it was a part of himself.

But even after the pact he forged, he felt the deal required that he took it off in order for it to be completed.

No matter how painful it could be, that part of himself... It had no use for him right now.

He grasped, he tensed, as he slowly started pulling it off. (it hurts, it hurts)

He tears it, he pulled and pulled it, slowly and painfully, he ripped it off, blood started coming out of his face.

"AAAAAAAAAHG"

Another scream, the pain was evident, his upper face was now covered in blood as his gaze rose
towards the king once more.

Right there on the boy's face, there was a huge smirk on his face.

A terrifying smirk, his dark grey eyes have turned into glowing yellow eyes.

With that grin on his face, he had accepted the deal, all its consequences and all the pledges that came with it. The price; was he holding the power to save himself.

And the name, it gave form to it.

It gave him purpose, and after all it was the source of his rebellion. It was an easy name to remember.

"Give me your power... ARSENE!"

Fire followed that statement. Blue fire started rising from the boy's feet, slowly taking over his body...

"HeheHAHAHA! "'HeheHAHAHA!'"

A maniacal laugh started echoing through the castle's main hall, the fire was rising.

It covered the boy's hands starting from his closed fists, his upper body, and face.

The form of the kid's body was completely swallowed by the blue flames.

The flames took the shape of a man, and it was a coated one, a taller and ominous figure.

Suddenly the flames started raising up, leaving black chains behind. The chains were holding IT to the boy's body.

His figure started to come back, reappearing from the flames.

But something changed. His clothing.

He was wearing a long black coat, red gloves, slightly pointy boots, black pants and a dark grey shirt with solid parts.

The fire behind him was taking a form of its own too.

The form was diabolical to say the least.

Red long boots until his thighs.

It had knives instead of high heels, long red gloves that joined to a red jacket over his black suit like torso. With long black needles like nails at the point of its black fingers.

And a long top hat.

But instead of a face, there were only burning red and yellow flames that formed two eyes and a mouth reminiscing a creepy smile.

On the sides of its head, there were horns like protuberances, long as its hat, but pointing to the front of its head.

The chains were only visible around this being that was still emanating black and blue flames from parts of its body.
The knights started to pile around him.

The young boy raised both of his hands, and then... Wings, wings came from the back of the being behind him, long black wings that caused a dark wind with one jolt.

The force of the wind threw everyone, the king included, to the floor.

The kid gazed upon the King and Sakamoto, their looks, they were terrified.

'This power, this is MY power'

The boy started to maniacally laugh again.

He had a huge smirk on his face.

'I am the great diabolist, Arsene!'

The voice that only the boy could hear came back.

The black haired boy could only laugh, this is what he always needed.

This is what he always wanted, the power to face himself.

If such performance was to cause fear in others, he could only embrace such result with a smile.

He finally had the power to take whatever he wanted…

End of Part 1

Chapter End Notes

-In the Japanese dub Arsene actually says “I’m the great magician Arsene!”
-03/25/18: Fixed grammatical mistakes. I think this is the final fixing.
He was still smiling to himself trying to grasp the reach of his power while looking at his hand.

"What the-" The blonde boy was astonished.

Amamiya face changed as he gave a gentle smile full of satisfaction to the boy in front of him as he closed his eyes.

"I'm the rebel's soul that resides within you. Trust in me and I shall grant you my strength"

The being that was residing inside his soul, his other self, manifested itself behind him.

The boy could only smile some more as he realized the origin of his new power.

This was a feat he managed to pull out.

He couldn't care about hows now. He needed this power.

Fortunately he had a chance to survive through all this.

"What are you waiting for, catch him!"

The King ordered

The boy turns his malicious gaze towards two guards standing in front of the pervert king.

They quickly start to dissolve into a black liquid.

From the puddle of black and red mud, arise two figures.

The two were somewhat demonic, but not so intimidating as the knights in armor from before.

They looked like some crypt dwelling pyromaniacs.

"You'll learn the true strength of my men."

The king had a twisted look on his face while saying this.

"Detest the enemies before you! Change that power into animosity and unleash it!"

The voice inside his head spoke to him again.

It sounded exactly like him, but more mature and with a more tenebrous yet chivalrous tone.

The boy targeted the two beings floating in front of him.
Both of them looked like a Halloween souvenir.

Their pumpkin heads were floating mid air with only a ragged coat and a witch hat on them. No torso, no legs.

They were holding only an oil lantern with their white gloves.

He felt how a new knowledge was infused into his brain.

Like a memory that suddenly came back.

This knowledge wasn't his, it came from the deeps of his heart. And although he couldn't understand how, he knew that he would become the catalyst of the actions from being floating behind him.

Arsene had a power, a power that was brought upon him from the deeps of hell itself, as that being would let him know.

This power was the ability of turning his life force, his stamina, his energy, into pure dark magic.

Yes magic, a term used to describe the knowledge and methods unknown for the minds of the people. But also to describe the trickery acts that men used to fool their equals.

"Hee-hoo"

The voice of the once knights in armor, and now floating pumpkins was getting in the boy's nerves.

He felt he was putting his life and strength in the hands of this being floating behind him. That being was ultimately himself, so the boy felt no remorse.

As the voice told him he has to see his enemies with animosity, this would trigger his capacity of using this power, he focused on them, and...

"Arsene... Eiha"

As the boy ordered, the figure behind him started dancing in a circle of blue fire until his wings unfold.

His long hands reached the floor as he was kneeling behind the boy.

Suddenly a dark wind started coming from under one of the pyromaniac pumpkins.

This wind raised more and more until red rings of light started to pierce through it's being.

The light was pure raw dark energy.

The boy understood then.

That was a curse spell. A curse so strong that could take form of pure raw energy and damage his opponents.

'I see...'

Ren felt he really made a deal with the devil, but he couldn't care less at this point, there was only one thing on his mind right now... Slaughter.

The other figure, the one he didn't target preyed on his distraction and charged towards him.
His intent was to burn him. The boy couldn't avoid it, the impact was straight forward and he felt the strength of the attack in full force... But it was nothing.

Although the attack looked like it could send a normal person flying around the hall, he barely felt it.

He figured up the reason quite rapidly.

The being behind him, his new power. It didn't only gave him the ability to use spells and have new clothing.

Everything he needed to be capable of such prowess was enhanced.

His strength, his agility, his endurance, his stamina, and even his luck.

It doubled or even tripled so he could perform such feats, so he could resist such strong assaults.

"Swing your blade!"

'Huh?'

Amamiya felt something forming in his right hand.

He was holding something, from between the black and blue flames in his hands, a knife.

He smiled again.

That was all he needed.

A weapon.

He jumped, full speed towards the one pyromaniac who attacked him.

With his new powers, with his new speed and agility and strength, it'll be no problem.

"Hee-

He reached his enemy in a second.

Like a dance he swings, from the left, form upside, from the right, one, two, three times.

He cuts through the pumpkin's "body" elegantly.

Stylish.

It was a short spectacle to see this boy perform such an attack.

And he was enjoying his slaughter.

If he was going to use such power from now on, he would do best to take full advantage of the "fun" that could bring to yield such mightiness.

"I don't want to die..."

Cried the childish distorted voice of the pyromaniac pumpkin, but it was too late.

The pyromaniac started to vanish.
It melted back into the black muddle, but this time he was dissolving into nothingness.

He took a look at his next target.

He smiled more. He knew he had killed an unknown being on their own turf. And he certainly knew he could easily kill the next one too.

He was accelerated.

He wanted to keep testing this new power more and more.

But he realized that after he was done with this enemy, he would probably have to face more.

"This power of mine is yours! Kill them however you want. Run wild at your heart's content"

The voice spoke to him again, and he understood... The power he was wielding was the one tempting him for more.

More carnage, more battle, more experience and more pleasure.

'I will do just that, but...'

The boy thought as he regained his composure.

"Calm down"

Ren Amamiya said to himself.

He knew that he would need this power to survive the day.

He knew that every attack would cost him his strength little by little. So he was going to use it smartly from now on.

He waited for his enemy attack.

The pumpkin came charging again.

But this time, he dodged. The pyromaniac had missed his swinging attack, this was Ren's chance.

He ran full speed against the enemy just like he did before, and swung his knife once again, one, two and three.

That was it.

The enemy started to vanish like before.

He confirmed then that this method would serve him best to save energy for his later encounters.

The king was watching the battle development from the lookout between the stairs now.

He ordered more guards to follow them with a signal.

"Capture them!"

And then the king retreated towards the back of the big hall.
There it was a big painting of himself in a shiny golden armor.

After looking at it for a little while he turned the paint around and walked through as if it were a revolving door.

'He ran away?'

The boy thought.

"What-"

Amamiya composed himself again after hearing the blonde boy's voice near him

He was sitting on the ground next to him, watching the whole battle, he had a impressed look on his face.

"What was that just now?"

He snapped out of his concentration after he heard the boy's question.

'What was that?'

He wondered to himself.

He didn't have the answer.

He felt as if the knowledge and the strength started to drift away from him as soon as he lost his focus.

Amamiya looked around and then to himself. The strange being that gave him such power was gone.

He noticed that he was actually wearing a new outfit for the first time.

'Nice'

He thought.

He liked what he was seeing. Thinking it was stylish, he regained his calm but there was no time for this.

"Stop right there you fiends"

Another knight was closing by.

Amamiya wasn't in guard and realized he had to ready himself to battle again. He was still feeling his straight drifting away slowly. But...

"Argh"

The knight fell, the blonde boy was standing in front of him.

He had charged against the plate armored knight with full force so he wouldn't attack his savior. A brave move and quick reaction.

"You like that you son of a bitch!"

The blonde boy screamed, he looked surprised of his own actions.
"Come on, we should run!"

Amamiya exclaimed while looking at Sakamoto.

"R-right" he answered

They started running away from the hall to a near door at the right of the entrance.

They had noticed the door before but they couldn't reach it since they were so quickly surrounded as they started walking around the hall.

"Don't let them escape!"

There were 6 guards following them, they got through the door that lead to a stair to a lower level.

As soon as they started running downstairs they noticed they were going down a tower like structure. Right now, missing the knights was a priority. By staying put on a corner, they watched them pass by them.

"I can't believe that worked"

Said Ren.

"Hey"

The blonde boy pointed behind his ally, and then he noticed.

They were standing in a dungeon.

Prison cells were all around the area.

An underground river divided the room in two.

It was big and full of chains and iron all around the area, they could hear ominous sounds besides the running water.

"God this's effin' nuts!"

Sakamoto said.

He turned to the other boy who was as dumbfounded as him but, his outfit wasn't the same anymore.

"What the eff man? What's with that outfit of yours"

Sakamoto asked.

Amamiya has returned to his previous school uniform outfit.

He didn't seem to have noticed until the blonde boy pointed it out in surprise.

"I don't know..."

Said after taking a brief look at himself.

"Hey, Blondie, frizzy hair! Over here!"

'frizzy hair?'
Ren Amamiya wasn't used to being called in such a indolent manner. He looked around to see the origin of that boyish voice he just heard.

"A cat?"

Sakamoto asked.

Right in the other corner of the room near a cell that was opened. There was a strange small creature greeting at them.

His features were catlike.

With a big round head, cat ears, light blue cat eyes and white fur over his mouth and under a black cloth mask covering the upper part of its head.

He had a small 45 to 50 cm body, a cat's body. But he was standing on two feet and his front paws were holding a big Scimitar and he was wearing a small fanny bag belt.

"I'M NOT A CAT, SAY THAT AGAIN AND I'LL MAKE YOU REGRET IT!"

The cat barked.

'It's cute'

Amamiya thought while calmly taking his time to study the creature's features.

"I was wondering what the fuss was all about, so it was you two, Interesting. You two are trapped in this castle too, right?"

The creature asked to the boys with a worried look on his face.

"What the hell are you, you're one of them, right?"

Sakamoto didn't seem to trust the feline being yet.

"I'm Morgana, and that's all can tell you for now, in case you haven't noticed, we need to escape"

They heard steps closing by soon after that exchange.

"Huh? They're catchin' up already...!"

Sakamoto noticed. Then he tried to look at his phone to make a emergency call.

-no service-

"Tch."

He turned around to face the creature again.

"Wait how do we know you're not one of them"

The boy then wondered to the self-called Morgana.

"What? Why should I be hiding if I was one of them? Also why would I help you either if that was the case?"

The cat inquired at the blonde boy
"I-I don't know."

Said as he scratches the back of his head in wonder.

The cat shakes his big head.

"Ugh. Listen, to be completely honest, I was just investigating this place. But I got in trouble, just like you guys, but thanks to all that commotion you caused I could find a way out of it. So I came to investigate what was that all about."

As the cat finished talking, the steps were closing in, everyone stayed on their guard.

"Now hear me out, in order to escape this place, I'm going to need your help, got it? We need to clear a room on the upper floor, in the next room after that, there's a way out... I think"

As Morgana requested the boys help, there was a little phrase that raised Sakamoto's eyebrow.

"You think?" Sakamoto asked.

Ren Amamiya was watching the scene as he looked around to see if they were being ambushed.

"That guy Kamoshida, he escaped for now, but I don't think you can fully take him just yet, it'll be pointless to look for him."

The cat continued as he walks to the corner where Ren Amamiya was standing.

Suddenly a sword swung at them from the other side of the corner, he backed out just in time.

Sakamoto fell on his butt from the scare jump.

"Stand still, no one stands against lord Kamoshida"

Another knight came behind the one who attacked first

"A-ahh, Shit... Shit, it's them!"

Sakamoto screamed while on the ground

"You amateur, stay still."

Morgana turned around to talk to the black haired boy, who recovered his previous outfit out of the blue.

"Hey you frizzy hair, you look like you can fight, follow me!"

The cat figure raised his sight and summoned his own other self

"Come. Zorro!"

"Ahhh!"

Sakamoto couldn't believe it.

The a huge explosion of light came from the cat. There, a black muscled figure wearing only black raised from behind him.

He was a cartoonish muscled super hero figure. With muscled arms, he had a mask like hat that
covered its face, only showing its eyes.

He was wielding a sharply pointed sword, he cut a "Z" through the air leaving a brief light trail.

"We will promptly shut them up."

Morgana crossed its arms, looking at the foe in front of them, as if waiting for them to charge.

Two armored knights turned into mud again, one turned into another pyromaniac pumpkin, the other one turned into a flying little red brute with... A huge horn between its legs.

"Damn shadows, they've taken intercept positions."

'Shadows?'

Ren wondered

"They're holding nothing back, fight with all your strength, otherwise they'll kill us, you know that much right?"

The cat instructed the boy, as he was wiggling and jumping around while he's focusing on his enemies.

"I do."

The boy nods and turns his attention to the two monsters in front of him.

"I'll back you up, let's go!"

The black haired boy smirks and summons his power

"Eiha"

The same spell from before hits the ground below the red flying little devil... an incomplete damage is done to the demon's amusement.

"I knew you were an amateur, this is how it's done"

As Morgana smiles at Amamiya’s attempt, the cat suddenly stops his movements and focuses on using his own power.

"Zorro, GARU"

Suddenly, the figure wings his sword as it's starts to shine, and from his movement, the pumpkin that was charging towards Morana suddenly stops, or more likely, it's stopped... by the wind generated from that being's sword.

A wind, so strong that sends the pyromaniac flying to the wall behind him.

"Those shadows have weaknesses depending on which attacks you use, some are weaker against physical attacks, you can let me analyze their behavior to find out, we need to be smart, because we don't have much time to waste before they call for reinforcements Use that opening to strike again!"

He nods as Morgana uses the same strike again.

This time the strike landed as soon as the pumpkin started to recover from the previous attack.
As soon as the winds start swirling around it, his figure starts to vanish into black mud again.

"Come, Arsene! Cleave!"

This time, Amamiya came with a different attack. Something he just knew Arsene could do.

It costs him a little more of his own strength, but they had to finish these enemies as soon as possible.

The summoned being floating by him starts to turn on and rises one of his legs. The following attack landed straight into the little devil's face as he was getting closer.

It couldn't resist it this time, the attack was so strong that it looked like the knife on Arsene's heel split it in two.

"That was incredible"

The blonde kid was on his feet again, he let a euphoric praise to Morgana and Amamiya.

As soon as Ren looked back at Sakamoto his clothes vanished from the same blue fire that gave it form again.

"Hmph. It seems you can't fully control your persona yet."

He flinched, his gaze turned towards Sakamoto for a moment.

'Persona'

Ren thought.

"Persona? Is that the thing that comes outta you guys all dramatic-like?"

Sakamoto asked to the little cat.

"Yes, you saw how Frizzy Hair here ripped off his mask when he summoned it, right?"

Sakamoto's question was answered with another question

'How does he know all this?'

"Don't call me frizzy Hair, but yeah, that's what I did."

The cat crossed his arms/legs while he was deepening his explanation.

"Well, everybody wears a mask deep within their heart. By removing that, you liberate your subconscious strength, and let it manifest into this world. You can say they are a manifestation of your tamed inner self."

"...

He remained silent through Morgana's explanation.

He felt he didn't needed this exposition for some reason. Everything this cat was telling him... felt familiar.

"Hey, It looks you have problems focusing, right?"

"Pardon me?"
"I mean, you lost your outfit, so you obviously don't have full control of your powers yet."
The cat explained what he meant to Ren Amamiya before it turned into a misunderstanding.

"Oh" he sighed

"The transformation shouldn't normally dissolve like that after all--"

Morgana was interrupted by a grunt

"Rgh, that's enough! This crap doesn't make any sense!"

"Can't you just sit still and listen for once, Blondie!?"

Morgana looked pissed because he wasn't allowed to finish.

"Don't call me Blondie! My name is Ryuji..."

"There is no time for this, you said something about an exit?"

Getting tired of the childish discussion Ren interrupted the argument.

"Right, but before that, take this, it's a medicine that can help you with your injuries, it's more efficient than you think... Now follow me!"

Morgana handled them a small medic pack. They both looked at each other with the same question in mind 'Where did he got these?' before following them.

Interlude / Tracking Progress

Meanwhile in the teachers faculty office. Sadayo Kawakami, the homeroom teacher of class 2nd D was ticking her fingers on the desk.

Her gaze was focused on the clock on the wall of the room.

'Second Period already started, where the hell is he?'

She thought.

She was wondering where the troublesome student went to.

The whole situation was a mess for the young teacher.

She was put in charge of the one type of student she didn't want anything to do with.

Someone with a troublesome past.

A boy that has a record and can't possibly go through high school without experiencing some difficulties.

And the same boy who was already late on his first day on his new school.

"Kawakami-san, what are you up to?"
A male voice confronted her during her troubled state of mind.

"Oh it's you Kamoshida-san... ugh, I'm waiting for trouble I guess."

"Really now? You don't strike me like someone who wishes for trouble."

"It's not my choice, I sure you."

Said Kawakami. Who was only getting more and more irritated as time passed.

"I know. It must be about that new trouble-student you mentioned before, right?"

Kamoshida asked with a serious look on his face.

"Yes, I guess trouble describes him well so far."

Kawakami looked more and more drained as she continued speaking.

"Sakura-san... His guardian said that Amamiya-kun left the house this morning. Should I contact the police? No... That would be such a hassle."

By now she was speaking to herself.

"Well, I can't tell you what to do Kawakami-san. But I wouldn’t let a boy like that do as he please and give the teachers and our school a bad name by doing so."

“I don’t know. I’ll wait a little more.”

“I see. Well then, I’ll do something myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll make sure that he understands that he shouldn't devalue the richness of a quiet and peaceful school life.”

“And how would you do that?”

“I’ll just lecture him a little when he shows up. Heh”

Kamoshida smirked as he cleared his goal to Kawakami.

Kawakami looked puzzled as she saw the tall PE teacher retreating from the school faculty office.

“Gosh, what did I do to deserve this?”

**Interlude/Out**

**Self-exoneration**

“Here”

The three intruders entered a room that looked different from the rest.

“Wait, before we go there, we need to ask you something”
Ren stopped the march, they were hiding from a bunch of shadows that were patrolling the halls. Somehow they managed to escape the dungeons back to the big main hall. Then the hid in a big room that Morgana called a “safe room”.

“Huh? You too? We don’t have much time before the guards come back, you know?”

“Yes but still, what is this place, this isn’t school right?”

Ren asked.

“Of course it’s a school. It just happened to turn into a palace”

“What are you even talking about?”

Ryuji Sakamoto wasn’t really following the cat boy explanation.

“We are in a Palace. Palaces are formed in a different reality that is projected by the ruler’s distorted heart.”

Still morgana followed through his explanation.

“W-what? Distorted heart? Are you listening to this?”

“Yes”

Ren had a serious look on his face, to Ryuji’s surprise… he was paying close attention to Morgana.

“This castle is a symbol of their distorted desires.” The cat followed. “The school turned into a Palace might be because someone at school thinks of it as his castle.”

“Kamoshida…?”

Ryuji burbled

“Yeah that guy, I guess you can say that this is a world where distorted desires materialize.”

Ren was shocked.

This whole bizarre incident started to make sense for some reason. He wasn't having such a hard time believing that story because he just experienced a supernatural event of his own before meeting this “cat”.

"It seems his influence in the real world reflects through his distorted desires in this world. It’s quite simple if you think about it”

Amamiya nodded to Morgana’s remark holding his chin, deepen in thought.

“IT’S NOT SIMPLE AT ALL!”

But Ryuji disagreed.

“Quiet down, you idiot!”

As Morgana yells at Ryuji.
He can overhear steps behind the door leading to the hall, the troops were still looking for them.

"Don't let those thieves escape!"

The armored shadows passed by the corridor in front of them.

"You shouldn't do anything stupid. A Palace distorts any of its ruler’s desires. You won't just be able to fight him, unless..."

Morgana took a good look at the frizzy haired boy.

He handled him the glasses that the knight punched out of his face earlier on.

It seems Morgana found it on their way through the main hall.

"T-thanks."

"No thanks to you. Thankfully you have your own will of rebellion. And thanks to that we were able to fight those guys off, who knows, you may be able to fight that Kamoshida guy at some point. You'll die if you do it on your own though."

"Will of Rebellion?"

Ren was curious what he meant by that.

"Those clothes you had before are a manifestation of it, a proof of your will."

'I have such a thing?'

Ren took a look at his hands again. He could still remember the red gloves that have manifested from nothing but thin air before.

"You heard it right? A voice calling you, before your powers manifested, that's your Persona. It came from the depths of your heart."

That twisted laugh. That was his own reflection, and his most depth desire for rebellion manifested in the form of that being.

His persona, Arsene...

"I don't hear footsteps anymore. Come on, let's move on!"

Morgana started moving on.

Ryuji and Ren looked at each other before moving on.

"Goddammit the more I hear the less I get it!"

Ryuji complained

"This way."

Morgana Pointed as he ran outside of the room

“Here”

They had to cross the hall.
The black cat was signaling a door.

He opened to see if there was no one around, inside there was a ventilation shaft in a big wall over a bookshelf.

“You can escape through here.”

The cat leads the group inside.

“Huh? How there’s no door in here!”

“Calm down, and I already told you to lower your voice, do you want us to be found again?”

“I see, so we are going to blow up the wall.”

Ren said calmed while examining the bookshelf.

His answer made Morgana jump.

“Wait, don’t be so extreme! Look up rookie, that’s your way out!”

“I see, then leave it to me”

Ryuji said as he climbs the shelf.

“Be careful”

“Yeah try not to make so much noise.”

As the cat warns Ryuji, he waved him off while trying to rip off the shaft cover.

But he used too much strength. He ended up falling on his back with the cover making enough noise to alert the guards.

“Who’s there!”

“Dammit, just go!”

The door began to tremble as guards were trying to get in.

“What about you?”

Ren asked.

“We are going our separate ways. I still have some things I need to do in this place, you guys go ahead.”

“I see, thanks.”

“Heh, you have manners.”

Morgana waves at Ren as he climbs the shelf behind Ryuji.

“Don’t get caught again”

He warned the cat in a friendly manner.
“Huh, you better be careful too.”

The cat said with a smirk on his face while crossing his paws.

“C’mon”

Ryuji was hurrying Ren. Who immediately started following him outside.

“If my judgment is right, that guy can be really useful.”

The creature was watching the two teenagers leave as the door behind him opened. The two guards immediately try to jump at him.

"Zorro! Show your might!"

----

“Whoa, don’t push!”

“I can’t see a thing!”

“Look in front of you”

*"You have returned to the real world. Welcome back"*

“What?”

The voice came from Ren’s phone, as soon as the voice stopped, the phone turned off.

The two boys finally reached the end of an alley.

Ryuji fell on the ground after being running for a while.

At the end of the alley they finally saw the street were they first meet.

There they saw a bunch of people walking not giving much attention to the blonde boy lying in the floor.

“Are you ok?”

“Urgh, wait, are we really back In the real world?”

“It looks like it.”

“What the hell is going on?!”

“What’s with the yelling, are you students from Shujin?”

‘Crap’

As soon Amamiya noticed the source of the query, he let out a tic of frustration. Two cops were walking towards them.
“Cutting classes, are we?”

Said the other cop.

They looked aggressive and forward.

Once again Ren Amamiya was being treated as a criminal.

‘This is the real world alright’

He thought.

“Well? No! We were tryin’ to get to school, and we ended up at this weird castle!”

‘You idiot!’

Amamiya shakes his head out of disenchantment.

“… What?”

An expected response came from the Officer.

“Hand over your bag. You better not be doing any drugs.”

“Why would you think that?”

‘Why wouldn’t they?’

“Are you his friend?”

The cop was directing to the other boy now, meanwhile the other was going through Ryuji’s bag.

“He was bullying me.”

Ren let out in a low voice while scratching the back of his head looking at the ground.

“Don’t lie like that! Tell ‘em what happened!”

Sakamoto knew the frizzy hair boy was joking.

But he got frustrated of not being taken seriously again, enough to yell at the guy who saved his life earlier.

“See? He’s bullying me again.”

He kept going with his act.

“What the hell dude?!”

Ryuji glared at his schoolmate as he was trying to look away, avoiding eye contact.

“Like I was trying to say…! I don’t know what’s going on either”

Ryuji said to the police officers as they handled him his bag.

“These two look like a couple of idiots making up excuses, should we take them in?”
“That would be a hassle… Hey! We passed by Shujin on our way here, there was nothing out of the ordinary about it.”

After talking between themselves the cop with a bicycle retorted to Ryuji’s argument.

Amamiya took a look at the cops. He had no choice but to take what Morgana told them seriously after all they went through earlier. And after the cops testimony of their school being there instead of a castle.

“C’mon, say something!”

Ryuji interrupted his thoughts asking for help.

“I don’t want to be late.”

But he looked at him with a serious look and started walking away towards the school once again.

“Is this guy for real?”

The cops watched as the blonde boy started following his school mate in the distance.

Interlude /

“The minister of transport finally announced its resignation…”

Meanwhile in the SIU.

The director was meeting with the same suited man from before, this time they weren’t watching the news.

“It seems that everything is going as he predicted it.”

The SIU director had a mild smile on his face.

“Which reminds me Kamiya-kun, what are you going to do about Sae Nijima?”

“Why should I do anything about her? Sensei. She’s under your command after all.”

“Hmph. You really are going to ask? You know her for a long time, I thought she qualified as direct competition for you.”

The old SIU director was trying to get a read out of Kamiya’s reactions.

“I can see why. If she’s anything like her father she will probably be as thorough. But I think she won’t be as much of an idealist as he was. Which is good for her career... I’m kinda proud of her.”

Kamiya had a smile while speaking his mind about the young prosecutor.

“You seem to be more than just "proud". But I don’t mind, if that’s your impression I have no choice but to go along with it.”
The old man didn’t seem comfortable with Kamiya’s response.

“To tell the truth sensei. I think is best to let her be, at least for now.”

After crossing arms and thinking for a while Kamiya finally gave a serious response.

“Very well.”

“… But I find funny that she asked for Akechi-Kun’s help so suddenly, you think she’s into younger boys?”

Kamiya asked with a puzzled look on his face as he was seriously wondering to himself about Sae’s tastes.

“… Mmm, why are you suddenly babbling about such nonsense?” The SIU director looked even more uncomfortable with Kamiya’s question.

He wondered what kind of adult would be wondering about such things during a serious conversation.

Before the sunglasses wearing man could answer his phone started ringing.

“Excuse me sir.”

Kamiya walked some steps away from the SIU director’s desk.

“Hello? … Yes this is Jirou Kamiya, what can I do for you…”

The SIU director was taking a look at Kamiya mannerisms as he was talking to an unknown receiver.

“He did what? I understand, very well, I’ll see to warn his guardian, I’ll be there when he gets home too, thanks for notifying me. Good bye”

“Tch.”

Kamiya looked at his phone with a vexed look on his face.

“Having problems with your part time babysitting job Kamiya-kun?”

“… It’s nothing sensei, I’ll be going now if you won’t be need anything else.”

“We can continue another day then, I’ll contact you again if needed.”

The director dismissed the young officer who took a bow before leaving the room. The director then lied back on his seat relaxing a little after talking to the officer.

“For now, huh…?”

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**Peaceful School life**

“So that’s him? That’s the guy with the criminal record?”
“I heard he hides a bunch of dangerous stuff in his bag”

“Isn’t he a criminal that’s gotten into all sort of stuff?”

“I heard he’s a super problem child, and no other school would take him.”

“Did you see what people were saying in that site? It’s him…”

As he walked through the halls of the Shujin academy, Amamiya could hear the gossiping between his schoolmates.

The current word on the school was his criminal record.

It was disconcerting.

Ren could feel the gazes and the fingers pointing at him without rising his sight towards his peers. And they were relentless.

‘Enjoy your school life, huh?’

Amamiya knew he was late.

He knew he was going to be scolded.

And he knew that he arriving late at school with a boy who was some kind of stereotypical “rebel without cause” wasn’t going to add points to his case.

Even more after said boy was still not overcoming their whole ordeal earlier that day.

Ren knew that no excuse and no alibi would be heard.

That’s the typical attitude in japan when it comes of people that “go out of their way”. Someone that doesn’t follow the expectations the Japanese society puts on the young... has no word or credibility.

And he knew the cops from before would have to call to their school. That they’ll tell them about them wandering around town instead of being in classes.

That’s how unoccupied cops usually are in a peaceful city like Tokyo these days.

Willingly unoccupied he’ll say.

Ren parted ways with the blonde boy as soon as they arrived since he was meant to go to the faculty office on his own.

But to his great concern he was received by no other but the “king of the castle” himself.

The PE teacher Kamoshida, who wasn’t happy about them being late.

But his behavior was completely different from the exhibitionist King they escaped from before.

He was a proper teacher who talked to them in a respectful manner. But his last warning before getting in, was still sounding inside Ren’s mind. “Good luck trying to enjoy your new school life.” He said that with a big smile on his face.

“Let’s just stay away from him. That guy’s nothing but trouble.”

“That guy’s life is over, he should just disappear already.”
“Drinking, smoking, theft… I heard that guy’s done it all.”

“He’s gotten involved in all sorts of shady things, right?”

Once he arrives to the second floor, he is already used to the numbness of not paying attention to the people around him.

Ren had developed a cope mechanism that allows him to stay calm as everyone is passing judgment on him.

He’s already used to it. How wouldn’t he?

Ever since his incident, people from his home town were relentless too.

The people he knew. The people he cared about didn’t waste time on judging him either. At that time, his heart was torn apart because his trust in the people that surrounded him his entire life crumbled. Nobody tried to side with him there.

Nobody tried to support him. To believe in him.

So how could he care about what a bunch of “ghostly” kids he doesn’t even care to know can say about him?

That’s how Ren Amamiya saw those around him.

A bunch of ghostly figures.

He wouldn’t bother remembering their faces.

Not even their voices.

Since he was meant to go away just a year from now, what use would it be for him to remember their faces?

Especially now, that everyone seems to have displaced him already.

"Uh!"

"Sorry"

But as soon as he arrives to the faculty office, he steps back as the door opens in front of him to avoid a collision.

"You... you must be the new student, you are in second year right?"

The female voice came from a brunette in a bob cut with blunt bangs.

She was wearing a black vest over her shujin uniform.

She also has a French-braid styled headband and red eyes.

Her seemly posture would’ve been imposing if she wasn’t a few inches shorter than him.

She was holding a bunch of books close to her chest.

"... I am"
Ren responded in a monotonous tone.
"I see. You're aware the 3rd period is about to start right?"
"... I guess I am now."
The cynical tone on his voice bothered the girl that was trying to carry a conversation.
"Well, this is the faculty office. Miss Kawakami seems to be waiting for you, making her wait more wouldn't be recommendable, given your situation"
"My situation?"
Why wouldn’t she be judging him like the others? At least that’s what he was about to conclude, but…
"Being late on your first day?"
"Oh"
"Well excuse me. Oh I… Suggest you to go talk to Miss Kawakami as soon as possible. The third period will start soon and it’s her class next."
The 3rd year girl meant no hostility with what she was saying.
He was not paying much attention to her comment. And he didn’t took it that way either.
But at first glance, Ren could notice that she wasn’t a normal student. Her speech, her dressing code and her mannerisms.
She was the image of a honor student.
He then understood why she needed to say something else. For some reason, she wasn't used to partake in a motivational one on one conversation.
"... Noted."
Said the bored black haired boy.
"Okay then..."
She stepped aside so he could enter the faculty office.
Before she left she looked back at the boy.
'What's with that boy?'
She wondered.
"Did you know senpai?"
The girl could hear a couple of volley ball members talking near her.
"Some crazy second-year student is transferring to our school."
“Yeah, I heard about him, all the second-years are talking about him. Apparently he’s such a problem student that no other schools would take him.”
Said the male volley ball club member.

“Why does he have to come here...? I hope he doesn’t try anything funny with the volley ball team.”

The female 2nd year student was concerned.

“It’s fine, Mr. Kamoshida’s on our side. The transfer student won’t do anything to us.”

The brunette honor student stopped listening to the volley ball members and keep on walking.

“I see…”

After realizing the situation, she fades out towards the stairs headed towards the 3rd floor.

----

“Being super late on his first day? He’s really insane...”

“Careful, he may slug us if we look him in the eye…”

“Settle down... Well I’d like to introduce a transfer student: Ren Amamiya. He had to attend late because of his weak body condition. Alright, please say something to the class.”

"My name... is Ren Amamiya, nice to meet you all."

He bowed

The boy introduced himself to his new classmates.

He noticed their curious and intimidated looks on their faces.

But at this point he didn’t care about first impressions anymore.

"..."

"He seems quiet... but I bet when he loses it…"

“I mean he was arrested for assault right?”

“Uh, so… “

Miss Kawakami was having a hard time too, so she tried to place Amamiya on a new seat.

“Your seat will be… Hmm… Sorry but can the people nearby share your text books with him for today?”

But he was acting calm, composed, shy... that's how he should be acting.

But everyone already knows about his record and look at him with fear or disdain.

Everyone is already judging him. So what's the point?

That's what he thinks.
Once again the cynicism is filling his mind.

He should be acting as everyone is waiting for him to be.

He should be trying to not be a bother for anyone else.

His life his desires, those don't matter, those shouldn't get in the way of what it's expected of him.

What it's expected of him is him to be Ren Amamiya, the unnoticeable new transfer student. But that's not 100% possible anymore, so why should he bother? And besides...

'That's not what I want to be.'

He had admitted that to himself earlier during the day.

But no matter how much he tried, he couldn't force himself to care about that.

He proceeded to walk towards his new seat near the window.

"You were at the station this morning… Liar"

He hears a female voice coming from the blonde girl sitting in front of what would be his seat the rest of the year.

“Huh? You’re that girl.”

“…”

But she didn’t pay much attention after she spoke her mind. The blonde haired girl from the station.

“Did you catch that? Do those two know each other?”

“Did he hit on her before transferring here?”

“That means she’s two timing him with Mr. Kamoshida.”

“Well this is Takamaki-san we’re talking about.”

“For real. That side of the room is totally awful.”

“So that’s how this class is…”

Ren was looking at the window while he was hearing the mumbling of his classmates.

He opened his bag, and to his surprise there he found something he thought to that point was not part of this world.

A perfect combat knife. It was the same he was using to battle those monsters in that castle.

The same that that being materialized out of thin air and gave it to him.

“Huh?”

Ren turned around and noticed the boy behind him was shivering, he must have noticed the knife on his bag.

Ren then quickly closed his bag and turned back to the front.
Great… This is exactly what I needed.

Luckily for him the boy didn’t said a word and kept quiet for the rest of the class.

He had the feeling before, that he would have to go through a long year, but now he knows, this year was going to be a nightmare.

---

After classes were over, Ren wasn’t feeling so well.

The amount of times he had to avoid direct eye contact with his classmates weren’t that difficult. Considering they all were trying their best to avoid him.

But that didn’t meant they weren’t trying to have a peak at him every time they could.

They were evaluating him unabashedly.

Everyone was waiting to see him do something unethical.

Everyone was in alert whenever he was close. Although he was already used to it, he couldn’t avoid feeling more and more wretched at the lack of human kindness.

Yet, he couldn’t blame the them.

Even if part of him thinks he should, he finds himself wondering if he wouldn’t be doing the same if he was in their shoes.

Outside his class room he notices something’s off.

Dizziness fills his vision at first. The same feeling he had once he entered that castle.

In a flicker the same view he had in the castle’s hall came back in front of him.

He took out his damaged glasses so he could rub his eyes a little. Then he realizes it was just an illusion, he was still in the school hallways, right in front of his classroom.

*Sigh* “Are you sure you’re ok?”

His homeroom teacher was standing right in front of his classroom door.

She was looking at him with a tired expression.

“I-I am… Fine.”

He saw no point on telling her.

He tried to before, as a Joke, right after she asked him where he had been in the faculty office.

She didn’t take it well.

“…It seems people are already talking about your record, but I’m not the one who told them. I can’t even catch a break… Why do I have to deal with this?”
The teacher complained

“Yeah… Poor you.”

Ren whispered in a sarcastic low voice.

To which Kawakami didn’t seem to notice.

“You should head straight home without stopping anywhere. Sakura-san sounded pretty angry. I heard the principal called your probation officer too.”

‘Of course, the day isn’t over yet. I still have to deal with more cold shoulderings.’

Ren’s face didn’t show any emotion. His glasses reflected too much light for Kawakami to notice his fatigued eyes.

“Oh, and about Sakamoto-kun. Try not to get involved with-“

The teacher couldn’t end her warning before the punkish blonde boy entered the scene.

“Speak of the devil… What do you want? I heard police caught you cutting classes today.”

Kawakami crossed arms waiting for Ryuji’s response.

“Ugh… It was nothin’.“ Answered the annoyed kid.

“And you haven’t dyed your hair back to black either…”

The teacher remarked the boy’s intention to go against the genetic norm of the typical Japanese hair pigmentation.

Ergo his self-desire to brand himself as someone that goes against the natural flow of society remained intact.

“Sorry ‘bout that.”

He dismissed the teacher and walked towards Ren.

“…I’ll be waitin’ on the rooftop.”

He said to him. Ren nodded but also noticed how some students where curiously watching the scene. Kawakami could only sigh at the whole situation.

Misinterpreting the boy’s motives, of course.

“See? That’s why I don’t want you getting involved, do you understand now?”

She was warning him one more time, to help him blend in school, he should ignore those who stand out. Kawakami then heads back to the faculty office again.

“Did you hear? Sakamoto-kun just called him out to the rooftop.”

“Man, that’s scary, is he going to punch him or something?”

“Aren’t criminal records really bad? How is he even allowed in our school?”
“Everyone’s scared of him, I hope he gets expelled soon.”

“I tell you he has a knife in his bag.”

“Ugh. And we're supposed to be an elite college prep school. I wish they’d fix this problem…”

Ren let out a sigh before heading to the stairs, trying to ignore the gossips again.

This is the current state of affairs for him from now on.

Amamiya wonders if it’s always been like this, people only caring about the image and not about reality.

He couldn’t have known until he became a target of these rumors himself.

He soon arrives to the rooftop. After opening the door he realizes that Sakamoto is sitting there over a bunch of broken desks.

“It seems people took the whole bullying thing seriously.”

Ren broke the silence, calling for Sakamoto’s attention with a joke.

“Well you got that coming didn’ ya?”

“I guess So…”

“Sorry for calling you up here like this. I bet Kawakami already told you stuff like ‘don’t get involved with him’, huh?”

“You must be used to this by now.”

Ren said in a sad tone, understanding what the blonde boy must be going through too.

“Figured as much. Then again we are in the same boat.”

Ryuji sat more comfortably after realizing their similarities.

“I heard you got a criminal record. Everyone’s talkin’ about it.”

“Really? You're imagining things.”

Ren said sarcastically

“Heh, no wonder you are so gutsy.”

But Ryuji could only smile at his reaction.

Ren came closer and sat down on a desk near Ryuji. They have to make sure they both lived the same experience earlier that day.

“What was all that that happened? You know, how we almost got killed at a castle…”

Ryuji started pondering.

“It wasn’t a dream… Right? You remember it too, yeah?”

“Yeah, I remember.”
“Well, just ’cause we both remember it doesn’t mean much though…”

Ryuji was spacing out after Ren’s answer, but he composed himself quickly.

“I mean, even if it was a dream, you saved me from Kamoshida. So yeah, thanks… Ren.”

“… Yeah, it was nothing.”

Ren seemed hesitant. No honorifics, and first name basis, was that what was bothering him?

“But man, that Kamoshida we saw there.”

Ryuji got back at his reminiscing.

“You ‘prolly don’t know about it, but there are some rumors about him too.”

“The teacher we meet earlier?”

Ren had crossed paths with Kamoshida plenty of times in just one day already.

He first saw him picking that girl near the station. Then in the castle, and then in the school entrance where he was trying to “politely” scold him.

“Yeah, the ripped mophead.”

‘Eloquent in his simplicity’

Ren smiled at his bold description.

“That asshole who was all full of himself in the castle.”

Sakamoto was getting mad by only remembering the name of Kamoshida.

“No one says anything against him ‘cause he’s some medalist who took the volleyball team to nationals.”

“The way Kamoshida was King of that castle felt crazy real ‘cause of that…”

Ren pondered while looking a frustrated Ryuji

‘He really doesn’t like him’

“I wonder if we can go back to that castle again... Ugh forget it. Must’ve been a dream! It had to be!”

Ryuji stands up, he got tired of think about the whole ordeal.

“I… See what you mean.”

Ren was lying, he still had his doubts.

After all, he could still feel the punches and kicks and... scratches from the creatures he fought in that castle.

“Sorry to drag you out here like this. That’s all I had to say.”

“Huh? Oh, okay”
Ren’s surprised by the unexpected politeness of the blonde “punk”.

‘He’s not a bad guy at all’

He had enough proof of that through the day. He was willing to die so at least Ren could live twice that morning, he couldn’t abandon someone like that.

“You know, we may be pretty similar. I guess we’re gonna get along just fine as ‘troublemakers’.”

Ryuji had a smirk on his face.

He doesn’t seem to have a problem accepting Ren’s troublesome background at all. Much to the surprise of the frizzy haired boy.

“I won’t help you steal any bikes tho.”

Ren gave him a smug smile in response.

“Haha, I’m Ryuji Sakamoto.”

Ryuji extended his hand towards Ren in look for a friendly response.

To which Ren answered with a handshake.

“I’m… Ren Amamiya.”

Although a little insecure in his tone, the black haired boy had a smile on his face while trying to hide his shyness.

“Man, you really don’t speak much, don’t you?”

Sakamoto seems to have noticed Ren shyness but wonders if he’s hiding something up behind his timid smile.

“It’s… different here.”

“What ya mean?”

“I don’t know.”

Ryuji takes a second looking at the black haired boy from top to bottom.

“…Ow. I see... you have a country accent right?”

Once again, the blonde kid catches Ren off guard.

“Wha- It’s not that noticeable... Right?”

‘Do I have such a thing?’

He nervously mumbles

“I mean I can’t really call you out on it, can I?”

“Speaking like a Punk is not the same as having an accent.”

The conversation turns into a friendly bashing.
Both of them had gained a certain familiarity after going through a lot in just one day.

Ryuji’s easygoing nature only loosens things up a little more.

“Heh, I bet you thought your accent was going to be something people will pick you up for, right? Well I guess you can look at the bright side, that isn’t the worst thing that people could be callin’ you out for anymore, right?”

“You have a very positive mind…”

'To put it gently'

“What can I say? That’s how I roll.”

With this, the first friendly encounter for Ren Amamiya in Tokyo was over.

He had to head straight to his current home to get scolded again.

He had to take two trains for that, so he decided to part ways with the other “delinquent” boy and head straight home.

----

Once he Enters Le Blanc, he’s faced with an unexpected scenario. The cafe shop is usually empty at this hour, but the barista was still in his “uniform” and serving a familiar face in the bar.

He notices how Sojiro’s sight pierces towards his direction.

‘Yep, he has it in for me’

The worried the boy thought as he readies himself for his lecture.

“Hey got an interesting call from your school today, so did Mr. Kamiya here.”

Ren gulps at the sight of the “police officer” who stands in front of him after taking one last sip of coffee.

"Ren Amamiya... Do you think I didn't know?"

Ren doesn’t get the meaning of those words.

Looking confused, a sentiment he shared with Sakura who was standing looking at the cop with disbelief.

"What?"

"Your name, I know everything about your parents..."

Ren eyes opened wide.

This officer of unknown rank and duties was in charge of his file. But he was sure everything about it's classified.
He was told he wouldn’t need to bother about it.

But he also knew that eventually someone would find out the truth. He shouldn’t be surprised the one who did it was his probation officer.

What worried him were the consequences of this discovery. Since he knows a police officer in charge of his file wouldn’t like to be kept on the dark over this.

“I-“

"A change of name"

The police interrupted him.

To that Sakura reacted with great surprise as he looked back at the boy with a puzzled face.

“I didn’t bother reading your file at first, since I was asked by a friend in the force to look after you. I wouldn’t have cared about it to be honest, not until today. Your parents must have some good connections to manage that..."

He says as he gets closer.

"Well, it is possible for a 16 year old kid to change his name like you did under the right circumstances. But your parents overlooked the fact that your new probation officer could actually be a former police detective. Not just a volunteer or some random rookie."

He had no chance to hide it from the very beginning.

He realized that he was once again rigged into an unfair situation. The change of name was the last attempt of their parents to give him a future.

To avoid his societal death.

But now it’s out there in the open. Just like his criminal record was in school, everything came crumbling down that easily.

"They probably thought that doing that could protect you from your own reputation. But look at you, on your first day you manage to ruin your entire facade by goofing around town. I heard everyone on school already knows about your situation."

Sakura crossed arms as he was trying to digest the whole situation. Ren was only capable of looking at the ground trying to avoid eye contact with the police officer in front of him.

"..."

He could only give silence as an answer. What else could he do? After all this time, he had let the adults handle his situation.

He was only meant to shut up and take it, so he could manage to “survive” a whole year on his own. To prove himself worthy of a second chance he knows he won’t receive anyway.

So he had to take it and bear with it, at any accusation thrown at him, he’s meant to take it all and not retort to it.

After letting out a sigh Kamiya took a second to look at the boy’s current state.
"Listen well kid. Neither I, nor Sakura-san here care about you or what you decide to do with your life. BUT, if you're going to be a troublesome kid that would only be the source of problems for us busy adults. Why don't we just get things over with and sent you straight to Juvenile prison. That way you can save us the trouble of waiting a whole year until you decide to mess up again?"

Sakura closed his eyes.

He meant to say the same words to the kid after Kamiya was finished with him, but that wasn't necessary anymore.

"I... I'm sorry for today."

"hmph."

"..."

Sakura and Kamiya took a brief look at each other after Ren’s response.

"Will you behave from now on? This is the last time I'll ask you this."

"I will."

Kamiya was arms crossed taking a piercing look at the boy.

Amamiya was still looking down, looking apologetic.

But Kamiya’s eyes still intimidated him.

He was at least a feet taller than him.

"... Very well. Sakura-san, it's completely up to you what to do with this kid, let me know what decision you'll take beforehand, alright?"

Sakura nodded in response.

"...Ok"

After that Kamiya picked his coat from the seat in the bar and took off. Without saying another word.

"I won't ask you about the whole name thing, it's not my problem and I sincerely don't care. But what Kamiya-san said it's true. Your life is forfeit if anything happens. You understand the meaning of probation, right?"

Sakura fixed his glasses as he talked to the boy, trying to make sure he was mentally capable of dealing with his own life.

“I do."

Ren raised his head at Sakura and nodded.

He had a serious expression.

But the “sympathy” Sakura offered to him about his name helped him to stand up from his apathy for a little while.

*Sigh* “Ok then.”
As soon as Sojiro finished talking to the boy, his phone started ringing.

“Hey, what’s up? … Yeah I just closed up shop. I’ll be there in half an hour.”

Sojiro had a totally different tone while speaking to an obvious acquaintance on his phone.

This new side of Sakura surprised the boy who still wasn't used to this change.

‘Another side of him…’

He had heard enough of that for today.

“Hey, what are you standing around for? Hurry up to bed.”

Sakura scolded the boy once again after noticing him just standing there in the middle of the shop.

He then headed upstairs without a word.

“…No, I just hired a part timer.”

But before he reached the top Sojiro asked for one more thing.

“Yo. Don’t forget to lock the door and turn off all the lights off. Okay?.”

Said the old man, as he was heading outside himself.

Ren Sighed and head back behind the barista to lock the door behind him.

He could still hear him mumbling to his phone.

“Yup. I’m leaving now, I told you. He’s a part timer…”

‘I guess he’s still able to do such things’

Ren thought, as he was trying to figure out if the old man was talking to a girl or not.

Soon after closing shop he headed back upstairs.

Tired wasn’t enough to describe his current state.

He didn’t had enough strength to change into more comfy clothes before crashing down on his bed.

The boy could not even pull the sheets to cover himself, he had enough.

‘I can’t handle this, and it was just one day…’

Inevitably he falls asleep.

-----

*Drip*

A drop of water's heard through the room
It’s dark, the boy opens his eyes slowly, he is not in the attic anymore.

He sees blue quilted walls surrounding him, panic.

He rises up as if he’s pricked with needles, where was he? How did he get there?

Those questions go over his mind, he sees a toilet near him, he jumped out of his bed. A bed? That wasn’t his bed, the room is small, after examining the room a little more he notices his hands, what is he wearing? An old prisoner uniform, with black and white stripes, and a chain's cuffed around his ankle.

‘Is this a Joke?’

He sees it then. The origin of the light that lights up the room.

A cell door, the door wasn’t only bars and metal.

There was also a couple of big chains running through it, like an extra measure to avoid his escape.

He’s in an extremely rare cell.

He hears laughing and steps coming from the outside.

He runs towards the cell door, this can’t be he shouldn’t be here, is this a dream? How comes this feels so real?

‘This can’t be happening!’

*chuckle*

He sees two figures closing by, each one coming from both left and right to the center of his cell door.

Two little girls.

If he could guess they’ll be around the age of 6.

They look like twins, they both wear blue uniforms, like cops uniforms.

They both also wear a hat, with a strange message on each one, one he can’t decipher just yet.

‘Children? No, this MUST be a Joke’

The twins are looking straight to their Inmate face.

Their looks don’t tell a thing about their current emotional state. Their seriousness is troublesome for the kid, they seem to be too much in character for his liking.

‘What’s this?’

His confusion only grows worse since the two little wardens step aside as if to open make way for the inmate gaze.

So he could look what’s behind them, a strange figure, a man, old, a very long nose, big bloodshot eyes, he was resting his chin over his hands.

His hands clasped, fingers crossed, in the middle of an orbed room.
The room was big but what got the Inmate’s attention was, that his own cell wasn’t the only one there.

There were plenty other cells, each one identical to his, all empty, what did it mean?

His attention goes back to the Old man in the middle of the room.

His table was a simple one, there was a lamp, a feather pen and some papers on it. And he was wearing a butler like suit, elegant but also very old fashioned.

He had pointed ears and bulging, he’s also mostly bald but he had long white hair running on the side and back of his head.

The bizarre looking old man then speaks to the inmate by stretching his hand towards him as a salute. He was wearing white gloves. He had a very big cartoonish grin on his face while doing it.

“Trickster, welcome to my velvet room.”

He had a scary deep voice.

‘Velvet room?’

Was that the name of his prison? It didn’t look like a comfy room at all. He couldn’t take it anymore, he wanted out, these people were messing with him he thought.

“You’ve finally come to, inmate.”

Said one of the little girls.

She had a bratty voice, silver blonde hair under her cap, she also was styling two hair buns under it.

“The you in reality is currently fast asleep. You are only experiencing this as a dream.”

Said the other little girl standing on the left side in front of his cell. Although both sounded similar, she had a calming tone on her voice, acting as composed as she could be.

“You’re in the presence of our master. Stand up straight!”

Shout out the bratty one.

A master?

He wasn’t so sure this was HIS dream after all, they confirmed it to him this wasn’t part of the reality he usually lives in.

“Welcome. I am delighted to make your acquaintance. This place exists between dream and reality, mind and matter.”

The bizarre man spoke more nonsense, how could he be at such place? This isn’t a dream he should have, that was what he kept thinking but…

“It is a room that only those who are bound by a ‘contract’ may enter”

‘A contract? When did I ever…?’

‘I am thou…’
Those words came back to him… The memories of what had lapsed today.

“I am Igor. The master of this place, remember it well.”

The old man looked entertained, his right hand was resting on the table, his fingers were tapping in turn through the table. His left hand elegantly held his chin up.

‘He looks like a doll’

Ren couldn’t put his mind into it, but the man in front of him didn’t look real, not at all. His slow movements were somewhat rough.

“I summoned you to speak of important matters, it involves your life as well.”

“Let me out!”

He screamed, but only the echo was heard until…

BAM

“Pay attention when you’re spoke to Inmate!”

The little bratty girl on his right hit his cell with a metal stick.

This good cop bad cop act was already getting on his nerves

“Still this is a surprise…”

The old man didn’t seem to pay attention to his complaint.

“The state of this room reflects the state of your own heart. To think a prison would appear as such.”

‘My heart?’

He thought in frustration, this wasn’t a situation he would want to find himself in.

That couldn’t be.

But the way he said it made it feel like this is the reality his heart was currently placed in.

“You truly are a prisoner of fate.”

He continued

“In the near future, there is no doubt, ruin awaits you”

Those ominous words, he said it all with such a static face, the old man in front of him was really enjoying himself?

Or was it that just the only face he could show?

‘Ruin?’

“Are you kidding me?”

Ren finally lost his temper.
He couldn’t want any of this he is out of his element here.

He couldn’t tolerate this room being a part of his heart. He didn’t want any of this.

“Haha, worry not. There is a means to oppose such fate. You must be ‘rehabilitated’. Rehabilitated towards freedom…” Igor said.

‘Rehabilitated?’

The word ‘rehabilitation’, the due process of incarceration or deprivation of liberty. So an inmate could return and become a ‘useful member of society’ after fulfilling a sentence.

Given his circumstances in the real world. He finds it weird that he never heard that word as being the sole purpose of his probation, not once.

“That’s your only means to avoid ruin…”

Ruin, he keeps saying that, and still. Ren can only think of his ordeal during his first day at school.

“You already prove you have the resolve to challenge the distortion of the world”

“I…”

“Ah, pardon me for not introducing them. To your right is Caroline, to your left, Justine.”

“They serve as wardens here.”

Caroline and Justine.

The two little girls obediently stood to the side and back to his direction so they could look up to his face.

“Hmph, try and struggle as hard as you like…”

Said Caroline…

“The duty of wardens is to protect inmates. We are also your collaborators.”

Said Justine…

“…That is, if you remain obedient.”

She added with a composed but still challenging tone.

“You’ve awakened to your powers. And special ones at that.” Igor remarked.

“That moment signals the beginning of your rehabilitation.”

“My powers…?”

“You will be training the power of Persona, which you have awakened to.”

‘Persona’

That was the same word that cat used to describe the source of those powers.

“Personas are, in other words, a ‘mask’ – An armor of the heart when confronting worldly matters.”
‘A mask…’

The word that made it all make sense.

The way he summoned such power, was by taking off a mask that was part of his face.

A facade that he showed to the world.

That was the catalyst of his ‘awakening’.

“I have high expectations for you.”

But the tone this ‘Igor’ was talking was getting into Ren’s nerves.

He had enough things to worry about than trying to communicate through cryptic messages.

“That’s not my concern.”

“Show some respect Inmate!”

The little warden with a stick hit his cell door once again, this time the boy with the fake name was expecting it.

He wasn’t intimidated by it anymore.

“There is no need to worry, you will learn all you need to know… when the time comes.”

Striking the same creepy smile the whole time Igor reposeful addressed the boy.

“By the by… Have you come to appreciate the Metaverse navigator?”

“So you are responsible for that thing?!” The black haired boy said

“Using it will allow you to come and go between reality and Palaces.”

Igor ignored his obvious plea and proceeded with his explanation.

“I bestowed it to you as a means to train you as a thief.”

“H-how?”

“Hehe”

Igor’s grin didn’t change.

Steps could be heard from behind Igor.

High heels hitting the ground sounds.

A female figure was standing behind the strange man.

She was stunning.

Tall but also very feminine.

She had gray long hair. A small and almost unnoticeable side ponytail held by a golden butterfly like ornament.
She had glowing yellow eyes, she looked like she was in her mid-twenties.

She was wearing a black sweater and a dark blue skirt over some black hosiery under her black boots.

Over all that she was using a white laboratory coat.

She was holding a white tablet and a pen.

Behind the tablet a white eye like figure was noticeable with black patterns.

Similar to the metaverse navigator.

“I am Jun, I’m in charge of check on how your rehabilitation proceeds. I also am here to help your mental stability if needed.” The woman’s voice was a little deep too.

But not as distorted as the man with yellow eyes he faced before. Still, her presence was overwhelming the boy.

“A therapist?”

Ren wondered as he looked at the women standing behind igor.

“Nothing of the sort. She’ll be on charge of checking your progress. She will also be the one in charge to bestow the Metaverse App if there should be others who prove to be beneficial to you. I will tell her to grant it to them as well.”

As Igor vaguely explained the role of the white haired girl, he referred to the Meta-app as a gift once again.

“The Metaverse Navigator is a gift from our Master inmate, you better take care in using it.”

Caroline warned the boy about not discredit such a ‘gift.’

"Devote yourself to your rehabilitation. So that you may become a fine trickster.”

Justine added to her sister’s advice.

“This is all for you to grow as a most excellent thief.”

Igor added.

“Now then it seems the night is waning… The time has finally come, take your time to come to understand this place. I look forward to continue to observe the path of your rehabilitation.”

Igor was clear on looking up to this boy’s future, but then…

“Once you wake up in that world, you should enjoy your break before coming back here” Added the white haired girl.

Did this mean his real life outside was his break from this place?

No, he hated that thought he hate it so much.

To be a prisoner of his misfortune.

His fate being decided for him.
That couldn’t be part of his true self, his heart couldn’t form such a distorted place as his journey. He jumped back at the door cell he couldn’t tolerate the thought.

‘Let me out’

He didn’t want be here, more importantly.

‘I don’t want to come back here’

What could all that mean to his only and true goal, to finish the year without going back to jail? It was so simple, but once again his luck has run out even before starting his journey.

“His reaction is very shallow.”

Said the woman in the white coat, as she started clicking her tablet with her pencil.

"You will get a glimpse of your future. But that is nothing more than a possibility."

Igor continued.

"The story that develops from now on depends on you."

Igor made it clear, that they would meet again.

As he raised his hand, a bell rang.

It wasn’t a common school bell, it was the disturbing sound of a bell that signed the inmates could briefly go out of their cells to have a break.

“Time is up! You should hurry up and go back to sleep.”

"Now, before you go. Your mask is gone while you're here, you will be able to be yourself for the first time in a while."

Igor extended his hand towards the boy.

"Prisoner, at least let me ask you."

"What is your name?"

Igor had the same grin he had from the beginning of this encounter. Yet the boy felt for the first time a note of kindness in his approach.

"My name..."

He didn't want to hide it anymore.

He had let his previous name back in his home town, thinking he wouldn’t ever use it again.

That he was going to have a new life from then on.

But he was mistaken.

Being a dream or not, this is where his mask breaks.

This is where his journey starts.
He realizes that he was lying to himself.

"I am..."

There was no room for doubt anymore.

Earlier that day he promised to himself, to take his resolve and fight the world to regain his fate.

But to do so, he must first unchain himself out of the fate imposed to him.

To do that, he must first, face himself, tame himself, and accept who he has always been....

"I am, Takashi... Takashi Kido."

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, this is a Takashi Kido fic, surprise... Well not really, I was building it through the whole chapter. But for those who don't know about this fan theory, I hope you continue to follow this story to see where it goes.

And about these two new characters... I don't plan to have them replace anyone, but I want to use them as a tool to compensate certain "lacking" events through the game's story and add a little more to the overall plot.

Once again, I apologize for possible grammatical mistakes, as I said in my profile, English isn't my first language, but I really want to improve my writing, and I'll obviously take any kind of criticism as a chance to improve myself.

Update 01/11/2018: Shortened some scenes taking out some unnecessary dialogs and focusing in context.

Update 03/25/2018: Fixed more grammatical mistakes. I also shortened some unnecessary paragraphs.

At first I thought of awakening both Joker and Skull persona’s in this same chapter, but I wanted to give Ryuji and Takashi’s relationship more time. So I just dedicated this entire chapter to be about Takashi’s inner struggle.

I bet the anime will handle Ren and Ryuji’s awakening in just one palace trip though.
"The school turned into an old castle?"

The silver hair woman had an unbelieving expression while trying to confirm the lacerated boy’s story.

"And a talking cat? Are you hallucinating from an overdose?"

The teenager boy remains silent.

He could only wish that his capture, torture by the police and interrogation by this woman were all part of a tasteless prank from his imagination.

“It seems you had a very promising start for the first two days.”

“I wouldn’t call it promising.”

Sae closed her eyes after the boy’s sharp answer.

She committed to only fix her hair and continue to speak to him in a scolding manner.

“It’s better than what most people under probation get, believe me.”

“…”

“But then, you come up with this story?”

The district prosecutor had all the right to leave the room because of the suspect clear unwillingness to cooperate.

But she couldn’t let an opportunity like this to go to waste.

She must put through this boy’s characteristic misleading nature to get to the truth.

“You had a new home where someone would take care of you. A high school willing to reform you. And a probation officer with enough interest in you to actually come visiting regularly.”

The boy was unresponsive as the prosecutor started listing his reputed conveniences.

“But then everything came crumbling down, all the trouble people went for you was for nothing... Because you weren’t even the person you were supposed to be?”

Ren Amamiya. The boy who transferred to a Tokyo highschool with the hope of ‘rehabilitate’
himself, wasn’t even a real person.

On one hand, Sae Niijima had a folder with the kid’s ‘name’ on it. Inside, there was a list of this boy’s record and judicial circumstances besides his previous school and parents names.

But apparently, some of these were fake.

“No really, at the time only a few people knew the truth...”

“So you used that to your advantage...”

The boy finally showed hesitation. Answering such an incriminating question wasn’t going to help his case right now.

“I see. I knew you weren't trying to act all mysterious to look interesting. Your cryptic behavior had a reason after all.”

There was no answer again. But considering Sae wasn’t asking a question she didn’t forced the issue.

“There's nothing on the files saying you had a change of name before your probation.”

“...”

“I don’t need to point out the obvious right now either. Since the moment I’ve entered this room I confirmed that everything about you was a lie.”

He could not predict that those words would still pierce through him because of the tone of her voice sounding so disappointed.

“Not… everything…”

The boy finally broke the silence.

“I can't deny I didn't enjoy keeping people in the dark.”

His voice was quiet, yet Sae Niijima could feel the resentment hiding behind his words.

“…Not being so predictable actually helped me a lot, but... I'm used to be treated the same every time I pop my head around, regardless of how I’m they call me.”

This was the first time Niijima had heard this boy speak so many words.

But this was also the first time he sounded so authentic while speaking to her.

She felt this was something she had to take advantage of.

Trying to hide her disbelief she continued.

“Again with the cryptic speech… Well enough of that.”

She collected herself to focus on the boy’s new ostensible will to collaborate.

“You look more calmed, and a lot more talkative of what I'm used to.”

“I-... You being here is reassuring Sae-san.”
His wit was getting on her nerves.
The comment didn’t sound honest at all.
As if he knew what she was trying to do.
He just had to speak to her that way with a dishonest smile on his face.
This boy can certainly be a sweet talker when he wants to. But he should know better at this point.
“Nonsense! Don't try to pull that with me. I still haven't forgotten what you did her.”
Nijiima’s voice cut through the boy’s intentions again. He had his previous soft smile turned down as he continued to drop his gaze to avoid hers.
“...About that...”
“Later. You must continue were you left.”
“Why and how did you change your name? Who helped you through that?”
Those were the obvious questions she needed to ask now.
She only find out about this version of his story, which means she has no way of finding out if his real name has any lead she could follow at this moment.
She convinced herself that she should only leave this room once she had every bit of information she wanted.
‘So nobody in the police actually knew except for him...’
The boy was trying to find out about his own situation as well.
“That’s… something I could explain as I go with everything that happened.”
Sae Nijiima took a close look at the boy's current expression. His look didn’t changed that much from the moment she entered the room.
She still couldn’t figure out if he’s actually hallucinating or making fun of her. But she wasn’t expecting for him to tell her everything just like that.
She didn't also expect for him to be this... resilient to the standard interrogation methods.
"I won't put up with you if you're simply joking around. I'm going to have you continue the story."
This was her case.
It was supposed to be her the one who solved the mystery behind the Phantom Thieves existence.
With that in mind, Nijiima took Amamiya’s folder away and put it back inside of her black notebook.
Instead she took out another folder out of her purse, this time it had no name on it.
She puts the folder in the middle of the table, right in front of the boy surrendered gaze.
"The one who received a ‘calling card’ from the Phantom Thieves was an Olympic medalist..."
The boy took a look at the picture, he frowned at the sight.

"...An alumnus from Shujin Academy -- The PE teacher Suguru Kamoshida."

He remembers the name as being the one who owned that castle, the ‘exhibitionist king’.

"It's true that what he did were deplorable crimes from... Indulging to his desires. He confessed to it all."

Sae Niijima disclosed the police's context of the case, expecting at least a gesture in return.

"But there should've been no connection between the two of you since you had just transferred."

"I wish"

Niijima seems to understand what the boy meant by that.

After all she had heard about this ‘teachers’ misbehavior before.

It’s understandable and possible that this boy had experienced them in the flesh before.

"Why did you target him?"

At this point Niijima was through with the expositions.

She needed a reason to even consider his story as a reliable source of information.

"I'll tell you later."

"That's unacceptable! Try and recall it once again... Takashi Kido, if that’s really your name."

"Have you ever heard that said that the more people approached nudity the stronger they became?"

Nostalgia filled the boy's voice, but it was not because of a pleasant remembrance.

“What?"

“Never mind…”

He tries to clear the memories of the castle away as he sits straight again.

“I’ll tell you what happened next.”

“Very well, continue from mid April, just where you left off.”

“Was it at this time when you decided to become a Phantom Thief?"

“…”

“It would have been more efficient if you had decided to do whatever you did by yourself…”

Takashi Kido only takes a small breath at Sae’s question.

He knows where she’s going with this.

It’s all about ratting out the people who decided to go through all those adversities by his side.

Regardless of his great misfortune, they all had a reason of their own for helping him.
He could still remember, very clearly actually, who was the first person joining him.

“However, you did not. There are merits to having associates… That’s what you’ve decided. Am I wrong?”

“…”

The boy knew that even if he decided to change the world, he could never do it on his own.

He also knew that all the disadvantages society put on his though his path, were nothing compared to lots of people's circumstances.

The only thing he needed was a reason.

Reasons to have them follow him.

A reason they all could find it on their own…

“No. You’re right…”

Their own reason to rebel.

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Confined truths

“Yaaaawn”

It was a rainy morning, the boy publicly known as Ren Amamiya was sitting on his desk near the window at school.

He wasn’t paying attention to the current lecture, so he couldn’t help but to let out a yawn while trying to summarize his current state of affairs.

He was constantly judged and calumniated by rumors spread by his own schoolmates.

Meanwhile the teachers and not even the principal tried to do anything about it either.

He had to keep a strong face and avoid any kind of confrontation, otherwise his one year probation will be in jeopardy.

Thinking about it, the boy realized that it was for the best.

Bringing more attention to the matter would only make things worse for him in the long run.

“Socrates!”

On the other hand, he didn’t seem to bother that much about it. Considering he’s currently living under a new name, he should just go ahead and start a new life anyway.

Regardless, the boy was having trouble digesting the supernatural events he suffered during his first
day.

“That’s right. Socrates is the one who used to say that the human body is divided in three parts, a soul composed of appetite, spirit and logic....”

He managed make it in time for school today.

He took off earlier and tried to avoid the same road. There was no blonde boy intervention on his route either.

“Plato’s teacher, Socrates, said that evil is born from ignorance.”

He also didn’t run with the blonde foreign looking girl who was sitting in front of him on his way to school.

He was completely ignored by her while to his seat earlier that morning.

She looked a little wet.

It was possible that she forgot her umbrella again.

“People who’ve been babied, taught that evil is due to individuality, can only become society scum.”

Fortunately, he also avoided an encounter with the ‘King of the Castle’ the PE teacher, Kamoshida.

Even with the lack of his presence in Kido’s morning, the boy couldn’t help but to relieve the misadventure.

The castle.

The shadows monsters.

The strange cat being and his persona, all that in an alternative reality.

It was too much to even bother to take it seriously.

But he could remember the fear he had at that moment, when those beings were trying to kill him.

He could remember the killing intent, it was almost as if he could still feel it right now...

*BAM*

The boy felt the impact of a finger size object crashing against his forehead.

It was a precise blast from a piece of flying chalk.

He touched his forehead, shaking off the white chalk remains disseminated on his hair.

It was then he noticed the entire class was looking at him.

It made sense.

He was completely absentminded during the lecture.

So much that the old ‘by the book’ teacher that looked like a the boss of a part time job for some comic book hero noticed. The teacher wearing suspenders over his white shirt, Mr. Ushimaru, had enough of his lack of ‘existence’ during his class.
He gets it now. The killing intent he perceived and thought he was still vividly reviving from the day before. It came from the bottle butt glasses wearing perpetrator.

“You better start paying attention to class young man!”

“I’m sorry. Ushimaruu sensei.”

The girl in front wasn't an exception to the rest of the class when it came to turning around and to curiously glance at him.

His classmates were whispering between themselves.

Waiting for his his reaction after receiving the impact of a non lethal chalk bullet.

But considering she's sitting right in front of him, turning around to see him was a lot more neighboring than the rest of the class.

She lowered her gaze after realizing he noticed her before turning around again.

Takashi couldn’t translate the gaze she just gave him to something specific.

'Was that pity or sympathy?'

"Anyway, the volley ball rally will start soon during the third period, you better be ready, all the volley ball team will be there. And you better be careful not to get injured.”

That was the reason some of the students were already wearing the PE uniform that day.

Takashi was warned of this event by the dispirited homeroom teacher the day before.

He wouldn't make the mistake of not packing his PE uniform on his second day.

The second period ended soon after that.

The blonde girl immediately heads outside the classroom, unlike the rest of the students who stay a little more to chat and apparently… to gossip.

“Ugh. Why do I have to be in the same team as Takamaki?”

The glasses wearing boy could listen to the students complaining while he was still packing his stuff.

“She’s only a magazine model because of her stupid ridiculous body. Being near her disgust me.”

“Yeah, but we can’t just ignore her, either, because of what happened with Mr. Kamoshida.”

“Dealing with her is such a hassle. I wish she’d just not come to school.”

As he walked away from the classroom the boy took a look around the stairs.

His blonde standout female classmate was talking to the tall PE teacher with a distant look on her face.

“Are you taking care on your way home these days? Things have been pretty dangerous lately with all those accidents. I could take you home today after the rally you know?”

“Yes I am, but sorry, I have a photo-shoot today. It’s for the special summer issue, so I can’t afford to miss it.”
“Hey now… Being a model’s fine and dandy, but don’t work your pretty little self to the bone.”

“You mentioned you weren’t feeling well, right? Something about appendicitis?”

“Yes, I keep planning to go to the hospital, but I’ve been too busy…”

The boy with the fake name immediately noticed that the girl wasn’t speaking the truth. She was trying to avoid having a long conversation with this teacher.

He focused on his reactions for now.

Trying to read his behavior, trying to find anything that could be relatable with that exhibitionist king he saw the day before.

He needed to understand if that could have been the same person.

“You must be lonely too. I feel bad for keeping your best friend at practice so often.”

So far the teacher had a ‘caring and thoughtful’ approach towards the young female student.

But he could notice something off in his manner of speaking.

"That's why asked you out in the first place."

There was no doubt that the Volley ball teacher could be found somewhat... Intimidating.

He was taller than the average Japanese sportsman.

He was also physically gifted.

Or at the very least he had a very well trained body.

But there was something certainly unsettling in the way he approaches a teenage girl in such a straightforward manner.

The boy known as Ren could think that he was being biased against such approaches because of his previous experience with this teacher ‘alternative’ self.

But the rumors he keeps hearing, despite knowing better about taking them seriously, were talking mostly about the two people standing just a few feet in front of him.

Those rumors about them being an item should’ve come from somewhere after all.

Just like his record being a "real rumor".

"Oh, and... Be careful around that transfer student, He's got a criminal record after all. If something were to happen to you..."

Yesterday, the blonde boy who went through that entire ordeal with him and survived, told him that Kamoshida was the responsible of spreading the news about his criminal record around school.

It's not like the boy needed more proof.

But, that made him realize this guy wasn't really trying to save face when it came to bury his social status under any kind of concerned facade.
"Thank you."

It was a polite but awkward answer coming from the girl.

"Anyway the rally will start in 10 minutes, I hope to see you there."

"Yes. Please excuse me."

The girl walked away, much to the teacher's frustration.

"Yo."

The boy turned around to find the one greeting him in such a casual manner was no other than the blonde 'delinquent' boy from yesterday, he was also wearing... some parts of the PE uniform while standing there in quite a ramshackle way.

"Are you trying to ambush me?"

"What are you on 'bout?"

The noisy boy's name was Ryuji Sakamoto, a second year student from the other way of the school hallway.

He had a serious expression the whole time.

"I need to talk to you..."

"..."

With that the boy followed Sakamoto, who headed towards the stairs.

Both trying to ignore the PE teacher standing at the other side of the corridor.

Kamoshida still noticed them both going downstairs together though. Only to flinch at the sight of two 'delinquents' hanging together, surely in the look for trouble.

"I wanna talk about that castle from yesterday."

Both Sakamoto and Amamiya were standing on the courtyard next to vending machines.

Sakamoto was drinking some cheap soda while trying to speak his mind some more about the bewildering events from yesterday to the composed and cheerless black haired boy.

"What about it?"

“I… I tried tellin’ myself it was all just a dream… but…”

It’s certainly a topic they both knew couldn’t be avoided by simply calling it a ‘dream’

“I know what you mean…”

“… I can’t act like nothin’ happened, It’s all connected to that bastard Kamoshida after all… And besides…”

“… You really don’t like him, do you?”
“Huh? Well… That’s not the only reason I’m worried. Sure I wanna know what’s up with that place but… I saw somethin’ there, I saw somethin’ that really bothered me…”

The look on Ryuji’s face as he was trying to join words was quite miserable to say the least.

Kido noticed the change of tone in his voice too.

“I didn’t say anything back then because that furball kept tellin’ us to move on, but while we were in that dungeon. Do you remember the screams we heard in that place?”

Calling them ‘screams’ was an understatement.

Those cries for help remained in their minds like a daylight nightmare for the rest of that day.

But neither of them dared to bring it up again, as if they weren’t willing to just accept all of that back then.

“Yes, I do.”

“I tried my best to ignore it that time, but… If what that cat thing said it’s true. I think I have an idea of what really was going on there…”

The screams, the dungeon, the cages and chains.

There was only one thing that could be happening in such a scenario, somebody was being put through a lot of pain.

“What if we aren’t the only ones who got trapped in there? What if…”

The memories in the black haired boy’s mind suddenly started to turn into a horror story.

He didn’t want to imagine what could have happened if he hadn’t woke up to his ‘powers’.

That’s one of the reasons he accepted Ryuji’s reasoning to take it all as a dream and move on.

Once he went home he had that strange dream…

He was afraid of having nightmares about that castle before going to bed.

Nightmares about what could have happened if the Nudist King had gone through what he was planning to do to them.

Instead he had that strange dream where saw that long nosed man from inside his cell.

“I saw a red shirt, a dude wearin’ a metal helmet inside of one of those cages…”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I recognized the uniform, it was the Shujin volleyball team shirt”

“…”

“Listen… Ren… I know you’re new and all. And you don’t owe anythin’ to this school or the assholes that keep talkin’ shit about you. But…”

Sakamoto was hesitant to ask something to this boy.
Giving the fact he’s alive because of him, he was having a hard time asking for a favor.

But ‘Ren’ knew from the last encounter they had in the roof top. That this boy wasn’t as bad of an influence as the teachers told him.

Or that he had hidden intentions of his own, he was only being transparent to him so far.

“You want to ask around the volley ball team members about Kamoshida, right?”

“Yeah…”

“Will all of them be at the rally today?”

“Most likely…”

“Then let’s go…”

“… Thank you, man.”

--------

The rain had finally stopped.

But the noise inside the school gym was euphoric.

The two kids got there just in time to watch the teacher’s team going against what they imagined to be the volleyball club team.

As they sat down Ryuji started to look around.

“Nice Job.”

“Man, you’ve still got it coach!”

“Thanks, let’s go for one more!”

Kamoshida was playing on the teachers side.

Takashi could recognize a couple of his classmates playing in the club’s team.

There were more of them but he didn’t bother to remember their faces after all.

“Look at those kids. They’re from your class right?”

“Yeah…”

“Did you notice? They all have some sort of injury or bruises on them… It’s all Kamoshida’s doing…”

“…”

One black haired boy stood out for him though.
He was constantly targeted by Kamoshida’s spikes, not for the amusement of the rest of his teammates.

“Man, she hasn’t changed at all…”

Kido noticed that Ryuji had stopped watching the match for some time now.

He was looking at the direction where there were a few female students gathering to see the match, or more precisely, to cheer their PE teacher.

The majority of the girls were cheering the PE teacher every time he got a point.

But Sakamoto’s gaze fixated towards only one person.

Takashi immediately noticed the source of his amusement.

It was quite easy, considering how much she stands up from the rest.

“She still sticks out…”

As soon as Ryuji noticed the gaze of curiosity coming from the boy he knew as Ren, he started yawning and stretching trying to avoid any kind of question that could come out because of what he just said.

“This is pretty boring, ain’t that right?”

Takashi smiled at the boy’s reaction, taking the hint.

They have a reason of their own to be there after all.

The boy took his time to look towards the blonde haired girl though.

She wasn’t amused with being there.

He had noticed her behavior wasn’t that cheerful to begin with, but there was a look of uneasiness coming from her that kept bothering him.

“So he knows her, huh?”

Takashi didn’t took long to put two and two together.

Ryuji probably knows that girl longer than him, but he couldn’t help to feel curious about the two of them and what sort of relationship they had.

“Ow!”

But their train of thoughts stopped.

They heard a painful cry as they noticed the same black haired boy from before was falling unconscious to the ground.

The impact of Kamoshida’s spike he received must’ve been quite strong… needlessly strong for him to take.

“Sorry, are you all right? Someone take him to the nurse office!”

Kamoshida didn’t look very troubled as he tried to rise the boy up from the ground.
“That douchebag…”

The ball had landed near the two ‘problematic’ kids who were watching the whole incident with a serious look on their faces. Ryuji took the ball and threw the ball at Kamoshida. The blonde girl was also giving a thoughtful look at the teacher’s action.

“C’mon, let’s go.”

Sakamoto raised and went outside of the gym, Takashi took off behind him soon after crossing sighs with Kamoshida.

INTERLUDE / Doing it for you

The rally continued.

Meanwhile outside on the courtyard. There were two girls sitting in a bench.

One was the blonde haired girl from second year, she was sitting beside a black haired girl wearing a ponytail and the usual Shujin uniform.

Although she looked quite athletic with her knee braces and black spats shorts under her skirt.

She didn’t look very thrilled while talking to her friend.

“Sorry for asking you to come with me Ann.”

She was part of the sport event. She recently got a change of clothes after her part of on the rally was over, so she asked her friend to come with her.

“Don’t worry about it Shiho… You look tired.”

Takamaki the blonde girl with aqua eyes came out from the gym to see her friend who just finished playing a match a few minutes before they decided to meet.

Although she was worried at first, she kept smiling while talking to her friend.

“I haven’t been sleeping well lately… Whenever I close my eyes I keep on thinking about many things… It’s quite a bother. The nationals are coming up soon.”

The volleyball club member was getting distracted with her own thoughts. Worried about the prospect of failure as she continued to vent her frustrations.

“Should someone like me really be on the starting line up?”

“Don’t worry”

Said Takamaki with a cheerful smile.

“Just be confident in yourself. Your skills have finally been recognized after all!”

“I… well Volley ball is all I am good at after all… It’s all I have.”

“… You worked hard to get there. You deserve it!”
Takamaki’s gaze fixated on Shiho’s arm, she was bandaged and trying to hide it putting one of her hands over it.

“How’s your injury?”

“It’s nothing. The meeting is coming up… I won’t let this stop me…”

She said while trying to smile at Ann raising her injured arm and closing her fist trying to make it look strong.

“Besides, I finally got picked…”

But after saying that, her face turned serious again.

“Shiho…”

The girl shacked her head at Takamaki.

“How about you? I heard there’s a new guy in your class.”

“Huh? Yeah…”

Shiho attempt to change the subject was bold but it didn’t go unnoticed to her friend who went along with it.

“Everyone’s saying a lot of bad stuff about that transfer student. Ann”

Takamaki seemed bothered by something.

“I know. I hate rumors already, but they’re getting more and more complex as time goes on.”

“I wonder if he’s alright… I hope he’s not letting it get to him too much.”

Shiho had a thoughtful face while saying that, looking up as if she was remembering something.

Meanwhile Ann Takamaki was looking down.

“That’s just like you, Shiho. Always worrying about other people before yourself…”

Suddenly a phone started ringing.

“…”

“Shiho… are you alright?”

“Yeah I… It’s Mr. Kamoshida, he probably wants to talk about the team.”

“I see. Cheer up Shiho, you can do this!”

Takamaki raised and closed her fist trying to cheer up Shiho once more.

“Ann, I…”

With that last response she smiled back at her friend before rising up and heading towards the gym once again.

“Once the meet is over let’s go eat some crepes!”
Ann tried to recite a motivational prospect.

“…Yeah, well, I better go.”

The black haired girl took off waving at her friend.

INTERLUDE / Out

The rally was finishing.

A few first year kids who were taking a break from the volleyball activities were drinking sodas near the canteen.

“Hey, you’re in the volleyball club, right? We wanna ask you somethin’…”

“Sakamoto? What do you want?”

The student didn’t look very pleased talking to them.

He got even more nervous as Sakamoto was starting to get closer to get a more private exchange.

The other kids near the vending machines took a fidgety look at them before spreading around the hallway.

“What did Kamoshida do during practices that so many got injured? Tell us what’s goin’ on.”

‘He’s being too direct.’

Takashi Kido took a brief look at Ryuji while he continued interrogating this first year boy.

His face was as serious as it could be, Takashi could understand why his Kohai was feeling intimidated by such a thuggish expression.

“Sorry, but what we need to know is if that teacher is actually doing anything to you guys…”

Takashi intervened with the questioning.

“You’re that second year with the knife!”

“Knife?”

Kido was shocked.

He remembers the boy sitting behind him noticing it on his bag while he was packing his stuff.

‘Rumors go around that fast?’

“He calls it practice in public, but he’s actually abusin’ you all, right?”

Sakamoto tried to continue. But the boy started to take back steps trying to avoid any further conversation.
“I don’t know, leave me alone!”

Said the boy before taking off to the courtyard.

“Hey! Dammit!”

Sakamoto took out his frustration by hitting a vending machine in front of him.

“That’s three of them…”

Takashi had noticed a pattern after asking to the volleyball club members from first year the same questions.

Everyone avoids them as soon as they mention Kamoshida.

“This is bullshit! Why isn’t anyone saying anythin’?"

“Are you sure you weren’t imagining things back then?”

“What? No man I am serious, I told you already, besides… That wasn’t the first time I saw that douchebag abusin’ students!”

“…”

“Dammit, are they fine with being treated like that?!”

Takashi looks at Ryuji. He thought that he out of everyone should understand it.

He didn’t realized it until a few months ago.

The hivemind-like mentality that governed through their culture would dictate that; even if something terrible comes to happen to you, you shouldn’t speak on your own behalf since it’s seen as a humiliation to publicly accept that you can’t deal with your own problems.

Especially when it came from some sort of abuse.

Being a victim… it’s an humiliation.

Besides that, there’s the obvious possible retaliation of the abuser himself to take into account.

“They’re too scared… Say, Is Kamoshida the coach of the boys volley ball team? Did you see any girl trapped in that dungeon?”

“Huh? No, he’s the coach of both the boy’s and girl’s teams.”

“…”

Takashi had a worried face as he was putting some pieces together.

“You wanna question a girl from the club? You think they’ll talk?”

“I dunno, it just crossed my mind, he’s the kind of guy that…”

He couldn't finish the sentence.

Imagining the worst kind of things going on in that castle was enough.
He didn’t want to think about it, but at this point of his young life, he’s used to waiting for the worst. He blames his unfair circumstances and his unlucky streak for this mentality.

Because of that he feels he became some kind of nihilistic adolescent with some uncommon cynical views.

But because of that way of facing life, he believes he won’t be so easily deceived by the adult world ever again.

Or at least he used to think that until a castle from another dimension manifested itself in front of him. Forced to make a deal with a devilish being he considers to be his other self that same day... was not part of his carefree teenagy expectations of what boring school life would be like.

His commonsense is continually struggling to balance some peace of mind at the moment.

“Hey. That guy, he’s Mishima, from second year right? Isn’t he in your class?”

Takashi turned around.

Near the entrance a black spiked haired boy was taking off with a depressed look on his bruised face.

“I think so.”

“C’mon, let’s try one more time.”

Takashi nods as they head towards the black-haired bruised boy.

“Hey, got a second?”

Ryuji’s tone surprised the boy as he turned to see the two taller specimens. They were both the same age as him but they emanated a more dangerous aura than most of his classmates, or so he thought.

“Sakamoto…? And you, too?”

“C’mon, we just wanna chat.”

“That sounds exactly like something a bully would say before kicking you in the gut.’

Takashi was having a hard time dealing with Sakamoto’s inquiring methods.

But he didn’t have a chance to call him out on it yet.

“Kamoshida’s been ‘coaching’ you, huh? You sure it’s not just physical abuse?”

Ryuji crossed his arms officially starting his interrogatory.

“Certainly not!”

“What’re you talkin’ all polite for?”

‘Maybe it’s because you talk like thug?’

Takashi didn’t bother saying it, probably because it wasn’t the right time for that.

He started to notice a certain fear coming from the lacerated boy in front of him.
It wasn’t just a case of social ineptitude when handling abuse.

Takashi feared things could be even worse than he had thought.

“All right.”

Sakamoto tried to continue.

“We saw him spike you in the face today.”

“—that was just because I’m not so good at this sport…”

“Still that doesn’t explain all the other bruises you’ve got.”

Sakamoto was aiming his gaze to the arms and neck of the boy, where many other bruises and bandages were noticeable.

Takashi was starting to get impressed with Sakamoto’s sudden turn into a more sensitive inquisitor. Even if he was still a somewhat straightforward questioner.

He was having no problem empathizing with this kid for some reason.

“It’s from practice!”

“Is he forcing you to keep quiet?”

“That’s…”

“What are you going to do when you know?”

Mishima instead asked a question.

There were no signs of emotions attached to his voice this time.

“We are going to prove he’s physically abusin’ you!”

Disappointed Mishima downs his gaze to the floor.

“There’s no point…”

His voice slowly starts to break.

“It’s useless, no matter if you can prove it or not… Everybody who can do something about it already knows…”

“What?”

Takashi was out of words.

His fear was turning into reality once more.

A great injustice was happening in front of his eyes once again.

“They all know… The principal, our parents…”

No one bothered to do anything.
The whole world giving them the blind eye as they try to escape a undesirable fate.
The feeling of disability, of being cornered by your own worthlessness.
He knew that feeling all too well.
“And they all keep quiet about it.”
"This has gotta be a joke..."
Both Takashi and Ryuji had their eyes wide opened while listening to Mishima’s words.
Deep down they both knew this all along.
But, How long has Kamoshida’s been doing these kind of things without any repercussion?
How many students were victims by now?
The potential truth was as terrifying as the image of those torture cells in that dungeon.
That was the reason they were asking around school in the first place.
To see if they could find someone willing to share enough to find a connection to that place.
But they never imagined that facing the truth was going to be this hard to swallow.
"Don't be a pain, you don't understand what I'm going through."
Mishima's started glaring at Ryuji.
"Shouldn't you of all people know that nothing's going to help...!? "
Like if he was hit by a low blow, Ryuji is taken aback by Mishima's words.
His tough act was completely shattered.
Takashi noticed the weird conduct of his now only ally, but he knew better than to dig it up at the moment.
"But if no one ever speaks, this kind of abuse will never stop."
Instead Kido tried to be a voice of reason.
“What’s going on here?”
The not so deep voice coming from the tall mop haired teacher could be heard behind him.
“Mishima, isn't time for practice?”
Saying that while giving a condescending look at the spiked haired boy. Kamoshida ignored the other two ‘delinquents’ while confronting his student.
Classes were over. The feeling of alleviation Mishima must had after the rally was over must had escaped through his pores. He realized that the club activities should proceed normally after school.
“I-I’m not feeling well today…”
“Then you should just quit the team if you’re not up to the challenge. You won’t improve that crappy form if you never show to practice.”

“Tch.”

Ryuji couldn’t take it anymore.

He got between the teacher and the hurt student.

“Didn’t you hear? He ain’t feelin’ well!”

He defiantly stared at Kamoshida.

The act on itself was a brave one considering the difference in size. But it wasn’t enough to divert the teacher’s attention.

He ignores him and continues his conversation with Mishima.

“Well Mishima? Are you coming to practice or not?”

…I’ll go.”

“Wha-“

Mishima starts walking towards the courtyard, heading back to the gym.

Kamoshida has a small smile on his face but turns serious as he moves his gaze towards the blonde ‘punk’ in front of him.

He takes a big step to respond to the defiant stare Sakamoto’s was giving him and by getting closer.

“You’ll pay for this Kamoshida.”

Said Sakamoto looking up at the Teacher’s face in a low but defiant voice.

“Huh?”

The teacher clenched his teeth.

“You should watch what you say Sakamoto”

He has a convoluted look.

The teacher’s patience was running out by just a few words coming out of this blonde boy.

‘It seems he can’t stand seeing him either’

Takashi noticed then that Sakamoto’s resentful feelings towards Kamoshida were actually reciprocated.

“Same goes for you, transfer student.”

His gaze turned towards the young frizzy haired boy.

But instead he traded his warning with a soft smile while tilting his head.

“You have an amazing spike sensei.”
Said ‘Ren Amamiya’, in a pleasant and composed voice.

“Hmph.”

Kamoshida’s twisted look vanished for a second.

The tone of the new transfer student was something he wasn’t used to.

But even so the calm behind his words transmitted an obvious message.

Unlike Sakamoto, Takashi knew better than to defy the teacher directly.

Yet this was aggravating for the teacher.

“I hope you get what your situation is.”

“Both of you have your backs against the wall. You… The principal only took you because he thought that he could reform you someday. And yet… You trample over all those feelings with your apathetic attitude, how discouraging.”

“Don’t worry though, we will help you with the intense training regime of the volley ball team.”

Said the teacher showing a smile while doing so.

