Veni Vidi Amavi

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Summary

— we came, we saw, we loved.

In which the Phantom Thieves have nothing to lose and a world to see.

So what exactly greets them beyond the horizon?
hey, all! it's recommended that you read the first part of this series to have a better grasp on everyone here, but it's not absolutely necessary! just a few things to know if you're heading in without prior exposure: 1) akira, futaba, and sojiro are the only ones who know that akechi is still alive and kicking, 2) futaba and akechi are related! as to how the theory will be proven, however....

No betas we're going down and yelling timber

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ryuji: yo guys, SUP!! how's it goin’?!

Haru: Oh, hello there!

Makoto: You seem awfully excited today, Ryuji.

Ryuji: how can i not?! dude, it’s coming UP!!!

Yusuke: ?

Makoto: Ryuji, what are you talking about?

Ryuji: for real?? ann!! you know what’s up! c’mon, you gotta back me up here!!

Ann: Uh, I do?

Akira: It’s April already.

Ann: Yeah, and? We’re seniors now, so what’s the

Ann: Wait

Ann: OH!!!!

Ryuji: ffs took you long enough

Yusuke: Ah, I see. This must be when the Phantom Thieves were first formed with you three as the founding members.

Futaba: geez, ryuji. you should have just said this in the first place instead of trying to go all cryptic on us. it doesnt suit u at all lmao

Ryuji: aw shuddup. yall are the ones who said im always too damn obvious!

Makoto: Well, he DOES have a point…
Haru: How delightful! It’s the first anniversary of the Phantom Thieves!

Haru: I have to say -- I’ve only been with everyone for a few months but it honestly feels like I’ve known you for much longer. I’m very happy to have met you all!

Ann: Haru!!! ♡♡♡

Yusuke: Likewise. You are an irreplaceable comrade to the team and a dear friend.

Futaba: AWWW HARU;;; srsly tho, i joined them not long before u did so i feel u (╥﹏╥)

Ryuji: man, thats one ugly ass emoji

Futaba: i dont wanna hear that coming from a guy who has zero sex appeal and is too illiterate to tell the difference between an emoji and an emoticon!

Ann: OMG FUTABA

Ryuji: how am i supposed to know that!?

Akira: Oh, and also Mona told me to tell you that you have bad taste.

Futaba: WHO!?

Akira: Not you. Ryuji.

Ryuji: wow dude, thanks for having my back!

Akira: No problem.

Makoto: What a disaster.

Akira: You miss this disaster.

Makoto: .....No comment.

Makoto: Moving on, if we’re going to make plans, please tell me ahead of time so I can make sure to free my schedule.

Haru: Oh, yes! Does anyone have any ideas?

Yusuke: Might I venture an opinion?

Akira: Shoot for the stars, Yusuke.

Yusuke: The sakura trees will be in full bloom soon. I propose a picnic where we may indulge in the simple luxuries of a traditionally made hanami bento, along with karaage, udon and warm miso soup.

Makoto: Udon at a hanami?

Ann: Uh oh.

Ryuji: why am i getting deja vu
Akira: He’s talking about his unfulfilled hot pot dreams.

Yusuke: The gentle fragrance of the air as we partake in various delectable pleasures will surely be a most gratifying and stimulating experience for all of us, indeed.

Ryuji: DUDE, PHRASING. I SAID THIS BEFORE, BUT SRSLY

Yusuke: I am most certainly in the mood

Futaba: inari, do u mind if i give u a piece of constructive criticism?

Yusuke: No?

Futaba: shut up

Yusuke: :( 

Futaba: wait wait wait i take it back!! u used an EMOTICON!!!

Ryuji: eff you guys

Akira: Wow, language!

Ryuji: isches

Futaba: real mature

Haru: Um, back to the topic at hand...

Haru: If everyone wants to revisit Destinyland, I can definitely try reserving it for us again!

Ann: That sounds awesome! But I think we should try something we haven’t done before.

Ryuji: like what?

Ann: Idk….karaoke? I guess we could also do that picnic, but I just can’t really cook that well…

Makoto: Neither can I, unfortunately. Sis usually brings home dinner for the both of us.

Ryuji: welp then scratch that. thanks but i’d rather not die from food poisoning

Futaba: better watch out for that mystery food x!! \(\(\(\(\(\(\)

Ann: Anyways! I think we should just think it over for a while.

Haru: I agree! We should make our first anniversary a special one.

Makoto: It’s settled, then. I’ll notify everyone if I come up with anything. The rest of you should pitch in with your ideas too.

Ryuji: will do, queen

Makoto: Ryuji…
Ryuji: SORRY SORRY I WAS JK

Ann: RIP

Futaba: #getrekt

Akira: He lived a good life.