Takashi noticed the swift in the teacher’s tone.

‘For a second, he was like that…’

Kamoshida turned around and went back to the gym by himself.

“That bastard…”

Sakamoto was clenching his teeth too, he was a heap of quiet contained anger waiting to explode.

“He was aware of us making questions around school. Someone must have told him about us.”

Takashi spoke trying to get the blonde boy’s attention back to their current situation.

Sakamoto calmed down a little after hearing his composed voice.

It was just a matter of time for this to happen anyway. They knew as much.

“Dammit, it’s gonna be hard to do anythin’ under his watch.”

Sakamoto took out his phone to look at the time.

He suddenly remembered something.

“We better change, I’ll be waiting for you outside of school.”

“Okay.”

-----
It was getting late.

School was over and most clubs were finishing their activities. Takashi Kido had changed his PE clothes back to his regular uniform and was ready to head home.

He knew the blonde boy was waiting for him outside, and because of that he felt his day wasn’t nearly over yet.

“I’m already tired.”

Said the boy to himself, the physical exhaustion wasn’t really a thing.

He was mentally tired because of the stressful interactions he had to go through during most of his school day.

He wasn't used to interact with that many people.

And the feeling of inadequacy had actually taken a toll on him for some reason.

He needed a drink before going out.

But it was then he noticed a girl standing between the vending machines and the door heading to the courtyard.

She looked somewhat athletic. She wears a white turtle neck shujin uniform shirt, some black spats under her skirt.

She had a knee brace on her right knee, but regardless of her sportive looks, her appearance was of a downtrodden girl.

The girl was looking at the vending machines while playing around with her ponytail.

She was probably just spacing out in the middle of the hallway for some reason.

If he had to guess, he'll say she was just wasting time.

‘Is she from the volleyball team?’

Takashi remembered his thoughts about asking a female member about the abuses.

He was reluctant now.

He wasn’t sure if he was ready to see a girl acknowledging going through such a sick and delicate subject.

His own mind was constantly imagining bad and disgraceful scenarios in a 'must be happening' basis.

At this point after all he had been through, Takashi Kido had unconsciously trained his mind to imagine all the worst outcomes he could come with to keeping himself in check when dealing with his now irrefutable misfortune.

The worst case scenario for a young athletic girl and an abusive PE teacher…

He didn’t want to imagine it, but he couldn’t help it anymore.
He could blame his unfair circumstances all he wanted and think it's just part of his now cynical nature.

But he can only blame himself for having such an irresponsible way of absorbing the issues that plagued his surroundings.

Because he knew that way of thinking wasn't so different to the ones that were constantly misjudging and labeling him with rumors and slanders.

He was aware of that fact.

But even so, that way of confronting his unbalanced fortune had also worked for him so far.

At least enough for him to keep his composure (mask) during critical and treacherous moments.

There was a poking feeling bothering him during each step he took towards her.

But before he knew he was already in front of her, he had no choice but to start a conversation at this point.

“Hi.”

“Uh?”

The surprised girl looked at the taller frizzy black haired boy who was standing in front of her.

“Oh. Am I on your way, aren’t I? Sorry.”

“No it’s fine…”

“…”

He didn’t know how to proceed with the conversation and played around with a tuft of his hair over his glasses.

“I am really sorry though, I shouldn’t have spaced out like that.”

She said while bowing down respectfully.

This was a polite greet that Takashi wasn’t used to anymore.

“Say, did you take part of the practice today?”

“Huh? Yeah, I was part of the starting team, why?”

While she said this Takashi took a look at her noticing the bandage on her arm.

“… Are you alright?”

“Oh this, it’s just a bruise I got trying to stop a spike but I hit the ground too fast.”

“I see, you don’t look that clumsy, it was probably the floor’s fault.”

Takashi said this with a reserved nervous smile while taking his hand to the back of his neck.

“Hehe.”
Shiho timidly laughed while looking at the second year boy.

There was something about this encounter that she wasn’t expecting. It didn’t take long before she realized that she hasn’t smiled this sincerely in for some time now.

This boy made her laugh with a bad and dumb but friendly joke.

“You don’t look familiar.”

“I just got transferred here… You probably heard about me anyway.”

Takashi said that while looking away.

He had a feeling that this conversation will soon be over.

“Oh I see, you’re in class D right?”

“Yeah.”

“Um…”

The girl grabbed her injured arm and looked away to the ground before continuing.

‘It didn’t took long for it to get awkward…’

He thought.

“This may be none of my business, but don’t let the rumors get to you, Ok…?”

“Huh?”

Surprise, Takashi couldn’t find the words to answer such a simple but open-handed advice.

He decided to shake it off, the mask was on again.

“Don’t worry, It doesn’t bother me…”

He said calmly while putting his hands on his pockets.

“I see, you must be used to it then.”

She said. Takashi could notice a pitch of sadness on her voice as she looked away.

“Mind if I ask you, why would you say that?”

Takashi tried to draw her out a little while trying to find out more about this girl.

Shiho sighed but looked back at Takashi before answering.

“Well, I helped someone with a similar situation before…”

Shiho let out of her arm after noticing Takashi was actually listening to what she was saying.

Something she wasn’t used to either.

Not by a stranger.
“...My best friend is often misunderstood too, all because of her looks...”

“I see...”

Kido figured out something about this girl.

She wasn’t like the others. Maybe she was not a reject as Ryuji or himself, but she was still different from the rest.

He noticed that this girl had a great awareness of her surroundings. Even after spacing out she immediately noticed his situation.

But what really captivated his attention wasn’t the fact that this girl was capable of noticing other people’s concerns. But the fact of how kind she was and how selfless she acted when she was having her mind busy with problems of her own.

“How... what’s your name?”

“Huh? I am Suzui, Shiho Suzui.”

“That’s a nice name, I’m... Ren Amamiya....”

There it was again. The betrayal Takashi felt every time he had to introduce himself to someone with his ‘new’ name.

But this was the first time he actually cared about it.

Between other things, he was having trouble realizing why he felt so dirty.

“It’s nice to meet you Amamiya-kun.”

Shiho said with a kind smile.

“It’s my pleasure.”

Takashi returned the smile.

It was time.

He broke the ice, this girl was the first person besides Ryuji to who he hold a somewhat significant conversation with.

He had to ask, he had to ask her about the abuses in the Volley ball team, but...

‘Is this girl really being abused?’

She couldn't be this easygoing and caring while being through such a dreadful suffering herself.

He closed his eyes trying not to imagine what could have happened to such a kind girl if she were to be abused.

But he stopped himself.

He'll go along and ask.

That way he wouldn't need to let his mind fabricate more regrettable mental images.
“Hey… About the volley ball team… and Mr. Kamoshida... Is he-”

“Eh?”

Just by the mention of that name, Shiho Suzui’s entire body frightened.

All her movements froze and the smiling face she was just wearing was completely gone.

The boy realized what would happen if he continued with his questioning.

And he knew exactly why this girl reacted the way she did.

‘Dammit!’

It was weird.

It broke his heart to look at her like that.

He had just met her, but the guilt smothered him still.

It’s been only a couple of months since his life changed forever.

But ever since he felt he also lost something else besides his future. But right now he was feeling it again.

Something he wishes could’ve gone away with his remaining sense of hope.

He felt a great deal of empathy for this girl

He made a mistake, he imagined himself in her shoes for a moment.

How would he react if someone would suddenly address him and ask him about the incident that turned him into a criminal.

'No, this is worse.'

He thought.

Takashi Kido considers that his life is done for.

His future was taken and he's been labeled for good.

But even so he can still find a way to live his life on his own regardless of having society's contempt as a burden.

He feels jailed by the limitations imposed to him.

But still, he's not suffering a constant dehumanization from a immovable authority figure like this girl.

Sadly, he could only confirm her circumstances this way.

This girl, this sweet girl that took a moment of her time and worried about him for at least a few seconds.

The first person to actually show some concern about his situation in this horrible experience of a high school life... was being abused too.
“Sorry, forget I said anything, I hope to see you around again Suzui-san.”

Takashi rushed to finish the exchange.

To that Suzui bowed her head trying to hide her worried face.

"N-no, I-it's ok... I-I..."

But even now, she had noticed that her troubled expression was bothering the frizzy haired boy. So her first reaction was to hide her face to stop worrying him.

“Hey…”

Being a subconscious reaction or not, the girl must have felt some sort of guilt herself.

Like an automatic defense system that activates when she panics.

“Sorry I didn’t mean to drag you like that… I have to go.”

“... All right.”

A saddened Takashi couldn't help but nod at her response.

He was about to rise his hand to reach her but stopped himself after hearing the melancholic tone of her voice.

“I'll see you around”

She said before taking off.

He lets out sigh with a disappointed look on his face.

“I'm done with this place….”

Takashi felt the weight of his soul being crushed.

'In here of all places…'

The girl he just meet wasn't what she appeared to be, just like Sakamoto.

For the first time he was wondering, how many people out there were victims of their circumstances and were being forced to be nothing more than stoic public faces and helpless conventionalists.

Earlier he felt he recovered a part of himself he thought he had lost for good.

Empathy.

He felt some when he discovered he could relate to Sakamoto’s circumstances.

He felt the guilt of forcing that girl to remember something awful. And now he feels a general sympathy for the unknown number of victims he hasn't really considered so far.

'I don’t know If I really wanted this…'

It was always in the back of his mind.

The only thing that kept driven him to ask these things was the favor Sakamoto asked him for.
‘Doing the right thing’ or so he thought.

His ‘awakening’ had made him to face any kind of insecurity he had before that day.

And now he keeps noticing the changes in his understanding of the world.

He became even more mentally tired.

He had to deal with constant rejection through the whole day while trying to find any evidence of the teacher’s abuses.

He had to confront the teacher himself.

And now he finds out that the only person that showed any kind of pleasantness towards him was also a victim of the sick abuse cycle present in this school.

It wasn’t fair, but so far, the world has shown him that’s anything but fair.

“Hey can I talk to you for a sec?”

Takashi took a look behind him.

There she was, the blonde girl who was confronting him was his classmate Ann Takamaki.

He had heard her name around the campus from the rumors that were being spreading around too, none of them good.

“I’m busy.”

He said nonchalantly.

He didn’t meant to sound rude. He was trying to avoid any sort of conversations, as he took out a soda from the vending machine in front of him.

His last encounter felt like it drained all his remained will for human interaction for the rest of the day.

“I’ll be quick.”

She said persistently.

“Anyway, what’s with you? Why did you lie the other day about being late?”

“I didn’t lie, it was the teacher who did.”

“Whatever… What were you talking about just now… With Shiho.”

“… Why do you want know?”

Takashi was playing at the defensive.

Although he couldn’t get anything from the other girl, this one seems to be even more directly involved with Kamoshida.

Apparently, she also had frequent conversations with the teacher during school hours.

'Shiho, huh?'
There was also the way how she referred at Suzui by her first name without any honorifics.

Takashi could deduce she was confronting him to find out what her friend could have told him.

Because of that he felt he should take advantage of this conversation to get more information.

But on the other hand, he was feeling really tired of playing nice at this point.

“Because she’s my friend, she looked worried after talking to you… what did you tell her?”

Takashi's gaze moved away from the girl to his drink.

He didn't felt like telling the truth.

“Maybe I was just confessing to her and got rejected, have some compassion will you?”

He said with a calm voice while shoving one hand inside his pocket. He takes a sip of his soda while finally deciding to turn around to face her.

After hearing such a calm but cocky response, she gets understandable angrier.

“Don’t play dumb! You told her something about Kamoshida, didn’t you!!”

Takashi’s expression became even more serious after she namedropped the teacher.

She wasn’t taking any jokes and she was good enough to read the mood.

This girl could find out if he was lying by just looking at his face.

“How did you came to that conclusion?”

He didn't saw her around while he was speaking with Suzui, so she wasn't eavesdropping them either.

“Please, you’ve been asking about Kamoshida around school all day haven’t you? Besides you just got here, and you’re hanging out with Ryu-Sakamoto and doing all this stuff as soon as you’re here? How can that not be suspicious?”

“What's so suspicious about getting to know people?“

He said without looking at her, she was certainly aggressively straight forward.

Something he was kind of used to, but not so much when it came from girl of his age.

It would make sense she noticed him hanging around Sakamoto. And the ones they were interrogating probably didn't chose to stay quiet either.

That should be how Kamoshida found out about what they were doing.

"Oh right, there's that weird rumor about you too."

To that Takashi rolled his eyes.

"Which one, you'll need to be more specific..."

Earlier, he was wondering about how he would feel if someone would come to ask him about the rumors out of the blue.
But he wasn't expecting for it to actually happen that same day.

“Why are you screamin’ at him for? Whaddya want with him?”

Takashi turned around and to see the blonde boy who grew tired of waiting in the entrance. He cached up some of the discussion he was having with his classmate.

“Right back at you.”

She said.

"You're not even in our class."

"... We just happen to know each other."

'Smooth'

Takashi though at the bland response of his accomplice.

He took his gaze away from the two blondes as he concentrated on finishing his drink.

"What are you planning on doing to Mr. Kamoshida."

Finally Takamaki's voice softened a little.

"Doing?"

Kido asked while shooting an uninterested look back at Takamaki.

"You two must be up to something, why else would you two of all people go around doing these useless inquires?"

"Huh? Useless?"

After hearing her comment Sakamoto frowned at her.

"... I see. I getcha!"

Ryuji's tone changed to a mocking one.

"He gives you rides on his car and now you're all buddy buddy with Kamoshida after all."

"Huh!?"

'Oh no'

Kido couldn't avoid feeling bad for how this discussion was turning out.

Both of the second years were throwing verbal hits at each other without being aware how much it was hurting the other side.

"This has nothing to do with you Sakamoto!"

And as expected her tone went back to an aggressive one.

"If you found out what he's been doin' behind your back, you'd dump him right away."
Sakamoto shoved both his hands down his pockets as he said that.

But Takamaki was taking it all with a surprised expression.

"Behind my back!?!"

It was to be expected that the blonde boy was aware of the rumors about her and Kamoshida.

She didn't minded him knowing or him saying it for that matter.

But there was something annoying about the fact that she was also aware about the rumors concerning this boy. And for some reason, she didn't bothered taking them seriously.

But now, all of the sudden she felt like an idiot because of it.

"Ugh, what are you trying to say?"

She said as her gaze fixated on the blonde boy. She was waiting for a serious and honest answer.

It's not like she wasn't doing it before, it's just that she didn't felt like taking a fake or dodging answer from now on.

"...

Sakamoto surprised by her reaction, took a brief look at Takashi who just shook his head at him.

Taking the hint, Sakamoto while looking back at the blonde girl.

As if he realized he was going too far in the exchange, he tried to stop the questioning before he could regret the outcome.

"You wouldn't get it."

He said looking away from her.

The girl was showing hints of getting more angry as the awkward silence was extended.

"Anyway..."

She said closing her eyes, containing her emotions.

"People are already talking about you two. I don't know what you're trying to pull, but no one's gonna help you."

She said as she looked back at Takashi.

"I'm warning you, just in case, that's all."

With that she walked away from the duo.

'Why is she doing this?'

Takashi couldn't help but wonder.

"Why's she gotta be so aggressive all the time?"

There was something that certainly felt aggressive about this girl straightforwardness.
She had the looks of a foreigner so that kind of behavior it's expected from a 'non typical Japanese' person.

But even so. The real question that was hunting Takashi was, why would someone like that to go out of her way to just to 'warn them'?

"So. You two seem to know each other."

Kido already knew the answer by how she didn't use any honorifics while referring to Sakamoto.

"Huh? We just went to the same middle school."

"... Anyways, that's not what we should be talkin' about. C'mon, let's go outside."

Takashi sighs at the response.

"Yes, please. Let's get out of here."

Both Kido and Sakamoto started walking towards the school gate, but on their way there Sakamoto took out his phone looking at the hour.

"Hey... I was wondering, how do you think we got into that castle in the first place?"

The castle they ended up was a medieval looking building that hid all sort of monsters and had an exhibitionist ruler wearing nothing but a ping speedo. No one on their right mind would want to go to such a place.

At first Takashi thought they got lost on their way there.

But that same night he had a dream.

The strange long nosed man, the two warden children, and that strange doctor-like women.

They talked about an navigation app leading them there.

Soon they both reached the entrance, Sakamoto leaned on the now half opened gate.

"You know, somethin’ strange had been happenin’ to me all day, I wonder if that place messed me up somehow…”

“… What do you mean?”

“I... while I was waitin' for you outside, there was this puddle of water on the floor, it reminded me of how it was raining yesterday too."

Kido took a moment to remember how he meet this boy in the first place, and how they both ended in that castle.

It was because the rain had delayed him.

He could curse the weather all he wanted.

But he had the feeling he would've ended in that place regardless of the reason somehow.

"Yes, by the time we reached that place the rain had stopped though.”

"Yeah, the thin' is... ugh, you'll prolly gonna take me like a crazy idiot but..."
Sakamoto took a moment to collect his thoughts, this gave Kido a chance to return his attention to the boy's weird demeanor.

"I looked down at my reflection... it was weird.... different...it didn't looked like me..."

The surprise on Takashi’s face could be described as disquiet.

"... I mean, It looked like me, but... it wasn’t the only time it happened to me today … What I mean is… ummm, forget it."

His hesitation was overshadowed by his embarrassment.

He couldn’t force himself to continue such a wild story.

Takashi had experienced something similar before all the events of the castle had transcended.

There was an eerie feeling going through his spine.

"To be honest I never believed in ghosts stories or hunted buildin's... but after yesterday...I wonder."

Sakamoto kept talking, there was nothing wrong with calling such an encounter a 'paranormal' one.

After all, they had to face shadow demon like creatures in there. Their escape wasn't something they could understand either.

Takashi thought they just ran far enough to leave that place out of their sight.

But when they came back through the same route, the castle was gone. The school they were currently standing in front of was taking it's place.

"Hey do you think it has somethin' to do with the rain'?."

Takashi could only smiled at such a wild assumption.

He had no way to confirm or deny any kind of theory of what that place was.

No, there was something else, but he didn't felt like telling Sakamoto about that weird dream.

"You're awfully talkative today..."

Instead he teased the blonde punk to avoid any awkwardness.

"Shuddup, I was bein' serious."

Takashi chuckles before finally adding to the conversation.

"I don't think it has anything to do with the rain... probably."

"Then, what could it be?"

'Another dimension?'

Takashi took a look at the sky as the remaining clouds scatter to show a clean blue sky.

There was still some time until it started darkening.

He remembered the words of the long nosed man called Igor.
He called it the metaverse navigation app.

An app that was mysteriously installed on his phone.

Igor told him that said app was the method he used to enter the 'metaverse'.

'\textit{Meta-verse}.'

The app was supposedly given to him by that weird psychologist like woman.

And he also said that it'll be given to those he considers useful...

"... You've been looking at your phone a lot today... Is there something wrong?"

Takashi turned his attention back to the blonde boy who was again playing with his phone.

"Huh? Not really, it's just a weird app that got installed by itself on my phone, I couldn't find out what it is yet tho."

Takashi startled. He brought his right hand to his chin while crossing the other under his left arm, deepening in thought.

\textit{That navigation app was also installed on his phone?}

"Hey, Ren..."

The kid called for his attention with his fake name.

"If we could...go back to that place, would you come with me?"

Surprised once again, Takashi could only accept the facts and carry on with the current state of affairs.

"... Why would you want that?"

"Just hear me out, Ok? That place obviously has somethin' to do with Kamoshida, I didn't get everything that cat monster thing said... But."

But he already knew the answer, Sakamoto and him had something in common as he actually said to him the day before.

"You want to find out more about those 'tortured students'."

He completes the sentence Sakamoto was about to say.

"Yeah, I feel we are out of choices here. That place is the only thin' related to Kamoshida we have left to investigate."

Takashi closes his eyes as he adjusts his glasses.

There it was, he already knew, but Ryuji Sakamoto was a caring and honest boy after all.

Even if he had personal reasons of his own, he was still ready to go all the way to 'do the right thing'.

Right now he was focused on stopping and exposing Kamoshida's abuses.

And there was probably nothing able to stop him from trying to reach that goal.
But Takashi needed to make sure, he needed to hear the boy in front of him being 100% sure about what he was about to do.

He himself wasn't completely sure if the method to get into the metaverse was safe enough.

If Sakamoto could actually figure it out by himself, maybe he'll be capable of realizing what kind of nonsense they were dealing with.

Or at least, that was what Takashi hoped.

"And how do you plan on doing that?"

"Hmmm, I was thinkin' on going back from where we came from that day. You know... the same route and all... But..."

"It's kinda late for that..."

Takashi said as he continued his personal test of Sakamoto's resolve.

Kido is worried of what would happen if he leaves Sakamoto by himself today, and what he'll do if he actually finds a way to go back to that place on his own.

Still, Sakamoto was having a hard time trying to figure out another method.

'Maybe I should just straight out tell him, but...'

But then it seems it clicked.

"Oh, that reminds me- Didn't you have a navigation app thingy on, back then?"

"..."

"You didn't noticed? I heard stuff that sounded like one comin' from your phone. You know? 'Returned to the real world' or somethin' like that?"

"You mean this?"

He directly went through his phone menu and pointed at the red eye like icon on the screen.

"Oh, then that's it!?"

Sakamoto quickly scrolled around his own phone, and then showed Takashi the same app on the same manner.

"Cute logo, huh?"

With a serious face, Takashi broke the silence with an ignominious remark.

"C-cute isn't exactly how I'll describe it."

He could see Sakamoto's tolerance waning.

"Anyway, look."

The punkish boy took Takashi's phone out of his hands and started scrolling around after clicking on the app.
"I knew it, it shows your search history! It IS a navigation app. Oh man I'm such a genius!"

Sakamoto had an over joyous expression as if he had just discovered electricity.

"Yeah, right, give me back my phone, will you?"

"Let's try using it."

"Wait!"

"Kamoshida, Shijin Academy, Pervert, Castle... Beginning navigation."*

It was too late.

Soon enough, they were inside that world again.

They felt how the atmosphere around them turned lighter.

As if they could go jumping around without wasting much energy. But the most strange thing happened to Takashi who just decided to give up trying to stop his school mate.

“What the hell?”

They were standing in front of the same gate of the medieval castle from yesterday.

“Look it’s the castle from yesterday. We really made it back! Does that mean what happened yesterday really happened… Huh?”

“Those clothes…”

‘What the…?’

He was again wearing that same coat from before. The white mask and black thief outfit he used the last time he summoned his persona.

The look of this attire wasn’t something Takashi hated.

In fact, it felt good for him to be this unrecognizable from his normal and mundane appearance.

For some reason, even if he was still mentally tired, looking like this stimulated him somehow.

They say the way you dress can boost your self-confidence.

The way he looked right now; Takashi felt capable of doing anything.

“That happened last time too, huh? What’s with that outfit!?”

“You jelly?”

He couldn’t stop the words coming out of his mouth, neither had he regretted them.

“I-I’m not jealous.”

Ryuji Sakamoto was jealous.

As Takashi tried to mask his own uncertainty in such a sophisticated manner.
He was wondering if this radical alteration of his own clothing could actually mean he is able to use that power again.

“What’s goin’ on here? This makes no effin sense at all…”

“Hey!”

Suddenly, a childish familiar voice called for them.

Looking around they realized how detailed the castle surroundings were.

It wasn’t until they checked the gates were they came from that they noticed the small figure of a catlike being.

Black and white with a yellow kerchief on his neck, and a fannypack, its name was Morgana.

The thing that helped them escape the castle and told them about the ‘alternative’ reality they were on.

The little thing got closer by jumping into small steps leaving the same colorful water drop-like traits that they do when they enter the metaverse.

“Stop making a commotion.”

Morgana was acting mysteriously stealthy as he approached them.

“Ah… You!”

“What are you doing here?”

Takashi asked.

“That’s my line. The shadows started acting up, so I came here wondering what it could be…”

It seems this cat-thing had an extraordinary sense that allowed him to feel the presence of the shadows nearby.

It was that ability that allowed them to have a clear escape route last time.

And now, he was alerted about the presence of these boys by the movements of the shadows wandering around the area.

‘Which means he can only feel shadows, but not us?’

“…To think you guys would come back to the entrance when you barely managed to escape.”

The cat sighed as a sign of disappointment.

‘I think he may have been waiting for us.’

Takashi pondered as he was trying to see through the cat’s lines.

“Hey… You told us before, that this place was our school after all, that it turned into a palace, can you explain what the hell does that mean?”

“Yeah, that’s right, this place turned into a castle only because that’s the will of its ruler.”
“You mean Kamoshida’s desires turne-… Distorted the school into a castle?”

Kido tried to clarify what Morgana had told them last time. Considering they were in such a rush back then, it wouldn’t hurt for them to go through a little review.

“Yep, It must be how his distorted heart views your school, as his own castle.”

“Kamoshida… Distorted…”

Sakamoto was still having trouble assimilating the exposition.

Suguru Kamoshida has such a distorted heart that his sickening desires represent him as the ruler of that school. Those desires are interpreted by this world as a lustful castle of torture and sexual depravation. A place where he fulfill his most twisted yearnings every day.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHGG”

But the conversation between the intruders is interrupted by a loud scream coming from inside the castle. The scream was frightening, it was as if someone was being tortured with their limbs being stretched to the limit of their lengths.

“W-What was that?”

“There really are people being tortured here?”

Both Sakamoto and Kido couldn’t dare to deny the existence of the terrifying incidence going on inside this castle.

“It must be the slaves captive here.”

Say the cat being while stretching.

“Slaves? Are you kidding me?”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!”

The scream were piercing through their incredulity.

There was no denying that someone was being hurt inside.

“This is for real? We can’t stay here, we have to do somethin’!”

Sakamoto panicked as he started to look for a way in through the main door.

“Hey I told you-“

But morgana was cut off by Ryuji’s desperate attempts to open the big entrance door.

“I saw some guys being held here yesterday, they’re from our school, I’m sure of it!”

"Ryuji…”

Takashi couldn’t help but feel bad for Sakamoto.

His main reason to come back was because he felt that he saw and abandoned the tortured people here.
Sakamoto obviously has his own history with Kamoshida.

But revenge doesn’t seem to be his main goal. At least not right now as he only reacted this way because of the screams.

“It’s likely they’re being tortured on Kamoshida’s orders, It’s like that every day here.”

“What!?”

Sakamoto paused his attempts after hearing Morgana’s illustration of the everyday events elapsing in this place.

“After you two escaped he must’ve lost his temper quite a bit.”

“That son of a bitch!”

“Ryuji?”

“Calm down.”

Sakamoto shakes his head at the concern of the two other intruders.

“This is bullshit!”

And proceeds to crash himself against the door with all his might. Still not managing to open it.

“Mmmm, it seems you have your own reasons to be here, but doing that won’t do.”

Morgana seems to comprehend the situation a little more.

He ponders what could he could do with the two boys that are inevitably intending to infiltrate the castle once again.

"Hey monamona!"

But all the sympathy Morgana managed to gather for the blonde punk suddenly vanished.

“It’s Morgana!”

“Hey, I need you to take me where they’re bein’ held captive, you know where those voices are comin’ from, right?”

Morgana started to analyze his current position, he was looking for an excuse.

Right now he’s being asked to help the blonde boy.

But he would rather owe a favor to the black haired boy who’s able to use his own persona if he could have it his way.

That was it, he didn’t need to help just one of them, why do that if he could help both of them, again.

“That way he’ll surely accept my conditions.’

The cat thought

“I suppose I can guide you there. But only if he comes with us.”
“Huh?”

‘What a manipulative little guy’

Takashi frowned at Morgana through his mask.

“I wonder.”

He said at first, trying to play hard to get.

But after taking a look at his schoolmate’s impatient and uneasy eyes he made up his mind.

“Let’s go.”

He said as he started walking towards the door.

“It’s settled then.”

“For real…?”

Both of the other two intruder’s gesticulations displayed great pleasure towards his response.

Sakamoto got closer to Takashi.

“Thanks, Ren… Sorry for dragging you into all this.”

“…”

“All right follow me.”

Morgana then directed the duo towards the same ventilation shaft they used to escape last time.

“Why here though?”

Sakamoto couldn’t hold down his curiosity as of why they couldn’t go through the main door again.

“Not barging in through the main entrance is one of the basics of phantom thievery.”

“Phantom thievery?”

‘Is all this some kind of game for this cat?’

“Come on, over here, I’ll show you the way!”

“I guess we have no choice….”

Then Sakamoto started climbing on his own.

But as soon as Takashi had room to start his climbing, he stopped after noticing something was off about the entrance.

There was something in there he didn’t saw last time, or maybe he just didn’t noticed. He wonders if it’s safe to go and check on his own, but…

Curiosity is one of Kido’s weaknesses after all.

He got near the source of his concern.
It was a bright bluish door floating on its own near the shaft.

He saw it in awe as he reached to touch it but then suddenly the door opened on its own.

As if it welcoming him in, he decided not to deny the ominous Invitation, and started walking towards the light.

-----

There was only silence.

The noise of a drop of water echoed through the quilted walls of his cell.

He was again inside that weird room, the room Igor called The Velvet Room.

But this time, there was something different.

He was still dressing on his striped prisoner clothing, he was still chained to his cell door. And he was still locked inside a cell secured with chains instead of a simple lock.

But it wasn’t he wasn't bothered by the ominous and grim surroundings.

What was bothering him was the absence of something very important.

There was no weird old man sitting in the middle of the oval room. There were no little warden children raising their voices at him.

But there was one lone presence sitting in the same desk that Igor was sitting before.

It was that same girl.

The one with the silver hair and bluish butterfly ornament on her hair.

The same girl wearing the white coat while holding a tablet.

She was crossing legs and looking at him from the middle of the room.

“Wait, what are you-”

“I’m here to check on you, the prison master and the wardens are off duty.”

“Off duty?”

“Uh-hum.”

The long nosed doll like old man who warned him about an incoming ruin.

The one who seemed to let out so much less than what he knew. That man who looked like he was out of a supernatural book, was taking a day off?

Did this lady mean that Igor wasn't the one summoning him this time?
The two little girls that were usually at the other side of the door of his cell were also absent.

What could they be doing they weren’t here he wondered.

“…”

An awkward silence filled the room as the girl started typing on the tablet she rested over Igor’s desk with an improvised keyboard of sorts.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m checking your reactions. I’ll be studying how you choose to use your power to see if you’re really worthy of the wild card ability.”

The girl spoke with great security and her speech didn’t have any sort of pause for Takashi to assimilate all the new terms she was using.

“The what?”

It was that simple, Takashi Kido was lost.

He was very lost under the riddles of this woman’s words.

“I mean, the power chose you, or it was probably always part of you.”

“What are you rambling about?”

The kid’s blinking started to accelerate.

“Or maybe you are just a second hand user.”

“Second hand?”

Now, there was absolutely nothing he could made out or let alone understand about that statement. But somehow it irked him the wrong way.

“I mean the prison master wouldn’t want another failure like last time…”

“…”

The blinking intensified.

“Or maybe he does… Oh! Don’t mind me. I’m just thinking out loud.”

“You are certainly noisy.”

The girl took a small pause fixing her thin glasses while firing a short glance at him. Only to immediately direct her attention back to her improvised notebook as she continued to type.

“Hmmmm, unsolicited brashness after an emotional instability and lack of plight awareness, I see.”

“What?”

A frustrated question was shout out like a physical reflex after being hit in the knee by a small hammer.
“You also like to constantly repeat pointless inquires.”

She continued typing.

“Hey, wait…”

It was pointless, he wasn’t being heard at all.

Or more likely, he was simply being selectively ignored.

The girl paused her typing while resting her chin on the backside of her fingers leaning over Igor’s desk.

“How’s the app working for you?”

“Huh?”

“The app. Obviously you consciously chose to use it again.”

The metaverse app, a tool trusted to him to access that world, she was designated by igor to handle him such tool.

“I-I did… But”

“I decided to give it to your partner too, since you already seem to have a use for him.”

‘A use?’

The woman was obviously referring to Ryuji Sakamoto.

The boy showed him the app himself after all.

She managed to handle that tool to him too somehow.

“How?”

“How? That’s a boarded question. You can’t really expect me to guess what you mean by that.”

“How did you gave it to him… to me?”

“I installed it remotely.”

It was a cheap but precise answer. He couldn’t force himself to ask for more specifics.

The feeling that the answer would probably end up being some kind of technicality he wasn’t sure he could understand.

Either that or she would mock him again.

Takashi wanted neither of those options.

“How am I here?”

"You walked in here."

"But why was that door there? What is this place?"
Her mocking was really starting to get under his skin as the volume of his voice raised after every question.

“This is the place between dream and reality, mind and matter, yada yada…”

But the woman dismissed his question while uninterestingly waving her had around.

“So far, you need to work on your handiness and amiability.”

“What are you talking about?”

The voice of his frustration rebelled.

“… And common knowledge.”

Ignored once again, his behavior was added to the woman’s notes as she continued typing.

“Stop taking notes!”

“I can’t. it’s my job.”

The boy then surrendered, letting go of the cell bars and turning around.

“I’m out of here!”

He took a short look and noticed that the same bright bluish door was still there.

There was way out of this dreamy cell after all.

“Oh, I’ll check you for a date next week!”

“Whatever.”

He decided to walk out, leaving the strange woman behind.

‘This was a mistake’

Once he walked away from the same door bright door, he noticed the absence of his other two companions.

“Hey, frizzy hair! Don’t space out like that here! Come on, or you’ll get captured again!”

Morgana was grumbling at him from the other side of the shaft.

“Going!”

He said, as he turned around to watch the door one more time, but it was gone.

‘Figures.’

He decided to ignore that weird encounter, since it’ll be too difficult to explain it to his two accomplices for now.

INTERLUDE / Chains of the heart
It was a yet sober afternoon inside a quiet and almost empty bar. Soft lights arranged for relaxing the atmosphere for the clientele.

There were a bunch of people at the bar.

The soft music characterized a most typical scene for an after-office escapades.

"You haven't touched your drink."

The bar's layout could was anything but romantic though.

The smell of cigarettes and frankincense filling the room were a statement of cheap prestige.

Someone like Sae Niijima, a serious but young district prosecutor. Only accepted such an invitation to come to this place with a man for a drink for that reason.

Yet she was showing some hesitation.

Showing any appreciation for such a fellowship gesture coming from the almost middle aged man in front of her could become a bother.

She had to force herself to go through this encounter to find out what this man was trying to inform her of.

Jirou Kamiya. He was already over his 30's and had respectable position between the police department.

It's not strange that two people that share a similar line of work could meet up like this. But the uncooperation coming from the prosecutor's side was somewhat intriguing for the police officer.

"I thought you called me here because you wanted to talk about something specific."

"Well of course that's the case. But there's nothing wrong with us relaxing a little before starting a serious conversation. I bet you had a long day."

"A day that's not over yet, you may add."

"Oh my, you really took time off your busy schedule just to come to see me? What would your colleagues think?"

There was no need to express how busy the prosecutor had been lately.

Coming all the way from the court building to another district to be joked on during work hours was not on her schedule today.

"They would think nothing of a non-existing conversation, I'll be leaving now-"

"The last name, Isshiki."

Niijima was grabbing her bag while pushing the drink away before stopping at the mention of that name.

"That's a very important name that came during your research, right? "The real first victim." You called it."
Kamiya's look had also changed, a serious glare had invaded his face.

"Akechi-kun?"

"And why would the boy know anything about it? Oh I see, you asked him to dig into it?"

Sae turned back to her previous position. Sitting more comfortably without changing her serious demeanor.

She took a good look at Kamiya, trying to deduce his intentions.

"What do you want Kamiya?"

"I want nothing from you Sae-chan."

The man said while distracting himself with his drink.

"Nonsense. People like you always want something."

"Like me? Sae-chan you hurt me. We know each other for a long time now."

Disgust took over the prosecutor.

Even if she was at her mid-twenties, she had enough experience when it came to dealing with the police networks.

She knew about how the police handled information like it was some sort of barter or currency system.

The extortive tone this man was using, even if they were somewhat familiar with each other, helped her conclude that this man had an ulterior motive for mentioning that name.

"No we don't, and I don't plan to start any time soon."

She barked back, as if she wasn't in the mood for faking any sort of friendly conversation anymore.

"Ha, cold. Still, although I respect it, like it or no, I know a lot about you."

"Besides, I wouldn't dare to go against you after all the times I've been forced to be your punching bag."

The police officer wasn't fretful at all though.

He had the upper hand in the conversation by managing to keep his cool the whole time.

Something that bothered Sae even more.

She considered herself good at hiding and handling her emotions.

Living in a world of wolves like she does, showing any sign of frailty could be a fatal mistake.

"I apologize. I didn't meant to treat you like an... enemy."

To that Kamiya only smiles and takes a sip of his drink.

"Incidentally, I can only mention that I'm somewhat worried about you Sae."
The woman curses her uneasiness that clouded her judgment every time she speaks with this man. She feels that he has earned the right to call her name without honorifics.

But even so. Every time he does that, she has this remorseful feeling that makes her wonder why did she ever allowed him to become this familiar with her.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She asks.

"I wonder... You already made it this far, I know I helped you sometimes but... I really wonder how far you could have gone by yourself."

This is an unusual sigh for Niijima.

This man was actually showing a vulnerable side as he rememorizes something about their past. This surprise was enough for Sae not stressing herself over the fact that he was taking some credit of her current success.

She could empathize with this man current frustrations about his professional position.

Still, she couldn't just let that go unnoticed.

"Are you trying to take credit for something you didn't do again? You never change, do you?"

"Heh, and you would never let that go, do you? Well you won't need to worry about me meddling in your business much longer. But now I wonder if you'll do better without me around..."

"Better?"

"..."

"Someone has threatened you?"

There was no way someone as stubborn as Kamiya would stop pestering her career development from just one day to the other.

Not without a reason.

And she knows this man had taken some risks to help her up in the past.

In their line of work, bluntness wasn't a useful method for conversation.

But Niijima knew this guy was a sneaky type.

Sometimes she thinks that he's only like that because he's trying to act cool though.

"Now dear, why would you take it more seriously than I do?"

Kamiya was taking the whole deal as some kind of joke.

"Because that could only mean you're bothering someone important."

And that someone important has his/her eyes on that investigation too.
She couldn't ask him about the last name he dropped just a few moments ago.

She knew he would only dodge the topic and expose her intentions while doing so.

But now she is finally understands the reason he wanted to talk to her.

"Let me tell you something about threats Sae-chan. If people wanted you out of their way, they wouldn't waste time warning you about it."

But his answers were always vague and frustrating for the ears of the prosecutor.

"… Always so careless."

"Regardless, people like me don’t have much to lose. It wouldn't hurt anyone if a no-good former detective suddenly goes missing."

"Former…? Are you trying to make me console you or something? You're not this pathetic."

Sitting back again, Niijima finally decides to take a sip of the drink. She had submitted to the idea of having to stomach a whole conversation with this man to get some information.

It would be only fair if she had some alcohol to set herself up for it.

And he had said he'll pay for them anyway.

Those times she had to put up with the 'courtesy' of going out drinking with her bosses and superiors had finally paid off somehow.

"You're so strong Sae, I'm so glad you turned out to be like this."

"…"

"But you're isolating yourself in your work, that's not healthy."

Sae puts her drink back on the table before continuing.

Her face showed no emotion but her voice still let out some sort of derisive ring.

"Coming from you that's not something I should take seriously."

"I may be sitting in my desk all day doing nothing but minor chores these days, but I have my own duties to fulfill too."

"Until you get that promotion handed to you a few months from now. Please, a position in the security planning division is something you've been dreaming for a long time, Kamiya."

"You're very well informed."

"The security bureau no less huh?"

"It's not my fault they choose me to contest for the position, after all I have both the right age and years of experience."

"I'm sure it had nothing to do with your contacts in the diet."

Said Sae sarcastically while calmly taking another sip of her drink.
"I know you understand how the political world works Sae. That's why I'm telling you not to take that high road so blindly."

"Blindly?"

The man shakes his empty glass making noise with the ice and showing a disappointed face as he notices he already finished his drink.

The prosecutor was arms crossed ticking her finger over one of her upper arms impatiently waiting for him to correct himself.

"I'm sorry. All I was looking for was for a chance for intimacy, so I could advise you about your current undertakings."

To that Sae finally lets out a sigh of resignation after such an honest answer.

"I was never under the impression of me hinting any need for your intimacy."

"You may not, but didn't you knew already? Bonds are formed regardless of you choosing to neglect them or not."

"People can choose to chain themselves to others for all I care, but I don't have that luxury right now."

For Sae Niijima. The people who ruled over the law world were political overlords that saw every subordinate.

Even law abiders were just pieces on a bigger game of status and recognition.

That's how they played their roles. Even if she got herself into this world while trying to reach her goals and dreams. She had no choice but to play this game to at least have a chance of success.

Sadly for Kamiya, from the time this young and talented lady became a prosecutor, in her eyes, he had turned into just another piece.

"It's a doggy doggy world, huh?"

The man says, he knows the struggles this woman had to go just to get where she's right now, he knows better than most.

"I admire your professional pursue Sae, I really do. But just try not to forget that every achievement has a price."

"Yet some people seem to have it easier than others."

"Touché. Are you feeling any better?"

Kamiya was still in his cool behavior firing a smile back at her comment. As if he was waiting for her to say that eventually.

"... No... I don't need to vent if that's what you were trying to do."

"... For the record, you're right Sae. Intimacy is a chain that bonds people to similar fates."

He said with a distant look on his face.
"Then I'm glad I have no chains on me."

"But you do, she is-"

"If you need to bring up my family, I'll need to end this conversation here Kamiya-san"

He was cut short very quickly as she had no intention of going forward with this certain topic.

"Alright, Sheeesh. You need to be more patient."

"Patient? You have no Idea how much this means."

The animosity finally started to break out again as Sae was showing slight of frustration that filled her voice.

"I do."

"No you don't. You've been handled most of your success, and now you want to lecture me?"

"You're misunderstanding things Sae."

"And you are not denying them. It's really like I said before, you're just like the rest."

The whole time Nijima Sae was arms crossed while passing judgment to this man's life hood.

She didn't saved any word when she was exposing his facade to him.

As if he was one of those criminals sitting besides the judge in a court room.

"Still, you need to understand If I was able to find out..."

"I appreciate it, but I have nothing to hide when it comes of this investigation."

Although she felt this wasn't the right time, she could only hope her approach wasn't burning any bridges.

As the usefulness of this contact was still considerably meaningful.

"I will find out more about the first mental shutdown case, and I will discover what causes them."

Now that she spoke her mind, she only needed to clarify her goals to the police detective so he would let her walk away of this chiding session.

"I bet you'll do."

"I will do it by my own methods."

"That's fair."

The prosecutor was politely rushing towards the end of the conversation. Although Kamiya took the hint, he couldn't help but to look disappointed that his drinking partner wasn't going to continue being his excuse to order more booze.

" I appreciate your concern... But you didn't need to warn me."

This time she sounded a little more gentle.
"I'm just worried your idealism will get you into trouble."

"Then you don't know that much about me after all."

"..."

"Thanks for the drink."

"See you around, Sae-chan."

Niijima bowed out of courtesy before leaving.

Their talk didn't have much meaning to her other than some official confirmation that she was being watched.

And although she doesn't consider this man worth of her trust, she could at least feel a little less troubled knowing it was him the one who warned her about it.

Even if it was a somewhat hilly conversation at times, having an equal to talk with can actually help her check her focus from time to time.

As soon as Kamiya confirms Sae boarded a taxi in front of the bar, he lets out a sigh of relief before taking out his phone and making a call.

"Hello, It's Kamiya... Yeah, I was with her just now. She was smart enough to notice, but she had the wrong assumption I was coming to her from the police interest's side."

"Indeed, trying to avoid using the police's resources would certainly slow her down a little. I think that should be enough for now."

"I see. I'll do just that then."

After hanging up, Kamiya had a melancholic look on his face before gazing at the bartender raising his finger, asking for one last drink.

He then turns off his phone and looks down and his watch.

"Glad you're on the right path."

Interlude / Out

End of part 1

Chapter End Notes

Update 01/11/2018: Personal goal, don’t do more than 3 interludes per chapter.
Many people complained how this game lacked more interactions between the npc
characters between each other. But given this is a retrospective story told from his perspective, it kind of makes sense he doesn’t go out of his way to tell too many things that should be out of his knowledge.

Even the scenes he wasn’t there like the constant SIU scheming cut scenes in the game could make sense as only being the protagonist assuming that’s how things go from his perspective.

That’s why I find interludes as being the best way to handle extra scenes that help to give more context to the events happening in the background.

Update 03/30/2018: Fixed some grammar errors and pacing between dialogs. Mostly deleting unnecessary verbatim.
"T-This can't be..."

"...

Both Sakamoto and Takashi were watching the gruesome scene from behind some bars.

They were once again down into the dungeon levels of the castle.

The scene developing in front of them looked like it was out of some ridiculous 80's low budget horror movie.

Shujin students hanging in the middle of some strange room being tortured by stretching their limbs.

They were two of the volleyball club members they had questioned earlier that day. They were even wearing the same uniform.

But what really bothered them was the sight of the two male students hanging from their arms being shot by what looked like volleyball's set on fire.

Running tracks with an endless treadmill with a grinding machine at the end of it.

A volleyball match room were the losers were set on fire.

Another volleyball field where the students were being beat up with sticks by the armored guards.

A bunch of boys hanging on cages over an underground river.

This cartoonish but grimsome show was the major fear Sakamoto had before entering the castle.

"You have to be shitin' me."

But even so he couldn't imagine the absurdity of the events that are taking place in front of him.

"We have to do somethin'!"

"Relax Ryuji, I already told you don't need to panic, and stop making so much noise!"

Morgana was standing behind the duo witnessing the scene with them unimpressed.

"Relax? these people are bein' tortured! This is beyond messed up!"

"Something is odd though."

"Ren?"
The whole scene was somewhat inconsistent in Takashi's head.

How would so many students end up in here without rising any suspicion?

How would they end up dragged here in the first place?

No matter how uninterested the school authorities and parents pretend to be, at some point the disappearance of children should rise some questions.

"Huh? ... You're right."

"Listen, I get how you are feeling, and I brought you here to honor our deal, now let's just go to that safe room again and I'll explain you things more calmly."

Said Morgana while trying to convince the two boys to follow him, to what Takashi nods.

But Ryuji continued to look around the room, trying to talk to one of the students locked in a cell.

"Hey! Didn't you listen to me?"

"Leave us alone... It's useless..."

One of the slaves in shorts pledged for the trio to leave them be.

"If we stay obedient we won't be executed like you will."

"Executed? You are tellin' me you wanna stay in a place like this!?"

Ryuji jumped at the cell bars trying to get closer to the hurt student.

Taken aback by such statement something suddenly clicked inside Takashi's head.

This place was a world created by the desires of that king as Morgana had told them last time.

Even if everything felt so real, this still isn't the world where they belong.

When they came back last time, the castle had turned back into a school and nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary on the building structure.

'Could it be that these guys are...'

"Wait a minute, were you planning to take these guys out of here?"

Morgana then seems to have reached a realization of his own.

"Why wouldn't we? We can't just leave 'em here!"

"How stupid can you be...?"

"You're very judgmental aren't you?"

Morgana's words were actually somewhat helping to solidify Takashi's theory again.

But his blatant tone wasn't helping them to reach a conclusion either.

"These are only human in Kamoshida's cognition. They aren't real humans that have entered to this reality. They're different from you two."
With that Ryuji could notice Takashi letting out a sigh of relief.

"Cognition?"

"So he really wishes school to be like this?"

"Yeah, sort of what I told you last time."

"Ha-hahaha... That son of a bitch!!!"

Both Morgana jumped back at Ryuji's rage exploding again.

"You really must hate that Kamoshida guy."

"Hate doesn't begin' to describe how I feel... EVERYTHING is that asshole's fault!"

Ryuji's fists were clenching hard.

"Anyway, there's no point in saving them! They're different to the ones in your world... You could say, these are extremely similar-looking dolls."

"But what does this represent? Does this mean the students in the real world are going through something similar?"

This time Kido went ahead of himself, asking with a serious but concerned face.

"You're sharp. This probably represents what Kamoshida feels he should be doing to these guys."

"So the school's a castle and the student's are slaves. It's so on point that it makes me sick."

Ryuji turned around once more glaring at the scene behind him, but that only worked him up even more.

"This really is the inside of that asshole's head!"

Morgana could notice the growing frustration on Sakamoto. So he decided to actually have a peek of the situation himself.

"Still, this is horrible. If he treats them like slaves in the real world too, this wouldn't be so far from reality either. They may be physically abused every day... There's no way they'd be so beat up normally."

So far it seems the strange cat-thief wasn't paying much attention to the happenings inside this castle.

He knew there were 'people' being tortured.

He knew there was bunch of sickening acts being committed around the building.

But he never bothered to grasp the magnitude of the effect these events were having that other world.

Not until he meet these two boys who came from that other reality.

"So, they're really going through similar shit in reality!? The physical punishment could actually be for real then..."

"It's not 100% certain, remember this place is based on his distorted desires, so it could also mean that he just wants to do things like this to those people..."
Morgana followed up the argument with a cautious remark.

Kido nodded at the comment and tried to see things with the same logical approach.

In the end, this room revealed to them not only a warning of how twisted Kamoshida's mind could actually be, but also what were the dangers of verge towards his volley ball club.

"There's also the chance that all the people we asked today were already being abused too, right? We saw their bruises, and their behavior was similar to those who tried to warn us earlier..."

A fast image of a certain pony tailed girl crossed his mind for just a second while he asked that.

"Yeah..."

Morgana couldn't add nothing more, the conclusion was clear, there was nothing else they could get from this room except one thing.

"If those rumors end up bein' true, wouldn't this be somethin' to report to the police?"

"I'll use these guys as evidence."

Sakamoto takes out his phone to take a picture of the scene.

That way he could have something, at least a glimpse of evidence of what has been happening at that school.

Even though the location takes out a lot of validity of said evidence. The likeness of the students and the real bruises in the real world should be enough evidence.

"... Huh? it's not working? We can use the navigation app but the camera's a no go!?"

"Figures... It would've been too simple..."

Kido said as if he was expecting this drawback somehow.

"A navigation app?"

But Morgana was twining his tail in wonder at something Ryuji said.

"That's what we used to come here."

Meanwhile Takashi was also trying to open his camera app to no avail either.

"I see... Anyway we are going to get caught if we stand around like this. Come on follow me."

The cat started heading back from where they came from without saying any other word.

"Hey, it seems I brought you all the way here for nothin'. I'm sorry." "Don't, I'm somewhat relieved to find out the true about those slaves, but..."

"Yeah, there are still things we don't know. C'mon."
"This room again, I thought it was in the first floor."

It was a completely unremarkable room. If it wasn’t for the quivering image of two dimensions commingling together like if it was a flicker in the lights.

The twinkling image between a class room and a chamber from that old castle was certainly not a reassuring scene.

That way the distortion stopped and they could try to regroup more easily

The school furniture mixed with the castle's wall structure made distinct and odd sight in comparison to the rest of the palace's architecture.

'Another reality the palace ruler's heart projects."

Takashi remembered Morgana's words from yesterday.

"I was wondering last time too, why didn't shadows get inside these?"

"Because there's a lack of distortion here, the ruler's control over this area is weak."

Both Morgana and Takashi were silent at the realization of Sakamoto's ire was still running so deep as he remained staring at the wall.

"I don't know what happened between you and that Kamoshida guy. But don't let your emotions get the better of you. His lackeys are everywhere inside."

Morgana gave an eloquent piece of advice to the blonde boy.

The slim boundary between emotion and logic was being distorted between Sakamoto's heart after all.

That fragile and slim line is what creates what we usually call sanity.

Both Morgana and Kido worried about Sakamoto's crossing said line and acting on something he'll regret.

"Anyway, about my clothes. You called it my will of rebellion last time."

Takashi tried to change the subject.

"Yeah, it's quite simple."

Morgana replied with a cheerful pitch. Happy to give more exposition.

"It's not really."

Sakamoto wasn't doing well following these conversations.

"In order to prevent the distortions of the palace's ruler to affect you, one must hold a powerful will of rebellion, which is why your outfit manifests itself like that... It's the image of rebellion you hold within."

"I see."
"... So his image of rebellion is of a weird magician for kids parties?"

"Hey!"

"Hmmm, it looks more like one of those 90's hackers outfits from those movies tho."

"Take that back!"

"Well, you changed your mood quickly."

Said Morgana while bringing his little paws to his waist.

"Not really, I'm fed up wit this shit. What the hell are you anyways?"

"I am a human, an honest-to-god Human!"

'No you're not'

"No, you're obviously somethin' more like a cat!"

'He is'

"This is, well... it's because I lost my true form... I think."

"You think?"

"You don't even know?"

Both Sakamoto and Kido inquired the cat for a clear answer.

"W-well that's the reason I snuck in here in the first place, it was to investigate the means in how I can return to my true human form."

"What is this, a manga? This is seriously crazy..."

"Anyway we should move on, this something else I wanted to show you."

Morgana then jumped off the table heading to the door.

"See?"

"What!?"

"The hallway?"

As soon as Morgana opened the door, the landscape outside the room was completely different from when they entered.

"Yes, remember when we were here last time? Let's just say that since a safe room is a place out of the ruler's control. We are able to use multiple safe rooms around the castle to travel to areas we already have been before."

"... This keeps makin' even less sense!"

"Let me guess, it has to do with cognition, right?"

"Yep. Even by walking around here we are affecting the landscape of this palace. So we can be able
to use these rooms with poor to almost no distortions as a way to accelerate our exploration."

"But how?"

"I guess it has to do with who opens the door, and what they're imagining or remembering at the time... Or something like that."

"Again with that?"

"Anyway I'll be counting on you to help me clear our path this time."

"Right."

"Hey, don't worry. I'm not gonna force it all on you. I thought I might help, so..."

'Oh no, what's he up to?'

Sakamoto had a honest smile on his face.

That didn't tranquilized Takashi's mind one bit given his current knowledge of this boy's slovenly nature.

But what came next put his mind on edge even more, considering Sakamoto had just pulled a gun out of his bag.

'So while I was bringing a knife to school, and he was bringing a gun... great. '

"I brought this just in case! It's just a model gun tho, so it only makes sounds!"

Kido took a moment to analyze Sakamoto's intentions.

He couldn't come up with a good joke given Sakamoto was being so honest and so eager to help.

"That's a toy."

"That's a toy!"

Both Morgana and Takashi just resigned with pointing out the obvious in unison.

"But it looks totally real, so it'll at least fake 'em out."

"That won't-"

"Oh and I brought some medicine too. You know what they say: 'Providin' is pre... something' Huh? Huh?"

"... Uh-huh..."

It was time for him to not bother anymore.

"On second thought, that may be helpful after all."

But still at the door, Morgana was actually pondering something.

"What do you mean?"

"Heh. Take those, come, I'll show you."
Right now both the cat and Takashi are both hiding behind a wall trying to ambush a shadow-knight patrolling the area.

Sakamoto came closer to the duo who were sneaking around looking for an opening.

"Shh be very quiet, we are hunting shadows." So far, Morgana had taught Takashi a few tricks and methods to hide his presence so shadows wouldn't notice them.

It helped them greatly to avoid any confrontation until they reached the lower dungeons.

But to escape this palace, they still had to go through the big halls around the first levels.

There, a new enemy's sent to check the area.

This proves to be the right time for Morgana to teach them a little thing about ambushes.

“Remember, you have to take off their masks to momentarily break the control the palace’s ruler has over them. That way they’ll show their real selves, then we can off them.”

Takashi nodded at Morgana’s instruction.

In a swift move, Takashi dashed towards the Knight who had just turned his back to them.

A mistake the shadow wasn’t able to regret.

The boy climbed over the knight’s shoulder with cat like agility.

It was over in an instant.

"Come out to play!"

He said while wearing a big grin as he ripped off the knight's mask.

The form of the knight melted back into the familiar form of the same crypt dwelling pyromaniac.

Accompanied by a gallows flower being.

“Heh.”

Takashi couldn’t help but smile at the sight his petty enemies.

He had already figured out the method for killing such an adversary.

The new one didn't seem to be much of a threat.

The speed the boy used during his following attacks weren’t natural at all.

He was like a human weapon that could pierce through his enemies by dashing through them.

He would be better described as the sharp point of a knife once he starts charging.
“Now aim that gun and shoot!”

He could hear Morgana’s instruction.

Maybe it was the frenzy of battle.

Maybe it was him just getting too submerged into his so far unknown battle spirit.

But he complied the request.

The enemy was dazzling so he took that chance to aim that automatic fake gun as he jumped back to take distance.

It was a critical hit.

The pyromaniac pumpkin was lying unconscious in the ground.

Meanwhile Morgana had already dealt with the gallows flower monster with just one blow of his wind spells.

Two more shadows spawned after it.

This time they were two flying fairies.

But they were taken down swiftly by Morgana’s own shooting weapon.

‘A slingshot? Really?’

“All right, this is a great chance to show you a good method to get rid of these pests with great swiftness, I’m sure you’ll like it.”

Takashi cleaned his lips with one of his gloved hands.

Spinning his knife around with his other hand, his knife was anxious for more action.

“All right.”

“Hee-Hoo! Have mercy’

It was a scream for piety from the remaining pumpkin, but it was too late.

“All-out attack!”

"Are you kidding me? Just that!?"

After voicing his immediate disappointment after Morgana revealed their next tactic.

They charged.

He had no trouble following Morgana’s steps.

There was only one goal in mind after all, slash the enemies as much as he could while they’re knocked down.

It was a simple but practical attack.

Even though Takashi was somewhat frustrated by the plainness of the assault. He understood the
fruitfulness of this kind of onset.

Their enemies were as vulnerable as they could be.

Lying on the ground without any chance to fend themselves, it was an unique chance for a practical but brutal strike that could end the conflict at once.

They had to use all their might.

They had to use an all mighty attack to finish this battle in one shot, so they wouldn't waste much more of their energy by pointlessly trying to find a tactical advantage against multiple enemies.

It was such a simple tactic, and it was ruffianly effective.

Takashi could feel the thrill after every cut.

He continued to dash through his enemies with great precision, tracking back his steps after every strike.

It was as if he's tied his current target.

He continued to come back delivering attacks with overwhelming speed.

Using his momentum to increase the damage of his cuts.

It was a slaughter.

One that he was feeling very proud of, as if he was sculpting an art piece with all his might.

Finally the butchering was over.

The last impulse Takashi got was not needed anymore as the enemies were already vanishing in their own vital liquids as they poured their remaining existence all around the battlefield.

Soon they started to disintegrate, he landed a few feets away from the crime scene.

It was aesthetically perfect, his stylish masterpiece of violence.

"That was... actually fun."

"Good job rookie."

"Did that toy really just shoot real freaking bullets?"

Sakamoto came out from hiding running behind them to ask this question.

"That's how it works in this cognitive world. If our opponents sees them as real, it becomes such. It's a good thing it's realistic-looking."

"Well... that works." Kido couldn't find a better way to put it.

"... I don't get it."

"Mwehehe, I wasn't expecting someone with your brains to understand such a logical explanation."

Said the yellow bandana wearing, sword swinger, slingshot shooter talking cat with a mocking tone.
"How about you frizzy hair? Did you understand what I just said?"

"It's simple logic."

Kido said with a neutral expression.

In truth. He has already given up trying to make sense of this day a long time ago.

"Hmmm, well if it's better to have somethin' realistic, why do you got that stupid slingshot? And it was just a strong as a goddamn gun!"

"Uh?, well, um..."

Morgana sighs at the unexpected comeback.

"Fiine you can choose to understand it however you want! Oh we have to decide how to divide our roles in battle next!"

"He totally dodged my question."

"So, the next room is the big hall isn't?"

Morgana reached towards Takashi who was trying to open the next door heading to the big hall from before.

"Yeah, but we must be careful, at this rate we'll be found out even if it's just the three of us. Fighting each one of the knights in this castle will be both time consuming and exhausting. And you really don't look like you have that much energy left anyway."

"... You've noticed?"

"What?"

At this point Takashi Kido couldn't hide his exhaustion to his school mate anymore.

Reality is that he felt how every step, every jump, every breath he took while they descended through the dungeons were taking its toll on him.

But what was bothering him was the fact that he had felt his exhaustion growing through the whole day.

Not only in the meta-verse, but in the real world too.

It felt as if he haven't slept for days.

He was feeling physically and mentally exhausted.

His muscles were sore, just like the day after your first gym session. His thought process were working only at 40% speed capacity.

His reflexes were getting slower. And so was his ability to remember the spells his persona employs to use them.

In other words he was wearing down as time passed.

"You probably needed more rest before coming back here, anyway we should avoid combat as
much as we..."
"INTRUDERS!"

But the half opened door revealed two giant armored knights heading towards them from the big hall.

"Dammit! We should split to get to the entrance, I'll see you there!"

"Wait!"

"Ryuji follow me!"

Without hesitating, Morgana tried to run towards the stairs while Sakamoto and Kido eluded one of the knights trying to go to the door at the other side of the room.

"Don't stop c'mon."

At first Takashi felt like was going to lead Ryuji towards the door. But soon enough the blonde boy started to run past him at great speed.

'Am I this tired already?'

Kido wondered since the boy had already reached the door before him.

Sakamoto's speed doubled his at least for a few seconds.

"Look out!"

"Huh?"

But before the blonde punk could open the door, this one was kicked open by a big golden armored knight.

This knight was different from the rest.

He exuded a strong presence, or at least that was what Takashi thought as he started to put one of his hands over his mask.

Things had turned into a matter of life or dead very quickly.

Sakamoto couldn’t help but to quiver in fear at the sight of the golden knight big sword held up.

“They, are you ok!?"

“Uh?”

But when he opened his eyes, he could only see the black clothed phantom boy standing in front of him.

His schoolmate had saved his life again by summoning his persona and meddling between the sword and him.

“Try to run to the exit, I’ll make sure they focus on me!”

“... Ren!”
The boy he knew as Ren was breathing hard.

He was hurt.

Sakamoto could only imagine what had just happened.

He had taken the blow meant for him in his stead.

But that didn't seem possible.

The persona thing was floating between Ren and the monster shadow. Taking the blow instead of the kid.

It was a frustrating sight to say the least, the powerless boy had no other choice but to obey.

'Dammit, like this I can't do anythin'!'

Two more armored knights came from the sides surrounding the boys.

A familiar scenario they hoped to not experience ever again.

"Dammit frizzy hair! I told you not to fight!"

But suddenly the two knights were surrounded by a strong wind force that came from out of nowhere.

Takashi noticed the cat-like thief jumping from the roofs to his side. Reaching towards him.

"Here grab my hand!"

After touching Morgana's small paw for a few seconds, the cat summoned his persona.

In just an instant, Kido felt like his vitality had risen up.

It felt like he could move freely without pain again.

Like his wounds wouldn't hurt anymore when he started moving.

"I'm... healed?"

The wind around the two armored knights vanished as they turned into two dirty two-horned beasts.

"Just your wounds. Seriously though, I can't let you guys alone for a few seconds, I'll explain later. We have to- ARHG!"

One of them charged against Morgana and launched the little being around the room with great force.

"I heard some intruders have invaded my castle again. So it was you! To think you'd go through the trouble of coming here to get killed."

With all the commotion, the intruders couldn't notice the presence of the Nudist king standing up in the stairs in the main hall,

"Kamoshida!"

"It's great you want to die so badly."
"Freaking Asshole!"

Sakamoto was clenching his teeth again.

"Did you think that because you got away from me once, you could do it again?"

The look on the face of the king was a twisted one.

He was smiling wryly as if he was trying to excuse his escape from their last encounter.

Now he obviously felt he had the advantage again.

"No. I won't allow it to be so easy this time."

He raised his hand, the golden knight started to approach the three intruders, all of them on their knees.

"Let's see how long can you survive him... Try to entertain me until dinner at the very least?"

His smile turned into a sadistic grin as he lowered his hand giving a command.

"Kill them."

Immediately the big golden knight reached for Morgana.

But instead he grabbed Takashi by the throat.

Once again the white masked boy had put himself in the way of the golden knight's attack.

This time the knight was not surprised, his reaction was immediate. Changing his focus away from crushing the cat's head to grabbing the boy's throat.

"Argh"

'No good, I'm about to pass out!'

Kido was at his limits.

He couldn't even summon his persona at this rate.

His concentration was far gone and he could only focus his remaining strength on trying to catch a breath.

"Let GOOOO!"

"Argh!"

Sakamoto had tried to assault the knight with a metal bar he grabbed from one of the decorations in the room.

But his attempt only was found with the golden knight's left free fist shoving him away.

The knight then dropped the phantom boy to the ground.

After looking for a nod from the king, he approached the blonde kid lying on the ground and trampled over him.
"AAArgh"
"It's so fitting for you to be on your knees again, worm."
"Dammit!"
"Ryuji!"

Morgana was still trying to survive the horned beasts from before. But the cat was having a hard time on his own. The wind spells on only left an opening for another one to charge. Resulting in the cat being sent flying around the room once more.

"Do you get it yet? You're powerless before me."

The king's face was still displaying the same sadistic face from before.

"Especially you Sakamoto."

"This is just how my Justice works. The one I uphold in my castle, one that you can't do nothing about."

Sakamoto was trying to drag himself out of the knight's foot to no avail.

He could notice both of his accomplices lying on the floor trying to recompose themselves as well.

"Just like when you and your precious track team were punished for defying my guidance."

"That shit ain't no guidance, you abusive bastard! ARGH!"

His complain was shut short by the foot of the golden knight.

It seems he had to suffer through the king's speech before facing his execution.

"Heh, well it's true that I planned to crush that whole team from the very start. It was nothing but an eyesore after all."

A weaked Takashi tried to rise up again.

Taking a look at Sakamoto's face, he could conclude the king was actually telling the truth to an extent.

"I am the one who needed to achieve results! I did nothing wrong by crushing them under my feet!"

The king smiles to himself

"And look at yourself. After going around limping for so long. Being seen as a violent punk that tried to punch a teacher and got what he deserved. Even after the whole track team vented their frustrations on you and blamed you for them not being able to reach the inter high meet. You still haven't learned your lesson!"

'So that's why...'

Takashi was getting back on his feet.

One of the horned beast was approaching him leaving Morgana with only one custodian.
If he could get past that one beast he could try to save Ryuji.

"You couldn't bear it anymore did you? Just like that time, but look at the outcast you've become because not knowing your place!"

Besides the king was too busy by having a bliss while listening to his own voice.

"You can't never win against me, and you will always be a loser."

He dramatically points his finger at the boy.

"Now die like the dog you are."

The golden knight raised his sword once again.

'Am I going to lose again?'

As if resigned, the blonde kid gaze was lost in his own deception.

"Sakamoto! Do you really want to die just like that!?"

BAM

Arsene.

One last time he used the force of his persona to charge with a cleave to tumble the golden knight. Ryuji was free.

"Huh?"

"... Leave this to me and run!"

Takashi had trouble saying those words.

He knew the weight behind them after all.

He didn't meant to make Ryuji feel any worst than he already had by saying them. But the situation was dire.

'Shit! Am I really gonna lose again?'

He couldn't handled the idea of that happening again.

"NO! I WON'T RUN!"

His powerless voice turned into a rowdy one.

"Huh?"

All Morgana, Takashi and the king noticed the sudden change in the boy's tone.

"I can't run, not until..."

The boy was slowly getting up.

He was facing the floor.
His voice started to rise its volume.

But instead of crumbling by the amount of emotion holding the boy's posture, he could feel as if his entire being was trying to break free.

"Not until..."

*Thump, thump*

His heart beats were increasing, he could feel a strange thrill inside him.

"I get back what this bastard stole from me!"

He finally raised his head, he guided his sight towards the Perverted King.

Everything that was important to him was taken away by that abusive lord.

He thought he could never get all that back, but still...

'I can't... Lose'

The king felt like he had an advantage from their last encounter, he thought he was already victorious.

("Do you really want to die just like that!?")

The people that were lying on the floor, were the people that decided to help him.

The people that decided to side with trash like him, they were about to die because of him.

That was the reason the king was so confident.

Their future were under his whims.

"I..."

Ryuji Sakamoto knew how this teacher must feel right now.

He had already seen that face he was wearing once before.

He knew what this 'King' meant by saying that he could never win over him...

"I'll..."

Because back then... he had that same sadistic smile on his face the whole time.

One year ago, while he was writhing on the floor in pain.

He remembered that smile all too well.

He had enough of it for the rest of his life...

"I'LL WIPE THAT STUPID SMILE FROM YOUR FACE!!!"

*Thump, thump*
Bloodshed eyes with a glowing yellow iris. His mind was about to go for a ride.
Like he said before, hate could not begin to describe how he truly feels.
Only the physical pain he was about to feel could rival with those emotions...
A familiar voice, calm but also ghoulish, cold and menacing, came from the depths of his mind.
It was the voice he never used before...

You seek power correct? Then let us form a pact

It was indeed all he needed.
The power to oppose his sentence to oblivion.
He could give all he had for one chance, just one chance for redeem his life.
But he had nothing to give in return anymore, or so he thought.
He still had his wretched future.

Since your name has been disgraced already...

He's been let down by the world too many times to just stand by any more.
He's been the enemy of silence because nobody was willing to listen to his cries for help.
He's been a witness of squander his whole life. Enough to know nobody will save him the trouble.
He's been labeled and exiled.
He had his own democracy overthrown.
Then...

Why not hoist the flag and break havoc...?

What else has he left to do?

Other than pillage over the world and take what he wants.

The other you that exist within you desires it thus...

His need for clarity had never been so satisfied.

I am thou, thou art I...

He had all he needed, under his mask.

There is no turning back...

He will break havoc, he will raise his voice, he will prove his existence, he will uncensor all the wrong doings he had suffered, and he will tell the world... That they can shove it.

The skull of rebellion is your flag henceforth!
The pain was excruciating.

Sakamoto was rolling on the ground this whole time holding his head, trying not to pass out from the pain.

He was losing control of his body functions.

Sweating profusely and even drooling at the agony of breaking himself apart from his past self.

But that pain and agony were nothing compared to what he knew he could get away with.

On his knees for the last time, the mask he wore his entire life takes form.

The metal skull mask strong enough to resist all the assaults of the scoundrels that tried to take his future was covering this never shown face.

All his life he was trying to avoid turning into what he hated.

To be the same like these rudimentary masses of contempt who were telling him to properly behave.

They can all go to hell for what he cares, from now on he will navigate the path of his desires, without looking back.

*Rips*

The mask is off, making him go through tremendous pain as blood starts pouring out of his upper face.

The scream of pain turns into an explosion of light and wind, unbalancing everyone in that room.

"What? Another one?"

The king smile finally vanished as he realized the meaning of the scene developing in front of him.

In the remains of that white light turned into bluish fire as it diminishes.

It was the rotten figure of a skull face with glowing yellow eyes wearing what could be called a pirate hat.

It was the Pirate itself from legend, boarding his ship like if it was a skate board.

The rebel pirate, the new source of this boy's resolve had finally taken form.

In front of it, the blonde boy was standing up with a huge grin as the wind of the remaining strength of his new persona had put his enemies at bay.

He tries to take a look at himself.

He was wearing a new outfit.

A body tight black leather jacket with a big collar and a messy red ascot.

His black leather pants and combat boots, the shiners on his belts, knee pads and the metal vertebral arrangements on the back of his jacket were the only parts of his outfit besides his red ascot and yellow gloves that didn't allow him to have a complete full black outfit.
"Right on! What's up persona?"

Looking back at his hands Sakamoto was grasping the looks his new powers gave him with a huge cocky smile.

While both Morgana and Takeshi slowly began to stand up.

They notice that his new reinforcement was more than eager to test his new strength.

'So he has a persona too?'

Kido couldn't help but to smile back at Ryuji's eagerness.

This new glimpse of hope could be the chance they needed to help them survive this otherwise ill-fated day.

The two remaining horned beasts charged towards their new enemies.

They were focusing directly on Sakamoto's torso.

But before they could reach anywhere near his personal space, he started crossing both arms in front of his face as the shadows of his now vanished mask started to pour something similar to the blue flames from before.

Only this time his eyes filled with detestation were visible.

What came next was a light speed thunder, the victim was the first charging beast.

The attack was precise and lethal, but it was only one enemy.

The remaining horned beast was still charging.

But even if Sakamoto didn't had enough time to zap this beast. He had enough time to level out his composure.

He could see, and he could predict the force and speed of the charging attack.

Sakamoto had seen it twice by now, he could also dodge it.

And so he did.

The charge passed by, leaving the beast back fully opened for Sakamoto's next attack.

With a huge smirk, the blonde punk preyed on this generous situation and onshored the enemy with another zap of his thunder spell.

"Tch, don't start getting cocky! You think you can get away because you managed to fend some weaklings, think again!"

Shadow Kamoshida raises his arm signaling towards the golden knight.

"Don't dare to mock me brat!"

This one raises his sword out of pure anger and smashes it on the floor.

More precisely, the force of his strike was so much that he used the entirety of his body to smash the floor. Melting himself into the black mud that all the shadows have distorted themselves to before.
From it, the figure of a bigger red armored knight riding a horse emerges wielding his own spear.

"I'm ready, let's brin' it! Let's go! CAPTAIN KIDD!"

This time Sakamoto was pointing one of his fingers towards the knight while holding it with his other hand.

The signal was a fire mark.

The target was the knight

And the cannon, it was the Pirate's arm floating behind the skull masked rebel.

It was a strong shot, hit with full strength, it was so strong that the knight's horse couldn't keep itself standing anymore.

"One more time!"

This time, one shot was all he needed, the firing was aiming directly at its target head.

There was no way around it, it was a merciless display.

"Tch, nothin' special!"

But at the defeat of the big armored knight, two spawned from the stairs and three more were coming from the dungeon areas.

Quickly enough, they were surrounded once again.

"C'mon! I'll beat the crap of all of ya!"

"Ryuji wait!"

But that meant nothing for Sakamoto's renewed spirit.

As soon as he smashed an armored knight with a club he picked up, A bedside brute came out of it.

This one tried to ambush the blonde kid by flying towards his blind spot.

A pointless attempt.

The brute couldn't even complete his flight as he was found by a flying cleave from the red and black flying personification of Takeshi's heart.

Arsene cleave attack took down the brute and managed to take advantage of that opening to critically hit two more enemies with his knife and gun.

"NOW!"

Sakamoto didn't need to hear anything more than that.

He had seen it with his own two eyes before anyway.

Two enemies were lying on the floor trying to recover.

It was an opening they couldn't waste, so they charged, full speed with all their might, it was all out or nothing.
And it was successful.
The enemies never had a chance to recover.
Regardless, Sakamoto was starting to visibly pant after so much effort.
It was his first time using such power.
He still couldn't measure the limits of his new strength, not until he reaches it himself anyway.
"Right! That's how we do it! Now that I have this power, It's time for payback!"
"Stubborn pieces of shit! Bring them to me! I'll personally execute them all!"
"You better look out Kamoshida, because I'm comin' for ya next!"
Hiding his fatigue he pointed towards the king who was starting to get even more displeased at the sight of the two rebels still managing to stand on their feet.
"Ryuji look out!"
Sakamoto's cry for more battle may had been too soon as another armored knight was heading towards him, aiming his sword at his vulnerable neck.
But behind the armored knight, another dark figure was waylaying.
It was the buffed masked Zorro. Who only needed a winnow of his sword to call for the winds to wreak distress to the armored ambusher.
The form of the knight disintegrated and the small master of the wind persona was standing there arms crossed mockingly smiling at the easy success of his spell attack.
"What an annoying bunch of weaklings"
"Morgana?"
"Heh, so you've awakened your persona? You still need to get better though, you were almost done for there."
"I haven't even gotten used to it yet!"
"Well at least you're stronger now. Maybe you'll be able to help me steal it then!"
"Steal?"
Still panting in exhaustion, Takashi could only listen the lasts parts of Morgana's recent statements.
The small creature was beginning to let out some hints of his true intentions.
"But first we need to get out of here. Here I'll show you a little trick."
Morgana then put out something out of his fannybag.
(Goho-M)
It was a strange item indeed, a small oldschool like hand grenade, match and all.
He threw it down and the resulting explosion let out enough smoke to cover the entire main hall.

"What the-"

"I can't see them-"

"Someone do something!"

As soon as the king recovered his field of vision, the intruders were nowhere to be seen.

"Rrrgh. What an annoying bunch."

"Myyyy kiiiiing! Where are you at?"

A familiar female voice came out from the upper stairs.

The voice seems to be enough to calm down the King's animosity, bringing back his twisted smile to the room once more.

"Heh. Well I better prepare before those thieves decide to come back again."

With that the King majestically turned away heading upstairs.

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Once again at the castle main entrance, the intruders were recovering their breath.

"We managed to escape..."

Takashi said between deep breaths.

His pessimistic nature must had prepared him for the worst many times during the day.

"What was that?"

But once he noticed Morgana had recovered his breath, Takashi could only wonder what was that thing the thief cat-thing used to allow them to escape.

"It's an item I manufactured myself. Pretty cool huh?"

*pants* "Anyways."

Says Ryuji nonchalantly.

"I don't remember changin' into this!?"

"Really now?"

Morgana found himself narrowing his eyes at Ryuji's incredulity once again.

"You look like a thug."

Said Takashi, still trying to recover his breath.
And probably still holding a grudge at Ryuji's last words about his own outfit.

"The hell!? I-it's still better than your magician-lookin' one!"

But this time he managed to fluster the blonde boy a little.

His answer was a little less clear minded than last time.

He smiled and regained his composure putting his hands in his pockets once again.

"Quiet."

"Did you found them!?"

"No, search that way!"

The voices of the shadows came from inside the vent.

They were standing right in front of it, so their mere presence could be noticed by only giving out a heavy breath.

They were still not safe.

They decide to walk away a little more near the entrance.

"So what's goin' on?"

"When a persona user opposes a palace ruler and becomes a threat, this happens, that mask you wear is like the opposite of those knights..."

"Is this... a Skull?"

"Again, your appearance reflects your inner self, it's the rebel that slumbers within..."

Morgana then stops mid-sentence after realizing the futility of his intention.

"Not that you'll get it."

"Nope."

"Then stop asking questions and accept what you see for what it is!"

Morgana wiggled around angrily but still managing to keep his lower voice.

"Easy for you to say."

"You did call him a rebel. Why would he listen."

The constant bickering from the two high school boys was starting to get on Morgana's nerves.

"Ugh, could you two please focus?"

"Oh Shit! We are in deep shit right?"

"I said to be quiet!"

"But what 'bout the Kamoshida's in our school? How are we goin' to deal with him after this?"
"That's a sudden realization coming from such an idiot."

Morgana finally started to relax again.

That's what knowing something that others don't does to his cheeky ego.

"What?"

"Relax. The Kamoshida in reality can't know what happened here. A shadow is the true self that is suppressed. A side of one personality that they don't want to see."

"I see, that's why he didn't remember about us that time."

Takashi seems to be remembering the encounter they had with Kamoshida during his first day at shujin.

Back then he only recalled his encounter with Takashi from the train station.

"... So we're ok?"

"Most likely, some things that happen here could still alter his behavior in the real world."

Morgana explained as Takashi tried to interject to ask about something that had called for his attention.

"I see, but wait... What you said earlier... About shadows being the suppressed self..."

"Wait, I guided you as promised. It's your turn to cooperate with me."

'I knew it.'

Kido was expecting this revelation through the whole day.

"That's why I was super nice about teaching you idiots everything."

Said the cat assuming a sassy arms crossed posture.

Kido took a look at Ryuji's direction, who cached his glance and seems to understand what Takashi's intentions are.

"Huh? Cooperate?"

And so Sakamoto started the 'play dumb operation'.

"Don't you remember? I came here for an investigation of my own. I need to erase the distortion from my body and regain my real form."

"hmmm."

But Takashi's eyelids weren't helping him keeping him focus on his aspirations to stay awake.

"That's why we must delve deep into mementos and-"

If he wasn't so deeply gone into the zero stamina left land, Takashi would had no problem listening to the cat's whole story.

Sure he was trying to manipulate them. But the cat did a great deal helping them to stay alive.
Kido wasn't aware of where his feet were at anymore, just being in this light headed world was taking away his consciousness.

"Whoa hold on. What're you goin' on 'bout? We never said anything 'bout helping you out."

"Huh?"

Morgana took a look at the frizzy haired boy looking for a more coherent answer than the one the blonde boy just gave him.

But he only meet with a big uninterested yawn.

"Don't tell me... Are you not going to repay the hospitality I showed you? Especially you! You're going to up and leave, even though you're already part of my master plan!?"

'Plan?'

"Sorry I wasn't paying attention."

Suddenly Morgana's sight turned into this cartoonish view of the two new villains that had just taken advantage of him.

On the right, it was the blonde street thug with a pipe, smiling at himself like he was about to steal away any hopes and dreams away. On the left there was the frizzy haired thug who was fixing his gloves with a smug mocking smile on his face, ready to steal anything that he had put his sight on first.

"Is it because I'm not human...? Because I'm like a cat...? Is that why you're making a fool of me!?"

'Now I'm not sure if he's that insecure or if he's really trying to manipulate us again.'

Regardless Takashi was not going to have it, he needed his beauty sleep, and he needed it soon.

"We're busy."

Said Sakamoto while going down on his knees to thank Morgana.

Takashi couldn't avoid turning the image of Ryuji talking Morgana down as if he was some sort of middle-schooler kid.

"Thanks for everything, cat. You've got guts, bein' a cat and all."

Morgana's sulky face wasn't taking it very well, much for Takeshi's amusement.

"See you around."

To that both teens started running away while taking out their phones.

"HEY! What the hell!? Ugh, seriously!? Why're you wrapping this up like everything's all honky-dory!?"

"Oh HELL NO! Get back here!!! GRAAAAAAAAGGGHHHHH!!"

Rowdy Promises
Both kids were back at the school entrance. 

“I dragged you along a lot today, huh? Sorry, man.”

Both Sakamoto and Takashi were still trying to catch their breaths.

“I told you already, it’s ok.”

“Ugh, I’m dead tired, is this how you felt that time? How you holdin’ up?”

“I… could use a nap…”

“Me too, Man, Im gonna sleep like a rock when I get home. I’m exhausted even though I used to do track.”

“Yeah, I heard as much…”

After the mention of the Track team, Sakamoto remained silent for a little while.

“-But anyway, if what we saw was for real, things gonna get good!”

Suddenly the blonde punk got pumped.

From Takashi's perspective, Ryuji Sakamoto was a very noisy carefree boy.

But this was certainly a face was something he wasn't expecting to see after going through such a dreadful situation.

“Now you seem awfully motivated for some reason.”

“You kiddin’? We can manage to get more evidence on Kamoshida the more we go to that place, we can find out somethin’ worthy and we could have enough proof of any physical abuse!”

‘Again, this guy has some strong positivity going on.’

To put it lightly, Sakamoto’s positive nature heavily contrasted with Takashi’s calm but pessimistic conduct.

He thought that this would eventually lead to them not being that compatible.

But after spending some time with him and going through some dire events together, Kido feels like he began to understand better how his mind worked.

And what’s more important, he felt his positivity was somewhat spreading to him for some reason.

“I guess you can see it that way. But that would mean you want to come back to that place again.”

The premise doesn’t seem that smart in retrospective.

Their odds could have highly improved with their new powers. But they need to be more thorough next time they decide to intrude in that palace, and they’ll be fine.
Takashi’s mind was dueling with doubts the blonde kid had completely discarded.

“Well yeah, but only because that cat told us the Kamoshida in this world knows nothing about that place. And if what he told us is true, then what we get to see there are his true desires. Maybe we can even take advantage of that to catch him before he does somethin’ here, you know what I mean.”

“That’s- actually quite clever…”

'I'm surprised it came from you.'

This kid having some sort of talent for pointing the most overlooked possibilities and make them work looks like some sort of talent.

At least it seems to be a more reasonable way to see his way of coming with some of his ideas.

“Heh, whatcha talking 'bout, I’m a genius.”

But then again, Kido could imagine the kid coming with ideas just for the sake of them being something unpopular.

“Hey… so… I know you heard all that shit about me being hurt by that asshole some time ago… I…”

“It’s ok if you don’t want to tell me…”

Kido regains his composure and fixes his glasses while leaning towards the school wall.

The indecision in Ryuji’s face was obvious.

He didn’t want to force the issue, even if he was very curious about it.

“No, it’s just… Listen, since that asshole spread your record ‘round school, you can’t lay low anymore right? I mean, I know nobody will take anything I say seriously, I feel like it may be the same for you now…”

Takashi remained silent at the realization.

It’s not like he was going to try to go to the authorities of the school or the parents to ask for help, he already knew better.

But even so, after hearing it, he can’t help but to put things into perspective.

In this world, he’s just as powerless as this boy.

“What I’m trying to say is that we may be on our own, but we can’t really just sit back and let that asshole do what he wants right?”

“… I guess not…”

“You looked into it too, do you… want to help me out uncover that asshole?”

“… It would be only fair, wouldn’t it?”

What else could he do anyway?

When he arrived to this city, he was prepared to live a completely unremarkable life as a normal high
school student.

He was ready to be a loner so people would refrain to get close to him and find out about his record.

He expected the teachers to label him and treat him like some sort of convict, and he expected to live on his own with only the minimum requirements for what could be called "a healthy life hood".

He was mentally prepared to live that life for one year.

But he was not ready to face yet another form of abusive behavior constantly developing in front of him.

He wasn't ready to share the same halls with the daily victims of such a sick cycle.

And he wasn't ready to become one.

Takashi Kido didn’t really see himself as an ally of justice.

He considers what forced him to act over an event that caused him to have his record was just an act of impulse.

He can think of it as irresponsible, reckless or naïve behavior.

But he can’t ever think about what he did and look at it with regret, not now, not ever.

“Huh? Ren? Are you alright?”

“Ren…”

He mutters his fake title to himself.

Until now, Kido was someone else for this blonde punk.

So far he only wanted to live a routine while ignoring both unrest and gaiety to live a life of complaisance.

He wanted to be just another normal boy in this high prestige highschool.

Now he still has that same yearning. But it's different than before.

Because now he wanted to be himself while doing it.

For Ryuji Sakamoto, he was Ren Amamiya, the geeky looking transferred country boy student.

Was he still trying to fool himself and by extend those who want to help him?

“Dude you look like shit… I mean I know you were tired but you suddenly went dark on me….”

“I- I lied to you Ryuji…”

It was not fair.

This boy had poured his entire genuineness to him and took him seriously as the person he was.

He didn’t doubt him and followed him.

He trusted him and asked him for that same trust.
But he was lying to him to try to preserve that dead useless facade on?

“Huh?”

“Can we start over?”

Takashi Kido can't betray that conviction anymore.

“Start over? whatcha talking ‘bout?”

“My name… It’s not Ren.”

There was no point on shielding himself in pointless anticipations.

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The evenings on Shibuya were as crowded and noisy as always.

It could be said the same about every capital city in the world during the rush hours.

But the organized nature of the Shibuya train system was the only reason Tokyo could actually feel somewhat 'alive'.

The city life had an "automatic" feeling when it came to routine.

The trains and people's distribution were always on point.

Such an organized system could be described as the only reason of why such an amount of people could peacefully conglomerate in such large numbers, and still manage to always keep their sociability during the multitudinous experiences of their everyday life.

It took a while of convincing and some stomach grunts.

But Ryuji Sakamoto finally managed to persuade the deadbeat Kido to go with him to a Big bowl shop.

It was just a small detour.

They both had to take the train back to Shibuya from school anyway.

And going out of the station for some meat while the rush hour passed didn't sound that bad.

Sakamoto's enthusiastic words were enough to convince him.

And it was a good chance to finally clear the air about his previous revelation.

On their way to Shibuya though, the black haired boy couldn't avoid but to fall asleep while standing in the full packed train a few times.

Leading to Sakamoto having to hold him still a couple of times.

Once they got there.
The long line outside the shop disseminated Takashi's spirit once again.

He was continually regretting making the decision.

But it was too late.

A brief moment of animalistic yearning for food had led him to this absolute state of suffering.

An evening wasted on forming lines for a cheap bowl of meat and soup instead of some sweet slumber on that old and detached mattress at home.

He wishes he was a responsible honor student that goes to bed as earliest as possible.

He also wishes there was a way to keep himself in line of making such decisions.

Takashi Kido is kind of a procrastinator when it comes to responsibly administering his own time.

Eventually they managed to find some seats.

Kido made sure to ask for the biggest bowl and some more.

That way he'll drown his regrets in enough flavors so he can start dreaming about having noodles instead of hair when he gets home.

While they were waiting Takashi made sure to selectively explain details about his name situation.

How his family choose that course of action for him to have a chance of experiencing his new school life without anyone finding out about his situation.

How this could help people not tracking his family because of him.

But he avoided specifics about his family name.

The unasked question remained in the back of his head the whole time though.

What if one of the reasons included having his parents trying to avoid any sort of backlash because of him?

He couldn't really answer that, how could he know what his parents really meant by choosing to change his name?

They never told him after all.

Everything was done with such a haste that he was only left with enough time to only make his own assumptions.

Before he knew he was boarded into a train to Tokyo.

The excuse was that the academic year had already started and he shouldn't miss any of it.

('In other words they got rid of you for being a pain in the ass.')

He remembers Sojiro's words for a few seconds.

His narration lead to him being arrested and indicted as a criminal for assaulting a random passerby while not having a chance to be heed, nor to defended himself in any sort of way until he was finally sentenced.
“Holy shit dude, what the hell?”

“... I’m still eating you know?”

Regardless, Kido managed to tell the abridged version of his story in his typical serene way.

But Sakamoto would have none of that.

He was only getting more pissed as he continued advancing through his story.

“Oh, I’m sorry. But seriously, how much shit can that asshole get away with?”

Regardless of the fact of Kido noted that Sakamoto used the word "shit" twice while he was still trying to savor his meal, he decided to ignore the hassle of calling him out again.

A full mouth didn't stop Sakamoto from continuing his attempts to communicate.

“So, you changed your name to start over didn’t you? I see.”

“Yeah, but now that doesn’t seem to matter anymore…”

Takashi nodded melancholically as he puts down his bowl.

The ferocious hunger he felt while he was waiting in that line was suddenly fading away for some reason.

“All because of that scumbag Kamoshida… I’m sorry man.”

“You don’t need to apologize.”

“I know. But it must feel like shit, not only you’ve been denied a chance to live your life in peace. But you’ve been labeled twice already. That effin’ sucks.”

“Yeah… It does.”

Eloquent as it could be, Sakamoto's statement hit home in Takashi's mind.

But he didn't liked the idea of constantly looking back at his past as if there was something he could do about it.

“Well, it’s not better than bein’ labeled because of having some sort of accent or anything…”

A sigh of frustration came from the geeky looking black haired kid.

He shook off those thoughts away after hearing such annotation.

“I told you already, I don’t have a dialect! Didn't you hear me speaking all day?”

“I mean… it’s not like you talk that much.”

“I speak when I’m spoken to.”

Maybe it was his lack of energy but Kido couldn't really manage to gather enough resolve to continue this dispute.

“In the end, it seems this whole Kamoshida deal has become personal for you too, huh?”
Sakamoto pauses his fast swallowing and puts down his bowl and chopsticks for a while.

“It looks that way.”

“I guess it’s only fair… You told me your story anyways…”

“… You don’t.”

“Nah, it’s ok. I suppose we may be more alike than I originally thought.”

Ryuji tries to get comfortable in his chair before starting his story.

“… So, what did you do?”

Says Kido to break his dinning partner musing silence.

“I don’t got a record like you do!”

He tried to take a deep breath at first.

What he was about to do wasn’t something he thought it was possible anymore.

He was about to tell his own truth to someone that he just knew for two days. Of what happened a year ago.

A story he himself censored and locked away deep inside his heart after being ignored for so long.

He could finally tell someone about it again.

He smiles gloomily.