Ryuji: GUYS

…

Ryuji: you all suck

Ann smirks at her phone and slides it into her pocket. Sometimes she really didn’t understand Ryuji, and other times, she wasn’t sure that she wanted to.

The elevator dings, a signal for Ann to fish out her keys. Finally.

Her building is a contemporary kitasando highrise with a polished marble mosaic floor in the lobby, located snugly in the outskirts of Shibuya and Harajuku. The elevators are sleek, rich mahogany cushioning the interior walls with warm downlight and downy, lush carpet that extends out to the corridor before her.

When she opens the door to her apartment, a wafting aroma instantly welcomes her and she breathes in, feeling the stiff muscles in her unlock one by one and she sighs. It’s her favorite brand of sweet pea — a blend of pineapple and plumeria to add a subtle cheerful sweetness to the air, with a touch of creamy musk and sandalwood to vivify a state of blissful repose.

She pads to the living room and turns on the TV. In an instant, the tranquility of the room is shattered as the cheerful notes of a random reality TV show come to life.

“And now, for our next segment! Tonight, we bring you the latest scoop of: What does your blood type say about you? According to—"

She yawns as she changes out into casualwear, relieved to finally be out of her clothes and let her skin breathe. As she heads towards the fridge to hydrate herself, she checks to see if the oil in her diffuser is running out. It isn’t, and she sighs in relief at the prospect of not having to buy another refill so soon.

Before her parents began their career, back when they lived in a small house in the country, her mother would light candles every day, and each day, Ann would be welcomed home with a new aroma. Even when she was having a bad day, stepping a foot into her house usually whisked it all away.

Even in the absence of her parents, she had hoped to continue that tradition in her own way; but it’s a poor mimetic resemblance as of late. And she has a feeling it’s not because she opted for incense sticks rather than traditional candle wax (later curfew thanks to cram school and modeling equals no time to light candles). It just seemed that home was more of a dusty attic surrounded by the people she loved the most, rather than her apartment which seemed so empty and lifeless nowadays. She was considering getting a roommate just so it wasn’t so quiet all the time.

The question is, would her parents approve? It had been a while since she’d last spoken to them. The last she heard, her mother was working on a new design, and her father was up to his eyes in
business calls and prospective clients. Thanks to that, they’d been rather curt with her the last time. That had been three months ago.

So when she boots up Skype on her laptop and sees a message sent very recently by her father, she was more than surprised. Curious, she presses call — as she waits for the call to connect, she glances at a nearby clock. 8PM, so that meant it’s 6AM where he is, which is pretty unusual. Her parents normally don’t contact her this early, but she swiftly discards her trepidation when her videocam blinks green. “Morning, Isä!”
“Ann, darling! How are you doing? Bored of Japan yet?” Her father’s smiling face lights up the screen.

He looks older than she remembers. His blond hair is now flecked with hints of grey, and the first few signs of wrinkles are beginning to show around his forehead. But his blue eyes still shine and crinkle around the edges when he smiles, and she can’t help but return it.

“How are you and Äiti?”

“Your mother is actually in Geneva right now. I’m taking the train from Bern tomorrow to meet her.” He pauses, fidgeting with the tie around his neck, “We were actually hoping to see you soon.”

Elation surges through her and she replies quickly, voice heightened with excitement, “You’re coming to Japan?!” She claps her hands, “This is great! I can’t wait for you and Äiti to meet all my friends!”

“W-well,” he cut off, “Wait, this is a surprise! You don’t usually talk about your friends, except for Shiho.”

“Yes, Isä! I made lots of new friends this past year!” She counts them off one by one on her fingers, “There’s Akira, Ryuji, Yusuke, Makoto, Futaba, Haru, and Morgana!”

Her father’s face breaks into a wide smile, “Ann, sweetheart, that’s fantastic!”

She beams back at him, “I know, right? They’re the best. You guys are totally gonna love them! When are you coming back? I’ll tell them so we can set up a time and—”

“Er, yes, about that,” He interrupts, smile faltering, “Your mother and I were actually hoping that you would join us in Geneva. We’re just about to release a new business and pleasure line, and we’re one of the sponsors of the E.I.F.C! We want you to model our new line!”

Ann’s smile falls. The European International Fashion Competition was world renowned. Its prestige was almost unparalleled in the fashion industry. Held every two years, the competition pits designers and models against each other in a series of events over a two month period. The people that compete are ruthless, their bloodlust and cruelty know no bounds. Fights are an everyday occurrence and more often than not, designers and their models are expelled for inappropriate
behavior. The press is bulldogged and ever present, waiting on the sidelines like the vultures they are. God, did she really want to throw herself into all of that? The only reason she managed to avoid it so far was thanks to her age; they required all participants to be at least sixteen years old.