“About a year ago, I was part of the track team club at our school, we had a good teacher and the team was pretty good”

Crossing his legs while bouncing in his seat he raised his head while looking at the roof for a few seconds.

He couldn't help but to let out a small smile while reliving what he could call some good old days.

"The team was aiming for the nationals that year… We were doing great too. We were like the biggest thing our school had at the time."

"Tracking is a solo sport, but even so, havin’ a bunch of partners to compete with every day makes it quite fun, you know?"

“I can imagine…”

“But then, our teacher was fired. Kamoshida was asked to take his place until the school could find a replacement…”

“I see…”

Takashi’s gaze darkened while Ryuji stared frowning at the memory.

“I guess you can imagine what happened… That bastard, right from the very start. He was tryin’ to get rid of us.”
As he advanced through his story, Takashi could notice how vexed Sakamoto was getting by just remembering the teacher's name.

“He’d give us crazy work outs. Then when we couldn’t do ‘em, he’d add even more on top of that. Day after day it was nothing but that BS.”

“So you think he took charge of your team because he wanted to make you all go away?”

“Yeah. I think he even had to do with our original coach bein’ fired. He always had that much pull after all.”

Ryuji says while looking to his half empty bowl.

“He was goin’ after me specially. He knew… He knew I was the kinda guy who’d fight back…”

Takashi couldn't avoid feeling guilty for Sakamoto's current state.

It was obvious he was losing his appetite as he started to look at his bowl with disdain.

As if he could only see the events of that day happening in front of him again.

“I see… I’m sorry…”

“What are you apologizin’ for?”

“Well, you stopped eating.”

Sakamoto's eyes widened as if he remembered something after looking at Takashi's bowl

"Oh, no way man, you're the one who hasn't eaten at all. Here have some ginger!"

Sakamoto grabbed his chopsticks again and started to pick some condiments and ginger before aggressively shoving them into Takashi's bowl.

"What are you doing?"

"Just lemme do it. I gotta thank you for helpin' me."

'BUT YOU SAVED ME TODAY YOU IDIOT.'

By the time Sakamoto finished shoving ginger into his bowl, he had a big warm smile on his face.

Kido had no option but to admit defeat against his kindness.

Now he had to focus on just finishing his meal as punishment.

"Anyway, I suppose I'll start callin' you Takashi now, right?"

"... Dunno, call me whatever you want..."

Kido didn't really bothered looking away from his plate as he answered the boy.

It seems the matter of his name was not really much of his interest at this point.

A given name is an important part of a person's identity.

But all the things Takashi had to go through these couple days made him realize that no matter how
he's called. As long as he has the resolve to face any circumstance by his own set of rules, he will
always be who he needed to be.

He is also certain that this blonde punk feels the same way after awakening his power.

"Hmmm, wouldn't you get in trouble if they find out about your name in school?"

"Don't think so, even if I didn't really had a choice, Ren Amamiya is actually my official name right
now."

"Hmmm."

Takashi looks sideways towards the punk who was pondering something.

*Danger, Danger, Danger!*

He had to stop a potential catastrophe before he needed a time machine to fix any sort of irremediable
silly idea coming from his mouth.

"... On second thought, just call me Ren at school... If you have to."

"Well, I'll do that then... Hey, you're livin' in Yongen right?"

Thankfully for the frizzy haired boy's blood pressure Sakamoto decided to change the subject

"That's right."

"Well, it's still rush hour on the subways, maybe we can kill some more time here before headin'
home."

"... Actually, I think I'll go after finishing this, no offense, but I don't believe I can stay awake for
much longer."

"None taken, heh. Anyways, I got your back like you got mine from tomorrow on."

"Sounds good."

"Hey, tell me your chat ID."

Without delay they exchanged contact information.

Takashi wasn't really looking forward checking his chat app again, he had eluded it for some time.

But there's not much he can do about it now he got a new... friend.

"If we do something about Kamoshida, I guess we both end up feelin' better about going to that
shitty highschool."

*Helping people, and trying to live a honest highschool life... It doesn't sound that bad, right?*

That was all he wanted from the start, just a peaceful and uneventful life where he could be free to do
whatever he wanted.

But to reach such goal, first they have to expose the most troubling factor that goes against that
likelihood.

Kamoshida
"Just you wait Kamoshida...."

"After today, we need to lay low. See what else we can get from other students...."

"I know, I know, I won't go charging against Kamoshida if that's what you're tryin' to say."

Kido let out a smile after realizing that his new blonde friend also seems to understand him quite easily.

The same goes for him every time he senses Sakamoto coming out with something.

Especially if it's going to be something odd.

Soon after Takashi decided to head home after saying goodbye to the blonde punk.

**INTERLUDE / The bonds we make**

It was late in the evening already.

Sakamoto parted ways with Takashi on the Shibuya station after he decided to take the Yongen line.

But instead heading home just yet. The blonde boy decided he needed something to drink digest the food they had assimilated earlier.

He could even buy a manga while he was at it.

There was a bookstore in central street, and there were a bunch of vending machines near it, it was a good plan.

Once in the book store, he was warned of not spilling his soda over the mangas.

The the store was packed with people.

Apparently a lot of people had the same idea.

But then he catches a glimpse of a familiar face, it was a third year girl from his school buying a manga, 'Psy-Pass'.

'Never thought she could be into that kind of stuff.'

By the time he reached the counter the girl had already taken off.

It's not like he wanted to talk to her, she was the image of an uptight person in his mind.

But he may had learned something about not to judge a book by the people's cover or something like that....

The thought or at least had the intention of shaping a phrase in his head went away as soon as the cashier spelled the price of his favorite weekly manga.

"For real?"

A fruitless adventure in Shibuya's illuminated evening.
Wasting so much money on a bowl of meat and rice made him re-evaluate his current non existent livelihood situation.

Was he wasting so much money that it cost him his most precious source of entertainment for this week?

He could always find a part time job and live the luxuries of the slovenly life of a stereotypical 'rebel without a cause' high school student.

He does it now and then anyways, it even helped him getting a decent games console at home before.

But he feels he should check his money managing skills in the future.

Before he starts regretting his financial state much longer, he realized that today was a special day.

He had shared a good evening with someone he could dare to call a new friend.

The image of Takashi's newfound trust and appetite relaxed him. Because it made him realize that the amazingly skilled black haired boy with the powers of dark curse energy was actually just a high school student like him.

But today he woke his own power.

The skills to fight those demonic beings in that world. The strength to resist what he thought could be any sort of punishment as long he could retaliate.

An appropriate way to describe this feeling could only be as 'the coolest thing ever'.

He felt just like one of his favorite mangas protagonists.

Like he could start making his own story from the events that they passed today.

Sakamoto had decided to kill some time reading his new manga. But after he failed completing the quest, he had to find out a new way to pass time before the rush hour winds up.

People watching wasn't really his thing.

And the Arcade won't allow a highschooler to be there much longer.

So he decided to just hang around the vending machines some more until he emptied his phone battery.

"C'mon Shiho, here's the crepes shop I told you before."

"I know Ann, it's always been here..."

'Ann?'

His attention was then draw towards the two familiar female voices on a near store.

There he noticed the outstandish second year twin tailed blonde girl. Along his former classmate Shiho Suzui.

They were both looking at the menu of the sweets and crepes store in the middle of the central street passage.
Both were wearing their casual clothes.

The image was something Sakamoto wasn't used to.

'\textit{Man... they\textquotesingle re really cute from the distance.}'

Sakamoto thought.

Deciding not to think much about it, he focuses on the reason why those girls could be hanging around there at these hours.

It seems they headed home after school and decided to come back here after they changed for some reason.

'A girls night out' he could call it, it appears like they were trying too hard to have fun though.

'She would laugh at me if she knew how I wasted so much money today.'

There was no way he\textquotesingle ll try to interact with the duo.

They were both harmless in Sakamoto\textquotesingle s mind.

But he knew better than to confront the straightforwardness these two girls posses.

Especially while having the advantage of being together.

He couldn\textquotesingle t blame them for being who they are though, as he could relate to their handling of unwanted human affluence.

Besides...

'She was with him...was she?'

"Oh wow, I wasn\textquotesingle t expecting to find you girls out here so late at night."

"Huh?"

This was when he noticed another familiar voice.

A voice he didn\textquotesingle t want to hear ever again if he could help it.

When he turned around the PE teacher, Kamoshida was walking towards the two girls.

It could be that he was actually following them?

"Ummm."

"I-"

"S-Shiho just accompanied me to my photoshoot, that\textquotesingle s all, we were heading home now."

"R-right."

"Huh, you told me that earlier alright. What about your appendicitis though?"

The blonde girl\textquotesingle s argument didn\textquotesingle t seem to impress the teacher.
She found herself out of words as he looked to be reliant on his 'charm' to outmatch these girls excuses.

"Come now, no need to be so shy, how about I invite you something? You were about to buy something here right? Crepes isn't? How cute."

Sakamoto could feel his rage building up inside him, his eyes were filling with the same ire from that day a year ago.

It was no good.

He had promised his new friend he wouldn't do anything rash like going charging towards the teacher.

He knew that this wasn't the place to let that temper blow out.

The same weakness he felt so many times was coming back.

He was unbeatable in the metaverse just a few hours ago.

He sought to never lose sight of his resolve.

But then why was he allowing himself to feel this way again?

Was there nothing he could do to defeat this excuse of a teacher?

Ryuji Sakamoto knew he wasn't 'smart' enough to do something sophisticated like drawing out those girls away from that teacher without making things worse.

And starting a fight would only get him in trouble and give the teacher the upper hand once again.

'Think, think, what would he do?'

"N-no we were just heading home now, c'mon Shiho."

Ryuji knew both Takamaki and Suzui could manage to get away from the teacher's harassing any time.

But right now they both seem to be out of it for some reason.

"Oh I see, then allow me to give you a ride then. I was about to get to my car until I noticed you two little girls wandering around, you know it's not safe for you to stay out until these hours."

Sakamoto couldn't take his attention away from the scene.

Something sinister was about to happen.

And even if it was not, he couldn't allow the risk of it to go by in front of him without doing anything to prevent it.

He remembered the black haired boy's last words before they parted ways in the train station.

('Don't be hasty, we can at least pretend to be at the defensive...')

He's always so calm and composed.

Kido was like one of those silent protagonists of his favorite shounen mangas.
He admired his serenity and how clearheaded he was.

It's like he always knew how to react to being cornered or in some form of distress.

But he knew he couldn't ever be like him.

Still, there was something he did earlier that saved them a lot of trouble.

(You have an amazing spike, sensei.)

That was it!

The way he said it, he appealed to the friendly and harmless boy card.

He didn't needed to be honest.

By delivering that comment, he let the teacher's abusive attitude without an excuse to continue his imposition.

'Playin' at the defensive, huh?'

"W-we..."

"We have practice tomorrow Shiho, you live the closest from here right? I heard your parents work until very late, at least I can take you..."

"... I-...

"Shiho, it's ok I'll-

Ryuji Sakamoto realized today he was a cannon fodder.

Someone who was willing to take the damage as long as he could return the punch.

He was a charge force, nothing else.

He became aware of how much of a noisy and fierce force he could be, and embraced it.

But most importantly.

Ryuji Sakamoto wouldn't ever allow himself to feel that weakness again.

Now that he had the power, now that he was capable of accepting that side of himself. He can do it, since it was one the things he was best at.

Being noisy and drawing unwanted attention.

"OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOIII, Kamoshida-senseeeseee"
crowd.
The vulgarity and familiar tone this high school student was using to address this adult man was certainly not a popular sight.

"What the hell are you doing you damn bra-"

"Please maaan ya promised us to buy some crepes with dise girls, right senseeeeeeelll!?!"

"You piece of-"

Kamoshida is taken aback by this unfamiliar behavior from the punkish boy.

How would he ever dare to address him in such a manner?

"Store owner-saaaaaan!"

""""Huh?""

As dumbstruck as the teacher, both Suzui and Takamaki were watching the scene developing in front of them.

They were too perplexed to even feel any sort of embarrassment for what the boy was saying.

Not only that. They've both managed to transcend over the expectations of what people may be saying about them at this point.

So right now, they could only feel the uncertainty over this boy's intentions.

"Can you pleeeeeeaaase give us a couple of crepes!? Sensei right here will pay ya for those, he's takin' me out on a double date with these girls, you know!? We need to make a good impression if ya catch my drift!"

As he spoke to the shop vendor, he was trying to hide his voice from the teacher and the girls.

But his exited gesticulations were giving him away.

"Wait-"

'What is he on about!?'

Ann Takamaki's expression was a puzzled one.

She had warned him to stay away from her business earlier today. But here he is trying to do something reckless in spite of this teacher again.

She could only answer Shiho's astonished gaze with a shrug.

"I mean DAAAMN! I've never been on a double date before, where will we take 'em next sensei!? You said you'll take us somewhere in ya car earlier right!?"

This time the boy raised his voice even more.

It all became clear to the teacher.

He wasn't in the Shujin corridors, there were no teachers nor principal here who knows about the past these two share.
They were making a public scandal with this scene.

"Those are high school students?"

"It seems so, why are they hanging with a teacher at this hours?"

"Huh, the things you see these days."

"Hey, shall we call the police? I want to see a scene."

"Who says that?"

"I'll record this?"

The four members of the street performance could hear the muttering around them.

But only Kamoshida seems to be disconcerted about the public's voices.

"Ah, Sensei?"

This was a first to say the least.

They were outside school.

These three teenagers have each their own circumstances that make them not care about their public image being tarnished.

In other words, these three kids had nothing to lose whereas he had a lot to answer for if things come to escalate.

"Ugh, you damn punk! You are going to regret this."

Says the teacher in a low voice.

"Uh-uh. It's you who's payin' sensei."

Says the roguish punk with a big grin.

"Tch... I think this boy is just over excited and let a lot of things go over his head."

The teacher then tried to put his smiling face facade to avoid continuing through this painfully cringe scene.

"THOSE ONES ARE FINE, TWO OF THOSE PLS!"

"It'll be 1000 yen."

But the blonde boy was a lot more efficient when it came to attract attention to him.

The teacher's claim was ignored while the cashier was looking for compensation.

"Oh maaan, Sensei c'mon you promised!"

Sakamoto had the advantage of playing in a neutral turf.

The king was vulnerable outside of his castle, this sight exhilarated the boy who remained in character.
".... You mother-"

"Sir?"

"Ugh, Here!"

Kamoshida then hurriedly takes out the money and throws it to the cashier. He then takes some steps towards the boy with a disturbing expression.

"You will pay for this, scum."

"Sure."

But Sakamoto's grin wasn't moved by his belligerent approach.

Normally he'll be opposing the teacher's intent to intimidate him. But right now he's rejoicing on his victory so much that he doesn't feel the need to display any sort of animosity anymore.

"Tch."

Kamoshida decides to turn his back and head towards the Shibuya station, walking away from the still bewildered girls.

"Here you go boy."

Sakamoto grabs the now free crepes from the shop attendant's hands. He didn't really wanted anything sweet at this moment.

The look of these huge deserts were actually making him feel even more satisfied than before.

"I'm not really a crepe's guy, so here, have mine Suzui."

"Uh? T-thanks."

Suzui didn't had a choice but to grab the two crepes. Sakamoto waved goodbye at them without looking.

Probably trying to go away before they could come out of their puzzled states to start questioning him.

'I can't believe that worked'

Consequences be damned.

Nothing could take away this small victory from him.

The jovial teenager heads towards the train station whistling his favorite anime opening as he marches.

"That idiot... He never changes, does he?"

As if she had seen a scene of one of her dramas in real life, she felt like this wasn't the first time this boy had made a scene that could had embarrassed her.
Earlier that day the boy had assumed that she was in a relationship with that teacher.

Why would he bother going through all that for?

She would like to assume he did it to get under the teacher's skin. But that would help no one in the long run, even less himself.

But he was always a hasty person.

She got used to his rowdy behavior during middle school.

But there was something different in the way he was acting today. The fact that this boy actually had his typical blustering self under check, made her remember that he was capable of being a decent representation of male candidness from time to time.

Even if the scene pointed towards the total opposite impression of that.

Takamaki noticed her friend was trying to figure out her current line of thoughts thanks the uncanny comment she just made.

'Wha- don't look at me like that!?'

Her reaction was incriminating as she forcefully grabbed one of the crepes away from Shiho.

Her friend couldn't help but to let out a soft smile at the blonde model's reaction.

Her appetite for sweets was a sight to behold after all.

They began to walk towards the station themselves.

There was no certainty that Kamoshida had already gone his way out of the district.

But they came to this place to hang out a little and take their minds out of their school life.

Only for it to find them here.

The hidden original goal was to talk out all their problems.

It may had been the only chance they had to have a honest heart to heart moment in a while.

But the mood was completely gone.

Still, they could at least share this moment of sweetness with their free crepes thanks to the strange good hearted rascal.

At least until Takamaki felt her phone buzzing on her purse.

Her face made a complete shift after realizing who the giver of the message was.

**Kamoshida: I'll talk to you tomorrow. Privately.**

"Ann?"

Takamaki expressionlessly looked sideways towards her friend.

"Huh? it's nothing... C'mon let's go home, it's kinda late."
"... Yeah"

As if there was no other way to finish this encounter, Shiho Suzui looked down resigned to finish their day out.

Walking together towards the train station.

**INTERLUDE / OUT**

The alleyways on the Yongen-jaya district are peaceful and calm. Still, they are always quite populated and somewhat noisy at the same time.

It was a residential district. But the majority of people on the streets at this hours were mostly children or elderly.

On his way to the coffee shop, the frizzy haired teenager was trying to make his best to arrive without recurring to any sort of crawling.

His phone started buzzing a few moments ago.

He had been ignoring it for two days now, only looking at it to check the time and some navigational help... And that weird app.

He could only think of his dusty room in the attic, his hard improvised bed and soft sheets covering him.

Takashi Kido knew he was about to be chewed out by the shop's owner, but he didn't care.

The incertitude of how worse could things get for him during his second day in Tokyo appalled him yesterday night.

Today, he doesn't even has the capacity to contemplate whatever happens during the next ten minutes.

But at least he didn't turn up late to school today, that's progress he thought.

"Excuse me, Hi?"

"Huh?"

Takashi Kido's attention was brought towards a non-familiar pleasant voice directed at him.

"You must be living around this area right?"

"Um, yeah."

To be frank, Takashi Kido didn't want anything to do with more interplay today.

But the pleasantness in this boy's voice didn't gave him any shot to be dismissive.

"Sorry to bother you, I was looking for a snack over that store but I couldn't find anything to appease my tastes."
The boy signaled towards a potato truck seller stationed in an alley near a clinic and a theatre.

"Do you perhaps know about a place with fair cooking around the area?"

'Really now?'

The first thing to came to mind was the irony of a tourist asking for directions to a recently arrived 'country-side' guy.

He heard about this sort of things happening a lot before coming to Tokyo. But to actually live it was quite opprobrious.

"... Not really."

'I doubt you are a curry guy anyway.'

"Oh, that's too bad..."

"Well..."

It was now the chance Takashi had to dismiss the conversation and move on to his original goal, his bed.

But the boy in front of him remained silent as if he was trying to think for another conversation topic.

This made Takashi actually bother enough to take a look at the appearance of the pleasant boy standing in front of him.

He was wearing a tan peacoat with black buttons, striped black and white tie, black trousers, and black gloves. He also rocked a chin-length shaggy brown haircut.

Kido noticed the boy's reddish-brown eyes were also examining his figure the same way he was studying him.

"Um, oh right."

Finally the brunette kid spoke again.

"I'm also in the look for a certain person, I don't know exactly where she lives but..."

"Yeah?"

Kido didn't care to be polite anymore, he just wanted this encounter to be over.

"Does the name Futaba Sakura sounds familiar to you?"

'Sakura?'

The name certainly resounded inside Kido's mind, the name Sakura, as in Sojiro Sakura, that was it.

"No, I'm sorry."

But even if he did managed to put that together, he had no evidence, or couldn't really say he cared about the similitude of those names.

"I see. She's a young girl about your age. So I thought you may know her since you seem to live in this area too."
'My age? How much older than me this guy thinks he is anyway?'

There was something about this boy that was slowly getting under his skin.

But even so, he didn't feel any sort of animosity towards him.

It was a feeling similar to not liking to be lied on.

"Well, I apologize for taking your time"

Resigned, the elegant boy fixes his tie after letting out a disappointed sigh.

"I only approached you because I thought a high school student could be more approachable than the very private adults that live in this area. I'm sorry if I was a nuisance."

Although the pleasant boy obviously has his way with words, he lacked certain touch of tact when he was addressing people with a tryhard esteem.

Or maybe it was just because he was speaking to him?

Takashi remembers that he's currently wearing his glasses and messy hairstyle.

So it wouldn't be weird to be look down at for him, but why would he bother choosing him for questioning then?

"Not at all."

'I just wanna go to sleep already.'

"I'll be on my way then."

Kido said while casually walking away.

"Shujin, huh? Why would he-"

While bringing his hand to his chin, the boy wondered about why the high school student had such a beat up behavior.

It was by mere chance he meet such a unremarkable looking boy who had a strange presence.

There was something about his voice and mannerisms that made him look suspicious.

He couldn't help himself to reach out to him.

"How interesting."

Meanwhile Kido walked past Le blanc as a precaution while pretending to get a soda from the machine in front of the bath house.

Although he was tired and wanted to head home.

Kido also had enough awareness to notice that the pleasant boy was hiding something.
As soon as the door bells ring inside Le blanc's, Takashi Kido could feel the glare the shop owner was throwing at him.

He looked not afflicted by it. But deep down he felt like it was just a matter of time until this man lost any hope on him and kicked him out.

"... You're home. I take you actually went to school today?"

As if nothing had happened. The owner of the completely empty shop who was reading a newspaper who absolutely was not waiting for him tried to sound uninterested.

"Of course..." 'I can't prove it though'

"I guess you learned your lesson after what happened yesterday."

"Eh, as long as you're not getting into trouble, it's fine by me."

Sojiro Sakura's facade wasn't making much of an impression to Takashi. So he decided to finally get serious just in case,

"Now listen up. I don't know what you've been up to, but I hope you remember that you'll gone the second you start trouble. Just in case you forgotten, your life is not a free one right now."

Takashi's eyes narrowed as he tried to nod, he was falling asleep on his feet again. But he tried his best to follow the protocol for 'being lectured on' situations.

*Pi, pi, pi*

Suddenly Takashi's phone started ringing once again, this time he could use it as an excuse to bail from this scolding session.

After checking his phone, he notices the incoming messages were from Sakamoto.

Ryuji: Hey, I decided to go ahead and message you.

Ryuji: Can you see this?

Takashi: Nope

Ryuji: Then you can!

Ryuji: We need to talk some tomorrow, I'm gonna be counting on you. Ok?

Takashi: Got it.

Ryuji: You're a bro, man...

Ryuji: Welp, Seeya tomorrow.

With that, the essential exchange was finished.

"Sheeesh, are you even listening to me?"

As if he was resigned to this boy's calmed but disinterested nature with just two days of hanging
around him. Sakura's frustration seems to be somewhat self inflicted as he wonders why is he even bothering warning this kid.

"Just stay away from bad influences, Ok?"

'Wasn't I the bad influence?'

Takashi thought to himself before nodding back at the shop owner.

He began to walk towards the stairs, before remembering something.

"Ummm, Sakura-san... Do you-"

'Know a Futaba Sakura?'

He stopped, why would he ask that?

It was none of his business, but he couldn't help to feel curious about it.

He shouldn't bother making things worse for him by just asking something out without knowing if it could piss the barista off.

"Huh?"

"Nothing, sorry..."

"... Anyway, I'll lock the store, don't go wandering out, got it?"

"Got it."

Once upstairs, Takashi took a brief look around his dusty room in the attic of the coffee shop as he started changing into more comfortable clothes.

He was too tired to take a shower in the small bathroom downstairs.

The shower was very small and he didn't felt like struggling with the room in his current state.

Yet somehow, he couldn't help but to feel more relaxed to finally be home.

Even if it was just this dusty room in an attic, he could still manage to make it feel somewhat homier if he decided to look at it as a safe zone from the rest of the world's constant bickering.

Once he collapses into his bed, he hears his phone buzzing again.

The messages were from Sakamoto once again.

But this time, he decided to look down at all the previous messages he had been ignoring so far.

'Dammit.'

This was one of the reasons he was hesitant to exchange chats ID in the first place.

He felt like he could ignore all the texts he didn't want to check over if he could limit his contacts to the ones he chose not to erase.

Those being only his parent's contacts.
He didn't felt like reading those.

He didn't felt like it because that could lead to him to irredeemably asking the question he didn't want to find the answer for.

Still he could check them, but what if...?

Still it's unfair to treat them like that... but what if...?

He decides to at least check.

Today:

**Dad:** I know you read me, I'll stop texting you if that's what you want, I can find out how you're doing from Sakura-san anyway.

**Dad:** But at least answer your mother's texts. She's worried sick. That's all.

Today:

**Dad:** I know you read me, I'll stop texting you if that's what you want, I can find out how you're doing from Sakura-san anyway.

**Dad:** But at least answer your mother's texts. She's worried sick. That's all.

What was he running away from?

What was keeping him worried after every paragraph he started reading?

Was he really that afraid of a truth he couldn't handle?

**Mom:** Hi. How are you?

**Takashi:** I'm fine, don't worry.

To that, the woman started to type immediately.

**Mom:** Thank god, please take care of yourself dear, just, listen do what people say.

**Takashi:** Got it.

**Mom:** ....

Although his mother continued to type at the other side of the line, Takashi felt like he couldn't continue this exchange.

If he did, he may be reading something he'll regret. Or worse, he could say something that could make him feel sorry for the rest of his days in just a few seconds.

He knew better, instead he checked the chat from the boy who unknowingly forced him to go through that confrontation.

**Ryuji:** Yo, I forgot to ask you.

**Ryuji:** That weird app that got us there today, you know what it is?

**Takashi:** The what?

**Ryuji:** The weird red eyeball icon thingy, remember?

**Takashi:** Yeah, the cute one.

**Ryuji:** It was not cute at all!!!
Ryuji: For real tho, what is this thing...?
Ryuji: Think it's being downloaded on its own somehow?

....

It was already 1:00 AM, Takashi didn't felt like explaining the boy the origin of the app while being so close to the abyss to dreamland.

Takashi: Probably not.
Ryuji: It's dangerous using something without knowing what it is.
Ryuji: But with it, we can go to that weird place, right?
Takashi: Seems like it.
Ryuji: So it's gonna depend on how we use it.
Ryuji: Anyway we need to find a way to get solid evidence on that shithead from tomorrow on.
Ryuji: I'll be counting on you so don't go ditching school on me.
Takashi: Didn't planned to.

Although her mother's texts keep on coming. Takashi couldn't handle the exhaustion anymore.

Finally he gave up on his bed.

Earlier he felt like throwing his phone around the room because of the continuing buzzing. But right now he doesn't even has the remaining strength to do it.

Today was a strange journey, he got labeled some more, got screamed by a cat, almost got killed again, and now he was closing the day trip by texting... a friend... something that he thought he wouldn't find in this place.

Finally, the exhaustion took over.

Without even noticing, he turned his phone off and fell asleep.

The fool

*Drip*

A drop of water echoes through the room
It’s dark, the boy opens his eyes.
He's not in the attic anymore.
He sees blue quilted walls surrounding him.
“Welcome to the velvet room.”

He was again in this now familiar room, his prison, the Velvet room.

‘…She’s not here.’

Takashi took a look around while sitting on his bed inside his cell.

He's dressed in his convict clothes once again.

He was looking for the absent silver haired woman.

“Stand up Inmate! Our master want's to speak to you!”

The small warden hits the door of his cell making him cringe at the sound.

He stands and heads towards the door.

He was certainly looking forward for some answers.

"I thought about resuming our previous conversation, that's why I summoned you tonight."

The deep voiced prison master was also known as Igor.

It seems he had the absolute control over this room.

Takashi could feel something besides his chains tying him to this place.

He decided to play along with all these nonsense.

As long as he could find some sort of reasonableness out of these encounters, he'll keep doing that.

He gave up making sense to what Morgana was saying to him back then.

He played along and the results were impressively useful.

The same logic could be applied for these 'dreams'.

"What are your thoughts? Are you becoming accustomed to this place?"

But that was just nonsense.

"Don't be stupid!"

He babbled it in a disinterested voice.

"Show some respect Inmate! We won't tolerate you addressing our master in such a manner!"

The hit on the door was louder than usual.

"Hm hm, marvelous, It seems you have nerves of steel."

"Still I can understand your frustration, but don't fret, your rehabilitation determinates if ruin can be stopped. Yet such a feat cannot be done by you alone..."

'The whole ruin thing again...'
This time, Kido was in his collected self act.
Igor had warned him of such a fate before.
"You seem puzzled, Let me explain."
The Prison Master continued.
"Today, you entered a partnership with someone who awoke to the same power, haven't you?"
'Partnership?'
Takashi didn't bother calling it that way.
He certainly could see his newfound friendship with Ryuji as some kind of temporary association.
"You mean Ryuji?"
"Involving yourself with others is an important foundation of your recovery. You've done well."
Ignoring his questions, Igor proceeded his conversation by commending him.
But then again. The constant mention of rehabilitation and recovery were making Takashi feel inadequate every time.
"Persona abilities are driven by the power of your heart, you can burst their might with the help of bonds you make with others."
'Bonds?'
It was today that regardless of the perils he went through, that he managed to make a new friend.
By doing so he also found a new goal to look forward to.
It made him feel like days could go by more easily that way.
To have someone to count on.
"It's thanks to the new allies you make during your journey towards rehabilitation that you'll be able to awake these new powers. Still, It must not be of frivolity, but a ring of those who would, by morals or faith, lend you their strength."
"In other words, they're bonds with those who had been robbed of their places to belong."
"The expansion of said ring will, in return, help you mature as well."
Kido was still assimilating the concept of his heart being driven by multiple sources of strength and will.
By the ring of bonds he meant people, and by 'robbed' he meant those in similar circumstances to his.
That much he could make sense of. But this power, he already had what he needed.
Why bother for getting more power?
And even if he ended up needed it.... Using people's motives for this, felt kind of off for him.
"With the birth of these new powers you may obtain the winds of blessings you need in order to consummate your rehabilitation. The stronger your bonds become, the more power your Personas will gain."

The quiet warden with the ponytail, Justine, finally spoke.

She was looking through her notes blog.

"Personas? As in plural?"

Instead of finding an answer from the twin from the left, he was only meet with more words from the twin on the right, Caroline.

"And who knows? They may lead you to freedom, besides only giving you the power to break through the chains of your heart. There are countless people in the city who have talents that a weakling like you doesn't."

"And, it's thanks to you actually managing get a new confidant that you managed to obtain the power of the Chariot Arcana."

A small light started glowing inside one of the pages of Justine's notes blog as she mentioned this.

"As your bond with these allies continue to growth, so it'll do the power hidden within. So you better rack that noggin of yours and get them on your side. We'll canalize that into your persona's powers."

Added Caroline with her bad cop act.

'Use their assistance?'

The word 'use'.

That word kept bothering Kido. As if he knew that there will be a point he could regret involving himself with these methods.

It was easy for them to ask this of him, what will they gain from this he wondered, until...

"Indeed, you should be prepared to use even myself, or your ambitions will not come to fruition."

Igor spoke again.

'Use him?'

Use the prison master who had prompted him to find these 'confidants' and use their abilities to his advantage.

How could he consciously ask for such a superficial thing to be taken seriously.

Unless...

'To use them. To understand their 'hearts'. To gain their trust. Will that let me have enough power to face those monsters? By fortifying my own heart with their help?'

He remembered Morgana's words.

He remembers his awakening.
His growing strength after facing those monsters for the first time. He remembers the 'distortions' he had to face.

It would only make sense to strengthen his will.

His resolve... using theirs as his own... But still, it felt weird.

He could never manage to care about what other people felt unless he had direct involvement with them.

That's only logical after all.

He could sympathize, but he couldn't force himself to just randomly concern himself for how other people felt about their own circumstances out of the blue.

That's not how human interaction worked.

But to manage to get these bonds, he had to gain the trust of these people.

And 'use' his own heart to reach theirs, to understand them.

Still even if it felt weird, he could do it, he could find a way to convince people to open up to him.

Actually, he had already done it.

It wasn't that hard, all he needed was... to keep his mask on...

What could he lose by trying it?

'I see, I finally get it...'

He could finally have a use for that name.

He was always capable of doing this.

He felt he could reach other people and find some of himself on them.

And then he could grasp core of their existence.

The why's and how's of their daily lives.

But he never had a reason to force himself through that hassle.

If it was going to do this to get more power though.

He could do it. To help himself, to help those he gain trust with.

He could use that power to bring justice for his ill fated heart.

Still he fears he could easily lose himself in such an endeavor.

What if he starts steeling himself away again?

What if he won't be able to let those people in?

What if he has a loss of insight
Or worse...

What if he doesn't care about them.

The sigh of Takashi's doubts seems to amuse Igor somehow, as he starts to chuckle.

"If you are willing to travel this road of readjustment, then I'll grant you my trust in your plight against ruin, are you willing to accept?"

The long nosed man extended his hand towards him once again.

This time he seems to be willing to make another pact with him.

A pact.

He already made it.

The image of Arsene's came back to Kido again.

He had already steeled himself.

He had already made a choice.

He couldn't not allow himself to waver anymore.

He would set himself free, and he will rehabilitate himself from this world.

"I accept."

"We have a deal then."

He could feel it.

In those bloodshed eyes of his, the high expectations Igor had for him.

And he was certainly looking forward to fulfill these twisted shared prospects.

'So this is how it works...'

"This is your journey. The journey of the fool. This Arcana is yours and it represents the number cero. You have the chance to reach towards infinite possibilities."

Justine note blog shined once again, this time a new card could be seen through the pages.

"Remember what you've learnt today, now get lost Inmate!"

Said Caroline while crossing arms

"You shall not forget the vows you made if you ever want to break free from that cell."

Added Justine one last time while fixing her hat.

"I will explain the true power of the wild card, in another occasion. Continue devoting yourself to your rehabilitation."

'The wild card?'}
That word again. He had heard it before Igor mentioned it now, but the one who said it was absent tonight.

Finally Igor raised his hand.

Not as a sign of farewell, but to signal the ring of a recess break bell.

"It's time for us to bid farewell, until we meet again."

The chains weight lowered, the bluish imagery of the room filled his mind again.

Then, he woke up.

Chapter End Notes

Unlocked:

The Chariot Arcana: Ryuji Sakamoto

The Fool Arcana: The Prison Master

This took a while, my excuses; some crazy ass storms, a few busy days of work and the fact I'm a lazy f**k.
I'm not really 100% satisfied with this chapter, I feel like I use a lot of verbatim, which makes the work feel lazy and it really is a pain to look back at the exact dialog at times (I even resorted to the manga for reference in certain abridged scenes), but I feel like I should use those kind of scenes a lot for consistency, especially during the "tutorial" stages of the story, since I also feel the game did a good job getting the initial obligatory exposition parts out of the way.
One of the reasons I don't deepen into Takashi's past is because I don't like to make flashbacks inside flashbacks, so I'll probably expand more on that after we finally reach the present of this retrospective narration.
Who knows, I may have some surprises prepared for that.
About the OC characters
Jun and Kamiya, I want to make sure people who read this doesn't feel like I'm trying to have them be some sort of Marie 2.0 or Adachi 2.0 given their roles. Because that's really NOT what I have in mind for them.
I have something prepared for them as my tools for some new story elements I feel it could be valid for this game's setting.
Update 03/30/2018: Fixed some grammar mistakes and shortened unnecessary verbatim and descriptions.
“So, your frustration against your oppressive school life was the for going after that teacher?”

The voice of the young district prosecutor, Sae Niijima, echoed through the empty interrogation room.

“… It was one of the reasons.”

The bruised boy was answered.

The state attorney became more straightforward.

But she couldn't allow herself to give the impression that she'll believe every word of his testimony.

“How want me to believe you did it for a just cause, like saving the victims from abuse? Although I can understand that reasoning, it’s still very… convenient.”

Given all these circumstances, his story was still an exaggeratedly fanciful tale. And too perfectly timed.

“… There is more.”

“I see, so it was personal after all.”

“… We had no choice but to go after him.”

The hesitation in the boy's voice made her realize that even if he was hurt, he wasn't tripping over his own narration.

His dedication to tell her this story was out of question.

He was having a bad time remembering some of the events because of the truth serum side effects.
Even if he had ulterior motives to keep her tangled with his version. What other choice did she had other than play along?

“Well… Then proceed with your story… I doubt something as dangerous as your group could’ve pulled off by orthodox methods.”

She took away the folder containing the case files and started going through the pages.

“You mentioned you needed to infiltrate certain locations before, right?”

He was being called a thief after all.

It was around that time, that he officially stated his operations.

“Skillful infiltrations and escapes to all manner of places.”

She puts down the folder.

“So far I’ve gathered that you must have used many methods to get to some of your victims.”

She pauses to look at his face..

“This means you needed to have someone who was proficient in deceiving the eyes of others.”

“…”

“There’s even the possibility that you used special tools and had someone who manufacture them…”

Sae closes the folder and goes straight to the point.

“Well, answer me… How did you get all this?”

Never raising his gaze towards the young law abider, Takashi lets out a dissembled comment.

“Most of the time… by being in the right place, at the wrong time...”

**Signs of Hope**

It was a slow week inside the halls of Shujin Academy.

During lunch break. The boy publicly known as Ren Amamiya was roaming around school looking for more evidence against Kamoshida's abuses.

He had found someone he could consider to be a potential good source for information.

Given her status as the school newspaper club (and only member) president, they tried to rely on her intel.

“Hmmm, well I heard some rumors about this school being hunted.”

This girl with glasses did have a strange fixation for strange rumors.

But her backing didn't seem to be of much of a help.
“What? For real?”

Accompanying the boy who's real name was Takashi Kido, it was Ryuji Sakamoto.

Another intimidating looking second year who shared the same goals.

“Yeah, like, some people have seen weird things happening. Ghostly figures, and some weird screams coming from the PE faculty office when nobody is around.”

“…”

Kido and Sakamoto stared at each other for a little while after hearing her talk about the PE room.

Something about that felt very wrong.

They both could take guesses about what the reasons behind the screams were.

“Wait, are you that new transfer student?”

“… Yeah.”

“Hmmm, can I ask you some questions? Wait… can I write about you?”

“Nobody likes paparazzis.”

Kido took this chance end this conversation before turning around.

“How dare you! I’m a serious journalist, I wouldn’t just write about a guy who has a rebellious complex anyway.”

“Oi!”

Sakamoto decided to follow him as Kido waved the girl without turning around.

“I suppose that’s for the best. Keep on the good work.”

“Wait.”

It didn't take long for Sakamoto to reach his accomplice.

“She knows nothing…”

After another letdown the boys headed to the courtyard.

Sakamoto satiated his need for carbonated drinks as Kido wondered what to do next.

“You have something in mind?”

“Suzui. Shiho Suzui.”

“Takamaki’s friend?”

Much to Kido's inconvenience, that name brought unpleasant memories.

But their intentions were set.

They had run out of witnesses and victims interrogate.
And those two girls were still evidently involved with Kamoshida in some form.

They also happened to be best friends.

But approaching them has become a pretty delicate matter.

“Yeah, for some reason, I think she may say somethin’ if I ask her the right way. But…”

Sakamoto couldn't finish his sentence as he remembered something.

“Hmmm... Forget it.”

He said trying to avoid Suzui as a topic.

“... I already spoke to her.”

But Takashi intruded Sakamoto's thoughts

“You mean...”

“She’s... probably a victim too.”

After hearing this, Sakamoto's continual abhorrence towards the PE teacher started boiling inside him.

“… Goddammit!”

Clenching his fist and squashing his can of soda before throwing it at the trash can.

Sakamoto was running out of stress-relieving methods.

“This is too much, I really wish I could just kick that bastard stupid face and get over it.”

“Same. But that won’t do... Those guys that are being tortured in the dungeons are definitely the same guys with bruises and bandages in this world. And still...”

They did manage to confirm that much.

“Yeah, that still gives us nothin’. What the hell should we do?”

Sakamoto scratches his head trying to force some sort idea out.

“I don’t think the police could believe somethin’ like ‘HEY, we seen these guys tortured in another dimension. And these here have bruises too’”

“What's with that crappy detective movie act?”

But Kido didn't bother to honor Sakamoto’s point.

“ANYWAY. What about Takamaki? She must know lots of things about him… She is with him after a-”

“What is it?”

Once again the blonde boy didn't bother finishing his sentence.

But his growing frustration was more plausible as he brought his hands to his pockets in a
The small quadruped creature sitting in front of them.

disgruntled manner.

“Nothing, forget that last part too, she won’t be of any help either… Grgh there has to be a way to expose that bastard!”

He grunts some more.

"It’s like he’s untouchable while he’s at school."

"At school?"

“… What?"

The thought of Kamoshida being the ruler of Shujin wasn’t so farfetched.

But as they know by now, this school wasn’t the only place they’ve seen that man.

“... What if we go after the King?”

While still lost in his own thoughts, Kido let out a very strange comment.

“Huh? You mean, going back to that place?"

The day before Sakamoto had to drag Kido with him to confirm the happenings on in that place.

His surprise couldn’t be greater now that Kido was proposing to come back to a place they were almost killed twice during the last two days.

"You remember what Morgana said? About things happening in this world reflecting on that world as well? What if the opposite could also be possible?"

"Yeah, but... how do we know that?"

"We don’t."

"That’s not very reassuring dude."

"I finally found you!"

Both teenagers stiffened after hearing a familiar voice.

"... You said somethin’?"

Takashi shakes his head in negation.

He was Hoping that his senses were finally failing instead of lugging him through another absurdly paranormal event for the third time this week.

His dreams of having the rest of a normal school day, are shattered yet again once he notices the source of the familiar boyish voice.

"Don’t think you can get away from not paying me back for helping you."

And there it was.
The source of the disharmony.

It was a black cat with a white muzzle, paws, and tail tip, wearing a yellow collar.

It's bluish big eyes were shifting focus between Kido and Ryuji while it sits on the table in the middle of the two juveniles.

Preening itself on the process, because why not?

"That voice... Is that you, Morgana?"

Said a shocked Sakamoto.

'... It's cute.'

Takashi's fixation lied elsewhere.

"How dare you, up and leaving me the other day!"

Complained the small creature.

"The cat's talkin'!?"

"I'm NOT a cat!"

Said the cat.

"This is just what happened when I came to this world."

He added while scratching the back of one of his ears with his back paw.

"B-but, how can you talk!? You're a cat!"

"How should I know?"

Morgana quickly retorts.

“Hey are you hearing this?"

Takashi snapped out of his quiet captivation for the small furry and raised his sight towards Ryuji, the bright in his glasses was hiding his tranquil but rousing eyes...

"Meow?"

He timidly answered.

Whatever Kido was thinking while looking at Morgana at the time. It must've gone deep enough in his psyche for him to suddenly reach a form of glossolalia syndrome.

"THIS IS NO TIME TO BE JOKIN’ AROUND!"

Thus, making Sakamoto lose his temper in the process.

“It seems you guys are having trouble in this world as well, you are hopeless.”

Ignoring the exchange between the teenagers. The cat spoke his mind.
“Ah, that condescending attitude, this thing gotta be Morgana!”

Concluded the Sakamoto detective.

“You were still doubting me?”

“Why are you here?”

Kido then interrupted the bleak exchange between the punk kid and the cat with a question of his own.

"I already told you, I was looking around for you guys all day. It was a lot of trouble finding you two..."

Morgana seems to be remembering some disgraceful events as he worded his displeasure.

"B-but how did you came to our world?"

Sakamoto wonders as he gasp at some sort of realization.

"Does that mean you have a phone!?"

And for some reason he got the most unlikely assumption yet again.

"You don't need one when you're at my level."

Morgana seems to be pretty relaxed after finally reaching his goal.

Enough to start grooming again.

"I did get pretty lost making my escape though..."

Shivers are not noticeable in a cat.

But Kido seems to have noticed a sort of similar reaction coming from the black feline as he refers to his ordeal.

"Did a dog chase you?"

Kido asks.

"Hmph. I'm not some hopeless alley cat."

Morgana pridefully raises its head.

"Anyway, frizzy hair, you seem to have figured something up, right?"

Kido gingerly nodded.

So far he was aware of Morgana's obvious duplicity showed behind his aid.

But since he went through the trouble of somehow getting out of that world to exclusively find them.

At least he can go through the trouble to listen to Morgana's intentions.

"The king. You said all the manifestations in that castle are because of his cognition of this school, right?"
"Yep."

"So, if what he thinks of this world becomes something real over there. What would happen to him here if something changes in that place?"

"Huh, I knew you were smart."

It was not as noticeable in this cat form.

But Morgana was wearing a smile full of satisfaction after hearing Takashi’s theory.

"I'll tell you... But let's go somewhere safe first..."

Morgana continued to lick his paws.

Both Kido and Sakamoto looked around. A couple of teachers were seemingly looking for this feline intruder around the courtyard.

**Interlude / A sacrifice sport (casualty)**

"Again!"

It was normal but quiet practice morning.

The second year students were having regular PE classes after the second period.

The class instructions were the regular running fields and stretches.

A few girls were having a Volley match, arbitrated by the King himself.

“AGAIN!”

For some reason his patience was running low.

Especially at a certain ponytailed girl.

The teacher had made them replay that exact same play over and over again because of any mistake the girl made.

The girl’s name is Shiho Suzui.

Even if she was physically fit, she seems to be out of it today for some reason.

Much for the teacher’s displeasure.

“What are you doing!? DO YOU PRETEND TO STAY IN THE STARTER TEAM BY PLAYING LIKE THAT?!"

He raised his voice enough for some of the boys who were running around the gym to stop and look at the scene.

“Look at me Suzui! Do you want to quit the team? If that’s the case you just have to tell me so.”
The girl shivers at the tone of his voice.

After hearing the word ‘quit’, she quickly covers her mouth.

One of the young boys tried to complain without sounding challenging or disrespectful towards his teacher.

“S-she’s done nothing bad teacher…”

“Shut it Mishima, you won’t know what good form is even if you had watched Volley ball matches all your life!”

He approached the boy who looked down at the ground trying to avoid eye contact.

“Get back on running!”

He pointed boys to move on, and so they did.

“And you! Come to the PE office now. I have to make you understand that this is a team sport!”

“Y-yeah.”

The school gym was connecting near the second floor of the practice building.

There the PE teacher escorted the girl to his office.

The room was pretty messy.

Unused chairs and portable boards thrown around the corners.

Suzui could notice the unused volley ball’s scattered around too.

This room looked more like a dormitory rather than a school faculty office.

Bothered by the uncomfortable connection she just made. The girl finally decides to speak.

“Kamoshida-sensei I-“

*Smack!*

But she was quickly silenced by a loud slap to her face.

The resounding echo didn’t left the room though.

The open hand didn’t connect cheek but to the frontal side of her face. Almost hitting her directly in the eye.

It sounded almost like a silent clatter.

The force of the strike was strong enough to shock her out of her feet.

She lied on the floor as she felt the stung in the upper left side of her face.

“I’m sorry Suzui, but this is for your own good.”

The teacher sat down on his chair.
Arms crossed and hovering one leg over his right knee.

As if he was getting ready to pass judgment to some unruly peasant.

“I’m tired of screaming at you. You defy my guidance and good intentions, you leave me no choice.”

Suzui was holding her face in pain, the ardor was excruciating enough to make her squirm. The way she was writhing in the floor seems to amuse Kamoshida.

He was taking a good look under her skirt, even if she was wearing spats, it was enough to entertain him.

These kind of glares coming from the ominous instructor were probably the reason she started wearing those in the first place.

“Get up, it wasn’t that hard. Will you do as I tell you from now on?”

“Y-yes.”

“Will you tell anybody about my training sessions?”

“N-no…”

To that, Kamoshida lets out a placid smile.

“Good girl. You’ll keep being starter for good that way. You have a good body condition, and you certainly can excel as long as you listen to me.”

He stands out and starts walking towards the girl.

“I mean look at you, you can be a star, but here you are lying on the ground, you wanna know why?”

“…”

“It’s because you have no confidence, and because of that you drag everyone down, even those who try to help you… Like me. If you listen to me, I’ll do everything in my power to make you an Olympic Athlete. Just like me, It’ll be that easy.”

Kamoshida squats near Shiho and gently grabs a lock of her hair as if trying to comfort her.

“It’s not that hard, is it?”

He says in a gentle voice.

Suzui timidly shakes her head.

“I mean, there are already a lot of people that believe in you, like your good friend Takamaki. Will you let down everyone who had put their faith in you?”

“Besides, this is your place in the world, right? If you give up now, what else are you going to do?”

“…”

The words of this teacher were imprisoning her into her own shallowness.
She felt devoid of all freedom as he exposed her worst fears naked in front of her.

What good was she if she didn’t do the only thing she’s been mildly good at?

The irony of this school name resonated around her mind.

“Answer me Suzui.”

“I’m not good at anything else… please…”

And as if she had become a colorblind person, the reality warped around Suzui’s mind.

She had been swallowed by the burden this teacher had imposed to her.

And she had no way of turning back now.

Because if she did quit, what would be left of her?

“All right then. I’ll consider keeping you in the starter position as long as you keep listening to what I say. But there are a lot of prerequisites needed for that to happen, you know?”

A very frightful thought.

The will of this ruler was something she didn’t ever want to imagine, but she had to comply to it.

“Prerequisites…?”

“You’ll need the support of the rest of the team too. But as I said, I can work that out if you are willing to do as I told. Also, your parents shouldn’t get in your way either, no matter if they tell you to quit, that’s just how parents are.”

“…”

Kamoshida raised his index finger as if he was about to give the blessing of lecturing this girl.

“You think I didn’t got injured and sore back in my day? There were people trying to hold me down and not letting me play too. But still, I never gave up and brought that medal home.”

Kamoshida was back on his throne, checking some files of his volleyball team members.

“You know the life of a sportsman is a scarified one, right?”

“… Yes.”

That way, he will allow her day to continue.

“Well, PE classes will be over soon as the rest of the second years continue playing. But we still have practices after school. I hope I’ll see you there.”

“Y-yes.”

“We’ll discuss your position then. Now go.”

She leaves the PE room and immediately heads to the women’s restroom.

How miserable she looked.
She was taking a good look at the were she was hit just a few moments ago.

There’s no sign of a bruise showing up yet.

But the hit did let a red mark on her pale skin.

She tries to hide it with her hair while looking at herself in the mirror.

She feels uneasy by looking at her figure for too long.

She lowers her gaze at the sink. She’s too used to it by now.

To not looking forward anymore.

To just do as she’s told.

That way she can do what she wants, that way everyone will surely leave her alone.

“…”

Deep down she must know she’s just trying to look away.

But she can’t force herself to do anything else.

Her screams are contained.

Her cries are kept silent.

Those will ever reach anyone.

So even if she decides to start screaming, all she’ll do is make things worse.

Why bother?

What else can she do?

Other than excel at the only thing she’s been good at.

A stupid ball game.

That’s the only thing she has left.

It must be…

“Ann…”

Her friend was supporting her, she’s been believing in her all this time.

That’s right!

She has her friend.

The girl that went through so much only because she looked different.

How could she dare to look her in the eyes and tell her she quitted.

“Pathetic.”
Did she said that?
She couldn't raise her head.
There was no one else in the women’s restroom.
It didn't matter… that word described her perfectly.
And it hurt so bad to even think about how could things be if she had at least tried to do things differently.
But instead she went along and let herself be in this state.
How could she allow things to get this bad?
How could she think this is worth it…
“It is…”
She has to think that.
She has to believe in herself, just like how she wanted that one girl to believe.
Otherwise, she would be left behind, and she’ll fall into the hands of those who want her broken.
But if she continued enduring, she’ll reach her goals.
That’s how it should be, that’s the only way she could look at it.
But then why?
Why is she doubting now?
Why is she struggling and holding her breath.
A drop of water fell into the sink.
She couldn’t hold it together.
She felt miserable.
Pathetic.
She was supposed to be better than this.
How could she dare to cry after everything she endured?
'I won't cry, I won't cry, I won't cry.'

“Heh-hahaha”

That laugh.
It sounded distorted.
But it also sounded like she finally had let go of something.

That she could finally rest more easily and just continue with her daily struggle.

It’ll be that easy if she could just laugh like that, but she didn’t.

It wasn't her.

Now, she was afraid.

So far she was sure she was alone, but it was only her own voice that had been tricking her to believe that.

“…” As if she knew what she’ll encounter by doing it.

She began to rise her head with great apprehension.

Somehow she knew that after looking at her own face, something could change forever inside her. Fear couldn't describe the uneasiness she felt as her mid waist figure began to hoard her eyes.

The uncertainty of not knowing what look her face will show was paralyzing her.

But she had to know.

She had to look at her face, and confront her own washout self.

It was that one time she had to dare to look forward, to see how miserable she'll look if she dared to give up now.

But she was so scared of it.

Scared that instead of regret and desolation, her face would be of wretchedness and loathing.

And then, she sees it.

Her image, her figure, it is the exact same she’s been looking at just a few minutes before.

But why couldn't she dare to look at those eyes?

"…"

They were glowing.

It was a demonic gaze.

Full of disdain staring herself downward menacingly.

“You're worthless.”

She was terrified.

She needed to turn away, she needed to run.

If she confronted that figure much longer, she knows she'll regret it.
She turns away, heading outside with a fast but uneasy peace.

She must be imagining things, she couldn't be this gone, she thought.

"Shiho?"

"Ann?"

But her mind is quickly taken away from those thoughts.

She turns around after hearing that familiar voice she had been wanting to hear all day.

The voice that keeps her away of those moments she resent so much.

“Shouldn’t you be on practice?”

But those words immediately took away all the prepared joy she was about to release into her system.

(‘Like your good friend Takamaki, will you let down everyone who had put their faith in you?’)

How selfish was she to look for comfort in her friend in a moment like this.

How could she dare to face her in such a weak state.

She mustn't, she definitely mustn't show her this face of hers she thought.

“...Uh-huh...”

She nods quietly, trying to avoid her look before turning around.

She must head back to the gym.

“That bruise above your eye... Is that from practice too?”

But her friend catches a glimpse of her face.

She was too reckless, she shouldn't have let her see that

“Y-yeah.”

Suddenly Ann Takamaki's phone starts ringing.

The blonde cringes at the timing.

Her dissatisfaction grew as if she knew who the caller was.

"Shouldn't you take that?"

"It's probably just my part-time job... I think."

She spits a quick response as she ignores the phone while shooting a worried look at her friend.

"I should get going."

Shiho says trying to avoid her friend's look again.
"Shiho... Are you sure you are ok?"

"...Uh-huh..."

She says again, before turning around and walking away.

Alone, Takamaki looks down at her phone.

She knew it, that name, it was Kamoshida's.

Ann Takamaki knew she had to be brave for both of them.

She thought she could manage this situation.

She's been looked at the same way that man sees her before anyway.

Besides, she thought she could still make that long term plan of hers work somehow.

"... Yes?"

She finally gathered the courage to pick up.

"T-today won't work... I'm... I'm not feeling so good..."

Without even listening to the other side, she mutters something that she feels is good enough to get her out of this situation.

"Sorry. Bye."

She's able to hang.

It felt like all she had been planning could've gone through the window if she had failed to the tension.

She lets out a sigh and continues walking, heading to the restroom.

"Hey, wasn't that Takamaki?"

"Rumor has it she's dating Kamoshida."

"Seriously?"

"You know... she seems pretty easy, huh? You think I'd have a chance, too?"

"C'mon dude, you can't go after Kamoshida's bitch!"

For a moment Takamaki had forgotten where she was standing.

She was in the middle of the school second year floor corridors.

They didn't notice. But she could hear the two disheveled male students in the corner talking about her.

She ignores them she enters the rest room.

Takamaki felt tired, as if she had been running all day.
She wasn’t lying just a few moments ago, she felt sick.

How wouldn't she?

This charade she was putting, it sickened her.

Did she lost control of her plan?

If not, why is her friend looking like she’s suffering so much right now?

That guy promised her.

But now, Ann Takamaki is being cornered by her own decisions.

She has to find a way to get herself and her friend out of his sight, but she must first play this game some more.

But how can she do it?

She washes her face.

She can't take away her friend from her dreams, but what else can she do for her?

All that time she felt so useless and discarded until she met that girl, now she had her as her best friend.

She knew Suzui was a talented person. Meanwhile the only thing she had was her looks.

The looks that cost her so much of her intimacy.

She confronted that burden thanks to her friend's help.

And now she was trying to make good use of it, what anyone could think of her didn't matter.

It was the only thing she could do for her.

But then, why?

Why was she feeling so dirty?

She looks down at the water sinking and decides to take a look at her troubled face in the mirror for once.

She knew exactly why.

Her arms were trembling as she holds herself with both hands on the opposite sides of the sink.

She looked emaciated.

But although she didn't paid much attention, her eyes reflected a very disturbing gaze.

A demonic and piercing look.

She may be imagining it, but she couldn’t fully detest that image.

It was her face, it was her truest conviction, it had to be.
The only difference was in her gaze, her aqua eyes were reflected as some weird glowing yellowish eyes.

She could understand the look she was giving to herself.

She definitely could relate.

It was a feeling that could describe how she's been feeling all day.

"Disgusting" *
"Disgusting" *

Interlude / Out

Risk and dubiety

They got to the roof.

That way they'll avoid any sort of unwanted attention.

Classes were already over.

But finding two of the famous shujin delinquents playing around with a cat could only be so suspicious.

"You must be Jokin'... Kill him?"

Sakamoto's said nervously.

"Just listen to the end! I think it's only fair you knew..."

The cat continued explaining without much concern.

This behavior was bothering Takashi Kido for a while.

But they were unprepared for this.

Kido's suspicions about changing something inside the Metaverse to help them dealing with Kamoshida in the real world, was a possible procedure. At least according to Morgana.

But there was also a huge risk.

"Attacking his castle will certainly help you guys changing his ways, but there's really no way knowing if he'll turn out ok."

"... So, how do you know it'll work?"

Kido, still perplexed by Morgana's previous statement tries to verify his reliability.

"It's just simple logic. The treasure that's sheltered in the highest point of his Palace it's his most valuable possession. Therefore it must be the core of his palace, the source of what distorted his
desires and helped him create that place."

"Nothin' about this is logical at all!"

Sakamoto barks in frustration.

"But you also said the Kamoshida in this world doesn't realize what happens in that world."

Kido tries to keep Morgana's attention focused on answering his questions.

"He doesn't, because it's deeply connected to his heart. Shadows are the suppressed selves, the form their treasure gains are the source of the corruption that warps their hearts, the thing that made them fall apart from whatever they used to be... At least that's how much I gathered."

"But killing him..."

Doubt fills the mind of Kido. The magnitude of such a possibility wasn't something he was ready to face today.

So far, Morgana explained to them that stealing the treasure hidden within Kamoshida's Palace could trigger something he called a "change of heart".

Something so fanciful shouldn't be taken seriously.

Not until the potential fatal aftereffect was mentioned by the talking cat.

The idea of being bereft of his own ambitions, the source of his desires. Could be enough for him to have a change in his personality. Making him recollect everything he did and how much his distorted ambitions coerced his own actions.

Thus forcing him to recognize his previous doings. And make them intolerable enough for him to go as far as to confess his own sins by himself.

It was a fanciful tale for Takashi Kido's pessimistic line of thought. Hearing about the potential side effects made it more believable for some reason.

"Again, the impact is something I can't predict. I only told you that death is a possibility."

"... But stealin' it would really make a difference?"

Sakamoto shared his disbelief.

"Certainly, as I said, the treasure it's the core of the Palace. And since the Palace is the manifestation of his distorted desires, once it disappears..."

"His desires would go too."

Kido had gathered as much, everything made sense that way.

Given the absence of the resolve of fulfilling your own desires, would certainly make a person crumble because of his own self awareness.

"Precisely. I like how fast you pick up things!"

Morgana praised the frizzy haired boy's answer.
"Oi... But how can somethin' like that kill him?"

The cat narrowed his eyes before giving examples.

"Just imagine if you lost all your ambitions, your will to eat, sleep, fall in love. If all of those yearnings were to vanish, they'll be no different from someone who had shut down entirely."

"Somebody like that would need serious caring in order to survive."

It made sense in Kido's head.

For somebody with the disciplined lifestyle of a sportsman like Kamoshida. Losing his resolve could lead to some sort of self destructive behavior because of some untolerable sense of guilt.

"But the risk tho, it's..."

"It's not something I'm ready to do..."

"Yeah..."

Once again Sakamoto and Kido's thoughts seem to align.

"What's with those faces? I gave you a way out of your predicament, aren't you determined enough to face such risks?"

Morgana mocks the duo, trying to provoke them into a favorable response one last time.

"I'm not a murderer."

"Yeah, I'm not down with that..."

Disappointment makes cat shrink.

"Sheesh... I came all this way, and this is what I get? It's not like anyone will ever find out."

"That doesn't make it better."

Kido quickly responds.

"He's right, if we go around doin' whatever we want, we'd be no better than that effin Kamoshida..."

Sakamoto adds his own complain.

"Urgh, isn't this your only option?"

But Takashi doesn't budge.

The thought of Morgana telling them the risks so casually made him doubt himself. Was he really that naive?

Or could he truly be selfish enough to consider such a risk to be worth it?

Either way, he wasn't ready to pass judgment, not to the cat or to the possibility on itself, not right now.

"Fine, I'll come back later, make sure you've made your decision by then."
Morgana then jumps to the roofs as only a cat could do.

"Man, we're gettin' all worked up for nothing... Dammit!"

Sakamoto says as he kicks the floor in frustration.

Kido sighs as he heads downstairs.

Trying to clear his head, he remember something Igor mentioned before.

To use the strength of other people's hearts to his own advantage. He had to lose the frivolity of his shallow intentions to live a normal highschool life.

For that he had decided to use his new name as his own mask in this world.

Meanwhile his true self, his other self tamed by the resolve of his heart can help him battle through that world.

In the end his goal was still the same.

That's what he had decided to do, he had to find people willing to help him.

People who also had their fates taken away from them.

So he could "use" their strength.

His battlefield's end was on sight.

But the potential price of retrieving his peaceful future in this city, is too much?

To willingly use those around him.

To kill potentially someone

"Ryuji, do you think it's worth it?"

They've stopped as Kido stood in the stairs.

"Huh? For real?"

Sakamoto wasn't really aware of Kido's state until he passed by him and had a chance to look at his face.

“What are you guys doing?”

“What?”

But they were interrupted by a familiar voice.

It was Shiho Suzui.

“Wha- she’s here?”

She was coming out of a classroom by herself to pick up her personal things before heading out.

“Um… I just wanna go downstairs.”
“Sorry, we are in your way, right?”

Takashi Kido moved away from Suzui’s way.

“Thanks… Also, thanks for yesterday.”

Said Shiho with a calmed voice while looking at Sakamoto

“Huh?”

Ryuji noticed something was wrong with her.

“Hey… are you, okay?”

“I…”

“Your eye!”

“That’s… I’m sorry, I have to go!”

With that Suzui started running downstairs.

“Dammit!”

“Ryuji wait!”

But as soon as Sakamoto tried to follow her, he was stopped by Kido's hand holding his shoulder.

“Where are you going?”

He noticed the wrath in Sakamoto's voice, and tried to make him comeback to his senses.

“That bastard!”

“Wait!”

“Lemme go!”

“What are you going to do?”

Sakamoto finally stopped the struggle and managed to calm down.

“What happened yesterday?”

Kido questions.

“That… That asshole!”

“Ryuji!”

The serious tone in Kido's voice finally made Sakamoto realize the situation.

“I got in the way of Kamoshida trying to force those girls to get into his car.”

“Those girls?”

“Takamaki and Suzui… they were hanging around central street yesterday, I saw them when
Kamoshida started creepin' at 'em

“Ryuji I told you-“

“I didn’t do anything…! Nothin' physical…”

“I just… made a scene and he walked away.”

The frustration in Sakamoto's voice pacified Kido.

He was being honest.

“We were outside of school, so that bastard wouldn't dare to do anythin’, but today he must’ve…”

“... He took it out on Suzui today…”

It was clear what had happened.

Kamoshida's frustrations and vulnerability as an abusive power figure was exposed by this insurgent punk outside 'his' school.

'He's a coward, of course he is. Now he'll probably be even more harsh to his students so he can validate himself again.'

Takashi could guess what that meant.

The teacher turned out to be that kind of person.

“Look… About what Morgana said-“

“If we go now, we may end up dead.”

Kido cuts Sakamoto short before his suggestion could go any further.

"But-

"We are only two, we barely survived with the three of us last time, if we go, we need to be thorough."

“Y-you right… but meanwhile that guy is going to keep-“

“As long as he doesn’t go any further..."

Kido doubts his own words, there was no way he could know how far that monster could go.

And his pessimistic imagination wasn't really helping him either.

But he needed to keep his partner at ease, so their alliance can continue to be reliable.

"I think we can make this happen, still… Killing him…”

Stopping the cycle of abuse with murder.

That wasn't exactly what Kido considered to be a way to balance their situation.

“Grgh… Still, we need to stop him somehow.”
“We do… I’m tired, I’m going home. You should go too.”

Having enough, Kido walks away.

“Dammit, why… Why is nobody speakin’ up!”

Sakamoto stays still for a while trying to understand their plight.

“They don’t care… Nobody does.”

The gloomy words coming from the boy that had saved his life twice during the last two days took him aback.

So far, that boy's strong will was inspiring, but now, it feels like he was slowly drifting away.

“Only the victims care about what could happen, it’s same way everywhere.”

“Takashi…”

Kido turns around to face his ally once more.

He timidly shakes his head after noticing Sakamoto's worried face.

Takashi quietly laughs to himself.

“Being able to see the world differently, and being capable of changing this world by going to an entirely different one… Talk about ironic.”

This was turning into a burden way too fast.

He couldn't tolerate the idea of failing considering how much is at stake.

How many people could be affected by their actions or lack of them.

Either way, he had to fall in with this new shared responsibility.

Find a way to stop this teacher from continuing on ruining so many lives.

“Yeah…”

Sakamoto seems to understand the feeling behind those words.

He never had to think about the wellbeing of so many before.

He only focused on doing things for his own good.

His main goal and saving his other schoolmates from Kamoshida aligned somehow.

“I don’t know where Morgana went, but we need to talk about how make things differently.”

Added Kido.

They needed to be more meticulous in how they handle the situation.

“I knew somethin' was wrong, she couldn’t be his follower after all….”

Sakamoto's quietly grumbles away from the conversation.
“Follower?”

“Ann Takamaki… She’s in your class man, you remember her warning us to not mess with Kamoshida?”

“Ann Takamaki…”

The image of blonde twin tailed girl sitting in front of Takashi in class came back to him.

“…”

"There were some rumors about Takamaki and Kamoshida being an item. But today I heard around school that Suzui was Kamoshida's new favorite, the thing is that... I know those girls since middle school... There's no way that Kamoshida is their type, y'know?"

"Rumors, huh?"

Sakamoto could feel Kido's glare behind him. As if he was waiting for him to accept his own lack of self awareness.

"What I'm tryin' to say is that those rumors had to come from somewhere."

He tries to make a point.

But Kido didn't seem to care about the source of such information as he shrugs his comment away.

“Ugh! What a load of bull! We can’t let it end like this. We ain’t givin’ up, right!?"

“No… Just... Head home for today, okay?”

“Right, right… I'll be going then… We look for that stupid furball tomorrow.”

That said, Sakamoto and Kido part ways.

On his way out of the school, Kido could hear the noises coming from the courtyard.

The school gym was apparently being used by the Volleyball team.

Kido didn't have the courage to go there.

He imagined that if his presence were to be noticed, not only he, but those abused club members could get in trouble as well.

He decides to head to the station, leaving the atrocities going on in that school sports temple behind him.

**A source of kindness**

Walking around the road to the train station, Takashi Kido could still hear the mumbles of his schoolmates.

Of course, he wasn't going to get away from his usual rumors quota.
"Did you see what people were saying on that site? It's him!"
"I think that's the transfer student, people online were saying he's a criminal."
"He assaulted a police officer? That's scary."
"I wish he could just stop coming to school, y'know?"
"I've seen him hanging around with Sakamoto-kun. The two of them are so scary..."
"He doesn't look like the kind of guy who'd have a criminal record. Maybe he's one of those?"
"You know, the people in those accidents. Maybe he suddenly freaks out and attacks people."
"Huh? I don't think so. He's just been coming to school. Actually, he almost seems normal."
"And from what I've heard, after you have a psychotic breakdown, you go brain dead and die right there."
"He must really be a scary dude behind that calm demeanor."
"I wish I had bought some headphones before leaving home."

Most of the students were also heading to the Shibuya like him.

Takashi managed to find a seat in the train.

"I'm so traumatized from the video of that accident. I've been afraid of riding the train ever since."
"There've been similar accidents before, right? What happens if you get a psychotic breakdown?"
"In the very end, you die in a lot of pain. That's what I hear. You die, or you're as good as dead."

It seems the current theme between not only students, but also salary men and even the newsheets seems to be the same.

The epidemic of psychotic attacks and the train derailments.

The boy wasn't that assiduous when it came to watching or reading the news.

He had his own reasons to not care to believe anything about those tidings shared around without much concern.

So when he heard something about the ATC lines being deteriorated, he didn't bothered paying much attention anymore.

The Automatic Train Control computers were part of a very modern system built not so long ago.

Meaning that most of the more employed modern lines use these systems.

The ATC built aboard the trains computers are used to automatically stop the train before reaching a critical point or in case of a possible derailment.

It also disallows train engineers to accelerate over the point of speed limits, overwriting their commands to avoid accidents if necessary.

This system was of course, a part of the public knowledge for the people of Japan.
The announcement of the failure of such safe system being broadcasted by the media could mean many things.

The message could've been sent out to spread the awareness and discomposure to the population.

But that awareness also takes away the security of knowing your life was in the safe hands of an automatic system that had never failed until now.

Somebody was going to have to pay for such a critical negligence.

But for Takashi Kido, this is just what the busy life of a capital city like Tokyo is supposed to be like.

He could wish for it to be nothing like this all he wanted.

But there was nothing he could do against turmoil the populace decided to make.

All he could do was break away from those insecurities shared by the general public.

To dedicate himself to live his life the way he chose to do so.

Or in his specific case, the way he's allowed to do so.

"Will you please give it a rest? I told you already, I'm not feeling up to it!"

As soon as he arrived to the station square, he hears another familiar voice.

Almost next to him was a girl peevishly talking to her phone, in the middle of the crowded train station.

The girl was Ann Takamaki, also on her way home.

"Wait, what...!? That's not what you promised! And you call yourself a teacher!??"

Her voice cracks into an frenzied pitch.

"This has nothing to do with Shiho!"

The source of the call must've been Suguru Kamoshida himself.

'He's blackmailing her?'

The girl didn't seem to notice his classmate standing right beside her.

The teacher seems to have abruptly ended the call.

"... Shiho's starting position."

She had a stunned expression while looking at her phone.

Like a child who knew she was about to get scolded for something she didn't deserved.

From a strangers perspective, one would say she was about to crack down a confession for a some mischief.

The girl crouches down nervously biting her thump, trying to come up with some idea.

She couldn't control the flow of emotions blowing up inside her.
This frustrated her greatly as she knew she didn't have time for such an outburst.

It was evident for her that once that first tear breaks free, what would follow would be an uncontrollable stream of self-abhorrence.

She'll end up sitting in the middle of the street, in all fours crying while no one would dare to notice her.

That wasn't allowed, this was her fault, and she had to come up with something.

"... Hey, are you ok?"

"Huh?"

After raising her gaze, she notices that one frizzy hair boy from her school standing right in front of her.

His eyes weren't visible behind the glare of his glasses.

Her guard was down, this boy had noticed her.

This was not good for her as she didn't know a thing about him.

She feared what ideas he'll get about her while she was looking like this.

After quickly getting back on her feet she takes a step back away from him.

"Wait... Were you listening?"

"I was eavesdropping."

He says nonchalantly.

He had an uninterested expression this whole time.

"Ugh, haven't you heard of privacy?"

He closes his eyes and sighs.

"It wasn't on purpose though."

His tone was apologetic.

That made her feel bad for a moment, as she noticed she was standing in the middle of one of the most crowded trains stations of the world.

"... No, I was out of line. Sorry."

She answers with a forced and politely manner.

The girl wiped her eyes while trying to look away from him.

He noticed her hands were shaking while holding her bag very tightly.

"How much did you hear?"

"You were saying something about your friend."
He answered honestly, with little hints of guilt hiding behind his words.

"Shiho..."

"Hey listen-

"It's nothing at all."

She rubbed him off as she wiped her eyes again.

"... Nothing."

She was having trouble keeping a steady breath, as if she was holding small hiccups from coming up.

She was covering her face with her free arm as she held her bag closer to her chest, it seems she was at her limits.

Without saying anything else she turned away and started running towards the subways.

"..."

He couldn't let it be.

No matter how rude she was before. Or how much she wanted to be left alone.

After hearing that conversation, he feared that if he let her be, an unrepeatable damage will be done to her.

Because of that man.

'She can't be...'

"Tch."

Before he could continue imagining the worst, he swallowed his logical thinking and pride, and began to follow her downstairs.

"Wasn't that girl who ran by really cute?"

He continued following her through the escalator not losing sight of her.

"Hey! don't run when there are other people around! Such a nuisance..."

He could hear mumbling of the people witnessing the scene.

She didn't care, in her current state she couldn't be aware of her surroundings anymore.

'Please, calm down.'

He thought while trying to reach her.

Finally she stopped in one of the less crowded parts of the station.

She was trying to hide behind a big pillar.

He took a deep breath and started walking towards her with a more calmed peace.
She notices him getting closer and immediately wiped her tears away with a frustrated speed.

"Stop following me... Just leave me alone!"

"Calm down, will ya!?"

Although she was still showing an angry face, the surprise took away her anger because of the sudden shift in this boy's voice.

He spoke in a tired but also irked manner.

It almost heard like a grunt.

"What's with you? why are you following me!?"

She couldn't get it.

Everyone was just ignoring her so far.

She clenched her fists and then opened them again.

There wasn't a reason to be so frightening at the sight of this boy.

She had dismissed so many boys with hidden intentions the last couple of years, that she got used to it.

So much that she could consider it a sport of sorts if she didn't hated every second of those uncomfortable interactions.

But then why was she so reluctant to accept his words?

She wasn't allowing herself to show any sign of amicability.

But he continued to pursue her anyway.

He took a deep breath while scratching the back of his head.

"It's not safe for you to stay like this in such a place."

Her eyes widened with a growing incomprehension.

"Stop it, I don't want to hear it!"

But she didn't have time to guess his intentions.

She couldn't force herself to care.

She couldn't allow herself to find out that...

He could actually just have good intentions.

After all she's been doing, and all that she had caused.

She didn't had the right to think that.

"It's ok, just let's go upstairs... Everything will be fine."
But he kept on persisting.

She was running out of patience.

No, she didn't had any left at this point.

But yet, she couldn't really manage to get rid of him.

It was a strange territory for this natural rejecter.

She never saw anyone caring this much for a stranger before, not with an ulterior motive.

So why...

"Why...? Why do you keep worrying about me?"

"Because you're hurt."

He immediately replied.

Her breath skipped for a second.

"...Huh?"

She wasn't prepared to hear it.

It was obvious she was hurt, but hearing it made it unbearable.

She had to do something to fix everything.

Realizing how weak she is by letting her powerlessness get the best of her, was the last thing she needed worry about right now.

She could feel a warm liquid running down her cheek.

It was so embarrassing, to let someone notice her weakness so blatantly.

She couldn't hold it anymore.

She finally lets out a sob.

It wasn't fair.

His dark mellow eyes were staring deep inside hers, like if he was reading her every thought.

It was like if he was aware of every emotion she was struggling to tame.

Pretty damn invasive if you asked her.

He was a little taller than her, so his gaze was even more obtrusive while he was looking at her from above.

But now he had an unfeigned expression, unlike his previous indifferent one.

How could he be so genuinely worried for a stranger?

She couldn't read it. It felt bad, for the first time, she didn't know how to react to a boy of her age
approaching her.

Her previous emotional disarray began to slowly fade away.

Replaced by bewilderment.

She started to give up those containing chains holding her sobs.

Finally, she cries.

'Great job Takashi, you followed a girl into a subway and now she started crying.'

He thought he wasn't really doing a great job.

They were really sticking out.

He had to chose his words carefully if he didn't want to trigger any sort of pervert alarms when people inevitably starts noticing the cute foreigner looking girl crying while talking with the tall delinquent looking boy.

"Let's go somewhere safe, just take it easy for a little while before heading home."

She sobs again.

It really wasn't fair.

He had to have some creepy reason, he couldn't be this smooth after the way he told her to calm down.

After the way she had treated him before.

He turned around.

"Follow me, ok?"

He said, gently this time.

"What the heck? I really don't get you..."

Maybe it was his pleasant tone.

Or the way he walked like he didn't had an interest in the world.

But she felt a strange relief after he asked her to follow him.

He wasn't blackmailing her.

He wasn't forcing her.

He wasn't trying to guilt her into it and he wasn't acting with condescension.

The way he asked her to follow him away from this remoteness, it was very... trustworthy.

He turned his head to look at her again, waiting for her to proceed.

She lowered her head in surrender, quietly following him upstairs.
The People at central street were too worried with their own shopping to notice the two teenagers. Even if one of them still in tears. They got into Big Bang Burger to try to avoid much attention. The girl was sitting on a corner away from the multitude near the door. Meanwhile the boy was bringing two glasses with water. 'Why did I agree to come here?'

Ann Takamaki was still confused by the boy's intentions. After a while she managed to rise her guard again. Even if she wasn't feeling any inconvenience right now. Even if he just walked her here without asking, she didn't felt forced to come in with him. It wasn't exactly a romantic venue for a date. So people won't really get weird ideas while looking at two teenagers spending time here. So she couldn't really complain about that. Not that she would care at this point.

"Here, drink this."

"Thanks..."

He sat down in front of her, handing her some water. She was polite enough to thank him for the gesture.

There was a reason for why Ann Takamaki was still on guard. She is aware of her 'promiscuous' reputation given to her at school. So a boy from that same school acting as if he's worried could also be just a set up to lure her to yet another unwanted encounter.

But what people chose to do is out of her power.

"Are you feeling better?"

Her tears had dried out a little while ago. She wasn't as exposed as before, which allowed her to shield herself from any sort of duplicity. "I have nothing to talk about with you."

She says trying to distant herself from any sort of possible conversation.
"I'm not gonna pry, you just looked so distressed after that call."

His concern sounded 'unselfish'.

'Dammit, that's low.'

She thought, making her look like a hysterical woman again by playing to be such a nice guy.

"It was just an argument."

She wondered why was she being so rude with this boy anyway?

It was then that she realized that there wasn't a point to hide her frustrations to him anymore.

She wasn't going to change his interest in her situation.

And he'll keep worrying regardless.

She could read that much about him

He speaks as if he wasn't interested, yet he had showed her some sort of compassion by bringing her here.

And she still followed him here because of that selfless kindness of his.

Maybe he was just acting this way because of some naive sense of chivalrously.

Maybe he just wanted to do a good deed on her expense.

Maybe he was just curious.

Or maybe he genuinely cared.

But that didn't bothered her anymore.

She couldn't really grasp why, but she knew this boy was listening to her.

And that he will continue to listen to whatever she had to say.

It was such an alien feeling.

Everything was so wrong already, if she told him everything, what would change?

Why was she even considering it?

Kido noticed some female students from their school were looking at them from outside.

'Great, more rumors.'

He fixes his glasses dragging his attention away from them.

This girl was in a vulnerable position.

The reason he had been trying to calm her down, was the fear of what could a distressed person like her do in such a situation.

"It's about Kamoshida?"
He asked her bluntly.
So far she was trying to avoid his almost invasive eye contact.
But once he dropped that name, her eyebrows twitched in reaction.
She takes a deep breath, as if giving up once more.
Still trying to avoid eye contact.
"So you know about the rumors too, right? About me and Kamoshida."
As if being stabbed by a feeling of guilt, he couldn't dare to nod.
It's not that he bothered to pay attention to those rumors about her.
But there was something awful about not being able to do anything about something so wrong.
Just because he thought it wasn't his place to do so.
"Everyone says we're getting it on... But... that's so not true..."
She begins to disinterestedly play with a paper napkin while continuing her story.
He had figured that teacher's true self.
How cowardly his methods could come to be.
He could only guess how much this girl had to go through by trying to deal with his advances.
It was no wonder why she was so defensive all the time.
"That was him on the other line. I've avoided to give him my number... for the longest time."
She wasn't choking the words, but the obvious disgust behind them was very palpable.
"He told me to go to his place after this..."
The disgust turns into evident anger as she crushed the napkin with her hand.
"You know what it means."
Kido gritted his teeth as if bearing with something.
He knew all too well how far that kind of man would go.
But this wasn't the place for an outburst.
There was still more to it than just that, there must be.
Why was she bearing with all that?
"If I turn him down, he said he'd take my friend off as a regular on the team..."
And that was exactly it.
Kido now knows the tool Kamoshida was using to black mail her.
But it was so obvious.

He even had the evidence talking to him twice.

He already knew both Suzui and Takamaki were friends.

He also knew Suzui was being abused too.

But he didn't really knew what Takamaki was doing about that, until now.

"I've been telling myself this is all for Shiho's sake..."

It was obvious she had been doing this because of a selfless affection towards her friend.

She was not even thinking she was doing something so reckless.

'I see, deep down she's pretty kind.'

In this situation, she was probably too kind for her own good.

His interior was boiling with rage.

But he can't allow this distressed girl to notice.

Especially after realizing how good she is at absorbing those emotions.

"But... I can't take it anymore..."

So far she didn't know better.

What else could she do?

It's not like she didn't thought of another possibilities.

Yet she can't help but to feel stupid for allowing herself to fall this low.

"I really can't... I just hate him!"

She keeps on speaking her mind.

As if she finally realized the damage she was bearing... she was causing.

"But still... Shiho's my best friend, she's all I have left in that sorry excuse of a school!"

She couldn't hold the tears again.

She looks Takashi Kido in the eyes again without holding her tears anymore.

His calmed expression waived for a second, as he could feel the raw emotions of grief coming from her.

She may had been looking at him longing for sympathy.

Yet he can't find an reason to look away.

"I.."
Back then, it was the price she had decided to pay.

Still, it hurts so much not being noticed.

So much, she couldn't ignore being so dehumanized anymore.

After remembering all the times she had to be called names behind her back by those who didn't even try to look at her like a person.

After all the times she had to put with not being considered someone worth talking with, if it not to try to woo her.

And after all the times she had to be consoled by the silliness of her only friend.

How couldn't she do her best to prevent her friend from suffering the same torment as her?

What else could she had done?

What can she even do now that things had gone so wrong?

"Tell me... what should I do!?"

Kido's fingers were tighten up his knees under the table.

The perversion she had to put through had lead her to think that she could only use her body to save her friend.

And someone was being so inhumane to make her go through all that.

How frustrating it was for him not being able to just come up with an immediate solution for her cries.

But the answer was in the back of his mind this whole time

The meta-verse, the king, and the treasure.

Would that help her in any way?

("He may end up dead.")

But he couldn't drag her into that.

How irresponsible it'll be for him to involve someone who's not capable of making clear minded decisions just yet.

Someone without the same abilities like Sakamoto and him use to survive in that place.

This was not the time for that.

"Sorry, that was unfair, I shouldn't have asked you, it's not your problem."

He noticed he had drifted away in his own frustration as she apologized.

She must had thought she let herself be so selfish to ask some stranger for a solution to such a tangled issue.

He raised his gaze again to meet hers.
"You should say something... You haven't said a word."

She fixed her hair timidly trying to relax a little more.

Her embarrassment was noticeable.

"What should I say?"

"I dunno... We barely even talked before, why am I saying all this to you?"

Her face relaxed a little more after hearing him ask that.

She wasn't aware of how much this whole exchange meant to her until now.

How easily she poured all her frustrations in the open for this boy to see.

"Maybe that's why?"

"... Heh, you may be right."

She cleans her small tear that never came down.

It was an innocent smile she just let out.

"... You're so weird. Usually everyone just ignores me."

Finally she grabs her glass of water.

Looking down, again falling away from his gaze.

"Ignores you? Because of the rumors?"

"Uh-huh."

She nods.

"Are you really a bad person as the rumors say...? I don't really believe it."

As if he finally had time to take back his breath…

He calmly pushes his glasses back up by the bridge of the framework.

Hiding his eyes behind the shine of the crystals in the process

“Bad to the bone.”

Saying it like he meant it.

The foolishness of the scene made her chuckle.

“What was that?”

She says with a smile.

The boy seems to also have a playful nature hidden behind his quiet behavior.

Maybe it was his way to say those rumors don't really bother him.
"I thought as much, those rumors were too big to be true."

She couldn't help but to carry some sadness in her voice.

"But you looked so lonely, like if there was no place for you to be...."

"Maybe, but it's still for the best... I guess."

The echoing voices of the incognizant came back to his mind.

As if a filter was turned off.

Those around them.

Those who don't know the misery of being isolated, while still being surrounded by people.

Those who make them feel denied of a sense of belonging.

He could relate to them not being aware of their own wretchedness.

But he could never force himself to try to be one of them anymore.

"Yeah, I kinda felt the same way, so I figured we may end up talking more easily because of that."

It was the same for this girl.

She couldn't look at those people's faces at recognize them.

They were just mundane figures with voices attached to them.

She wouldn't allow herself to be caged in their fashionable expectations either.

"I'm worried about Shiho, I'm not sure she's strong enough to deal with it."

Her mind came back to the issue that bothered the most.

"She has really changed lately."

"She really can't quit the team?"

He asked, even if he already knew the answer beforehand.

"It's not something she deserves, she had worked so hard for it all this time."

This strong sense of purpose was Kamoshida's leverage against these girls.

"I just... At some point, it stopped being about her playing, and about him leaving her be. I-"

She stops before starting blaming herself again.

"I just wish there was a way he could just leave me alone. Like, forget about me and everything..."

She relaxed herself in the booth as if she was about to fall asleep. Probably thinking of a perfect world without her having to deal with the teacher's advances.

"As if something like that would ever happen..."
But she quickly puts herself down to earth again.

"It could."

She notices then that the boy was musing again, not looking at her but at his own hands over the table now.

"You don't need to be so serious about it, It's ok. I know better."

Her answer take him out of his reflecting state.

"But I do feel a bit better now, I'm heading home."

She raises up taking the plastic cup with water with her.

"Don't tell anyone what I told you, Ok?"

She says in a belligerent tone.

He only smiled while nodding her back.

"Well, thanks.... Amamiya-kun"

Noticing she was too aggressive with her previous sentence, she timidly shows her gratefulness.

Meanwhile Takashi Kido could only nod at the sound of his fake last name.

"… Not a problem."

As soon as she walks away he takes out his phone.

He sees the ominous app twinkling in his phone.

'She should be fine until tomorrow. What should we do now?'

Kido could feel the relief of knowing the girl headed home instead of the other awful possibility that had forced him to follow her in the first place.

He thinks about messaging Sakamoto to tell him what just happened.

But knowing the boy he'll will only get more furious than what's necessary right now.

'We have to deal with him somehow.'

Takashi Kido heads home with only tomorrow on his mind.

In the meantime, the blonde girl who was waiting for her train in the Shibuya station was looking at her phone remorsefully.

'I should tell her everything. '

She couldn't tolerate the idea of that Teacher taking advantage of this rejection to put another burden on her friend.

At least she should tell her that everything was her fault.

And so she decides to send a text.
The speakers announce the arrival of her train.

'Tomorrow... I tell her everything tomorrow.'

She could only think of lying on her bed right now.

Hoping to wake up with everything fixed and not having to risk losing her only friend because of her foolishness.

**Interlude / Breach**

It was getting dark on the outside of Shujin academy.

School activities had long finished.

Only some of the volley ball club members were still around.

Suguru Kamoshida was still engaging in club activities inside his throne room, the PE faculty office.

"How dares she..."

He was clenching his fists in an isolated display of controlled rage.

"Now listen, you better post what I've told you... EXACTLY how I told you."

The teacher was talking to the boy who was lying against the wall a few feet behind him.

He was holding his already bruised face with one hand.

Yuuki Mishima, the second year student who was being used by this teacher as a punching bag hesitantly answered the teacher.

"Y-yes sir."

He had no choice.

"Tch... stupid bitch..."

But even after wreak his anger away on the boy, it still wasn't enough.

"Mishima! Go and get Suzui, then you can head home for today."

He calls for his next target.

"Yes..."

Mishima goes downstairs, never raising his head.

He knew exactly where Suzui was.

"Mishima."

She notices him entering her classroom.
There was no one inside besides the two teenagers.

He was just a messenger, but he wondered why should he be the one to call her.

By the look she gave him, she already knew why he was there.

"Suzui-san... Kamoshida sensei is calling for you...In the PE faculty office."

He had no emotion in his speech.

The spiky haired boy was doing his best trying not to imagine why he was delivering this message. Because this was just supposed to be part of their routine by now.

All he knew, or all he wanted to believe, is that he was just sending her to that man's lair.

"I... see. What does he want?"

She realizes what this boy is going through, she had to go through the same burden at some point.

She wishes she could at least be prepared for what was waiting for her.

"I don't know..."

It was pointless.

He couldn't dare to imagine how the mind of that man works.

He had to what he's been told, otherwise...

She walks past him, heading upstairs.

"Suzui..."

Mishima tries to reach her with one arm, he sees the bruise in her face, and then he realizes it.

For a second, he wishes he could just grab her by the arm and run.

He knows this girl will not resist in her current state.

He’ll be exactly the same if someone would come to drag him away.

But then what?

He can only imagine the reparations waiting for them if he dared to make such a decision.

"Huh...?"

She looks at him confused.

Her face was as if she was begging him to let her get things over with.

Mishima is pretty sure that he also wore that same face before.

It was in front of those two boys asking him about the Kamoshida's abuses.

Back then he thought he couldn't face the consequences of betraying that teacher.
Right now, after seeing her face like that, he can't force this girl through that either.

How could he?

What right had he to do such a thing?

"It's nothing... I... have to go."

He lowers his head, turns away heading towards the gate.

As he was ordered to do.

"..."

Suzui looks at the direction Mishima went with a sad expression.

She could understand his fear, but the way he ran away worried her.

She froze there for a moment, and wished she could just go home.

But she had to come back here tomorrow.

And the day after tomorrow

She had to, for her.

Her phone starts ringing.

The texts appearing on her screen brought a shiver down her spine.

It was her best friend.

The reason she had been struggling all these months.

The only person supporting her.

The one she didn't dare to disappoint.

The one person that she couldn't allow to be contaminated by this unmerciful cycle of encroachment.

Ann: I need to talk to you Shiho

Ann: It's important

Ann: Please, let's talk tomorrow if you read this later.

Ann: It's about Kamoshida.

Ann: Please, don't listen to anything he tells you.

Ann: I'm so sorry.

"... Ann."

She goes upstairs.

Shiho Suzui already knew it, but these texts confirmed her fears.
Her friend was being dragged by this teacher's viciousness.

Because of her.

She can't allow her friend that struggled so much to stay away from the sophistry from her surroundings to be concerned by this.

She must confront him.

Even if she's about to pay a price, she won't run away.

She has to stay in the team.

She has to see it through the end.

So they could be able to smile again someday, together.

When everything is over.

"Please, excuse me."

She enters into the PE faculty office.

Her previous impressions of this room's layout came back to her, accompanied with a chill.

The teacher was sitting in the same seat as before, legs and arms crossed.

Looking at her with a priggish glare.

"Sorry for suddenly calling you like that." "What do you need me for?"

She tries to keep things short.

"Suzui, from what I've seen from your performance on this afternoon practice, your form has dropped, worse than I thought."