Ever since she turned seventeen in January, her parents had only called her twice; once on her birthday, and the other three months ago. It was safe to assume that they’ve all but forgotten about it.

How could she be so naïve?

“—n? Ann?”

Ann snaps back into focus. “Uh, yeah! Um, sorry, what were you saying?”

“Like I said, since this is a once in a lifetime opportunity for you, wouldn’t you like your friends to be there with you to cheer you on?”

Her friends? What did they have to do with— “W-wait, wait, wait! No, this is too soon — Isä, I need time to think this over,” Ann blusters, her voice rising in panic. “Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?”

At the very least, he has the decency to look apologetic. “I’m sorry, honey, but we only got notified about this recently, too! We thought you would be elated to be part of this. Your agency has been telling us you’re doing so well; they were the ones who encouraged your participation.”

Her lips twitch.

She’s always had an inkling, but hearing it from her father outright just confirms it right there and then. Honestly, why hasn’t Japan standardized confidentiality contracts for their employees like Americans? Granted, she’s not of legal age to claim her independence yet; but even then, it doesn’t mean that they have to blabber everything to her parents like she’s some kind of overgrown toddler!

“Oh, speaking of. I just remembered something!”

She sighs, suddenly feeling far too heavy. “What is it, Isä?”

“I heard your fellow model Mika will be participating as well!”

She freezes.

Did she just hear that right?

Mika. That Mika. The girl so insufferable about her modeling career that she resorts to belittling Ann every chance she gets.

Okay, that got her attention. She wasn’t much for revenge, but Mika just got on her nerves. Being blown off once or twice? No big deal. Ann likes to thinks she’s pretty tolerant with these things. Modeling is a fierce and unforgiving career, so having someone like Ann who was born with a natural metabolic leeway compared to other models her age? She understands Mika’s feelings… sort of.

Though that still didn’t give her the right to bully her into constantly playing the bad guy on set. In front of Akira, no less! So no, she can’t just let this go. Besides, a little payback wasn’t bad, right? As her favorite Broadway actor once said; Most actors refuse to acknowledge competition. They don’t want to compete. They want to get along. And they are therefore not first-rate actors.
The good actor is the one who competes, willingly, who enjoys competing. An actor must compete, or die… Peacefulness and the avoidance of trouble won’t help in his acting. It is just the opposite he must seek.

Let it be known that Ann is never one to back down. Her father seemed to know this, too; for good or bad, she doesn’t know yet. She thinks she could see the twinkle in his eyes when he speaks again, though she can’t find it in herself to get mad.

“So how about it, Ann? I was going to meet up with your mother tomorrow to discuss arrangements for you; that is, if you consent. However, should you choose to relinquish this opportunity, I suppose we can settle with that sweet girl— what was her name again? Oh, yes, M—"

“Alright, you win!” She groans, slamming her palms on her keyboard and accidentally keysmashing in her chat to her dad. Oops.

Sometimes, she considers it a blessing to have nurtured the fine art of finagling (despite what Ryuji and Morgana say) — but then she remembers where exactly that talent came from. “I’ll do it. No way in hell I’m gonna let that mynx show me up like that!” then she huffs, letting her voice dial down to a begrudging grumble. “I can’t believe you would pull that against me. That's just low.”

She hears a staticky cough on the other line, but she knows her father is smiling behind that hand of his. That conniving little— “Apologies, my dear. It just would be an utter shame if you had decided to forgo your entry. We do very much prefer our own beloved daughter to represent us, as I’m sure you realize.”

“I know, but still.”

“Don’t pout, kulta,” he says in the voice that reminds her of the days when she was a little girl and wanted nothing more than for him to brush her hair before bed — and braid it if she was lucky.

That was at least six years ago.

“I know we haven’t been around for you for very often, and that this isn’t how you should be growing up. I am well aware of how you feel about this,” he continues just as Ann opens her mouth to protest. “But we’re still your parents. We’d like to make amends while we are still able. Won’t you grant your selfish parents this one request?”

She slumps on her couch. “I mean, it’s not that I don’t want to. If it means I get to see you guys again, of course I’d want to go!”

“Are you worried about school?”

“Well...” she clicks her tongue, staring absently at the TV, which was now showing some animated commercial about entrance exams. Just her luck.

Though that animation style sure is beautiful. It looks really familiar, too...like that one film that topped the box office a few years ago.

She shakes her head, reigning in her wandering thoughts.

Senior year had just begun for her, and while she’s always dealt with a stubborn procrastination streak, she’s managed so far with a decent track record. Thankfully, the competition wouldn’t be until summer vacation; although normally other seniors would be attending cram school during that time in preparation for college entrance exams (god knows how much Makoto had been drilling it into her). Truth be told, academics didn’t worry her. Worse comes to worst, she can just cram abroad
and take online classes while she works. It’s not like she hasn’t done it before.

It’s just....

“I was thinking of… doing something with my friends over the summer.” she finishes lamely.

Spoken like a true ninny. She’s come up with better half-assery than this.

Against all her expectations, he breaks into raucous laughter.

She stares.

“So that’s what you were worried about?” he manages after a few bouts of wheezing. “Kulta, if you had been paying attention to what I was saying at all, then there was absolutely no need to panic!”

She blinks. “Huh?”

He smiles at her, and it’s the widest, brightest smile she’s ever seen in a long time.

“How would you feel if your friends were to come along with you?”

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“Whaaaat!?” Ryuji practically shrieks, and the shelves in Akira’s room rattle dangerously from the frequency. “Are you shittin’ me?!”

“Ryuji, shut up!” Ann hisses, smacking him with her folder. Her ears are about to burst from the overwhelming reaction from her former teammates, but naturally, Ryuji’s is the loudest of them all. She thinks she can tolerate Morgana’s yowling better than his. “There are customers downstairs!”

“Switzerland, the country of collectors,” Yusuke begins, munching on his endless supply of Calbee sticks as Ryuji moans in agony. Yusuke is possibly the only member of the group with a reaction bordering on the mundane. Physically, at least. “I have heard of many breathtaking accounts of their mountain landscapes, including the visionary grandeur that sparked the sublimity and picturesque quality of the Romantic movement. I look forward to drawing inspiration from the hallowed and precipitous valleys of the Swiss Alps, as well as pursue my greatest desire to sojourn to art museums much like the internationally renowned Kunsthaus Zurichs.” He turns to Ann expectantly. “I humbly accept this invitation. When shall we embark?”

“We haven’t decided anything yet!” Ann squawks. “Actually, I think you’re missing the bigger picture here!” She notices Futaba snickering as Yusuke frowns, and then realizes the irony of her words. “Th-that’s not what I mean!”

“Wait...but does this mean I can go too?” Morgana jumps up onto the table, looking up at Ann with big hopeful eyes.

“Err...” She actually hadn’t thought about that. Would they be able to take Morgana on a plane? Would her parents allow her to take a pet along? Would it cost extra money? “I’ll look into it, but I’m not entirely sure...”

Morgana looks down and lets out a whine, “Of course, the cat can *never* go with you. This is like
Hawaii, but ten times worse! What am I supposed to do without you guys for two months!?”

“We don’t know if we’re going for sure yet.” Haru says with a small smile, “when we know for sure, I bet that we can figure something out so you won’t get left behind, Morgana.”

Morgana doesn’t reply, he just shuffles around to the front of the table and drops onto Akira’s lap.

“When you called us together this weekend, Ann,” Makoto remarks, her wide, crimson eyes the only feature belying her surprise. “I would have never expected you to suggest something like this.”

It’s Sunday, and they had all devoted the day to lazing around Leblanc, munching on Sojiro’s infamous curry. As soon as they started discussing their ideas for their one year anniversary, Ann had decided to drop the news immediately, unable to contain it any longer.

“I wouldn’t mind going,” Futaba says with a yawn, “I think it would be fun! Plus, if we’re in Switzerland, then that means we can go see other places too right? I want to go to Italy and see the river town!”

Akira chuckles and pats her head, “You mean Venice?”

“Yeah!” Her head bobs excitedly, “Mom talked about that place a lot. She said she spent time there when she was beginning the early stages of her research.”

Ann frowns slightly, “What did her research have to do with Venice?”

“Don’t know. She never said.”

“Perhaps it has something to do with Carnevale...” Yusuke muses, drifting off into deep thought.

“What does a carnival have to do with cognitive psience?” Ryuji asks, clueless.

“Not a carnival. Carnevale, as in the big celebration that’s held every year in different parts of Italy,” Makoto says patiently.

Ann lets out a long sigh as the conversation catapults away from her main point. Could she really ask them all to come with her? Was it fair? Makoto and Haru were just starting university. Would it damage their performance if they were to suddenly disappear off to Europe for two months?

Yusuke was working on several different pieces, trying to break away from Madarame’s image. Some of his works were being considered by top notch galleries scattered all across Japan. Could she really pull him away from all that, even though he already agreed?

Futaba had already started high school and was off to a great start. She had come home a few weeks ago and loudly proclaimed that she had made a new friend in Akihabara. Sojiro certainly wouldn’t approve of her leaving, just as she was starting to improve her social skills.

And what about Ryuji, Akira and herself? This was going to be their last year at Shujin, they had to start worrying about entrance exams. Would it all be too much? Was she really so dependent on her friends that she would drag them halfway across the world?