The teacher brought his hand to his big chin as if meditating about his wording.

His semblance was one of a hyena waiting for a chance to knock off an already wounded prey.

"I-I see..."

She felt intimidated by his glare, but she had to remain strong.

She knew where he was going with this.

Even if he takes her out of the team now, she can always go back with her own merits.

She had to.

Her hurt arm shakes.

He was taking his time continuing, so he can mentally frazzle her.

"I think you will not be on the starter line up during the next meet."

His face darkened.
"Y-You can't!"

But she couldn't help it.

She let out an obvious sign of weakness.

It was an opening for the scavenger.

"... Heh, don't panic..."

Under his hands, his mouth forms a sinister smile.

"Whether I still make you a starter or not, it's still up to you..."

He lays out his trap.

Standing up while slowly walking towards the school girl.

"... Up to me?"

She takes a step back.

She wants to run.

But the figure of the teacher is so threatening that she remains frozen where she stands.

His presence was overwhelming.

"Well..."

He stops in front of her.

He stretches his arm towards the door behind her, mildly pushing her back against it with his torso.

He locks the door.

"As long..."

He gets closer to her neck, putting his hand through her shoulder.

She shivers, she tries to shake his hand off, but she can't move.

"Kamoshida-sensei...?"

She tries to speak, but she knows that her first mistake was coming to that room on her own.

He had absolute power over her.

There was no difference if she were locked in an underground dungeon or a high tower.

She couldn't escape anymore.

"... As you keep quiet until I'm finished. Suzui..."

His serious face turns into a smirk.

There was nothing else in her mind right now, school was empty.
No one could hear her.
No one will come.
She was alone with this warped man, for good.

**Interlude /Out**

**Honor test**

The city lights illuminate his steps as he wander through the alleys of the residential district of Yongen-jaya.

The night sky was clouded.

But the darkness wasn't so deep for some children that were still roaming the streets playing ball or walking their dogs.

Kido can't help but wonder what sort of reception he'll get from the coffee shop owner this time.

It was way past the curfew he gave him, and because of it he has to come up with some sort of excuse.

Currently his mind wasn't concentrated in any sort of alibi.

He hasn't bothered coming up with anything like a skirmish or a 'Missing in Tokyo' adventure.

Most likely because his head is still recalling the crying face of that young girl.

The door opens and the barista is sitting alone going through his crosswords.

A familiar scene as days pass by.

"So, where were you walking around in a time like this?"

"Some thug was bothering me."

He couldn't help it.

The lip came on it's own.

Backtracking to his previous interactions with another blonde.

"Just don't come to me when you get arrested. That'll be it for you, remember?"

"I hope he does..."

Kido noticed that Sakura wasn't actually alone.

Jirou Kamiya was there as well. Who was not showing any interest in the slightest on their conversation.
"Yeah, Kamiya-san is here again, great timing for your smart-ass comments, huh?"

"Don't worry Sakura-san, I'm not on duty, I'm just here for your amazing bean juice."

"Well, whatever. You shouldn't act so strangely in your situation. Neither should you hang around weird people, got it?"

"I actually meet a friend."

The boy tried to smooth off the conversation by adding it some honest small talk.

"Huh. It has to be some strange people if someone wants to spend time with you."

But Sakura wasn't in the mood to indulge his hints of light-heartedness.

"... Sure."

"Just make sure you're careful who your friends are, if you don't want them ruining your life."

"Spoken like a true father figure Sakura-san!"

Adding nothing to the conversation, Kamiya is heard in the distance praising Sakura's lecture.

"Hmph. Oh, look at the time. Sorry Kamiya-san, it's time to close the shop."

"Aw well. I guess I'll just go for some drinks in the bar near the clinic."

As Kamiya starts packing his papers scattered around the table.

Sakura continued voicing his concern in a grumpy manner.

"Seriously though, think about how I feel, having to stay up here waiting for you."

"He's right kid, he's been doing nothing but waiting for you, he didn't even got me my refill."

Kamiya finally gets close enough to the two coffee residents, willing to pay his bill to the barista.

"It'll be 2000 Yen."

"What!? Oh, well."

"I'm sorry..."

Says Kido respectfully bowing to Sakura.

He slightly raises his sight towards the detective for a few moments.

"What is it kid, got something to say to me?"

But Kamiya notices the oddness in Kido's behavior.

"Actually..."

An awkward silence fills the room.

"Hmm, Sakura-san, can I borrow the kid for a little while? Only as far as the tobacco store."
Sojiro’s face showed an obvious surprise.

'So much for bad influences'

As if disappointment filled his mind. Takashi can't help but to cringe at the cliché vices of the police detective.

"Ugh, fine. Just make it quick, I have to be home soon."

They walk outside.

Kido was doing his best not to worry the coffee shop owner more than he already had.

Regardless of his grumpy attitude towards him, he is still giving him shelter.

"Now, what is it? You look pretty choppy."

Takashi took a second to try to figure out if the police officer wasn't trying to make a pun because of his hairstyle.

Kamiya buys a cigarette box before bringing back his full attention towards the troubled kid.

He had actually gathered enough courage to talk to him after all.

There was only one thing he needed to confirm.

Jirou Kamiya was in charge of monitoring his activities and daily life.

So if he were to report everything that was happening to him, it was only fair that he'll tell him about his struggles with a certain instructor.

'Here goes nothing. '

At this point, Kido felt he needed to do the right thing first before making more abrupt decisions.

"There's a teacher at school who's abusing the students."

He couldn't guess what his reaction will be.

He sounded very disinterested on helping him the last time they talked.

But he still went as far as to find out about his name situation.

Of course. That wasn't enough to proof that this law enforcer had enough dedication to his sense of duty, but he had to know.

Was this person able to help him?

"... Is there really?"

He shows no emotion while lighting up his cigarette.

"...

This was exactly what he expected.

Kido didn't had hopeful experiences with the police to begin with.
Still, he had a hunch that this man could at least be different than those cops.

He certainly acted differently than most officers.

"... You have any proof of this?"

"I..."

He didn't thought this through, Kido finds himself out of words.

He spent all day looking for clues.

Both him and Sakamoto hunted for evidence of the teacher's abuses again today.

But they found nothing.

Kido knew that if he told Kamiya about the bruised faces of the volleyball club members, he'll just disregard the evidence as 'not good enough'.

He couldn't dare to expose that girl just yet.

('Don't tell anyone...')

He didn't even got her contact information, so trying to talk her into the idea was out of the question.

He had nothing.

This was the reality that had forced them into believing that going back to that sinister castle was their only chance to make a difference.

But he had to try.

Noticing his hesitation, Kamiya sighs.

"Did you got in trouble with this teacher? He did anything to you?"

'He tried to kill me'

"Not yet..."

He couldn't tell him about that world.

Not without being sent to a cell for being suspected of illegal drug possession.

For a moment he thought on just pressing the Eyelike app button and show this officer that other world.

But he wasn't sure if that could even work.

And he didn't know what could happen if he did.

"Hmmm, are you sure you didn't just got into someone's bad side because you were acting like a punk?"

"I didn't..."

Getting in his bad side was an understatement.
That teacher wanted him gone for some reason.

Kamiya sighs again.

"All right... I'll listen to you, but not today. You need to go sign some papers on a monthly basis anyway. Sakura-san had to give me his reports about you twice a month, and that was supposed to be it. But having you come to the police station once a month works better for me too. So how about it?"

It was a reasonable offer, but Kido didn't see the point on it.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

Kamiya chuckles to himself after Kido's response.

"Man, you really are a gutsy one are you? I am a detective. I can't allow myself to believe everything people tell me without proofs. Especially when it's coming from someone who's serving a sentence."

Finally getting a straight answer, the boy lowers his head in surrender.

He knew he wouldn't get anything out of this exchange, but to fail so miserably still hurt his pride.

Kamiya finishes his smoke before giving the boy one last word.

"I'll check out your school situation anyway, If you're doing anything strange, I'll find out."

"Of course."

"... Well, go home for tonight. We'll have time to talk later, just let me know when you'll come to the station. I'll appreciate if you come as soon as possible. It has to be this month though. Otherwise, I'll have to choose the date."

"Right."

Kido heads back to the cafe shop.

"The apple really doesn't fall far from the tree, huh?"

Kamiya says to himself before looking at his watch and heading to the train station.

---

**In to the King's court**

Back to the rumor mill most of its inhabitants call school. Kido walks around the corridors hearing the usual murmurings of his schoolmates.

His mind was set on entering Kamoshida's Palace later that day.

Regardless of Morgana's reasons, they had to do something.

Just a slight sign of weakness or some kind of personal secret could be an advantage for them in this world.
They needed Morgana to help them so they could handle themselves in that place.

But first, he had to deal with another biased teacher.

"... Are you listening to me Amamiya-kun? Ugh, I swear you just keep giving me more and more work."

Walking beside him, there was his untidy looking homeroom teacher.

"Seriously, I don't know what you did, but following you around doesn't make none of us any favors."

'That guy...!'

Takashi Kido could join the dots quite easily.

He has been put 'under surveillance' by his homeroom teacher. Going as far as having him report to her as soon as he arrived to the campus.

Only to have her escorting him to his class room.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Kawakami."

She sighs, as if he took away her excuse to keep voicing her lamentations.

'She really likes doing that?'

He was planning to look around for Sakamoto before classes started but that plan got canned now.

"Really though. I may have to ask someone from the student council to keep tabs on you or something. I just can't keep babysitting you like this."

"You don't need to do that, sensei."

"That's not up for you to decide, first we had the reports of you and Sakamoto harassing the volleyball club members, then the principal gets a call from your probation officer to keep an eye on you, seriously..."

'That stupid detective!'

Kawakami stops her march as soon as she notices that Kido has stopped listening to her again.

"Listeeen, just try give us adults a break and behave for at least a week or so. That way we can get done with, and by we; I mean 'you and I can go back to do our own things without having to worry about your noisy quirks."

Still, there was something about the voice the teacher used to grouse that really hit Kido as... Inoffensive.

Even by using epithets to label his behavior, she still sounded as if she was begging him.

"I'm sorry sensei, I really don't want to bother you."

He said, with all the good intentions of ending their exchange in a good note.

She sighs again.
The teacher had no other choice but to surrender her niggling.

----

There was a distinctive air in the third floor of Shujin Academy classrooms areas.

Here is were most of first year classrooms were.

The image of fresh faces and gullible minds was something that gave this area of the institute an atmosphere of teenage innocence. Unlike the rest of the second and third years in the lower levels.

There was also the school library, the school broadcast room, And the student council room, and the access to the rooftop.

Shiho Suzui, a second year student was an unfamiliar face for this area since last year.

Classes have not started yet. Meaning the hallways were filled with students.

Yet her presence was not being noticed that much by her peers.

It was not the fault of the easily distractible teens.

It was the fact that Shiho Suzui, an athletic member of the volleyball club, who until last year was a “proactive and lively girl” was showing no signs of her own existence.

She was quietly moving through the stairs.

One step at the time, with a humdrum peace.

The students kept walking past her.

Without even noticing her.

Or at least, pretending not to do so...

"Is that Shiho Suzui from 2A?"

"It is! What's she doing here?"

"Wasn't she acting strange lately? She's been sighing a lot."

"The boys from her class say that she used to be a lot happier when she was a first year. Plus those bruises.... I think she's in trouble."

"She's a volleyball starter. I heard she has private lessons with Mr. Kamoshida every day."

"Apparently she's been a really good player ever since she was in middle school."

"Ugh, acting all sad while keeping Mr. Kamoshida to herself. Isn't that kinda arrogant of her part?"

Her face was haggard.

Her gaze was hidden behind her messy hair.
She had to do her best with her remaining energy to filter the sound of the voices surrounding her. Just a little longer.

"Suzui-san?"

A familiar voice seems to have noticed her despite her unremarkable state of being. She slowly turned her head only to catch a glimpse of the one calling her name.

"Senpai..."

She said in an almost imperceptible voice.

The one who called her name was a third year student. Normally a third year wouldn’t be hanging around the first years floor before classes started. Unless she was either going to the library, or if she was a student council member. People usually don’t go to the library before classes start, but Shiho Suzui knew exactly who this girl was. She was a famous honor student after all. A favorite between the school teachers. Someone who was very distant from her reality. Almost untouchable because of it.

"What are you doing in the third floor? Classes are about to start."

Asked the diligent girl.

"I… needed some air..."

Suzui’s voice was remote and lifeless. There was no energy in her words.

"I see. But access to the rooftop is forbidden for students, I'll recommend you to go to the courtyard. But classes are about to start."

Her lack of emotion didn’t seem to incite any sort of concern on her senior.

Who gave an automatic decent response.

"...

But Suzui herself lacked response, in all aspects of the word. Her breathing was indiscernible. The bruises on her face were being hidden by her long hair and her walking was as slow as a ground tortoise.
"Suzui-san, are you feeling ok?"
"..."
This time, a little more concern was discernible on the red eyes of the third year.
But Shiho Suzui isolated herself from the rest of the world.
Her senpai voice couldn't reach her anymore.
‘Why did I came here?’
She wondered herself.
Yesterday she went home, she took a bath, she threw herself to the bed.
She didn’t eat, she didn’t sleep, she did not speak to anyone.
To come back here, today, there was nothing wrong with living her daily routine.
‘Like nothing happened.’
“If you not, I can take you to the nurse office.”
Going to other adults, telling them the real reason behind these bruises.
Was that something she was supposed to do?
The thought of even considering that.
That she could had made things differently in any way, was inconceivable.
She couldn't allow herself to fathom such an idea.
"Miss Preeez! I need your help, it's about the cuts for this year culture festival!"
Another familiar voice interrupted their exchange.
"Huh? What's the matter Amano-chan?"
The black-haired girl came storming towards the third year student while being followed by a young brown haired boy from about the same age as her.
They both were second years, and they both were in the same class as Shiho Suzui.
But none of them seem to have noticed her.
The boy looked at her Senpai apologetically.
"Senpai. The teachers had informed some members of the culture club that they’ll cut expenses for this year budget.. because of a request from the volleyball club.”
“Eh?”
“I need you to give me the scoops Miss prez. What’s going on? Why do other clubs have to suffer these cuts? Did Kamoshida-sensei really asked for more funds for the volleyball club because of the upcoming meetings? What did the culture club had to do with that cut?”
At the mention of that name, Kamoshida, Suzui’s eyes widened.

As the conversation carried on, Shiho Suzui’s heart was continuously being pierced by the monotony of their conversation.

They were continuing their lives without any effort.

For them, this was going to be just another day like the others...

And she had to go through this day with the same endeavor?

“What? I’m not aware of any of this.”

“I’m sorry Senpai, she won’t let it go, she came all this way to--“

The boy began to speak but he was quickly cut short by the newspaper club member.

“Sensei Ushimaru had said that all the management of resources of the remaining clubs will have to go through you this year, right? Shouldn't the other club leaders have a voice on the matter as well?”

“I have not been informed of this. And please Amano-chan, could you do this interview through the proper means instead of lunging at me before the school day officially starts?”

The diligent third year never lost her composure as she gave firm answers.

She was a by the book representative of the student authorities.

“B-but the whole deal is unheard of.”

Slightly intimidated, the second year interviewer tried to hide her worried eyes behind her glasses.

“Amano-chan. The student council and the teachers faculty office are always the heads of the festivals organization. It's the same with every other school.”

"But a teacher requesting for the founds of another club to be given to theirs, that's not under their tutel-"

"It's a valid request as long as the heads of both clubs had agreed to it. So far I haven't been informed of this. If I were to be put in charge of the organization fees, I'll just have to do my best for the sake of the student body."

“You say that. But all this looks like it's just an opportunity to give you the assignment to burst your status as the most valuable student of this school, right?”

Somehow the school newspaper club president (and only member). Put together enough courage to point her pencil directly at the student council president face.

"Huh?"

"I mean, with your entrance exams around the corner, it'll be a failure for the image of this school if their most rewarded student and president of the student council isn't the one in charge of organizing the school festival... In her last year in the academy, it's probably a parting gift before heading to a collage of your choosing, right?”

“Pardon me?”
The student council president frowned.

It was just for a second, but her calm face turned into a tranquil but threatening expression.

The newspaper girl seems to have noticed this quick change.

But then the ring bell that marks the beginning of classes finally rang.

“Please Amano-chan, go to your classroom, we can talk all you want... after school.”

The third year girl quickly regained her composure once again.

She then dismissed her kohai before turning around to continue her previous conversation.

But the ghostly presence to which she was talking to, has already gone.

-----

He enters the classroom.

The image of the delinquent Ren Amamiya escorted by the homeroom teacher drew the attention of the disrupted students.

"Did he got in trouble again?"

"I heard he and Sakamoto were mugging someone."

"Mr. Kamoshida stopped them."

"EH?! Could it be he found out Takamaki was two timing him?"

Kido walks by the faceless voices to reach his seat.

"Such luck."

He says to himself while sighing.

Kawakami claps her hands to bring the students’ attention onwards.

It didn’t take long for Kido to avert his attention to the window.

They needed to go back to that palace.

Which means that in the end...

‘If he ends up dying, that would only mean we messed up.’

They needed to do things right.

"Have you made your decision about charging on that Palace?"

Suddenly the familiar boyish voice surprised the sleepy Takashi.

The black cat from yesterday popped out of his desk drawer.

"Wha-"
"Meow!?"
An empty silence fills the room.
Disbelief filled the students' faces.
The homeroom teacher just let out a flawless playback of a meowing cat in front of the uncontained teenagers.

Kawakami's face slowly began to exemplify the advantages of having a healthy blood pressure, while her face demonstrated light crimson tones around her cheeks.

What followed was a burst of uncontrollable laughter inordinately rumbling around the classroom.

"What are you doing here!?!"
Kido preyed on the turmoil to speak with the paranormal kitty.

"S-Settle down!"

"That was perfect, sensei!"

"She's a natural!"

"Man, what a noisy bunch. Hey, you know we can go today, right? You must've realized by now that my offer is your best chance to accomplish something."

Morgana's tone did strike him as some sort of nine year old kid asking him to ignore his responsibilities to come out to play ball with him.

"Keep it quiet, I don't need a cat giving me a hard time now."

"Shiho!?"
Everyone is shocked at the sudden reaction of Ann Takamaki.
She abruptly stood up, without alienating her gaze from a window in the corridor.

Once again the room was in complete silence.

Everyone started to aim their own glances at the same direction Takamaki was so desperately looking at.

"T-There's someone standing in the rooftop!"

"She's going to jump!?!"

"No way."

Kawakami was quivering, unable to move after realizing the source of the uproar.

She shake it off by slapping her face with both hands.

And then she stormed out of the classroom.

Takamaki ran to the window.
"Shiho!"

---

"...Ann"

It was like she could almost hear her through the crystal window.

She had a hopelessness expression, she could see her aqua eyes watering.

Her image was so far away, but she could see her as if she was standing right in front of her.

Suzui could read her lips, and reproduce her friend's voice inside her head.

"Turn back! Hurry up and turn back...! Please Shiho!"

"I..."

She was at the opposite side of the campus, at the edge of the building over the fence.

"You don't belong there."

That voice... a familiar distorted voice, came from the other side of the fence, in the other side of the rooftop.

A figure was lying back against the safety of the wall behind her.

"Turn back!!"

Her phone was lying in the floor.

Blackness with flashes of red lights filled the broken screen.

"You can never be like them again."

"I'm..."

She couldn't dare to cry.

She couldn't dare to turn around and face that thing.

She couldn't dare to believe she could continue as if nothing had happened to her all these months.

"You have... no future here."

She was sweating profusely.

Finally, the girl lying against the wall laughed.

"... ending this, is your only chance for liberation."

"I'm sorry...Ann."

She takes one step forward.

The door behind her slams open.
Sadayo Kawakami stormed outside.

But she found no one.

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End of Part 1

Chapter End Notes

Notes: Shiho Suzui is a character that I like very much, I hope to write more of her in the future.
In urgency

Takashi Kido ran outside of the classroom. Everything happened in a second.

Ignoring his classmates screams, he looks for a familiar face.

"Hey!"

Sakamoto waved at him.

"Come on, let's go to the courtyard now."

"What the hell is goin' on!?"

Kido only waving Sakamoto to follow him.

As soon as they arrive at the scene, they witness the grievous state was Suzui.

All while Ann Takamaki was sitting beside her.

The crowd of students suffocated the blonde boy.

He notices most of them were taking pictures with their smart phones and mumbling to themselves instead of doing anything helpful.

"What the hell is wrong with these people?"

The gruesome sight took Kido by surprise.

Blood was staining the grass besides the blonde teenage girl.

It was at that time, he felt he had made a wrong decision for the first time since he awakened his persona.

"Someone... Please..."

He was looking directly at her watery eyes again.

Takamaki’s cry for help momentarily took him out of his dejected state.

But the astonishment of the other students wouldn't allow them to act.

"S-someone must've reported this already."

"If this get's on the news, our school will..."
"This is not funny."

"A phone?"

The distressful voices of the students enraged Sakamoto as he pulls out his phone. But he shuts it off as he notices a bizarrely shaken Kido had already called the ambulance.

"Shiho... Why!"

Sakamoto cringed as he heard the despaired cries of the girl.

"It can't be... Suzui."

But he brings his attention to the spiky haired boy who was shaking at the scene. He was a few feet behind them. The blonde punk frowned at him. This made Kido turn back to look for the source of his ally displeasure. Mishima couldn't help himself but to desperately run inside the building again. Both Kido and Sakamoto started following him. As soon as they leave, both the Principal and the PE teacher himself arrive to the scene.

"What's with this crowd? Disperse now!"

Orders the teacher.

The familiar voice makes something snap inside Takamaki as she turns towards him.

"Kamoshida...? WHAT DID YOU DO TO SHIHO!?"

She screams at him in front of the crowd. Kamoshida's taken aback by this outburst, noticing the young girl lying in the floor in a pool of her own blood.

"Suzui?"

The principal sees the teacher's reaction and decides to take action himself.

"Everyone return to your class rooms."

Seconds after the teachers started to lull the noisy students, the ambulance arrived to the scene. Kamoshida took this chance retreat from the scene as Takamaki's full attention was set on helping her friend.

----

On the rooftop, Sadayo Kawakami was holding herself by the fences, with her fingers trembling in between the metal as she looked down to the courtyard.
"... Not again."

She was holding Suzui's broken phone in one hand.

She couldn't dare to look at it.

It was just like a nightmare.

-----

"Senpai... What should we do...?"

The brunette second year boy asked the student council president for an indication.

She was standing in the first floor corridors, looking through the windows alongside the Newspaper club girl who was having the same astonished reaction as her.

They couldn't dare to go outside.

She was holding her mouth with both hands.

Trying to somehow make sense of the scene.

It was of course, impossible for her to discern what answer to give at this moment.

"... Why?"

It was the only thing she could mutter.

-----

Mishima came out of the boys restroom.

Covering his mouth and holding his stomach.

He just went through an unpleasant forced regurgitation.

"Suzui..."

"Yo. Why were you runnin'??"

"Huh?"

As if he was greeted by a jumpscare, Mishima backs himself into the lockers behind him.

He had cornered himself between the walls and the two most famous delinquents in school.

And a cat who was watching him above the lockers.

'A cat?'

"Oi, Answer me!"

Sakamoto got closer.
Mishima closed his eyes in fear.

"Just tell us. What happened to Suzui... You know, right?"

After hearing a quieter and gentle voice he tried opening his eyes again.

But the face didn't match the tone.

As soon as he got a glance of Ren Amamiya's unquiet face, he quivered in fear again.

"L-leave me alone!"

Smack!

"SHE JUMPED AND TRIED TO KILL HERSELF!"

Sakamoto hit the locker besides the spiked haired boy.

Mishima let himself fall back to the wall. Giving up.

"Suzui..."

He remembers the face she showed yesterday.

He remembers how he wanted to grab her hand and run away.

He remembers how he couldn't dare to save her.

"...I'm so sorry."

He raises his face looking at both Sakamoto and Amamiya while holding his tears.

-----

"SHIT! I can't believe she jumped!"

The silence in the PE faculty office was broken by Suguru Kamoshida's fist hitting his desk.

'I need to do something.'

His eyes were narrowing in a ghoulish expression.

"YOU PIECE OF SHIT!"

The voice of the punkish boy came from in front of the door he had just smacked open.

"Sakamoto...?"

"What the hell did you do to that girl!?"

He waved his arm angrily while pointing his finger at the teacher.

"What are you talking about... Huh?"
He noticed two more students coming in from behind Sakamoto.

"Amamiya, Mishima... I don't have time for y-"

"Don't fucking play dumb with me!"

Kamoshida attempt to dismiss the boys was interrupted by Sakamoto kicking a chair down in front of him.

"Watch what you say. Don't go around accusing people of."

Kamoshida's eyes were menacingly looking down at Sakamoto as he said this.

"STOP PLAYING DUMB! You definitely did somethin' to her!"

"Ryuji!"

The frizzy hair boy got closer to Sakamoto while looking sideways towards Kamoshida.

The teacher was calmly sitting on his chair.

Kido wouldn't dare to show him any sort of opening, he tried to stay calm the whole time.

They needed to get out of there soon, before...

"And where's your proof."

He could turn things against them.

After hearing that familiar sentence, Kido's gasped angrily.

"Proofs"

They had none.

This was Kamoshida's turning point.

Takashi Kido realized then, that they walked directly into the wolf's lair.

Their fates were his to take from now on.

"T-that..."

Sakamoto found himself out of words.

"You barge in here and accuse me of things you have any proof of."

Kido knew exactly where the teacher was going with this.

They barged in here after an incident, and now they were about to assault a teacher.

Given Kamoshida's status and position, everything they say could be used against them now.

For a few seconds Morgana distracted Kido's attention as he poised over a nearby table.

He remembers his objective.
He and Mishima followed a rampant Sakamoto to stop him from doing anything reckless.

Right now, there wasn't much he could do.

Sakamoto was losing it, Mishima was scared beyond words,

It was up to him to prevent the situation to fall apart.

"That's not true, Suzui was hurt yest-"

But he couldn't keep Sakamoto from following the teacher's game.

"Oh, So you admit that you talked to Suzui before she tried to commit suicide, hmmm?"

"Wha-"

That was all he needed to hear. Now he had a whole plot set up in his mischievous head ready for them.

They were going to be his scapegoats.

"I see... She came to consult me about something yesterday, that must be it."

He folded his arms again, relaxing in his chair with a smirk on his face.

"She couldn't bear with your continuous acts of bullying anymore. That's why she tried to kill herself by jumping of the rooftop."

"What!? That's a lie, what are you playin' at asshole!?"

"Suzui is in a coma..."

Kamoshida's words stiffened the three young students.

Shiho Suzui. The last and most notorious victim of this twisted man, was in a state that would not allow her to give a testimony against the abuses she had suffered.

If this teacher was telling the truth, they were done for.

"Even if it is exactly as you imagine it to be."

Kamoshida taunts the trio with a prideful posture.

"What can you do?"

"W-what you did... wasn't coaching."

Mishima broke the oppressive silence.

"You... You ordered me to call Suzui here... And when she got here... you..."

He forced himself to stop before he voiced the image that had been hunting him since yesterday.

But Kamoshida's glare was impeaching the kid even more than his own imagination.

"You are going on about the same things these punks say without proof too, huh?"
He turned around looking at his desk once again.

"You are simply saying these things because you can't be a regular in the team, right?"

"That's not-"

"I got the message from the hospital. Her chances of recovery are slim, how would someone like that make a statement?"

Kamoshida raised his arm as a sign to shut up the boy's oration.

The fact that Mishima dared to admit Kamoshida's abusive actions, in front of him no less, meant that he was finally set to announce his discontent to the entire world.

But Kamoshida was rubbing Suzui's status to his face for a reason.

"The poor girl... having to go through the bullying of you two. And on top of that, there's Mishima. The responsible of spreading Amamiya's record, besides all those rumors about Takamaki and Suzui online, all because of his jealousy."

Kamoshida turned his head while shooting an accusative look to Mishima.

The boy melted down in his own guilt, falling to his knees at the revelation in front of the two supposed delinquents.

As if he was sentenced to confront consequences.

"What!?"

Ryuji turned back to face Mishima.

"Ah..."

He was at loss of words.

"Mishima...?"

"I- I did it... because he ordered me to do so...I had no choice."

"Hehehe, hahaha."

"You goddamn...!"

Sakamoto took a step forward towards the teacher, who quickly stood up in front of the punk's face.

"This again? Do I have to fill another self defense report today?"

He slightly bowed to get his face at the same height as his, in a very mocking fashion.

"Shut your mouth you son of a b-"

He raises his fist, charging all his strength on the next punch.

But he's stopped by Takashi Kido's hand holding his arm.

"Why're you stoppin' me...!?"
"Calm down."
"You kiddin!? This bastard is-"
"Getting to you, don't make things worse."

Kido wasn’t looking at Sakamoto.

He had never averted his eyes away from the abuser standing in front of them since they entered the room.

"-But still!"

He pulls his arm away.

"Oh, what a surprise... You actually act like you have brains, but there's no need to hold back. A man should act without hesitation, you know?"

Kamoshida smiles as he teasingly raises his big square chin.

"Why not attack me?"

Both Kido and Sakamoto clench their fists in frustration.

"Ohoho, you can't, but of course you can't, hahaha."

"Y-you can't do this, you-"

Mishima desperately complains.

"Hehehe, now think about it, between a couple of problem kids, a hopeless failure of a player and a star medalist... Who would people believe?"

Kamoshida lectures the boys about their current status in the school hierarchy.

"Tch."

Sakamoto knows all too well the answer of the teacher query.

Kamoshida turns his back at the trio again, sitting down in front of his desk.

"Now, I need to write a report to present at the next staff meeting..."

He turns around laughing while looking at Kido. "So that the three of you will be expelled."

Kido finally frowns at the teacher, putting his arm in front of a charging Sakamoto who only stood there looking at him.

"Hahahaha"

The teacher burst in his self satisfaction.

“Come on.”

Kido turns around leaving the PE room.

He puts his hand over Mishima’s shoulder signaling to get out with him.
"Hey dammit! He can't get away with this!"

They leave the room.

"Scum."

That was Kamoshida’s last resentful word towards the tree second year students.

Takashi Kido didn’t plan to let this be, he could look for a culprit for all he wanted.

But he realized that this whole situation was an inevitable outcome.

Sooner or later, that teacher would’ve found an excuse to kick him out of this school.

It was the same for the other two boys.

Right now, this didn’t change his previous resolve to head back into that world.

If nothing, this gave them no other choice.

That cop won't help, the teachers won't help, nobody would help.

"Huh?"

Morgana steps behind the kids while Kido face them outside the PE faculty office.

Mishima and Sakamoto look at him with both confusion and impatience.

"Let's go."

Kido starts walking downstairs.

"What?"

He turned around looking at Ryuji without changing his previous serious expression.

"Let's change his heart."

Taking a moment to look at the depressed Mishima besides him. He notices the cat following Kido.

Sakamoto finally nods.

"... Yeah."

"Amamiya? Sakamoto?"

Mishima follows them downstairs to the second floor.

"Stay here Mishima, we'll be back."

"Huh?"

Sakamoto stops the kid from following them any further, his face wasn't threatening to him for the first time in a while.

Although the blonde punk expression was as intense as always, he actually showed a sincere sign of amiability towards him.
He had no choice but to nod.

Both kids headed to the school entrance downstairs.

Whatever they were about to do, he didn't needed to know.

-----

"Looks like you two made up your minds."

Outside the school gates, Sakamoto and Kido were looking down to the mysterious cat.

"Are you sure this will work?"

"Positive."

Says Morgana answering Kido’s question.

"Then let's do it."

He takes out his phone.

"Just to make sure you won't turn away in the middle of the heist... You are aware of the risk, right? The risk of him having a mental shutdown."

"If that comes to be the case... Then, so be it."

Takashi Kido said coldly, much to Morgana's surprise.

Shiho Suzui had reached a point of no return because of that teacher.

It may was his newfound empathy or his delusory desire to just have a normal year.

But Takashi Kido couldn't tolerate the teacher doing as he wishes at the cost of everyone else's lives around him.

"I agree, somebody almost died because of that asshole! I don't give a rat's ass what happens to him anymore."

The cat looks at the blonde kid who also thrown his own resolve on the table.

"Then it's settled. This is exactly like Phantom thieves treat each others, pretty fitting."

Morgana said something weird.

"Phantom thieves?"

Kido asks.

"Yeah. Those who covertly sneak in and stylishly steal Treasures. That is what shall aspire to be."

Morgana puffs in pride as explains.

"You keep making all this look like some sort of game, but... that doesn't sound that bad."

"That sounds kinda cool."
Sakamoto says while forming a smile.

The cat walks between the two teenagers while looking at the school entrance from the ally.

"We have a clear view of the school from here. This is the main entrance of that castle too, after all. So entering from here should be fine."

"Alright, let's do it then."

Morgana says while stretching.

"Huh?"

Sakamoto looks at the cat with curiosity.

"What?"

"You just go inside that place? How do you do it?"

"Huh? Wait, how do you guys got inside twice?"

Sakamoto takes out his phone, showing the cat the weird app with his finger.

"With a strange app in our phones."

"I see, well I just go by making up my mind. I guess it makes sense you guys need something more elaborated."

"... What does that mean?"

Ask Sakamoto, taking offense.

"Anyway, which steps do you follow?"

Morgana ignores him bringing his attention to Kido.

"I guess, we just put a name, like, Kamoshida, Shujin academy, pervert, and... castle?"

*Conditions found*

"Wow, so that's it?"

"I wonder how we got this thing."

Sakamoto looks down to his phone in confusion.

"A strange long nosed man gave it to me in a dream..."

Kido answers bluntly

The reactions of both Sakamoto and Morgana could only be described as boggled shared with a 'judging your sanity' expressions.

"Huh!? Whatcha talkin' about?"

'So It's only me who gets to see that guy in my dreams.'
"… Nothing."

"Well this is not the time to think 'bout that..."

Sakamoto turns around facing the school gate from the alley.

"All right, time to storm the castle!"

Sakamoto says while hitting his palm with his other fist, readying himself.

"Yeah."

Kido presses the 'navigate' button.

The air around them distorts.

The scene shifts.

The light and ambience changes to a darker and gloomy view.

They were in front of the castle, full in their rebellious thieves gear.

"HUH!? What is this?"

But a familiar voice distracts them.

Sakamoto turned around to find the blonde girl who's stunned looking at the building.

"Where did that castle came from!?"

"What... Takamaki!?"

"That voice... Sakamoto, what's with that getup!?"

"Forget that, what are you doin' here!?!"

She momentarily tries to swallow her shock as she forces out an answer.

"...I heard you guys were going to be expelled while I was looking for you at school."

While Kido wasn’t showing any emotion, Sakamoto kicked the ground with annoyance.

"Tch. That asshole is at it again."

"...Why were you looking for us?"

Finally Kido addresses to Takamaki

"I-... I wanna help!"

"What?"

Sakamoto annoyance disappeared at the surprise for the girls words.

"You guys were going to do something about Kamoshida, right?"

"Why do you care?"
Sakamoto asked coldly.
"I knew it! Let me in on to it too."

She brings her hand to her chest.
"What? No, nonono, you must go back."
"Ryuji?"

Kido wonders about his partner sudden reaction.

Sakamoto marches in front of her, getting in the way of her and the castle’s entrance.

"Just... No! We are goin' inside that Palace, we don't know what's goin' to happen once we're inside!"

"What's a Palace?"

She asks while tilting her head.

"Uh, how do I explain this?"

"You jumped on to her, you explain it."

Kido shirks Sakamoto’s request for aid.

"What?"

"Now now, please calm down."

But finally a boyish voice tries to bring peace to the children perplexity.

"Hi there, I'm Morgana. May I ask your name?"

Takamaki looked around trying to find the source of the voice. Maybe by answering she could localize the source by following the sound, so she complies.

"Uh...? Ann, Ann Takamaki."

But as soon as she recited her name, she notices the small figure of the big headed cat thing standing just a few feet from her.

It was looking at her with a big and gentle smile as if sparkles were surrounding its face.

"Oh, Ann-dono. Such a lovely name...!"

The cat says while displaying a bright smile.

It was a brief moment of complete silence.

"... WHAT? The cat can talk!?"

Disregarding the strange way in which this strange being just addressed her, she breaks her short state of disbelief to inquire Kido while pointing at the creature.

"Unfortunately, yes."
The frizzy haired boy answers bluntly.
"HEY!"

Kido sighs, finally taking hands into the matter.
"Takamaki-san, I think what Ryuji is trying to say, it's that this place is too dangerous for you."
"That's right, we can't take you with us!"
"What do you mean dangerous!? And what's a Palace?"
"Well... Uh..." Sakamoto scratches his head, doing his best to avoid answering her.

Kido looks around to see if they were bringing undesired attention to themselves.
"Ryuji, we can't stay here."
"Dammit, just go back, we can do this without you."
"I won't go away until you tell me what's going on!"

She puts her feet down as if planting herself in the floor with her fists closed and arms stretched down.
"We'll explain everythin' once things are over!"

But Sakamoto didn’t stop his march, like a bulldozer, he starts pushing Takamaki away from the entrance, back to the alley.
"Hey what are you doing!?"
"C'mon, let's go, I'll take you out."
"W-wait. You are Amamiya-kun, right? Can you do something about Sakamoto? I need to talk with Kamoshida!"

She looks at the boy with the fake name for help.
"Just let Kamoshida to us."

Kido says in a cold voice she hasn’t heard before.
"That's right, Ann-dono!"

Morgana added from afar.

The air changes around them again.
They were heading out of that world.
"Let me go!"
"Can't do."
"Hey, where are you touching!?!"

"Sorry I didn't mean... Wait that's not important!"

"Kyaaa!"

"Stop screamin'!"

"Sakamoto stop... RYUJI!"

Slap

"OW."

It wasn't dark anymore, the sound of the slap echoed through the area, even through the school gates. They were back in the alley in front of Shujin Academy, just the two blondes this time.

"Will you stop it?"

"Dammit just go away, this has nothin’ to do with you!"

Sakamoto barked back at her, clearly irritated while rubbing his face.

"Nothing to do with me? Are you kidding me? Shiho is my-"

"No! Just go away, will ya? You are gettin' in our way!"

"What? No! I can't just sit back and do nothing after what happened to her!"

She was right, she was in all her rights to feel this way.

But he couldn't allow it.

Outworn because of his own inability to handle the situation, finally Sakamoto loses his temper.

"Dammit, you are useless in that place, don't you get it?" "Uh?"

"I said go! There's not a damn thing you can do."

She stands there in silence, both were still assimilating what was just said.

Sakamoto turns his back to her immediately after finishing telling her off.

He couldn’t just regret what he said.

"... You... Asshole!"

And finally, she runs away.

Another reason why he choose to turn around was...

That he didn’t want to look at her crying face again.

"... Urgh."

He went back to that world walking by Kido and Morgana without saying a word.
"It's everything ok?"
Kido ask his friend.
"Yeah..."
"I feel bad for her though."
Morgana worded his concern while looking back at the alley.
"... Well, we can't drag her into this place..."
Sakamoto explained in an unusual quiet but serious tone.
"You should be more careful. You were trying to show off that app thing, but you guys ended dragging someone else because you were not paying attention."
But Morgana quickly turned back to complain about Kido and Sakamoto's carelessness.
"S-shuddup!"
"... You're right, but we have to go."
Kido brushed the conversation off, walking inside the arch door, finally heading in.
"Right."
With both the cat and Sakamoto followed him.
-----
One of the advantages the thieves have inside this world was the increase in their reactions speed. Their personas speed resistance and agility gave them the chance of reaching their physical potential while in there. They climbed the castle's structure and reaching through doors and windows with ease. With Morgana's shadow sensing ability, they were able to reach a safe room in no time without unwanted confrontations.
"We need to reach another safe room in the higher levels, at this pace, we'll get to the treasure in no time."
"Sounds good."
Says Kido while closing the safe room door behind them.
"So, is gettin' rid of a palace is hard...? You've tried this before, right?"
Sakamoto asks.
"... When did I ever said that?"
"Figures"
"WHAT!? Were you just pretendin' to know!?"
"Keep it down!"

Kido shakes his head while interrupting their exchange.

"Takamaki found out about right before we started, we have to do this as fast as we can."

He takes a moment to look at Morgana who was sitting in a desk.

"Can we do this? Or are you still holding some secrets for later?"

A big grin formed on Morgana's big roundish face.

"Of course we can, Joker."

"Joker?"

Sakamoto butts in with a question.

"It's a codename, you can't just go around a Palace, screaming your real names. It's a precaution."

"Uh-huh.... So, why Joker?"

"Because he's our trump card when it comes to fighting strength."

Morgana says it as if it was so obvious.

Much to Kido's languishment.

'Still treating this like a game I see.' "Well, whatever."

Kido says, unofficially going along with the cat's wish.

"Then, everyone has to use a nickname?"

"Yeah, yours should be... Thug!"

"Sounds appropriate."

"Argh, are you pickin' a fight with me? I'll choose it myself!"

Sakamoto grumbled a complaint.

"...Ummm, but if I were to have one, it has to do with my outfit, right?"

"Fine, why not skull then?"

Said a dissatisfied Morgana.

"Oh that sounds awesome! I'm skull."

Sakamoto pompously shows his approval.

"What about you Morgana?"

"Hmmm, how 'bout Mona?"

Kido sweat drops at Sakamoto's insistence of calling the cat that way.
"Well if it's easier for you to remember that name, then I'll go along with it."

Said a resigned Morgana.

"We need to be absolutely thorough about using those codenames from now on!"

"What about these medals?"

"I guess those are for that door we saw earlier?"

On their way to this floor, they had to split and look for alternatives to get to the upper levels.

The main hall wasn't an option, since it was full with guards.

But on one of the biggest salons, Morgana and Ryuji found each a different room containing each a book that opened a secret passage in a library.

It was a horrid room that represented Kamoshida's sickest hidden obsession with Shiho Suzui.

A room that depicted a horrible impression of what he did to her.

Inside that room they found out they needed medals to open certain doors.

"I'm just glad she didn't had to see that."

Kido notices the dismal face Sakamoto was displaying under his mask.

"We should move on, how are you guys feeling?"

The boy tried to focus the trio on their main goal.

"We are good. But we need more man power if we want to break through certain areas. It looks like we won't be able to avoid combat at all times."

Morgana's remark seems to hint their capability to avoid encounters so far had paid off.

But now they'll only find stronger enemies as they advance.

"We need to get an edge over those guards, we are probably going to have to use some sort of energizing or something to keep going."

"Those ain't easy to get."

"Well, then you may need to look for something similar."

"... How about caffeine?"

"That works. But I have an idea... Follow me."

They head outside the room.

Hiding behind the furniture, the trio watch over a solitary guard who's patrolling.

"See that lonely guard, let's get him!"

Takashi Kido nods while displaying a roguish grin after Mona's battle cry.
He jumps out of his cover, climbing to the knight's shoulder with ease, ripping off the knight's mask.

A Beguiling girl shows up out of the mudding remains.

The three intruders surround her, with their guns recklessly aiming at her.

"Heh! This is a hold up!"

"I see... so what now?"

Joker questions.

"Shush, just follow my lead...ehem. NOW, give me everything you have. Be it money or items, just cough it up!"

"That's it!?"

Skulls groans.

"Ugh, It can't be worse than this. What are you going to do with me!?"

"Uh..."

"Wait, we can talk to them?"

As Joker was out of words, Skull couldn't help but to ask for the obvious.

"Shadows are beings born from people's hearts, so naturally they can talk too."

"Are we really mugging demons?"

Joker questions the situation.

"Shadows! Now give, give!"

Mona turns his attention back to the target.

"Uh!? Really? You'll let me go if I give it to you?"

"This cat is a bad influence."

"Focus! It's better than just offing them, who knows what you may get."

"But I have nothing!"

The trio remains in a reflective silence for a bit.

"Don't go offerin' shit if you have nothin' in the first place!"

"So much for an edge."

"... Um, what...? Wait, I can fix this!"

"So, we really are just robbers now?"
Neither Skull nor Joker seems to be listening to the cat at this point. "I feel like I'm going somewhere I won't be able to come back from."

Added the frizzy hair thief.

"Stop whinnying! Ugh well, whatever, time for you to go to hell."

Said the overzealous cat thief.

"WAIT! Can't we make a deal!?"

"Fine. You wanted an edge? I'll show you some edge!"

A vexed Joker butted in.

"Won't you let me go?"

"Oh, I'll let you go sweetheart..."

He takes a step forward, trying to masterly pull his hair back for a second before continuing.

"To Hell!"

The awkward silence from before came back.

"You're so cringe sometimes man."

Finally Skull broke through the muted scene after realizing Joker was doing his best to actually sound serious.

"Ahahaha"

"See? Even the thingy laughed!"

"..."

Joker face showed no expression, while Mona slightly shakes his head.

"That was so lame, that was the best one-liner you could come up with?"

Joker closed his eyes focusing in something else to say.

"You know what would be more cringe?" He inhaled "A bullet to the face!"

But now he ended shouting his best impression of a villain from a western gangster movie.

"Seriously?"

Asked a still not convinced Skull.

But the shadow remained in a restless state.

"A-a-a-ahaha, on the other hand I say cheesy stuff like that all the time"

She nervously added.
"I'm just so unlucky, being mugged by kids in my first day here!"

"Yeah, my first day here sucked too."

"Oh, we have so much in common."

"Hey, what's going on?"

After noticing the brief exchange resulted in Joker lowering his gun, Mona turned his attention back to the target, realizing a bright light surrounded the fairy being.

"Oh cool, I remember now! I don't belong just to King Kamoshida!"

"What the-"

Skull surprise was also interrupted by attention being brought to Joker extending his hand towards the shadow's figure. In a welcoming fashion

"I am thou, thou art I... I am an existence that drifts about in the sea of humanity's souls"

"Did Joker's scrappy act actually worked?"

The cat wondered.

"My name is Pixie, from now on I'll live inside your heart!"

Finally the light surrounding the Pixie swallowed her whole, transmuting it into a small mask.

The mask was a light blue version of Joker's.

His hand then signaled towards his own face, and as if obeying his command, the mask flew straight to his face.

Replacing the existing one.

"Did you just make a deal with a demon because she empathized with your rotten luck?"

"That was a shadow! But... but-"

Both Mona and Skull couldn't believe their eyes.

The pact was done.

An instinctive reaction or a hereditary knowledge from his original awakening. Joker somehow knew the significance of this new acquisition.

He couldn't help but to let out a smug smile full of self satisfaction as he casually puts his hands inside his pockets.

"Y'know, for someone who acts all uninterested, you really are getting into this role."

"Woah, your mask changed color!"

Mona's fascination only busted Joker's ego a little more.

"Hmmm, I would like to fight another shadow..."
"What?"

"I mean, I'm always up for some ass kickin', but..."

While touching his new light bluish mask, Joker forms a kind smile from the corner of his mouth.

"I think this can be really helpful."

Mona gasped at a sudden realization.

"Does that mean you can use multiple personas!?"

"Wait, what?"

"I think that's the case."

Joker said while holding his chin, thinking.

"Wait, what does that even mean?"

"Normally people only have one heart, so they can only have one Persona. But he sealed the enemy’s appearance and powers into that new mask, and made it his new Persona. I didn’t even knew it was possible!"

Explained an astonished Mona.

'I get it now, so this is what she meant, this is what that strange Prison Master meant when he said that...’

He smiled to himself again.

"I guess you can say that... I'm a wild card."

He didn't felt the need to laugh, but he didn't knew a better way to express his content than to crack a joke, "Can you cut it out with the stupid puns, dude!?"

Still, it was fun in his head.

"That's actually a good way to put it if you think about it, yeah... Heh, not bad for that codename I gave you, huh?"

Mona folds his little paws as he tries to take some credit for Joker's accomplishment.

“… Well, I guess! Now I’m curious to see what he can do with that shit too.”

“It’ll be extremely useful indeed, you should try to do that again when the opportunity arises!”

Joker nods at Mona's comment

“Hehe! I really have something special on my hands!”

But the cat's eyes shined in a ambitious gaze.

“We should focus on our main objective though. There’s a door to the next floor ahead, we need to find that safe room.”

Joker ignored the cat excitement.
"Right. Let's move!"

-----

**Interlude / Invited to the dance**

"This is that place from earlier...!"

She didn't know what she got into.

But she had more time to behold the view.

The stone walls of the castle looked fragile like rotten wood.

The atmosphere felt light and the air was sweet like honey.

Every step she takes feels like she's crushing a bug or walking over hard water.

One thing was for sure.

Just being here made her feel sick.

"... What's up with this app?"

A few minutes ago, Ann Takamaki went back to the school courtyard trying to hide her tears.

Back then, she didn't bother to hide of anyone who could still be wandering around.

She couldn't care about it anymore.

How worse things can get anyway?

And yet, she wondered why the words of the blonde punk had made her dissolve herself into such a state again.

She tried to order her thoughts while sitting in the same bench she used to share with her best friend during the school breaks.

She had witnessed her friend attempting to commit suicide.

She couldn't do anything to stop it.

Once she reached her lying body, she feared the worst.

What would she done if that was the case?

She was the only volunteer to accompany the unconscious girl to the hospital once the ambulance arrived.

But when they got there, the girl was being taken care of by the ER medics.

Once again, there was nothing she could do.
She came back to the school.

Even if she had an idea of what (who) could it be, she had to get to the bottom of what caused this.

As soon as she arrived, she heard some girls talking about those two famous delinquents getting in trouble for trying to confront the PE teacher.

It was those two.

They knew what happened, and they were trying to do something.

That was her chance.

She could do something herself too. Find a way to make things right....

To get revenge.

But when she found them, she got kicked out of their way.

She wishes to blame Sakamoto for doing what he did, but deep down, she knew his reasons weren't meant to hurt her.

"... He's still a moron though."

She said to herself while looking down at her phone.

While sitting on that bench and looking at the courtyard... She remembered exactly where her friends body was lying just a few hours before.

She tried to go down through the texts she send her friend the night before.

But her screen was displaying a strange sequence of images.

Her phone was acting strange ever since the night before.

A weird navigation app was constantly popping up again and again.

"...

She rememorized the 'key words' those boys were talking about in that alley.

"Kamoshida, Shujin Academy, pervert, castle..."

As soon as she mentioned those words the app reacted again.

She went outside, at the same point she was taken out by Sakamoto.

That was it, that was how they entered.

'Stil... why is this thing on my phone?'

After realizing there was no way she could know about it, she shackled her confusion off.

'I'll just ask once I find them.'

That was her objective, those two knew what this place was.
There has to be something she's able to do here.

They mentioned Kamoshida being here for some reason.

This paranormal situation was not something she could make sense of.

Maybe it was her emotions were finally getting the best of her, or maybe it was her need to get things right... But there was nothing that could stop her from going inside this castle now.

She was afraid.

The atmosphere made her feel ill.

Her body felt extremely light, and yet she could only walk forward to the giant doors.

But as soon as she steps in front of the giant door.

This one opens by itself.

"Huh...?"

"Princess!"

"What?"

In front of her a giant armored knight with a strange bluish mask was getting closer.

She froze up, she couldn't move a muscle.

The huge guard grabbed her by the arm.

"You shouldn't be here, princess!" "Wai-"

But she couldn't complete the sentence.

She was being dragged by force inside the building.

She struggled, but her strength wasn't enough to free herself.

Inside the big hall, two more knights were waiting.

"N-no! Let me go!"

But they weren't heeding her requests.

"I guess is just one of the moods the king wants her to be."

"Such strange role plays."

"Wha-"

She could heard them saying strange things.

But no matter how much she struggled to free herself, she wasn't going to get away from this.

("You're useless in that place./There's no a damn thing you can do.")
How come?

Once again she had blindly walked in on a situation she thought she could handle, without realizing how powerless she really is.

"No!"

"We'll take you to our majesty, he'll be pleased to see you."

"He was looking for thy highness."

"Wait..."

She choked on her pledge.

Without realizing, her goal was being fulfilled.

She was being taken directly to the ruler of this castle, the man she wanted to confront.

But as deeper they headed inside this fortress, the more she felt like she wasn't going to get away from her deserved consequences this time.

Interlude / out

Set Free

They walked into a big room, with enough pillars surrounding the center of the lounge.

"The pillars in this room... Be careful."

Mona warned the two rebels.

"Look! A map!"

But Skull couldn't hide his excitement after noticing a potential advantage.

"I said be care-"

A chuckle interrupts their likely argument.

As soon as they walked inside the pillars, metal bars began to descend between the columns, closing any possible way out.

"Wow, it was totally a piece of cake!"

The familiar female voice was the source of the previous laugh.

The voice used an unusual tone though.
"Huh?"

"Sensei will be so pleased! I can't wait to see how he'll reward me!"

"That voice, it can't be!"

The female figure finally shows herself in front of the boys.

She was only wearing a bikini that let very little for their imagination.

The cat ears headband over her blonde hair shined the most.

"Takamaki?"

She slightly bowed in front of them.

Crossing her arms below her bikini line, highlighting her bust size to them.

"Tee-hee."

"Wow!"

Said Joker, not even trying to hide his surprise.

"Ah- What a meowh-velous figure!"

Added Mona.

Also falling under the spell.

"The eff!? Snap out of it you two!"

But for some reason, Skull was immune to the so called charms of this fake girl.

"Eh?"

"Ahahaw, Sakamoto-kun, you look so shabby, you could use a massage~ !"

Her tone although seductive was so shallow that Skull felt the veins in his eyes were about to explode because of the phony nature of this being.

"This can't be her..."

He said.

There was no way that girl could be hiding this aspect of herself, not her.

"… Right?"

Skull asked Mona, looking for a confirmation.

"Y-you're right, this doll must Kamoshida's cognition of Ann-dono. This is..."

"Disgusting."

Completed Joker.
He had seen that girl true feelings about how's she's seen by that man.
The image of her figure acting this way engraved itself into his mind as the ultimate sign of disrespect.

"Dammit!"

Skull jumped to the metal bars surrounding the room, getting real close to the blonde doll's face.

"Urgh, GET US OUT OF HERE YOU STUPID BIMBO!"

She playfully jumped back while raising her voice.

"Aw, how vulgar, you deserve a punishment."

She shrugs as she jumpily walks towards the big door at the other side of the room.

"Quit messin' around!"

"OH pleaaaase save me, oh knight of the square table!"

She screams while pointing her finger at the metal skull masked intruder.

"Huh?"

A pink armored guard crashes through the door to rescue the bikini princess.

"Princess, here you are! Our lordship has been looking for thy highness all day!"

"These thieves are trying to take advantage of me~!"

"What?"

The cognitive Ann pulls down the chain that activated the trap, raising the metal bars.

They were free, but her guardian got in at the same time.

The pink armor melts into the usual shadow juice revealing a new enemy.

It was a fox like creature, white fur and a long fluffy tail.

The creature was wearing a small white Japanese monk outfit.

"I'm The King Onmyoji's, guardian of the princess."

Said the small beast while getting in the way of the intruders and the 'princess'.

"How dare you to disturb this castle's peace!"

"Tch."

Skull mood wasn't improving, as he noticed the cognitive Ann throwing a kiss at him in the distance as she leaves the room from the same door this knight came from.

"Get out of our way!"

He screamed.
"We don't have time to hang around here fighting!"

Mona warned his allies.

"What should I do?"

Joker says, not to Mona, but to himself.

He puts his hand over his mask, and just like that, it burst into blue flames.

"Come... Pixie!"

Mona and Skull eyes awed at the sight.

The shadow they were battling before had appeared behind their ally.

"Zio!"

Without giving his enemy time to react.

The fairy being behind him uses that same lightning spell to zap the boy's foe.

And just like that, the Onmyoji was stunned enough to fall on its back.

"And that's that."

He said while aiming his gun at his overthrown enemy

"This power, I see, you have a bright heart."

Kido smiles with confidence after hearing the shadow's words.

"Heh, I don't know If I'll describe it like that. This is just to make things... less unfair."

"Hahaha, a pure search for justice, I remember now!"

"I am thou, thou art I."

"My name is Abe-no-Seimei, from now on I'll purify the contents of your heart!"

Just like before, this enemy turns itself into a blue mask.

The masks manifests on Joker's face.

"He really is using multiple personas?"

But Mona's eyes were shining in excitement.

"Damn, that was fast!"

And skull couldn't hide his amusement either.

"Come on, she went that way, right?"

"Wait we shouldn't just follow her."

Mona tips the duo.
"But she must know where the treasure is, right?"

Joker said bluntly. "Y-yeah, but-

"Oh, you're right, we just have to get her to tell us!"

"Hold on!"

They search another safe room to hide themselves from the roaming knights.

Once there they focus on regaining their strength for a few seconds.

"Tch, so many of them! We wasted so much time gettin' here."

"This is all because you guys provoked Kamoshida, you know?"

Mona niggles at Skull.

"How are we supposed to steal this treasure thing anyway?"

"Don't be so hasty Skull, we need to secure a infiltration route first."

"A what?"

"A path to the treasure's location."

"Hey, you say you don't have your memories and all, but somehow you still know about that kinda stuff?"

Skulls once again, questions the cat's reliability.

"Do you think this thing's really got amnesia?"

"... Who knows?"

"Really dude?"

But then Joker tries to advert the conversation somewhere else.

They could hear the voices of two patrolling knights at the other side of the door.

"Still, how come there are two princesses?"

"I don't know, but we've been looking all around for more intruders. The King wants no interruptions this time."

"What do they mean by princess? Wait, is that fake Takamaki a princess here?" Skull wonders to the group

"'Two princesses', It can't be!"

But Joker face discolors at the realization.

Soon the group realized the situation.

The app must’ve also appeared on that girl’s phone. Skull rushed first towards the supposed church she was being taken to.
Joker followed him as he tried to explain the metaverse app existence to Mona.

They were getting good at avoiding detection.

After skipping through a couple of rooms they reach a new big area.

The facade shifted between what seems to be the school gym and a the inside of a giant chantry.

It felt like their mere presence was distorting reality.

"A church, wait, now is a gym?"

"Could it be?"

"Yes, it makes sense. This is not a real church, it's Kamoshida's sanctuary. A sacred place where he's venerated, it makes sense that an athlete thinks of a gym this way."

"Bullshit, this place is where he puts everyone down the most!"

Skull grousing Mona's explanation.

"Skull, quiet!"

Mona was hiding behind a pillar, looking at the scene ahead of them.

There were many benches.

There, a bunch of topless female high school students were lustfully looking at the ridiculous image of a giant statue in the altar as rose petals were falling from the roofs.

"All these girls... are they..."

Joker asked not wanting to know the answer.

"I remember some of them, they're from the volley ball team!"

But Skull remembered the faces of some of them.

"This is sick. We shouldn't be looking at them like this!"

Said Skull looking down.

"I told you this place was no church...Look!"

Just below the big King statue.

There were a couple of figures walking around the altar.

"What's the matter, you were so lively before..."

"You kidding me... W-who is that?"

They were Ann Takamaki, The Pervert King, and the doll princess.

The real Takamaki was tied up to a X frame that looked like it came out from some weird red light shop.
"Where are we!?!"

The prisoner asked.

"Huh, You're different from my Ann."

But the King wasn't going to bother answer her questions as he laughed to himself.

"Are you afraid?"

He looked at the girl while getting closer, the knights were standing by just in case.

She saw the crowd in front of them, the whole scene was like it was part of some sick and cheap b class movie.

"What's with that look? Have you lost your mind!?"

She questions at the King's appearance.

"It's alright, this is my castle, my Kingdom, my world of dreams and ambitions... I do what I want here."

The King answers.

"This is bad, there are too many of them."

While sneaking closer to the altar, Skull was looking for a way to get ahead of his allies.

"We need a distraction..."

Warned Joker.

"The hell with that! We can take them!"

But Skull wasn't in the mood for a tactical approach.

"Don't be so hasty, they could hurt her!"

Mona alerts Skull about the potential consequences of his actions.

"Dammit..."

Meanwhile the King was signaling at his toy girl with a snaky smile.

"Come on, don't you like what you see? This is the real thing, isn't that right, princess?"

"Hehe."

The doll giggles.

"Wha-"

The fake doppelganger standing in front of her was acting like she was enjoying herself.

Seeing her face and body acting that way was a maddening experience for the captive teen.

"She will act as a fine slave..."
"Slave?"

It was so painful for her to admit it, but it fits her. She now knows everyone she knew were victims of this teacher's whims. She wanted to imagine she was not the same, but...

"This isn't funny, cut out the bullshit Kamoshida!"

The King smiles as he turns back to his doll princess, looking for validation.

"Hmmm, the girl decided to tell me off. But what do you think?"

"Uw, Talking back is like, totally unforgivable... you shouldn't have done that."

A sleazy remark coming from the doll, as if she was under an hypnotic trance.

Takamaki felt a strong revulsion.

"... Then there is no other way. I'll have to execute her!"

The Kingdictates a sentence.

"NO! Takamaki!"

Skull came out of his hiding, jumping to the altar.

"Huh?"

Takamaki gasp in surprise.

"Heh, And I was just starting to play..."

The king says mockingly.

"How many times are you going to keep coming back here?"

Both Mona and Joker follow Skull to the altar without having much choice.

The crowd wasn't reacting to their presence.

They were only having their eyes aiming to the Statue in stupor.

Shadow Kamoshida looks at Sakamoto with annoyance.

He raises his hand and signals his guards to charge while turning towards his prisoner.

"Knight! Get rid of those pests!"

The golden Knight dissolves into their own life fluid.

From it, a revolting demon sitting in a toilet appears.

“What is that?!"

Takamaki gasps again in surprise.

The other knights accompany the charge against the intruders.
"This will be my entertainment."

Shadow Kamoshida stops besides the X frame holding Takamaki.

"All right, come on!"

Screams Joker.

Getting ready for the fight.

"How dare you to bother king Kamoshida with such trifle matters!"

The frizzy hair boy summons his black winged persona, casting a dark spell without saying a word.

But it was useless, the demon didn't moved an inch.

"Captain KID!"

"Zorro, Garu!"

Both the cat thief and the skull rebel attacked next with their own summoning and spells.

Thunder and wind made the demon spin uncontrollably for a moment.

The other two knights immediately turned into horned horses and flying incubuses. But only to be Skull pipe and Mona’s scimitar.

As soon as the big demon regained control, he shoots ice spells around the room.

But they all were quick enough to evade the attacks for now.

"Wind pisses him off, huh?"

Joker says as he puts his hands over his mask once again.

"Abe-no-Seimei...! Garu!"

The same white fox figure from before takes shape behind Joker.

He fires a whirlwind spell making him spin around some more.

"Argh, annoying pests!"

The king turns his attention from the battle after realizing the efforts these intruders were putting to save this girl.

"I see, so you are the same like these fiends over here. You came here to complain to me, did you?"

He grabs her chin with ones of his hands.

"Aw, you look so distressed... Hmmm I forgot what her name was, but wasn't your fault she jumped?"

"Eh?"

"Because you wouldn't accept to be my play partner... I had to chose someone else instead."
Her eyes widened, she knew exactly what he meant.

She was being reckless. She knew that.

But all this time she took the risk thinking that if something ever came to happen, it’ll be all on her.

"No... Don't mess with me...!"

She did it because she wanted that girl to be safe from this man’s machinations, and yet still…

"Stop it!"

She hears Sakamoto's screams.

He was still trying to fight off some of the armored knights on his own to reach her position.

"Don't dare to come closer, or I'll kill her in the spot!"

"Shit!"

Standing just a few feet below the altar, the Skull masked thief manages to evade the swords of more incoming knights as he looks up at the girl they came to help.

"Now, I was planning to play a little so I could break some sense into you… I shall do just that before your execution."

The king said as he lowered his hand around the girl’s neck.

Her face continued to look down, recapitulating everything she had done so far to get into this situation.

She flirted with this teacher, she did it, she did it so she could help her friend out of his abuses.

So she could move towards her dreams and goals.

She knew she was playing a dangerous game, she knew there could be dangerous consequences for her.

And yet still, why was Shiho the one taking her place?

"Are you kidding me...? Shiho..."

A few years ago her priorities were just eating sweets, watching her animes, reading magazines and playing with dresses.

People called those things girly stuff.

But for her it was just the things she had lying around her the most. Things she could find an easy and simple fascination with.

She adored colorful clothes and flashy attires.

And she admired those women that made them look so cool and mighty on those magazines and even in her anime shows.

What was wrong with her wanting to be like them?
Her mother applauded her for it. She even furnished her with similar clothes and modeling platforms to play around as a child. And she just liked it.

Even if she couldn't see her mother as often as she wanted. Ann knew she wasn't doing anything wrong as her dad also supported her fascinations.

But still.

Why was she still being look at in such a deviant way?

Did she deserved this?

"Haha! That was her name?"

Shiho Suzui, her best friend.

The kings laugh blends along with the battle sounds around the church.

"She was so unattended as well, the poor girl. Hahaha."

He says as he puts his arms around the doll princess as if recreating his predatory steps.

"After I finished with her, I told her she was still out of the team regardless, all because of her 'poor performance'."

He didn’t even care for her fate. He just used and abused her, only to dispose of her.

Shadow Kamoshida grabs the unresisting doll chin roughly while looking at the captive real girl with a nasty grin.

"... You should have seen the look on her face."

And he starts boasting again.

"That's the exact same face I want you to show me!"

All this time, she was shaking as she recreated the terrifying moments her friend must've lived with this man.

"Y-you... BASTARD!"

There were no tears at this point.

Her heart felt so powerless that it couldn’t manage to properly convey a single emotion right now.

The only thing she could recognize right now, was regret.

Before that man, they both were living a happy life with a bright future ahead of them.

Even if they were meant to fail at their personal endeavors, at that point it wouldn't have mattered. Because they had each other.

But then she became a distant link between her friend and their future as such. A real life doll doing only what's she's "meant" to do.

Suddenly, failure was not an option anymore.
It was all because she had chosen to flirt with that man so her friend didn't had to suffer his abuses.

It was because of it, that everything had turned this way, because she thought she could take it.

She thought she could take it on her stead.

"I'll start with your clothes..."

"N-no, Stop it!"

She begs in a weak voice.

"Oh, that's too erotic, sensei."

The doll giggles.

"What're we gonna do?"

Below the stage, the thieves were fighting for their own lives at this point.

It was a battle of attrition at this point.

They weren’t dealing enough damage, and the demon wasn’t flinching or giving an opening either.

"Focus on the enemy! We can't do a thing if we don't clear a path to her first!"

"Takamaki!"

Skull screamed at the girl again, trying to bring her back from her bleak state.

"I..."

She said in a low voice.

‘Come on, you have it in you, right?’

Joker thought as he continued battling, keeping the altar on his sight.

"Is this... my punishment for what happened to Shiho...?"

She was breaking down, the guilt she felt was only dragging her to the hell she saw below her feet.

She thought was fitting for her.

It didn't matter if it was an agony this king was willing to impose on her.

"That's right... That's the face!"

She was always a strange thing, a thing that people either wanted or despised.

So she thought she could be able to handle a man like this pretty easily.

But why couldn’t she do it?

If she had done it properly, she could've taken him away her.

Let her fulfill her dreams and have the future she struggled so hard for.
she should had been able to handle him, since she was good at keeping people away.

But why, why was her friend's future ruined in her stead?

"Shiho... I'm so sorry..."

She said it again, just like the night before.

And just like back then, it was a pointless thing to say.

"Takamaki! Are you going to let this be!?!"

Joker screamed as he avoided the sword of a knight.

"Huh?"

She sees the figure of the white masked thief.

She remembers his face back then.

(‘You’re hurt’)

(‘As if something like that would ever happen...’)

What she wanted back then…

To be left alone, that this torn king leave her alone for good.

That was what she told him.

"...No, I don't want that...!"

Even if she still considers herself accountable for what happened.

This twisted pervert was still the major responsible.

"Why did you come all this way!?!"

Joker asked again, struggling to avoid more incoming attacks.

"I-..."

She came here, to attain justice...

Such a childish yearn was what caused all this trouble. The thought made her giggle a little.

"You're right..."

She said convinced.

"Just saying it isn’t going to change things…”

She laughs at herself again.

Disgusting, pathetic. She was all that, because she wouldn’t just accept truth of what she wanted to do all this time.
Everyone remains in silence in the altar.

“What should I do…?”

There was a quiet anger hiding behind those words.

As a flame that was slowly rising up in a forest, she couldn’t control the lift of emotions boiling inside her anymore.

“Slaves should keep it to themselves.”

But the king feckless words were the lighter she needed to harness those flames.

“Shut up! I had enough, I’m pissed off you son of a bitch!”

*Thump thump*

The pain ignites a change.

Her body started trembling in agony as she moans and sweats.

All while still being held by her bondage trap.

"Urgh...!"

"My... It's taken far too long."

Her voice came from inside her own heart.

Her body shakes around in pain more and more, trying to break free.

Not from her captivity, but from inside her.

She got it all wrong, but now she has to accept the truth.

She said that she came here looking for justice.

But the real reason… was vengeance.

"Tell me... Who is going to avenge her if you don't?"

She was not looking to save her friend.

She had already failed to do so.

She wasn’t looking for answers either.

She only wanted to see him pay.

"Forgiving him was never the option..."

She knew this wasn’t something she had to long for...

But she had been an object for desire for so long.

This was a whim that she, most than anyone else, deserved to satisfy.
But that wasn’t all, that girl was still alive.

So, she also owed her this much.

"Such is the scream of the other you that dwells within..."

Even if she's never worth looking at the eyes of those wronged because of her.
And even if she can't never be true to her wish of having a future of her own willing.
There's only one thing she can never let go, her passion.

"I am thou, thou art I..."

She can’t never let it go.
Not to this man
Not to anyone.

Because, even in her loneliness. Even through despair of losing the ones she cares for...
She cannot admit defeat to someone like him.

"We can finally forge a contract..."

And there she lies in complete silence, the struggle had stopped.
But not because surrendering.
But because she knew exactly what she needed to do now.
"I hear you... Carmen."

She rises her head, the red cat like mask has formed over her eyes, eyes full of fury and disdain.

Demonic glowing yellow eyes, aiming directly at the king.

He steps back while still holding his doll.
"You're right. I will not hold back anymore!"

She says as she frees her arms and legs with a new strength she always had in her.
The flames start to slowly take forma round her body.
If what she wanted was wrong, so be it.
She now had the power to manipulate her own fate.
It was enough to break her free of the chains of domination.

"There you go... Nothing can be solved by restraining yourself."

She is on her feet now.
There's only one absolute fact she can't deny.
It was the only way she was able to live this far...

That's right....

No one would ever dare to force her to do anything.
She would never allow herself to be anyone’s doll.
No matter what...

Ann Takamaki will always be free.

"Understand? Then I'll gladly lend you my strength."

She rips her mask off.

"Aaaaaah!"

The glowing bluish fire burst with a wind so strong that makes everyone around her move back in astonishment.

The figure shows from the flames.

A red tight latex bodysuit, her high heels boots and pink gloves holding a leather whiplash.
She was ready to inflict punishment.

She jumped out of the sight of the guards who kept her on the X frame trap.
She took away one of their swords with a kick. With enough speed she grabbed the sword in mid air. And using the momentum of her fall, she laid the attack directly to Shadow Kamoshida…

But he was still holding his doll princess.

Instead of taking the blow, he puts the doll in the way while rolling away from the slash.

The result; the doll is cut in half by the real and now only woman in the room.

The distorted scream of vanishing doll princess behind her was music for her ears.

But Ann Takamaki’s eyes were only focusing on her real target.

The coward king lying on his knees a few steps ahead of her.

The view of him crawling away from her was appreciated.

"You know what? I'm not some cheap girl you can toy with... you scumbag."

Behind her, the figure of a dancer was standing over a heart shaped headed man on his knees, while holding another man with the branches full of thorns around the neck of its heart shaped headed.
She held her red rose shaped dress as if she was ready to break a dance worthy to be seen before dying.

And this was now meant to be the new performance to take place in the stage the king set up for her.

She and her gypsy dancer of love were ready to walk all over him.
"Bitch...!"

The king tries to backtrack from the altar.

Carmen was holding a cigar on her free hand, from it, flames started burst.

"You stole everything from Shiho... You destroyed her... Now it's your turn!"

She finally had the power to take revange.

"I will rob you of everything...!"

And more.

She points at the king with her finger.

The command was clear, the dancer fired a flame so strong that would melt the metal an ocean cruiser.

But the king managed to quickly dodge it.

"AAAAAGH"

Still, the flames weren’t devoid of a proper victim. The Demon sitting in a toilet was set ablaze.

The image of the creature slowly melting down made an impression on the boys who were still fighting so hard to survive this battle.

"I've had enough of you. No one's gonna stop me now!"

The girl says as she readies herself to cause more damage.

"Let's go, Carmen!"

She loosens whiplash.

"Tch."

Once again, the king retires.

The remaining knights came charging at her.

At the sight of the king leaving, Takamaki clenches her teeth.

She quickly whips her weapon, entangling it around a knight’s neck, taking its head off with a strong pull.

"Burn them, Burn them all! Carmen!"

She screams as the flames start to fill the room.

One by one the knights start to melt away. Not leaving a trace.

"Did she really needed to be saved?"

Asked a frightened Skull.
"She's so strong!"
Commented the enthralled Mona.

"Heh, let's give her a hand!"
Joker said with a Smile.

"Right!"

“You dare to defy King Kamoshida’s love, you brat! –AAAAGH-”

Those were the lasts words of an unknown armored guard, before being strike down by the flames of the embodiment of this girl’s heart.

“That pathetic guy is nothing but a loser! I will step over his head!”***

The girl screamed as she attacked, but she was running out of targets.

“Ann-dono, be careful!”

She hears the boyish voice warning her.

Thanks to that she managed to avoid a big golden sword waving at her. She jumps down from the altar, landing just beside the other thieves.

“This is a holy ground! It is preposterous for miscreants like yourselves to come waltzing in and tarnishing this place!”

The golden armored knight revamps into a winged heavenly punisher.

“You will pay for foolishly defying King Kamoshida… with your lives!”

He readies his sword as he charges up.

“We don’t have a choice. If we want to escape this place, we must take it down!”

Says Mona.

“Don’t lower your guard”

 Warns Joker.

“CARMEN! AGI!”

But the attack doesn’t inflict enough damage to move the target.

“What?”

“Ann-dono!”

The archangel figure attacks, arrows made out of light start forming over the thieves heads, slowly crossing paths as they come down at full speed.

“Look out!”

Joker screams.
He summons Abe no Seimei again, reducing the damage of the attack by half.

“Ugh.”

But the pain was still excruciating, noticing his friends took major damage he tries to heal himself quickly.

“Pixie.”

The spells quickly gets Mona healed.

“Thanks. I got this!”

The cat said as he tried to heal Takamaki next. But much for his surprise, the girl was already healing herself with the power of her own persona.

“Wow, she’s amazing!”

“Mona heal skull, quick!”

Joker’s voice snaps Mona out of his enchantment as he heals the blonde masked boy.

“We need to do somethin’!”

“Time for trial and error!”

Joker summons pixie as the winged knight comes charging.

He takes this chance to zap a lightning over it.

“Argh!”

And much to his presumptuous joy, it worked perfectly.

“Now, Ryuj!!”

Joker looked at Skull.

That was all he needed to say. The skull boy understood what came next.

“Captain kid! ZIO!”

Another shock, this time the archangel was on his knees, unable to move, Joker, Skull, Mona and Takamaki surrounded the guardian.

It was do or die, and that night, they came out victorious.

The winged knight vanished after the might of the group’s attack.

“Where did that bastard go!?”

The fight was over, and as soon as she could get back on her feet, she started looking for Kamoshida’s shadow around the room.

But he was nowhere to be seen.

“Ann-dono, please calm down! You did great!”
Said Mona as he slowly approached her with a smile.

“Huh? What are you, you are alive?”

But as soon as she tried to step back she fell over the weight of her own body.

“Oh”

Another thing she didn’t realized, was that she was holding her body’s weight over the head of the small cat being besides her.

“Huh…? WHAT IS THIS!? WHY AM I WEARING THIS?”

This was certainly a night of surprises for her.

The realization of her current outfit was her biggest shock so far.

“Well, I’m stumped.”

Said a resigned Mona.

“Dammit, why did you have to come this way?”

Added a frustrated Skull.

“You look great…”

And finally mocked a smug Joker.

“Huh? Where are you looking at?”

Takamaki blushes as she covers her chest away from the view white masked thief.

“We really don’t have time to explain while we are here, reinforcements will come back soon, we have to go!”

Said Mona in a hurry.

“Ugh, She’s a bother but what can we do? You can’t move right? Hey, help me taking her out.”

Finally Skull takes one of Takamaki’s arms.

This time she doesn’t aggressively reacts to the boy’s touching, as she knows she doesn’t have enough strength in her to resist their aid.

**The Lovers**

They managed to escape the castle once again.

Once back in the real world, both Morgana and Takashi took their time explaining things to Takamaki in a calm manner.

Meanwhile Ryuji comes back with some drinks for her and his friend.
“Which one you want?”

“Which ever is not carbonated.”

Says the girl.

“They’re both carbonated.”

‘Of course they are.’

She sighs.

“Then… this one.”

“What about me?”

Suddenly a small cat pops out of ‘Ren Amamiya’s bag, asking for a drink.

The view of a talking cat still fascinates the girl.

“You’re a cat.”

Automatically answers the punk kid.

The cat hisses at the boy, but the dynamic between them seems to be enough to take her mind away from the grieving feelings she had before.

She lets out a quiet giggle.

“You’ve calm down I see.”

The calm voice of the frizzy hair boy forced her to give a peaceful smile as she nods.

“That’s good, you were pretty stressed up.”

Said the cat.

“Emm… Morgana, right? I’m really talking to a cat.”

Even after having heard the cat explaining her the workings of the Metaverse for about thirty minutes, exchanging words with it still felt unnatural.

“Oh, sorry, you’re not a cat, right?”

“It’s only natural, we all are still a little raddled.”

Said the selectively empathetic cat.

“It’s not like you can believe all that at once.”

“To be honest, I really don’t believe it yet… But that power, my Persona…”

“It’s the will of your rebellion Ann-dono. As long as you have that, you can fight in that world.”

“So, If what you told me is true, then what Kamoshida did is unforgivable… and you want to make him confess his crimes by changing his heart? You think you can really do that?”
With a determined look she takes a moment to wait for their reactions.

But Kido smiles knowingly.

“We talked to the victims. Not the parents or the teachers will say anythin’ against that pervert… If we tried to complain, they’re just gonna shoot us down, the truth is, we really have no other choice.”

Sakamoto bluntly explains their situation.

“Then let me help, I wanna make him pay for what happened to Shiho… He just keeps going like nothing happened, even after what he did to her… I’ll never forgive him.”

The true of the actions of Kamoshida is that he has no redeemable interpretation.

He has gone too far too many times.

And although Kido could understand Takamaki’s guilt for not being able to prevent the tragedy of Shiho’s suicide attempt today, Sakamoto’s nature wasn’t ready to just accept her resolve.

“Wait… you mean, you want us to take you along?”

He said surprised.

She realized what Sakamoto’s intentions were.

He was trying to fend her away of the dangers of that place again.

That’s just how he has always been, but she wasn’t going to allow him to choose what’s best for her.

“Don’t act like I’m going to drag you down! Weren’t you watching? I can fight too.”

As if looking for help, Sakamoto looks at Takashi.

“Hey, what should we do?”

“She has a strong heart.”

But he only finds Kido’s satisfied expression.

“I agree. Her strong heart is what determines the strength of her persona. We are lacking man power as well… don’t worry, I’ll protect her!”

Added Morgana with a convinced look.

“Even if you said no, I’ll just go by myself.”

She says defiantly.

“You say that, but there is anythin’ we could do…”

Complained Ryuji.

“This is your fault Takashi, your cocky speech made her come back!” Sakamoto took out his childish frustration on his friend.

'Let kamoshida to us’
Those words could certainly provoke a contrary reaction to a prideful person.

“Me? You threw her out so badly that she wanted to come back to kick your ass!”

Said Kido in a mocking tone.

“That’s right! Ryuji screwed up!”

Morgana popped out of the bag to blame the punk some more.

She looks at both boys acting with a natural familiarity, enough to call themselves by a first name basis. If she didn’t have a friend to act the same way with, she could imagine herself being jealous of their quick friendship.

"Wait... Takashi?"

Sakamoto shrugs in embarrassment after noticing Kido’s glare.

"... Ops!"

Kido stops glaring at him to sigh in resignation.

"It's a long story... but…"

He pauses, thinking in a way to tell her the truth without spilling too much.

There was no point in lying to her anyway.

“Ren Amamiya... That's not my real name, at least, not the one I was born with."

"So... you have a fake name?"

"No, my name was changed as part of my rehabilitation program, my birth name is Takashi, Takashi Kido... while my legal name is Ren Amamiya... But, you can call me whatever you want..."

Even if he was being quiet enough so no one else could hear their conversation. This was the most words she had heard this boy speak before.

"I see, so... you don't like your new name?"

She catch up to that for some reason.

"It's not that... It's just that is useless now, given that everyone knows about my record anyway."

He says that as he timidly plays with a fringe of his hair.

"Oh, then... Is it Ok if I call you Takashi-kun?"

"Huh?"

A surprised expression took over him, why would she go out of her way to do that?

He didn’t know. But for the first time since they talked yesterday, he felt that same kindness he knew this girl had been keeping deep in within her without being able to convey it.

Only that this time it was being directed at him.
"I mean, that's your real self, right?"

"My real self...?"

He mused for a second.

Was she referring to how he acted in the metaverse?
Or how he acts in front of her...

Either way, she seems to have an idea of ‘who he truly is’.

If she’s going through the trouble of decipher his personality, what reason has he to not allowing her
to call him that way?

"Heh, I already call him that."

Interrupted a cocky Sakamoto.

"This is not a competition you dummy!"

This exchange clicked something inside Kido.

Their informality and simplicity when they talked to each other.
The way they suddenly act without a worry in the world...
They tell each off and won’t hold their words as they say what they want.

He does the same with Ryuji... It was a nice feeling.

Being able to just be themselves.

"Heh- hahaha."

He can’t hold his laugh...

It was so simple, a pure state of being.

He had pondered so hard about what Igor had told him about the frivolities of the bonds he’ll make.
That he completely forgot the meaning behind those alliances.

"Huh?"

She looked at him in confusion.

"I'll be glad if you call me that, Ann."

He tildes his head with a gentle smile on his face.

"Uh... Right!"

She tried to agree as quickly as she could, taken by surprise by the lack of honorifics when he called
her name.

Still, she didn't mind this sudden feeling of familiarity he was yielding.
‘What a strange boy’

She thought.

He acts uninterested most of the time, but right now he emanates a strange enthusiasm and mystique hiding behind his fully confident smile.

"We should keep it a secret though, he already has a lot of shit on his back."

It was weird, with these three guys, she felt like she didn’t need to feel bad for who she was while she talked to them.

"Y-yeah... I won't say a word."

She says.

"Thanks."

Kido says with a warm smile.

“Oh, we should exchange our contact info.”

“Right…”

As soon as they finished their exchange, they ready themselves to part ways.

“Don’t go to that world without telling me, ok?”

She warns the trio as she finishes exchanging their chat ID.

“I will make Kamoshida atone for everything he did. Not just for Shiho’s sake… but for everything he’s done. No one should suffer because of him anymore.”

Takashi takes a good look at her serious face. Her resolve had strengthen her voice like he haven’t heard her before either.

“I’ll do whatever it takes!”

She finishes.

Kido nods as Sakamoto closes his eyes in resignation.

“I’ll be counting on you then…”

She smiles at the cat over Takashi’s shoulder.

“Yep! Same goes for you Morgana.”

“The pleasure is all mine Ann-dono.”

As they start to walk around the station before each heading towards their own lines. The band discusses a some methods they’ll need to make this operation work.

“A secret hideout, huh? How bothersome.”

Noticing Takamaki’s melancholic state after Sakamoto and Morgana suggested the school roof top as a new hide out. Kido tries to derail the conversation.
“What’s with that attitude?”

Asks Morgana leaning at him on the left side of his face.

“He kinda acts like that most of the time. I bet he’s so lazy that he doesn’t even clean his room and shit.”

Mocks Sakamoto.

“You wouldn’t either if you saw it.”

Mumbles a sulking Takashi.

The girl chuckles at the conversation before parting.

“Well, let me know when meeting will be then… I have to go, see you!”

They wave her off.

“Well, since I can’t contact you from that world, I’ll stay in this world.”

A shiver ran down Kido’s spine.

“That being said, I’ll need someone to take care of me. So I’m personally nominating you! You should feel honored.”

Says Morgana as he hops out of Kido’s bag and lands on top of his head as if reclaiming a hill before nailing a flag

Kido remains in silence. There wasn’t much he could say to a cat that could only follow him home no matter what he says.

Sakamoto shakes his head while waving the duo off.

“Well, congratulations, I couldn’t keep it at home anyway, so let’s meet tomorrow, kay?”

He hears the name of his train arriving on speakers, and starts heading to his gate, waving Takashi and the cat.

“Right.”

“Ok, let’s go and look at my new residence for this world.”

Says an enthusiastic Morgana.

Not waiting any longer either, Kido goes on his own way too.

The Magician

“Ann-dono is amazing isn’t she?”

Yongen-jaya remains as lively as always during the early evening. The elderly were listening to their radio on the close alleys. A drunk man was waving harmlessly around.

The and a pawn shop still showing some good products at this hours.

Kido was doing his best to not to look as if he was talking to himself every time the cat popped out
of his bag. Meanwhile Morgana was enjoys the free ride.

“She’s pretty brave…”

Kido shortly asserts.

“Not only that. She has such an admirable consideration for others, and the innocence to cast herself into the jaws of death to achieve her goal… she’s caring and beautiful! She has captured my heart.”

“Now now, you better keep quiet and get in the bag, it’ll be trouble if the chief finds out about me smuggling you in.”

Ignoring Morgana’s newfound poetic nature, Kido tries to warn the cat to keep up with the plan before arriving to Le blanc’s door.

“Alright, you better have something good to eat though, I’m starving!”

“You eat?”

“Funny, I’m in this world now, so this body works like a normal cat body would in here… I think.”

“There are a lot of things cats can’t eat, you know?”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Shhh…”

He opens the door.

The atmosphere is quiet as always. This time, the barista is properly standing behind the bar, cleaning some cups instead loafing around as he usually does.

“Hi.”

As if surprised to actually see the kid not arriving late this time, he takes a good look at him.

‘Is he disappointed I came earlier?’

“… The store is still open, go upstairs.”

This was Sakura Sojiro’s way of greeting him.

It was still an improvement from the constant lectures he gave him the last couple of nights.

Takashi heads to his room, but not before taking a good look around the shop. Waiting something to ruin his evening at any moment.

He notices a client was still sitting on her booth minding her own business.

She may be a regular, given that Sakura was actually pretending to do his work at the very least.

Trying to take a good look at her. Doing his best to turn his head as he goes past the booth.

He notices the woman was actually a pretty attractive mid twenties Goth looking girl.

Despite rocking some eye bags, and a distant look, her attractiveness was undeniable.
She has dark blue hair in a messy bob-cut with blunt bangs and brown eyes.

Wearing a choker and necklace at the same time, that daring style was the kind of thing that would steal any men's sight. At least that's what Kido thought.

Under a black jacket she was wearing a blue dress with a white spider web design.

‘What an unique woman.’

It was certainly a more appreciated view than another certain sunglasses wearing customer.

“Are we there yet?” /Meow/

His bag shakes, drawing the attention of everyone present to the quiet yet distressed boy.

“Huh?”

‘Shit!’

The woman brought her sight to the kid, his reaction made her smile for some reason.

“Hmm? What? You like what you see?”

“Huh? hmmm…”

Speechless, Kido does his best to quickly return to his previous appeased self.

“Hey, lay off the costumers!”

“It’s ok, it doesn’t bother me…”

Said the gothic punk looking girl.

“I’ll head upstairs, good evening.”

The kid bails.

Once in his room he takes a moment to catch his breath.

His phone starts to vibrate again.

Come to think of it, the phone was constantly ringing on his way here again.

But he was too busy trying to conceal Morgana’s presence to pay attention to it.

**Mom:** How are things over there?

Once he looks down at the texts his face shifts into a sad look.

**Mom:** Are you eating well? **Mom:** Let me know if you need me to send you anything…

He wanted to take his attention away of the screen, but more messengers keep coming.

**Ann:** Hey, I wanted to thank you again.

**Ann:** You saved me and I didn’t even thank you properly
Takashi: It’s ok

Ann: I just wanted to let you know at least.

See you tomorrow.

Even if her sincere thanks was meant to start some sort of conversation.

Kido doesn’t feel like texting anymore.

“Oh so that’s the thing you guys text each other with, right? Looks very useful, I want in too, so I’m gonna have to ask you to type out for me.”

After realizing the cat was snooping at his phone’s screen from his shoulder, he turn his phone off for the night.

“What the-….!? What is this place!? An abandoned attic?”

The cat contemplates the room from Kido’s bed.

“… All right your entitledness, answer me this, will you?”

Doing his best to ignore Morgana’s anguish, he readies himself to interrogate the creature.

“What is it?”

“I have an idea after what happened earlier today, but people can’t really hear you talking, right?”

“Looks like it.”

Morgana says while grooming.

“So, whenever we are talking, people only hears you meowing?”

“Probably.”

“… Well... that could be somewhat useful.”

“Heh, a practical way to put it. I like it.”

“Anyway-“

“I thought I heard meowing!”

Sakura came from the stairs, he sees the cat shrinking and getting ready to jump in case the shop owner decided to get violent.

“Well shi-“

“Why did you bring it here?”

It could be a sign of resignation or just a risked bet, but Kido remained calm as he tries to come up with something.

Even if Sakura decides to get riden of the feline thief, he'll just follow him around anyway.

“Umm… It followed me home. It doesn’t have anywhere to go…”
Sakura looks down at the cat, Morgana can’t see his eyes through the shine of the crystals.

“No place to be, huh? That’s too bad…”

He begins to play with his mug as he brings his attention back to Kido.

“We are in a restaurant, we can’t have animals here…”

He looks back at the cat lying on the bed, whose big blue eyes were shinier than before for some reason.

“But… Perhaps if you have something counting on you to live, the responsibility having a pet could help you stay in good behavior…”

‘Really now?’

Kido contains the need to object Sakura’s excuses.

“Fine. But as soon as I open the shop you need keep it quiet or take it out of here, or I’ll throw it out… and I’m not taking care of it, that’s all on you.”

The boy decides that nodding was the only good course of action.

He takes his attention down to Sakura’s hands, he was holding a plate of curry the whole time?

“Oh, what’s that!? Smells good!” /Meow/

Morgana says from the bed.

“Ummm?”

“You already ate dinner right?”

“Actually…”

Before he could answer, the shop owner lowers the plate over the bed, right in front of the cat.

“Seriously, it keeps meowing in that cute little voice.”

“… Huh?”

“Why are you looking at me like that? There’s more downstairs, you can serve yourself some if you are really that hungry.”

“… Right.”

“Looks like the boss likes me better than you.” /Meow/

Says a felicitous Morgana.

‘Can cats even eat curry!??’

“So, have you named it yet?”

“Morgana.”

Says a morose Kido.
“Really? I was hoping to name it…”

Disillusioned, Sakura starts to head back downstairs.

“Hey Sakura-san… who was that girl?”

But the kid’s curiosity got the best of him again.

“That customer? I think she’s a doctor of some sort…”

He starts looking down at the stairs with a reflective face.

“She helped me out before, she sells some good medicine. But she seems to have a bad reputation for some reason.”

After noticing the kid was actually being mindful to his words, he decides to end up the conversation.

“Anyway, I’m heading home.”

Sakura says as he parts.

“So that’s the ruler of this place… He seems very understanding for someone who keeps you cramped in this dump.”

Morgana shared his impression.

“You’ve finished already?”

“It was delicious, what you wanted some?”