She doesn’t have an answer.
“I think we need some time to mull everything over,” Akira says quietly, and everyone’s chatter dies. “I have no doubt that this trip would be a blast, but we all have a lot going on right now.” He glances at Futaba, who drops her gaze and stares fixedly at a spot on the table, a small frown pulling at the corners of her mouth. He looks back at Ann. “When does your father want an answer?”

She hums contemplatively. “I’ll give him a call later tonight or tomorrow, but he’ll probably want one by the end of next week. The competition isn’t far off. “

Akira nods, “Alright, let’s sleep on it, and we’ll figure it out sometime later this week when everyone’s thought it all over.” He bites the inside of his cheek. Crap. He hasn’t even found a way to break the news to them yet, and now Ann’s asking them all to go to Switzerland? “Damn it.”

He doesn’t realize that came out of his mouth until Makoto gives him an odd look. “Something wrong, Akira? You seem distracted today.”

He shakes his head and gives them an easy smile. “Nah, I just have a lot on my mind, is all.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Futaba texting away rapidly on her phone, a concerned expression on her face. No one seemed to notice, all of them too preoccupied with the former leader.

“What’s going on, you two?” Makoto asks with narrowed eyes darting between him and Futaba. “You’re both acting awfully suspicious.”

“Indeed.” Yusuke says, resting his chin on his hands. “Futaba hasn’t been this nervous around us in a long time. Her social skills have improved tremendously since we first met her. Yet now, both of you are acting incredibly odd. “

“Yeah!” Ryuji suddenly chimes in, “You guys hidin’ somethin’?’”

Neither Futaba nor Akira answered. Akira closes his eyes, thinking hard. Is this the right time? Futaba is glancing between all of them, gnawing nervously on her bottom lip.

“Stop it, all of you!” Haru exclaims suddenly, jumping up. Her eyes are hard, expression set in stone. “Why are you all interrogating them? They’ve done nothing wrong! And I’m sure that if they are keeping something from us, that they have a completely valid reason. They’ll tell us when they’re ready!” She seems to deflate, losing most of her energy. She turns to Akira, “Right?”

But before Akira could open his mouth to respond, he was cut off by Makoto, who kept her eyes downcast, “Yes, you’re right, Haru. It’s none of our business.”

“Yeah, I guess she’s right.” Ryuji grumbles, kicking absently at the floor. “Just don’t like it when you guys keep stuff that seems so obvious.”

“True.” Yusuke says, “although I see no reason for you to keep this from us. It’s quite clear how much the two of you care for each other.”

“What?!” Futaba yelps, looking at the artist with an expression that doesn't quite know if it
Morgana butts his head into Akira’s chest, blinking his bright, knowing eyes up at him. “You can tell us anything!”

Ann nods along with a smile, “Yeah! And you know that we’ll support you guys!”

Akira felt that something had been off with them, and now it clicks. It occurs to him in that moment that everyone probably thinks that he and Futaba decided to enter a relationship.

Huh. It seems they’ve could’ve planned all this out a little better.

Futaba glances towards the stairwell. Then back at Akira. Then back at the stairwell. She steels herself. “Actually,” she walks over and stands next to him, pushing down her nerves, “we do have something to tell you, but it’s not what you think.”

“You mean you guys aren’t dating!?” Ryuji interrupts with surprise.

“Of course we’re not!” Futaba snaps, glaring at him over her glasses. “That would be totally gross!” Then she pales. “I—mean, Akira’s super attractive, but we’ve always been— he’s always been my—” she flails her arms, her face reddening. “Why are we talking about this!? Akira!” He feels her glaring daggers at him, and he coughs.

Well, it was fun while it lasted. Now onto the nitty gritty.

He finally turns back, smothering the remnants of his mirth before rising to his feet. “We’ve come across some new development. We’re not sure how all of you are going to take this, but we thought you guys needed to know either way.”

Leblanc’s bells jingle as if in response, and Futaba’s eyes grow wide.

“That’s him!” she whispers conspiratorially, glancing at Akira hurriedly before rushing out. “I’m going downstairs!”

“What’s going on?” Makoto starts as feet thunder down the stairs. Akira can only smile sheepishly at them as they exchanged perplexed glances at him and each other. He wonders if he can make it out of today in one piece.

Or him, for that matter…

Akira can’t hear anything downstairs thanks to the constant buzz of the TV and chatter of that one pompous customer who always seemed to stop by. But it didn't take long for him to hear the excited footsteps on the stairs — and a set of much less excited ones lagging behind.

He holds his breath.

Futaba prances back into the room, dragging along one very reluctant and resigned Goro Akechi behind her.

All hell breaks loose.
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updates and wips will go on our twitter, feel free to hit us up! @makarakaja and @toomuchstressha

Kulta: Finnish term for endearment (honey, sweetheart) also can mean metal gold
Äiti: Finnish for mother
Îsa: Finnish for father

also, we highly recommend that you watch the commercial that Ann is watching in the beginning! It's adorable!
...and Into the Fire

Chapter Summary

What could possibly go wrong?

For the most part, everyone reacts the way that Akira and Futaba expect them to. Ryuji leaps up, swearing violently and looks around for something to hit. He settles on the wall beside him. Ann lets out a loud squeal and jumps backwards, almost falling into Makoto’s lap. Yusuke lets out a strangled huff and stands quickly, before slowly sliding back into his chair in an effort to calm himself. Makoto remains seated, but her face pales considerably and her eyes narrow into slits. Morgana lets out a guttural snarl and digs his claws into the table, baring his teeth.

Questions are being slung in every direction. How did Akechi survive? What’s he doing here? How long has he been back? What the hell is happening? Why has he come back now?

What they don’t expect, is Haru.

Sweet, joyful, Haru; who had faced so many trials, yet has always maintained her gentle nature. She marches up to Akechi, coming to a stop directly in front of him.

He eyes her warily.

Suddenly, her fist snaps back into the air, and a sickening crack echoes in the dim attic, followed by a heavy thud. Time seems to crawl down to a halt and a heavy silence drapes over them like a thick veil, stunning them into paralyzed speechlessness as they struggle to comprehend the scene before them.

Goro is on the floor, eyes wide in shock, cradling his nose. Blood flows down his front like a river, staining his blue and white checkered vest an ugly red.

Haru turns and returns to her seat, as if nothing had happened.

The silence grows thicker by the second as Goro slowly picks himself up, using his sleeve to stem the flow of blood.

Futaba doesn’t understand what just happened. It’s like one of the very few times when she misses a cutscene thanks to being distracted by her phone. Mashing the pause button means diddly squat if she can’t at least hit rewind or read the conversation log.

Per contra, she knows how to take her losses in stride. Now is not the time for regrets; it’s time for action!

“Well...So...uh, ta-da!” Futaba croaks into the deafening silence, waving her arms towards him. All eyes turn to her, and she visibly shrinks, shimmying closer to Akira. She gives herself a firm shake, straightens, and says in a shaky voice, “Goro Akechi is alive!”
For a moment, no one moves and no one breathes.

Futaba wishes the floor would open up and swallow her right then and there. Maybe if she wills it hard enough, her cognition would actually let it happen, the way it did when it conjured up a deceased Wakaba in front of two emotionally vulnerable teenagers. What gives?
Then Makoto stands, and her carmine eyes zero in on Akira, Futaba, and Goro. She points to the
now empty couch, and says with needle point precision and control, “Sit. Now.”

She really hopes that whimper just now didn’t come from her.

The three of them hesitantly move to the couch. Goro sits at the end, closest to the door. Akira is at
the other end, with Futaba sandwiched in between them. None of them speak. Outside, rain has
begun to fall. Thick heavy drops splatter onto the windowpane. It’s the only sound in the attic.

The seconds crawl by.

Akira fiddles with his bangs as Futaba coughs awkwardly. The silence remains. Everyone is simply
staring at them, as if they’ve committed some heinous crime. Makoto’s sharp eyes dig into them, and
Futaba wonders if this is what it feels like to be interrogated in an isolated room by a Niijima. She
suddenly feels overwhelming empathy for Akira, who’s adopted a very stiff and straight posture
beside her. Only Goro seems unfazed.

Futaba only wishes she has that courage.

After a moment, Makoto leans back and crosses her arms. “Start from the beginning,” she orders
like a real gumshoe would, “and don’t leave anything out.”

Goro glances towards the others before tentatively raising his hand, the one not covered in blood. “I
would love nothing more than to talk. But may I, perhaps, borrow a tissue first?”

Everyone seems to remember in that moment that the star-crossed detective is still bleeding.

“Oh shit!” Futaba yells as she jumps to her feet. “I’ll get you something!”

Desperate to escape from the suffocating atmosphere, even if only for a moment, she races towards
the stairs—

—only to trip over Goro’s legs.

*It hasn’t even been three steps,* she thinks, letting out a frantic holler as she goes down.

Since when had she soaked up all the bad juju in the room? On second thought, maybe it’s a blessing
in disguise. Some higher force has finally decided to spare her from this dastardly scourge and is now
sending her on a oneway ticket to blissful insentience.

The last thing she sees before she closes her eyes in acceptance is Goro’s eyes going wide as he
reaches out...with both hands.

She braces for impact, but the ground doesn’t come. Opening her eyes, she sees her samaritan in the
form of steady arms braced around her.

Arms stained with *blood.*

“**EEEWWWW !**” She shrieks, jumping away from him and staring down at her beloved shirt in horror.

“This is my favorite shirt!”