“No… I just want to go to sleep to be honest.”

The boy didn’t try to hide his fatigue as he stretches out some more energy out of his body.

Morgana seems to be very mindful of the boy’s reactions.

“… When are you going to ask me what I am?”

The cat with the boyish voice finally asks the question he was waiting to be asked.

It is true that Kido is curious of the true nature of the creature.

So far the cat didn’t lied to him. Morgana did hid information to gain something in exchange. That’s why Kido thinks that asking Morgana more about it’s existence could only lead to the cat either trying to get something in exchange, or not knowing about his past.

And for the looks of this cat’s current confused state, it seems Morgana was unsure of how to bring this topic back to the table.

“To be frank, I don’t know anything about my birth…”

“I see…”

There was not much to add then.

Kido didn’t know Morgana well enough yet to realize what kind of response would be best to avoid
touchy subjects.
It felt weird for him to have a cat’s feelings in consideration though.

“It must be because of the distortions around the metaverse. I don’t remember anything before that palace. But I have a feeling that if I can find out the source of all those distortions, I could get back my memories…”

“I see, so that’s why you were looking around inside that castle.”
Morgana ponders for a little while before confronting Kido again with great resolution.

“Let me be clear, you taking care of me won’t be for nothing, it will be a give and take deal.”
Kido could perceive the same enthusiasm in Morgana’s voice as he did before entering the palace earlier that day.
He wasn’t sure if this was a good sign, but the cat’s motivation and determination were somewhat endearing for him.
Infectious even.

“Due to my knowledgeable and dexterous nature, I have a lot of intel on infiltration tools.”
“Can you make lockpicks?”
“Whoa, I won’t tell you until we make a deal”
Morgana was already under a roof and he was already feed too.
But the cat seems to be very ceremonial.

“In exchange for you keeping me here, I’ll teach you all about those tools, what do you think?”
Kido sighs. He already had accepted the terms of their deal before heading here.

“It’s a deal then… now get out of my bed.”
He bluntly says wanting to get things over with.
Besides…

‘You’re a cat, I’m gonna take you in no matter what.’

“How rude! I don’t need to sleep in a bed anyway! I’m a highly adaptable thief, so I can find comfort in any place I see fit, sleeping is just a way to recharge your energy anyway.”

With that Morgana jumps out of the bed.

“Don’t forget the deal, I’m gonna stick with you wherever you go from today on.”

“Why?”

“Well, Personas are the strength of the heart. Your power seems to be unique. By building up experience, you should be able to gain even greater power. If you get to know more people who could be useful to your cause, who knows how stronger you can get... so I’ll make sure you can harness that power!”
He could feel Morgana smiling behind his feline features.

Kido froze in place for a little while.

Those words, he heard those same words from Igor before.

Why was Morgana saying all this now?

Was that so obvious? Or was he just that clueless?

“This is all part of our deal, got it?”

Although a little bothered by the bossy tone coming from the cat, Kido nods and get things over with for tonight.

He takes a short shower downstairs before heading to bed.

He could only think about Shiho Suzui’s tragedy until he couldn't keep his eyes open.

Morgana eventually found himself sleeping over his belly once Kido submerged in deep sleep.

A comfortable and safe place to be, indeed.

**Omen**

The next day, Shujin school day was going as any normal day.

Even if the rumors about Suzui’s condition weren’t good, and most of the teachers were trying to avoid the topic altogether.

Shujin was a prestigious school after all.

Given the Japanese nature of giving their all before and complaining later, people were focused more on not bringing up an incident that could potentially give a bad reputation to the school.

Takashi Kido did his best to filter the voices of the corridors.

He knew the reasons behind the tragedy, he knew how far the last victim was being pushed, and he had become closer to at least a couple of them by now.

On top of that, the rumors about his imminent expulsion seems to be already spreading around the students ears once again.

"You heard? That new delinquent guy and Sakamoto are getting expelled."

"They say that they tried to start a fight with Mr. Kamoshida."

"Can you believe it? Idiots, they deserve to get kicked out!"

He couldn’t avoid hearing the voices of his peers who were pointing at him without any shame.

Classes were still going, it was the short break between the third and fourth period.

But Kido was being called out by Kawakami as soon as the homeroom class started.
He was heading to the School Guidance Room.

The boy advised the cat to stay hidden inside his desk crates until he finishes his business there.

The room was besides the faculty office.

He didn’t know what was expecting him inside. But one thing was for sure, it was going to be related to his confrontation with Kamoshida.

Once he opens the door, he feels as his heart stopped for a few seconds.

"Welcome, I'm the school counselor, Jun Sōseki."

Truthfully, there was only so much a healthy teenager heart could take.

He was used to jump scares and ominous presences because of his blood relationships.

But as a boy that was trying his best to live a normal life. He still lowers his guard a lot for someone with the amount of paranormal experiences as him.

The image of the woman greeting him was more familiar than he would have wanted.

She was dressed differently this time.

But that smug look on her face, the curly silver hair and the blue butterfly ornament.

She was unmistakable.

"WHAT!?"

The shock had taken away his voice volume measurement capabilities.

"Why are you so surprised...?"

She asks nonchalantly.

"Y-YOU!"

'It can't be.'

He points at her. He wasn’t showing much nervousness, but his pointing hand was shaking while he frowned at her.

"My, aren't you lively?"

She fixes her glasses.

She was sitting on her desk, legs crossed and resting her elbow on top of the desk, leaning her face over the back of her hand. A familiar pose.

Instead of her white coat, she was wearing a black business blazer and a skirt of the same color, with a set of black leggings.

She was the image of a business lady.

But for some reason, her yellow eyes weren’t as piercing as they were in those dreams.
"You've really done it this time, haven't you? I've been hearing the rumors about you all week, but to get expelled so quickly..."

She starts tipping on her tablet's improvised keyboard.

The boy remained speechless, taking short glances around the room and back to her trying to confirm the veracity of the scene.

She notices his confused expression and indulges his yet unvoiced curiosity.

"I heard the rumors from some students while I headed here earlier, your reaction just confirmed my suspicions."

"S-So... you don't... know me?"

It was possible this woman wasn’t the same one he had been dreaming about.

That idea calmed him for a bit.

"I am a clinical psychologists, it is my job to get to know some things about you beforehand..."

She explains with a professional tone, as if she was reading some sort of manual.

"I see..."

He sighs in relief.

This was a student guidance office after all.

Professional psychologists are usually the ones called to check on students at least once a week.

Every school must have a room like this.

Morgana also mentioned something about people’s shadows to him before.

This woman could also have a projection roaming around in that other world. Just like Kamoshida.

But why was he dreaming about this woman specifically.

She was using a very informal speech to address him when he entered the room.

It couldn’t be…

"But..."

He had lowered his guard again, he realizes his mistake too late.

"Huh?"

She has a grin on her face.

"I told you I was going to make an appointment for you. Didn’t I?"

"..."

"What is it?"
There was no mistake.

This woman was the same one who was sitting in Igor’s place that time.

She was the one who gave him the metaverse navigation app.

"Just... Who are you?"

He was having trouble believing what he was going through right now.

He knew the meta-verse was no dream.

He felt the pain of the injuries that he carried from the times he came out of that place. They were still hurting in the real world.

But the velvet room was different, only he knew about that place.

This woman being here proved that the velvet room, was more than just a dream.

‘Between dream and reality’

"... I already told you, I'm the school counselor, Jun Soseki."

It’s the first time he actually hears her full name.

There she was like a normal person drinking her coffee.

"I'll be making some test to you from tomorrow on... technically it’s just a formality. I have no say in the final decision regarding your expulsion."

She says as she continues tipping.

"... Wait."

"But let's start with today's test first."

"Wait just a moment!"

"My, you are so impatient."

"STOP TAKING NOTES!"

He lost the control of his voice again.

"Is there something wrong here?"

Suddenly the door behind him opens.

The big and wide figure of the bald school principal was standing behind Kido.

He was menacingly looking at the kid, as if he was looking for an excuse to lecture him.

"Nothing at all, Principal Kobayakawa. This kid was just a little agitated by my questions, it's pretty normal at first. I’ll break him out of his shell eventually."

The girl said with a professional yet imperious tone while looking at him again.
Unhurried she continued her tipping without looking at her guests anymore. 

"Hmmm, regardless..." 

But the principal doesn't budge, he was studying Kido's carefree posture. 

"It can't be helped, the rumors about this kid had already spread around the campus, and if he actually happens to be responsible of the bullying that caused Suzui-san's incident, well..." 

It seems the principal was aware of his situation. 

His sentence was set on stone once Kamoshida gives his report. 

Kido inadvertently gritted his teeth. 

"I see, you let your case pretty clear to me last time, Kobayakawa-sensei. As a member of the Japanese Society for Cognitive Psychology, I'll make sure to live up to your expectations." 

She says something Kido couldn’t care to decipher right now. 

He was busy wondering when the neck lacking principal would go back to his office so he could finalize this unwished encounter. 

"In the meantime, I'll have to keep on with the standard procedure for these kind of situations. So I'll need to keep having these sessions with him until I have a full report ready for you." 

She finished. 

"Very well, please try to have them ready before the next staff meeting day." 

"Of course sir." 

Finally the principal leaves the room, letting the two velvet room guests appreciate a short moment of silence. 

"As you can see, all I can do is buy you some time." 

"You must be joking. That's not what I care about right now!" 

"Oh? Such an ungrateful sentiment." 

"No, that's not it, why are you here?" 

Finally Kido finds his words. 

The mood was clear for her. 

"I told you already..." She sighs "Your inability to accept reality could be a serious case of denialism. Although that would make a lot of sense, given your situation."

"... Just… answer me!" 

Not wasting Kido inquires her again. 

"... As I said before, I'm in charge of following your development as the user wild card ability." 

Says a bored Jun.
"But that..."
"That means monitoring your daily life is required."

His frustration grows deeper.

He can’t really deny her previous assessments regarding that topic. But it was her constant nagging was making him feel fatigued.

"But, weren’t you part of that world?"
"I'm just a therapist. I just lend my services. That's all."
"..."
"..."

An awkward silence filled the room again.

He was doing his best. But for some reason he wasn’t sure how to dig her pompous attitude every time he sampled his confusion.

"Are you, studying my reactions?"

She smiled as she remained quiescent in her seat, looking at him gleefully.

"Stop it."

She chuckles, briefly bringing her attention back to her keyboard.

"Just answer me, how do you do it?"

"You mean going to the metaverse, the velvet room and here?"

"Yes!"

"You are really going to ask the one who gave you and your allies the app to navigate through such places that question?"

"...I-"

It was a lost game again, and she wasn’t even trying.

He was not meant to be an interrogator.

"Speaking of which, how’s that girl who joined your cause doing? She has an amazing emotional adaptability, I would like to study her too."

His eyes widened.

She could only mean one person.

"Ann... did you chose her too?"

"No... you did."

"Wh-..."
He composes himself again before giving her another rampant reaction.

"I did not do such thing."

"Oh but you did, just the day before, you were about to tell her everything, right?"

Surprised he proceeds to ask the obvious again.

"How do you know?"

She lets out a small chuckle again.

"Because I'm a psychic, of course..."

"..."

Her teasing had transcended the barriers of his common sense and pierced through his frontal lobe, temporally relieving him of any coordinative capabilities.

If he were to confront this woman again, he needs to do some groundwork.

He needs to prepare himself mentally and spiritually, so he could at least end a conversation with her without him feeling drained of his will to socialize for the rest of his life.

She laughs as if she can’t help it.

"I'm joking. I saw you following her in the station, and choking in your words in that junk food restaurant. You need better expertise when it comes to paying attention to your surroundings."

Landing back on earth, Kido manages to understand what she meant by that.

"You were following me?"

"... monitoring your daily life is required?"

"..."

She stands up taking a more serious tone for her next exposition.

"I guess it can't be helped, you may go around and ask about me, you can also look for my name on libraries or other public services... Or, you could just come to these sessions and find out more about me, directly."

The way she tells him this seems to say that he’ll waste efforts otherwise.

"To tell the truth... I'm more than thrilled to find out how the mind of a persona user works, this could be most interesting."

"Y-You are not a normal human at all, are you?"

He nervously ask, afraid of what the answer could be.

"... I am as normal as you are."

But she answers him with a smile.

"That's..."
A tricky answer.

What was normal about him anymore?

At this point, “being normal” was just the façade he was trying to put over so hard.

"It seems it’s still too soon for me to get a viable contract with you. So I'll just have to wait until your shock has faded and you start to accept reality."

It seems she only wanted to make herself noted for today.

"Arugamama, eh? That's something, coming from a psychologist.”**

"You are obviously aware of such a life orderliness. The process of accepting the events life sets up for you can also help you to deal with unexpected situations with a calmer and clearer mind."

Kido couldn't hide his surprise for the spiritualistic take coming from the woman that makes a living by studying the science of the workings of the human mind.

“But your pessimistic nature seems to be doing that for you anyway.”

Kido stops himself from answering her teasing.

"... No, I get it... I'll be back."

He never took a seat, so he just turns around to the door.

"Oh? In that case, I'll be looking forward to our next session. I gladly explain to you how the metaverse navigation app actually works."

Before he closes the door behind him, she gives him one last piece of advice.

"And please remember, you can only venture so much inside someone's heart without piercing it to pieces."

He stays still for a while, she is also aware of the risk of changing Kamoshida’s heart.

Yet remembering him the possible price for his insurgent look for a better school life was pointless now.

"Noted."

He closes the door.

The week wasn’t even over yet, but he felt like years of his life were taken from him by these constant paranormal encounters.

“Such luck…”

---

**Resolution**

*Drip*

A drop of water echoes through the room
It’s dark, the boy opens his eyes, he is not in the attic anymore.

He sees blue quilted walls surrounding him.

“Welcome to the Velvet Room.”

He was again in this familiar room, his cell inside the Velvet room.

“You have finally taken upon your role as the wild card user I see… Wonderful.”

Igor’s deputies, the two little wardens, were silently standing in front of his cell.

“So… I can use multiple personas. Is that the power of this wild card?”

Igor didn’t bother to answer. His bloodshed eyes were fixed directly at him as his ominous laugh could be heard in the oval room.

Justine turned to face Takashi while going through the pages of her hardboard clipboard.

“As we told you before, the abilities of your personas are driven by the power of your heart. Your resolve and connections with the bonds you make during your rehabilitation will influence your overall strength.”

The twin on the left, Caroline, also turned around to face him.

“Shadows can only be defeated by the powers of Persona. The power you willingly pull from the masks you use to protect your heart from the external world.”

Caroline tried to dispose of Kido’s evident discomfort with an explanation of her own.

“Those bonds will burst the strength of your will based on the similar aesthetics and beliefs you share with them. You will get more power by acquiring new talents. That includes the abilities your Personas gain.”

The girl on the right added.

Two bright lights bright from the inside Justine clipboard pages.

“You’ve unlocked two more confidants that will help you to harness such power… First is the lovers arcana. In moderation this power could help you to bolster your heart, illuminating you through the choices you make, but in excess, well…”

“It’ll break you down and make you bleed!”

Caroline sharply states after her sister.

“There’s also the magician arcana. The initiative and confidence to manipulate your fate is the key for you to start your journey as you take advantage of your true potential.”

Justine looks at the other page inside her clipboard as she explains the arcana’s benefits.

“But be careful to not get too cocky. If you start looking down at people, they’ll step all over your head eventually.”

But Caroline brings Kido’s spirit down to earth again.
“I urge you to remember what you’ve learned today, that way you can truly reach your full potential. Consider this a token of my expectations for you.”

Igor raises his hand, snapping his fingers.

For a second, Kido could feel a small burn on the back of his eyes.

“Uh?”

From his perspective, he got a blue flame coming out directly out of his cornea. The terrifying image made him jump back a few steps inside his cell.

It wasn’t until he realized that he was unharmed, that he took out both his hands out of his face.

Noticing Caroline smirking as Justine closed her eyes trying to not to react.

Something was definitely different.

His sight was never bad to begin with.

Those glasses he wore were just an ornament. But even so, his sight was not this good before.

Now he can see things he definitely wasn’t able to see before.

The dusts flying around the room, every detail of the twin girls hairs and even Igor’s strange gaunt skin.

And besides all that, there was a strange feeling he had never felt before.

Is a new… everything.

It was like he could ‘sense’ what he sees, he was seeing more than just the superficial existence of those in front of him.

It was impossible for him to pick out what could mean to “feel” each of these new experiences he was capturing inside his mind.

The only way he could describe it, is as a new sense altogether.

A new sense that allowed him to perceive the presence and paths he could never discover otherwise.

He couldn’t see it of course, but the shine of his eyes were as the lights of a lantern, using an invisible light to illuminate his path.

“The third eye. The eye of the mind, will allow you to clearly see the path you are willing to walk. Without being fooled by pointless detours… You are a trickster after all. You shall not be so easily deceived.”

Kido could feel the chemical reactions in his brain were starting to provoke a momentary state of pure euphoria.

He wouldn’t bother displaying it. But he felt as if he had reached a state of being that could only be colloquially described as ‘hype’.

“No way...”
He wasn’t able to hold his exited smile as he looks down at his hands.

There was a fact about Takashi Kido, he was clearly becoming an admirer of these unique advantages.

‘Power, this power, is… so stylish.’

He lets out a roguish smirk again.

“Now go away Inmate, your time here is up!”

Caroline dismisses the rogue teenager.

He could see it now, the path was clear, he’ll get to the end of this invidious gamble.

And he will win over everything that was on stake.

He leaves the velvet room, with a face that exemplified tough confidence.

Igor’s laugh could be heard resounding inside the room again on his way out.

Chapter End Notes

Unlocked:
The Lovers Arcana: Ann Takamaki
The Magician Arcana: Morgana
New Personas - Arcana:
Abe no Seimei - Magician

*Disgusting: 気持ち悪い - Kimochi warui D:
**Arugamama: あるがまま - acceptance of life as it is.
*** There’s a pun in the literal translation of that scene, where Ann mentions Kamoshida is a looser outside of school, could also be interpreted as “I’m a dominatrix and this looser…”… I think.

Notes:
Jun last name; Soseki is based on the famous writer of the novel "Wagahai wa neko de aru(I am a cat)", Natsume Soseki, and yeah, that's probably the tale that inspired Morgana’s curious speech.
What inspired her appearance for me, was an unused character design shown in the concept art book that didn't make it to the final game (Here: i.imgur.com/yYiYL7W.png), she could had been an early sketch for Lavenza, Wakaba or even Takemi for all I know, but I feel that her design fits the image I have for her, only with Silver hair insead of black. Also, the blue butterfly ornament.
Please feel free to share your opinions or criticism.
Update 04/16/2018: Fixed grammar mistakes. Cut shortened some scenes. (This is still the longest chapter because of all that happened.)
The face of the district prosecutor was exhibited great cogitation.

The boy in front of her established a new scenario.

She understood the frustration this kid and his supposed allies had to go through at that time.

It could still be a lie. He could have just made up the fact he already knew about Suzui’s abuse before the teacher confessed. Regardless, it was a pausible reason for them to go after this teacher.

The method of how they triggered a change of heart was still a mystery though.

“As I mentioned before, this is the time I started finding out more about the mental shutdowns during my investigation. This was also the time the teacher got that mysterious change of heart. I remember you telling me something about nobody listening to you in your school before. But you seem to have taken matters to your own hands quite hurriedly.”

He did told her just now that he tried to tell a police officer about the abuses. But his imminent expulsion and Suzui’s fate played a major role on their decision.

“Wouldn’t you’ve done the same if you could, Sae-san?”

If… she could magically change a criminal’s heart to save lives, to save her the time and effort, to bring justice upon them.

Would she?

“That’s not the point. Whatever this story is just a façade you are using to cover your true actions or not, you are still admitting you actually committed the deed.”

There was no point wondering about such an unrealistic fantasy.

That was not her reality to ponder on.

He was cornered and it was just a matter of time for the truth to come out.

“There’s no point in lying to you now.”
The boy makes a good point, still, irrelevant.

“I’ll decide if what you’re telling me is true or not…”

“Yes…”

He affirmatively submits to her point again.

“Well, tell me then, you had weapons on you when you were arrested, also some weird medicines. Why would you carry those?”

She asks even knowing what the boy’s answer will be.

“I told you already.”

“… That meta-verse.”

She closes her eyes, resigned to continue this charade.

“It’ll be easy to track those who cooperated with you. You should just tell me, who gave you those weapons and medicines…?

But she won’t let him skip through her inquiries just like that.

This boy had some strange contacts. Some very special contacts that helped him all this time.

Those who cooperated with him so he could have enough tools to escape from his inevitable captivity.

Those people must’ve known who he really was all the time.

And even if they didn’t, they could be a real pull for her to get a confession.

But still…

“Some random strangers…”

He just spat another incomplete truth.

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**Upgrades needed**

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The palace was in high alert, they had been battling tough adversaries for a while now.

The three teenagers had one goal. Steal Kamoshida’s treasure.

This will provoke a chain reaction destroy the distortion called a Palace, triggering a new inception in his heart.

So far Joker had managed to capture and add some new Personas to his repertoire.

Enough for him to be a key advantage against the diverse horde of enemies patrolling the corridors.

Once they cleared the church again, Joker managed to open some previously locked and inaccessible
doors thanks to Mona’s lock picks.

The rooms were filled with new kinds of treasures and items.

It seems those were the private pertinences of the king in the real world.

Things like sport shoes and kinesio tapes that helped the team through their mission.

They tried to take benefit of those for now once Mona explained the advantage those kind of items gave them in this cognitive world.

The party was currently climbing the main tower.

After defeating some guards that were holding keys, the fatigue finally started to take a toll on them.

Ann Takamaki, AKA Panther as she herself decided to be called from now, was really getting into her role as a new member of these roguish band of thieves.

She got used to her persona abilities rather quickly too.

Panther adopted the same style of battling and support as Joker and Mona, heavy magical attacks, specifically of the fire element and eventually giving healing support if it was needed.

To tell the truth, her weapon of choice and outfit were abreast to her elasticity and agility at the time of combat.

She did not only captivated her fellow burglar attention, but also to tents to playfully punish her enemies, like a cat playing with her food before putting them out of their misery.

She showed signs of inadvertently enjoying herself a little too much from time to time.

As time and battles passed by, they managed to get used to her showy and alluring battle style.

But they were doing their best to avoid fighting once they reached the higher levels of the main tower.

Trying to reach the treasure room they previously saw in a map, they decided to accelerate the pace.

“You’re mistaken if you thought you could get past those steps.”

But as soon as they reach the final room before the throne floor, they are confronted by yet another golden knight.

“Another one?”

Skull was having a rough time catching his breath. He had to spend a lot of spiritual energy to defeat those knights in the lower levels.

“Be careful, he looks strong.”

Mona warns the trio.

The cat-like being seems to have a really good mean to measure the threat level a shadow imposes compared to the rest of them.

Still, his detection levels are limited to his vision field only.
If a shadow is hiding he can’t really do much more than just ‘sense’ it’s presence.

“Huh, we’ve fought a bunch of those golden knights by now, this will be no different!”

Panther was pretty confident of her chances against this knight.

She had every right to be so. After Joker got that Jack O’ lantern Persona, they both managed to save enough energy by swapping their turns to blast enemies with their fire spells.

“Sounding real confident there, Panther.”

Joker joins her with a reliant smirk of his own.

“You pests will regret getting this far!”

The knight starts melting, a familiar sight for them by now, but what came next wasn’t an ordinary spectacle.

Out of the black mud of shadowy molten, comes the corroded and repulsive figure of a Torn King of Desire.

A greenish slime-ish image of a mushroom like being… that was constantly erecting and contracting itself, readying for some sort of attack.

The ‘thing’ had no eyes, but it was quite clear that it was aiming it’s whole being directly at Panther.

“Kyaaa!”

That was the natural reaction of a high school girl witnessing an unwanted display.

Panther jumped back taking away her previous confidence with her.

“Is that…?”

Skull asked after he finally regains his speech.

But before anyone could answer the Swelling looking slime expands and contracts at a faster pace than before.

Finally starting moving forward towards its target.

"It's coming!"

Mona yells as they ready themselves.

"Phrasing!"

Joker takes off his mask as fast as he can.

The slime mushroom comes charging full speed.

A rather abnormal speed for its melted form, tackling between Panther and Skull. But they were ready enough to elude the first attack.

“Panther, cover yourself!”

Joker warns while the slime charges back at her position.
“Nonononono! Get away!!”

She starts backtracking while blindly whipping her weapon around.

“Look out!”

“Snap out of it idiot!”

Both Mona and Skull try to make her come back to her senses.

Eventually she gains enough distance to summon her persona.

“Ugh! BURN IT DOWN, CARMEN!”

The fire spell connects fully. But from the fume the slime continues its charge as if nothing happened.

“HUH!?”

“I said cover!”

She strengthen her legs and raises her arms to cover her face at Joker’s command.

Meanwhile the slime torn king of desire stops his charge just a few step from her.

Trying to aim his assault dive with full strength.

The slime’s form morphs, or more precisely, ‘spills’ itself over its target.

Making the girl shiver as her persona takes part of the blow so she could remain on her feet.

“Arsene! Cleave!”

The slime receives the strong tackle from the reddish devilish Persona, getting knocked down away from its victim.

“EW!”

Panther tries to regain her self-control as she shakes her mud covered arms with her gloved hands.

“Now everybody!”

But she was taken back to her battle mode after hearing Joker’s war cry.

An all of nothing attack.

They slashed, whipped, and chopped until there was nothing left of the shameful shadow’s figure.

That was their last victim for the night.

They took their time regaining their breath.

The exhaustion won’t allow them to go much further if they weren’t careful.

"Let's keep going!"

But Joker concentration was at his peak today.
The team couldn’t help but felt inspired to not allow themselves to fall behind him.

“I’m so done with this place!”

Panther expresses her frustration.

“That took longer than it should…”

Skull added.

“We need better equipment.”

Mona said as he looked at his damaged scimitar.

“And maybe some energizing drinks, or something.”

Panther was whipping the sweating under her mask as Joker looking for supplies inside his bag.

“Hehehe!”

Skull laughed to himself.

“I know just the place!”

He folded his arms as he bloats.

“Later, the treasure is so close I can smell it, we can reach it today and set up our infiltration route!”

Mona looked eager to continue despite his fatigue, but Joker looked at him puzzled.

“… An infiltration route? You mean we can’t steal it today?”

“I’ll explain it once we get there, come on, we are so close!”

And indeed they were. Once they reached another safe room, they realized they were just beside the throne room.

Inside, Shadow Kamoshida was gathering his men. Unaware of the presence of the grabbers roaming the terrace inside the big room. They sneaked behind them to the treasure room.

Inside in the middle of the habitation full of golden coins and valuable jewelry, there was a cloudy light floating over the pile of gold. The cloudy light was almost shapeless, but for the eyes of the thieves present, it looked like the form was constantly morphing into a familiar item for a few seconds.

“WHOA! This room is huge…! And look at all that gold!”

An excited Skull said.

“So… What’s this?”

Asked Joker.

“Hehe, that’s the treasure. It’s what we’ve been looking for”

“That cloudy thingy!?”
Skull now voices his disappointment.

“This is what I wanted to explain to you guys.”

Mona jumps over a pile of gold to get everyone’s attention.

“You can’t just come and take it, it has to manifest on its real form first.”

“Real form?”

“The desire that caused the distortions that created a palace doesn’t really have a form just yet. The owner of the distorted ambition has to become strongly aware of him having it first, then the treasure will manifest itself in here.”

“I see, how do we make it happen?”

Ignoring all logical attempts to make sense of these explanations, Panther tries to get to the point.

“By sending him a calling card. We’ll let him now that we’ll be stealing his heart.”

“A callin’ card? Just like real phantom thieves, huh?”

“Once he’s conscious that his most precious desire might be stolen, the treasure will finally appear… I think.”

“That again… But it’s worth the try after gettin’ this far.”

“We secured an infiltration route, all what’s left is sending the calling card in that world. And come back to get the treasure.”

Mona jumps down again, looking at Joker’s way to get his approval.

“All right, let’s do it.”

And so he does.

“We have to make sure he doesn’t just ignores and throws the card away, it has to really get to him. There won’t be turning back once we do it, the treasure will only manifest that one day we send the card, so we have to be ready.”

“Aight, I’ll do it!”

Skull jumps forward enthusiastically hitting his palm with his fist again.

“Wait… really?”

Making Panther react in surprise.

“Ummm.”

“I leave it to you then.”

But before Mona could complain, Joker went along with the idea.

“What? Really?”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”
Both Panther and Mona question the frizzy haired thief.

“I mean… he’s really good at getting under people’s skin, isn’t that the point?”

“… I guess that makes sense.”

“That’s righ- HEY!”

“Well, he actually knows how to make that pervert mad from experience, but you better not ruin this, you got it!?”

Finally Panther resigns herself to the idea but not without giving Skull a fair warning.

“It’s fine, I know just the perfect way to get him, heh.”

“How troublesome.”

“Let’s go back, Ryuji, I’ll need your help… about what we talked earlier…”

Joker starts walking out of the room.

“Gotcha!”

Skull demonstrates his enthusiasm once again by following his friend with a big grin on his face.

An untouchable initiation

Daylight was almost over. The two boys spend their last remaining bits of energy walking around the central street area.

On their walk from the station they found from a politician rally to sketchy illegal-looking businessmen trying to talk to them in front of every passerby like nothing out of the ordinary.

Although they were still a little fatigued, both Takashi Kido and Ryuji Sakamoto were in good enough conditions to at least have this last detour before going home.

Ann Takamaki headed home right away. Or at least that what she promised to the boys. But they have already figured out that the girl had been spending her time visiting her still unconscious friend at the hospital as much as she could this last week.

They didn't confront her about it given how much this whole operation meant to her.

Her focus was in the right place for them, and that was good enough.

After avoiding the attention of the busy passers-by, the boys reach a desolated alley.

“This is the place?”

“Yeah, cool right?”

They walk in looking for a specific store with a green neon sign, in the middle of an alley.
“It’s quite suspicious.”

“C’mon it’s just what we need.”

Before walking in, Kido takes a look around.

His glasses hide his mistrusting gaze once he notice the presence of two black suited men in the same alley.

“Look.”

“Who’re those guys?”

Sakamoto ask.

“Probably cops…”

“For real?”

Ignoring the blonde’s surprise, Kido walks closer to the door.

“We got this far, if we turn around and leave without entering, it’ll be too suspicious.”

“Whoa, don’t you think it’ll be more suspicious if we enter now?”

“Are you chickening out on me? You brought me here.”

“I’m not a freakin’ chicken!”

Sakamoto shouts while the black cat pops out of Kido’s bag.

“At least you have the hair cut.”

“Shuddup cat!”

“Come on.”

Finally they walk inside. There, the store had unique equipment all over the place.

One would say it could be enough equipment to start a small war.

But looking at the stuff like combat knives, semi automatic rifles, and strange fishing to medieval looking gear, one could also think this was an bizarre looking pawn shop.

In the counter a surly looking store manager was reading an inventory magazine.

He was wearing a cap and had his shooting headphones resting over his neck.

“Can I help you?”

His deep voice put the boys in alert as soon as he notices them.

The voice surprised Sakamoto, who almost dropped a small set of knuckles he grabbed from a stand.

“Y-yeah, we’re lookin’ for guns!”

The blonde boy says.
“Well, I guess you came to the wrong place, I only sell model guns.”

The manager replied as he returned his attention back to his magazine.

“We know! That’s what we’re lookin’ for.”

Sakamoto barked back in frustration.

“Then yes, you’re in the right place, if ya have the money…”

He looks back at the blonde punk from top to bottom.

“Which I doubt.”

“Huh!?”

Finally the man puts his magazine down and sits properly while looking at them.

“Listen, I run a serious business here, this is not some toy store.”

He puts a his store inventory book with pictures over the counter for the boys to see.

“This is an enthusiast shop, my regulars’ll be mad if I let casuals like you hang around, y’know?”

“I’m not a freakin’ casual! I bought shit from here like, last week!”

“Huh, can’t remember you.”

“You bastard.”

Sakamoto gives up as he looks down.

“Actually I just want to help this guy to start his own collection, so I came to guide him through your inventory.”

Takashi Kido sees himself forced to meddle in this mesmerizing ‘thug to thug’ cultural experience.

“… Really? So you’re an enthusiast? How come I’ve never seen you around here then?”

“I’m new in the city.”

“… Fair enough. Anyway, of course these ain’t the real deal, but they’re not simple model guns either. Take a look at the counter, choose what you want.”

The man stands up and opens the inventory for the kids to see.

“Dude all this stuff look so real!”

But Sakamoto’s natural zest was getting the best of him once again.

“So… whaddya want?”

Asked the inpatient manager.

“Uh… What would you recommend?”

Sakamoto ask, making Kido sigh and the manager raise his eyebrow at him.
“… I dunno, just buy whatever looks interestin’ to you.”

“Some customer service.”

“… fine, what type of weapons are you lookin’ for? An automatic? A revolver?”

“Something that looks real.”

Kido says nonchalantly.

“… Oh? So you punks are plannin’ a nice bank robbery or somethin’?”

The manager teases them while shooting a curious look at the two loose looking teenagers.

“That ain’t it! We just like how they look, is all!”

The man resigning himself to the obvious conclusion.

“… Listen I’m always up for helpin’ fresh faces… But I have to give you a disclaimer first.”

Kido’s initial plan to make a good impression went down the toilet thanks to Sakamoto’s constant involuntary simplicity. But he accepts this chance to finally start doing business with the store manager.

“… Alright.”

“First, don’t go ‘round pointing ‘em at other people. Keep ‘em in your bags or somethin’ if you’re outside.”

The shop’s manager takes a look at a screen right besides his counter, out of the look of the two boys of course.

“And second would’ve been; ‘don’t let the fuzz catch wind of you with them so they don’t come here to pest me… But I guess it’s too late for that.”

He signals his screen at the puzzled looking duo.

“You won’t happen to be workin’ with those gumshoes outside, right?”

Sakamoto leans over the counter to see the image of the two detectives on the screen. They were standing a few feet from the store’s door.

“Whoa, those are the guys that were actin’ all weird before. They really’re cops?”

Kido turns his attention back to the airsoft shop owner.

“Not a chance, I hate cops.”

He raises his left arm, showing the store manager a scar on his wrist.

A very peculiar type of scar, most likely obtained because of a forced handcuffing.

“What ya know? So do I…”

The manager says as he moves the lollipop around one corner of his mouth to the other.

“Then, why don’t you just let me buy you some things and we’ll get out of your hair right away.”
Whatever his previous experience was, to the store manager this kid doesn’t seem to be the type that would work with the cops.

They could still be forcing him to work with them, blackmailing was a common method used to snitch people around.

But for some reason, the boy’s approach made him doubt of that possibility.

His partner was oblivious of the magnitude of situation.

If he was really part of a cover up, he would’ve immediately slipped out the whole operation to him.

The surly man knows the loose lips types when he sees one.

But the way the calmed glasses boy was taking the situation pretty peculiar to say the least.

The detectives outside could enter the store at any moment. Breaking a deal was it then.

The boy didn’t seem to be wired either, he had the equipment to prevent those kind things all over the store anyway.

He also noticed that a cat of all things was constantly popping out of his bag... a cat.

‘What a weird kid.’

“… It’s almost time.”

And besides, the call interception app he had running this whole time allowed him to listen most of what those cops were talking about before these kids showed up.

“If that’s the case, can you do me a solid?”

He searches bellow his counter, taking out a paper bag with something inside.

“I’ll let you have a weapon from the beginners catalog for free. If you take out this bag with you outside, you’ll have to return it to me later though... But, uh... best not open it.”

The truth was, that he didn’t care about the fate of this bag.

It was something he himself worked on, but if he gave it to him he’ll go away.

Taking the problem with him.

It seems it’ll best for the two kids to stay away from the cop’s attention.

“Dude this is too sketchy…”

The blonde punk says to his partner in a low voice.

“Let it be two.”

But Kido raises his fingers at the manager raising the offer.

“What?”

“Heh! You have some balls... Alright, but if you want more, you’ll have to pay.”
“Yo, Takashi, Is this guy for real!?"

“Then I’ll take that small machine gun and the small shotgun.”

“Deal, now…”

The manager quickly takes the guns out of his counter.

They were clean, of course they were, he takes care of his merchandise.

“Put those on your bags, take this and go away.”

“Got it.”

The duo hide their new weapons inside their bags.

Morgana hugs the machine gun as tight as he could to save space inside Kido’s bag.

“… They’re here.”

The store door opens, in come the two men in suits.

“Munehisa Iwai, right? There are some matters we’d like to discuss with you today.”

Said the stern looking detective.

“Shit, they’re here.”

Sakamoto whispers.

“Keep it together.”

“R-right!”

The blonde straights up at Kido’s request.

“Go, kids…”

Iwai says to the boys as he fixes his cap.

Sakamoto bails outside. But Kido stays put in the semi opened door.

“-atch your attitude!”

Screams the vulgar other detective inside.

“Well, you’re gonna search me? Go ahead, do watcha gotta do.”

He closes the door behind him, leaving the scene carry on without his presence.

It was obvious for Kido that he had just become an accomplice of some sort.

Outside, Sakamoto was waiting for him in the corner of the alley.

“Dude, that was scary.”

“Indeed it was.”
“What were those detectives doing there…?”

The cat on Kido’s shoulder pops up with a question.

“Who knows, I don’t really wanna know, to be honest.”

Sakamoto answers looking at Morgana with a tired face.

“Anyway… aren’t you curious of what’s in the bag?”

Morgana was poking Kido’s unremitting curiosity.

“Seriously? He told you not to look inside.”

Sakamoto protests.

“I don’t think he’ll care if he doesn’t know.”

Says Kido without hesitation, and in an unusual convincing tone.

“Well…”

Ignoring his answer, the unwilling accomplice opens the bag as Morgana leans closer over his shoulder to look inside.

Not wanting to be left out, finally the blonde boy decides to take a look too.

“Whoa! It’s a real gun!”

Said a shocked Sakamoto.

“No, It’s fake…”

But Kido corrected the boy with great security, sounding almost disappointed.

“How do you know?”

“Look at the ring at the point of the barrel… It’s not metal, and it’s painted black to make it look real. Airsoft guns have colored rings at the point of their barrels.”

“Oh…”

“It looks miles better ahead of the one you had.”

Said an astonished Morgana.

Before Sakamoto could ask Kido ‘how do you know that?’, he started walking away again.

Until he notices a familiar sight.

“What’s wrong dude, you looked like you’ve seen a ghost.”

The blonde boy’s assessment wasn’t very far from reality.

The disconcerting image of a small girl wearing the blue warden outfit floating… Or more precisely, sitting at the top of the same bluish cell door that he saw in the meta-verse before.
It seems his close encounters quota with ‘extra dimensional beings’ was running low this week.

‘… come to think of it, he did say I could return there at my own accord.’

“… Here, can you hold this for a moment?”

He handed the bag to Sakamoto and walked towards the strange looking girl.

“Huh? Wait, don’t go around tossin’ evidence to other people!”

On the corner of the alley, the girl was waving her legs over the bright cell’s door.

“Our master is waiting for you, inmate…”

She said.

“Take me to him.”

Caroline smirks as she gets down opening the door guiding the boy inside.

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**The fool: Life plan execution**

*Drip*

There he was again. That cell, the grievous reflection of his heart.

Wearing his prisoner outfit, he gets up.

Takashi Kido faces the long nosed master of this prison.

“Welcome…! How does it feel slipping into the unusual from your usual life?”

Igor, the prison master greets the boy.

“…”

But Kido does not dignify him with an answer.

Instead he looks around, noticing a significant absence.

“She’s not here again.”

He says.

“The woman from who our master requested aid for your rehabilitation is currently following your rehabilitation in that world.”

Justine gave a clarification.

“You better not cause her any problem, Inmate!”

And Caroline gave an exclamation.
“She is a fine guest here in the velvet room, it’d be best if you could show her your full cooperation.”

For some reason, Justine seems to be fond of that woman, as she closed her eyes as if remembering a pleasant memory.

“Guest, huh…?”

He sighs as he already knew the current whereabouts of that inconvenient woman.

“Why were you in the real world?”

This question made Igor loose an ominous laugh.

“Our master has arranged an access point to assist you in coming here directly from the real world.”

Justine answers instead.

“That door you just came through it is. Be thankful, Inmate!”

And once again Caroline dispatches her forwardness at the boy.

“…Joy”

Kido says quietly.

“By coming back here, you continue to truly make it worth rehabilitating you.”

Takashi Kido hated the word ‘rehabilitation’ by now.

Every time he hears it his grip tightens to the cell bars.

“What do you want from me?”

The prisoner asks.

“I called you here to introduce you to yet another aid we can provide you, as a reward for your continue endeavor.”

Although Igor's aid had been of great significance during his adventures through the meta-verse. Takashi Kido doesn’t feel grateful at all towards this strange man.

Part of him had been blaming the only one who seems to know and understand what was the meaning behind his power…

A power he never was aware of having until this man appeared before him.

“I never asked for this.”

He says with an empty voice.

BAM.

“Shout your mouth and listen, inmate!”

Caroline slams Kido’s cell with her stick.

“Worry not, as the essence of the rehabilitation you must complete will be explained to you in due
time.”

“In fact. It seems you have been encountering new allies that share your aesthetics to help you
discover your place in reality.”

Allies. The word Igor and that woman use to describe his new friends. They were each represented
with certain arcana types by these little wardens.

The Magician, The Chariot, The Lovers... And he, The Fool manifested in his bond with the prison
master himself.

He had captured 3 more new “allies” in that palace yesterday.

He managed to get the pumpkin head, Jack O’latern(Magician), Pixie (lovers), Agathion (Chariot),
Silky (Priestess) and Abe no Seimei(Magician).

Those new Personas got him enough power to get to the high levels of the castle and to the treasure.

Those beings are based on certain aspects of human hearts.

The Arcanas represented those traits.

He wonders... Why his mind naturally arranges them accordingly to those cards. Why he gained that
knowledge by accepting those beings inside his heart.

“What do you mean by aid…”

Kido wonders what the long nosed stiff man can be planning to give him next.

Last time he gained a kind of sixth sense that allowed him to view things he wasn’t able to perceive
in the past.

He could only imagine what else this strange man-doll could offer him.

“That power you hold has infinite possibilities. We will assist you in nurturing that potential.”

The bloodshed eyed man snapped his fingers.

“…To that end, we must execute your Persona.”

The man’s deep voice filled the oval’s room silence with an eerie atmosphere.

Takashi Kido eyes opened wide.

So far he had been executing those shadows in battle, but his and his team mates survival was
enough of a reason for him not to feel any sort of discomfort.

Yet, he felt uneasy after hearing Igor’s words.

“Execute…?”

Suddenly he was afraid, what could happen.

If he executed those aspects of the human heart that resided inside his heart, what would happen to
him?

Igor chuckles at the boy’s reaction.
“Do not be alarmed. Personas are personalities that exist within you. Thus you will only be discarding old personalities to have them be reborn as new ones…”

‘Different personalities’, as different aspects of himself.

Personas were meant to represent semblances of his heart. Yet, why would he want to dispose of those parts of himself?

“But an execution…”

Justine turns her attention to the withered looking boy.

“In the depths of every human heart, they all share a single wide area reminiscent to a sea. This is the same concept known as the ‘collective unconscious.’”

Her face darkens.

“People typically avert their eyes from that world, and the darkness in their hearts may float there... when that darkness takes a form, it becomes a shadow.”

His grasp of the cell bars loosens a little after hearing the calm voice of the quiet warden.

He already knew this for some reason. But it was certainly soothing hearing it with such certainty.

“The shadows I capture became my personas. But if they are part of everyone’s unconscious, why are they on that palace?”

He was capable of speaking with those shadows so easily because of his ability. He subconsciously realized this.

Besides Morgana first attempt to get something out of mugging shadows, the boy also heard a voice during the assault.

A voice that let him know that he had the ability to associate himself with those beings.

‘Does that mean the wild card power allows me to connect more easily to that collective unconscious thing?’

He wonders to himself.

Connecting with the power of the human hearts, and capitalize it.

A most advantageous ability.

“Shadows are attracted by human desires. Those shadows were trapped and enslaved by the ruler of those distortions. They are forced to return to their original form in order to battle you. Once they manifested before you and assumed their true forms, you’ll be able to obtain them as a mask because you were willing to free them from the distortions and accept them into your heart.”

Justine finishes as she walks into the dark.

“Why do they look like demons?”

The boy asks Caroline before she also walks away.

“Theyir appearance is related to the image of power all mankind share.”
She says plainly.

But his attention is soon brought to a side of the oval room after hearing a dragging noise.

There he sees the image of the little warden Justine pulling a cord that stretched two gigantic looking guillotines.

‘Where did she got those!?’

The boy steps back in surprise.

“Now, choose two masks, and give it to us.”

Caroline shoots a smirk at the boy.

“We’ll show you a little something.”

“What?”

“If you throw away those old appearances, a new form will be born anew taking its place. That is the basis for this execution. You could think of it as a fusion.”

Igor explains to the boy to dispose him of his doubts, and masks.

He choses two masks.

The ones he continually used and became stronger as they advanced through Kamoshida’s palace.

Pixie and Abe no Seimei.

He won’t get ridded of Arsene.

Although he didn’t had much chance to use his original power, that mask represented something important to him.

Justine holds both mask in her hands and shatters them by closing her fist.

Thus making the two Personas physically manifest.

Caroline followed the ritual by covering both with blue burial shrouds. Their forms shift inside their covers, an effect caused the strange shroud.

Takashi Kido knew exactly what would follow.

The logical thing would be to avert his eyes from the execution.

Yet he never takes his eyes away as Justine raises both guillotines and Caroline places the victims the lunette.

Why was such an extreme method used to consolidate these beings into a new form?

“This is…”

But he couldn’t deny the comfort of knowing he’ll be gaining a new advantage soon.

He became anxious, like a kid waiting for his birthday present.
Yet there was something that was throbbing in the depths of his mind.

He was afraid to admit it at first, but he had already welcomed that aspect of himself back when he got Arsene.

It was a strange thrill he felt. The pleasure that was the sight those personas... of the representation of the hearts of the everyone’s shared unconscious tamed by him. The representation of the darkness in the hearts of the people that had been wronging him for so long. The image of those embodiments being executed in such a gruesome manner, was something he quietly enjoyed from his cell.

The blade falls. Light comes from the ‘beheaded’ beings, like small particles... ‘small light butterflies’ the remnants assemble.

He smiles to himself for a few seconds...

“I am thou, thou art I, my name is Tobi Katou, I will serve you with my countless spells, the best of our age.”

The voice echoed in his head.

This new formed from the remnants of the ‘decapitation’ has manifests in front of him.

The ninja-like looking being quickly shifted into a silver and light blue mask.

He looks down, the mask was already in his hands. He had a new power waiting to be used.

By accepting it into his heart, the also accepted the unique knowledge and spells carried with it.

It may not be that much, maybe it wasn’t going to be that useful, but it was something unexpectedly convenient.

The power of the wild card, the power to assume a form and aptitude he wanted to overcome an obstacle. To fight his enemies.

It meant he could go through the masks without needing to be himself all the time.

It meant he could take and adopt an aspect of everyone’s hearts at will, and use it to his advantage.

He could reach the hearts of those he considers useful to his cause.

A big smirk forms on his lips.

Igor’s eternal grin yields a dim laugh while looking at the boy’s expression.

Kido blinks, the shine in his eyes reflect the blue flames of his rebellion.

Suddenly feels a hand over his shoulder.

“What is it? You found somethin’?”

It was Sakamoto, who was standing right beside him in the same ally as before.

“… Huh?”

Kido blinks in a brief confusion.

“I though you found somethin’ in that corner, you were starin’ at it for a few seconds.”
A few seconds was not close enough the amount of time he spend inside that room ‘fusing’ his previous masks.

He remembers Igor’s words. 'Between mind and matter’, and how only he can see that shiny door and the velvet room attendants.

He looks up to see the small girl sitting at the top of the blue door looking at her nails uninterested.

“It was nothing, let’s go.”

“You sure? You look weird, like if you saw somethin’ gruesome. Did you see a dead animal or somethin’?”

The blonde boy asks while following his friend.

“You could say that…”

Takashi says with an empty gaze looking nowhere.

He didn’t want to think about it.

Yet Kido knows, he shouldn’t have enjoyed that whole spectacle as he did.

The night had finally arrived at it's fullest.

After the boys parted ways and Kido finally arrives home, once again, the old man was waiting for him past his closing hours.

But this time he throws something at him as soon as he enters the shop.

“Hey, catch!”

It was a copy of a key.

“It’s a key to the store, I can’t keep waiting for you to these hours.”

It was certainly unexpected.

Kido couldn’t have imagined Sakura going out of his way to give him this sort of commodity. Even less to trust him the shop’s keys.

“You trust me with this?”

He asks with a slim sarcastic tone.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. I am a busy man with my own responsibilities. You’ll do best to remember that yourself, and you should also keep in mind what would happen if you don’t come back early enough to get to school next day.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll throw me out…”

He says as he heads upstairs waving his hand to the barista.

“As long as you get it, now I’m going home, lock the store and eat something if you haven’t.”

He turns around to see the barista go. Lately he had been more and more permissive to him.
“Isn’t that nice, we can go around the city at night now.”

Another reason the barista probably was in good moods every time he saw him could be the small cat that he took around everywhere. An unexpected soft spot for such a stern looking man.

“Why would I do that?”

Kido ask uninterested.

“Don’t be like that! I want to see how the city is at night sometime.”

“It’s probably only lightier, and muggier.”

He said demonstrating his unfamiliarity with the capital city’s nocturnal life.

Once he arrives to his room, he starts filling his mind with unwanted thoughts yet again.

What would happen if they fail to change that man’s heart?

The possibility of everything going wrong, or killing him.

The gruesome scene of his personas execution.

His inexplicable fascination for such a scene.

He shakes his head and begins to wander around his room.

The cat followed his steps with a curious gaze.

The emptiness and silence of this room wasn’t helping him to keep his head clear.

He needed something to do before sleeping.

He goes through the big box where his luggage was packed.

There were still lots of things he never bother unpacking.

Things that could bring back bad memories to him.

Inside a shoe box, he takes out a smaller box.

It was a cards deck.

“You like playing cards?”

Morgana jumps to his bed were Kido was sitting.

Takashi was looking for specific cards. The set was old, and the cards looked like they were handled too many times.

“I only know how to play poker though…”

Morgana sits beside him as Kido begins to spread the cards around his bed.

“That’s good. A respectable phantom thief must be good with his hands… Whoa that looked like a magic trick.”
Morgana looks as if he was about to jump at the boy’s hand with what could be described as an instinctive need to catch something.

The boy playing around with three cards.

He did a simple trick, putting the king of hearts card on top of his set and snapping his fingers after taking the top card up.

The trick was that the king of hearts card will always be the one on top after each finger snap.

Morgana’s fascinated voice made Kido chuckle.

“That’s exactly what it was…”

The cat’s tail was wagging showing his interest

“You should teach me that sometime.”

Said the cat.

“You’ll need opposite thumps first.”

“I know that! I mean once I regain my body. Will you?”

Kido remembers the cat precarious position.

He can’t imagine how it’ll be to not know your origin.

It was a scary thought, but he didn’t want to imagine this cute bratty little cat could be some sort of monster.

Morgana has been helping them a lot, and their goals were aligned so far.

Kido tried to follo his yearnings without any gripe, he owed him that much.

“… Of course.”

He smiled at the cat’s excitement.

Kido could only wonder, was him this excited when he asked that man to teach him those tricks too back in the day?

He picks up the king of hearts card and shows it to Morgana.

“The trick is that the other cards are blank. You just put the king of hearts up again and again by double lifting the cards intercalary after every finger snap.”

“Whoa, that’s an impressive trick!”

Kido smiles at the compliment. And begins to playfully shuffle the deck once again. He takes out the Jester card out.

“… I’m not sure what lies ahead, but you’re really a promising prospect, you know that?”

The cat comes closer to his hands again.

“… Am I?”
But Kido doesn’t take his sight away from the card, the jester, the joker, the fool, him.

Whatever lied ahead, he had to be ready to be the trump card for the team they’ve formed.

He had 'Infinite potential'. Both Igor and Morgana seems to think so at the very least. But what about what he wants to accomplish?

Takashi Kido was not only blessed with a second chance to overturn his tremendous miss fortune, but he was also mandated with a great burden.

One he could never been prepared for.

One he feels he needs to take to the very end.

'How far can this power take me.'

His eyes felt heavy.

His hand couldn’t hold the card up any longer.

The cat was already sleeping by his side. He lets his hand down, and finally falls asleep.

There were still many things they needed to prepare before the final heist.

Meta Knowledge

It was Kido’s second week at school.

April was coming to an end and so was his time in Shujin Academy if Kamoshida gets away with his plan.

Given the rumours about him bullying Suzui into suicide, the principal decided to send this boy to the student guidance room without a second thought.

To Kido, this was a way to say he was already considered guilty without a chance to defend himself.

A familiar torment.

He’ll be send to the guidance room from time to time during classes.

He’ll be forced to leave his belongings in his class until his return. That meant he had to leave morgana down on his desk.

In the end, that would be for the best in this boy’s mind.

He didn’t know how to explain the circumstances behind his encounters with that woman.

But at least he could take this chance to clarify as many doubts he had about the meta-verse.

"To tell the truth, the app does nothing by itself to alter reality around you..."

Besides the mental health scientist, there was a bag of junk food. She must’ve been eating an uncommon lunch for a girl of her bearing.
"Then..."

He brings his attention back to the neglectful looking woman.

"The human mind is a very powerful thing Kido-kun."

She was present the moment Takashi Kido reconciliation with his original name.

It was the first time Igor called him into the velvet room, and of course she’ll call him by that name.

“I’m curious though... Why Amamiya?”

She must’ve noticed the small cringe reaction he gave after hearing his name coming from her.

“... They’re a family in my hometown. They’re close friends with my father. They adopted me as their child as a favour to him, only on papers though... it’s... a long story.”

“I see, one you’re not willing to share just yet, that’s fine... The name fits you though.”

“...”

“Well, let’s see, oh right, you’re here for the Meta-app!”

She tries to regain some composure by sitting straight in her chair. Then she enthusiastically begins her exposition.

"What the app does, well... it just triggers an artificial cognitive dissonance in your subconscious by sending a deceptive stimulus via subliminal audio-visual transmissions to you. By doing so, it alters your brain’s wavelength to a similar frequency of those realities.”

But Takashi Kido was already lost.

It wasn’t a case of ‘Attention Deficit Disorder’ or some other related shortfall. It was quite difficult for the boy to suddenly take the same school counselor that just a few seconds ago was lying back on her chair seriously.

It was as if she was so filled with junk food that she could barely form a sentence.

“It allows those with the proper mental capability to momentarily transport themselves to different states of existence that lie inside other people’s own personal realities.”

Trying to catch up, he picks up the word reality and existence.

Apparently the app does indeed alter something inside them to access something he could only describe as another dimension.

He could gather that much, but...

“The app localizes the distortions. Then it creates a checkpoint before synchronizing that location with your brain’s cognition of the place with a map. We call those worlds as being part of a ‘Meta-verse’.”

The ‘guide’ continued with her elucidation.

“Basically, if the proper conditions are found, the app allows your mind to open a door inside someone’s heart."
She pauses for a moment. Taking a look to see if the boy was following, but he was tilting his head in confusion.

“I… don’t get it… how?”

She only lets a tender smile at his response.

A smile he could translate as a form of pity if he decided to look too much into it.

He opted to let it slide and shook his head, attempting to communicate her to forget his last affirmation and question.

She relaxed a bit more on her chair before continuing, crossing her legs and folding her arms.

"The sequences of the navigational data that are broadcasted to you through your phone take advantage of a specific type of energy that can be evoked from the user’s minds. If your mind is focused on the concept of your own personal reality while the app is doing this transmission, your brain will automatically take in a specific signal and interpret it in a way that will momentarily alter your mental capabilities... It's like the activation of an Involuntary Mental Diffusion Field.”

She says as she raises her index finger to clear a point and lead his full attention to her next statement.

“To summarize, he app works like a switch.”

She takes a sip of her remaining soda before continuing.

“It allows you to focus and use the ideal energy of your minds to travel to those places once you localize them…”

‘What the hell are all those terms!?'

The boy wonders.

“Any normal person could be able to use it. Technically, almost everyone can have a persona, at least in theory. But not everyone has the potential to be strong enough to tame their own shadows. Those who are weak are risked to be drained from their own life force if they find a way to enter that world since you need a great amount of psyche energy to function there.”

She says so with a troubled face.

Kido couldn’t help but to quiver at the idea of accidentally dragging innocent bystanders again like they did with Takamaki before.

“If the user isn’t capable of holding itself in that reality, his or her mind will probably collapse by the weight of their suppressed selves trying to break free. Dissolving their minds into pure Kegare.”

‘Dissolving their minds', what a troublesome statement'

Kido couldn’t understand the meaning of the word ‘Kegare’. But it couldn’t be any good given her previous depiction.

“Is the app is that dangerous?”

Bringing other people with them was a no go.

But he wonders how many unnoticed dangers are they going through while using this piece of tech.
“The app it’s not dangerous at all, it only takes advantage of your brain capabilities, as I said before. That’s why Persona users are the best suited subjects to use it. The dangerous parts are the inhabitants of those worlds. And the users themselves, that’s all… as for what is the meaning behind those concepts…”

She takes a breath, trying to relieve some sort of dissatisfaction.

"Truly, I’m not sure myself... That was the same explanation I was given back when they taught me how to properly operate the app, word by word."

She says while displaying a nostalgic expression.

“I have no idea of how this piece of tech was developed. I only worked with those who I think created it. I was hired as a test subject to manipulate it… that’s when I meet those who inhabit the velvet room."

Kido was waiting to hear this part. How this woman got there? what was that place supposed to be? And also…

“So, there are other people that are aware of that place?”

He knew she would only give her vague answers about that place nature. She probably doesn’t know about the velvet room’s origin or significance either.

But at least she could help him through the foreign concept of that place existence. And if there’s anyone else he could plead for help to understand his current position.

“Probably… At the very least, I am certain that you’re not the first one to visit it.”

She says stating the obvious, as she herself was considered a ‘guest’ by those strange little girls.

“As for me, I was only hired to manipulate the app, but I’ve lost contact with them two years ago.”

Hired she says. The idea of an extra dimensional paranormal prison hiring a real world psychologist with real currency felt somewhat ludicrous for this boy.

Why would someone like Igor need money for?

“Wait, two years ago? Who are ‘they’?”

The important questions worded themselves out of his mouth.

“Well that’s…”

The woman hesitates to answer for a bit, looking away at the door with a disquiet frown.

“What is it?”

The boy inquires, bringing her attention back to him.

“By the time I found out about it… well, the investigation was apparently over, and I was left behind with this app…”

“What? You mean the people who did this are no longer around?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t try looking for them, because, well…”
“What do you mean? Why?”

“I… was trapped inside that world for a long time. I lost contact with the outside world. It wasn’t until you were able to enter the velvet room… that I was able to get out again….”

Her voice sounded different. Her unwavering tone shifted into a dejected and defeated one.

Takashi Kido felt despondent for some reason.

His unwilling yet beneficial summoning to that cell was actually more meaningful to this mysterious woman’s life than what he initially thought.

Her motives to follow him and his ‘rehabilitation’ could have a greater meaning to her than what he first imagined, yet…

“… But how?”

How was she trapped?

What lead to her thinking monitoring him could help her?

Was introducing herself to him at this school the first thing she did in this world after two years of absence?

He had so many questions about this woman’s true nature, a concern he didn’t imagined possible earlier today.

“I’m not a physics scientist Amamiya-kun. All I know is, that the concept we perceive as time goes by differently in that place. It felt like I wasn’t there for even a day… and still…”

She silence herself while taking a worried look at her notes. Realizing she stopped logging in for a long while now, sh was drifting in unpleasant memories too much for today.

Having too much time by herself wasn't helping her staying focused.

“… Are you ok?”

“I’m fine… Let’s start with your tests, or perhaps are you having trouble assimilating things yet? I could take a few more minutes.”

Her voice was back to her usual petulant inflections.

“Bu-… All right.”

He gives up the intent of protest as he notices her amused expression.

“Tell me, are you meeting new people yet?”

“I don’t really know what you mean by that.”

“Well, it’s a new city for you. It must be difficult to make new acquaintances, especially in a capital city where everyone is busy all the time.”

“I’m managing, I guess…”

“Hmmm, did you have any friends in your hometown?”
‘Where is she going with this?’

Kido asks himself before answering.

“I had some, I guess… Why talk about that?”

“Would you rather talk about your parents?”

He frowns at her as she rested her chin on the backside of her palm. She had a dishonest smile. She didn’t really cared, and he wasn’t about to share unnecessary information. Not to this specific woman who seems to find joy in disgruntling him.

“I rather not.”

“Most people don’t. You’re not very confident, are you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, you just look to me as a loner. You also have a tired and bored face most of the time, it’s a shame given how cute you are.”

‘Cute?’

This was a double strike he wasn’t ready for, and there was something annoying about her being capable of reading him so easily.

He pretends to cough before proceeding.

“I do have some acquaintances back at home. But I can barely consider them friends. And you’re right, I rather be alone most of the time.”

She smiles at his honest answer, tilting her head with interest.

“And why’s that?”

“Because, I can do whatever I want that way.”

“I see.”

She remains silent.

Moving her hand back to her tablet, but not typing this time.

“… Isn’t this the part you tell me I’m weird?”

He asks awkwardly.

“Oh, there’s nothing out of the extraordinary with you, at least not yet.”

“Huh?”

“The most interesting thing about you is the path you’ll choose. How you will evolve in this setting you’ve been thrown into. Your behaviour should also develop in a specific way in order for you to survive this year without turning into a real delinquent.”

She notes casually.
“Well that’s encouraging… and pointless”

“Is it really? Aren’t you working on to fix those misconceptions about you?”

She bluntly asks.

They were trying to change Kamoshida’s heart. The man responsible who bruited his record around school.

The man that will incriminate him as being the cause of Shiho Suzui’s suicide attempt.

Preventing that was enough of a reason for him to do it, but…

“No. I’m trying to not get expelled, and to stop that monster from ruining more lives.”

There was nothing he could do about his soiled name at this point.

“Noble, I’ll take that answer for now…”

“Do you have everything you need from me?”

“Certainly. I only needed you to sign these papers to sustain your presence during these test anyway.”

Trying not to be offended at that comment, he prepares to leave the room.

“Then, I’ll be going.”

“See you next week.”

He steps outside the room and takes a deep breath.

The cost of gathering information from that woman put his enduring capabilities to test.

The second period was about to start.

It was his second week in this school, tomorrow was April 23, Saturday.

They had one week left until the meeting. He had to get things ready.

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**Interlude / Constraints**

Inside the SUI building, Goro Akechi is meeting the young silver haired district prosecutor.

The woman was reading a file handed to her by this boy.

Or at least she was pretending to do so.

“The girl seems to be living as a shut-in, just like you said.”

The kid got through the trouble of writing an entire report before coming to see the prosecutor.
She didn’t know if this by the book behavior was this boy’s usual orderliness. Or if he was just trying to impress an adult.

But for some reason she didn’t want to disrespect his efforts.

Even if she could do with an vocal report.

“I see, so that’s the situation. What about the coffee shop owner?”

She asks as she goes through the pages.

“Well, I was going to visit the shop and check out myself. But doing so would have conflicted with a priority request you gave me…”

“…Conflict? What are you ta-“

“He did not enter the shop because I was there.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a familiar sharp voice.

“Kamiya?”

The tall black haired detective was standing behind Akechi.

They didn’t seem to have noticed his silent presence until he spoke.

“Hello, Akechi-kun, Sae-chan.”

He greets them with a simulated smile.

“… So you really are hiding something, are you?”

But he’s greeted back by Sae Nijima’s forthright accusations.

“Not at all, the owner happens to be an old friend of mine.”

He steps back smiling while raising his palms as if he was assuming a weird defensive position.

“And I should believe that given that man’s past?”

He smiles to himself a little more while shaking his head. He brings his attention towards Akechi with an accusing look.

“I get the prosecutor office is understaffed and that they're working on low budgets. But using a teenager to do info gathering duties?”

Kamiya says.

“It’s not a problem at all Kamiya-san, working with Sae-san helps me to gain experience, besides-“

“Really?”

The man interrupts him abruptly. Folding his arms and walking closer to the boy.

“Here’s a tip about the prosecutors in japan, Akechi-kun. They do not file indictments in cases in which they are uncertain they can win, they only work on a worth to do basis.” “Let me guess, you’re about to say that I’m using him to get an edge in my investigation. Maybe because of some
naïve and idealistic expectations, right?”

But an unimpressed Niijima doesn’t bother to look at the man after hearing his denouncing comments.

Instead she calmly packs her belongings inside her purse.

“I certainly hope that’s not the case. Regardless, it’s not like you’re trying to hide your intentions.”

Why should her.

To Sae Niijima who was being constantly looked down by men like him. She had no reason to believe she could have a worst crippling disadvantage when it came to her investigative methods.

“Kamiya… you.”

Yet, disappointment fills her voice anyway.

“I’m sorry sir. But I trust Sae-san’s instincts. At the very least she has stumbled with a potential case of abuse while doing this.”

Akechi interferes in the conversation again, much to Kamiya’s surprise.

“Akechi-kun, please do not give him explanations.”

Niijima indifferently objects.

“Abuse? Ha! Let me save you both the time of finding out. You are mistaken, the only thing being abused here are good resources”

The man walks closer to Niijima’s table in the middle of the hall. He puts his hand over a folder she was about to put away.

“I know about your suspicions of that woman having a mental shutdown. But the autopsy results didn’t mention anything about it.”

His eyes meet her cold glare.

“… I know, It was ruled a suicide… by you.”

He closed his eyes, letting go of the folder.

“That’s right, two damn years ago, and knowing that, why didn’t you just asked me about the case in the first place?”

Staring at her with a claimant gaze, he steps back giving her enough space to rise from her seat.

“Your continuous intent to block my investigation is not helping me trusting you, Kamiya.”

She says bluntly.

“Are you implying something, Sae-chan?.

He raises his eyebrow at the comment, giving her a defiant look.

“It is certainly a suspicious attitude, Kamiya-san.”
But Kamiya’s insubmissive façade is cracked down by Akechi’s unexpected comment.

“You too?”

He reacts taking a step back and unfolding his arms in an exaggerated fashion.

“Ugh, enough!”

Niijima stands up and begins to walk away.

“Sae-san?”

Akechi looks at her puzzled.

“I’ll proceed by myself, I’m leaving.”

“Oh?”

Kamiya regains his coolness at the curiosity of her reaction.

“Ummm, that’s out of the blue Sae-san.”

Akechi starts walking close to her making her stop her march to face him.

“I shouldn’t have asked you to do this for me Akechi-kun, so, forget I said anything.”

She says apologetically.

“Oh... I see.”

“That’s why you don’t send a kid to do a man’s job.”

Once again the man interferes in their exchange, this time from the distance.

“And you, could you stop harassing me? I have enough in my table to pay attention to your childish vagaries.”

Niijima voices her discomfort at the man who only feigns a shivers at her comment.

“Ouch.”

“I apologize, Sae-san. I’ll be ready to listen to any future request from you if you need me.”

“Noted.”

She says without bringing her full attention back to the boy.

“...”

Closing her eyes resigned she turns away again.

“C’mon kid, time to go.”

Niijima sighs frustrated, stopping her march at the door of the building.

The sight was a grey one.
Monotonous and fancy at the same time. The court building was right in front of the police station.

She remained still while looking at the also gray sky.

It was a familiar look she had been used to for a long time.

A view that had become a part of her, regardless of her own volition.

“… Am I the only adult here?”

Most people would consider the menacing cop a threatening presence. But to her, who was able to manhandle him in self-defense training, he posed no threat.

She respected the young boy’s dedication.

She knew the rules of this world dictated that people like them, were meant to take sides to progress through the political and law sphere.

Yet she wishes somehow things could be a little easier once in a while.

She checks her phone looking at the time.

Niijima realizes she had spent more time than she had initially set out herself for today again.

“That’s right, today is… I should go home.”

Looking at the date, she comes to a realization, it wasn’t easy, but she had to do her best, what else could she do?

There was no consolidation for the lack of effort, there was no point on her reflecting on it now…

She had work to do, duties to perform, roles to fulfill.

The young district prosecutor walks away from the law building. Trying to let behind her working front.

Just for today, she should do her best to be at home earlier than usual.

She needed it.

But from tomorrow on, things will continue as usual.

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“Well, that was quite the scene.”

The tall detective was standing in a hall near a sprue. The young pleasant looking boy was standing there going through his phone without much interest.

“Her reaction was unexpected indeed.”

The boy said calmly.
“I warned you about her…”

“With all due respect, Kamiya-san. I had it under control.”

Yet Goro Akechi doesn’t take his sight away from his phone while saying this.

“What, her temper? Sure, but you’re constantly underestimating the wits of those you work with. Especially of those you get closer with.”

Kamiya says with a great familiarity.

“I don’t see it that way. Sae-san has been kind, but I’m not trying to take advantage of her sympathy.”

The boy answers with a serious face.

“That’s not it, you fool. Someday, your overconfidence will be the end of you. This job is not a kid’s game.”

The man’s sharp voice doesn’t fit his professional sounding advice. It sounded more like a threat for the unfamiliar ears.

“…”

“It’s for your own good. Just keep a distance from other people’s cases.”

He finishes his drink and waves at the kid.

“You don’t need to tell me that.”

The assurance in his voice made the sunglasses wearing man turn back to him.

“I do, you were about to offer yourself to continue trailing the case for her, right?”

But to his accusation, Goro Akechi kindly smiles at him while tilting his head.

“… For someone who seems to be willing to be the bad cop so often Kamiya-san, you really are a thoughtful person.”

Kamiya gives no reaction at first. But then turns around in an effort to not face this boy.

“And for someone who smiles so much, you really are terrifying.”

He looks down at his watch, still not facing Akechi.

“But you should know your limits when it comes to working with the force. Try not to overstep that by doing additional jobs for the prosecutor’s office just yet.”

Goro Akechi was willing to protest the request. He immediately had the perfect argument set. They all work for the same judicial system. The reasons behind them enforcing the law and working together shouldn’t be an obstacle, but he knew better than to argue with him.

“… Understood.”

At least, not at this time.

He had to proof himself again to Sae Nijima first, because of this man.
“Hey man, did you know…? There isn’t any manga at all in this library…”

Both Kido and Sakamoto were still roaming the school corridors after classes.

The boy with the frizzy hair was searching for something on his phone. Meanwhile, Sakamoto, who heard his friend was heading to the library from the voice inside Kido’s bag, was following him around.

“Outrageous.”

Kido said without taking his sight away from his phone.

“I know right!? I mean what’s wrong with a little recreation?”

“You mean ‘recreation’?”

He corrected him while stopping at the stairs leading to the third floor.

“Yeah that… I actually told them to bring some for the students who just want to relax once in a while, but I got told off pretty quickly.”

“Shame…”

He was still looking.

“That’s why I told you we can’t count on anyone on the student council. They only care about lookin’ good in front of the teachers.”

The student council room. They heard the newspaper club member on the second floor complaining about them before.

Yet Kido still had to meet one member of said council.

“I see…”

“Man, you ain’t payin’ attention to me!”

Sakamoto complains.

“Here…”

But Kido just pressed a button on his phone, making Sakamoto’s ring immediately after.

“What’s this?”

Asks Ryuji while looking at a text message in his phone.
“A list of items. I already texted it to Ann. It’ll be helpful if both you guys could pick some on your way home… She told me she’ll do it, could you help her?”

“Uh… sure, what’re you gonna do?”

“I’ll pick some medicine and probably something else…”

“For real? Would that even work on that place?” Morgana pops out of Kido’s bag to answer the “delinquent”.

“It will, you realize how effective the fake weapons are inside palaces, right? Just imagine the effects real medicine could have in there.”

“If you say so… Well, I better text her before she goes out without me then…”

He turns away while looking at his phone.

“Hey, don’t forget…”

Kido tries to remind him of something.

“Yeah, I already have them ready…”

“… Them?”

“I hope that moron doesn’t ruin the plan.”

Morgana lied on Kido’s shoulder looking somewhat defeated.

“I have hope.”

But Kido only displayed a diffident smile as he said this.

“Will you get that book?”

“Yeah, yeah…”

Ever since last night, Morgana has been bothering the glasses wearing kid about having nothing to do during their secluded nights in the café’s attic. Especially after having no materials left for lockpicks fabrications.

He also weared himself out after his obligatory work out sessions.

A book was a good way to keep his mind sharp, so they both agreed that this mission was for both their best interest.

He walked his way to the school library.

After a few moments of awkwardness with the school librarian realizing he was the famous delinquent transferred second year, he finally asked about his preference.

“By any chance do you have anything from Maurice LeBlanc?”

He immediately assumed a “all business” tone before she continue to make a scene more uncomfortable.

“Well, let me see, yes we do, but… umm…”
He had a specific book in mind.

Takashi Kido always knew about Maurice LeBlanc’s greatest work, he knew about Arsene Lupin, the phantom thief. He even watched many shows related to him in the past.

But he never bothered reading the author’s original book series.

Still, it felt like he became aware of some unconscious knowledge he had hidden in some part of his memories at some point. It was a very similar feeling to how he suddenly became conscious of how to use those mysterious spells in the meta-verse.

Right now he had an urgent need to confirm if that externally supplied knowledge was actually the real thing. Or just a fabrication of his imagination.

Takashi Kido couldn’t help but wonder how he got this far without finding out more about these stories. He has developed some natural fixation with these kinds of stories for some reason.

“Hey, you got the book!?”

Suddenly, Morgana pops up with a question that makes Kido panic for the brief seconds the library attendant turned her back.

“Get back in the bag!”

He shouted in a low voice.

It was the paranormal cat who indeed convinced the boy into getting the book in the first place.

‘A book related to his persona could reveal hidden aspects of himself’ he told him. A most practical reason, and as always a most practical excuse to satiate their relatable curiosity.

‘It’s like I have nothing better to do…’

Kido tries to convince himself.

He already got the equipment he needed for tomorrow’s heist.

“Ah! That book wasn't registered as rented yet, but it seems somebody else is already reading it today...”

The library girl muses for a little while.

“You could ask for an exchange for another book to that person if she’s still reading it here in the library...”

“I see... thanks.”

He walks around the library for a while, looking for some fiction books, he finds “Zorro the Outlaw” in one of the novels stands.

He picks it up wondering how much does his cat companion actually knows about that story.

Having taken a ‘plan B’ choice just in case, he decides to take a second look around.

There wasn’t many students reading inside the library.
Most of the people present were looking around for books or talking to each other in low voices.

There were a couple of students sitting inside the small booths with their own notebooks or just going through their cellphones.

But there was a specific student sitting in the middle of the room in a round table, all by herself.

She was sitting in the middle of a small hill of books on her side. And on the top of the pile, there it was, a copy of Maurice LeBlanc’s own “The Great Thief”.

The quiet and diligent looking girl was taking fast paced notes on her notebook. Her red eyes focused on the open book on her left. It looked like she was in another state of reality.

Isolated from the presence of everyone inside the room.

There was nothing else but her notes and that book for her at this moment.

Takashi Kido didn’t know if he should feel scared or impressed of how masterfully this girl was taking herself away from her surroundings.

It was as if she was enclosed inside a crystal bubble that repels any sort of noise or distractions.

It was a truly remarkable study method. One Kido wishes could excel at like this girl.

To tell the truth, Takashi Kido was good at filtering the uninteresting voices of his faceless peers around school.

To him, it was a efficient way to keep himself away from unwanted attention.

Sadly only he looked at it as an actual skill.

But after looking at this distant girl excelling at his own system, he felt kind of envious.

She looked so smooth and peaceful in that state.

And her endearing musing figure was certainly something that could fascinate any male student quite easily.

But at the same time, that same peace and distance made her look quite unapproachable… unattainable.

He was tempted, he had an excuse. She was in a diligent and composed state, a state that he couldn’t help but wanting to disturb for some reason.

It was an obligatory devilry he had to satisfy.

“Umm...”

He decides to move forward, close enough for her to notice him, but far enough to avoid being invasive.

Yet, it was at this point that he realized a failure in his plan.

Yes, he was good at keeping people away. But by doing so he lacked an obvious trait needed for simple human interactions.
He had the initiative to talk first, he had the will and the courage. But he lacked the actual experience and tact to begin a casual conversation with such a remote girl like this.

She blinked twice and brought herself back to this reality, noticing the presence of the boy immediately.

"Yes?"

He remained quiet and calm, yet for some reason he was in a reflective state.

"Hello, I..."

He finally put together an entire sentence in his head.

But as soon as he began to speak, his "Shujin-anti-rumor’s-filter" turned itself off to have a proper exchange with this girl.

"Hey look isn’t that the criminal boy?"

Now, he could hear the students mumbling about him again.

And so did this third year in front of him.

"He’s talking to the prez. The nerve!"

"Is he really hitting on her?"

“Huh…”

He says as an involuntary reaction while looking sideways.

"What is it? As you can see I’m quite busy."

The girl hastes him, doing a better work ignoring their peers voices than him.

For a second his admiration to her lack of awareness turned into a doubt of this girl actual sense of perception.

Was she really willingly isolating herself? Or did she lacked that much self awareness?

Regardless it seems the situation got the better of him this time.

'It's like I've completely forgot where I was for a second.'

At the realization of his mistake, Takashi Kido terminates his book hunt operation and begins a fast damage control performance.

"It's nothing, my apologies."

A simple dismiss.

He turns around, bringing the fear of any possible unwanted outcome to an end.

"I see."

And so the girl returned to her notes without a second thought.
Still, while walking back to the library reception, he can’t help but wonder what could force a girl like her to become so distant.

"Hey Takashi, you don’t want that book anymore?"

"Nope. I guess The Zorro book is ok for now."

"Oh, that’s a good call too."

Once again the young boy is bereft of a chance of having a normal interaction. He walks away of the library for today.

'She’s into that crime novels, huh?'

He could hear someone calling her ‘pres’.

Kido remembers her face, his first day in this school.

She was the first student meeting him outside the teacher’s faculty office.

She had a third year pin on her vest, she must be the student council president.

And If something of what Ryuji told him was true, she isn’t going to be of any help.

Looking at her minding her own business like that, he realizes her priorities lie elsewhere.

What could a student council member do against a corrupt teacher with that much pull anyway?

Regardless of the council knowing anything about what elapsed during Shiho Suzui’s suicide attempt, there was no point on distracting himself from his original goal at this point.

Everything was Kamoshida’s fault.

Suddenly, a cold sense of dread overcame the boy, he quickly turned around.

“I’m surprised you can come to school all calm like that.”

A familiar voice brought a shiver down his spine.

Without him realizing it, Kido was already standing in the middle of the first floor corridors.

He was so submerged on his own thoughts that he didn’t bother paying much attention to his surroundings again.

Behind him, there was standing the six foot four figure of the volleyball teacher.

He was looking down at him with a distasteful smirk, as if mocking his presence.

Kido frowned at the teacher’s satisfaction, but quickly retorted.

“Why shouldn’t I come to school, sensei?”

He calmly ask with a small and gentle smile.

His hair covers most of his eyes from the teacher’s perspective.

He couldn’t notice it at first sight, but he knew this boy was shooting a defiant look at him.
“Hmph. Scum like you can’t let go of things, surely you aren’t scheming something stupid, are you?”

‘That’d be pointless.’ Was surely what the teacher tried to say.

“… So what if I am.”

The boy replied after a few seconds.

Kamoshida gritted his teeth at the audacity of this delinquent.

He frowned back at the boy, obviously not being used to be talked back like this.

“Don’t give me that cheek! You insist on making a fool out of me… That attitude of yours really pisses me off.”

There was a vacuum formed between of the teacher and the second year student.

The awareness of the rest of the students witnessing their exchange was dissipated from their minds.

Kamoshida seems to notice the cat’s eyes behind Kido’s shoulder, staring straight at his neck. The little beast was ready to jump at his face at any moment.

What kind of person brings a pet to school?

He could take the pet away, he could report him right now for bring it at school, but what would be the point?

It’ll be a lot sweeter if he only waits to publicly expel and embarrass the two insurgent punks on the same day.

His expression changes again, to one of calm resignation.

“But I guess trash will never be anything more than trash. You don’t show any remorse for what you did. Eliminating you from my school, and from my sight will be one of those simple pleasures in life. I hope you’re looking forward to the board meeting.”

Kido was hearing every word Kamoshida was spitting at him, and he could only force himself to remain quiet the whole time. Noticing the obvious irony on the teacher’s words.

He wishes he could engrave those same words onto his skin. But if he does things right, he won’t need to.

“Everyone will be happy when you get expelled, I’m sure they’ll cheer that trash like you is finally gone for good!”

He couldn’t hold it anymore. Kido couldn’t stand the revolting gravitation of this teacher’s mere existence.

But he knew better.

He knew everything they’ve done so far could go to hell if he made a mistake now.

Ann’s retribution, and Ryuji’s and his future were at stake.

There was also Morgana who was counting on them to help him regain his memories.
He had to kill off that rage… no, he just had to let it loose tomorrow.

But at the very least, he’ll indulge himself a little.

“Those same words will hit you back after the school meeting… Sensei.”

His voice was cold and emotionless.

He didn’t even bothered raising his sight to meet the teacher’s as he said that.

As if he wasn’t even worth the trouble.

“You piece of-“

This ignited Kamoshida’s tolerance to the boiling point.

He grabbed the kid by the collar, ready to punish him. But Kido didn’t react at all.

There was no point, whatever he chose to do, it’ll be used against him once again.

But one thing was for sure. Takashi Kido refuses to allow this dispose of human garbage to feel any sort of satisfaction at his expense.

“…”

Takashi Kido was chained down from his legs, arms and even his mind.

The teacher was almost twice his size, he’ll physically overwhelm him in no time.

No matter how many people were standing around them, nobody will believe the teacher started the aggravations instead of the boy with a criminal record.

Yet, he could still open his mouth.

He could feel overpowered and submitted, but as long as he can take a breath, he won’t let anyone take his chance to have a win over him.

Kido will use every little advantage he has to snub him.

The "teacher" can beat him into a pulp.

He can lie and say he started it.

He can blame him all he wanted for every sin he committed.

But at the very least, he’ll take his pride and confidence away from him. He’ll chew it, and spit it back at his face.

Even if it’s the last thing he’ll do.

“What’s the matter?”

Finally, Kido raises his gaze. His eyes meets the teacher’s, showing him how the eyes of someone with nothing else to lose really looked like.

“You scared?”
After hearing the boy’s cold voice once again, Kamoshida’s eyes were twitching in rage.

It was Kamoshida's move.

But never before someone had taken him this far.

Not in this kind of situations, not without him having a field advantage from the get go.

Even when he broke that punk’s leg, he had already decided the fate of the entire tracking team beforehand.

Sakamoto’s defiance was just an useful excuse back then.

Then why?

Why was someone who’s fate was already predetermined getting so much under his skin?

What was he afraid of?

The sound return to his ears.

The blackness around them lights up to his eyes. Kamoshida finally sees the figures of students and even the canteen employees looking at him with worried expressions.

“Oh.”

After a grunt he let’s go of the boy’s collar, trying to return to their previous position of him looking down at the boy.

“Heh, don’t you see? We all want you to go and spend the rest of your shitty life elsewhere. You better get lost, and don’t dare to show your disgusting face in front of me again!”

After that warning, the teacher walked away in an angry manner.

That was the difference between them, he had a façade he was forced to keep, while he only chose to display his at school.

‘Coward.’

Kido thought to himself.

He notices the eyes of the students were still silently gazing at him. Some faces were more surprised than others. Some were really quiet and timidly trying to look away as if nothing happened.

After meeting that diligent student, the school newspaper girl, the school cantinier, and even some clueless art club members, Takashi Kido realized that there were still some students that were trying their best to just live a normal life the best they could.

Regardless of them being aware of the happenings in the volleyball club and PE classes.

Probably, just probably, his school life could actually improve somehow without that negligible teacher being around.

“That was intense.”

After reaching the school gate and with no one around, the cat in his bag decided to show his face
again.

“A warning could be useful next time, you know?”

Only to find Kido’s grouse.

“What do you want from me? I’m not supposed to make noise remember?”

“You were supposed to be the eyes on the back of my head.”

The boy signals the back part of his head with one hand as he continues to walk away from school.

“What do you think I am? I’m not some magical radar that would alert you of the enemies power level getting closer or something!”

“Isn’t that what you do?”

“That’s In the meta-verse!”

Morgana voice stops as he emulates a cough.

“Still, it was impressive how you managed to stay calm the whole time, he’s has quite a threatening presence.”

“It’s hard to take anyone seriously after seeing them naked so many times.”

“You have a point. But that didn't sound right at all.”

The day wasn’t over yet, they still had some chores to do.

Regardless, Morgana’s point was something Kido didn’t take into consideration.

A few days ago, he was feeling exhausted by just trying to have normal interactions with people. If he was forced to have this encounter before, he probably would’ve not been able to handle it this way.

Maybe it was the thrill, maybe it was the handicap he was submitted to.

But Takashi Kido was sure of something, he could get used to this feeling quite easily.

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Interlude / Unofficial resolutions

Two salient blonde figures are wandering through the different stores in the central street area. They were looking for specific items for some time now, their last stop was the gigolo arcade.

“Seriously tho, why are we pickin’ these weird ass sodas?”

The young local Shujin Punk, Ryuji Sakamoto doesn’t seem to be pleased with his current assignment.

“Will you stop complaining? Takashi-kun said it helped us in the palace before, we tried some back
then, remember?”

The explanation came from the young beauty of Shujin, the eye catching Ann Takamaki. “Yeah, but, it was not that big of a help, we got tired quickly enough again.”

Says Sakamoto as he picks a can.

“Besides did you see those ingredients? ‘Blended with Placenta’? What the actual eff!?”

Of all people, Sakamoto didn’t strike her as someone who would read the products ingredients.

“Stop being so noisy, it’s probably just a joke ingredient name or something.”

She comes up with some vague explanation to quell the boy’s crescent doubts.

“Besides, you only get tired that quickly because you go around attacking everything that moves.”

“Those things creep me out, I’m just defendin’ myself!”

At this point Takamaki had given up and focused on loading her bag with some more sodas.

But for an obvious reason, most people visiting the arcade at these hours were young adults who were shooting some invasive glances at them.

“What is it?”

Ask the unsuspecting Sakamoto.

“I… it’s nothing, come on, arcades are no place for me after all.”

“Callin’ bullshit on that, you really liked vydia back in the day.”

“I still do, but it’s late, and there are only weirdos roaming around at these hours.”

She begins to walk away from the arcade as Sakamoto stops to take a look around.

“Someone was creepin’ you out?”

He asks.

“Not really, forget it.”

“Aight.”

After hearing her answer, he calmly passes by her with both his arms folded behind his head.

“That was quick!”

She says surprised.

“I ain’t gonna argue with you, you’ll just do whatever you want anyway.”

A selfless way of saying ‘I’m just following you around’.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

She brings her hands to her hips as she questions the punk boy.
“You know what I mean. You went to that palace by yourself just like that.”

“Really? I already apologized to you, and even thanked you for helping me, could you let it go?”

“That’s not what I mean…”

“Then what is it? I’m not helpful enough?”

“No, you’re great, is just that…”

“What…?”

“… You should know better than anyone…”

They were both standing outside the arcade. The brief silence between them turned into an awkward exchange of expectative stares.

Both were wearing serious expressions. But neither of them was bothering to take this too seriously.

They didn’t had to, after all, it was just the four of them going against that teacher’s castle. They couldn’t have the luxury of have a personal skirmish right now.

“… I see, you really suck when it comes to being subtle, huh?”

She knew what he meant, only because he had been doing his best avoiding the topic.

Her best friend got hurt by taking a ‘reckless’ decision. And Ann Takamaki herself got involved on that man’s tangle because of her friend.

She understood why Sakamoto would think twice before accepting her involvement. But he could surely understand her need to do so too.

“… Yeah, it’s not my thing… But I ain’t down with lettin’ more people get hurt because they involve themselves in my business, y’know?”

It was exactly as she expected, Sakamoto feared not for Ann’s capabilities to defend herself. But for her own decisions.

“Well, it’s my business too.”

“I know…”

He says while trying to look away. Doing his best to cope with the burden of lacking the tact and straightforwardness to say things like she does.

She lets a small sigh out as she picks up her march.

“Look, I know you can be kind of a jerk sometimes, so I won’t take what you say seriously anymore, if that’s what you want.”

This discussion started because the boy in front of her was feeling somewhat guilty for some reason. Or at least that’s what she grasped from his incessant need to bring back that unusual topic.

She admits that she wasn’t that familiar with this boy as she could have been. They both spent most of their earlier teenage days in the same middle school, yet they haven’t spent that much time together
since then. But if there’s something she knew about him, it’s that he was really prompt when it came to get over things and move on.

So he bringing up a bygone topic like that was very unusual from him.

“Fine… wait, that’s not! Ugh see what I mean?!”

She innocently giggles at him.

“Hehe, dummy, I know you mean no harm, it’s you we are talking about.”

Officially, he hasn’t apologized for screaming at her or for even implying her to be Kamoshida’s lover back then.

He tried to do it during their text exchange the night after she obtained her persona. But it ended in just her thanking him for some reason.

If she didn’t knew him from before, she could find his lack of sensitiveness infuriating. But after realizing how much of a hard time he was having trying to bring up that topic to give it some closure, she felt a little more at peace for some reason.

“How’d you suddenly turned this against me!?”

An indignant Sakamoto continues his protests.

“Quite easily…”

She says with a smug smile.

“Umm…”

Realizing there was not much he could add to the conversation after she suddenly became so friendly, he finally gives up.

“Come on, let’s go home, we have enough, besides someone’s giving me the eye again, and I’m tired.”

Takamaki starts walking away again.

“How do you notice those things?”

“By not being a complete klutz.”

“Are you messin’ with me?”

“I wouldn’t dare… Hey….”

The sudden quiet brings his attention back to Takamaki’s now frowning face. She struggles to word her questions properly without sounding awkward.

“What?”

“I was wondering, what was that whole deal with Kamoshida the other day?”

“Whatcha talkin’ ‘bout?”

He also frowns at the mention of the teacher’s name.
“The whole ‘YOU asking for crepes to him’ thing?”

“Oh that, I just felt like messin’ with him… I prolly shouldn’t have done it tho.”

Given the end result was Kamoshida taking his frustration out on Suzui the next day, he begins to question himself again.

“I mean, it was helpful, but it really felt like something way out your league.”

She notices the boy was stressing himself into guilt again.

“Whatever, it worked didn’t?”

And just like that, he was his usual self again.

“Yeah… Thanks.”

It was a simple answer he gave.

She welcomes his noble honesty with a timid smile.

“You said it yourself, that asshole is just a loser outside of school, we just need to expose him.”

Remembering how Kamoshida backed down of the scene back then proved that fact. The teacher was dependent of his public image, something that they had been deprived of.

The lack of it that they had soaked in until now.

“Yeah… no matter what.”

She supports his statement with one of her own.

Suddenly her phone starts ringing.

Scared at first she hesitates to look at the caller’s name, but a smile of relief fills her face once she decides to look.

“It’s Takashi-kun.”

She answers the call.

“Hi! Yes, we got all you asked, even those weird recover oils and odd morsel things.”

“This is not how I expected our supplies to be like.”

On the side, Sakamoto moans some more.

“Shush!”

After a while she just starts nodding at some seeming instructions coming from the other side of the line.

“What’d he say?”

“Only that we should go home, everything is ready on both parts… except for…”

She narrows her eyes while looking at Sakamoto.
“Heh! Now it’s my turn to shine!”

And to worsen her concern, he starts displaying a huge grin.

“You better not make it look as dumb as you! I couldn’t stand the embarrassment!”

“Chill, I got this. You better head home.”

He waves her off heading back to the station.

It was time, school was closed.

This was his chance to enter through the backdoor he purposely let unlocked earlier today.

“And don’t get caught!”

“Who you think you’re talkin’ to!?”

After a few seconds, the fast odd teenager boy disappears from her sight.

“… He’s such a dork.”

She looks down at her cell phone once again.

Lately she’s been hanging with these two ‘rascals’, doing her best to help them to bring that monster down.

So it was not strange that her last bunch of text messages were directed to both the boys individually and in a chat group Sakamoto created.

Still she couldn’t help but to remorsefully look at the last texts exchanges she had before them.

That one name she wishes was texting her back at any moment.

“Just wait Shiho, this for you.”

She will do her best to rest well and save her energy and resentment for that day.

The date of the staff meeting was May 2.

They’ll rest this day, and start their operation next Monday.

Interlude / Out

End of part 1

Chapter End Notes

New Persona - Arcana:
Tobi Katou (The Fool)
Author notes:
Dividing chapters in two parts will help me to improve my release schedule too…
Probably.
All them references… How many can you catch?
Cheers for following this story, and I hope to hear your opinions.
Update04/21/2018: corrected some grammatical mistakes.
The Death: Placebo Effect

Takashi Kido was standing in the middle of the residential area known as Yongen Jaya.

The boy was having a brief conversation on his phone.

“Great, tomorrow is the day, go home and rest well, okay?”

On the other line it was his female ally Ann Takamaki, who was acquiring other essential items that they’ll need during their heist next Monday.

“See you guys tomorrow.”

After hanging he takes a deep breath, this was one of the last errands he was supposed to do for the day.

One would think a boy of his age should been enjoying his Saturday afternoon with his friends, playing videogames or watching some movies, but he was obviously not an ordinary teenage boy anymore, he was looking for specific medicinal drugs that could help them through a future and possible gruesome skirmish.

“Okay… here we go.”

The boy walks into the clinic in the corner of the street.

“How can we get her to give us the medicine?”

Morgana asked as they reached for the door.

“I’ll come up with something.”

Once inside they notice they were in a quite empty waiting room.

The silence was lugubrious and the smell of hospital wasn’t precisely a welcoming atmosphere.

“Stay outside… just in case.”

He says as he notices the uninterested languid doctor reading a magazine at the other side of the counter.

“You sound scared.”

“… Please.”

Kido tries to sound confident as he lowers his back and walks towards the woman.

Her aura wasn’t threatening, yet for some reason Takashi Kido understood the risks of annoying someone with enough medical knowledge to prescribe some lethal pills cocktail of some sort.

‘She’s a doctor after all…’
The boy expands on his expectations of a goth/punk looking doctor fitting that notion he seems to have about doctors.

Even if it was a childish stereotype most people get over after their first medical tests where you get blood samples taken from you, no one can blame him for feeling some mistrust for some back alley doctor.

“Can I help you?”

“Uh…ummmm, I’ve been having strong headaches.”

“…”

‘She doesn’t buy it!’

The woman wasn’t taking her sharp and haggard glare away from him for at least thirty seconds, she made no gestures and remained still with her cold eyes glaring at him in silence, as if she was a pale fragile doll expecting to be moved by someone.

“I came for that rumored medicine.”

After gulping he finally gains enough courage to speak again, being as straightforward as he could.

“…Huh?”

The surprise was actually noticeable on her peering expressions.

Kido could come to appreciate the woman’s odd stoic beauty, if it wasn’t for her intrigued face quickly turning into an inquisitive frown.

“…”

“…”

The quiet in the room remained unbroken until the doctor finally decided to ask a question after taking her time to analyze the boy’s features.

“Regular medicine won’t do the trick for you?”

“… I have my reasons.”

She realized the boy was not going to step back without a minimum effort, so she surrendered her magazine for some more immediate form of entertainment.

“Fine… please enter the examination room.”

Once in the room, Kido is invited to sit down while the doctor remained close to the door.

“That medicine, huh?”

She lies back looking down her clipboard, not showing interest in hearing the boy’s answer.

“You really are so gullible to believe every rumor you hear around the streets?”

“…”

“… Not that I care of course.”
She sighs while looking over her shelf of herbal medicines on the back.

“I’m about to dispose of that medicine anyway. I got a little too carried away with it.”

“… Too carried away?”

“Hmhm. But tell me; why would someone like you care so much about something like that to go as far as to come here and ask me about it so directly?”

“I…”

The boy tried to look away from her guilt inducing brown eyes while trying to remember his already planned excuse.

“Open this door Takemi.”

But their conversation was interrupted by the voice of a man in a suit on the other side of the door. Once Takemi realizes who was standing outside, she lets out a dispirited sigh, and opens the door.

“Please wait for your turn like a normal patient.”

She says to the man who wasted no time entering to the room while still uninvited.

“Don’t give me that! You know why I came here… who’s this?”

The man notices the boy sitting in the middle of the room, not really looking at him but at the doctor, waiting for her reaction.

“A patient. You know this is a clinic, right?”

“Hmph. Like someone could want to take advice from the Plague.”

The woman puts her hand on the back of her head looking somewhat annoyed and fixed her sight back at Kido for a moment.

“… Excuse me kid, I…”

“No, let your ‘client’ hear this, I bet he’ll love it.”

“I’m going to call the police…”

She frowned at the man, but he only gave her a nagging smirk in response.

“Do it, I wonder what they’ll have to say about those illegal herbal drugs you’re fabricating without a permit.”

“… Everything in here is legal.”

“I’m willing to bet the contrary.”

Takemi only lets out a quiet grunt at the suit man’s mockery.

“You should know better Takemi, this is my last warning. Stop fabricating that drug, there’s a reason hospitals only take aid from the big pharmaceutical corporations for their procedures.”

“… Of course, long and expensive treatments with half assed drugs are more profitable for them.”
“And you should know better than to get in their way… A drug that can provide continuous physical endurance renovation, it’ll be like a source for unlimited power… You think this is some kind of joke? Can you imagine how much will that cost to our biz? How many careers you will ruin?”

“I can’t sleep because of it.”
She says sarcastically while looking away.

“You’re such a smart little girl, aren’t you?”

The man folds his arms showing no intention to go away.

“I have nothing to say to you, now could you please leave and avoid being hit by the door on your way out?”

“If you were better at your job you wouldn’t need to be selling these cheap drugs to punks like these, imagine if she-“

“I will call the police right now.”

Takemi snaps a quick retort at the man while taking her phone out.

“Heh.”

The man smiles, even if he didn’t have what he wanted, he seems to be appeased enough by sending the message he came to deliver.

“Now this better be the last time I have to come to this shithole.”

He says while turning away.

“I certainly hope so too.”

“Tch… And you, you better not say a word of what you heard here. Being near the plague will only infect you with her misery.”

Finally, the man leaves, letting the lethargic looking doctor with a bitter taste on her mouth as she grits her teeth.

“… Charming.”

Kido kills the silence trying to take the doctor’s mind back to the clinic.

“Indeed, but he’s right. I’m sorry but that made me lose the mood for playing games… what exactly are you here for?”

She turns around bringing her full attention to the boy in front of her again.

“I… need your medicine.”

“… I see.”

She closes and locks the door behind her while looking at the window to make sure that man was already gone.

“I’m not having a teenage boy trying to blackmail me into some ridiculous deal… If you want
regular medicine, you’ll have to pay for it.”

She was serious, the boy realizes her tone was not friendly, but he came all this way with a goal in mind, they needed these medicines to make sure they can survive their next dispute.

“Fine, how much.”

“… What do you want?”

“That medicine that man was talking about, that’s…”

“That’s beyond your budget, believe me. Besides, why would a boy your age want that?”
The annoyed doctor answered, she was expecting this outcome, of course this boy who came looking for a rumored strong medicine wouldn’t be satisfied with some cheap sleeping pills or some energizing prescriptions.

“I… need it for my exams…”

She looks at him with a disappointed look while she slowly starts to calm down, laying her back on the door once again.

“… Entrance exams, huh?”

Closing her eyes for a moment, she seems to be reminiscing something.

“I can understand entrance exams being a source of stress for most young people these days.”

She unlocks the door and steps away.

“But you can handle that with just a good sleeping schedule.”

That won’t do, he needed to convince her of the contrary, but he was running out of ideas.

Thinking fast was a challenge he wasn’t used to, but he welcomes the challenge as he tries to continue with the same approach hoping his persistence can breach an entry into her trust.

“I… really need it, I’ll pay you…”

“… Why? You don’t look athletic enough to be someone who sustains constant injuries, so…”

She takes her time again, thinking about the possible reasons a boy like this could be here, he obviously wasn’t send by that man, so that will also discards the idea of him working with the police to incriminate her.

“What exactly are you up to?”

“… It’s for brain power. I need to improve my concentration and reduce my fatigue.”

He used those few seconds she wasted analyzing possible reasons to come up with more excuses. It seems this had become a good mind exercise on its own for him.

“I have no obligation to help you with that.”

But her bluntness crushes his hopes for victory pretty quickly.

“Why don’t you have an energy drink sodas or something?”
She says uninterested.

“That won’t do…”

He was losing her. He needed to come up with another excuse quick.

On the outside, Takashi Kido looked calm and composed as always.

That was the boring facet everyone knew as Ren Amamiya.

He had that advantage as a good resiliency insurance in case he needed to show delude someone.

Yet on the inside the boy was continually trying to come up with more ideas and excuses.

But he was swiftly coming up with reasons for why each one of those ideas won’t work at the same time, forcing himself to come up with one last desperate resort.

’Begging?’

He could play to her heart strings.

It felt dirty and low but for him, he was at war with her indifference.

“Please… I’ll do anything.”

He looked at her doing his best to look as sad as he could.

But given this boy’s naturally stoic face isn’t used to convey many emotions at once, the best he could get was a tired looking expression with big shiny eyes.

“Those puppy eyes won’t help you… Ugh, you’re really annoying you know that?”

The doctor tries her best to sound angry. But it seems the attack was effective enough for her to drop her guard a little.

It was enough for the boy to gain enough participation from the woman to stretch the conversation some more, as he sits up straight once again.

“As I told you, it’s expensive. A high school kid can’t get his hands on this… So, just go home.”

She wasn’t yielding, but neither was he.

It became a test of endurance for both at this point.

“I’m not leaving until we make a deal.”

He bluntly says with a serious face, at this point it didn’t matter if he was shattering his previous facades.

He ran out of options and this was the most honest answer he had given her so far.

“A deal…?”

She got an idea…

Suddenly her eyes darkened and her disturbing and yet smooth glare sends a shiver down Kido’s spine.
“… Hmmm, do you consider yourself someone with a good amount of stamina?”

The boy wasn’t leaving, and that realization was annoying her out of her usual and comfortable apathetic safe zone.

In her mind he was something like a parasitic form of life that clings to some other bigger animal for their own prosperity.

But at the same time, those bigger animals take advantage of those parasites somehow.

“… I guess.”

She only lets a shady giggle out while hiding the lower part of her face behind her clipboard.

Kido gulps, whatever this dark physician had in mind it won’t be good for him.

He knew this kind of aura all too well.

“I’m having some trouble during the development of that drug I’m making, you know? The reason I couldn’t make a stable sample so far was because I had no human test subjects for it.”

“I-I see…”

He didn’t like where this was going.

“I even put some ads in the news papers, but it was no good… so, are you up for it?”

Test subjects, as injections and blood samples?

He was up for that, but he was really afraid of the idea that this specific doctor wasn’t going to perform simple tests like those to him.

But at the same time this was his only and possible last chance to gain her trust.

“A-allright.”

Regardless of the impact her attitude has on him, he thinks he had learnt how to deal with this kind of ominous presence during all his life.

It was time for him to put all his training into practice, and endure this overwhelming mortality awareness caused by the languid doctor’s aura.

“Heh. Really now…”

Takemi smiles wryly.

“Ok then. You’ll be participating in clinical trials for my drug development, now wait here for a bit.”

She comes back soon with a glass of red liquid, it looked dense and let out a strong inadequate smell.

Kido could feel the sweat on the back of his neck.

“Here, drink it.”

“W-what’s this?”

She smiles to herself again, feeling a small satisfaction after the boy’s reaction.
“Relax, my autopsy is guaranteed to find out exactly what killed you.”

She says proudly.

‘Autopsy!?’

“Changed your mind? The exit is right there.”

He won’t give up. She is certainly as menacing as he expected her to be.

The woman has that same morbid sense of humor he’s so used to, so she can’t be too serious.

It must be a test of some sort.

Or at the very least, that was what his survival instinct was hoping for.

“Well, bottoms up!”

“Huh…? You actually drank it!?"

It was bitter, but nothing he couldn’t handle given how used he was getting to Sakura’s spicy curry.

“Yep.”

He says proudly.

“Wow… Still doing Ok, huh?”

But the doctor regained her serenity quite quickly as she started looking at her watch without paying much attention to the boy anymore.

“H-hey.”

The boy felt a chill as he realized the doctor was seriously just counting the seconds now.

Meaning whatever he just drank wasn’t part of a prank.

And then it happened, the effect of the drink came to him in full force. The shocking chemical reaction overcame him, and he fell unconscious to the ground.

“… Welp, game over I guess.”

With that the Grim Reaper had come early to collect his youngest victim that day.

…

His eyes open, and the first thing on his sight were the long pale legs of the Goth looking doctor.

It was a sight he wasn’t able to fully appreciate given how heavy his eyes felt.

“You’re finally awake… How do you feel?”

He looks at his surroundings. He was still in the examination room alongside the now sitting doctor Takemi.

But he was resting on the clinic’s bed this time.

“I… I’m fine I guess.”
“That was not what I expected from you, but it seems the drug worked perfectly for someone of your height and weight.”

The boy scratched his head.

He had no idea how long he was asleep and probably not fully capable of thinking straight yet.

“Herbal medicines?”

He burbled. It was the first thing that came to his mind for some reason.

“It’s natural, yes.”

Not paying much attention to his words she continued taking notes on her clipboard.

Once he sits up in the bed, she rests her elbows on ever her knees bending down to see the boy’s face who was timidly trying to hide his dizziness under his hair.

She looks at the boy with a curious face.

He was cuter than she originally thought.

Especially while looking like this.

“But I have to admit it, you’re a brave kid. Coming to a shady clinic after hearing some rumors, and drinking some weird medicine just like that… You know? That’s usually how people end up with one less kidney, or worse.”

“You don’t look that bad…”

He still was having trouble regaining full control of his capabilities, thus wording things incorrectly was an expected reaction.

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“I-…”

He stops himself before saying something like ‘You look great’ to embarrass himself further.

His reaction put a contented smile on the doctor’s face once again.

“I’m Takemi, Tae Takemi.”

She says as she relaxes on her chair.

“I’m… Ren Amamiya.”

“Huh? Do you happen to bring rain with you everywhere you go?”

“… It’s raining?”

Finally the boy’s eyes are fully opened as he tries to look at the window.

“For a while now, yes.”

“How long was I asleep?”
“Long enough, you are very healthy for your age. It seems you needed the catnap.”

Trying not to think about what she meant by ‘very healthy’, he takes a look at the doctor’s desk.

Beside some weird bottles full of some strange yellowish substances, it was the empty glass he drank before.

The image brought an unsavory sensation back to him.

“What was that?”

“Human blood?”

She says jokingly but with a serious face.

“… Are you a vampire?”

He narrowed his eyes at her.

“That’s cute. Do you remember anything after you took the medicine?”

“I… don’t”

“You briefly woke up from your coma, but you were completely dazed during the entire examination.”

‘Coma?’

“Was I?”

“Yes, but it was more easy to handle your semi unconscious body that way.”

“Handle?”

The cold sweating came back.

“… You eventually lost consciousness and fell back asleep.”

Kido takes a look at his phone, it was 7pm now.

He had been asleep for 2 hours.

“It also seems you have a good sense of taste.”

He looks at her curiously.

“T-thanks?”

“Not style… taste, you lost consciousness because of the medicine produces a foul smell when it mixes with gastric juices, similar to surstromming.”

“Isn’t that the most disgusting fish in existence?”

“Pretty much.”

“Oh.”
There was an almost undistinguished green tone occupying Kido’s usual pale face.

“But thanks to you I was able to get some valuable data.”

“… Did I say anything while I was dizzy?”

He pauses his thoughts.

Kido didn’t really want to know, but he was afraid he’ll say something incriminating about the real motives behind this visit.

“… Hmmm, I think you confused me with one of your parents waking you up for school or something, nothing unusual or very embarrassing… sadly.”

“…”

He felt relieved and abashed at the same time, it was not something he’ll wish to go through again.

“So… you know what this mean do you?”

The doctor had a scary smile.

It was obvious she had the upper hand in their deal, and she was enjoying every second of it.

“Yeah, I won’t tell anyone… and you’ll keep your word, right?”

“Of course.”

She says, relaxing on her chair.

After a few more minutes, the door opens and the cat that was sleeping on the floor jumps back as if it was an instinctive reaction.

His hispid fur returns to normal once he realizes the identity of the person who ruined his catnap was Takashi Kido himself.

“Hey, you’ve been there for a while… what’s up with you? You look terrible!”

But as soon as the boy lowers his bag for the cat to climb up, he notices the boy’s face displayed a tired and scrambled expression.

“I think I died.”

He says in an emotionless voice.

“It can’t be that bad.”

Morgana tries to cheer up the boy by putting his small pawn over his shoulder from the bag.

“Are you sure this will work?”

The boy asks.

“Yes, as long as we believe it’ll be… I think.”

“So these medicines work like some sort of placebo over there?”
“I don’t know how it works, but I’m sure that it’ll have an effect no matter what, but the stronger the medicine is, the better the effects will be.”

“I see.”

“Relax, you’ll realize this was worth the try.”

“I sure hope so…”

With a slow pace, the boy makes his way to LeBlanc, terrified of how frightful the price of having this doctor’s contact info could mean for his health.

Cutoff 1

It was Saturday night, the boy was offered to help Sojiro Sakura around the shop that evening, but he had to pass.

He wasn’t feeling good enough to endure more of what he believed would be just added adult vexation for today.

Instead, to his feline companion’s recommendation he decided to go to bed early after making a short visit to the bath house across the street.

As tired as he felt, his mind had been playing him bad episodes through the day.

Not making things easier for his counterfeit calm appearance to remain firm.

From the odd feeling of pleasure at the sight of those demons being executed in front of him, to this odd quickening state he noticed after confronting Kamoshida once again after school.

He wasn’t really making peace with his anxiety at night.

The dread that man had for him was something that added an extra dose of uneasiness.

He wasn’t aware of how much he hated his guts until then, and most certainly he didn’t care, but on the other hand that put a scary thought on his mind….

He was aware that teacher was ready to go far enough to incriminate him for his assault to Shiho Suzui, but now he was forced to confront the prospect of actually failing to change his heart.

Kido didn’t bothered thinking what could happen if they failed to change his heart next Monday because he really never had the time to sit and contemplate things because of how focused they were on reaching the treasure.

So far they were pursuing this endeavor mostly to make him pay for his already committed sins.

They had to wait for the right moment, they had to be ready.

But will he ever be ready to accomplish such a feat?

And for what purpose, he wondered.

Days pass by without anything changing, again and again people continue their lives without paying notice to those who are being broken down and discarded by the world.
What difference will they make on their daily life if they succeed?

… And how many days had passed by now?

It was indeed a weird feeling.

He was in school, he shouldn’t be there.

“That’s him, they finally got him!”

“Good riddance!”

He should have never been there…

He walks through the gates.

A heavy weight was pressing his chest.

He felt suffocated.

His phone was constantly ringing but he couldn’t force himself to pick up.

He was too afraid to do it.

The cold sweat was running from the back of his head down to his spine.

It was no fair… nothing in life was fair.

Those people were still mocking him, he could hear their voices too clearly now.

He couldn’t filter them away like he used to anymore.

‘Go away! Leave me alone!’

He thought, but he couldn’t speak, words wouldn’t come out no matter how hard he tried.

He ran, ran as fast as he could sweating more profoundly as he reaches the station.

His phone never stopped ringing the whole time.

He needed to go somewhere safe.

Some place where he could be isolated from this hunting world.

LeBlanc, that was the safest place he knew in this dreadful city.

He ran… ran to that place he could feel safe for at least this day.

“You’re back… but school isn’t over, isn’t?”

The barista asked the boy, but he still wasn’t able to open his mouth, he needed to sit, he was tired, so tired… Why?

‘Why?’

‘Why?’
‘Why?’
Why should he bother helping those people?
Why should he bother feeling any sympathy for them?
After all, nobody was there to help him when he needed it the most…
Nobody felt bad for him…
That was why he couldn’t do it.
It would’ve been all in vain anyway…
What use there was for him to go so far, only to continue to have his future dictated to him.
… Why should he bother?
Ann Takamaki, Ryuji Sakamoto, even Morgana and Leblanc’s boss, they’ve become faceless dwellers of this city like everyone else in this city to him now.
There was no point anymore.
His phone rang once again.
Maybe it was because he was finally in this café, a safe place, a place no one would follow him.
A place no one could take him out to that world that hurt so bad again.
He slowly brought his hand down his pocket, picking the Smartphone with great hesitation.
He grits his teeth while unlocking the screen.
There were a lot of missing calls.
He didn’t try to look at them and swiped over to the chat group.

Ann: I’m going alone!

Ryuji: I’m going too, wait!

Hours had passed until there was another text.

Ryuji: Ann, answer me!

Ryuji: Takashi we have to do something!

A dead silence filled the room.
The only perceivable sound was the pendulum clock ticking on the back.

Tic Toc.

His breathing intensified its pace.

“Hey-”

“… Coffee good for you?”
He raises his sight to see the gentle and worried face of the barista serving him a cup of coffee.

The shop door opens.

Three dark figures enter the shop.

Jirou Kamiya looks down at the boy.

“It seems you were just some problematic scumbag beyond help after all…”

The boy stays silent.

He knows why the cops were here.

In the end, he couldn’t do it.

He couldn’t manage to care enough.

Not for them, not for himself.

“You’re a suspect of provoking a girl’s suicide at your school, she passed away yesterday night, the man who filed the charges was Suguru Kamoshida, a teacher from your school. You know him, right?”

The boy was shaking.

It wasn’t rage nor it wasn’t fear, it was pure frailty.

He knew exactly what was going to happen next.

Still, he couldn’t open his mouth.

It was like if his mouth was sewed shut and there was nothing he could do about it.

“Didn’t I tell you to behave yourself!?”

Sakura scolds the boy one last time.

“Another girl that supposedly was close to you at your school apparently is missing too. We’ll take you for interrogation.”

“I- I did nothing wrong!”

Finally his voice breaks free, but it was too late.

“What a disappointment.”

Sakura affirms.

“Take him away.”

It was done, Ann Takamaki, Ryuji Sakamoto, Morgana, Shiho Suzui, and his future, were taken away from him.

The sound of unlocked handcuffs is the last thing he hears, being forced to rest his face over the bar.

And then, he feels a sharp prick on his wrists.
“Gah!”

He wakes up.

Bringing his hand over his chest he tries to ease his heavy breathing.

He looks down at the scar on his wrists.

The pain was as palpable as it was that same night.

“Hey, are you ok? You had a nightmare or something?”

He hears the boyish voice coming from his side.

“… Y-yeah, sorry if I woke you up.”

The cat tilts his head looking at him worried.

“It’s fine, it’s almost time to get up anyway. What are we doing today?”

The cat scratches the back of his ear with his back pawn casually.

Kido manages to pacify his breathing after taking a deep breath, looking down at his hand over the sheets he touches his legs.

The sunlight began to slowly raise from the other side of his window. The rain had stopped, and the sound of birds was audible at these hours.

It was a really beautiful day outside.

The boy looks at the window with an emotionless expression.

“… We should train.”

He says quietly, throwing away the sheets and sitting up on his bed.

“Are you sure? Resting was a good idea, your idea.”

“Yes… but we can’t allow ourselves to be unprepared for tomorrow, I’ll make some extra tools too.”

He takes out his phone, checking out the group chat to see if anything has been posted… just in case.

After a while he types out something.

**Takashi:** How’s the calling card going Ryuji?

**Ryuji:** I’ll post it later today, so no one would see it.

**Ann:** How do you plan on entering the school on Sunday?

**Ryuji:** I let the back door unlocked yesterday.

**Ryuji:** I’m a genius, am I?

**Ann:** Sure

**Takashi:** Good. Rest well for today guys.
Kido doesn’t bother looking to their answers as he gets up of bed.

The cat follows him as they both stretch at the same time looking almost like they were doing some synchronized rehearsal.

There was no turning back.

Tomorrow was the day of the heist, the boy decided to work out his body for now.

Bringing a chair closer he tries to reach the ceiling wood joists, but Morgana climbs on his back reaching the joists first.

The cat makes himself comfortable while looking down at the boy.

“Fine, I’ll help you.”

The frizzy haired boy smiles wryly at his roommate.

He would take advantage of this free day to make the last preparations, and take out of his mind of whatever image of failure he had feared.

Because his friends were counting on him.

**Interlude / Calling card: Lust**

The morning of the last Monday of April was a beautiful day for the PE Teacher as he strutted down the Shujin Academy halls, his halls.

It has been a good day so far especially due to the absence of two specific characters.

The teacher usually walks the corridors early in the morning and after school, going the extra mile to just check if everything is good along the students, to see if anyone could cause any trouble inside his school.

The other teachers praise him for being so attentive.

He’s the most athletic and more disciplined teacher of the faculty.

Everyone looks up to him.

And that’s how it should be, he was someone who struggled his whole life to reach such a respectable position.

Everybody should be looking up to him.

That’s one of the reasons he decided to stay at this school after his life as an athlete was over; to become a life instructor.

Someone people could put their easy gullible prospects on him and so he could be appreciated for what he truly was, an extraordinary man.

Someone that was outside the mold of the common man.
Someone who was outstanding enough to lead these strayed teenagers to be ready for the gruesome reality that waits for them once they’ve finished their school life.

It was only fair that someone who had sacrificed so much for the good of the society’s future, for these kids, to have a liberty or two from time to time.

That’s what Suguru Kamoshida thought when it came to his role in life.

The ‘liberties’ he took were just a spit on the face to the world that had taken so much from him.

Once a career threatening injury forced him to surrender his life as an athlete, he was so quickly discarded by everyone.

Everything that he worked so hard for was taken from him.

But he didn’t give up. He struggled and fought to get a position in the school that had witnessed his raise to glory.

He was the image of sacrifice and perseverance.

And then, he had shown the world and to those who irresponsibly continued through their lives without noticing his existence that he was still the ruler of his fate.

“A calling card?”

“I heard it was already posted here by the time everyone got here this morning.”

The voices of a bunch of unsettled teenagers drew the teacher’s attention to a bulletin board near the school entrance.

“Does that mean the rumors are true?”

“Who are these phantom thieves of heart people?”

Red cards were filling the spaces through the wall and the board.

The cards were placed in such a way that the kanjis for "Kamoshida Suguru" could be read on the distance.

That got his attention.

His face immediately turned red with exasperation as he started reading the message printed in each card in a collage of distinct styles of kanji fonts.

-“Sir Suguru Kamoshida. The utter bastard of Lust. We know how shitty you are, and that you put your twisted desires on students that can’t fight back…”-

The gall , the cheek, the arrogance… he couldn’t conceive it.

-“That’s why we have decided to steal away those desires and make you confess your sins. This will be done tomorrow, so we hope you’re ready. The Phantom Thieves of Hearts.”-

He was fuming, who could dare, who could be so childish and naïve to go as far as to provoke him?

He was supposed to be the most respectable figure this school had to offer, everything he had and everything he’s done, he deserve it.
If it was up to him, every girl in this building should be begging him on their knees to be looked at by him… to serve him, to be chosen by him.

That’s how he saw it.

They had no right to be with anyone else but him.

Kamoshida always thought he was the living example of what as alpha male was supposed to be like.

A lion on his prime ruling his own litter.

“Who’s responsible for this…!?”

He took upon that role for them.

And by doing so he’ll teach them how this cruel world works.

Everyone was safe under his rule in this school.

As long as they did what he said and as long as they didn’t defied him, they should live honored to be his slaves.

And he’ll protect them from the real world until they cease to be the useful virgin meat they were supposed to be.

Yet, there was someone in this school with the nerve to challenge him, to humiliate him in front of his possessions.

“Did you do this!?”

He looks around to the agglomerated students.

There was that punk from first year that tried to avoid entering the volleyball team.

‘He couldn’t… he was a coward who just hid during PE classes.’

“Or was it you?!”

The girl who ran away from classes last Saturday.

‘She wouldn’t do it, I know her uncle.’

He thought as he realized he wasn’t interested in such a bland specimen anyway.

The students ran away scared.

This only pissed him off more, who could dare to do this?

He turns around towards the doors heading to the practice building.

He needed to reflect on this on his PE room.

But then he sees them.

Of course, there they were… the figures of the three most irritating teenagers he could imagine.
The three were always hanging away from the rest of the students.

They were silently eavesdropping at him, just like a bunch of hyenas waiting for their prey to fall death.

They were hiding in the shadows at the corner of the corridors.

Their faces were darkened and he couldn’t see their eyes, but he could see the smirks of the three troublesome teenagers.

These delinquents… they were looking down at him, mockingly.

Even Takamaki was with then.

She has been spoiled by those brutes by becoming one of them.

“You…”

The shine in the frizzy haired boy’s glasses made him clench his fist out of pure disgust.

That boy had always been a sore thump since day one.

He never knew his place, he never yielded at him.

His presence only caused him more and more inconvenience.

“What if it was?”

He steps just a few feet near them, he knows the answer already, just by looking at their grins.

They were invalidating everything he was with just looking at him that way.

“What if it was?”

He said so calmly. So composed.

The teacher could feel a vein almost burst on his forehead.

This boy, he was unforgivable.

“What garbage.”

That frizzy haired boy probably felt he was so imposing… he couldn’t let that be.

He had to calm down himself…

“Eh, it’s not a problem. You’ll be expelled soon enough anyway.”

But he couldn’t hold himself much longer.

He had to believe what he just said.

As the sacrificed sportsman he was, he had been told that he’ll never be successful from a young age.

That he’ll be nothing but a peasant his entire life.

But he overcame that and became the most important person in his school.
He was Indispensable, irreplaceable.

He became the king of this school… HIS school.

Then these punks came to his domain trying to trick him and take away his rights.

They defied his authority and his own merits.

And now they treat him like this. It was truly unforgivable.

He’ll kick them out, he’ll make their lives miserable… no, he’ll destroy them, all three of those miserable fiends… he’ll kill them.

And by doing so he’ll protect his kingdom.

“Come, steal it if you can!”

His presence was the most towering and threatening existence in his school right now.

He wasn’t about to let them do as they please.

It was definitive.

Suguru Kamoshida wasn’t just going to teach them a lesson.

He’ll wait for them to do whatever they’re planning, and he’ll take them out like the animals they’re.

The school corridors were empty as classes were starting.

Interlude / Out

Thus always to tyrants: Hunger

Security Alert level 99%

The impact of the calling card would only last one day, an impact that can’t be repeated, a shock that causes the treasure to manifest in this world, allowing them to steal it.

Today was the day, the phantom thieves infiltrate Kamoshida’s castle, to steal his heart.

“Don’t let your guard down!”

The shadowy figures of the intruders were skipping around the castle’s walls, chandeliers and roofs.

They reached the throne room in no time.

The high alert level made the whole area too dangerous for any mistake.

So they were doing their best to avoid any conflict so far.

But things were looking easy enough. One would say too easy.
The tangible manifestation of the PE teacher’s treasure was a giant crown.

Not very amused the trespassers started their thievery.

“T-treasure!!”

But Joker noticed something was off with their feline companion.

“M-meeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaooowh!”

The shine in Mona’s eyes reflected the radiance of the treasure.

To tell the truth the teenagers felt somewhat offended that this perverted and distorted teacher’s heart had kept such a marvelous looking treasure.

But whatever contemplation they were having was suddenly interrupted by Mona’s sudden nippy flying hug to the crown.

“Uh… what’s wrong with the cat?”

Skull wondered much to Mona’s inattention as the cat continued to embrace the crown with great excitement.

“This is not the time for something like this, Mona.”

Joker quiet voice seems to have restored Mona’s consciousness somewhat as the feline being descends from his treasure cuddling adventure.

“Oh, yeah… Forgive for displaying such an insolent sight in front of a lady…”

An ashamed Mona worded.

It was not an easy task to take such a giant object with them without being noticed.

To Joker and the rest of the phantom thieves this was obviously some sort of trap.

It wasn’t until they reached the throne room once again that the volley ball of expectation finally came down at them by smashing the crown out of their hands.

As it rolled down the floor the crown began to shrink into a more realistic form, only to be seized by the king himself.

To the thieves surprise the familiar figure of a blonde model wearing a bikini and a cat ears coronet came running down to hug the pervert King as if rewarding him.

Apparently the cognitive versions of people won’t just disappear even once they’ve been killed.

“About time you showed up….”

Joker remarked while shooting a disgusted glare at the king.

“That’s how he sees me… right?”

It was understandable Panther wouldn’t really remember most of her last encounter with that doppelganger doll who was constantly twisting her fingers around Kamoshida’s nipple under his robe.
Back then her instinctive reaction was to kill that aberration.

But after the rest of the team explained the meaning behind the existence of that fake Ann Takamaki, she couldn’t help herself to feel even more disgusted than before.

“I won’t let anyone touch this! I will kill anyone who dares to touch it!”

The king mocked the thieves as he pulled the crown up and down to his hands.

The crown was the core of his world after all.

It validated him as a king, of course he was willing to kill for him to remain as such.

“Yo pervert! Is this supposed to be your ambush?”

Skull returned the mocking tone to the king.

There weren’t any knights around this time, only the king and the thieves.

“I only made it easier to find you. I’ll dispose of you myself, right here, right now!”

The King’s face displayed animosity.

“That’s our line you sexually-harrassin’ D-bag!”

“What a selfish misunderstanding…”

But after taking upon the skull masked thief, Shadow Kamoshida’s face changed to a more arrogant expression.

“Misunderstanding?”

The other thieves turned around after hearing their female ally voice almost fracturing.

“… You were abusing people in secret, ruining their lives!”

Doing her best to contain her anger, she was doing her best to come to some sort of understanding behind this monster’s mind machinations.

Ann Takamaki could understand the human need to search for amusement.

She herself found that things like secretive practices could bring excitement even to someone like her.

It was an almost innocent thrill, becoming a phantom thief.

And even though she wouldn’t consider herself an innocent or naïve person. She understood the need for some people to find pleasure even behind things like pain and cruelty, but there was a line she clearly discerned and felt every other human being should.

The line that is breached the moment you start hurting the unwilling.

Something this twisted king found great pleasure on.

That… she couldn’t understand it.

No, Ann Takamaki couldn’t tolerate it to this extend.
“Heh, It’s not my problem they decided to kept it a secret, you know?”

It felt wrong to agree with this distorted king.

They knew where he was coming from.

Not only the victims, but the parents and teachers, all kept the cycle of abuse going by deciding to ignore its consequences.

He wasn’t finishing justifying himself.

“These adults who want to partake in my accomplishments, those students who have the drive to become winners… They will protect (adore) me so we all may profit from it.”

His arrogant smile turned into a disturbing devilish smirk.

Was this really his attempt for absolution?

The phantom thieves realized the dim reality they were facing in the real world from the very beginning.

That was the original reason behind them going this far in the first place.

But hearing it from the king himself as if he was trying to rationalize his sins was simply a preposterous spectacle.

“Too many imbeciles don’t get that…”

Skull and Panther held their anger by clenching their fists as the king started to descent from the stairs beneath his throne.

“Including naïve brats like you and that girl that tried to kill herself!”

Joker assumed a defensive position, hoping the king’s words weren’t getting the best of his companions.

“She may be an idiot… By letting herself be manipulated by someone you… trying to commit suicide.”

Both Joker and Skull wouldn’t take their eyes away from the approaching perverted king.

But they kept close attention towards the heartbroken voice of their blonde twin tailed thief companion.

“… I may be no better for not realizing it sooner.”

She prepared herself for battle this time.

“But no matter how foolish someone can be, they don’t need your permission to live their lives!”

Realizing the threatening attitude of the three young adults before him, the king’s tone also changes into an aggressive stand.

“Drop the attitude you mediocre peasant, There’s nothing wrong in using my gifts for my gain!”

"I'm cut above all other humans."
Said the darker side of the PE teacher while raising his crown and tightening his grip on the fake princess.

"That hairstyle says otherwise."

Mocked the white masked boy.

Joker was trying to cut through the King’s fixated attention, or more likely, his focused targeting of the blonde intruder wearing a red latex outfit by stepping in between them.

“You are less than a human being. You are just a goddamn demon obsessed with your sick desires!”

Panther voice finally reached her most biting pitch.

One thing was for sure.

Joker, along with his friends, were all waiting to have this chance to finally punish the king with their own hands.

But the King reaction was an unexpected one.

“Hehehehe.”

A sicken chuckle.

A demon?

Suguru Kamoshida’s shadow was certainly the representation of his most concealed ambitions and drive.

Yet in his search for validation, he believes that he strived through his whole life to find a dignified account of himself in the eyes of the rest of world.

But he was constantly denied the recognition he thought he always deserved for his sacrificed lifestyle.

How far he has gone to have it that way… it didn’t matter to him anymore.

Somehow the day had come when he finally he had been confronted by those who were just like him in his mind.

And they decided to look at him… as a demon?

So, maybe that was just it….

Maybe Suguru Kamoshida was exactly that.

“You’re right… I am not like you!”

For some reason this was a hilarious realization for the man who forced his immediate surrounding world to worship his existence and fear his resentment.

Being a demon… it wasn’t that bad.

If that’s how everyone would end up looking at him like in the end.

Then, why couldn’t he just embrace it…?
That way he can finally move over all the sins that prevented him to reach that absolute veneration and recognition.

And he could get whatever he wanted from the world that kept trying to deny him of all his ambitions.

That way he can rejoice in every pleasure he sees fit to his sovereignty.

That’s right; Suguru Kamoshida didn’t needed their permission to enjoy himself.

For he always got what he deserved.

If that made him a demon in the eyes of those who couldn’t grasp his gloriousness, then he’ll be just that.

All he had to do was eradicate those who opposed his wishes to prove he’s right.

“I am the demon… WHO RULES THIS WORLD!”

And that was Suguru Kamoshida’s cognition of himself.

With that the transformation began.

His size increased, his skin color reddened.

He had a crown, a grail, four arms, horns and a gigantic tongue that was drooling all over himself.

That was the form of the demon of lust Kamoshida turned into.

It was the form of Suguru Asmodeus Kamoshida, the meta-verse demon of lust.

“What the hell?”

Skull yelled in surprise.

A giant deformed and grotesque figure overwhelmed their line of sight.

The form of the king was big enough to almost hit the chandelier hanging from the roofs.

“I’m allowed to do whatever the hell I want!”

Shadow Kamoshida yelled at his challengers.

He held a giant kitchen knife and fork on two of his main two hands.

The other two held a chain and a gigantic cup of whine… with Takamaki’s doll inside.

This was the real form of the prison school star teacher.

He was the man who wronged so many lives because of his ill yearnings.

The white masked boy couldn’t tolerate his presence any longer.

"I grow weary of talking. Let’s finish this!"

A disgusted Joker yells back at the monster, signaling for the start of the battle.
“Nnngh... GRAAAAAAAGHHH!”

Like a bunch of hound dogs, the phantom thieves surrounded their target.

They all had expected it’ll come to this, and they welcomed the idea.

The original plan was to inflict a worthy punishment to this twisted king anyway.

And now they’ll finally have their chance.

Yet they had to be ready to take advantage of any opportunity to take the crown away from him.

The rogues try to form a perimeter around the gigantic monster.

The Demon didn’t let them just move around without notice though.

With a whip of the chains on his left hand, he brings out a bunch of peons who wore masks made of iron.

Just like the volleyball club members imprisoned in the dungeons.

Each one of them has a volley ball in their hands, and they were planning on use them as weapon.

“Look out!”

Skull warns his allies as he notices the enemies charging and firing in a synchronized way.

Panther whiplash lashes through the many volleyballs aimed at her with great precision, being an instinctive reaction or not, she walked unharmed of that attack.

What followed was Kamoshida’s gigantic tongue trying to constrict her.

She jumps back but she seems to have underestimated the tongue’s reach, ending up being trapped by it.

“Let go of me!”

Before she could close her eyes at the disgusting sight of the monster Kamoshida trying to swallow her up, a splash of blood monopolizes her sight.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAH”

The sound of Shadow Kamoshida’s scream was a good signal for her, but what she didn’t realized was that she was on a free fall from 6 meters in the air.

“Aaaaaa-!”

Her scream is silenced before hitting the ground.

It was because her classmate, Joker, had cached her in his arms right before the impact while managing to land on his feet and roll in the floor to slow down the fall’s momentum.

“Ah! T-thanks.”

He nodded at her before readying himself for the next attack.

She had no time to feel flustered since they were in the middle of a battle.
She quickly shook her head trying to make sense of what just happened.

Eventually everything made sense to her.

The cut on Shadow Kamoshida’s tongue was perpetrated by this white masked boy, and as soon as she started falling he followed her drop with a greater speed.

His cat-like reflexes helped him to do everything in such an elegant and perfectly manner that she felt more awed than embarrassed at the idea of being princess carried by this boy just a few moments ago.

“We can use some sort of opening to attack… we have to weaken him enough to return to his previous form!”

Joker warned as Shadow Kamoshida was recovering.

They needed an opening and if Mona’s words were right, this form was just an aspect they needed to get ridden of before facing the true shadow once again.

“How are we goin’ to do that tho?”

Asks an agitated Skull who was trying to catch up with the conversation while drawing a dazzled Shadow Kamoshida’s attention away from them.

“Already got that covered.”

Says the white masked thief while looking at the chandelier right above the demonic King.

“Keep him busy!”

He says with a big grin on his face, proceeding then to charge towards his enemy while taking out his now silver flaming mask.

“Tobi Katou!”

What followed was a quick precise strike of summoned winds fixated at the center of the King’s giant cup in front of him.

“HEY, don’t touch that cup!”

After both Panther and Skull took a quick peek at the structure above the king, they notice two sparkling blue eyes aiming directly at their target from the chandelier.

With a grin of their own at the realization of Joker’s plan they proceed to follow their triumph card ally on his charge.

“AGI!”

“Let’s go Captain!”

Meanwhile both of his allies attacked the rest of his body.

But the previous distorted scream from the king brought wary to the wild card user.

It was not the demon himself who startled him next, but the contents of the gigantic cup he had assaulted a few moments ago.
He could see at the distance the stack of female legs coming out at the top of the cup.

“I need healing!”

The image paralyzed him as the king took a bunch of those girls with his gigantic fork, and proceeded to swallow them up.

“Heh, much better.”

The King’s misshapen face displayed a creepy smile.

“What the eff!?”

Skull was out of words as it was Panther, but their astonishment didn’t last much as Asmodeus Kamoshida began his counter attack immediately.

Volleyballs were fired at the speed of sound from the distance towards the two blonde thieves, who still managed to evade the shots by jumping behind some pillars.

But their white masked companion wasn’t so fortunate.

He was the closest to the King’s reach, given he remained still during his last charge.

His bewilderment wouldn’t allow him to retreat in time.

And although the King’s strike didn’t manage to fully pierce him, he still fell victim of the king’s slyness.

He pulled the fork out of the floor and using the recoil as a catapult, he threw the black haired thief to the other side of the room.

Joker's body could not withstand the dull shock of the impact of the giant kitchen utensil, getting knocked down just a few feet away from the blonde duo.

Skull was in trouble, as soon as he got out of his cover a great roar tore through his ears followed by a great shock that slammed into his shoulder.

The next thing he knew was that he was lying on the floor face first.

He, no, his persona was attacked by Kamoshida’s giant knife.

The boy was sent flying at the same time his tamed self received the impact of the attack.

“Dammit!!”

“This has gotten to be a real pain in the ass.”

Both boys complained as their target remained immovable.

Joker shook his head that was hazy with pain and desperately tried to bring some clarity back to his mind.

“BERITH!”

He needed to endure the lustful King attacks just a little longer. He could see the black shadowy figure of Mona at the top of a chandelier, just over the monster’s head.
He unscrupulously smiled at the realization.

Grabbing one of Takemi’s pill bottles he takes a sip of the Recov-R syrup, feeling the effects immediately.

“Come!”

He taunted the atrocious creature, but the monster’s sight was fixated in one specific target. Panther.

By the time he and skull realized the monster original target, panther had already been preparing for his next attack.

“Time for the big guns!”

The distorted King says as he leaps through the air.

Soon, the purpose of the king’s hop was made clear to the two male intruders.

Just a few moments before their last attack, the small slaves had disappeared from the battlefield.

This was an obvious attempt from the king to gain an upper hand.

And so he did, because the slaves came back carrying an enormous volleyball with them soon after.

What followed was the ridiculous display of the giant demon leap to deliver a strong and precise Volley spike to the giant ball.

The absurdity of the strike was not the most offensive issue here, but the following result of the colossal spike was the last straw for the young thieves’ already battered logic.

A gigantic explosion similar of a shellfire sent the unprepared boys flying away.

Somehow the only one who managed to barely withstand the attack was a trembling Panther, who used her persona’s power to endure the impact.

“Dammit!”

Asmodeus; one of the seven princes of hell, the demon representing the sin of lust/hunger.

Similar to the knowledge Joker had gained by accepting those personas in his heart before, he also knows exactly the meaning behind Kamoshida’s power.

Back then, Justine and Caroline took their time to explain to him how shadows manifested from the sea of humanity’s souls.

Suguru Kamoshida was not exception obviously, and this form was a representation of his corrupted heart.

The manifestation of his thirst for predatory pleasures. Of his need for self-gratification.

If their personas were the power of their own will. This form was certainly the power of Kamoshida’s sicken desires.

A form Joker’s heart despises as much as he loathes the rest of the world.

“Skull! Drink it!”
Skull catches a bottle of a weird natural medicine Joker had in his coat.

It was one of Takemi’s drugs, apparently Joker couldn’t afford to buy more than only a couple of those to avoid suspicions. He had to trust for Mona and Panther to heal each other when needed given their wounds as much as they could. But their current situation was precarious.

“Y-yeah!”

Joker had trouble standing out, Asmodeus Kamoshida was laughing to himself as he took another bunch of girls out of his cup to heal himself.

Joker had taken this chance to try to regroup, but he feels a strong stitch as soon as he tries to get back on his feet. The last attack had made a toll on him, no, it was the attack before that.

It was the impact of the previous gigantic fork assault that almost pierced through his torso. He could feel a strong pain around his abs.

It was probably an internal wound he could not heal right now, for a moment he laments he got ridden of Pixie. Otherwise he could have healed himself.

But he had to prioritize his partners’ wellbeing before his. He needed all of them to win this.

Yet his condition was pitiful, struggling to get on his feet he suddenly feels a hand grabbing his from behind.

“Don’t overdo it, ok?”

The gentle touch came from the hands covered by pink gloves. Panther used a healing spell to relief his pain and allow him to finally stand up.

The girl stands by his side as Skulls tries to get closer too.

“Thanks.”

Somewhat stunned by this unexpected act of kindness Joker realizes the stupidity of his previous strategy.

He was sure he could get Kamoshida’s attention at first, but he failed to realize the king was prioritizing Panther over all.

He thought he could use Skull daredevil fighting style to get an opening against the demon, yet he didn’t count on the king having such a strong area attack.

He had been prioritizing his ally’s wellbeing over his to achieve victory. Yet it was he the one who didn’t count on them because of his solitary nature.

“Don’t just stand there guys! Attack!”

Skull warns his friends trying to get the King’s attention as he uses a strange spell of his own to burst his strength.
“You don’t get it do you…? I only do what I do because no one let me a choice, you people don’t understand what’s like to be under so much pressure!”

The now completely healed king started to natter to the intruders.

Joker looks up at the menacing figure of the King readying for an attack they could easily avoid and sighs while concealing his thoughts.

“… All right, I’m counting on you guys. I need you to get an opening, ok?”

Panther nods as Joker finally stands side by side with his allies.

They didn’t need to have a tactical approach. Neither had they needed a defensive strategy in case they could no longer handle the monster attacks.

Retreat wasn’t an option, they only needed to win.

With a simultaneous kickoff, they ran forward charging towards the king.

The bravery of their determination was received by shadow Kamoshida’s variety of attacks.

But the momentum behind their assault allowed the kids to use precise jumps to avoid the cutlery and volleyball strikes.

Finally everyone got to summon their persona and fire different elemental spells at both Asmodeus Kamoshida and his distasteful trophy, managing to destroy the cup it in the process.

“Noooo! I won that in the nationals!”

“Do you think you can get away with this? Do you know who I am?! I am KAMOSHIDA, don’t you get it?”

“We’ll think about it later.”

Ignoring the implication behind king’s cry about his trophy full of unknown women, the attackers continued their assault.

Joker immediately followed Panther’s attack with double fangs strikes from Berith, making the king send his peons away by letting go of their chains.

“This has gone long enough.”

The phantom thieves knew exactly what would happen next.

The slaves will bring that giant looking volley ball again for the king to bomb them with it.

At the same time this was the chance they needed, they got closer to him in order to connect more physical strikes next.

“You’re misunderstanding it all! I haven’t sexually harassed anyone!”

As if sensing the peril, Shadow Kamoshida tries one more time to justify his actions. Almost sounding like a final beg.

“They came on to me because they wanted to get in my good side!”
Panther cringes at his words lashing out her whip at the king once more.

But somehow Shadow Kamoshida managed to tangle the weapon around his fork, and used his knife to counter the thieves’ strikes with a giant sweep.

Thanks to the teenagers enhanced speed, they all managed to dodge and jump over the attack that was meant to cut them in half.

Instead of being shocked, Shadow Kamoshida’s already eerie face displayed a disturbing smile.

He starts taking a sip of the whine cup he had on one of his hands, the one with the cognitive Takamaki doll, swallowing her whole in the process.

The result was the king buffing up with a creepy grin on his face.

“Disgusting!”

Meanwhile the real thing holds her anger as she takes off her mask one more time.

“Panther, DODGE!”

But before she could summon her persona she hears the desperate warning from her former middle school classmate.

Just for a millisecond, Panther manages to avoid the almost fatal strike of Kamoshida’s giant knife.

The attack was so strong that the knife remained stuck in the throne room’s floor.

Such force was used that the king himself had to move his gigantic body forward in order to get the thing out.

He smiled at the trio once again, looking his slaves coming back at the distance with another giant ball.

“*Heh! You want to see that killshot again, do you!?*”

But something was off.

“*Wait… there’s one of you missing!*”

He was getting weaker and he took some distance from his original position.

At this point Shadow Kamoshida will only have one option.

Wait for the slaves before attacking once again.

This was the opening they needed.

“Now mona!”

Joker scream is followed by a fast shine coming from the rooftop and a black fuzzy figure jumps down with enough speed to take down the crown from the King’s head with a quick kick.

With great agility, the small cat lands on his feet just a few steps away from the giant crown with a huge smirk on his face.

“*Nooo! My… my precious…!*”
“He’s shake up, now it’s our chance.”

Followed by a quick wind spell from burglar cat, each of the teenagers began to ready their weapons.

And at the sound of their guns blazing, Shadow Kamoshida’s form began to dissolve more and more after every shot.

Trying to reach for his own head with his four hands at every moment his lower torso becomes pure black mud.

By losing his only recognition in life, he had become nothing more than wannabe.

And as everything he had achieved so far fades in the distance, the shadow has now to confront the reality of his sins without the excuses his self-validation empowered him with.

It was over quickly.

From the mud emerges the original form of Kamoshida’s shadow.

But soon he realizes that he wasn’t the focus of the intruder’s attention anymore.

Knowing he wasn’t even worth that by now, he shudders in fear after noticing what their new focal point was… the crown.

He desperately jumps in between them to protect it one last time.

The object shrunk to a more realistic size, enough for him to catch it with his hands and protect it near his chest.

It was his last chance to make it out with his only reason to live.

But he wonders now…. Why was he doing this?

He lost… what was the point?

“…”

He hears the steps of the young girl approaching him with a machine gun on her hand.

Before he realizes it, he walked himself to the giant window near the almost naked torso statues.

There was no escape anymore. He was quickly surrounded by his assailants.

“What was the point he wonders.

He was supposed to be a winner. He got all he wanted by winning every time.

It would only be fair for them to take what they wanted since they won too.

He was no match for them.

“Are you not going to run away?”

The cold and accusatory voice of the ‘object’ he wanted the most during the past few months was getting closer.
“It’s always been like this…”

The shadow speaks.

It was indeed a familiar sight for him, when everyone was putting their attention on him, they wouldn’t immediately reward him for his efforts.

“All those goddamn hyenas forcing their expectations on me…!”

Instead he’ll be forced to fulfill more expectations he was meant to.

So he could get what he wanted.

It had to be… it had to be them.

“I’m doing all for them! What’s wrong with demanding a reward for that!?”

He wondered.

For a long time he didn’t tried to understand, but what was really wrong with wanting something back?

With taking it when he wanted?

If he did not, somebody else would’ve… it was for their own good he thought.

“… Pathetic.”

The emotionless voice of the white masked boy reached his ears.

“You dare to say all that. And yet here you are, trembling with fear… like the pathetic loser you’ve always been.”

Him? A loser?

“Now you’re makin’ excuses… this is why we are here for… to take that distorted heart of yours for good.”

Take his heart?

“Right now you’re in the same position as Shiho… Why don’t you just jump?”

The blonde girl’s voice never recovered that submissive tone she had every time she spoke to him in the past.

And she was getting closer with an expression that displayed a frightening intent.

He wanted to go away indeed.

Shadow Kamoshida knew exactly why.

He wanted to escape from all that was waiting for him.

But he couldn’t leave his own heart.

“Don’t you get it? Somebody in your position could’ve been a benevolent guide… instead you decided to take away your students future and free will on a whim, It’s about time you pay up for
that.”

The way the black haired boy said it sounded like it was all his fault…

“… You scared?”

Joker said once again, this time with a malicious grin.

It was that same face he showed him in the school corridors… it was that same line.

Suguru Kamoshida needed the recognition of being a ruler.

But by being conscious of how many he could’ve helped to become better would’ve broken that illusion.

If only he had chosen not to take but to give…

He knows that possibility actually existed at some point.

But he had taken so much, from so many…

He was scared, all these realizations were overwhelming him all of the sudden.

Even when he was holding the proof of his own greatness that he used to endorse his actions for so long.

That item didn’t mean anything to him anymore… and that thought terrifies him the most.

“… You let her no choice but to jump…”

Flames started to manifest in the hands of the being behind blonde girl.

“… What would you do?”

She wasn’t wearing a mask anymore… he could fully discern the murderous intent in her eyes…

The irony of the situation strokes him once again. A few days earlier he wanted to see those same eyes break down into submission, but this is what he gets now.

“How a sixteen year old girl could be this terrifying, he wonders.

“N-ngh.”

He tightens his grip to his crown… that useless crown.

She was getting closer.

“N-no please wait! I beg you… just forgive me!”

“Silence!”

Her next step made a resounding sound in the empty throne room, and the entire castle.

They haven’t noticed it so far… but apparently the whole building was empty by now.
The remaining shadows were free from his now diluting heart.

Only the cognitive beings remained in their cells.

“What about everyone who begged you to stop? And still you took everything from them!”

Carmen shoots a fireball at the shadow.

“Nooooo.”

But she failed… no she purposely misled her shot.

The king falls on his knees…

He understands now, what true powerlessness feels like.

This is what he had been making those poor children feel all this time.

This was what he made that girl go through.

He certainly deserves it.

“I…”

His distorted voice was empty of all will.

“I accept defeat… You want this? Take it.”

His glowing yellow eyes were beyond scared.

He threw the crown to at black haired boy’s hands.

“Go ahead and finish me off…”

He deserves it…

Everything he has done finally catches up to him…

How dared he to imagine he could’ve live up with that in his heart?

“You do that… and my real self will go down too…”

He said holding his tears… he had no right to cry about this.

More importantly, there was one single true that had ruled his entire existence so far.

The one rule that he chose to be his only impulse to success.

The one rule he decided to impose on those who dared to defy him.

“You have that right since you’ve won.”

It was only fitting for him to be castigated by that same rule.

But the pigtailed girl was only getting angrier by that man’s logic.

Looking down at the king she realizes his total submission… he was being sincere for the first time.
It disgusted her.

It wasn’t enough.

He had harmed her and her friends so much.

She couldn’t just forgive him.

She wouldn’t.

Holding her tears and biting her rage down she raises her hand, signaling Carmen to take another shot.

“Ann!”

She ignored Skull’s cry.

The fireball was shot.

The former king never raised his sight to meet his end.

But the explosion only reaches the other side of the window’s framework again.

Once shadow Kamoshida realizes what just happened and decides to take a look at his merciful judge.

She already had her mask back on.

Only the remaining bitterness in her eyes was apparent now.

“If his mind shuts down, he can’t admit his crimes!”

The girl says while biting her lip.

“You’re kind Ann-dono.”

Both Skull and Joker take a breath of relief.

After realizing the girl’s struggle to let him live, he finally breaks down in tears.

“I’ve lost…”

He wasn’t worth such clemency, he was afraid.

He could care less about his image.

He only wonders how he could ever confront anything anymore.

He wasn’t a winner anymore… he never was…

His cognition of what victory meant for him was completely shattered.

“You’re through when you lose.”

Only the void of defeat and unawareness remained in his mind.

“What am I- what am I supposed to do now…?”
The tears were coming down in an unstoppable flow.

“That’s not my problem…”

The white masked boy turns around taking the crown with him.

“Figure it out by yourself.”

He says coldly.

Joker was not going to try to show fake generosity to this man now, not he would pretend to tell him how to fix his mistakes.

For Takashi Kido, this was an image he never imagined facing in his life.

Yet deep down he wants to think that it is never too late to do the right thing.

Even after becoming a demon, that man was reduced to a broken human being in the end.

And for him, every human being no matter how twisted deserved the right to be alive. At the very least, those who have the chance to remain as such deserved the life they are supposed to face. With all the consequences that carried.

He wasn’t sure if his allies saw it the same way.

But for the phantom thief known as Joker… this was enough.

They all turn their back to the defeated broken man.

“All right… I will leave now and return to my real self… I’ll make certain that…”

Showing a slight sign of comfort, the shadow vanishes from its own world.

Joker stops his march to turn his head towards the now empty throne room.

It was finally over.

“What’s happening?”

They all stop their march, except for morgana who was quietly grooming himself.

The reason was the sudden tremor around the castle.

The walls began to slowly crumble down and soon the roof will fall over them.

“Run!”

Joker orders.

And so they did without hesitation.

There was no time to go to the safe rooms. They needed to reach the exit as fast as they could.

On their way out they realize their enhanced strength and speed began to decrease.

It was the after effects of the cognitive reality of Kamoshida’s palace disappearing.
Sakamoto tripped on his weak leg at one point because of it.

And Kido felt Morgana suddenly jumping over his shoulder in his cat form. Another sign that they were returning to the normal world at the same time the Palace was collapsing.

Eventually they manage to escape after reaching the app’s checkpoint.

With their hearts on their throats they try comprehend what just happened.

After noticing the Palace has been “deleted” from the navigation app, with a short explanation Morgana lets them know that they can only wait for Kamoshida’s change of heart to manifest on his real self now.

So then the thieves are assigned with the task of living their lives as normally as they could until the meeting day arrives.

With the treasure in their power and the yet uneasy taste of victory at the tip of their tongues, all they could do now was wait for the best outcome.

A Change of Heart

The week passed by in a blink.

Takashi Kido roamed the corridors of Shujin Academy before classes.

It was May 2.

It was possibly his last day in this school, or even his last day as an “almost free” young adult.

“Well, well, you look so dreadful. It’s there something wrong with you today?”

While trying to get to the school gym to the appointed staff and students meeting, Kido hears a familiar voice he wasn’t ready to confront today.

“…”

“Did the cat bite your tongue?”

The woman with the white coat was standing in front of the door that leads to the practice building.

Her smug expression was something Kido was getting used too much to his contempt.

“I’m sorry, psychologist-san… I’m not in the mood.”

“My, don’t be such a stranger. You know you can call me Jun, although I wouldn’t mind if you add ‘sama’ at the end.”

“…”

He passes by her ignoring her last comment.

It was a mystery to him if this attitude of hers towards him was something she could dare display in front of everybody.

Regardless since most of the student body was already in the gym, she didn’t need to worry about
such things.

“You wonder if your inception in that man’s heart worked. Do you?”

She calls it an inception.

All they did was force that shadow to face his own actions by taking his ambitions from him.

Although Kido couldn’t fully comprehend what she meant by that, he couldn’t either force himself to care at this moment.

Not after such a long and anxious week.

“If anything, the teacher not showing up is a good signal, believe me… anyway, you better get ready, the meeting is about to start.”

The woman starts to leave but stops midway to turn to the kid with a honest smile.

“Oh, and Amamiya-kun.”

He turns around with a tired expression.

“Keep up the good work.”

After watching the strange woman leave for a moment, he crosses the door towards the gym from the second floor.

Looking down the hall he can see that ominous PE faculty room at the distance.

That was the place where that man had punished and abused so many. The place where he dictated a sentence trying to take away his future.

If they really managed to take that man’s ambitions from him, it would mean he was probably aware of all his sins at this point.

What worried them was not that, but what he’ll decide to do about it.

If this is what that woman meant as an inception into his subconscious, he can only wonder if they did the right thing by submitting his shadow in such a manner.

“Morgana, are you there?”

The boy says while going downstairs

“And.”

The cat jumps down from one of the lockers behind Kido, following him.

“Did you found Ann?”

“No, the only place I haven’t checked was the gym, she must be there already.”

“I see...”

He lowers his backpack to his knees, allowing the cat to jump in.

“Yo!”
He’s greeted by the blonde punk immediately after entering the gym.

(“…-I implore you to reconsider the importance of life and…”)

The blonde teenager ignores the principal who already started his speech as he tries to get closer to his friend.

“Man have you seen Ann? I haven’t seen her since that day. She ain’t answering my texts either.”

“I think she’s fine.”

“Oh, there she is!”

Sakamoto points at the front row right in front of the stage.

There it was the unmistakable figure of Ann Takamaki.

“Man what is wrong with her making us worry like that?”

The gym’s door is open with a slam that breaks the student’s attention.

“I…I’ve been reborn…!”

The afflicted teacher enters the scene shocking everyone present.

“Kamoshida-sensei? What are you doing here?”

The principal look of surprise was soon replaced with one of horror, as if he knew exactly what would happen next.

In between the student’s whispers and gossips the teacher climbs to the stage.

“I…”

Sakamoto face was frozen as it was Kido’s.

“Dude… Is this really happening?”

“That’s why I will confess everything to you all.”

“What’s wrong with Mr. Kamoshida?”

“Confess? Did the volleyball team do something?”

The students were in shock as it was the principal and the rest of the faculty teachers.

“I have done things that were unbecoming of a teacher… Verbally and physically abused my students. I also… sexually harassed female students.”

“What?”

“For real?”

“I… I was the reason Shiho Suzui tried to kill herself!”

He falls on his knees.
“Wha-? Why would he say that?”

“Disgusting!”

“He’s the worst!”

“I thought of this school as my castle… there are students here I tried to expel without having a reason of caring about it… I will resign those claims…”

Uncapable of raising his head while saying this, Kamoshida began to stammer harder and harder as he kept going.

“I… am truly sorry to putting the innocent youths through such horrible acts… I am ashamed. I have dug myself into a shallow grave… I am not worth being treated as a human being!”

Breaking down in tears he surrenders his arms and his face to the floor.

Fully adopting a seiza position.

“I will take full responsibility… And kill myself for it!”

Finally his voice breaks.

“What?”

“Did he just say that?”

The horrified faces of the students forced some of the teachers to try to rally them and take them back to their class rooms as the principal frantically tried to take Kamoshida away from the stage.

“Please get out of the stage Kamoshida-sensei!”

“I… want to die!”

Both Kido and Sakamoto were speechless.

This wasn’t what they wanted, they were frightened.

“Don’t run away!”

But Ann Takamaki had enough.

The spectacle had taken her by surprise as much as her school mates at first.

But she couldn’t stay put as that man decided to take the easy way out.

“… Even though you made her want to die. Shiho Is still fighting to be alive!”

The students around her tried to get away from her as soon as her lousy voice started yelling at the adult man.

“You… you of all people don’t have the right to run away!”

She was clenching her fist so hard that blood could almost pour out of her palms if she kept pressing like this.

“You’re right…”
The man slowly raises his face noticing the blonde teen in the middle of the crowd.

“You’re absolutely right…”

He had been sentenced.

She of all people deserved to pass judgment to him.

“I’ve… done terrible things to Takamaki as well…”

He had been spoiling her name and life. He ruined her innocence for so long.

“I tried to black mail her into having relations with me so Suzui-san could remain in the volleyball team.”

It was only fair he could at least try to release her from such burden.

“Disgusting!”

“He’s really the worst…”

“Horrible…”

“The rumors were true then.”

“I resign to my position as an instructor… I should be punished by the law and atone for my crimes! Please SOMEBODY CALL THE POLICE! I surrender myself!”

He was still on his knees. Dragging his legs around the stage like a wounded dog, begging to be condemned by his former students.

“Wow…”

Although he had a serious expression the whole time, Kido could only agree to his partner expression.

He wasn’t feeling sympathy or pity for the man who had been ruining many innocent lives.

But he was in awe that someone as coward as that teacher proved to be, could have such a drastic change of heart in reality to have enough guts to confess everything in such a way.

Their plan was a total success.

So much that it was scary to contemplate what they’ve done.

The man’s will to live was gone and it was replaced with a need for atonement.

Something Takashi Kido feels that man won’t be able to pay up until the end of his life.

The gym was getting empty.

The school security escorted the former teacher away as students and some teachers called the police.

Meanwhile the real culprits remained still in a corner.

“Isn’t this exactly what that calling card said…?”
“That thing was for real?”

“Was something done to Kamoshida-sensei?”

They hear their school mates mutter as they pass by.

“… Did we really do the right thing?”

The blonde boy apparently had the same reluctance as Takashi.

“…I wonder.”

Kido realizes Sakamoto is probably way more empathetic than he is.

There was no need to make him feel more worried than what he already looked like.

Morgana pops out of Kido’s bag trying to cheer up the duo.

“Don’t be like that! There were certainly people who were saved because of what you did.”

“… Yeah.”

They notice Ann Takamaki walking towards them.

“Hey.”

She greets them sounding exhausted.

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah, thanks…and sorry I didn’t contact you guys.”

“Don’t sweat it… things are happenin’ way too fast- Huh?”

Their conversation is interrupted by a bunch of students walking towards them.

“Takamaki-san! I’m sorry! We all knew… but we pretended we didn’t.”

Those were the short but blunt words of the second year bruised boy, Yuuki Mishima. As Ann Takamaki’s classmate he had been keeping silence while hearing all the defamations she had to go through…

But now there was nothing holding him back.

“We’re so sorry as well Takamaki-san!”

“We misunderstood you all along. It must’ve been horrible for you.”

“We sorry for all the rumors we spread about you… I just… we didn’t know. He was pushing himself on you… It must’ve been so hard for you.”

The other two female students also apologized while barely keeping their composure.

It was a horrible relief, to be free from the teacher’s grip, yet to realize that something could’ve been done all this time.

She understood this.
“I’m sure there are also a lot of people who are sorry… I-We’re so sorry!”

“It’s ok. The same goes for me too. It’s all over now.”

The girls take their time to speak to Takamaki a few more seconds until a teacher takes them away.

“I made such a great mistake, and I’m so sorry, Amamiya-san… Sakamoto-san. I…”

Kido understands what Mishima must be going through too.

These children were being dominated by that teacher all this time.

There was no point on questioning how things could’ve been different now, not to them.

“Arugamama, huh?”

He whispers to himself.

“Huh?”

“Nothing… It’s all in the past, Mishima.”

The stoic boy said gently.

“I- I’ll make it up for you some day, I swear it!”

Mishima bows one last time before running away looking almost embarrassed.

“Looks like Kamoshida ain’t the only one that had a change of heart.”

Kido sighs.

While taking his view away from his friends he notices something in the distance. Right on the second floor near the gym entrance to the practice building… There she was, the school guide.

She was looking down at him with an uncanny smile.

“Let’s go home…”

Kido says as he starts walking away without reciting another word.

“Yeah, I’ll text you guys later… Hey Ann…”

“I’m ok… don’t worry, I’ll go tell Shiho what happened.”

“Yeah, go do that… Let us know if you need anything.”

Takamaki smiles at the blonde boy as she leaves.

“Thanks.”

The trio walks their separated paths once again.

Still unprepared to comprehend what a “free” future can be like for them from now on.
After the day of the staff meeting, the golden week has officially started.

Yet for Takashi Kido these holydays didn’t feel like a recess at all.

(“In other news, traffic continues to jam in the areas around the Shinjuku district…”)

The television was announcing the news about his school already.

The morning after the incident things were actually starting to look up for him and his friends.

Kamoshida was taken into custody.

Both Kido and Sakamoto’s expulsion was nulled.

Ann informed them that Shiho Suzui had woken up from her coma.

It was almost as if she was waiting for them to slay the demon that had taken her soul.

No matter the reason, they all felt the relief of an innocent life being spared by fate.

Trying her best to overcome and alleviate her joy and stress, Takamaki suggested the trio should celebrate their victory properly.

The idea was obviously incentivized by the bratty cat and the school’s most famous troublemaker as well.

Somehow Takashi Kido was assigned with the task to obtain the funds needed for their feast.

All the conditions were already meet though.

The boy took a moment to look at the gold medal band hanging from his school bag which was lying on top of Leblanc’s counter.

Once they reached the real world the King’s crown had turned into an Olympic medal.

The item was a manifestation of the teacher inability to let go of his pasts glories.

Obviously this wasn’t the real thing, as Morgana explained.

It was just a perfect copy of the real medal that was still in Kamoshida’s possession.

Perfectly fit to be sold for the right price… Which at the time, was Kido’s current quest.

“This isn’t exactly how I expected my first golden week over here to go…”

The boy with frizzy hair complains while cleaning the dishes.

His lament was somewhat understandable given his current state of affairs.

“Don’t be such a downer, at least this way you can get into the chief good side. Besides, serving coffee doesn’t sound that bad. You can meet new people.”

Says the overly enthusiastic cat while resting at the top of the fridge.

Apparently only the cat shared said excitement over such a prospect.
As soon as the boy (who had been woken up earlier than he would’ve wanted by his now strict yet stickling new roommate) got up of bed he determined himself to go sell that medal as today’s goal.

But he was stopped by the shop owner on his way out.

Sakura immediately used the “freeloader” card on Kido to guilt him into helping him with the store during the holydays.

Incapable of saying no, the boy now finds himself attending the empty store while cleaning the dishes until the barista returns from his chores.

“But only old ladies come here.”

“Quit complaining, are you really just doing this to try to pick up girls?”

He wouldn’t deny it, nor will he admit it.

“… Such luck.”

The boy who doesn’t believe in fate finds something to blame instead.

(“… much isn’t known about the teacher’s motives to confess, but it’s assumed that it had to do with an incident that involved one of his abused students and…”)

“Hello.”

He hears an elegant voice after the doorbells rang announcing a new client.

“H-hi.”

As he turned around he was struck by the unexpected image of a good looking woman in a black suit.

The beautiful woman was indeed a sight to behold.

Her noteworthy poise, her silver hair and familiar red eyes full of confidence were certainly capable of taking any man’s breath away if stared for too long.

“Is it open today?”

“Yes, welcome.”

“I haven’t seen you here before, are you a part timer?”

“… Yeah.”

“Hmmm? Is it your first day or something?”

“Something like that…”

The boy signals the woman to take a seat as he walks closer to the counter.

“So… The shop owner just let you in charge of the store and went home?”

“He went to get some groceries. I just clean the place and serve drinks.”

“I see…”
“The Shujin teacher went through a bunch of unspeakable…”

“Tell me, are you in High school?”

The woman brought her attention to the boy’s appearance.

He felt she was analyzing him from top to bottom.

“Yes.”

“Do you happen to know Shujin Academy?”

The boy notices his school bag was still over the counter.

“… Actually, I am a second year from that school.”

“Oh, then you must’ve know about those incidents, I’m sorry If I made you feel uncomfortable.”

She says as the boy walks towards the bag and quickly hiding the medal’s band from the woman’s view.

“There’s no problem.”

He says with an almost unnoticeable smile.

Kido puts the bag on the floor so Morgana who was already standing near him could get inside.

“To tell the truth, I know someone that goes to that school too… It bothers me greatly to know such a person was sharing the same environment with her.”

“…”

Clearly disappointed at the boy’s silence, she moves to the next topic.

“Do you serve Coffee?”

“What would you like?”

“I’ll have the house blend.”

“Coming right up.”

After a few seconds the boy comes back with a ordinary looking cup of coffee.

“Not bad… Did you make this?”

The woman asks after taking a sip.

“Sorry, I haven’t learned how to make my own yet.”

“Huh? It’s quite good, you will probably have a lot to catch up to do if you want to learn to make coffee this good.”

“I see…”

He says sounding somewhat nervous.
‘Is it really that good?’

(‘… The incidents have clearly increased this year, to that the ministry of health and welfare had this to say…’)

“How long have you been here?”

‘Why so many questions?’

“I just started a few days ago.”

“I see. Did the boss had an abrupt change on his schedule for him to need help with his shop?”

“Uh, I don’t think so… Do you come here often?”

The boy does his best to sound as natural as he could.

Yet it was inevitable for him to expose his lack of interest on human interaction from time to time.

“Well, I’m not a regular, but this place always feels quiet and homey, it’s a good escape from the busy city life once in a while.”

So far the boy hasn’t paid much attention to the silent and personal atmosphere the shop had during the day.

“I see what you mean.”

He clearly understood why Sakura wanted to stay here the whole day until very late even if he doesn’t get any customers.

“I’m back, you… Oh, hi.”

Speaking of the devil the man with the pink shirt enters the shop just in time to catch up the unexpected scene of the boy serving this beautiful looking lady.

“Hello.”

She greets him calmly.

“Is everything ok?”

“I was just having a break in your shop, your new employee is quite attentive.”

“Huh. Well, let me take over… You can go now.”

The man dismisses the boy as soon as he puts his apron back.

“All right.”

Not really displaying his internal relief, Kido wastes no time on taking off after taking his bag.

“It was a pleasure.”

He says to the woman before leaving.

Not really looking very interested in the exchange but mannerly enough to display his consideration.
“Like wise.”

“It seems you found quite a decent help, Sakura-san.”

“… Y-yeah.”

Outside the store, Kido takes a deep breath as if he had just escaped Kamoshida’s castle once again.

“Hey, what is it?”

“That woman… she wouldn’t stop asking questions.”
“I suppose that’s what the boss meant when he said ‘talking with the ladies’.”

“… Maybe, let’s go.”

Looking down at his texts before taking off, he reads the exited texts of his friends hyping themselves up about their upcoming party.

Apparently Ann had a place in mind from the very beginning.

She even managed to convince Ryuji by bringing up some childhood debt he had with her.

Takashi manages to form a soft smile.

He had a promise to keep.

The hanged man: Shady Endeavors

They may skyline was clear and colorful.

Takashi Kido wasn’t used to the lively midday city life as he spends most of his time at school at these hours.

Even less during a holyday.

Once he started walking the station a few things cached his attention.

Some weird sun cultists were making a rackety.

While some news reporters were fishing for random interviews around the station.

Even a street musician tried to start a meaningless conversation with him at some point.

He was certainly not used to so much noise.

Takashi Kido isn’t exactly a country side boy as some people want to believe.

He grew in the suburbs of another big city near Tokyo.

Yet there was no point of comparison between the activity and amount of people in the two cities.

He could hear a small politician forming some sort of rally in the distance.

Kido wouldn’t like to admit it. But he would like to spend the whole day looking at all around the city.
Mostly because Morgana’s constant interest in the workings of the human world had also induced some curiosity about things he always took for granted.

Like a capital city nightlife, or specific types of food and entertainment.

Yet he had a mission to fulfill first.

As lively and youthful the city was looking in a day like this, the boy found himself roaming the inhabited and dark alleys of central street again in no time.

Morgana had brought back existence of this shop to Kido last night.

It was the ideal place to get ridded of such a striking item.

He wastes no time to enter that shop Untouchable.

Inside, the shop owner looked exactly how he remembered him.

Lying on his chair while reading a magazine, uninterested on his surroundings.

He remind him of Sakura’s me time with his crosswords.

‘What’s with this city and people not wanting to work?’

He couldn’t help himself but to wonder.

Kido was familiar with image of middle aged men who didn’t want to strive too much to make a living for some reason.

The man eventually notices the musing kid looking down at him with an accusing look.

“What is it Kid? Want me to greet you with fireworks or somethin’?”

Sometimes Takashi Kido has a very strange existential crisis when it comes to fate.

He would like to believe he is the owner of his destiny to a certain degree.

But things like him being surrounded by thugs no matter where he goes makes him wonder if he was truly destined to be branded a delinquent no matter what he did with his life.

He takes the item out of his bag and puts it in the counter, right in front of the shop owner.

“How much for the medal?”

He thought this was the best approach when it came to treat such a barefaced shop owner.

“A medal?”

Kido simply nods.

The man takes a good look at the object.

“Huh, you sell the weirdest things kid, I’m not some pawn shop, y’know?”

“They’re unique items, besides we made a deal right?”

The boy says as he brings a bag out.
“You brought it, huh?”
“It was quite useful.”
He says with a sting smile.
“Huh…”
Not many people would be brave enough to come back with an illegal item just like that. Even less people would be honorably enough to give back a Free illegal item.
Getting on his feet and taking the lollipop out of his mouth, the surly manager smiles back at the kid.
“Say… ain’t ya interested in some part time work?”
There was no lip on his speech this time, only expectation.
He working on an airsoft shop that sells fake guns and other combat items…
The items he got on this store were more than helpful for them in the meta-verse.
Kido doesn’t know what would they do next, but Morgana mentioned before that Kamoshida’s palace wasn’t the only Palace that existed in the meta-verse.
If what that woman said to him before was right, he can imagine many people could have their own.
Neither he nor his group of rejects had decided what they’ll do next, but having a connection to a place like this wasn’t a bad idea at all.
“Am I?”
He couldn’t hold the grin forming on his face this time.
Joker could certainly use this man’s help.
Things were really looking up.

The fool: Reading the future

*Drip*
A drop of water is heard through the room
It’s dark, the boy slowly opens his eyes. He is not in the attic anymore.
He sees blue quilted walls surrounding him.
“It seems you have managed to chastise the one who douse in lust. Congratulations.”
He stands up to face the eerie long nosed man.
“You also managed to get both the Death and Hanged man Arcanas, not bad.”
“Encountering those who had similar… conditions to yours, seems to be quite effortless for
somebody so unwilling to cooperate.”

“Yeah, you really are just a troublemaker in the end. Isn’t that right?”

“…”
Uneasiness fills Takashi Kido’s mind as he ignores Caroline and Justine’s praise.

His visits to this room had become more and more grim every time he steps in this cell.

It was only fair for him to be on his toes when he’s in this place.

“By the time your accomplishments bear fruit, you will realize you have already found your place in reality. You will soon find even more allies to help you in your need to oppose the world you are in contention with.”

Igor’s speech continued to puzzle the black haired boy.

Is he really able to see his future? Why is he helping him?

At this point he had realized that asking those questions will only lead to more cryptic answers. So he only just listens.

“I can’t wait to see what path you chose to take with these new alliances you formed.”

The old man laughs to himself.

“It is certainly most entertaining.”

‘It’s true, no matter what awaits me now… I’m no longer alone in this.’

The realization hasn’t passed by Kido either.

He had been gaining allies to help him to survive such a gruesome test.

There was no other way he could call this.

A test to his will, to his strength and heart.

Yet deep down he can’t help himself but to feel guilt for involving other people into these affairs.

Last time Kido entered this room he felt an unexpected thrill.

He witnessed a gruesome execution and integrated his heart with even more Personas.

Every time he’s inside this cell, he’s forced to face an aspect of himself he wasn’t aware of before.

The irony of this place, a cell of all places, being the representation of his heart… the only place for him to be his real-self, terrifies him.

“With this, your rehabilitation will officially start soon.”

His frustration grew deeper.

Even if he won’t get the answers he needed (wanted). He had to ask.

“I… don’t get it. I really don’t. Why am I here?”
“Huh, you’re as dumb as you look inmate.”

“Your potential is indeed something special. However, it needs to be refined into an useful power.”

Igor replies.

“Honing that power will grant you the strength needed to stand against the coming ruin… That is the rehabilitation cast upon you.”

“That…”

Ruin?

Just when the boy starts to think there couldn’t be something more ominous about this man’s clear foreknowledge, he comes with that word again and again.

What could be worse than what he had been through so far, he wonders.

“There are many means by which you may gain the power you need. Gaining experience in combat is one way. The fusion process is another… Even the meta-verse app will eventually have its uses for that prospect.”

‘That app, does that mean she will help me too?’

It was only fair to remember Jun Soseki’s words about that navigation app.

Takashi Kido could only imagine what more secrets that woman held from him.

“You better appreciate our master’s guidance, inmate!”

His line of thought is interrupted by Caroline’s loud voice.

“Even at the risk of sounding presumptuous, we also have words of wisdom to share as well.”

“Hone your relationships with those who you had formed contracts with!”

“The compromise you chose to take with them will cultivate your will’s strength. Making more you stronger and experienced.”

They had been through this before.

Those two girls keep bringing his contacts as a source of power.

It makes sense for those kind of relationships to give him more experience and knowledge to face life.

But at the same time, going on and around with the foresight knowledge of the benefits he’ll gain just feels… oddly convenient.

He had been warned of not forming those bonds of frivolity by that old man.

However, how other way could he face those people other than as accessories to a broader goal?

He fears that strange contradiction could actually stall his progress as that man was portraying his daily life.

Kido hears Igor’s amused chuckle to his confused state.
“Your heart has grown stronger thanks to the contracts you made this far. But that’s only a fragment of your true potential.”

“The power of opposition you’ve gained is indeed a joyful demonstration of your dedication. For that I’ll be granting you another ability befitting of your newfound growth. Consider it a gift.”

The doll looking man’s hand moves a little to signal him.

And just like that the boy feels a change in within himself.

A strange sense of deepness… as if his heart has expanded, opened.

Putting his hand over his chest he realizes the meaning behind this feeling.

This was not an open minded relationship.

Takashi Kido wasn’t a boy willing to make friends before coming to this place.

But now this strange man had opened his heart to strange and unknown possibilities for him with just a snap of his fingers.

“… I have high hopes of you.”

The man says with that creepy smile.

It seems that this boy can finally understand the meaning behind Igor’s amusement a little more…

The world he used to describe this process of change in within him.

The meaning behind his uneasiness while visiting this room.

Yes…

His rehabilitation from the real world had begun.

… He wakes up.

Chapter End Notes

Confidants unlocked:
Death: Tae Takemi
The Hanged man: Munehisa Iwai
Finally the Kamoshida arc is over.
Now to the big things.
Oh Takemi, I hope I made her justice, I also wanted to take advantage of the
Takeshi/death arcana’s connection.
I like to imagine these new OC characters with specific voices so I’ll drop a couple of
names for Jun.
She has a sassy personality, she’s obviously older than the protagonist, I have two VA
in mind for her in both the Eng and Jap dub: I think Claudia Black’s voice could work
for the kind of impertinence she conveys with her speech.
As for her Jap voice I think Atsuko Tanaka silky but cheeky tones could fit her
character perfectly, so there, I shared that so you could “heard it in her voices”.
Feel free to share if you have another type of voice in mind for her though, I want to
hear your opinions.
-
Beneath the Mask part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Beneath the Mask part 1

The phantom thief: Day or reckoning 05.

Police station: Interrogation room

The minutes past as the mistreated boy finishes his tale about the events that led to Suguru Kamoshida’s arrest.
“You were very methodical during your tale, but your persistence to avoid dropping names accentuates your overconfidence…”

The woman that until now was quietly listening to every word finally breaks the small lapse of silence after he finished relating the teacher’s arrest. Telling her how he ended up selling the fake medal that represented that teacher’s heart.

All without dropping a single name all this time.

“Perhaps you think we don’t have the upper hand here? We can track those who aid you quite easily.”

This didn’t make the young prosecutor, Sae Nijima, feel any less irritated.

At first she was disappointed, then once the boy began to retell his story she realized her discontent would only continue grow through this interrogation.

And after hearing the fancifulness the boy’s tale, she felt she had every right to feel upset.

“… Crimes.”

The boy murmurs to himself with an empty expression.

“You were committing crimes, and for you to try to fool me with such a fairy tale is a mock to my current disposition.” Says the prosecutor while tipping her finger on her upper arm.

Her inquires weren’t really as demanding as they could be so far.

Considering he was being tortured just a few minutes ago, her cold treatment was like his usually awaited lunch breaks at school.

The prosecutor had little sympathy for the boy at this point.

She was quietly waiting to get some realistic data.

But her patience was running low the more supernatural tones his story developed.

“Still, to think you’ll admit your involvement in that teacher’s confession… I can’t ignore that. Because of it I’ll have you continue. Then I’ll decide what true is to your story.”

“…”
“I remember the day we meet.” She relaxes while resting her elbows on her lap and leaning closer to the boy’s direction. "You were working at that café. The shop owner was most certainly your accomplice too.”

But her attempt to make eye contact was quickly dodged by the boy.

“It seems you are a problematically charismatic individual willing to use people for your advantage…”

She sighs and returns to her previous position at the lack of response.

“You must’ve some kind of experience in that matter. Am I wrong? How did you manage to either fool or persuade complete strangers to your cause?”

“I told you already…”

“No. There must be something else besides simple luck. There were more than just three of you, and there are also the people that helped you through many specific circumstances…”

The boy had mentioned it before.

A suspicious shop owner, a back alley doctor… but still, no names.

There’s something about him that made it easier to gain their trust.

No, she knew there was more to it.

“There’s also this cold and indifferent attitude of yours. You’re exanimating the mood and my reactions, waiting for a chance to do…something.”

“…”

His only reaction is to hide his eyes while lowering his head a little more.

“Right now, you fit the psychological profile of a dangerous and manipulative criminal.”

“I’m sorry I gave you that impression, Sae-san.”

“That doesn’t matter. But I advise you against trying to fool me from now on.”

“If I were to do such a thing, I wouldn’t have-“

“I say to cut it out. Another world in which people’s distorted cognitions take shape? Stealing treasures to take hearts?”

She stops herself to avoid giving him the advantage of keeping his cool over hers.

“How could I not take all this as a joke?”

She says with a quiet voice.

“You asked for the truth. But you can believe what you will.”

“The absurdity of your story doesn’t give your sincerity any credit.”

She fixes her hair and regains her cool again while shooting an ice cold stare at her detainee.
“But as I said, the testimonies and your confession of your involvement with the case give me no other choice but to continue to listen to your tale.”

She grabs the folder with Kamoshida’s picture from the desk and begins to turn the pages.

“At any rate, these two accomplices besides the cat thing that appeared in your story are Shujin students too, are they?”

She asks without looking at the boy.

“…”

“All right, let’s move on… What changed then?”

“…”

“If we take your story as the hypothetical truth, targeting Kamoshida made sense. Yet something had to happen between you and your allies to make you all continue to function as a team.”

The boy massages his forehead with his hand.

“Tell me… what happened?”

“…”

His silence was petrifying.

But Sae Niijima could not fear any answer, so she insisted.

“Why did you continue to be the phantom thieves of hearts? And how did you target so many people?”

The boy finally makes eye contact.

“… Mementos.”

The Phantom Thieves of Hearts Manifesto

A crowded weekend was the usual image of Tokyo’s evening.

But the high class crowd present in the corridors of the Wilton Hotel was a sight that Takashi Kido wasn’t accustomed to.

The boy came to feast at the delicacies of the famous buffet of the Wilton’s cuisine.

It was all Ann Takamaki’s idea. And the boy’s wasted no effort in assimilate the diverse types of meals until their time an out.

Ryuji went for the meat menu, going as far to taste about four types of animal in one dish.

Kido went for a great variety of salty food, trying to taste almost every type of sea food to salads at his disposal.

Trying to satisfy not his hunger, but his own completionist needs.

Morgana instructed the boy to get him the best types of fish and even some other spicy food.
It didn’t take long for the band of teenagers to regret their fervor for food as they all were eventually forced to hit the restrooms.

“I don’t think I ever ate so much in my life.”

Complained the frizzy haired boy as he leans on the wall outside the men’s toilets.

His face was still wet after trying to wash the queasiness out of his body.

“All because of that stupid challenge.”

Leaning on his shoulder in defeat the cat wasn’t exempt of the effects of the feeding overdose.

After patting the cat’s head to comfort him the boy dips in thought, there was something Ann mentioned before that kept him worried.

The police will most certainly show up at Shujin to interview the students about the perverted teacher’s actions.

Such a troublesome visualization doesn’t help him to keep his mind in the feast they were supposed to enjoy this day.

He can only imagine how bad things can go if Ann or Ryuji were to be interrogated.

Then again Kido balance of faith will always lean towards his friends over the crooked and lazy reality of the police.

Yet, there was no way their names wouldn’t come up given the trio’s reputation.

“Yes sir, we’ll be ready. Y-yes there won’t be any mistakes…”

But his reflections are interrupted by a rough sounding voice coming from inside the restroom.

“I’m pretty sure that’s not the case sir.”

There were two tall man wearing black suits in front of the big mirrors. One was washing their hands while the other was talking to his phone.

“Yes. We will be making a visit soon.”

There was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary about them… other than they were also wearing sunglasses indoors.

‘What’s up with that trending?’

The boy wonders.

“Oh there will be no problem sir. We made sure he’s up to date with that request. Their group is working hard on getting the proper founds as we speak.”

Kido hides his presence from the view of the suspicious duo by returning to his previous position.

“Yes we let them know about the incident, they’re working twice as hard to get things done this time.”

“S-sorry sir I won’t mention it again! I will make sure the penthouse is ready for the reunion just as
“it was planned. They will come.”

The man hangs out before taking a deep breath.

“Man, those guys at the SHibuTV really fucked things up for us.”

“Tell me about it. Right now all we can hope is that those guys don’t try to act smart in front of the boss.”

“I doubt it, that fatass knows his place.”

“Regardless that was a brilliant move. Now they have a perfect excuse to get his guy into the Security office.”

“I heard that some guy in the force is getting the job.”

“Really? The Security Planning Division is a mess though. I don’t think nobody would want anything to do with it after last year’s scandal.”

“Yeah, it’s like a political death sentence. No wonder they’ll make some pig take over if you think about it… Politics are nasty.”

Kido wasn’t really paying them much attention until he noticed they began heading outside.

He then pretends to be tapping his phone.

“That black ops division isn’t a thing anymore so I don’t think it’ll matter.”

“More importantly, do you have any idea of who’s the guy?”

“I.”

The man who was speaking to his phone before turned around to notice the boy’s presence and became quiet.

But before they decide to walk away his phone starts ringing again.

“S-sir? Yes right away!”

“Damn the speech is already over?”

Their panic is interrupted by the sound of a flushing toilet and a colloquial teenager voice.

“Maaaan I thought I was about to die! I never puked so much in my life!”

The blonde boy who was the reason Kido was standing there waiting came out of the restroom stretching his arms nonchalantly.

“Damn kids.”

The duo walks away in disgust.

“Puttin’ a time limit on food was a mistake. Huh, What’s up?”

“Those guys…”

“Huh?”
Ryuji Sakamoto notices the two men in suits walking towards the hotel’s auditorium hall at an uneasy pace.

“You didn’t listen to them, right? They were talking about some shady stuff.”