Goro narrows his eyes and once again returns his sleeve to his nose. “Oh, forgive me,” he says
indignantly. “I suppose your loss of balance was *my* fault.”

She glares at him and stomps her foot. “You didn’t have to catch me! I could’ve just hit the ground!”
Goro’s eyes soften a bit, and he surprises everyone by give her a small, genuine smile. “But then I wouldn’t be a very good brother, would I?”

Futaba deflates and drops her gaze. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry.” She looks back at him with a sly smirk on her face, “I could just let you bleed all over yourself like an infant.”

Akira chuckles and decides to step in. “Go get him a tissue please, Futaba. And I’ll give you one of my shirts to wear until you head home.” He stands and makes his way to his dresser as Futaba pauses at the stairs.

He tosses two shirts to Akechi, who catches them on reflex and stares at him questioningly. “One’s for you.” Akira says with a cheeky smile. “Go change, you look like someone tried to murder you.”

The rest of the Phantom Thieves stare openmouthed at him. But Akechi merely stands up, and gives Akira a glare before following after Futaba; she takes that as a cue to bolt down the stairs.

*Hold on, Akira!* Futaba pleads silently. *I’ll come back and do damage control with you, so please…*

She dashes to one of the vacant booths and snatches a handful of napkins for Goro. Compared to bathroom rolls, these were supposed to be softer and easier on inflamed skin. “Here, this should help stem the flow.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Sojiro’s voice drifts through the kitchen; Futaba whirls around to see him wiping his hands on his apron as he appraises the mess behind her. “Kid’s been here for barely half an hour but he already looks like he went straight through hell and back.”

“Sojiro!” Futaba groans. “Help him, please!”

Above her, she hears the telltale voices of dissent overlapping and rising tones, and grimaces.

“—You never told us—”

“—goes all crazy homicidal again—”

“—come to us from the very beginning?!”

Sojiro raises an eyebrow, one that clearly says, *I told you this wasn’t a good idea from the second he walked in today. And what did you do? You bring him up anyway.*

Futaba holds her ground.

“Sh’ kay, Fudaba,” Goro tries to sound reassuring with the bunched up wads of napkins shoved up his nose. He sounds like a bagpipe suffering from tonsillitis. “‘Can clean myshelf ub.”

He is halfway inside the bathroom when Sojiro rubs his forehead and sighs wearily. “Kid, get out here. Sit on the stool.”

It takes a few moments for the sullen brunet to finally drag himself out of the stall and onto the stool directly across from Sojiro. Futaba can tell he's not used to being reprimanded by someone other than Shido.

“Don’t give me that look,” he says gruffly. “You can change after we stop that bleeding. I won’t have you dirtying my floor and scaring the customers away.”

Futaba looks around. There are no customers; the pompous customer she’d seen earlier is nowhere to be seen. She bites her lip.
Sojiro notices her then; he narrows his eyes, as though he can read her mind. “Futaba, there’s an ice pack in the fridge. Go get it.”

Seizing her opportunity, she rushes to the fridge just as Sojiro tells Goro to quit tilting his head back since he might end up swallowing the blood — for goodness’ sake, it’s such basic knowledge. How does he even take care of himself? Stop sulking, sit up straight. Don’t cup your nose, pinch it. No, no, not there!

He’s still admonishing Goro as she returns to press an ice pack against his cheek (he’s holding one on his nose) on top of the commotion going on upstairs. The voices had gotten louder and angrier, but at least she can’t really make out the words anymore.

One thing’s for sure, though; she really fucked up.

She should have known that things would turn out this way. Who was she kidding? The odds and ends of compassion they had shown him in Shido’s palace was only an act spurred on by circumstance. Nothing else. It didn’t guarantee that they would act the same way a year later; especially since it seemed that, to them, Futaba and Akira had purposely kept Goro’s existence a secret. A secret from the people they thought trusted them more than anyone else.

Obviously, that wasn’t the case. But they never even gave him a chance.

She remembers looking at Haru. Her face had smoothed out, chillingly neutral and unperturbed, like she hadn’t just socked Goro Akechi in the face. Not even a slap on the face like most scorned ladies would do in media — it was a flat out sucker punch.

“—taba? Futaba?”

She blinks, finding the senior barista nowhere to be seen. “Uh, where’s Sojiro?”

“He’s taking a call outside. You didn’t hear his phone go off?” No, she didn’t. Goro looks at her, russet eyes verging on weathered concern. “Are you okay?”

Her mouth goes dry. Here he is, sitting in front of her, having endured an oral and physical beating, and the first thing he asks her is if she’s okay. What the hell.

I’m sorry.

This is my fault.

“This wasn’t how it was supposed to go.” she says instead, looking down. Because it wasn’t. It wasn’t like anything she had envisioned.