The cat addressed the confused punk.

“There was somebody else in there?”

“I wonder how they didn’t hear you.”

Kido wonders.

“Prolly ‘cause I was silently recoverin’ myself most of the time.”

Said a somber looking Sakamoto.

“You really threw out a lot down there…”

“Dude you abandoned me! What if I fainted or somethin’!”

Kido only shrugs at his friends complain as Morgana pops out of the bag again.

“You really ate all that just to throw it all up? Are you some kind of moron?”

“Shuddup cat, you puked too!”

“He does it all the time tho-”

“If you’re about to say “cats do that all the time” just remember I’m always hanging around your neck!”

Kido clears his throat.

“Gotta add that to the taboo list then.”

“Seriously?”

Ryuji shares his pity as they head to the elevators.

“What floor was Ann again?”

“Third floor I think...”

As soon as Ryuji presses the button he’s quickly shoved away by a tall looking man in a suit.

“What the…!”

Kido takes a look at the men, there were five of them.

They all looked like some sort of mix between a body guards and elite looking business men.

“What’s the status of the missing members of that trading company group?”

Right in the middle of the shady mini army of thugs there was a bald man wearing orange sunglasses.
He addressed them with no regards to their status or dignity as human beings.

Kido couldn’t have a clear view of the man. Yet he realized two of the men accompanying him were the same from before.

“They’re on it sir, last we checked that CEO Lady hasn’t returned from her trip to Russia yet. Most of her remaining staff are probably meeting with her over there as we speak.”

“Keep me updated. There’s that case in the news too… Anything about it I should know?”

“Not yet... But excuse me. Why are you so involved with that? It’s not something you should be concerned with.”

“I don’t care about your opinion your incompetent buffoon! When I say pick up the pace, you do it!”

“Nice guy isn’t he?”

Morgana said sarcastically.

“I don’t care who he is, they can’t just shove us around… HEY! You’re cuttin’ in line!”

Eventually Sakamoto’s shock wore off and the inevitable shouting began.

“Here we go.”

Kido sighs.

He walks forward following his friend into a completely avoidable conflict.

“What do you want?”

“Let us through!”

Kido walks closer to the man trying to draw his attention from his punk looking friend.

“… You shouldn’t just push people around?”

He says coldly.

“Huh…?”

“Who the hell do you think you are!? We were here first!”

“We’re in a hurry.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. So you can butt in front of other people if you’re in a hurry?”

Says Ryuji at the lack of apologies.

Kido notices how much disadvantage they have in the current environment.

Every present adult was looking at the scene with concerned eyes and pity.

Those accusatory looks, Kido knows them too well.

“It seems the customer base has changed since I was here last. Have they started a day care?”
The distinguished man in the middle of the men in black suits doesn’t even bother to look at the kids as he impatiently waits for the elevator to come.

“What?”

Takashi could see the rage boiling in Sakamoto’s face.

“We don’t have time for this.”

The man raises his voice to his subordinate.

“Right sir… move away punk!”

Warns the haughty subordinate as he shoves the blonde kid again.

“Hey!”

‘...That voice. No it can’t be... I must be imagining things.’

For a second, Takashi Kido feels a shiver down his spine.

He couldn’t figure out the feeling, but the moment that man howled at his body guard, a strange familiar image came to his mind.

“Shit…!”

The elevator arrives and the suspicious group leaves the scene.

“Hey Takashi, what is it?”

Morgana asks worried for Kido’s sudden remoteness.

“Nothing, I--... Let’s go, Ann is waiting for us.”

Takashi calls for the elevator again.

“... I seriously can’t stand people like that.”

“Calm down.”

“Tch.”

As soon as they arrive to their table, they’re greeted by a huffy Ann Takamaki.

“What took you so long!?”

She said while folding their arms.

“... I’m sorry, we would’ve called you but that would’ve taken us another 10 seconds.”

Said Kido almost ignoring her comment while sitting down in the coach in front of their table.

“...”

The girl just limits herself to close her eyes and trying to reduce the pace of her foot tapping.

“Why’re you all pissy!?”
“I’m sorry… Some woman just bumped into me a few moments ago and started ranting about me sneaking into this place and how I shouldn’t be here. It was so irritating.”

“Bwah! I know exactly what you mean! We bumped into some annoyin’ assholes near the elevators on our way here too.”

Kido drinks a sip of his water as he watches the two blondes share their tragic stories.

“… They obviously don’t want us here… If it wasn’t because we had the money, who knows how they would have treated us.”

Morgana adds.

“This is so lame!”

For most of the regulars it was indeed out of the ordinary to witness a bunch of mid class looking teenagers feasting in such a sophisticated environment like this.

“Anyway… I hate people that don’t even bother hidin’ the fact they look down on everyone else.”

Ryuji moans some more while looking at his appeased friend looking at him with a serious face.

“Doesn’t it bother you?”

He asks him.

“It does… but-”

‘What can you do about it?’

The black haired kid wonders, remembering what happened the last time he tried to step up to a person like that.

“What’s wrong?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Takashi answers quickly before worrying his punkish friend.

“He looks this pale because he never eats well… I’m always stuck with canned cat food too.”

Ignoring Morgana’s comment Kido tries to relax on his seat again.

“We should at least enjoy our remaining time here, or at least until we can digest all this.”

Says the loafing kid as he rests on the coach.

“… It just pissed me off how all the restaurant workers looked at me with this disapproving expression…”

Ann continued her rant while resting her elbow over her knee.

“I wonder if we should really be here…”

“It’s always like this… isn’t society a wonderful thing?”

Says the almost inert Kido.
Ryuji grunts to himself while taking out his phone.

“Guys… We were just talkin’ how people reacted to the whole Kamoshida thing. Remember?”

“What about it?” Asks a puzzled Ann.

“We got people pumped up by stealing his heart, many don’t want to believe it, but most people really think ‘the phantom thieves stole his heart.’ Look at these post!”

He shows his phone to his friends.

It was a simple web page.

It had a black and red background with white fonts.

“The phantom aficionado website…?”

Ann reads the site’s main banner.

“You were really googling the name we used for that calling card?”

Asks an uninterested Takashi.

“‘Well done phantom thieves’. ‘Now I can keep going too’… ‘Thank you for giving us hope.’… Wow.”

Ann eyes widen at the realization of how anonymity could usually be the truest form of sincerity on the internet.

“It actually looks stylish.”

Adds Takashi.

“You know, hearing people say all that feels… strange.”

Ann nervous smile turns into an innocent giggle.

“Yeah…”

“I know what you mean.”

“I mean, ultimately we did a good thing.”

The band of thieves timidly smiles to each other after Morgana’s last words.

Recognition for their actions: Even if it was to fix their own problems. Even if it came from those who wouldn’t dare to say it in person.

It was something they could not imagine dealing with just a few weeks ago.

“Morgana, you said anyone can have a palace, right?”

Ryuji looks at the cat sitting in the bag besides Kido.

“Anyone with distorted desires, yes.”
The question was regarding a previous conversation they had in the school rooftop.

Back then Morgana mentioned how anyone who had distorted their ambitions so much to create a palace could become a treat to those around them.

It was a scary thought at first, but eventually Takashi Kido made sense of it.

There wasn’t a lack of people like Kamoshida in this world. He should know that very well.

‘She also refereed to palaces as plural before.’

“Same for them havin’ a change of heart if their treasure gets stolen?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you bringing this all of the sudden?”

Ann asks to the blonde boy sitting at the other side of the table.

“I…”

“He probably is referring to those guys we bumped up with earlier.”

Morgana explains while Ryuji only nods.

Kido took a look at his blonde friend, he had been thinking for a while now. And he has an idea of what he’s about to say.

“… I’ve been thinkin’.”

Ryuji says.

“We did so much to change Kamoshida’s heart to save our asses, but most people don’t really seem to care about it.”

By people, Ryuji must mean the adults that staid quiet during these kinds of things.

Those who allowed people like Kamoshida to exist in the first place.

“But those who had no other choice but to just deal with it are the one thankin’ us. US! Of all people.”

They remain silent for a little while.

They all have realized this before, there was just no reason to think about it now they saved themselves.

“You’re right. There are probably lots of people out there going through the same things we went with Kamoshida…” Says Ann in a quiet voice. “I can imagine some of those people posting on that site being a lot like us.”

Takashi Kido knew there was no way of knowing that for certain. But he also understand the meaning behind Ann Takamaki’s words… they’ve experienced firsthand at school just as soon as Kamoshida confessed after all.

“You want us to continue to be the phantom thieves, for some sort of gratification?”
Kido asks bluntly.

“Don’t put it like that! What I mean is that we can just go back to do nothin’ while other people are going through the same shit we did.”

Kido was taken aback by Sakamoto’s honest answer, forcing him to face such a realization.

“I… I agree.” Says a musing Ann “If we ignore people who are in trouble, I’d go back to being the same as I was before…”

She had an irking sensation on the back of her head.

The thought of returning to being that doll terrified her.

The same goes for Kido and Sakamoto.

Something was changed in them forever once they faced their other selves.

“Well, that’s true…”

Says Morgana.

The burden of such a realization was making a tool on the inexperienced teenagers.

How could they face such an idealistic responsibility?

Being able to ignore the pain and suffering surrounding them was the only way they managed to survive this cruel world so far.

It wasn’t until they truly made peace with who their deepest conflicts that they became aware of the true meaning of personal responsibility.

It wasn’t until they gained the power to change themselves and to change the hearts of those who hurt others, that they learned what the cowardice of abandoning those who need them could truly mean to their own hearts.

It was not a responsibility they could face on their own just like that.

For some reason, the cat inside the bag couldn’t stand seeing them like this.

“But you guys are under my tutelage. Because of that there’s nothing we can’t accomplish as phantom thieves.”

Says Morgana, sounding very sure about his words.

So far Kido became more and more familiar with the cat’s nature.

Morgana needed them because he was after the human desires himself. His own identity.

But for some reason he was trying to become more reliable to them at the same time.

It was only fair he’ll offer his help since they all shared this worrisome uncertainty.

“… We could be able to help them out, shouldn’t we?”

Ryuji asks to the boy sitting beside him.
“Help people out…”

Kido ponders.

“That means we’ll have to fight those monsters again, doesn’t it…?”

Ann wonders.

“Eh, I’m sure we’ll manage.”

Says a smiling Sakamoto while looking at Kido again.

“Right?”

“Of course you’ll say that…”

He could only smile at his friend knowing how much he relish his time in the battlefield.

“So… we’ll help people this way by making them believe in us…?”

Ann wonders again, she already knows the answer of her own question. But voicing it probably helps her to make it more believable.

Helping people by exposing those who exploit the weak. It was a noble goal.

‘Hope…’

That was not a concept Takashi Kido was not familiar with.

He never had something to look forward to, even less after being branded a criminal.

All he ever wanted was to be left alone and live at his own biding.

Yet he still has to taste what true freedom feels like.

To bring hope to people… to himself and his allies.

Could something like that help him reach his own goal?

“I mean, we all have our reasons.” Ryuji says “And we all hate shitty adults like those from before, right?”

“If it works like with Kamoshida, we can bring lots of corrupt people to justice like that. And just imagine all the treasures we can find in those palaces.”

Morgana says.

"To bring justice, huh?"

He remembers his awakening... The words of his other self, Arsene.

What was Takashi Kido's deepest ambition?

("Thou who art willing to perform all sacrilegious acts for thine own justice!")

Slowly, a smirk forms through Takashi Kido's lips.
His friends had concerning look once they noticed the gloomy aura around the boy who was in rocking an ambassador pose while thinking.

They weren't able to see his eyes hidden behind his frizzy hair and shining glasses.

"Dude?"

But as soon as Ryuji calls for him he raises his head showing his friends a warm smile instead.

Perspective must’ve been playing them tricks. This boy was as enthusiastic as them.

"I agree... this is something we can do. We can make a difference."

"Right!?"

The animated Sakamoto almost jumps of his seat after the positive response.

Right now, Takashi Kido remembers his original reason to rebel.

In his heart, he had made a deal with the devil for this same opportunity.

It could be his revenge. An excuse to take his fate back.

‘I can do it if they're with me…’

Kido stops his train of thoughts.

He realizes both Ann and Ryuji were looking down at their empty plates, probably reflecting on their own meaning for continuing their role as a team.

But what made Takashi quickly snap out of his meditative state was the memory of Igor’s words back then.

How useful could his allies be to him and to his cause?

Then again, how could he dare to see them like that?

Like if they were mere resources.

“You guys may still be fledglings, but this means we are an actual organization now.”

Morgana couldn’t keep himself quiet while looking at the insecure state of his comrades anymore.

Even though they all became so easily familiar with each other because of their similar backgrounds, there was still a need to keep a certain distance between each other to retain their own individuality.

They all understood this.

“Hehe, that’s actually pretty fitting for us.”

Ann says enthusiastically.

“We can catch all those shitty adults by surprise, and make ourselves known to the world.”

Added the equally enthusiastic Sakamoto.

‘Maybe I’m worrying too much.’
Kido relaxes at the eagerness of his companions.

There was no need for him to degrade himself into manipulating them to achieve his personal goals.

They were joining forces because they were equally aligned by the same aspirations.

Still, a part of him felt it was all too good to be true.

That’s why he couldn’t simply believe they were willing to go all the way to achieve their own goals given how personal those were.

But he wanted to believe he could appreciate this chance, and take advantage of it… together with his new colleagues.

So he had to convince himself first.

“Are you ok being our leader?”

But suddenly Ann’s words take him by surprise.

“L-leader?”

The thought startled him.

“Yeah, you were already helping us up a great deal during our battles with your skills, and you are so calm and confident during the most dangerous moments.”

“Ann’s right dude, you’re really dependable and you always know what to do. I can’t handle that responsibility stuff.”

“I…”

“Where’s my say in this?” Morgana interrupts.

“But Ann-dono made her recommendation, so I guess I can allow it.”

Kido looks down at the cat.

If his facial expression could convey actual human emotions he could guess he was smiling at him.

It was a warm feeling.

Nobody had counted on him this openly before.

Of course, he could see it as them throwing all the responsibility at him.

And he knows he wanted to take charge of the situation from the beginning.

But that was beyond pointless.

He realizes the stupidity of his previous deliberations.

Ever since the day before the heist at Kamoshida’s palace, he knew he wasn’t alone anymore.

Yet it wasn’t until they showed him their inarguable faith on his capabilities that he truly understood that they had decided to be part of his life now.
“I’ll… do my best to not let you guys down.”

He says with a soft smile.

They all felt the excitement of the new prospect.

After all, it was this individuality that brought them together, what gave them the power to face all those adversities together.

Their group already had a publicly known name, so they just went along with that.

They needed more than just a name though. They needed a target.

It wasn’t an easy endeavor.

To become more known to the general public, and to give courage to those who needed it the most.

They first needed a method, a tool to reach the attention of the masses.

“I don’t like the idea of just picking somebody out of the blue like that.”

Ann confesses.

“Agree… We all should make a consensus on what our next target should be.”

Kido asserts.

“Right. Let’s narrow it down to someone we all can agree on then.”

Finally Sakamoto finds the most convincing solution.

“You’re really into this.”

Kido jokes about Ryuji’s focused devotion to their cause, trying to not demonstrate how much he admires his drive.

“Hmm, so we need a bigwig we decide on unanimously.”

“I like that unanimous decision part. It feels like we’re doing some kind of pact.”

Morgana and Ann approve.

“That’s it then….”

Kido takes out his phone.

“Now then, this is the official formation of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts organization!”

Morgana takes the lead and announces their group’s official foundation.

“Ok, now we need to know how we could reach the people.”

Sakamoto asks, but Kido was ahead of them.

“And post…”

He presses a button on his screen, and proceeds to show his phone to his school mates.
“The phan-site.”

He said with a smirk.

**Anon / Thread 05/05/20XX:**

- The phantom thieves of hearts will only target those who corrupt society and hurt the weak.
- The phantom thieves of hearts will never target anyone for personal gain.
- The phantom thieves hearts must always unanimously agree on who’s gonna be their next target, no exceptions.
- The phantom thieves of hearts will always make their targets repent for their sins.
- This is our manifesto, we will take the distorted desires of those who trample over the hearts of the powerless.
- We will reform society.
- This is the official formation of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts.

“Wow, that looks like a real announcement.”

Says Ryuji.

“It almost feels like some sort of message a real phantom thief would make in those crime light novels.”

Adds Takamaki.

After a few minutes, it didn’t take long for a couple of answers to be posted.

**Anon:** great shitpost op, now gtfo

**Anon:** is dis 4real?

**Anon:** don’t be so naïve

**Anon:** Op just gave me cancer.

**Anon:** Lame -`д´-

“Well that’s to be expected.”

Said Ann with a fake smile.

“It doesn’t matter what they say now, our objective remains the same. Right?”

Morgana asks his roommate.

“Right…”

“I guess our Viking feast is over now.”

Ryuji says with a sad expression.
“Aw, time really ran out?”

Ann added her disappointment.

“Very well… We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

Finally the teenagers adjourn the meeting.

**Interlude / Reckoning: The Disciplinarian**

The underground halls of the police station could be a grim scene for anyone who was used to the animated daylight of the capital city.

“Seriously, making me waste my time with such a trivial case…”

But for this man it was just another day on the office.

Days he dreaded and wished could stop being part of his everyday employ.

Walking down the corridor, Jirou Kamiya heads towards a room were an inmate was to be questioned next.

He was being followed by a guard and another man in a suit.

Kamiya asks the men to let him inside the interrogation room on his own.

The guard and the other officers comply while waiting outside.

Inside the room, a man was resting his hands over the only table in the small area while sitting with his head looking down.

He was sweating profusely, but he didn’t emit a single sound.

“Good afternoon.”

Kamiya walks towards the man and takes a seat in front of him.

While looking at the case file pages he takes his time to speak again.

It was a typical interrogation tactic that focused on mindgames from the get go so the interrogated prisoner agitation would peak during the questioning process.

Finally after a few seconds, he decides to just get on with it.

“Instructor Suguru Kamoshida-san.”

He says giving his full attention to the man in front of him.

Kamiya relaxes on his chair a little while still assuming a professional posture.

“How are you holding up?”

“…”

“Keeping quiet, huh? Did you spoke with your lawyer yet?”
The man simply shakes his head in response.

“I see… You’ll get a public lawyer from the court then.”

He lowers the folder on the table and rests his elbows on the metal trying to get closer.

“But man! You really fucked up big time. Taking the jailbait like that…”

He says with a friendly smile.

“…”

“I’m here to listen to what you have to say, they told me you already confessed most of what you did. But now they handled the case to me, so I guess I’ll have to put you through all that again… I apologize for that.”

“I… I’ll tell you everything…”

“… Will you now?”

Ignoring the broken voice of the former teacher, Kamiya takes out and lights up a cigarette.

“Ok, let’s start for the beginning… why did you do it?”

It was a straight forward question, one that was not that common at the start of an interrogation. But nevertheless, it was one that could be easily answered by a man as submitted as this.

“I… I did it because… I am the scum of the earth…”

It didn’t take long until tears started to come down the former athlete’s face.

“I-I’m so sorry. I wish I could fix it, I really do!”

“Wow, are you really crying?”

The weeping surprised the detective.

“I’m sorry, I just… I hurt them so bad… for so long… I wish I could-”

“Easy now, just tell me…”

He leans closer.

“Why did you do it?”

“I… thought myself as the king of a castle… the school was my castle.”

“You castle, huh?”

Kamiya slowly stands up and walks towards the corner of the room.

“I… made them do horrible things, the girls I-”

*Kick*

“AAAAW!”
Suddenly the man falls of his chair, it was by the impact of a kick given by the stern detective.

“Cut the mediocre act, you piece of shit.”

There were many reasons rooms like these served as temporary interrogation holdings.

One was to hold dangerous criminals.

So that if they try to escape from custody, they won’t have it easy given how deep underground they were being held.

Not only that but they also were inside a station full of trained police officers.

“I think you misunderstood my question. So I’ll try to be clearer from now on!”

“AAAARHG”

Another one; the walls were very thick, and they were far away from the higher levels.

This was a real life dungeon.

“Why the fuck did you publicly confessed it all!??”

Kamiya asks while stepping over the teacher’s ankle.

“I-I-I… because I was wrong, I can’t… I can’t live with myself anymore!”

“Really?”

He lifts his foot and lowers his smoke on the table.

“Do you have any idea of what your situation is…? There’s no point on crying, there’s no point in asking for help, nobody will listen to scum like you!”

Those words resonate through the former PE teacher’s skull.

“And there is no deal that can save you from what you gonna get once you’re convicted!”

Kamiya walks slowly circling around the man lying on the floor.

Once he gets near his face he proceeds to kick him in his abdomen.

“ARGH!”

“Do you have any idea of what they do to guys like you in the jug!? There’s a whole new education system ready to change your life and so many other parts of your skinny ass!”

The man got on his knees and grabs the teacher by the hair.

“There’s only one thing left for you… knowing for how long you’ll have to endure all that shit!”

“I’M SORRY! JUST KILL ME IF THAT’S FAIR…! I- I deserve it!”

“… Kill you!?”

“…”
Kamiya watches in disgust the resigned crying face of the man he had beaten down.
Kamoshida was relatively taller than him, but that hasn’t stopped him before.

“And what…? You think you’ll pay for your sins that way?”

To Jirou Kamiya, this man’s believes or need for conciliation didn’t mean a thing.
But he needed to let him know that at this moment, he was his most important adjudicator.

“I-…”
He gets closer and holds the man by his big chin, almost making it look like he was trying to rip his head off because of the violence of his grip.

“Do you really believe that…?”

His voice changed into a disturbing dreadful tone.

“I… no. I just-”

“Oh no, no, no… You won’t get out that easily.”

He let’s go of his head and walks a few steps back.

He takes a handkerchief out of his back pocket and cleans his hands. Then he takes his sunglasses off.

“Tell me sensei. Is it true you liked to physically abuse your students?”

“…”

“To tell the truth, I also know a few tricks myself… there’s so many ways to cause a great deal of physical pain to a person without leaving any trace. It’s quite fascinating…”

The tone of the man’s voice did a complete one eighty.

He even displayed a smooth smile the whole time.

“Like twisting the joins, or compressive asphyxia…”

The energy in his voice was on par to the intensity of his smile.

“Do you have any idea of what that means? I’m sure you don’t, given how much evidence of mistreatment is there against you.”

But the real disturbing part of his whole expression was the ghastly look in his eyes.

Not only he was looking down at the wrecked man in the floor, the blood lines were quite visible.

Those eyes prove to have the knowledge of how to end that teacher’s miserable existence.

He folds and puts the handkerchief back in his pocket.

“Don’t worry. I’m planning to show you plenty of new stuff. And after all that’s done… You’ll look as handsome as possible during your public trial.”
He walks forward, and gently turns the weeping man around with his foot.

Kamoshida was now facing the roof.

“All I need is you to be honest with me. And things will be over soon…”

He says in an almost placid tone.

“But man, a sportsman like you probably has so much resistance that this could drag a little.”

Smiling to himself he looks at the interrogation room’s camera, he unplugged it just a few seconds ago.

Kamiya continues to smile and looks down at the teacher again.

“So let’s get this shit over with.” He makes cracking noises with his knuckles. “And don’t worry. I’ll make sure even a degenerate like you won’t be able to enjoy this.”

….  

The dark skyline of the last days of spring was a sight to behold in Tokyo.

Even in the quiet and elegant Kasumigaseki district.

The pleasant temperature of the regular evening winds of May was blowing through the detective’s office window.

He was admiring the city lights from comfort his seat.

He was holding his phone for a while now… waiting for someone to pick up.

“It’s me. The guy doesn’t know a thing about what happened to him. Blackmail and any other conventional methods are most likely not possible…”

And finally when he hears the corresponding sound he wastes no time going straight to the point.

“Right. I suggest ignoring this case entirely. It’ll be solved by conventional ruling quite fast given how public the whole case turned out to be.”

He wasn’t moving a muscle, his arms felt drained of all energy and he could barely keep his feet up the table.

“If I were you, I’ll put your guys on alert just in case anything is going on with that ‘proceeding’ of yours.”

He says with his empty eyes looking at the distance.

“Agree. I’ll let Sensei know then… Yes sir, appreciated.”

And finally hangs up.

Taking a deep breath he feels like a weight was finally lifted out of his shoulders.

He hears someone knocking his door.

“Hey. Some kid is looking for you in the station.”
'Now?'

He knows exactly who.

“I see… I’ll be there right away.”

He had a long day, it’ll be best if he just made things quick and went home for a good rest.

But he has been saying that to himself for a while now.

Interlude / Out

Earnest effort

The boy legally known as Ren Amamiya was waiting inside the police station lobby.

Many officers were walking around in a hurry, others were minding their own business while chatting with some members of the desk staff.

None of the busy people inside the station paid attention to the languid looking teenage boy in the middle of the room though.

“So this is a police station.”

The cat on his bag didn’t popped out this time, but the black furred feline managed to take a peek at the place thanks to a small opening on the bag’s zip.

The boy remained in his usual silence. And because this was usually his default state of being, Morgana wasn’t able to notice Kido’s quiet discomfort every time a man in uniform stood close to him.

‘Why do I feel like this? I didn’t do anything wrong…’

“Hey you… I wasn’t expecting you today.”

A familiar voice takes him out of his alerted condition.

“… I’m sorry.”

He says at his probation officer who was standing near the stairs.

“Don’t be… Come, I need you to sign some papers.”

The boy follows the fatigued detective to his office.

There was nothing remarkable about the room, it was small and there was only a minimum of office supplies lying around.

The room had no charm at all, probably implying this man didn’t really spend much of his time here.

“So… I owe you an apology.”

The man says as he readies some documents in his desk.
“I know it’s not enough but… You told me about your teacher, I should’ve listened to you.”

He pauses his search to look at the boy’s face.

“Maybe things could’ve been different if I had listened to you.”

“…”

“Well, the guy is going to jail, there’s no way out of it for him. He’s done for… If that’s any consolation.”

He says as he lays the papers in front of the boy.

“Good.”

Was the only answer Kido gave as he started reading through the document, noticing the name ‘Ren Amamiya’ and the word ‘presented’ through the pages.

Kamiya signaled with his finger where he was supposed to sign.

“Did he do anything to you? Did you see anything strange about him while you were at school?”

Kido looks up at the man’s face.

He could notice the weariness behind the man’s glasses.

“…Well I… saw him naked a couple of times.”

“…”

“…”

Kamiya finally sighs trying to relax in his chair.

“Man I can’t really take you seriously, can I?”

Not knowing what to make of that comment Kido starts signing the documents.

“Sorry.”

He says quietly.

“I said stop apologizing.”

“Ok.”

The detective looks at his side as the boy finishes signing the papers.

He notices a leather backpack lying on the ground near him, he could swear the thing moved at some point.

Probably thinking his tired mind was playing him games he ignores it and takes the papers back to his drawer.

“You know kid… you really need to learn how to be more subtle.”

“… Why?”
“I mean, you’re quiet. But you still clearly like to act like a wise-ass brat who doesn’t know his place
all the time.”

The man says with a melancholic tone.

“… Just like your father.”

Kido grunts at the mention of his progenitor.

He hasn’t forgotten this man knew who his father was somehow.

Yet he couldn’t bother to ask him how that came to be.

Mostly because of the fear the answer could only make things worse for him.

‘Who lacks tact now?’

He wonders to himself.

“What’s in your bag?”

Suddenly he realizes the man was already standing beside him with an inquisitive look on his eyes.

“Ummm…..”

Without a waste of time, the man grabs the bag and opens it to find the scared creature curled up inside.

“A freakin’ cat…?” He takes a pause to look back at the boy “… pffwahahaha.”

“…”

The man tries to regain his composure once he notices the self-conscious state of the boy.

“Sorry, sorry… I didn’t see that coming.”

“…”

“Why do you carry a cat around with you?”

“… Sakura-san won’t allow me to leave it at his shop.”

The boy answers in a low voice.

He chuckles again giving the back the bag to the muffled boy before returning to his seat.

“You’re unbelievable…”

He lights up a cigarette, to Kido’s annoyance.

“You know, I may have been wrong about you all this time… I will make things easier for you if
you keep behaving yourself.”

“… How so?”

“Things like you needing to report to me twice a month, I’ll leave the poor Sakura-san be and won’t
call to your school anymore. That’ll make things easier for you, right?”
“… Probably.”

Kido doesn’t feel like acting thankfully after confirming this lazy detective was purposely doing such things.

The boy timidly looks at the side trying not to display his gladness.

“Heh. Well, I’m freaking tired. You’ll need to come back here at least once this month, got it?”

“Ok.”

“… If you stay safe until then…”

He takes a moment to think about a proper compensation while examining the boy’s quiet reaction.

“I’ll tell you everything about how your case ended up with me.”

“…?”

Kido’s full attention was brought back to the man after that last statement.

“You’re curious about it, are you?”

He says while displaying a taunting smile.

“… Why would you do that?”

Realizing he made the boy to finally be interested in what he has to say, he simply shrugs at him.

“… Let’s just say you earned it.”

He says with a smile while waving him goodbye.

Once outside the station the boy decides to take a look at his roommate inside of his bag.

“Man that was scary!”

The cat said.

“Welcome to my life.”

He says before returning his bag to his shoulder, heading home without any detours.

‘Behaving…’

He thinks as he walks.

It was not a strange condition at all… but hearing it like that helped to remind him why he was doing what he does at all.

To be able to live an honest life one day, he had to behave like he was having one in the first place…

He smiled to himself at the irony.

At the risk of belonging

The week was running quite slowly.
The phantom boy was doing his best to remain as unnoticeable as he could.

Takashi Kido wasn’t only dealing with the police officers roaming around school constantly stopping students to ask those questions about the Kamoshida incident.

The teacher also mentioned something about exams coming soon, which was a perfect excuse for him to improve his somewhat tarnished reputation.

Yet he didn’t many hopes about it.

And being completely honest to himself, he didn’t really care about it.

But as long as those results helped him to remain undiscovered, he’ll go through it with no concerns.

He also had to deal with a certain spiky haired boy who peeking at his direction during the whole school day.

“Ummm, Amamiya-san?”

Finally the boy managed to gather enough courage to get closer.

Kido did his best to pretend he hasn’t noticed Mishima’s weird behavior for hours now.

“Yes…?”

“Heh. It’s me Mishima.”

Says the boy who was obviously trying his best to look as calm as he could.

“Oh… Hi.”

“Hey, tell me…”

The boy scratches his check trying to find the correct words.

“…”

“Are you—…?”

He then toughens his will and leans towards Kido’s face with a determined look.

“Perhaps—”

But the boy with the glasses raises both his hands to stop him.

“Wow… personal space.”

Kido doesn’t move an inch, his face doesn’t convey any emotion, but his voice carries a clear annoyed vibe.

“Huh?”

“You’re too close.”

“Oh. S-sorry!”

“It’s ok…. I’m sorry but I should be meeting someone right now.”
Kido says as he picks the monabag.

“Can we speak another time?”

“Eh? But… Ok.”

The spiky haired boy tediously accepts his defeat.

“Bye.”

He heads to the rooftop as quickly as he can without altering his usual calm pace.

On his way there he heard all sort of rumors going on through the corridors again.

Much to his displeasure Morgana had suggested him to pay more attention to his surroundings given his last unexpected encounter with Kamoshida back then.

But hearing his school mates complaining about the school fame being damaged and worrying more about their future outside school because of the school reputation wasn’t his idea of intriguing information gathering.

Once he arrives he sees the two flashy second year students waiting for him.

“You’re late.”

Say the pigtailed girl.

“Is that our secret greeting code now?”

Kido says.

“Ha-ha.”

Takamaki mocked a laugh.

“Everythin’s all right? You were the one who told us to meet here today.”

Ryuji asks.

“Everything is fine…”

He opens the bag letting Morgana jump out to a near desk.

“Man, you didn’t need to be so cold back there.”

“We were hurried.”

“I already told, you should at least listen to what people have to say! Who knows what sort of information you can get by letting people become closer to you.”

“…”

“C’mon, cut him some slack. That’s just how he is.”

Sakamoto comments while putting down a new volume of his favorite manga.

“If he’s going to be our leader, we need him to be more approachable. He should be ready for whatever situations we may end up in the future…” Morgana says at Ryuji before turning back to
Kido’s “Making allies—friends, can be really useful.”

“Sorry mom.”

“Hey don’t call me that!”

“Anyway, what was that you wanted to tell us Morgana?”

Ann interrupts the exchange hoping to move on to the point.

“Ehem… We need to find a new target, right? We have some ideas, but did you find anything by yourselves?”

Morgana asks while facing the blonde duo.

“No. I checked the phan-site as you told me, but none of these posts are good.”

Ryuji says while tapping through his smartphone.

“Everyone’s just bitchin’ about their parents or boyfriends.”

He says drowned in disappointment.

The band remains silent as they hear their hope for an easy new target vanishing.

“We can’t really get everything online.” Says Ann. “Finding post with a name and locations is asking too much.”

“So what do we do? Maybe we should focus on bigger targets?”

Ryuji asks his leader… who just shrugs as he rests over the wall.

“Are you seriously suggesting we look for a target that even the police have overlooked?”

Morgana asks.

“Maybe we should just wait until exams are done with and take our time.”

Finally Kido adds to the conversation again.

“Wait, exams!?”

Sakamoto startles.

“You really had no idea we have exams next week?”

Ann asks in an accusatorily manner.

“Judging by your reaction you’ll struggle this time too.”

She says while folding her arms.

“Y-you say that, but the only thin’ you’re good at is English!”

“At least I’m good at something, instead of being bad at every subject.”

“I’ll pay you the due respects when the time comes.”
Says Kido while holding his hands as if making a pray.

“S-shuddup! I bet those nerdy glasses are just for show and you’ll flunk too!”

He could notice a trace of sweat forming in Kido’s forehead.

Takashi could complain about not having enough time to study given their whole Kamoshida situation.

But he decides to not voice his frustration since they all were most likely in the same situation.

“When it comes to Ryuji, even his Japanese is questionable.”

The cat says while raising his right paw in a playful fashion.

“What’s questionable is if you’re even human to begin with!”

Ryuji looks at Kido smirking after his immediate retort to the cat.

“Nice comeback, huh?”

“Let’s discuss this with our fists!”

Says Morgana while standing on two legs and taking his claws out.

“Bring it!”

“Ugh, cut it out you two!”

Ann orders while the two rebels brood the conflict away.

“Oh, did you got that new gear you told us about?”

She asks Kido next.

“Working on that…”

“Literally, that beef bowl store pay is miserable.”

Morgana says as he jumps back over the damaged desk next to Ryuji.

“You’re working on a beef bowl shop? Man, wouldn’t you get in trouble for bringin’ a cat to the shop?”

“…”

“Don’t overwork yourself though, we can also get a little money on our own.”

Ann tries to bring Kido’s morale up.

“Ugh, I don’t wanna go back on workin’ at triple 7 tho.”

Ryuji complains.

“You’ll never pay me back that way.”

Ann frowns at Ryuji.
“You’re still keepin’ that up?”

“Relax guys, we can get money from the meta-verse remember? We can always sell the treasures we find and even get money from shadows.”

Morgana explains.

“How did that worked again?”

The puzzled blonde boy asks.

“Who knows…”

Says the cat while grooming his face.

“That can’t be good for the economy.”

Kido says.

“You sound so responsible.”

Ann adds with a chuckle.

Suddenly their friendly and now trifling conversation is interrupted as they all remain quiet by the sound of the rooftop door opening.

Out comes a familiar looking girl.

The brunette student was wearing a black vest that covered white turtle neck uniform. She headed towards them with a serious look and stood in front of the group.

Morgana, who jumped over the school AA’s to avoid being noticed looks down at the girl who was taking her time to examine the scene.

“That girl…”

Kido remembers her face from somewhere.

The boy wasn’t good when it came to remembering faces, so this feeling was something unusual for him.

There’s an unwritten rule about boys not remembering girls faces and how disastrous the consequences could be.

So he did his best trying to remember any sort of encounter with this serious formal looking student.

“This place is off limits, you know?”

Those were the first almost programed sounding words of the proper looking girl towards the inadequate trio.

“… We’ll get outta here once we’re done chattin’”

Sakamoto says bluntly.

The girl looks down at the punk boy showing no signs of being intimidated by his thug dialect.

“Anyways, what’s Miss Council President wants with us?”
The boy adds.

*Council president?*

That’s right, Takashi Kido recognized this girl.

She was that one quiet girl that was exceedingly good at isolating herself from the world in the middle of the school library.

Kido remembers how much he admired her impetus and focus on her studies while the other students were dedicating their attention to whisper rumors about her.

In a way he understood the need for such moments of total disconnection from your own world awareness, he uses to do the same all the time.

But he also understands how much you need to sacrifice your awareness of your own surroundings to do so.

It was quite a dangerous method. One would say it needed to be almost subconsciously activated so you can still manage to concentrate in whatever you decide to do it.

It was also quite a lonely habit.

But this girl...

Even though the girl had a soft and gentle voice, her bearing seemed to be stiff and somewhat forced.

She had a very feminine and proper air about her.

Yet there was nothing incongruous about her behavior.

Not until she speaks to them again.

“The troublemaker, the girl of rumors and the infamous transfer student… What an interesting combination.”

The girl with the crimson eyes says.

It was obvious what she was getting at.

To Takashi Kido this could only mean this girl was looking for them.

No, she was hoping to find them together like this.

She was obviously looking for an answer. One she had already broken down to a theoretical certainty.

The girl used a tone that conveyed a superiority role.

Kido didn’t find that offensive though. Why would he?

This third year girl was obviously an honor student, someone above the common realm of some school outlaws like them.

Yet on the other hand, in contrast to her graceful idiosyncrasy and natural and mature beauty, she had this testy throb hidden in her voice.
“What a great way to start a conversation.”

Says Ann with a pitch of sarcasm.

Kido could contemplate the image of the council president being an extraordinarily busy person. That could explain her brash attitude towards some easy going looking bunch like them. Yet the question of why she was looking for them made Kido stay on his guard.

The girl ignored Ann’s comment as if she was expecting such a demeaning rebuttal from her, and directed her full attention to the black haired boy resting on the wall.

“By the way... It seems you knew many things about Mr. Kamoshida pretty well.”

She says in an impersonal manner.

“Who?”

Kido answers immediately, doing his best to not show his characteristic smirk while doing so.

It didn’t matter to him. The Kamoshida business was over, hearing his name only brings the undeniable satisfaction having done a good job reforming his heart and knowing that man will soon be behind the bars.

“He did say two students were about to be expelled during his public confession. And you two seem to have a clash with him a few weeks before.”

She says not taking her sight from him, waiting for his reaction.

‘She’s testing my reactions?’

Kido wondered.

“You know he’s been here just for a short while, don’t you?”

Sakamoto tries to cover his friend answer.

“Hm...?”

She emits an unsatisfied sound.

Kido managed to not move a muscle to her question though. To anyone else, this behavior could be taken as intimidating.

But to this girl it was nothing more than a sign of this boy insurgent nature. He didn’t bother to answer her any time soon, so he took advantage of this importunity to appreciate the elegance she transmitted with her eyes.

After just a few seconds that felt like minutes, he realizes something about her sternness.

It was too perfect…

“I heard Kamoshida-sensei used a volleyball student to spread rumors about your past record.”
The girl says.

The fact she’s aware of his record didn’t mean anything to him since most of the school knew already. But the idea that the girl suspicions are probably based on his past record and the rumors surrounding him frustrated him a little, even more given those suspicions were mostly true.

“Don’t you hate him? Kamoshida-sensei, I mean.”

She continued her questioning, much to his indifference.

There was nothing for him to hate. He wouldn’t bother looking back at something that didn’t mean anything to him anymore.

He and his friends were safe from Kamoshida’s abuses, and he was told that man would pay for the atrocities he did to his victims. That was all he cared.

He noticed how that girl was slowly changing her demeanor while addressing to him. She probably was getting frustrated by his constant silent treatment towards her questions.

There was also the fact that this girl is the image of what a model student should be. Just by looking at her anyone could guess that she was someone who wouldn’t flunk a single exam and will make it to a high class college.

She looks like someone who’s dedicated to please the teacher’s expectations and student’s needs equally.

But he didn’t buy it.

There was no way someone could be that perfect without showing any cracks that bared traits of their own identity.

“What’s this all about? My friend here’s an upstanding guy!”

Sakamoto defends his friend trying to get the girl’s attention.

“I don’t mean to offend. Many students have been shaken up by what happened. Those rumors about that calling card-esque posting aren’t going away either.”

‘I see…”

He noticed it. Takashi Kido noticed a hint of human emotions coming from that girl.

The calling card seems to be a point of interest, regardless of all the abstract clues that pointed towards the trio involvement, the student council president didn’t had any solid evidence of their connection with that posting.

Yet for some reason the girl seems to be playing the role of a ‘detective’ with an odd enthusiasm. That made Kido smile to himself under the shadow of the AA structure he was lying on.

The girl noticed this and looked him intrigued.

Was he mocking her? She wondered.

“I didn’t expect that someone like you would care about that tactless stuff, Niijima-senpai.”
But just when the girl was about to continue her questioning to the boy she knew as Ren Amamiya, Takamaki interrupted her with her own assumptions joining to Kido’s same realization.

‘Niijima… so that’s her name?’

“Tactless…? Um, anyway, we done here? We can’t leave if you keep talkin’ to us.”

The whole time the Niijima girl was doing her best to keep her line of questions, that way she could take advantage of this situation so the trio could slip something to her because of her surprising entrance and the revelation of realizing she was tracking them.

But they didn’t seem to care about her at all.

That bothered her. She took the risk of revealing her investigation to them for nothing.

Not only they’ll be more careful around her from now on, but she couldn’t get anything relevant after confronting them.

“At least try to understand my position here…”

She says with frustration.

“Being forced to deal with this horseplay.”

She finishes with a frown

“Horseplay…!?"

This time Ann gets offended for some reason.

‘Maybe she’s not really that much into it…’

There was a contradiction on how this girl talked and how she reacted.

Apparently she didn’t like the idea of wasting her time following some delinquents without a cause whens he could be dedicating to her time to her studies.

Her angry reaction also gave them a clue of what it’s really going on.

She was being forced by someone, most likely the principal to follow and find more about them.

Kido realized the irony of them being feed more information during this interrogation than the girl who came to question them.

“Can we go now?”

But instead of continuing reveling on her failure, he tries to finish the meeting.

She glares at him but then her expression returns to her previously calm posture.

She didn’t have any clues, but she got something out of this encounter.

This boy was calm and quiet, he always seems to be in control.

Both Takamaki and Sakamoto are known for being very emotionally driven persons. That would make the black haired boy the most influential person of the three.
Maybe it was just an act, a façade he elaborates to fool those around him. Part of her wishes that was the case for some reason.

Because from what she witnessed today, someone like Ren Amamiya doesn’t fit the image of a troublemaker delinquent that assaulted someone.

Yet his cocky attitude still managed to get under her skin. Even if it was just a little.

She learned something indeed; she should be more careful around him.

“Ah yes, by the way… this place will be closed off due to the incident.”

She says with an elegant but cheeky expression.

Her words also returned to their previous spaced and monotonous speech again.

“Since so many are coming here without permission, it’s only logical… I’m sorry to have interrupted you.”

She turns away while apologizing in an unemotional way. Having the last word she retreats from the scene.

“What was that all about?”

Ann stands up angrily.

“She pisses me off.”

Ryuji says from his broken seat.

“Why?”

Ask Kido, not really interested in the answer.

“It’s her know it all attitude, she’s just the typical teacher’s pet.”

“Is that another rumor?”

Kido asks knowing Sakamoto’s previous gullibility about the rumors of Kamoshida and Ann supposed relationship.

“I’m gonna have to agree with Ryuji in this one, she is known for taking the teacher’s side every time the student council has to make a decision…” Ann says while turning back at her blonde friend.

“She also kicked Ryuji out of the library once though, but he had that one coming.”

“I-I don’t care ‘bout that!”

“What did you do?”

Kido ask the punk boy with narrowed eyes.

“Why are you sidin’ with her?”

“He asked for the librarian to add some shounen mangas to the school library repertory and apparently started to make a scene, so she kicked him out very... grossly. It was quite out of character.”
“T-that’s not how it happened!”
Kido brings his hand to his chin while thinking about something.

“She is… Interesting.”

“What do you mean?”
Morgana asks while jumping down from the roofs.

Kido shakes his head disregarding his last words.

“She probably thinks she has us figured out already…”
He explains.

“Yeah. That girl looks rather sharp, we should be careful.”

“Why are you smirking for now?”
Takamaki asks to the black haired boy who was stretching before heading to the door.

“Nothing, I don’t think we should worry about her… but we should change our meeting spot from now on.”
Kido says calmly.

“Talk about a pain in the ass…”

“This is a great opportunity.”
Says Morgana.

“For what?”
Ryuji asks.

“I tell you guys after you finish your exams, for now you all should focus to live a normal life and not bringing much attention towards you.”
Morgana explains while turning to the blonde troublemaker.

“Especially you Ryuji, there are bound to be traps that will need to be solved with brains.”
Morgana then addresses the whole team while standing in the middle of the young trio.

“Keep in mind what you do in your daily lives has an impact in your abilities as well.”

“If we look at it that way it doesn’t sound so bad, it’s like our training to be phantom thieves!”
A motivated Ann says.

“You’re so chill, sometimes it worries me.”
Says a spiritless Takashi.

“That wasn’t what I had in mind when I was all fired up ‘bout helpin’ people. Lame.”
Says the discouraged blonde boy.

“There, there.”

Ann pats him in the shoulder with a fake smile.

“Once you finish your exams I have something to show you, so you’ll have something to look forward to… Remember you promise to help me in my mission.”

Morgana says full of a strange joyfulness.

“You can just tell us now.”

Kido says cutting his motivation off.

“I said later, I need you guys focused on it when we go there…”

“So it’s a location of some sort.”

Kido reflects.

“Ugh, I refuse to speak anymore!”

Kido looks at Morgana with a serious expression.

“On second thought that doesn’t sound so bad.”

“I’ll still guide you through your daily life, as our leader you need to stay unnoticed, leave that to me.”

“… Thank you.”

Says the once again dispirited boy with a record.

“You know, havin’ free time doesn’t sound that bad. We may as well relax a little.”

Once again, Sakamoto displays his amazing adaptability aptitudes.

“You’re always like that though.”

Ann says.

“I will have to agree with Ryuji too…”

Says the phantom thief leader.

Living an unremarkable life was going to be more difficult than he originally thought… But he may as well take his time to enjoy the momentarily peace they fought so hard to obtain.

“Well, let’s disband for today…”

Kido finally parts waving back at his friends.

Today was going to be a long day.

It wasn’t as productive as they first imagined, but they came out with a new mission.
This time the objective wasn’t such an urgent or dreadful reality they should overcome.

For now they only needed to overcome their daily lives as nothing had happened to them in the last couple of weeks.

But even if that sounded like an easy deed to achieve, a lot had changed for them since the first weeks of April.

They all had a new way to confront the difficulties of life and faced the darkest side of themselves.

Facing their daily lives with these new aspects of themselves could lead to new challenges and viewpoints they never experienced before.

Then there was that third year honor student that was investigating them.

The rumors about the phantom thieves had spread online and their hands will probably be full pretty soon.

At the same time he had to do part time jobs and take on the school exams while continuing to make new contacts that could help them through their pilferage missions.

To Takashi Kido… to Joker, living a double life felt like a thrilling undertaking. One he (finally) looked forward to accomplish.

End of part 1

Chapter End Notes

First of all sorry about the delay.
And well, finally a fully original chapter with a just a bunch of in game scenes.
Two more confidants in the next part.
Anyway enter Makoto Nijima, the honor student, and yes, Joker first… rival!
Although he doesn’t seem to take her seriously… yet.
Next chapter is probably going to be released sooner than later since I was writing both at the same time… yeah I’m not that bright when it comes to time management (how did I even get into a franchise of games which have time management as their most important feature is beyond me.)
I think I finally found the ideal length for my chapter’s releases.
I hope to be able to maintain this format consistently for the reader’s convenience.
Please leave a comment if you feel like sharing something.
I am always open to criticism.
Early mornings are usually not as hot during this time of the year.

Exams are mostly over and students began to frolic around town a lot more often again.

But with summer being that close, most people start to mentally prepare themselves for the incoming heat waves.

That seems to be the case for the elegant looking therapist of Shujin Academy’s guidance room, Jun Soseki.

She had made an appointment with the infamous troublemaker of Shujin, Ren Amamiya, after classes.

They’re bound to meet in the station square at Shibuya.

Once the boy arrived though, he found the outlandish woman eating ice cream in an indelicate manner.

As soon as she noticed the boy’s arrival she immediately threw the sorbet away.

He wonders if she felt some sort of embarrassment for having those mundane quirks.

“What took you so long?”

He couldn’t manage to find out.

The woman immediately tried to focus their conversation on the boy’s routine.

“I was busy trying to avoid a classmate.”

“Really? You dislike this boy’s presence so much?”

“I just don’t like people that try to force themselves into others.”

That has always been the case for the boy born as Takashi Kido.

His whole life he had enjoyed the peacefulness of a private life.

People often misinterpreted that wish as a form of antipathy.

But he’s more than ok for that to be the case, if it’ll mean even less unwanted attention towards him.
“That’s no good. You really are stubborn and a bit of a hypocrite…”

But the woman’s words take him aback.

“I’m sorry. What?”

“Isn’t that exactly what you’ve been doing this whole time?”

“I-…”

It is true that he’s been forcing himself into strange people’s lives recently.

But that was only as per Igor’s and this woman’s instructions.

“Haha. Maybe we can help each other after all.”

“Help?”

“It is my duty as the student guide to… well, guide you towards your future endeavors.”

“My future?”

“Yes. What profession you aim to. What do you want to do with your life?”

“… Oh, that.”

A mix of relief and disappointment is palpable in the boy’s voice.

“Why did you need to call me here for that? Shouldn’t the school guidance room be enough for that kind of things…? Isn’t that the purpose of the guidance room in the first place?”

“Relax, I call this “recreation”. This way you wouldn’t feel pressured by the school inimical atmosphere.”

“Still sounds like an excuse…”

“We can always meet in other places… besides…”

She looks towards the crowd surrounding them.

“I may need your help for other things too.”

Her tone became serious.

“So… you want me to help you, in exchange for you to do your job?”

But the boy instead finds this as an opening for his teasing.

“…”

He could swear he saw her sweating for a moment.

“What kind of deal is that?”

“I’m not going to help you only with your curricular prospects, you know?”

She dramatically starts searching through her purse looking for something.
“The app, I have the app! Remember?”
She says while taking her tablet out to the boy’s face.

“Well…”

“Ugh, aren’t you curious about it?”
Finally, frustration overcame her.

“No…”

“What?”

“You already told me how it works and what it does.”

“B-but that’s not all…! It has many other functions I learned while being trapped in that place!”

“Like what?”

“Like… wait… dammit you almost got me!”

“…”

The piteous display he was witnessing, although somewhat gratifying, also felt like bullying at this point.

“What’s with you, a cute lady is asking you for a favor and this is how you act? How rude.”

Yet he felt no guilt about it.

“I just needed to admire the sight of Jun-sama looking desperate for some reason.”

“I’m not desperate. I can handle myself just fine… But it’ll really help me if you could give me a hand with my current situation. And I could help you and your group too.”

Kido remembers the image of junk food trash lying all over her office back then.

Such an unrefined behavior coming from her was strange.

If she was really trapped inside that prison for such a long time…

Did she really needed to eat all that junk food as some sort of revenge or something?

“… Fine.”

He was going to accept out of curiosity anyway.

So he let his mind drift somewhere else before accepting.

“Great, then let’s head to somewhere more… open.”

----
Soon they arrive at the Meguro district.

They were walking around the riverbank near the Nakameguro neighborhood.

The sun was setting and the view of the cherry blossoms falling over the Meguro River was truly dazzling.

One could say romantic.

Such thoughts were the last thing he could imagine coming from this encounter though.

Still the woman that brought him here found herself looking at the other side of the river.

The other side was an area composed mostly of apartment buildings and hotels.

“Things really changed.”

She finally spoke again.

He couldn’t dare to speak at first, given how melancholic she looked ever since arriving to this spot.

He gets it now. She must be reminiscing her past.

“Were you really two years inside that place?”

“Yeah… Well, it felt a lot shorter… much shorter.”

“How did you ended up in there?”

“…”

She lowers her gaze to the river silence.

“Do you know?”

“Same way as you probably. Somebody wanted me there, no matter what I thought about it.”

“… But you said that you were providing your services to them.”

She sighs at his words.

Managing to throw her concerns away and finally regaining that presumptuous smile Kido found so arrogant.

“And I am. That was the deal we made so I could get out of that place and…”

“And what?”

“Help you in your venture to stop the ruin.”

“What is the ruin he was talking about?”

“m-MM’-mmm”

She made an audible shrug making it sound like a fast ‘Idunno’.

“Honestly… and you just believed it?”
“Didn’t you?”

“… I”

“The thing is Amamiya-kun. Whatever he meant by that, it was something worth picking you up from your daily life. And thrown into this new world you’re involved with… It has to be something only you could achieve. But anyway, you have the freedom to do whatever you want.”

She says that last bit with a disinterested pitch before returning her focus to the river.

He looks at her in disbelief.

“I may work as psychologist, but I can only do so much for to help you not screwing things up.”

She says while resting her elbows over the railing.

“… Should I be thankful for that?”

“No. And I rather you not, it’s more fun that way.”

‘Why does she keep getting on my nerves so easily?’

Kido always had a hard time understanding this woman constant need to mock him.

Being unconsciously or not, she always finds a way to distract him away of his thoughts. And make his coolness crack.

“What am I supposed to do to help you today?”

Finally Kido tries to go to the point of this meeting.

“You already did.”

But he’s found with this woman’s unexpected, yet sincere smile.

“Did I?”

She simply nods before looking back at the city lights.

“The city hasn’t changed at all… yet everything is so different.”

“…”

‘Did she not dare to come here on her own?’

Kido wonders before laying his elbows over the same rail beside her.

“Are you sure you’re not a monster from that world?”

He says bluntly.

“Your insolence gives your delinquent status credit.”

“Where did you used to live?”

He ignores her comment while looking at the buildings around the area.
“An apartment block near here. It was nice and cozy… But I’m sure I’ll get kicked out if I go there now.”

“Why?”

“I already owed a lot of rent.”

She says with a hint of embarrassment.

“… You are kind of messy, aren’t you?”

“I won’t pretend to be some classy lady, but I’ll have you know the apartment I lived on was quite fancy and expensive.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I really miss the comfyness and the good sight.”

“Comfy?”

‘How old is she?’

“The place I live now is quite the opposite, cheap and small. That’s all a school guide can pay these days.”

“… Maybe you should lower your expectations.”

He does his best to not let his inner smirk manifest in the real world.

“Maybe I should get another part time job… Do you know any?”

“… There’s a flower shop in the station’s mall looking for people.”

“Oh! I love flowers. You should get me some next time.”

She says enthusiastically.

“… Really? I didn't see you as a flowers girl.”

She giggles at the boy’s surprise.

Somehow his boldness and sincerity made her feel breezy.

He stood there this whole time, trying his best not to be invasive nor inadequate.

She understood this boy nature a lot more now.

"You really are helpful. You know that?"

"But I didn't do anything."

The boy puzzlement made her giggle some more.

"You are a good listener Ren-Kun."

She says with a gentle smile.
"Am I?"

"Yes... sometimes that's all it takes. That's probably one of the reasons people like to depend on you."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Now, now. I may look like I don't take my job that seriously. But that doesn't mean I don't know what I'm talking about."

She blusters.

"You see, that cute and boorish face of yours is actually very inviting."

"Huh?"

"You told me before that you are not a very social person, right?"

"... What about it?"

"Tell me something… Kido-kun. Do you hate people?"

The way she shifted through his names started to make him feel uncomfortable.

"... That's-"

"I don't mean if you resent the world or the system. I'm mean more superficially. Do you really find it hard to interact with people? Getting tired of them for things like wanting to be close to you?"

It was a tricky question.

On one hand, he really appreciates his solitude.

He wouldn’t deny people things like a basic conversation.

But he’ll prefer to avoid contact whenever he can.

His “mask” was on most of the time.

It helped him to avoid having people invading the freedom that he finds in his loneliness.

The thing is…

He really just doesn’t care about people.

"... Not really."

She smiles at his response.

"You see. Sometimes all it takes to become a social person, is to just go out there and practice."

She says while exaggeratedly extending both her arms as if throwing something at the river.

"That’s what I usually tell my patients with social anxiety disorders."

Noticing the oddity of her recent action, she tries her best to regain her composure in a musing pose.
"I'm not that kind of person though…"

"People usually isolate themselves when they're afraid of their own incapacity to confront a specific aspect of the outside world."

'She's ignoring me…'

"Most of the time it's not even their own fault. It's sad how humans can turn into a shallow version of what they can become."

It's not the first time he hears something like that.

He heard it before. From the man who raised him no less.

How some people do their best to avoid confronting their fears their whole lives.

People who fail to meet their potential.

And then there are those who do face their own darkness but become something worse.

People who are capable of doing great things. But end up becoming distorted.

People like Suguru Kamoshida came to Kido’s mind.

"What makes you different is your capacity to listen to people... even if you're not paying attention to them. It makes you dependable."

"I."

After hearing that, his feeling of guilt made him babble something.

He had been listening. But he can understand how his naturally uninteresting bearing could illustrate the contrary.

"Heh, don't worry. You see, people like that usually become natural leaders or dependable family members."

‘… By just hearing others speak their mind?’

"Yes, it’s starts from there… Just like now. Things like asking questions. That helps both sides to learn something from each other. That could help you to understand things you didn't know or cared about human interaction."

"... Yeah... that's how questions work."

He understands what she means, but he can’t help but to feel he’s being lectured.

"Speaking publicly also helps both the listener and the speaker to feel more aware of their own strengths..."

She ignores his comment once more.

"And of their surroundings. If you're nervous about something you just have to keep listening to what the other person has to say, that way you don't need to focus on how scared you are."

"Sometimes you really sound like a dependable adult."
He says while narrowing his eyes at her.

"Wow, that wasn't nice."

"... I'm sorry."

"I don't mind. I actually like when you try to sound like that. It's almost like if you're not a mundane teenager in a rebellious stage."

"... And there it goes."

She laughs maliciously while covering her mouth.

"I once had a very introverted patient. That person was so afraid to even being seen in public, the best way that person managed to fight that fear, was by public speaking..."

Her anecdote didn’t make much sense to Kido, she was obviously skipping some context.

He decided to exercise her whole “just listening” method for now.

"What I mean is that all that all it takes is to make one step. With patience and practice, people learn to not be so unnecessarily self-conscious. And that way, they learn to slowly let people into their hearts."

"I don't think that really matters."

Kido says while turning towards the river.

“People can easily leave you behind…”

His voice showed no emotion, but his sight focused at the white lotus floating through the river.

His last comment was most certainly the voice of experience.

"Doesn't it? The act of talking to people sometimes works as a process of elimination. Humans always wander around, looking for someone to understand them... some do more desperately than others."

"I'm not an introvert if that's what you're worried about."

"... You may not be an anxious or a troubled person. Yet there's obviously a deep conflict in within you. And it's making you hesitate to open yourself to others."

"Maybe I just like to keep a distance."

"That's fine. I won't tell you what to do or how to behave. I'm just disclosing how the majority of people face such matters."

"..."

The boy remains silent as he continues watching the flowers floating through the quiet waters below them.

"I apologize if I made you feel uncomfortable. But being able to tell you this was part of my job after all."
"It's Ok. I already know I have to make allies as much as I can."

He says without turning his attention to her.

"Who knows... you may even end up caring about those individuals."

She says while resting her back over the rail.

Looking at him on the side betweenggles.

“All you need to do is to listen to people... oh and smile.”

“...”

He finally looks at her with a bored expression.

“Figures, your face’s stiff as a corpse’s most of the time. Kido-kun”

A sigh of defeat leaves her mouth.

“You really are an annoying lady, you know that? Also, can you make up your mind on how you’ll call me from now on?”

He steps back bringing both hands to his pockets with an annoyed expression.

“Hehe. I just enjoy finding out more about you. Hmmm but you’re right.”

She starts musing with her index finger covering her mouth.

It takes her a short while.

“Don’t hurt yourself.”

He says.

“Ow, But I like your two names, they both fit you!”

“...”

“I know. From now on, you’re the Lotus-boy!”

“...”

‘Did she get that from the flowers floating down there?’

The boy looks at the current dragging a bunch of white flowers away.

“It’s decided.”

“Whatever.”

He stretches his muscles as a bored cat would before starting heading back to the station.

“Now let’s see... about your career...”

The woman follows him without stopping the conversation.
“Please don’t—”

“You can be a great pick up artist! How’s that for your curricular expectations?”

“… Minus ten, I’m going home.”

“Remember to check the app whenever you can.”

She says to him at the distance.

The boy couldn’t catch that one last smirk she had at that moment.

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Once he got back at Shibuya he began to wander around the old train near where an old man was giving a speech.

He was looking around for a specific small beast.

“Where have you been? I’ve been waiting for you for hours now…”

Finally the beast found him.

The black cat was over the old green train looking down at the boy.

“You don’t have a watch, how would you know?”

Kido says.

“Hey! Don’t underestimate my abilities… so, what’s the big secret?”

“I tell you later… did you found what’s has he been up to?”

“Well…”

The cat does his best to summarize his mission report after jumping over his shoulder and return to his base inside his bag.

“I see… Alright, I guess that’s good enough.”

“You mean…”

“Yeah, I’ll text the others tomorrow.”

Hierophant: The initial commitment
On their way to Leblanc the cat and the boy discussed the many advantages of saving money for a TV.

Kido was fine by renting some books at the school library once in a while.

But the cat insisted on gathering as many sources of entertainment as they could during their time in that bleak attic.

The enthusiastic feline had used his persuasion skills the best he could.

Eventually he convinced his roommate to save enough money.

Ignoring the laugh of a couple of kids had at their expense.

(because of them watching him talking to his cat) He stays still in front of the shop door for a moment.

The visible image through the crystal door was an unexpected one.

“Hey, Takashi… that woman is here again.”

The cat whispered over Kido’s shoulder.

Kido ignores his cat companion while doing his best to hear the conversation inside.

“As I told you before, I don’t pay attention to the news. I only let the TV on because my regulars like to hear the news on the back as they drink their coffee.”

Sakura was cleaning some mugs while looking somewhat absentminded.

“I see.”

The woman wearing a gray suit was drinking her coffee with great elegance. Taking her time while watching the news on tv.

“If you want I can change the channel.”

She shakes her head directing him to not do so.

“It’s ok. I usually don’t pay much attention to the news either, but this place is so quiet that I can’t help myself.”

Sakura could guess the woman was lying.

She finds a way to ask these types of questions during every visit.

“Makes sense, It’s a bit more noisy sometimes during the evenings though.”

“Do you have lots of clients?”

“Erm… Of course. This part of the town is mostly elderly though.”

“Hmmm, then I must be one of your youngest clients.”

The woman with silver hair says while closing her eyes. She looked almost pleased after taking a sip of her coffee again.
“Probably.”

“Do you not like young people coming here?”

“Only one man in particular, but the clients happiness is always a priority.”

Outside the boy was not really trying to hide his presence.

But at the very least he did pretend to be looking at his phone while resting his back over the wall beside the door.

“Is he referring to you?”

The cat asks to the boy.

“I’m not a client.”

There was only one relatively ‘young’ man who also spends his time here once in a while. Besides that eccentric movies critic that recently started to become a regular too. Apparently the usual clientele is starting to become younger ever since he arrived to that coffee.

‘I’ll like to take credit but…’

Finally he decides to step in and opens the shop’s door.

“Oh, you’re back?”

“I…”

“You forgot something, right? Check it out upstairs…”

Sakura quickly cuts him off.

“… Yes, excuse me.”

Kido does his best to play along.

“Sorry miss, but is about time I close the shop.”

“Right, it’s getting late. Well I’ll be coming more often, I am getting used to this relaxing atmosphere.”

“As you wish.”

Once Kido returns downstairs the woman had already left, and he had changed to his casual clothes.

“Man I thought she would never leave.”

Sakura says in relief.

“… I thought serving coffee was all about talking to the ladies.”

Kido says with a serious face.

“Did your parents never teach you how to keep those kinds of saucy comments for yourself?”
But Sakura could see through his mockery.

“… Not really.”

“Hmmm. That woman may not look like it, but she’s the kind of person that could ruin your life if you let her find out too much about you.”

That comment was surprising.

The young lady seems to be an important person no matter how you look at her.

Yet nothing about her interactions with this man or himself had demonstrated any sort of animosity for Kido.

“What’s with that face? You wonder how I know that, Isn’t it?”

“I do… She asks a lot of questions, but she doesn’t look-…”

“Like a bad person? Hmmmm…”

The man shelves some last mugs below the bar as he thinks how to word his point.

“If I have to put it in a way you’ll understand. Customer service gives you enough experience to figure all kinds of things about people by sharing a few words with them. Especially in the clandestine commercial world of retail.”

“That sounds like an elegant way to say nobody comes here.”

“Keep the lip down or else. Anyway, you didn’t help me today and you’re late.”

Sakura's mood never really changed. But right now Kido felt the accusatory tone of his voice a lot more than before.

“I’m sorry, I made a promise to help some friends today before the golden week.”

“Friends, huh?”

“…”

“Well it’s never too late to start. How about it, do you wanna learn?”

The continual offer from Sakura keeps surprising Kido every time.

Does he wants him to help this much?

Most of the time Sakura doesn’t sound that interested on Kido’s doings at all.

But sometimes he seems to go out of his way to try to make Kido feel less… unwanted.

“Coffee…?”

“Yeah… It’s relaxing. And you know, a man that’s remarkably good at something usually gets lucky with the ladies.”

“… I guess?”

“Heh, no need to be shy now. Do you want me to teach you or not? How about it? I can’t pay you a
salary so this is the best I can offer you for now. It’s a start.”

The way he put it didn’t sound fair at all.

But there was something about Sakura that made him charming to the eyes of his clients.

And to Kido, this old man was a grumpy and very private person.

He could respect that.

In fact, Sakura hasn’t asked him once about his parents, or his name situation either.

Probably to avoid him to inquire him about the same matters such as his own family.

Most of the time he made it sound like he didn’t cared at all about Kido’s wellbeing.

But, so far he hasn’t really made things difficult for him.

It was actually all the contrary, the space he gave him was… soothing.

“… I’ll be gladly doing it then.”

The boy says with a genuine smile.

“Good boy. Now, let me explain…”

Interlude / Not strong enough

The sight outside the hospital window was as dull as the gray sky above the city.

Two girls were conversing before the mother of the bedridden patient arrived.

"When I went home, my guardian asked me if I was ok"

Shiho Suzui was not looking at her friend while speaking.

Reliving the events of that day was something her friend insisted her to avoid.

Yet she proceeded through the whole tale as a way to get it out of her system.

Sadly, Ann Takamaki could only resign to stay put and listen to the whole thing.

"I didn't say anything... she ignored me and that was it."

She was doing her best to be as dependable as she could for her.

But she was shattering on the inside by learning every bit of suffering her friend went through that day.

No, it wasn't only that day.

By measuring the amount of pain she felt for her through her tale. Takamaki could only guess the amount of restrained agony she had been through before trying to end her own life.
"It was my only and last chance to say something."

Suzui’s voice was devoid of all emotion.

At this point there were no tears, no cry that could relieve the damage she had suffered.

Not at this point.

"After that I..."

That’s why she’s telling all this to her friend.

That way she can at least lighten the burden that’s crushing her chest.

"Shiho."

She remained still, words had stopped.

She couldn’t continue anymore.

She didn’t knew why.

But the feeling was different now.

She looks at her friends face… that’s why.

Ann Takamaki’s face was doing her best to not allow any tears to come out on her stead.

"I'm sorry I worried you Ann, I'm sorry I did what I did. I- I didn't meant to worry you, to make everyone feel like this, I'm so sorry."

"It's ok, you will be ok. Everything will be ok"

The blonde girl’s voice was clearly breaking as she tried to reassure her friend.

Kamoshida was gone.

"Ann..."

She wouldn't have to go through that again.

At the very least, that was for sure.

"You're awake now, that's all that matters."

She says as she does her best to give her a reassuring smile.

"Why is she apologizing to me...? Why I can't say anything?"

"Ann I..."

"Yes?"

"I-… You're right, I'm alive. And as long as I am, I can also be alright again... Isn’t it?"

"Of course!"
'She's so strong.'

"That's what mom said. I don't know how to do it though..."

"Shiho..."

"Sorry, I just don't want to think so much about it, not now. But I can't be alone with myself because of it... Ann?"

Suzui brings her head down again, tying her grip to the sheets covering her legs.

"Yes?"

"Can you stay with me until I sleep?"

"Yes, of course."

"Thanks."

After a few minutes, the girl’s mother arrives. She sees the blonde girl sitting besides her sleeping friend and thanks her with a gesture.

The woman went to bring new sheets and something to drink.

Takamaki said her goodbyes as visiting hours were almost over.

Once she closes the door she notices the blonde boy sitting in the waiting area.

He was casually lurking through his phone while chewing gum.

“Hey.”

He says once he sees her.

“Sorry for keep you waiting.”

“It’s fine, how’s she doing?”

The boy stands up with a serious concerned expression.

“She’s... ok I guess.”

The whole time Ann Takamaki wasn’t able to look up to the boy’s eyes as her voice didn’t convey her usual cheerfulness.

“You wanna talk ‘bout it?”

He asked with concern.

“Not right now. It’s ok, don’t worry.”

“Right.”

“We have to meet Takashi-kun at the station in a few minutes, we should hurry.”

“… Hey, don’t overdo it. If you ain’t feelin’ well, I’m sure he’ll understand.”
She had turned around to head to the hospital exit.

It was only natural for her to hate these places.

But as soon as she heard the unfamiliar tone of the boy’s voice she had to finally face his worried expression.

‘He’s so different when he’s worried.’

She lets out a weak smile and giggles to herself.

“Hehe. It’s ok, for real. Doing this will keep my head away from any stupid thoughts.”

“If you say so.”

And just like that the boy gave up his now needless concern.

“Hey Ryuji.”

She stops midway.

“What is it?”

The boy asks.

“What makes a person strong?”

“…”

This was out of character of her, at least for Sakamoto.

This girl usually never qualms in front of others. And she's really straight forward when it comes to questioning things.

But right now, she’s being very vague.

“Dunno. I guess it depends on what type of things scare you. And how you face that shit.”

“You think?”

“Yeah….”

He pauses as he notices she seems to be waiting for him to give a better answer.

“Like, I’m afraid of being a cripple, so I exercise my legs all the time so I’m not that weak ever again.”

“That’s not wha-…”

She stops herself mid-sentence.

She didn’t need to yell at the boy, he was being sincere.

Maybe his answer was not what she wanted to hear.

“What is it?”
“Nothing. You’re right. Let’s go.”

“Can we eat somethin’ first? I’m starvin’!”

“No complaining.”

Interlude / Weight of the attached

It was May 13.

Most students were roaming the streets with the evident stress overwhelming their daily lives.

Midterm season was almost over.

But that wasn't the reason most people are so distressed during these hours.

During the last couple of weeks, people were living under the fear of not returning to their homes.

It was all because of the frequent subterranean trains derailments.

The accidents usually happen during rush hours.

When people return to their homes.

But for some people like Natsuhiko Nakanohara, who was heading to his job at the municipal ward office. This was just another tediously lousy day.

Metropolitan Tokyo surely was busy.

But at the same time, for someone who had finished all their daily obligations, the sight of people assiduously going from one place to the other could become a banal sight.

That’s why Nakanohara needed to find an abstraction from this mundane world.

Every day he went to the Shibuya underground mall to buy flowers for a special someone.

It was quite an attentive act from him…

If only that special someone could reciprocate those feelings.

That would surely make things easier for him.

“Hmmm…? Where’s Hanasaki-san today?”

The man with librarian glasses and bowl haircut ask as he realizes the absence of the always cheerful flower shop attendant.

“She’s out finishing some personal requisitions for this week. She hired me to help her with the shop in the meantime.”

In her place, there was this strange teenage boy wearing hip glasses and an apron while fixing a jazzy looking bouquet.

“I see… You’re a new face indeed.”
It was not something he expected, but neither something he should care about either.

Nakanohara didn’t care about a boy’s name, so he just asked for his usual special request.

“A few lilies with some gladioluses and Roses… is that right?”

The boy worded the order again to help himself remembering it.

It was truly, a novice knack.

“Yes.”

Flowers are normal gifts for girls that you like.

A man that regularly sends gifts to a woman is look at like a creep.

But Nakanohara understands how things are supposed to look for her.

He keeps things between themselves.

He respects her privacy.

He wouldn’t send the flowers at her work.

He sends those at her apartment.

Recently she changed her address for the third time this year.

It was just a matter of time for him to find the new address thanks to his political position in the municipal ward office.

She surely must be pleased to know someone is being so attentive towards her.

At least she should.

That’s how Natsuhiko Nakanohara believes things should be.

He is a resolute man.

And that woman should’ve never abandoned him.

It was a mistake he was willing to forgive though.

As long as she decides to accept his feelings once and for all.

After finishing putting the order together, the boy seems to remember something.

“Oh, you must be Nakanohara-san then… Hanasaki-san told me about you. She really appreciates your patronage.”

“… Is that so?”

The man does not strive to sound interested.

“The thing is sir… She said I had to give this to you in case you showed up here while she’s absent.”

“… Did she?”
The boy goes to the back and handles him two special items once he returns.

“A red rose and a letter?”

“We wouldn’t dare to open it. It’s sealed, but it has your name on the back, so…”

The man looked down at the letter and then at the boy with suspicion.

“She only gave it to me and mentioned your name a few minutes after you last showed up.”

“…”

‘A letter?’

“If I may say this, that’s quite a romantic presentation, right sir?’

‘Could it be?’

“Huh…? Y-yeah.”

“Anyway it’ll be-…”

The boy is interrupted by the man’s hand almost hitting his chest with the cash.

“Here, keep the change! This is perfect!”

“Thank you, sir.”

After all this time, after all his efforts, she could finally return to him?

His hands shake while he holds the white envelope.

He would take it home.

This time was not about making it at her door in time.

This time he was going to have the right clothes and perfume.

It’s all he needed.

It was all he wanted.

No, she finally accepted her role.

She was going to submit to HIS desires this time.

It was his turn to use every bit of her existence to comfort himself.

Once he takes his time to read the letter at home, he’ll take his time going to her place…

And he was going to make her his for good.

Interlude / Out
Beware the Clingy Ex-boyfriend!

Takashi Kido was lurking through his phone while resting at the side of the subway entrance.
The cat was resting over his shoulder while spying through his usual navigations.
“You sure they’ll like those?”
Finally Morgana asks to his roommate.
“It’s better than what they have. Ryuji told me he likes shotguns.”
“Ann-dono liking these whips is really something I wasn’t expecting when I first saw her.”
“If you used a mane, you both could perform a fun lion taming routine.”
“Funny. I hope she whips you by mistake.”
Just as the cat was ready to continue his disregard for his partner’s wellbeing, they notice the arrival
of the two blondes.
“You made it.”
The leader of the band of paranormal thieves greets them.
“Sorry, It’s my fault. We went to see Shiho.”
“How’s she doing?”
“Fine… I’ll tell you more later.”
“Ok.”
“Hey, why are we meeting here? Doesn’t that guy have a palace somewhere?”
The punk boy asks.
So far, they have all agreed on who their new target would be.
But the method was kept a secret for them all this time.
“Don’t be so hasty. Take out your phones, it’s finally time I show you what I was talking about.”
The cat Kido speaks as jumped down of his shoulders and stretches himself.
“It’s like I said… Natsuhiko Nakanoahara. A teller in the city hall. He’s a positive target for the app… but.”
Kido summarizes the target’s profile.
“He doesn’t have a palace?”
Takamaki inquires.
“He does, just not as Kamoshidad did.”
The cat explains.

“Somethin’ is off about all this.”

Sakamoto voices his mistrust.

“It was an unanimous decision, remember? We already sent the calling card by now.”

The cat says.

“Now stop interrupting and put his name in the Meta-nav. Followed by… Mementos.”

“How? What are you tryin’ to pull?”

“Just listen to me. It should work… I think.”

“That again…?”

Ryuji puts types code on his phone, resulting in a positive result.

“So, there’s a palace here?”

Kido asks before nodding to his partner to push the app button.

“Right. It’s Just as I thought… Let’s go.”

Morgana laughs to himself while heading downstairs.

“Wait…”

Once the air starts to feel lighter again, and people around them suddenly disappears. The group of teenagers became aware of their entrance into the meta-verse.

Everything looked the same on the outside.

But as soon as they arrive to the underground mall, they notice a very frightening change in the area.

Morgana proceeded to explain the workings of the meta-verse again.

This was supposed to be a palace.

Not just a person’s palace.

But the palace of the general public as a whole.

Shadows were lurking this area too.

They’re attracted to something on the deeps.

This was Mementos, the subterranean train system that took them to school every day.

The place where the public’s shadows wander adrift… until they become something else.

The same system that lead people all around their daily routines, was also one giant palace that where all the distortions of the general public are concentrated.

The group of teens were already on their thief costumes.
Meaning the shadows are already aware of their scrambling presence.
The trio takes a look at their surroundings.
Strange red substances spread all over the place.
It looked like if raw meat thrown at the walls.
No, living flesh stickled to the columns and walls of the subterranean station.
Ominous sounds come from within the darkness of the tunnels.
It was almost imperceptible.
But it sounded like screams, cries, and laughter.
“This place does feel different from Kamoshida’s castle.”
Panther comments.
“Why are they all gathered here? Why do they share such a place, they’re all complete strangers, right?”
Skull tries to make sense of the situation.
“Think of it as the collective unconscious.”
“…”
Joker eyes widen under his mask.
He could swear he heard that word before.
“No, never mind. Not even I understand it that much.”
But Mona desists of his exposition.
“So… using this place we can change the hearts of the people who don’t have a palace?”
“Precisely. But the process is a little bit different.”
Says the cat while jumping away from the group.
“Can this shit get weirder?”
Skull asked. One would think it was a moment of involuntary clairvoyance.
“Morganaaaa, TRANSFORM!”
*BUM*
“What the shit?”
“What did just-…”
“…”
“Come on, Ann-dono, lady’s first.”

“Wha-”

“W-wait a moment! How the hell did you just turned into freakin’ car!?”

“Ah! This is the results of my efforts to learn how to change forms. It’s not so different of you guys transforming into those costumes… it took some training though.”

Says the now sapient black cat-van.

“THIS IS TOTALLY DIFFERENT FROM OUR CLOTHES CHANGIN’!”

“…”

“Wha-”

“For some reason, cat’s turning into busses is a common cognition in the hearts of the general public.”

"Do you also have a magical pocket?"

"A what?"

"Why a bus though?"

Ann does her best to ignore Takashi’s unreasonable question.

“I don’t know.”

“So you could’ve done this back in the castle?!”

Sakamoto grumbles.

“There was no space there.”

The cat justified.

“Hey, Skull wait! Lady’s first.”

Panther complained to the blonde punk who started to get into the weird first van.

‘Just roll with it.’

Kido thinks as he got inside himself.

“… I’m a car, I can’t move without someone driving me.”

“You can’t just go by yourself?”

“So who can drive?”

“Time to show up my skills!”

“Safety first, got it?”

The car starts and they drive into darkness.
They had to drive through the endless train rails that lead to many dead ends.

Eventually they found stairs to a new and distorted area.

The whole floor was different from the rest.

The rails were still visible, but the walls were not the same as the level above.

They were covered by pictures.

There were also many flowerbeds lying on the floor, rotten.

The pictures papered the walls were all different, but the same person was on all of them.

“She’s mine, only mine… how dared she!”

The distorted voice can be heard in the darkness.

“Those pics… is that the same girl in all of them?”

A disturbed panther asks to his teammates.

“Most likely. This entire level seems to be distorted by that man’s twisted desires. This is how palaces are born… probably.”

Mona explains. “What? You mean this place will become a palace?”

Skull asks to his feline companion that returned to his biped form.

“Sooner than later, yes. For now it seems this guy’s desires are only affecting his own will. I never witnessed the birth of a palace myself, but I’ve seen guys like Kamoshida here before they ended up in their own palaces.”

“I see… did we make this happen by sending him a calling card?”

Joker asks.

“I cannot be sure, I didn’t saw him before that. It can be the case, but that would only mean we need to finish him before this place turns into one, right?”

“But… where’s the treasure?”

Panther wonders.

“He has it.”

“What?”

“We have to take it from him before this place becomes a palace. Otherwise the treasure will be hidden in the depths of his new formed fortress.”

“And we already sent the calling card.”

Joker prepares himself.
“Exactly.”
Mona stands by his side.
“No pressure, huh?”
Skull adds as he joins.
“She’s mine, mine, mine, mine!”
The man in the darkness grumbled.
“Ugh, I can’t stand these types of guys… Let’s punish him!”
Panther groans.
‘Scary.’
Skull jumps back at her sudden reaction.
“If we defeat him… the treasure will appear?”
The leader inquires one last time.
“Yeah, but we must make sure of not killing him.”
Joker looks at Mona with a deadpan expression before turning towards his target.
“Tch. All we got are pure conjectures… but that’s how we’ve been doing this from the beginning. Get Ready!”
For a moment before heading forward Kido feels the phone in his chest pocket vibrating.
He ignores it as the time didn’t seem appropriate to lower his guard.
“Who are you?”
The man in a black suit and bowl haircut turns around to face the thieves.
“You, stalker boy. Haven’t you stopped to consider how your ex feels about your harassment?”
The girl in red complains at Shadow Nakanohara.
“She’s my property! I can do whatever I want with her!”
“So… more of the same.”
An uninterested Joker swings his knife around while walking slowly towards his target.
“I-it’s not like she didn’t treat me like a plaything! What’s wrong with me doing the same!?”
“I feel no reason to hear this guy anymore.”
Skull twists and flexes his arm around.
“What would you know!?”
“Shuddup! You can’t treat people like shit just ‘cause they did it to you. You’re pathetic…”

He takes out his shotgun.

“You’re causing trouble around you. We are here to convert bastards like you!”

The shadow of the man in front of them begins to distort.

“Gh… There are people who are worse than me out there!”

He trembles as he says this.

“Madarame… If you were really doing this for the good of everyone. Why haven’t you changed Madarame!?”

“Madarame? What’s he babbling ‘bout?”

The shadow clenches his teeth in anger while looking at them.

His form starts to melt into a mud of pure blackness.

“Here it comes… get ready!”

Mona warns.

Then, out of an explosion of mud comes a piggyback demon wearing the same haircut.

He starts jumping around the area. Confusing the aiming of the thieves as they start shooting at this new form.

“Dammit!”

Skull complains.

“Carmen!”

Panther commands her Persona to fire her flaming spells at the clingy demon.

But the speed of the shadow was enough to make a fool of her attempts.

“I’m going to destroy you all!”

Shadow Nakanohara yells as he charges towards panther at full speed.

She has no time to summon her persona again as she is thrown away by the impact of his head.

“Ghaaa!”

“Oi, Panther!”

Skull yells.

“Ghehehe! Now that I finally have what’s rightfully mine… I won’t let you take it away from me!!!”

“Ght!”

The girl tries to recover on the ground.
“You damn bowlhead!”

“Skull!”

The boy charges with his crowbar.

But the attack was once again avoided by the shadow.

“Huh?”

The little monster used that opening to kick the blonde boy away as well.

“What the-”

Joker stays puzzled at the speed of the monsters attacks.

“Dammit, his strikes are too damn heavy!”

The boy with the metal skull mask complains

“I see.”

He has been preparing himself for this day. A couple of visits to the velvet room led to an experimental number of fusions.

He had been irking to test this new power for weeks now.

Joker puts his hand over his now silver looking mask.

“Come… Chimera!”

He summons the fruit of his labor.

So far there hasn’t been a better result for his usual sinister talents.

In mythology, Chimeras were beings that were made up of parts from different animals.

The monstrous appearance of this persona was also fitting for its name.

A horned lion head besides his other goat's head sprouting in the middle of its body.

It’s snake's head tails didn’t allow it to have any blind spot either.

Thanks to the sacrifice of many of his previous captures. Joker managed to make the ideal persona for this battle… just because of one spell.

“Sukunda”

He commands it.

And so the Clingy form of Shadow Nakanoohara feels the change.

His speed decreased and his incessant hopping became more amiable to their sights.

“My turn! GARU!

The biped cat jumped from behind his leader and commanded Zorro to launch his magic attack.
“AAAHG!”
The effectiveness of the spell was commendable as the small beast is thrown back into the darkness.

“Nooo!”
He cried.

It wasn’t enough, he couldn’t lose to them.
The being stood in the dark for a moment before charging again.

He had everything to lose right now.
The form of the floor around them started to change.
The flowers began to rot even faster.
The rails disappeared becoming an apartment floor.

He can’t let them win.
If he can’t beat them, then he’ll lose everything… again.

“Gah!”
He jumps.

Head first against Joker’s chest, sending him to the ground.

“JOKER! AW!”
The next target was the small cat.
The size difference didn’t matter, it only made the attack more precise and stronger.

Immediately knocking the cat down. “Mona! AH!”

Next he targeted the screaming girl.
But his attack connected to the wrong target.

It was a lucky bet, to knock them all out at the same time.

That was his goal.

But instead of harming the girl who was trying to get on her feet, he connected his punch to the black leathered boy.

“Get up Ann! You’re stronger than this!”
The boy says while ignoring the harm he just received like it was nothing.

“Ryuji?”
She looked at him in astonishment.
He was referring to her awakening.

That moment she used all her might to slay two gigantic knights at once.

That time… she wasn’t at her best.

Yet her strong emotions allowed her to overcome those adversaries.

“She’s mine, mine, you can’t take her away from me! I’ll show her where she’s supposed to be!”

The place around them kept changing.

An apartment… flowers around the floor.

The ominous scene started to pass from an obsessive ambition, to what it could become a crime scene.

“Tch. This guy really pisses me off!”

Finally Panther gets up.

“C’mon, let’s finish this idiot up.”

Says Skull while standing beside his former middle school classmate.

“‘GHAAAA’”

“What?”

Small lightning bolts started to come from Skull gloves.

But instead of summoning his persona, he grabbed the girl’s hand.

Her reaction was a smile, by just looking at his cocky smile she knew what he was up to.

It was a funny and childish memory. Embarrassing even, at least at this point.

An attempt to perform a dancing move… like in one of those old American movies.

The boy’s grip was strong, stronger than what she remembered.

He then started to spin her around by her hand, like a twirl with him as the centerpiece.

She used her free hand to take off her mask.

It was time.

The landing was not a thing she could worry about now.

She wanted to use all her strength for the next attack.

Carmen appeared behind her, spinning around just like her.

But in her hands the flames she mastered started to cover her in a whirlpool of fire.

It was then that Skull let her go.
It all happened in just a second.

She was in the air. Like her persona.

Shadow Nakanohara then noticed the intent of the next attack.

But then, the whirlpool of fire that was covering Carmen was set free.

But something was different.

From the flames he noticed another figure.

It was a boat, and the skeleton pirate over it, Captain Kidd, standing right beside the dancing persona.

The whirlwind of fire and lightning headed towards the monster.

It was just an instant, the awe and the effects of the sakunda spell didn’t allow the little beast to escape.

“GAAAAAAAH!”

The second felt like an eternity of pain.

He was in the middle of the flaming and shocking vortex.

Suffering burns at every inch of his body.

The electricity wouldn’t allow him to react.

The rules of this world didn’t really make much sense to the shadow who was obsessed with his own ambitions.

In the real world this time-stop like feeling could be blamed to the amount of adrenaline the body uses to work through pain.

But right now… there was nothing that could save him from defeat.

He couldn’t move anymore.

He couldn’t attack, he couldn’t run away.

He lost… and with that, he lost her.

“Dammit!”

The flames spread away.

The burned figure lies on his knees, defeated.

At the other side of the room, the transgressors smile to each other.

Skull had prevented her fall like a professional dancer catching his ballerina.

The feeling of finally giving closure to a children’s play overcame them.

They only needed a splat that said “we are awesome” to give finish to their youthful amusement.
But this was no dancing floor.

They are different people these days.

More like, their bodies are different. And so did the boy holding the girl in body tight red leather noticed.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself!”

“OUCH!”

At the distance. Joker hears his teammates celebrate their victory at their accustomed style.

“I… was wrong… please forgive me.”

He was standing in front of the defeated Nakanohara who returned to his previous state.

Just like Kamoshida, defeat seems to have triggered a change in his ambitions.

Realizing that there were consequences to his acts in such a way made him understand how far he had gone.

“I just… couldn’t stop myself.

The area around them started changing again… returning to the ominous looking labyrinth.

Like the rest of Mementos.

Something started shining in front of Joker.

“So this is the treasure?”

“Yes.”

Mona noded.

“I was used too… that teacher, he threw me out on the street after he...”

“It’s too late for excuses now.”

Mona said.

“I was so alone, I didn’t want anyone to throw me out again…”

“That teacher he mentioned… that Madarame guy?”

Skull asks.

“So, some selfish bastard was making you suffer too…”

A sad looking Panther notes.

“That woman got all wrapped up in this because of that?”

Now anger replaced her sad tone.

“I know… I’ll put an end to my love for her…”
Shadow Nakanohara says at the verge of tears.

He looks up at the unamused Thieves leader.

“Y-you can change people’s hearts, right?”

It was a final pledge.

He needed no mercy, no compassion.

There was only one thing he knew could make things less painful.

But it needed to be a miracle.

“In that case… Won’t you change Madarame’s heart?”

He implored.

“You can do it? Right?”

He started to vanish, returning to his real self… just like Kamoshida.

“Before more people fall victim to him…”

Finally Joker grabs the shining item floating in front of him.

“Change Madarame’s heart?”

Panther wonders.

“This treasure sure is small compared to the last one.”

Skull comments.

“It’s the bud of a treasure actually.”

Mona crosses his paws while looking at the shining item.

“Had we let it be, it very well may have blossomed into a palace.”

He finishes.

“So it’s not just the shadow, but the treasure that creates those places?”

Skull asks.

“Did you ever pay attention to what I said before?”

An angry Mona groans.

“It’s a good reward.”

Joker says while revealing the item… An attachment pearl.

“Fitting.”

He adds.
“So Nakanohara had a change of heart, right?”

“Most likely.”

Mona nods to Skull.

“But how are we supposed to know if we succeeded now?”

“It was the lady who posted the name online. If he really does change, she’ll ‘prolly comment again.”

Skull says to the female thief.

“Hm, you do have a point.”

“That does sound like a way to give courage to the people who posted their troubles online.”

Says a happy looking panther.

“You did a good job guys. What was that technique you used back there?”

Mona asks the two blondes.

“‘No idea.’”

Both answer with a shrug.

“What is this wall?”

It was Joker who asked the question this time.

He was touching a strange looking wall that seems to be covering an entrance to a lower level.

“It’s just as I thought…”

Suddenly trains start passing at both sides of the platform the teenagers were occupying.

Red ominous lights candled the inside of the cars.

Shadowy people entered the trains from the other side.

As if was any other day in the station.

“W-wait… trains are active in this place?”

A scared panther asks.

“Of course. We’re in a subway, you know.”

Says Mona nonchalantly.

“But wasn’t this supposed to be palace?”

Skull sounded almost angry at the lack of notice from their cat companion.

“Then maybe this is how the public views this place? I don’t know.”

“People go through this darkness… every day…”
Said the sad Panther.

“Forget that! You sure we’re cool runnin’ around those tracks!?”

“It should be fine as long as we are not on the same ones… I think. I’m no train expert!”

“You gotta be kiddin’ me.”

The whole time Joker ignored the exchange, until he finally found a switch.

“I-It opened?”

Panther jumped back at the wall suddenly shifting, opening a new path.

“A new area has been confirmed in the depths. Updating guidance information.”

The meta-verse navigator suddenly spoke.

“Nice.”

Said the cat.

“Nice my ass! What the hell is goin’ on!?”

The impatient punk asked.

“That wall wouldn’t budge when I came here by myself before. But I knew it was not possible for the deepest part of mementos to be just some normal platform like this, right?”

Mona said with enthusiasm.

“I see… but why did it budged now?”

Joker asks to the cat.

“Since we changed Kamoshida’s heart, people are becoming more aware of our existence…”

“So their cognition changed.”

“Exactly.”

The cat nods to their leader.

“So, what now?”

Panther asks.

“Let’s head back for today. We didn’t came here to explore… at least not yet.”

Mona says while heading upstairs followed by Joker.

As soon as Skull starts walking away, Panther remains still looking at the darkness beneath the stairs.

“You’re wrong… I’m not that strong.”

She says bluntly without facing her teammate.

Skulls turns around to look at her for a moment.
But he just frowns before continuing to walk away.

“Tch… so what? Just get stronger then.”

He says before heading upstairs.

“… Ryuji.”

She shakes her thoughts off before following the rest of the band of thieves.

**She that brings forth…**

“So much for that cool fight. Now we’re back into this creepy car.”

Skull complains while looking at the windows from the backseat of the car.

“Don’t dare to insult my nyaangine like that again!”

They can hear the voice of the feline car complaining from the outside.

“No matter how you call it, this shit is just as creepy as the maze out there!”

Skulls groans some more.

“It’s the pussy wagon.”

Clarified the phantom leader with smirk.

He was holding the wheel with great eagerness.

“Please don’t, Joker.”

Says an outworn Panther.

“We’re here!”

Finally they arrived to the first platform again.

The view was the same as before.

Bile like liquid running through the walls and flesh attached to the walls.

All that added to the cold wind blowing from behind them.

It was a view the teens tried to ignore with their best efforts.

“This place is really creepy.”

Skull noted the obvious.

“We should be careful when we explore this place. Different types of shadows wander around here and there’s one specific that’s…”

Mona stops his march while looking upstairs.
“That’s what…?”

Joker asks his roommate.

He noticed then, that the cat’s astonishment was being shared in the faces of his other two companions.

They all were looking at the stairs that headed to the station square with the same dumbfound expression.

“My, my, what do we have here…?”

But before he could gaze towards the source of their shock, he gets a shiver by hearing a familiar, yet distorted voice.

“A band of young bandits looking for the riches of the human heart.”

The sound of high steps echo through the darkness.

The purplish “natural” light coming from outside vaguely illuminates the female figure heading towards them.

“…”

‘Why?’

The thief leader wonders.

He knew exactly who this person was.

Silver hair, blue and gold butterfly hair ornament.

A white coat covering her black sweater and a dark blue skirt.

It was her.

She stops her march right in front of the frizzy haired boy.

“J-Joker? Who’s that woman?”

After realizing his state of disbelief, Panther asks their leader for answers.

But he doesn’t give her a rebuttal.

Instead he continues to shoot an intense glare at the woman with glowing yellow eyes.

“What are you doing here?”

She smiles at him, before ignoring his question and turning around to face his companions.

“Welcome, Phantom Thieves…”

She says while theatrically extending her arms.

It was like a greeting ceremony.

The woman passes towards them, heading to the darkness.
She stops her march to turn around and face them once more.

“To the shadows of the underworld.”

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New Persona:

Chimera / The Chariot

Arcanas Unlocked:

The Hierophant: Sakura Sojiro

The Aeon: Soseki Jun – (Rank 1 Skill - “Resonance”: Allows two party members with special level of reciprocity to perform unique tag team attacks.)

New Area unlocked: Meguro River

Chapter End Notes

First of all, sorry it took me so long to continue this.
I am privileged and also cursed of having a new time consuming job.
I had this chapter finished a long time ago.
But I never dared to post it.
Mostly because of me not being able to edit and correct it properly.
I took the little time I had to correct the previous chapters before posting this. (I’ll continue to do that by the way.)
So a few things I did for this.
I skipped the exams, because who wants those amarite?
The date is a plot date. (may 13) We’ll see why in the next chapter.
Please keep in mind I’m not trying to do a canon divergence.
I just want to add to the story, and give it a few touches here and there.
Anyway, Jun is the Aeon Arcana, no surprise there.
Sorry about the amount of Jun in this chapter. (In case that bothers anyone.)
But since she’s a new confidant, I think it’s only fair to give her more “screen” time.
Since we already know all the vanilla confidant skills by now, I feel that adding a new skillset for her would make sense.
So Resonance is a similar skill to the ones we get in P4.
I don’t see why it won’t work in this game.
They probably didn’t wanted it around for this game so people won’t use it as an excuse to ship the party members between each other like in P4.
But what the heck, this is a good chance to do some neat ventures within the main cast.
The Cherry blossom trees at the Meguro River banks are a beautiful sight during spring.
I highly recommend passing by that zone if you’re visiting Tokyo at least once.
Also, no velvet room today, because our boi hasn’t got to sleep yet! (angry morgana noises)
Sae Niijima fidgeted in her chair.

She glares at the phantom thieves’ leader after hearing something she wasn’t expecting.

“A strange woman who was occupying the Student Guidance role?”

She finally said.

“…”

After all the strange events this boy had unfolded to her…

“Nonsense. I know Shujin Academy’s School-guide personally, he’s been in that position for years now… there was no woman in that role.”

This was the first time the woman was one hundred percent sure he was lying.

“…”

The boy remains silent.

There was no need for him to try to convince her.

She only needed to know about her existence. To him, that was enough.

“This is not the first inconsistency in your story. But why would you bother making such a pointless lie now?”

Her response was adamant.

Every time she wills herself to hear the rest of his tale, somehow he seems to find a way to test her tolerance.

“…”

She leans closer before raising her voice.

“Answer me! Are you trying to divert the story before I ask you about your next target?”

“… Did that really surprised you more than the cat bus part?”

“…”
Niijima takes a small breath before returning to her seat.

Takashi Kido wasn’t sure if it was the effects of the drugs that made him say such a thing. But apparently it made the prosecutor hesitate.

Whatever if she actually believed that part of his story or not will remain a mystery he won’t dare to peer upon… not in his current state at least.

“… This mementos place you mentioned. How does it work?”

“I’m not sure.”

The detainee answers.

“You don’t? You mentioned that the palaces you invaded in order to convert people came from that place.”

“I’ve never witnessed the birth of a palace.”

His voice was still aloof.

“But someone you know must’ve seen it then, why would you be so sure otherwise?”

“…”

“Something it’s been bothering me about this encounter mentioned.”

She goes back to her tame position on her chair. She needed to stay calm so she can expose this kid’s deceit.

“Your behavior seems to hint you’re hiding many things.”

The boy closes his eyes.

She’s aware of his attempt to jump through names and specific locations.

But there was something that made him look as an “adept” on holding vital information.

“You seem to have knowledge of the common interrogation methods. You do your best to not reveal names, only locations or dates.”

But now she wants to face the reason behind this sudden show of dishonesty.

“Speaking of which, you must’ve help finding your targets. And a natural conviction that makes you believe you can still get out of this somehow.” She closes her eyes “So this is your true nature… If that’s the case…”

She never bothered to trying to know this boy better until now.

But there’s a reason now.

“It seems I have no choice but to inquire you about your past before coming to this city.”

The fact that nobody cared about who he was until now doesn’t take away the fact that there could
be even more clues about his methods hidden within his past, before arriving to this city.

“…”

Hearing that, Takashi Kido looks besides the table, averting his eyes from the prosecutor once more.

“Hm, it seems you have many sore subjects you are not willing to share. But unlike our previous talks, you don’t have that luxury anymore.”

This was what she wanted.

All this time, this boy acted as a mysterious teenage kid with a premature case of abnegation.

But now that he’s facing the consequences, he’ll have to show her his true colors.

“It seems so.”

But he doesn’t flinch.

Maybe he doesn’t care, or maybe he was telling the true about everything started as soon as he got into that school.

“That’s a rough thing to say, Niijima-san.”

He says in a low voice.

“I don’t care.”

She couldn’t, she shouldn’t care anymore.

“Manslaughter…”

“…”

“That’s just one of the charges against you… do you understand what that means?”

Her tone tore through his calmed expression.

She sounded so... discouraged.

“It doesn’t matter if I do.”

Kido quietly claims.

“…”

She can see it in his distant eyes. His defeated spirit made him spit his reality to her with brutal honesty. And although that answer disconcerted her even more, he was right.
There was nothing she could do about it and this boy was aware of it.

Continuing to pressure him towards his past would only make him close himself away from giving her the ‘right’ answers.

“All right then.”

This was getting more and more complicated for the Prosecutor. Time was of the essence, and she couldn’t give to her avidity of getting all the answers she wanted at once.

She took a deep breath again before continuing.

“We’ll continue with the same pace then… tell me. Why did you target Ichiryusai Madarame? How did you got involved on his affairs?”

She lets him continue once more.

“Who helped you through it?”

But as always…

“Nobody important.”

The kid speaks only a half truth.

The Aeon: She that brings forth… (part 2)

Everyone stands still in the entrance of to the underground darkness.

The band of thieves was intercepted by a strange woman who gave them a cryptic greet.

“W-who’s that woman?”

Asks the small cat creature.

“My you haven’t told your friends about me? How cold”

The mysterious lady says mocking the white masked boy.

“Dude?”

“Joker?”

Both Skull and Panther shoot expectant looks at him.

Of course he knows her, this woman was a mystery he didn’t ask for… like everything else that has been happening to him.

But he never thought that she would contact with everyone else besides him, until now.

“She's Jun Soseki, our School Guidance Counselor... She appeared before me first in a dream soon after I woke my Persona. Then she showed up at school when we were threatened by Kamoshida.”
“Wait, she works in our school?”

Panther asks.

“Now that you mention it she looks familiar.”

Skull says while taking a good look at the woman’s face.

“And she... knows what the meta-verse navigation app is and how to use it... She said she gave it to us.”

The woman elegantly shoves her silver hair back as she chuckles to herself because of the scene in front of her.

“She does…? And you knew this!?”

Mona looks at his roommate in disbelief.

“What the eff, man!?”

“I'm sorry, I was going to tell you guys... I just-”

“Didn't think it was worth it?”

Panther chimed in his sentence dryly.

“…”

“Dude, I know you're quiet but this is ridiculous!”

“You even kept me in the dark! And I'm teaching you all these stuff!”

Mona wasn’t happy.

Their trust has been insulted.

“I-...”

“My, there's no reason to be so aggressive. It was me who put this child into such a position to begin with.”

The whole time the woman was folding her arms while enjoying the show.

“Who are you?”

Panther asks intensely.

“I...? I am a shadow. The true self.”

And the woman answers with a lady bow putting her right hand over her chest.

“Soseki-san’s shadow?”

Joker says.

“Where does that hesitation came from? Didn't you realize what's going on in this place?”
“This place?”

Panther asks.

“You just fought one, an aimless scoundrel’s shadow. And you succeeded in changing his heart.”

She theatrically gesticulates a heart signal with her fingers.

“That was truly poetic. A tale of a bunch of bandits willing to change the world! But to do so, they must adventure into the darkness of the human hearts and get soiled by their sins.”

“What's mementos...? Why does this place even exist!?”

Mona abruptly interrupts her monologue.

“My, what an adorable little kitten... How I wish you weren't already taken.”

“Please, answer me.”

“Mona.”

Kido could notice the severity on his companion’s features.

“The mysteries of this place origin, are to be revealed by discovering what lies on the depths of this darkness. I am unable to help you with that.”

“So you don't know.”

Mona sighs with disappointment

“...”

“Dude, what is she?”

Skull asks in a lower voice.

“I don't know.”

Kido answers.

“What am I? Why do you keep asking such odd questions?”

“Because you're not like the Jun I know.”

Says Kido while facing her.

“That is because she is my incomplete half... A whilom of the true woman she was supposed to be.”

“A what?”

The blonde rebel boy pried again.

“She's incomplete. She's not herself truly, therefore, neither am I.”

She waves her hand upside down as if trying to make the topic look irrelevant.

“But...”
For someone who’s shrouded in so much mystery, she sure didn’t like the attention towards her unexplainable nature.

But Kido had had enough of her inadequate ramblings.

“Just tell us what you want you half-assed therapist!”

His voice didn’t sound angry or impatient, just derisive, like only he can do.

“Wow!”

“Joker!”

Both Skull and Panther weren’t in favor of this approach.

But the shadow woman only smiles at the boy before continuing.

“As I told you before, I am a shadow. Between meeting the rest of you youngsters here and operating this piece of technology, I welcomed this aspect of myself you see now.”

“You mean...”

Morgana seems to have grasped the meaning of her presence here first.

“As long as I enter this world, I embody the true self of Jun Soseki... In the flesh. And she knew this before adventuring in here, such bravery.”

Shadow Soseki smiles wryly.

“To praise yourself like that... I suppose you are actually her.”

Joker asserts.

“Doubting me still? How whimsical of you.”

“I don't get any of this, but why are you here, and why did you gave us these apps?”

“And how?”

Panther and Skull look for more answers themselves.

“It was easy you see? To help him.”

The shadow points at the boy with the white mask.

“Him?”

Morgana eyes open wide.

“It was him the first to acquire the persona power of you three, no?”

“Persona... she knows... Joker how much does she know?”

The cat thief inquires.

“... Everything, I guess.”
Joker clarifies.

“This not fair... how?”

Morgana hops in frustration.

“There’s no need to be so alarmed. I'm going to help you all to achieve your goals, as long as you don't stop halfway, of course.”

“Stop halfway?”

Panther dreaded the meaning behind those last words.

“As this woman subconscious, I am the incarnation not only of her darkest side, but also of the hidden knowledge she doesn't dares to face.”

She puts her hand over her chest, as if taking an oath.

“If you help her... me, to become whole again, I'll help you all to find the means to truly become the tricksters you're supposed to be...”

“Help us? What are you planning?”

Joker questions.

“We made a deal.”

Shadow Soseki says with a grin on her face.

“Huh?”

But the thieves’ confusion is cut by the sound of the shadow woman hands clapping together.

“Wonderful... now all parts are informed...”

Her honest smile made them sweat uncomfortably.

“You came here to tell them?”

The feeling of embarrassment of being lectured by your parents in front of your friends didn’t really came close to this for Takashi Kido.

“This is what you wanted, no?”

Shadow Soseki says with a wicked smile.

“...”

“Very well... Phantom thieves of hearts. I will warn you first... this dark underworld may be a little more undeniable than the world you usually live in. Tread carefully, or all of you will be torn apart from your own hearts again, sooner than later.”

“...”

“...”

“...”
“…”

They couldn’t comprehend the meaning behind those words.

Yet for some reason the air around them felt as cold as a snowing night.

“*Well it’s about time. Please come closer…”*

She says while walking towards the group of teenagers herself.

“*Oh, and on your way out... please take care of me.*”

She takes the tablet out of her coat and presses the app’s button.

Everything distorts.

-------

The people walked past the group of teenagers who gathered around an unconscious woman. She was lying her back over the wall on the Shibuya station square.

The passers-by mumblings made the teens sweat nervously as the black cat got closer to the woman in the white coat.

Suddenly the woman let a hiccup sound in surprise as if waking up from a bad dream.

“Oh my, I must’ve fallen asleep on the train again!”

Her tone was completely different.

“… Again?”

Kido asks to the woman sitting on her knees.

“Ah. Lotus-boy!”*

“Lotus?”

The blonde girl looks at their leader with inquisitive eyes.

“Don’t ask.”

Kido answers wearily.

“Sorry ma’am. But you don’t remember anythin’ you just said to us down there?”

Sakamoto gets into the slav squat position to speak to the woman face to face.

“Down there?”

The woman realizes her position and decides to stand up.

“Mementos.”
But then her sight goes back to the floor to find the source of the boyish voice.

“Oh my! What an adorable little kitten!”

She reaches to grab the feline.

“What’s her name?”

She asks anxiously.

“I’m not a her! I’m Morgana, and I’m a boy!”

The cat says angrily while waving his body around to escape her grip.

“Really?”

She says while lurking below the cat’s waist.

“HEY! DON’T DO THAT!!!”

The creature waves more aggressively.

“She understands him!?”

An astonished Sakamoto asks.

“She heard me in the meta-verse, so she became aware of my voice. At least that’s what it looks like.”

Morgana explains as the woman had brought him to her chest area with a hug.

“He’s such a little cutie!”

She raises him up again as some would do to their babies.

“He’s actually a car.”

Kido says with a serious face.

“I’m NOT!”

“He can turn into a car? That’s amazing!”

The woman sounded even more ecstatic.

“She’s not impressed it’s talking!?”

Sakamoto seems frustrated for some reason.

“Either that or she’s really gullible.”

Ann guesses.

“She’s a weirdo.”

Kido broadcasts his thoughts out loud.
“How rude Lotus-kun! I’m just a normal young lady with a PHD.”

“That talks to cats.”

Takashi ironically says while looking around the people giving short glances towards the group from time to time.

“He’s not actually a cat, right boy?”

She says after finally putting Morgana down before petting his head one last time.

“I think I may like her.”

An unconvinced Morgana said before scratching the back of his ear with his paw.

“What side are you on?”

The betrayed Kido asked sullenly.

“I see, you are Takamaki-chan and Sakamoto-kun… Weird you don’t remember me. I called you two to my office back when Kamoshida threatened to expel those two.”

“Wait, you two knew her?”

A startled Kido asks.

“Yeah that’s right, but it was only once.”

Ann said nonchalantly.

“I didn’t really paid much attention back then.”

Says the typically carefree Ryuji.

‘Are these two for real?’

Kido wonders.

“Hmmm, let’s see, if you’re all gathered here, and I was unconscious. That must mean I’ve already made the deal with you.”

Meanwhile the woman stated musing to herself.

“What’s she talkin’ about now?”

“No idea.”

Kido shrugs at Sakamoto.

“Wait, I didn’t? Then how are you supposed to help me now? Aww this is such a huge mess!”

The woman starts to panic.

“You did talk to us. You really don’t remember?”

Ann asks.
“I did…? Well, I don’t remember it. I can’t exactly enter the meta-verse as myself like you guys do.”

Jun explains while taking the pad out of her coat again.

“So you truly know about the meta-verse.”

Morgana melancholically says.

“I do… Because I was thrown and trapped in there since two years ago.”

Jun casually says.

“‘Two years!?‘”

Sakamoto’s and Takamaki’s voices attracted the indifferent view of the passersby once again.

Interlude / The most important bet

While leaving the District Prosecutors Office, the young adult with the shaggy brown hair continued reading his handbook on his way to the elevator.

He could hear the mumbling of the young assistants in the corridors. The boy's used to be the source of rumors and misunderstandings giving his young age and “part-time” profession.

But no matter how used he got to the attention. He still couldn’t manage to properly avoid unwanted confrontations. Not without hurting susceptibilities that could led to even greater misunderstandings.

That’s why reading while walking was a strategically wise tactic for him. It helped to prevent any sort of encounter unless it was absolutely necessary.

He has the halls memorized by now, walking blindly was no trouble for him.

Whoever decided to interrupt his reading must be someone who’s unavoidably in need to speak with him.

That or some ridiculously rude person.

Either way, he had taken advantage of social norms enough to remain as polite and keep a safe distance from people.

For someone like him, It was a necessity.

As soon as he reaches the elevators, the boy thought he was safe for the day.

“Goro Akechi.”

But once the doors open he finds an unexpected but familiar face.

It was a stern looking man in a suit holding a briefcase.

“Good afternoon… Detective Kurosawa-san?”

He says in a pleasant and intrigued tone.
The man remains silent while the boy steps inside the elevator to accompany him to the lower levels.

“How strange seeing you around Tokyo again. Are you perhaps in the middle of an errand of some sort?”

Akechi tries to start a casual conversation topic without taking his sight away from his small book.

“I haven’t seen you in two years. You really became famous all around the country.”

But the man avoids his question by bringing another casual topic.

“… Well, I’m just following the steps of a senpai that counseled me long time ago.”

“Is that so? ‘The second coming of the detective prince’ is quite a title to live up to.”

“Yes, it is. But looking at it from a practical standpoint; fame is just a good tool to get results in our world. Sadly some people seem to overlook the end to justify their own disadvantages.”

“… Our world, huh?”

The man’s face darkens as he brings his sight back to the floor signal in the elevator.

“…”

“Well, whatever they say about fame, it doesn’t last forever… so enjoy it while you can.”

Finally the veteran officer breaks the awkward silence with an advice of his own.

“Kurosawa-san. Perhaps you…”

The door opens, but this wasn’t Akechi’s stop yet.

“Sorry but this is my floo-”

Before the man can leave, a distracted figure gets on his way.

“Kurosawa-san!?”

The stern man remains fixed between the door while looking down at the woman in front of him.

Straight to her startled eyes.

“Niijima… please excuse me.”

He saves no words for her as he walks past her.

“O-of course.”

She enters the elevator walking backwards trying to get a glimpse of the man’s destination.

“Hello Sae-san.”

Her eyes open wide again as she notice the presence standing beside her as the doors close.

“I’m sorry Akechi-kun, I didn’t notice you were there.”
“Don’t worry… you seem to be familiar with Detective Kurosawa.”

“Yes, just a little.”

The woman looks up at the floor numbers just as the previous passenger.

The idea of that man showing his face here bemuses her for some reason.

“… Perhaps he was a friend of your fath-“

“Akechi-kun.”

She interrupts Akechi’s awkward topic.

“Yes?”

“I would like to ask for your help once again. If it won’t be a problem.”

“… Not at all. You can count on me.”

---

Once in the ground floor, the woman takes a seat near the small table in the big central hall close to the entrance.

The same place this boy and her were having their last encounter almost a month ago.

“I’m honored you decided to ask for my help again, Sae-san.”

“Is that so? I’m going to be completely honest with you Akechi-kun, I’m not a fan of your… youthful pomposity most of the time. But I do respect the results you carry with you.”

“I see. Allow me to say that hearing that it’s even a greater honor since it’s coming from you, Sae-san.”

“I’ll go straight to the point. Are you under Kamiya’s surveillance?”

“… Not that I’m aware of. May I ask why that should be the case?”

“I’m pretty sure you can guess…”

“… Because I helped you tracking the case of Wakaba Ishiki.”

“So far I got no more clues about that woman’s research, other than it references some strange events leading to her death.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, what led you to believe that woman was actually a victim of a mental shutdown in the first place?”

“… Her autopsy.”

A sudden onset of skepticism swell Akechi’s thoughts.
“But the coroner did alluded “suicide” as her reason of death. Was that not the case?”

“Indeed, but there was never an autopsy to begin with.”

“… You mean-”

Akechi stops his words to muse at her obvious conjecture.

“The incident happened during a Thursday night during off duty ours. There was no registry of an autopsy taking place at all on the hospital she was taken to. Not since the day of her death to her cremation.”

“…”

“Which makes me believe the coroner could've neglected the report.”

Akechi ponders for a little while before inquire through her deductions.

She wanted a second opinion. An unbiased opinion of someone equally thorough as her.

“That’s a risky assumption, why would someone risk their job that way?”

Niijima looked at the boy to make sure he wasn’t trying to mess with her.

“Many reasons come to mind. One being that the coroner already had a reputation back then. He had shown signs of not keeping a track of his certifications. It wouldn’t be the first time someone in that position neglected his duty. All in addition to the haste with which the case was closed.”

Going as far about investigating those involved on the case, being officials or not.

That’s how thorough Sae Niijima is.

Yet, this was something she wasn’t supposed to be doing.

It was not usual for a prosecutor to do so much legwork.

Goro Akechi knew this, but he couldn’t force himself to judge her methods. There’s a certain respect owned for her need to finish what she started.

“But that is not enough evidence to-”

But he realized she called him here today to second guess her.

“There was only one report of the events that led to her death in that day. The only witness besides the driver according to the case file.”

For a moment Sae thought she noticed him wincing.

“…”

“She described the moments before that woman’s death with gruesome detail, the black liquid pouring of her eyes and ears. The loss of speech followed by a total collapse on the middle of the street… right in front of the police station.”

Niijima continued her narration of the events with a detached and serious expression.

“Sae-san.”
Akechi’s voice carried concern.

“But for some reason that testimony was archived and discarded because of the witness shock and mental instability.”

She ignored his concern while bringing her hand to hold her chin.

The professionalism displayed by the young prosecutor pushed Akechi back to his usual gleaning self.

“I see.”

“Nonetheless, for the symptoms to be identical to the ones we hear about almost every week now… It can’t be a coincidence.”

Akechi chuckles at the sight of Nijima submerging herself into a deep guesswork.

“I feel humbled by your researching capabilities, Sae-san.”

She closes her eyes trying to let Akechi’s amusement sly before moving on.

“All this time, Kamiya knew about the connection between that man and her research… It’s way too odd.”

“You mean…”

Akechi’s not that surprised by the mention of that familiar name.

“My only deduction could be that he was trying to protect him, and that girl. For some reason.”

“… That does make sense. Kamiya-san is the attaching type at times.”

“No, he’s not…”

She knew that man longer than this boy.

Sae Nijima knew how callous he could be when it came to his job.

“Oh?”

“He wouldn’t risk his career for a friend or for a friend’s family. He could’ve had more reasons than that.”

Nijima says assertively.

“… Perhaps his own involvement? He did sound like he didn’t want anyone involved on that case. He went as far as to warn me to stay away from such affairs.”

That comment made her remember something.

“He did hint to be under the gun during a previous conversation we had…”

Says Nijima while raising her chin.

“Kamiya-san? Someone threatening a police detective? That’s-”

“Just a supposition. But if that were to be the case…”
That name resounded on her mind, the stern veteran detective.

“If that were to be the case, Wakaba Isshiki previous employers could be the first major suspects.”

Niijima quickly asserts.

“I see, but their company was shut down after the whole embezzlement scandal with the government funds, isn’t that right?”

Akechi inquires.

“Yes… but the people involved on the research remain missing or ignore the whole deal.”

“Then you think that it could’ve been a case of tying up loose ends.”

“Maybe…”

Niijima closes her eyes thinking.

“But that still leaves a bigger question unanswered.”

Akechi points his index finger up.

“Yes, the reason I started this investigation. How do these mental shutdowns occur in the first place…”

They both remain silent for a brief moment.

Both Akechi and Niijima aren’t aware of the seconds passing by then as they continue their introspection.

“Maybe…”

Finally Akechi breaks the silence.

“…”

Niijima brings her full attention to the boy. He was about to give one of his famous deductions, the ones that made him so famous.

“Maybe it was magic?”

The rigid calm in Niijima’s expression did great to hide the veins pouring more blood to her head than usual.

“…”

“Heh. I jest of course.”

Akechi says with a mild smile, probably after feeling the quiet menace coming from the young prosecutor.

“Please don’t taste my patience like that again, Akechi-kun.”

“I apologize. I let myself go because of the thrill of this cogitation.”
Niijima sighs before lowering her hand back to her purse.

‘Why am I working with a child?’

“Regardless, I can’t help but to be surprised you decided to investigate a “paranormal” research.”

“…”

Someone as skeptic as Sae Niijima investigating a paranormal case did trigger some unpleasant rumors about her between her colleagues.

Yet, being the center of gossiping was something she’s used by now.

“Yes. Wakaba Ishiki’s research was the main reason I decided to read through her file. But it is true that more than the paranormal nature her research itself. What bothered me the most was the strange circumstances behind her death.”

“I thought as much. But given you’ve reached a dead end, I’m curious of what are your current hunches about the circumstances behind the mental shutdowns.”

Akechi meekly asks.

It was ingenious of him, to hear her theories first before coming with his own.

But if it’ll help her to see something she hasn’t so far, so be it.

“So far I can only suspect of a bio-hazardous epidemic of some sort. But none of the following mental shutdowns or psychotic breakdown cases revealed any trait of external infection. Only self-induced states of mental stress.”

A mental breakdown.

All the cases where officially explained as the “victims” suffering a time-limited mental disorder that manifested primarily as severe stress-induced depression, anxiety, or even dissociation of reality in a previously fully functional individual.

Japan is the country with the most holidays in the whole world. A measure taken by the government because of the high stress levels present in the general public.

Discipline and expectation are high no matter who you are in this country… no, some have it easier and some have it worst.

It’s been that way for a long, long time.

Even with all the measurements the government and health ministry take to prevent such an outbreak. Having an epidemic of stress inducing breakdown cases was a strange occurrence.

No one else seems to think so that way though. As Niijima was constantly recriminated by her colleagues for wasting efforts on such a pointless crusade.

But she knew there was nothing natural about the symptoms and more importantly, the timing of the cases she’s been following.

“That’s why my instincts tell me that she must’ve found out something unprecedented. Even by
modern science standards.”

“That’s quite the hypothesis. Do you have any evidence of that being the case?”

Niijima fists twitches at the question.

“Not yet…”

“…”

“No matter how I look at it, the only relievable track I have left, it’s the victim’s family.”

She closes her eyes, contemplating hypothetical consequences.

‘But if involving them could really lead to something awful because of my actions…’

“I understand how you feel Sae-san. Involving innocents into such a tangled issue could lead to some regrettable consequences. But…”

Startled by Akechi’s words resonating with her thoughts so much, she raises her sight towards the boy.

“If it’ll give you a chance to solve a case that could save even more lives… wouldn’t it be worth it?”

“…”

Sometimes, this boy sounded like a typical naïve teenager who just likes to spread a lot of wishful thinking.

Although he was being overly optimistic, she couldn’t help but to sympathize with his dutiful judgment. No matter how ironically irresponsible it sounded.

“It’s admirable how far you’ve come for this. I cannot express how much I wish to see you go through it to the very end, Sae-san.”

The boy who had a similar road as hers smiles gently.

That’s right. The only reason Sae Niijima bothered hearing Goro Akechi’s thoughts wasn’t because he was a young protegee detective celebrity, or to help a young promising prospect. It was only because he was so similar to her.

He wasn’t handled his success. He fought for it, he struggled to get the prestige he has now. All because of who he was. Just a kid…

‘A kid… dammit.’

She lowered her head, remaining speechlessness for a short while.

“I’m sorry Akechi-kun.”

It was all she could say now.

For a moment, she dared to look down on him for who he was.

She should be embarrassed.

“Huh?”
Yet the young detective couldn’t guess was she was meaning to say by that at all.

She took a brief deep breath before continuing.

“You’re right. I have to see it through. No matter what.”

‘I sacrificed so much already… This is my most important bet to the date.’

The resolve in her crimson eyes was as strong as the day he first meet this woman.

But something was different.

Her cold expression enunciated that she severed her emotions away from her commitment to her cause.

She wasn’t going to second guess herself anymore.

“I believe in you, Sae-san.”

Akechi smiles with his eyes closed.

“It was good to see you, Akechi-kun. Have a good evening.”

Despite her polite farewell, she didn’t return his smile.

But before she could leave, the boy reaches to her again.

“Before you leave, there was something I was wishing to show you for a while now.”

He says while lurking through his phone.

“What is it?”

Her eyes widen after looking at his screen.

The phantom aficionado website.

Such a pointless demonstration.

“The phantom thieves… I already heard about that.”

She says before handling his phone back to Akechi.

“Do you believe in such tales Akechi-kun?”

She asks while grabbing her bag.

“Heh, I’m not sure. I was only curious of what your thoughts would be, given you’re familiar with that place.”

“… I have nothing to say about that. For now.”

“I see…”

He smiles to himself.

“Personally… I hope they’re real.”
He says with an enthusiastic smile.

Interlude / Out

A wandering effort

She told them her story.

Kido had mentioned both Sakamoto and Takamaki the strange dreams he had before.

But Takashi never bothered to go in depth into details about what and where he was during those dreams.

It was a dream after all, how could he explain something he didn’t fully understood to them?

His guesses it was the same for that woman.

She avoided mentioning the velvet room the whole time too.

Only going to the extent of explaining she was trapped in a place inside the cognitive world.

“So… you met him in a dream, and that allowed you to come back to this world?”

Ann asks to the tired looking woman sitting in the same booth as them.

“To tell the truth, I’m not sure how that worked either. All I have are just wild guesses… The app must’ve evolved on its own, and a new option appeared that allowed me to exit that place.”

She explained while taking a drink of her soda.

The place was a familiar one for both Takamaki and Kido. But for some reason the one who was most familiar with the Big Bang Burger menu was the mid-twenties woman.

She immediately asked for a specific combo before the rest of the teens could decide their order.

“By the time I came back, I was standing in the middle of Shibuya. It felt like I woke up from a short dream, but… nothing was like I remembered.”

Yet she didn’t eat that much since they arrived.

Her mood has declined more and more as they continued through their conversation.

“Two years…”

Sakamoto mopes.

“You were a test subject?”

Ann asks.

“That’s effed up.”
Sakamoto shared the same empathetic expression as the rest of the team.

“What about those people you think created this app? How did they do it? And Why?”

Morgana pops from besides Kido’s side asking a bunch of questions at once.

“…”

Jun remains silent, taking a quick glance towards Kido for a moment.

“Please tell us.”

The small creature insists.

“I’m not sure about their motives or how they did it. And they don’t seem to be around anymore. I’m not even sure they ever were real to begin with.”

The woman says lowering her head as if trying to bear the weight of her own uncertainty.

“What?”

The cat tracks back in the booth away from the table in confusion.

“I…. Ever since I came back, my memories of how this world was and how it is now… they didn’t match at all. Things were so different. Now everything feels like a dream, my memories drift away every time I try to remember something. Whatever happened, whoever I was back then… doesn’t feel real anymore.”

With a clear soreness in the throat, the woman explains her own lack of understanding over her current situation.

Coming back to a world you abandoned for a short period to find out two years have passed. “A dream” was a fair description of her current condition.

Kido understood her implication.

“…”

But he couldn’t imagine how painful such a state of being could be.

Until…

“Your memories are disappearing?”

Morgana asks with a worried voice.

“I’m not sure… I recall things like places and familiar faces, the knowledge I got from studying, it’s all there. But names, and dates, my childhood. Nothing … feels real.”

She looks at the distance. Outside the window, a place she stood a few weeks ago looking for answers.

She walked aimlessly around Central Street during the day, hearing the students pass by her.

It was then she saw a familiar face through that same window she was looking from now. The black hair kid talking to the blonde girl sitting beside her now.
“That’s…”

“She looks back at the middle of the table. Jun Soseki felt she owed these kids a better explanation. They were the only ones with enough personal experience to believe anything of what she just said.

“All I remember is that I was handled this tablet as part of a cognitive experiment. Then I fell asleep. When I woke up, I was inside that place. Everything is foggy ever since… but it wasn’t at first.”

She brings her index finger to her temple as if trying to force a memory out.

“Every day that passes, the details about that time seem to fade away… Like if it’s been even longer than two years. I think it’s just like when you wake up from a dream and you start doing something. The actions you make after waking up start to overwrite the recollections of the dream you woke up from.”

Takamaki and Sakamoto looked at each other with concern while Morgana remained reflecting inside Kido’s bag.

They felt the same way about her situation. Her distressful circumstances made them worry about the mental health of the woman sitting in front of them.

All the questions momentarily vanished because of that. The mystery of the knowledge she hides and the strange behavior of her shadow-self became inconsequential.

She meekly smiles after looking at the teenagers expressions. Soseki couldn’t help but to feel guilty. They all had such noble souls.

“Please don’t look at me like that… this is why I needed your help.”

“That’s…”

Morgana finds himself out of words.

“Have you looked for help? Professional help I mean.”

Ann asks.

“The only person who could’ve helped me doesn’t exist anymore.”

But her blunt answer took everyone by surprise.

“What?”

“What do you mean?”

“…”
She smiles at their concern.

“It doesn’t matter, there’s nothing that can be done about that… All I wish is to find a way that would help me to become whole again.”

“Whole…?”

Morgana asks.

“That’s what she said down there.”

Ann points.

“Right, so you really saw her… my shadow.”

Soseki says.

“She mentioned something about that.”

Finally Kido adds to the conversation.

“Shadows are the manifestation of the darkest side of our psyche. They could be our deepest fears and even the monstrosities we don’t allow ourselves to become.”

Soseki explains.

“… Our inner demons…”

She adds with a wry chuckle.

The giggle made the thieves nervously look at each other for a moment.

“You guys had tamed that side of yourselves and became Persona users. It is truly an admirable deed.”

Her now honest smile takes the band aback. They haven’t been doing what they did in the look for praise, but to inspire those who suffer this world’s unfair reality like them.

But to be recognized this way, felt gratifying.

“Jun-san.”

She cleans her mouth with a napkin before standing up.

“Please, do not worry about me. I can’t really help you that much besides keeping an eye on the app and the new possibilities it may appear in time.”

Everyone starts following her outside the fast food restaurant.

The conversation is kept to a minimum given such a bunch could eventually gather some unnecessary attention again.

Once they reach the interception that lead to the train station she takes a brief moment to continue her delivery.

“If I keep finding out how this app works, I may be able to help you even further.”
“What do you mean?”

The cat inside Kido’s bag asks.

“The app can help you obtain new skills inside the meta-verse, it works as a cognitive stimulant. I found it emits all kinds of subliminal emission that change and shape the user’s cognition to work as a navigational app for that other world.”

She explains while raising her index finger again.

Showing great enthusiasm by doing so, to the surprise of everyone except Kido.

“That sounds complicated.”

Sakamoto laments.

“And dangerous”

Takamaki adds.

“You don’t need to worry. The app is harmless in the real world. Only those with the potential are able to use it like you guys do.”

“Wait.”

Morgana interrupts.

“You understand and use the app, but why do you not enter that world like the rest of us? Why is your shadow the one talking to us?”

“…”

“You don’t know?”

“Yes, it seems I’m not that capable of just using it at its fullest potential for some reason I ignore. That’s part of the reason of why I want to help you guys.”

She gets serious while she folding her arms.

“Wait, you’re using us to experiment with it?”

Ann asked worriedly.

“Now that sounds dangerous.”

Sakamoto mewled again.

“I wouldn’t dare to endanger you all with my experiments. As I said, the app is harmless in this world… I think.”

“That sounds oddly familiar.”

Kido says drily while looking down at his bag below his arm.

“That’s why I want to depend on you children. You are doing a great thing. Besides, I trust that helping you will allow me to reach my goal as well.”
She said before relaxing once again.

“And that’s also why I said not to worry about me.”

Her smile was truly dignified this time.

A sight not even Kido expected to see from her.

“You can’t be serious. The shit you been through is not normal!”

But Sakamoto couldn’t tolerate the way this woman handled her own hardships.

“It’s so sweet you’re worried about me Sakamoto-kun. But I keep myself busy by investigating this app most of the time, I came to terms with my circumstances by now... Also, I have a lot of reading to do. Two years of light novels are a lot to catch up!”

This time, her smile was as simplistic as it could be.

“Maybe you are right, she’s a weirdo.”

Ann whispered to Takashi.

“M-hm, m-hm.”

To what he nodded affirmatively, twice.

“I’ll help you!”

Morgana jumped down of Kido’s bag to stand in front of the woman’s feet.

“Morgana?”

Ann notices the cat unfamiliar purposefulness.

“…”

Same goes for Kido.

He knew Morgana could be a little imprudent at times. But the whole purpose behind their alliance lied on finding out about his mysterious origin.

“Kitten.”

Jun looked down at the feline thief with awed eyes.

Morgana turns back to face his companions.

“She’s just like me… She’s slowly losing her memories while I’ve already lost mine. I don’t even know who I am… that’s why… that’s why I need to find out what lies in the depths of that place.”

“Hey…”

Even Ryuji couldn’t hide his concern.

“This was the deal I asked you guys back then…”

It was true that Morgana took them to Mementos, so they could help him understand the nature of
that place. With their help he hoped they could reach the truth behind his own existence, his nature… his humanity.

“Maybe it was destiny that we met down there…”

The cat says while looking up at the woman.

“Destiny, huh?”

Kido whispers to himself while looking away.

‘Why am I pulling up with her games?’

He wonders to himself.

Takashi Kido knew she wasn’t telling them all she knew, it was the same back when she explained the app to him.

She used half-truths to earn herself points and credibility. But she must still have something hidden under her sleeve.

Suddenly entering the meta-verse by herself seems to be a bet she was willing to take to gain their trust.

‘But why go so far?’

“Wonderful. It seems our goals align!”

Jun claps her hands together in joy.

“How about it then?”

She reaches closer to the group again, looking directly at their leader.

“Those two really seem to need our help.”

Ryuji says while facing his other two partners.

“If we can do something to help them… we should.”

A thoughtful Ann voices her reasoning.

No matter what Kido’s instincts told him now, three of the four phantom thieves had unanimously reached a conclusion.

Of course he could refuse and end the sketchy discussion for today. But that way he wouldn’t be able to find out the reasons and the hidden knowledge this woman wasn’t willing to share yet.

“I’ve already promised Morgana that I’ll help him…”

The boy reaches down with his bag open for Morgana to enter again.

The cat does so as he reaches over Kido’s shoulder immediately to witness his decision.

Kido closed his eyes in resignation before turning to the woman again.

“If that’ll help you too, then so be it.”
“Yes!”

Soseki tights her fist up in joy.

The blonde highschoolers share unconvinced smiles. Wondering what they have got into for the third time today.

As the rest get ready to cross the interception Ann turns her attention back to Central Street.

“Hey, don’t you feel like somebody is watching us?”

She asks while looking around the area.

“All the time actually. But I don’t see any red eyes around here now…”

Says Takashi with a hint of disappointment.

“Huh?”

Ann tilts her head at his answer.

“She’s prolly just bein’ all too self-conscious again. She did the same when we were buying stuff back before stealin’ Kamoshida’s heart.”

Sakamoto says relaxing his arms behind the back of his head.

“That’s not It-”

“Excuse me.”

But before Takamaki could clarify the situation, she’s interrupted by an unfamiliar voice.

“My, what a hansome boy.”

Jun was the first to turn around to face the strange dark blue haired boy standing behind them.

The pale teenager who was wearing an unique white and black school uniform stands there with a serious expression. Not taking his attention away from Ann Takamaki for a second.

“T-That’s him! The guy who’s been stalking me for a month now!”

Astonished, the boy looks down at Takamaki’s pointing finger with a sincere incredulity.

“Stalking you? That’s outrageous.”

Says the very slim looking boy while fixing his hair.

The tone of his voice was calm and sophisticated.

“I know you’ve been following me for a while!”

“That’s because I was trying to contact you. But every time I try reach you to properly introduce myself, someone seems to hinder my efforts.”

The boy sadly says, while dramatically raising his right arm to the sky.

“Do you know him?”
“Never seen him before.”

Jun shrugs at Takashi’s odd question.

“Every time?”

“Yes. The truth is I couldn’t help myself from chasing after you after I’ve seen you again today. There is something I must request of you.”

“Request?”

“You’re the woman I’ve been searching for all this time! Please, won’t you—…”

“Searching?”

Ann takes a step back after every question she voices.

“Is this some sort of—”

Ryuji tries to whisper something at his friend.

“Shh, let’s hear it.”

“You mor—”

Takamaki takes her attention away from the tall blue hair boy to fume to her two school-mates for a moment.

“-Be the model for my next piece!?”

The unforeseen boy waves his right hand away theatrically like cutting through the group’s counterfeit expectations.

“… wait, model!??”

An almost disappointed Takamaki asked.

“What’s with that reaction!?”

Sakamoto fumes.

“All I’ve drawn till now has been lacking, but I feel a passion from you unlike anyone else!”

“This man is highly suspicious!”

Kido’s bag shakes uncontrollably.

“Will you cooperate with me? What do you say?”

The look on the boy’s face shapes into a somewhat menacingly expectation.

“He’s either a creeper or a very tactless boy.”

“You have no right to call anyone tactless.”

Kido answers to Jun’s whisper with his usual calm boldness.
“Ho-hold your horses! Who are you anyways?”

Sakamoto gets in between Takamaki’s and the unforeseen boy’s line of sight.

The boy momentarily steps back, not taking his sight away from the model in front of him.

“Oh, where are my manners? I’m a second-year at Kosei High’s fine-arts division.”

The boy then bows not before holding his hand on his chest in a very butler-esque manner.

“My name is Yusuke Kitagawa.”

The dazzle in the face of the Shujin students because of the boy’s manners quickly fades away as soon as Kitagawa shoves Ryuji out of his way.

“I’m Madarame-sensei’s pupil, and I’m being allowed residence at his place. I’m striving to become an artist.”

“Huh!? Madarame? Why does that name sound familiar?”

Finally Ann’s shock fades away as the name they heard before is mentioned.

Kido looks at Ann’s face trying to whisper something.

“Mementos”

“Oh!”

She says.

“It must be because he was on TV recently. He was on a show named “Good Morning Japan”, just the other day.”

“I see… wait, I remember seeing that! He’s a celebrity.”

Ann expression changes to shock again.

“Something of the sort.”

Yusuke says.

“Y’know who that is?”

Ryuji asks to Ann.

“He was introduced as a super-famous Japanese-style artist who’s been recognized all over the world!”

Ann explains.

“Oh, how fascinating.”

Jun enthusiastic voice reaches behind the teenagers.

“And you didn’t say anything about it down there because…”

Kido tries to probe for an answer but he only gets an angry frown from his classmate.
“Oh don’t you start that of all people!”

“… Fair.”

Sensing an imminent karma emergency, probably thanks to his third eye, Kido drops the issue.

“Yusuke!”

Suddenly a mature sounding voice interrupts the students exchange.

Their surprise wasn’t lessened once they noticed the source of the calling came from inside a Limo.

“Well, Well. So this is where your passion took you. You really stepped over the pedal… hahaha”

The mysterious looking old man started laughing to himself.

“Did that old man really just parked his limo to make a pun?”

Ryuji wonders with dubiety.

“He saw me from the car and followed me?”

The blue haired boy asks to himself.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t noticed the calls from Sensei… but thanks to that I was able to finally contact you!”

He continued now looking back at the blonde girl.

“How’s this not what I think, but it still feels like it is!?”

The blushing girl says while looking down.

“You kinda are a creep magnet, ain’tcha.”

“Shut up!”

“Can we go now?”

A bored Takashi tries to get the attention of his two blonde friends.

“That’s right Yusuke, it’s getting late.”

The man from the limo says.

“Is that Madarame?”

Ryuji asks.

“Yes he is.”

Ann answers.

“I’m sorry sensei, I’ll be right there!”

The Kosei student obediently says before turning back to the group once again.
“Madarame-sensei’s exhibition will begin at the department store near the station tomorrow.”

The boy says after taking a step forward almost invading Ann’s personal space by doing so.

“I’ll be there to help him out on the opening day. Please come by.”

Yet his educated mannerisms never hinted any sort of ill intention while handling her a bunch of tickets.

“It’ll be great if you could give me your answer in regard to being a model then…”

He says with a confident smile.

But then his expression changes to a frown towards Sakamoto.

“I bet you have no interest on such an activity, but I’ll give you tickets too.”

He condescendingly said to the male duo.

Ann indecisively grabbed the tickets.

Kitagawa then turns his attention to the mid-twenties woman standing behind them.

“You should come too, young lady. I can say just by looking that you hold some esteem for the fine arts.”

After finally being noticed again, Jun can’t help but to smile.

“That does sound fun.”

“Did he just said young lady?”

The cat from the bag asks.

“Even if he seems to be around the same age as ours.”

Kido ratifies the cat’s point.

“Is he pretendin’ to be mature or somethin’?”

The blonde boy comments.

Without paying attention to their comments the artist apprentice joins his sensei inside the limo. Finally parting from the scene.

“Why do all the weirdos come at us today?”

Ryuji wonders to himself.

“Aw, he’s not a weirdo. He just likes Takamaki-chan.”

Jun says trying to justify the scene she just witnessed.

“How dare he go after Ann-dono! That damn Yosuke! I won’t forget his face.”

Morgana mewled inside the bag.
“Hitting on Ann out of the blue like that is why he’s a weirdo in the first place.”

Sakamoto says with a mocking smirk.

“He wasn’t hitting on me…! Maybe.”

“Our femme fatale got outclassed.”

Kido adds with a serious and disappointed tone.

He was deprived of witnessing one of the famous Ann Takamaki’s heartbreaking rejections after all.

“Will you stop that!?”

“Wait, maybe? That guy was as easy to read as a book…”

Sakamoto says fully assured of his perspective.

“You’re not planning on goin’, are you?”

Takamaki frowns at the boy for a second before looking down at the tickets with hesitation.

“… I-I think I will.”

Sakamoto’s jaw drops.

Kido sighs. He already knows how this girl spends most of her afternoons aimlessly lurking around the underground mall every day. If he had to trail her modus operandi, he wouldn’t have to go further than to the school, the mall, and her house.

Not counting her modeling jobs taking her to different locations out of her usual interests of course… or her visits to the hospital.

Such an activity that could lead to an improvement to her career, would pick her interest.

Regardless she looked understandably preoccupied about it. If not just trying to hide her embarrassment.

“Oh I will go as well. This seems to be an interesting way to pass the time.”

Jun walks forward taking one of the tickets from Ann’s hand.

“Don’t you think so, Lotus-boy?”

She looks at Kido with a teasing smile.

Kido stares at her blankly.

“… You’re still here?”

“Rude!”

They all parted ways soon after that.

The woman promised to be at school every Friday after classes. She also proposed to aid them with any uncertainty they could have. But both Takamaki and Sakamoto didn’t feel like they were brave enough to go on their own.
Morgana insisted Kido to take him whenever he happens to go to that guidance room from now on.

Once Kido arrived to Leblanc and prepared to sleep quite early after such an active day.

He changed and got to bed earlier than usual. Even if he wasn’t that tired he didn’t felt like tempting his rotten luck anymore for today.

He lies on his bed and takes his glasses off. But then he notices that his phone started buzzing.

He taps the screen to see his phantom thief chat group, much to his relief.

**Ann:** I don’t want to sound rude, but can we really trust Soseki-san?

**Ryuji:** Why would you say that? Did she said something weird?

**Ann:** Hello. Do you forget the creepy shadow “welcome ceremony”?

**Ann:** Also what was all that about her shadow turning on and off after she woke up?

Kido takes a look at Morgana who was reading his chat right beside him on the bed.

The cat shakes his head in silence.

**Takashi:** I have no idea.

**Ryuji:** Yeah that was weird. But wasn’t the same for us?

**Ryuji:** I mean, I guess we all heard ours when we awakened our personas.

“No, it seems to be different for her, we all confronted our shadows and so they became our Personas. Apparently she can’t confront her own shadow like we do… we really should ask her what was that all about.”

Morgana says to a thoughtful Kido.

“… How did you awakened your persona?”

“Me? I-I’m special.”

“You don’t remember.”

“…”

Morgana grunts.

“Well, we’ll find out more about that sooner than later, right?”

Kido says trying sink his roommate moral even more while typing on his phone.

**Takashi:** We’ll have to ask her more about it another time.

**Ann:** Also. I didn’t felt like speaking about what we were doing on mementos in front of her.

**Takashi:** Why?

**Ann:** Because… I don’t know.
Ryuji: You’re being paranoid.

Ann: I’m not. It was just all out of the blue.

Takashi: She probably knows what we’re doing anyway.

Ann: OH! And the whole deal of you knowing about her and not telling us!

Ryuji: Yeah dude, the hell was that all about?

Kido cringes on his bed.

“Heh. You have to take this like a man.”

Morgana says while snuggling besides his roommate pillow.

The cat was ready to enjoy the protest session, adding his bits every time he could.

Kido does his best to stay awake during the whole scolding session to properly apologize before being able to sleep.

“It seems we’ll head to the museum tomorrow then…”

Kido comments, he was already covered on his sheets. But Morgana had ceased watching him type for a while now, and instead started watching his roommate face very closely.

“Erm…”

“I didn’t notice before.”

“Notice what?”

Kido asks.

“Your face, you have a very intense look now that I see you without your glasses.”

“…”

“No wonder you’re a delinquent.”

“I’m not…”

He puts back his glasses trying to look away.

“It’s just a hereditary defect.”

He mumbles.

“Is that how it works- meowh!”

But in an abrupt attempt to turn around, Takashi takes the sheets on where Morgana was sitting up with him. Making the cat fall of the bed on the process.

“This is the first time I see a cat falling on his back.”

He says after noticing the whereabouts.
“Be more careful!”

“Sorry.”

Morgana sits but his attention is quickly shifted towards a classic cards deck lying bellow Kido’s bed.

“Hey those are your cards.”

“…”

The boy doesn’t answer.

“Do you know any other tricks?”

“… A few.”

“And how did you learn those?”

“…”

How? It is quite easy if you have a proper teacher.

Someone patient enough to share their knowledge to the blank state of a mind little kids have.

No teacher is as good and comprehensive as a good parent willing to show their children things that could keep their minds sharp and put…

A family is supposed to teach their children the values of a decent life hood.

But instead he got to learn magic tricks, how to cook his own meals and… the dilettante expertise of the many different knife types.

‘No, that's not fair.’

Not at all. Takashi is sure that at some point of his life his parents embedded the same values they had on him. What’s right and what’s wrong. What’s evil and what’s good. He wasn’t contrived into believing something against his will. In fact, Takashi Kido feels he's left all too much on his own to make his own decisions.

(“No son of mine runs away from his problems!”)

(“Well thankfully I'm not your son anymore, right?”)

He winced at a remembrance he didn’t want to relive.

The whole time Kido was musing to his own he couldn’t notice Morgana jumping up and down from bed.

The cat's goal was to bring every card lying on the floor up to Kido’s reach. It wasn’t an easy job, since the little feline had to bring one card at the time with his mouth.

Kido stares at the cat that was wiggling his tail in expectation.

“Let’s just go to sleep.”

But he turns to the side facing the wall as he ready himself to get some rest.
“Huh? Really? But you don’t look tired…. Hey!”

He ignores the cat’s protest.

Why would he remember those things now?

There was no point, what’s done is done.

No matter how much he wished things to be different, he had accepted the reality as soon as he stepped into this new life.

The sole purpose to take this new lifestyle, was to change his future, not his past.

‘How foolish.’

He mumbles to himself before falling asleep.

They’ll go to the museum after classes tomorrow.

End of part 1

Chapter End Notes

The kanji: 蓮 represents the Lotus flower. Amamiya Ren reads: 雨宮蓮
So, yeah few scenes today. But I had to cut a lot of things so I can keep my 10,000 words limit per chapter personal rule. But I just moved some things for the next chapter, so all is good.
How do you feel about Kurosawa being in the story? I have plans for him, but nothing major at the time.
More Mishima and Makoto for the next chapter. I hope I can finish it this week… or the next.
Also, “NO NECRO, NO MORE FORCED DADDY ISSUES!”
I make no promises.
The Coldhearted Rogue Part 2

Winter Pain

Winter was not a good time to get bruises.

The stinger pain doesn’t fade away as easily and the falls hurt a lot more because your muscles are more rigid.

During the cold, the nerves may cause one to experience numbness and may not cause movement in finger tissues and leg muscles with full flexibility, but the sensation of pain may continue to be received and transmitted.

That’s exactly what Takashi Kido was going through as his father did a judo throw making him land on his back while trying to stop the fall with both his elbows.

“C’mon Mr. Man! Is that all you got?”

The tall man in a suit mocks him as he gets back up on one knee.

“…”

The dojo was empty, only his mother was looking at them with a worried face.

“You said you don’t need us to take care of your sorry ass, and this is how you prove it?”

His father continued to taunt him.

“… You’re taller and stronger.”

Takashi justifies.

It was indeed an unfair match for a fourteen year old to face a combat trained adult like this.

But he didn’t refuse this match when he could.

No, he accepted his father’s challenge because he needed to show him something.

“And…? So is the other half of this country.”

The man says as he walks towards his defeated son.

“And between them, there are the people who’s willing to hurt you… do you understand that?”

“I don’t care!”
But as he got closer Takashi tried to tackle him with a surprise jump…

“Ah!”

But the attempt was received with another unexpected grapple.

His father had taken advantage of Takashi’s momentum and speed and used it to his advantage, throwing him down again by tripping his foot and making him spin in the air.

The land was as harsh as the last one, but Takashi had learned to lower his chin to his chest and reduce the impact with both his elbows by now. It still hurt like hell though.

“Aaaaahg”

“That’s just pitiful.”

The man stands over him, looking him down with disapproval.

“Honey, don’t hurt him.”

Says his mother while trying her best to cope with this macho exhibition.

“It’s called tough love.”

Says the father as he kneels while extending his hand to his son, this time with a smile.

“How ‘bout it? If you manage to lay me down on my back at least once, I’ll show you one of those combat knifes you like so much.”

It was a tease.

No matter how much Takashi wants to pretend otherwise, his father does noticed him trying to take a look at those things he used to sell while he was just a kid.

This was hardly what he would like to call “bonding time”. Yet this was one of the few times Takashi’s father had offered him to do something together at all.

“That’s not something a kid should have dear.”

The mother objects in the distance.

“I-I kno-“

But that was enough to distract the father… Takashi used his legs, both of them to break his father’s balance, and then focused all his strength on them to bring him down with a scissors like maneuver.

The adult man fell on his back just like Takashi did a few moments ago.

“You’re down now.”

The roles are now reversed, as Takashi looks down at his dad with a mocking smile his father had never seen until then.

“… Sneaky brat.”

His father returned his gesture with a grin of his own.
“You were saying things aren’t going to be fair, right?”

“Heh. Don’t get cocky.”

As his father stands he puts his hand over his head as if petting him, or making him understand how little he was compared to him.

He hated those displays.

“Morons.”

The mother says as she sighs...

“...

The sun had raised, Takashi has changed and he was ready to go out like any other Sunday.

“Hey Takashi, they’re waiting for us.”

Kido looks around the dusty attic, the Cat is waiting for him near the stairs.

On his hands, a sheathed battle knife… a reward that didn’t feel like one anymore.

They’re supposed to head out today.

He puts it back in the tool box that came with the luggage they sent him from his hometown back then.

‘A moron indeed.’

“Let’s go.”

He says, walking out of his room to the train station.

**The trophies exhibit**

Takashi finds his friends waiting for him on their new “hideout”… right in the middle of the Shibuya station overpass area.

The irony of hiding in plain sight didn’t escape Kido, who went on noticing how undistinguished their existence is for the rest of the world.

But for Sakamoto, Takamaki and even Morgana’s more positive point of view this was also enough proof that their subtle practices were also showing in this world, much to Takashi’s disbelief.

They head to the exhibit soon after meeting, and to no one’s surprise (except Sakamoto’s) the place was crowded.

A familiar silver hair woman wearing an unusual black dress as her casual clothes was also roaming
the place. She was looking around the paints with a pompous fake smile.

Aparently, Soseki-san had been looking forward to be here for different reasons.

“Why is she here again?”

Sakamoto asks.

“She’s not part of the plan, just ignore her.”

Kido says with a blank expression.

“She’s really into this.”

Ann words her awe at the woman’s sophisticated act.

Jun was constantly reaching for the most expensive looking paints trying to praise it with some sort of chic speech the kids couldn’t hear from the distance.

“You came!”

And then the prodigious pupil waltzed in front of the trio.

“Oh… yeah…!”

Takamaki answers awkwardly.

“… So you really came.”

Said the condescendingly young artist to the two boys standing behind the model.

“Hey you give us the tickets dammit!”

To what Sakamoto took offense.

“Please, do not bother the other visitors.”

Kitagawa requests almost making it sound like a warning.

He was wearing an elegante-sport gray blazer over a white shirt and black pants.

If it wasn’t for his attitude while chasing for her, Ann Takamaki would’ve thought this boy was a colleague model by just looking at him.

“Come now. I’ll show you around. I’d like to speak more about the picture I’ll like to draw too.”

The well-mannered blue haired boy signals the girl to follow him.

“R-right, let’s do that… Well, see you guys later.”

Suddenly Ann Takamaki’s previous enthusiasm about going to a “mature” art exhibit banished.

“Will Ann-dono be alright!? What if he drags her behind some painting and tries something funny!?”

Morgana’s imagination flies as he pops over Kido’s shoulder.

“Shush, I told you not to come out!”
Sakamoto glares at the cat.

“Hey, isn’t that?”

But Kido’s attention lied on a man standing in the middle of the exhibit saying goodbye to a couple of tv journalists.

“… The inspiration sprouts from my heart. It’s genuinely important to distant oneself from fame and money. My atelier is just an old shack.”

‘Old shack, huh?’

“Madarame?”

Ryuji spouts the old man name almost involuntarily.

“Mmm?”

As the interviewers walk away the old man turns around after hearing his name.

“Ah, Hi-”

Sakamoto nervously greets him.

“My, you boys are rather young compared to the other visitors. Are you perhaps interested on getting into the arts and crafts world?”

“I-I…”

“Not really.”

Kido says bluntly.

“I see… then-”

Madarame twitches his eyebrow as a sign of his sudden loss of interest. But as soon as he tried to come up with an excuse to finish their conversation…

“Your pupil invited us here, we’re here to support him.”

Takashi comes up with another excuse.

“Oh, Yusuke made friends he hasn’t told me about? That’s interesting.”

“Y-yeah, we just met him the other day tho.”

Sakamoto says trying to keep up their façade.

“No matter, any friend of Yusuke is welcomed to take a look around without any concern. Please make yourself comfortable. I’ll see you’re treated properly.”

The man with a genuine smile bowed respectfully before turning away.

“Man, he doesn’t look like a bad person at all.”

“…”
“Excuse me? Madarame-sensei…”

An unfamiliar voice reaches the man as he headed away.

“Oh… I see you’ve been allowed in after all…”

Says the “venerable” artist.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let an opportunity like this go to waste. My name is Ichik-”

“I know who you are. Your newspaper had been trying to slander my name recently.”

He interrupts her while raising his palm as if asking for permission to speak. Or more like respectfully asking her to stop.

“Not that I am aware of, I only interviewed people surrounding you because you won’t allow me to-”

“My agent had requested me to avoid giving you or your newspaper any interviews. Now If you excuse me.”

Without giving her another chance to speak, the man simply walks away.

“Well, that’s that… What are you looking at?”

The odd woman suddenly barked at the two boys standing near her.

“Gha!”

“…”

Sakamoto jumps back as Kido just stares at her walking away.

“What’s up with that woman?”

“He’s giving an interview to another media now.”

Kido notices.

“… Can’t we go now? I don’t like it here.”

Sakamoto complains.

“Madarame-san is actually here?”

A sharp eyed costumer voiced her excitement.

“Over there!”

“I’m so glad I came on the opening day!”

Suddenly a mob of people came “crashing” towards the celebrity, taking down everything on their way.

“GHAAA! I’M GETTING CRUSHED!”

That includes the two teenagers.
“We gotta head for the exit, don’t die on us ok?”

**Interlude: Dry paint**

The art was truly magnificent.

Every paint must represent a stage on the artist life.

The paintings were ordered by year, dates, moments… styles.

Ann Takamaki always liked the idea that images being painted over a canvas could convey actual emotions.

She was an average fan of many artistic styles. Not limited to just drawing but also to painting and even of the graffities that call for her attention. She grew watching anime, one of the major reasons for why she chose her favorite mangas, was mostly because of the art-style.

It became an innocent hobby for her. To search for cute pictures online. Colorful imagery as wallapers or some good poster materials. She had evaluated an adventurous wish to even experiment with body painting at some later day. At least when she’s old enough to consider it worth it.

She has a lot of time for herself anyway. Looking back, having those appreciations had a big role on her current lifestyle.

Ann Takamaki is the farthest thing from an Otaku, and she wouldn’t consider herself an art critic either.

She’s just a fan of any modern creation that’s meant to communicate or appeal to senses or mind.

‘If shiho was here, she’ll laugh at me.’

A fun memory brings a shy smile to her face.

“There are so many Japanese styles here.”

She tries to break the silence between her escort and herself.

It was true that every paint had an unique style, something no artist should be able to achieve.

“Artist generally focuses only on one style first. But sensei is above such notions.”

Kitagawa explains.

“He’s special.”

He adds with satisfaction.

“I see…”

Even to Ann Takamaki who’s not an expert of the art world, that was still a concept difficult to
believe.

Besides, every paint seems to display a different sentiment. Some more than others…

“Oh, it’s that paint!”

She says with excitement.

“That one?”

Said Kitagawa in surprise.

“Yeah!”

Ann smiled innocently.

“I saw it on TV. I really wanted to see it in person.”

She gets closer while Kitagawa expectantly stares at her.

“I am no expert, but seeing it made me think how much anger an artist could have while drawing this, and still manages to make it look so… pleasing.”

“…”

Yusuke’s face darkened.

“In the interviews Madarame looks so calm, but to think he’s also able to paint something like this.”

She couldn’t see him bite his lip.

“There are many other pieces better than this one.”

He says while walking away from that stand, doing his best to take her attention away from the paint.

“Come now. Let me show you.”

Yusuke says.

“Huh?”

But suddenly his phone starts ringing.

“Hello… I see, right away sensei.”

His voice recovered that same refined tone as soon as he picked the phone.

For a moment Takamaki could notice his free hand shaking but calming down while the call lasted.

“I apologize, but I’m afraid I have to go and help Sensei for the rest of the evening…”

He says while bowing respectfully.

“Oh no. That’s fine.”

“… Regarding that request of mine, I would…”
For the first time since she met him, the boy started acting timidly.

“We can exchange contact info to talk about that.”

“That would be auspiciously feasible.”

After exchanging their info, Ann remained still after the boy said his goodbyes.

She made her way back to the previous painting.

It was like the drawing was calling for her, eventually she felt a presence standing next to her.

“Ooh. Such a sophisticated place for a date, right?”

“A date!?”

She turns with crimson cheeks to identify the silver hair woman right next to her.

“You and Kitagawa-kun, he’s quite handsome. Isn’t that the reason you accepted coming here?”

The teasing in the woman’s voice was not something Takamaki was used to ever since she stopped gossiping with Shiho.

“I-I, that’s not it!”

And she wasn’t even expecting such a low attack just when she lowered her emotional barriers because of that painting.

“Hehe, I jest. But I thought you’ll have a good appreciation for that boy’s aesthetically pleasing appearance.”

She said in between chuckles.

“N-no it’s not that, he’s actually really cute, but-”

‘Why am I explaining myself to her!? ’

“So-Soseki-san, what are you doing here?”

Ann swiftly tries to change the subject.

“Just enjoying my Sunday away from home. What about you? You got anything from this visit?”

Ann cringes as she lets out a nervous smile.

She pauses to assimilate the situation she just got herself into.

“I came here to see this painting I’ve seen on TV…! Yeah.”

She said doing her best to sound convincing.

“I see.”

Jun ceases her teasing to take a look at the painting.

“That boy… this painting fits his cold poise…”
“Now that you mention it… Yeah, it does.”

Jun turns her eyes back to Takamaki.

“You seem to be a great judge of character Takamaki-chan… you really don’t like people lying to you, isn’t?”

“Everybody lies…”

The blonde quickly answers much to Soseki’s surprise.

“…”

“I just don’t have to believe them every time. But I also know what’s like to wish for a lie to be real.”

If you repeat a lie often enough, it can become the truth… Unless you’re Ann Takamaki.

“Heh.”

Soseki can’t help but to smile at her answer.

“… Where did those two go? Oh, sorry Soseki-san, I have to go.”

The distracted blonde doesn’t notice as she parts from the scene.

“Take care.”

The young girl walks away, aware of what she needs to know.

She can hear the voice of the blonde punk of Shujin Academy sitting in the Station’s corridor.

Sakamoto was relaxing while talking to their leader.

She approaches them with a bored expression.

“Why did you let me behind?”

She chides at them.

“It’s not like that, we got crowded!”

Sakamoto explains.

“More importantly, we are goin’ to that Yusuke’s guy home, right!!”

“Yes. It’s the only way.”

Kido answers while looking at the blonde girl.

“Huh? Wait, this is all too sudden.”

She jumps back with clearly red cheeks.

“Why? We’re just going to talk to him.”

Sakamoto explained again.
“Oh, that’s what you meant…”
To what she calms down.

“Note to self. Ann is weak against unexpected attacks.”

“Don’t take notes of that!”

She ends up fuming at her leader again on their way to the station.

Interlude / Out

Child of Vanity

The rumors online about Madarame’s abuse over his pupils reached the team thanks to Sakamoto lurking for posts about it in the phantom aficionado website.

Things like inhuman treatment and art plagiary were posted all over the site.

They agreed to go visit Kitagawa at Madarame’s atelier the next day to get a proper version from one of the potential victims in person.

To their surprise the shack was actually just that. A shelter-like hut made of various cheap materials. It would be a common sight on certain rural areas or very poor neighborhoods.

But not for this urban area so near Central street.

“For real?”

“Is it really here?”

Both Sakamoto and Takamaki couldn’t believe their eyes.

“If you try to put that button smashing thing again I swear-”

Morgana who apparently was incapacitated until recently, angrily pops out of Kido’s bag.

But the cat is also surprised by the “home’s” structure.

“That wouldn’t happened if you’d stay in the damn bag.”

Said Ryuji as Ann rings the bell.

“Hello who’s calling.”

“It’s me, Takamaki.”

“Oh, one second!”
Rushed steps could be heard from the other side of the door.

“You came…! Oh, you came too.”

The sense of Déjà vu invaded the teenagers as they were greeted by the shifting tone of the boy with the blue hair.

“Yup”

…-----

“Preposterous!”

It was an expected response… the one Takashi feared the most.

Kitagawa was looking through the comments on Sakamoto’s phone, exaggerating an ironic laugh while doing so.

‘It’s not the first time he hears about this…’

Takashi realizes.

“Don’t let yourselves be fooled by such rumors. If sensei really hated children, why would he bother taking in pupils like myself?”

Yusuke said.

He was mad, Takashi could see it on his cold staring eyes.

Did they really insult him this much?

“Right now, I’m the only one left living here. Sensei picked me up after I had no family left, he raised me and teaches me everything he knows.”

He walked towards Sakamoto, looking him straight to his eyes.

“If you continue to slander his name, I’ll make sure you rue this day.”

“Wait, we just-”

“Yusuke!”

But then the old man himself stepped outside the hut too.

“What’s going on here?”

“Sensei, they heard those baseless rumors about you.”

“Rumors, huh?”

“…”

The trio remains silent at the gaze of the ‘artist’.
“Forgive them Yusuke.”

“Huh?”

“I heard those rumors too. They must be worried about their friend, that’s all.”

He turns his back to the group to return to his hut.

“It’s understandable.”

“But…”

“I’m an old eccentric man, I realize that. I can’t be liked by everyone.”

They can’t see his face as he tells them this, but the tone of his voice was so serene that appeased the scene.

“But Yusuke has nothing to do with it. I’ll appreciate if you become friends with him.”

He turns around again to face the visitors, this time he had a candid smile on his face as he bowed.

At the group’s silence, the old man returns inside leaving the teenagers to cope with their own astonishment.

“You really think someone like him would steal other people’s work or let alone abuse someone?”

Yusuke says to his visitors, but no one dares to answer him.

Sakamoto bites his words down.

“That’s right, I can show you this.”

Suddenly, Kitagawa’s face brightens as he pulls his phone out to show them a picture.

“That’s…”

“This is sensei’s first work, his most famous one: Sayuri.”

The image was of a classic style Japanese paint of a woman looking downward with a soft, appeased expression.

The apparent warm happiness captured in the image depicts such an unique feeling to the teenagers that they can’t hold their jaws up.

“It’s amazing.”

Says a moved Ann.

“Yeah, I dunno shit about this art stuff, but even I can tell it’s beautiful.”

Sakamoto comments.

“This is the painting that motivated me to become a painter.”

Yusuke explains while holding his hand on his chest, with an expression deserving of his longing

“The original was stolen long ago.”
“It is fascinating.”

“Sensei welcomed me when I lost my parents, I will be eternally grateful to him. I admire him and I aspire to be like him.”

“He’s like a father to you…”

Takashi guesses.

“Precisely.”

“…”

Takashi looks away after hearing his answer, trying to hide his washout expression.

“When I witnessed Takamaki-san’s beauty for the first time, I felt the same inspiration like when I saw Sayuri for the first time.”

“Eh?”

Ann’s cheeks turn a clear shade of red at the comment.

Once again an unexpected attack seems to have taken her out of her game.

“That’s the beauty I pursue. The one I want to capture and mirror into one of my pieces.”

Meanwhile Yusuke was musing with a brilliant smile as looking down at the picture.

The trio realizes this was the first time Kitagawa had been so openly honest to them by just looking at the shine in his eyes.

“That’s why I ask you, please, be my model.”

He bows towards Takamaki.

…

On their way outside the shack, Takashi couldn’t stop thinking about those words.

(“He’s like a father to you.” “Precisely.”)

A father figure he aspired to reach.

“This isn’t what I expected.”

Takashi murmurs to himself, but reaching towards his friends.

“Yes, he doesn’t look like a bad person.”

Ryuji estimates.

“Those rumors could be fake…”

Ann says.

“Maybe…”
The blonde duo begins to walk away in defeat.

“To think Madarame would live in such a shack…”

Those were Sakamoto’s last words before ending this investigation.

Beep.

*Conditions found*

Until Takashi’s phone made a familiar sound.

It was a hit.

“What is it?”

Sakamoto asks on a reflex, but he already knew what that meant after looking at his friend dismal expression.

“The meta-verse navigator…”

Takashi declares.

....

The Moon: The envisioning fan

Kido and Takamaki arrived to school together the next day after bumping to each other at the station.

Takamaki was acting elusive towards Takashi ever since they first left mementos.

This made Kido wonder if she was still resenting the whole deal with Soseki.

He had to bear with her unusual muteness all the way to school.

After what they’ve witnessed yesterday, there wasn’t much they could do other than directly confront Yusuke one more time.

Regardless of that, right now Kido’s worries lied on her silent companion.

From the looks of things, Takamaki wasn’t really mad. But there was an evident dejection replacing her usual cheerful and direct attitude.

Maybe her silence towards him had to do with him hiding his affiliation with Jun.

‘No, It has to be something else.’

Takashi can’t imagine something like that would bother her to this extend though.

He thought.

She could be worried about Yusuke
Their discovery did unnerve all of them that day.

“Hey, Ann…”

“…”

Once he decided to confront her about it, both teens noticed they were standing in the doorway to their classroom.

Their sudden pause already gathered the unwanted attention of their classmates by blocking the access to their classroom so suddenly.

They could hear things like ‘A lovers quarrel already?’, ‘Two troublemakers dating, it’s just meant to be a disaster’, ‘they both look like the typical hot delinquents you see in those trashy mangas, I hope their affair crashes down!’

Takamaki winced at the comments. It was another shameful misunderstanding again.

Before Kido could say anything, Ann got to her seat.

The awkward radio silence treatment she gave him for the rest of the day was probably the worst punishment he had received from a girl so far.

‘It’s not like I cheated on her or something.’

He reflects during class.

Then his phone starts vibrating.

Ann: All right, I contacted Kitagawa-kun about modeling for him

Ann: Still waiting for his response.

Ryuji: Thanks

Ann: I really have no idea what I’m supposed to do as an art model though...

She was all business, maybe this was his chance.

Takashi: Cover yourself in paint?

Yep, that’s the way Takashi Kido fixes all his worries alright.

...

Ann: can you at least try to take this seriously?

Takashi: How do you know I’m not?

Ann is writing...

Ryuji: Look, you don’t gotta go all out for this.

Ryuji: You’re only doing it so you can get dirt on Madarame, remember?

Ann: That is true.
Ann: It sounded like Kitagawa-kun wants this to be a private picture of his though...

Ann: Well, I guess I'll let you guys know when he contacts me again.

Takashi: Considering how eager he was about this, I don't think we will have to wait that much.

Takashi’s focused on the window again, trying to imagine what sort of life someone as Yusuke Kitagawa has. What type of life hood can a man like Madarame provide to make his victims try to protect him from being exposed?

Sadly for him, his meditation came during one of Ushimaru-sensei’s lectures.

The end result for his lack of presence was a familiar feeling of pain and white dust over his forehead region in just a few seconds.

“… You better start paying attention to class!”

That did bring him back to reality.

Ann had turned around to see his reaction to the chalk bullet. Once she realized he had received no major damage, she sighed before turning back to her notes.

‘I guess I have to talk to her eventually…’

He thinks while getting his phone back to his pocket while noticing the sleeping cat on his desk drawer.

‘But not today.’

Takamaki has been able to see through his calm façade from day one.

In a proper conversation, he’ll be unable to lie to her without her noticing something was wrong.

That’s why he knew that it’ll be for the best to let her be for the moment.

At least until she decides to share words with him again.

He did not wait for her on his way out after classes. The girl also remained on her seat while he passed by.

“I’m sorry senpai. I already told you all I know about that…”

On his way out he hears the familiar voice of one of his classmates.

It was a jittery Mishima, who was answering the questions of Shujin Academy’s own student council president near the stairs.

“I’m sure you did, but there may be things you’re not aware of that could still be of help. Please Mishima-kun, indulge these questions just for a little bit.”

“I don’t know how that would-”

“You told me that by the time Kamoshida threatened to expel you three, both Sakamoto-kun and Amamiya-kun started acting in an odd way. Isn’t that right?”

Her ruthless inquiry continues still, making the shy boy quiver.
“I…”

“If I’m not mistaken, that happened the same day Shiho Suzui tried to—…”

A sudden flinch and Mishima leans to the wall.

“Suzui…”

His face darkened as his eyes slowly started to damp.

“Mishima-kun?”

The third year girl tried to reach to him with a worried expression after realizing what she just did.

“I, Mishima.”

But they’re interrupted by Takashi’s best “Sakamoto dialect” impression.

“Huh?”

“… What do you want?”

The tall frizzy hair boy steps besides his distressed classmate.

“W-what?”

“You said you wanted to talk to me.”

“I-I did?”

“…”

‘Amamiya’ just stands there silently waiting for him to pick up his trail.

“Oh, right!”

Ren turns slightly to greet the dignified brunette standing on his right.

“Hello, Niijima-senpai.”

The boy greets her with a tranquil expression.

“Good afternoon, Amamiya-kun. It seems you’re attending school seriously.”

She doesn’t waste a moment to start a conversation.

There was no point on trying to be faint.

She already let his group know she had them on her sight. All in the hopes that such pressure would provoke a noticeable change in their behavior.

She could assume that the way Amamiya disrespectfully interrupted her conversation with Mishima just now was no coincidence.

Makoto Niijima wasn’t a mind reader or had any clairvoyance skill. Regardless, her guesses were usually right. Yuuki Mishima must be on Ren Amamiya’s side now.
“You also seem to be very close with Takamaki-san. You’re both coming to school together recently, haven’t you?”

So she’ll just move on to the main suspect for now.

Niijima’s confident that she can pull this. It was obvious for her that she had an upper hand because of her deferential status in the student body.

It’s not like he can just ignore her, or be rude to her without facing any consequences.

“You just got transferred here though…”

The fact that the boy acts so calm all the time also gives her confidence that he isn’t really the type of person that gives long or concrete answers. So she must focus on every detail about his behavior.

She has seen Takamaki and Amamiya arrive together at school earlier today.

The students were already spreading rumors about their relationship. Even Sakamoto was mentioned from time to time making the rumored affair sound like some sort of afternoon drama.

More inadequate rumors about the trio’s preferences were also roaming around, but she did not care about technicalities.

“I guess you two really click.”

Despite of the lack of reliability behind those rumors, all she needed was to take advantage of those gossips to force an incriminating reaction.

‘Anything works…’

Makoto told herself.

At this point, any sort of information she could seize could result useful.

She didn’t really care about the two second years relationship… all she needed was to corner him somehow. Finding out more about this boy was her priority.

He was the obvious leader of the group, he was quiet and composed all the time. Yet he had this air about him she could not describe.

A very familiar presence she may even say.

But if they were really doing something bad as blackmailing teachers, she’ll most certainly be doing the right thing.

There’s a chance they’ll succumb to the pressure if she pushes the right buttons.

That way this sort of manipulative tactic could be excused if she manages to prove they’re guilty.

Yeah, that’s how’s supposed to be.

“We’re just in the same class. Is there something weird about that?”

But he remained calm.

It made sense that he could be used to straight forward questions given who he hangs out with the
Makoto knows the way those two share conversations is uncommon for people who are only on the acquaintance level.

No, there was a certain level of familiarity both Ann Takamaki and Ren Amamiya share during their exchanges that astounds her.

The way they look at each other while talking, the lack of honorifics during their conversations… It’s like they’ve known each other forever. She would understand if it was like that with just Takamaki and Sakamoto, since they came from the same middle school.

But with Amamiya, it was totally different.

She wonders, was he really so bellwether for them? How can he manipulate people so easily and remain so calm about it? And at the same time, why those interactions look so legit?

It offends her, to not know. Yet, she recognizes him for it.

Being able to understand each other so easily… must be nice.

“Not at all. I hope I didn’t make you feel uncomfortable. You two just seemed to be a lot closer than that yesterday morning.”

Why did she have to persist?

She didn’t like it. But to Makoto Nijima’s knowledge, teasing was an efficient method to extract information from people who display traits of shyness.

The irony is not lost to her though, given her family tendencies to exploit that aspect of herself during her early teenage days.

Of course, teasing requires a certain level of confidence, and right now she lacks enough information about their relationship to properly expose him.

But Ren Amamiya acts as a very private person most of the time. She has to assume he could show difficulties when it came to handling these topics.

He looks at her with a blank expression for a moment before looking up and voicing his thoughts.

“Is senpai really asking me about my love life…?”

It was almost as if he was a totally different person for just one second.

The answer was so unexpected that she couldn’t really make sense of what he just said.

“There’s no need to be so subtle about it…”

No, it was the expression he made that took her completely off the conversation.

His serious demeanor changed to an unpleasant smile while he brought his eyes to her.

“I won’t bite you.”

He finished.
His sly tone... he was mocking her.

She tightens her fist only to loosen it a second after.

Makoto had been warned about this before.

How men often try to turn everything about themselves as soon as a woman starts asking them questions.

This boy was truly acting like a stereotypical troublemaker right now.

“Ah, I didn’t mean to sound like some Shoujo manga character.”

He said while rubbing the back of his neck.

Still, he was being selfish and impolite.

Amamiya pretends to look away from her uninterested.

“…”

After observing him from afar for a couple of weeks, she could deduce this behavior was somewhat uncharacteristic.

Was he actually doing this just to mess with her?

That would mean that he was fully aware of what she was trying to accomplish.

She started to conceal all emotion, even temper, letting out a simple “I see” before turning around to Mishima again.

“I apologize for taking your time, Mishima-kun.”

She politely bows towards the boy with the spiky hair before leaving.

There was no need to bother with him right now. A closer inspection should clear everything up.

“See you around, senpai.”

‘Amamiya’ says as he fixes his glasses.

“Around...?”

She slightly turns her head only to see the shine of his glasses eclipsing his eyes.

She could only notice his lips boasting that irksome knowing smile of his.

It could be considered a friendly smile for anyone else, but she knew better.

It’s been just a couple of weeks of her trying to figure out more about this illusive boy’s behavior.

After the exams were over he started to move around school more frequently. Unlike before when he usually hanged out in the roof with his other two second year friends.

Taking them out of that safe-zone they could use to machinate all sorts of dangerous schemes was the first step on her plan to expose them.
But it’s always the same with him.

He acted like he knew something she didn’t all the time.

That kind of attitude of his only makes things more difficult for her.

The pretentious confidence he displayed every time she tried to obtain new information.

The way he acts as if she was no treat at all…

She can’t let herself admit it, but it really pissed her off.

The student council president closes her eyes and continues her walk to the third floor.

“… She’s gone.”

*Ren* says with peaceful satisfaction.

“Hey… T-thanks?”

Mishima was looking at him with questioning eyes.

“Take care…”

But the “troublemaker” turned around to end the conversation.

“Amamiya-san, wait!”

“…”

“Wait. Please just hear me out.”

The persistent kid won’t let him go through the stairs without regaining his full attention.

“Y-you helped me not to say anything to Niijima-senpai for a reason right…? But you just made me your accomplice.”

The boy stops his march without turning to see his classmate anxious expression.

“… I don’t know what you are talking about.”

*Amamiya* says.

“I’m sorry… I’ve been a bad person to you. I just-”

He turns to see his distressed expression and sighs.

“I don’t blame you for anything.”

“Huh!?"

“Bye.”

“… Wait!”

Mishima gets in his way, looking around to see if nobody was looking at them.
Of course they wouldn’t. Who would even consider a conversation between him and a rumored delinquent to be worth listening?

He takes a step forward with all the courage he had gathered these past weeks, that same courage he saw this frizzy hair boy display against Kamoshida.

“You’re a phantom thief, right?”

“…”

“I-I won’t tell anyone! So please, just listen to me for a second I-I!”

“You, leader!”

Their exchange is interrupted by a familiar voice.

“Great…”

Amamiya can’t actually allow himself to facepalm right now, but that won’t stop his imagination to do so instead.

“Huh, Mishima?”

It was Ryuji Sakamoto who came out of his class looking for his friend.

“Leader?”

Mishima rephrases Ryuji.

“Oh crap!”

“Hey, Ryuji!”

He wasn’t alone though. Apparently Ann Takamaki went out of her class to look for him at some point after Amamiya left.

They usually go to their meetings together but this was an unknown fact for Mishima.

“So… you all are…. You definitely are!”

But right now there was a fact that was not concealed for him anymore.

“What’s going on?”

“…”

The “leader” remains silent towards Ann’s question. Anything they’ll say could only compromise them further.

“I knew it! You guys are awesome!”

“Please, don’t be so noisy.”

Ren interrupts Mishima’s celebration.

“Ah… I-I’m sorry!”
“What’s he talkin’ about?”

“He figured you guys are phantom thieves because you opened your loud mouth!”

Meow

Morgana hisses at the bleached hair boy.

Mishima looks around the corridor for the source of an unexpected meowing.

“Say what!?”

“Not precisely. But…”

The boy with the changed name tries to explain the situation, but his attempt is delayed by Mishima’s intervention once again.

“Guys, I… I have to tell you something.”

“… Niijima-san could still be around…”

Ren tries to warn Mishima.

“I-I see.”

After a second of awkward silence, Amamiya lets out an exhausted sigh.

“I don’t know what you want, but we can talk about it later…”

“We are a little busy right now too.”

Says Ann while popping from behind Amamiya.

“B-but I’m sure I can help you guys! I have information that can help you… about a man who recently went through a change of heart. He said something about wanting to help the phantom thieves to save more victims.”

“Victims?”

The trio stops their retreat after hearing Mishima’s almost broken voice.

“How?”

Takashi asks.

Mishima takes out his phone after taking a deep breath.

“You know the phantom aficionado website, right?”

The trio nods.

“Well, I made it!”

Says Mishima as he tries to puff in pride while holding the phone over for them to see.

“Really?”

Sakamoto wonders while sharing a puzzled look with Takamaki
“Hey, Takashi.”/meow

“… I know.”

Takashi Kido, as he’s known by his close friends, passes by the two blondes to go back in front of Mishima’s face.

‘I didn’t want to get you involved, but…’

But this time, his usual stoic-self managed to display some sort of sympathetic smile.

“… We’ll be studying together at Diner tonight.”

“‘Huh?’”

Both Mishima and the two blondes are surprised by the glasses boy sudden comment.

“We’re all in the same grade after all. Ryuji and Ann really suck flunked their tests, so I’ll have to help them out.”

He says while pointing to the bimbo duo behind him with his thump.

“T-that’s not true!”

“Hey, don’t brag you traitor!”

Both Ann and Ryuji take offense to the patronizing comment.

“You’ll only get decent notes because I was helping you.”/Meow

“Eh?”

Mishima looked puzzled at Amamiya’s shaking bag again.

“So… It’ll be great if you can help us. Can you?”

“Ah… Me?”

“Yes… It’ll be only for tonight.”

“I-I… Of course! I get it! It’s a secret meeting right!? I’ll be there!”

“Great, it’s a date.”

Ren Amamiya looking down at his phone to see the time.

“Now bye.”

But without even looking at him, Amamiya just turns around waving him goodbye.

“Huh?”

The fidgety blonde duo could only smile nervously at the “impersonal” attitude their leader was displaying.

“Once an asshole, always an asshole.”
Sakamoto mumbles before following.

“S-See you later, Mishima-kun.”

Takamaki says politely trying to hide her embarrassment for her partner’s lack of tact.

She then follows her friends, leaving the confused boy behind.

Once she reaches them she overhears the conversation between the two boys.

“Are you sure about this?”

Sakamoto asks.

“It will be for the best to know what he’s planning. Besides he could’ve reported us out a while ago by now.”

“That’s true.”

Ann looks back at the school as they walk towards the station and her phone starts vibrating.

“Guys he finally answered.”

She says as the boys look at each other before seeing the text on her phone.

“Let’s go then.”

Takashi leads the way to the station.

To be Continue in Part 3

Chapter End Notes

Well… that took more than it supposed to, again. Sorry, I was busy writing other things and got carried away (*ehem* bad ends *ehem*). I may have taken some liberties on Takashi’s unusual behavior with Makoto but I think I can justify it with Joker sneaking into his daily life for a bit there.

Also I think Mishima should have a bigger role on during the times the phantom thieves are searching for targets.

I am also working on some blender modeling and XNALara posing, feel free to check my tumblr (as necroalx ) or my deviant art (as NecroCainA1x) if you can. Who knows, I may even start using those to illustrate my fic eventually… actually that was the initial idea, lol.
Update

So bad news everyone…
My external drive, the one I had every personal project and many of my current works including all of the future chapters I've already wrote until now, was stolen.
This puts me in a very precarious situation, both personally and professionally. It’s also a good lesson I’ve known about from the very beginning. But needs to be repeated regardless; “never keep all your stuff in one single storage device”.
I’m constantly traveling because of my line of work, so writing/reading is the way I spend my time on the roads or planes. So much that it has become a ritual of sorts for me. I would like to assume so many people in here can relate.
All progress I had is gone now.
I quickly decided to move on and keep up from there, that's just how I am.
But that doesn't mean I will be orphaning this project. In fact, I'll have to go through a lot of things in order to pick up where I left it again. Like re-do some research from scratch (yes I actually take my time to research as many things as I can before writing, in this case, the Japanese culture as a whole, Gnosticism and Jungian psychology, or details like the price of things and some other minor stuff. I want to make sure I'm not messing that much.) Hell I may even have to replay the whole game (ok that's the fun part of all of this.) to see If I can come up with my previous and now missing notes again.
Going through all that only to dropping it here would feel like a waste.
I obviously have the end of the story and many other concepts already carved in my mind, as intact as they can be. Most of these are based on fan theories anyway.
I also still have some notes on my cloud and some other stuff written on my notebook. But that’s not even close to the amount of stuff I had written down. Stuff like characters interactions, reminders or adjustments to some previous misconceptions I had about characters, setting and even relationships.
All of them, lost. Same goes for so many other projects I had.
It’s incredibly frustrating but there’s no point on dwelling on it now.
I realize this is not the most popular fan-work out there, especially for a niche franchise like Persona. But I am aware that there are some people who are actually using a little of their free time to follow this story, and I can’t express how much I appreciate you for doing it.
That was the reason I felt the responsibility of publishing this update in the first place. It’s not only because of my pride as someone who wants to see things through to the end once I’ve started something, I also would like to do whatever is in my power to deliver something enjoyable for the people who had stick with me until now.
So, until I can find the right tools and pacing and a renewed vision to continue this story (and hopefully better grammar by then :D), I’ll have to ask for you guys to take this as a hiatus of sorts.
Before making this as long as a chapter, I would like to apologize if I disappointed anyone. And I hope I can still count on you to follow this once I start posting chapters again. Who knows, maybe I'll just do some quick shorts on the side in the meantime.
If there is something positive that I can point out, it is that this franchise has shown me how adversity is nothing but another struggle that helps us broaden our vision of the world we live in. Is up to you to decide how experience can help you to shift things in your favor.
Until then, have a nice day.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!