Ironic, considering she’s supposed to be the Oracle. And yet, all she could think about when she proposed announcing his return the other day was they’d cross that bridge once they’d get to it.

She really hopes that she didn’t accidentally burn it instead, but she’s not sure of anything anymore.

“I didn’t think so, either. I thought the napkins were enough; although I must admit, the ice does feel surprisingly nice on my face.”

She glares at him. Seriously?

“My apologies.” Goro coughs, trying to muffle his mirth. “I see that my repartee was made in poor taste.”
“No kidding.” she squints and holds her hand up to his forehead, earning her a similar squint in return.

He didn’t have a fever. He really was just trying to be funny.

“All joking aside,” he says, shoulders no longer trembling, and her hand falls from his forehead. “it was inevitable. I prepared myself for this the moment you convinced me to drop by.” He sets the ice pack aside — his nose is no longer bleeding, only a redness that can easily be mistaken for cold — and places a hand on top of hers.

It’s freezing, but she doesn’t pull away.

“It’s not your fault,” he says slowly and firmly, as if reading her mind. “I’ve been meaning to reconvene with your friends for quite some time.”

She sighs, staring sullenly at his hand over hers. “It’s just. There should’ve been a better way to go about this. I just wish—”

“Sometimes,” he cuts in, but not unkindly. “There’s only one possibility. And knowing that, all we can do is simply forge on regardless of our personal feelings if we want to reach the desired outcome.”

He sounds far now, like there are barriers standing between him and Futaba. She can't reach through, even if she wants to. In front of her is a one way mirror, its coat glass burnished with light streaming into the dark space behind it.

In that moment, she can see him; but he can’t see her.

When they return upstairs, the attic has gone surprisingly quiet, its prior helter skelter nowhere to be seen. Futaba looks at Akira, who shoots her a weary smile. She’ll ask him later for details.

“Akira says you and Futaba are related.” Makoto says, eyes closed, arms crossed, fingers digging into her skin. “Is this true?”

“It is.” Goro says readily. “It’s the reason I came to her first before the rest of you.”

“And you have evidence of this?”

“I visited Shido himself in jail. He told me the woman he had me enact my first mental shutdown on was my biological mother.”

“And this woman just happened to be Wakaba Isshiki, making Futaba your sister?” Makoto scoffs. “I hope you realize just how far-fetched that sounds.”

“I understand that it may be hard to believe,” Goro says, his smile a thin line. “But it’s the truth.”

“Bull shit!” Ryuji erupts from the corner of the room, his chair scraping against the wooden floor harshly. “How can you, of all people, trust anything that Shido has to say?! The bastard’s probably lying!”

“I agree.” Ann says with measured poise, shooting Ryuji a pointed look before facing them again. “Basing all of this off of Shido’s claim is a little much, don’t you think?”
"But it’s true!" Futaba gasps out. "I never told any of you guys before this, but when mom was alive, she’d talk about him sometimes. He’s the reason she worked so hard on her cognitive psience research!"

"That makes no sense." Morgana’s tail lashes angrily behind him. "If you knew who he was from the start, why didn’t you tell us?"

“She never said his name — she only vaguely about him. I had my suspicions, but I never had the chance to find out! We had more important things to deal with, remember?” Futaba proclaims, heart weighing heavier in her chest the longer she continued. “I only thought about it when I looked into Shido and how they used to be colleagues, but I was too scared to look too deep into it. It didn’t cross my mind until Goro revealed the truth later on!”

“Goro?” Yusuke echoes.

“Dude,” Ryuji starts, turning to face Akira. “Boss never said anything to you?”

“Sojiro didn’t know either.” Futaba cut in as her eyes began to water against her will. “Mom probably kept that information from him too. You have to trust me! Mom even—” came to us in person. We saw her in the real world!

—nearly comes out of her mouth. But saying that would only make things even more complicated than they already are.

Makoto looks perturbed. “Wakaba-san did what, now?”

Futaba looks away. “...it’s nothing.”

“...Assuming all of this is true, then it certainly makes the irony all the crueler.” Haru says, her tone perfunctory. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

An unpleasant silence falls on them once again, thick and oppressive. Futaba thinks she might throw up. To her side, Goro’s smile has completely fallen away, his bangs casting shadows over his eyes, obscuring them.

“Alright. This is as far as it goes.” Akira steps in, casting everyone a single, austere glance. “The truth is out in front of you. Take it or leave it, it’s up to you. I can’t tell you guys what to do. But what I can tell you is that there’s no point in dwelling in the past anymore. That’s not going to do anyone any good.”

“You think we don’t know that?” Makoto snaps — then she catches herself, shaking her head and sighing. “I’m sorry, Akira. But you have to understand that bringing Akechi to us without any sort of forewarning and breaking news this preposterous isn’t easy to condone.” She spares a fleeting glance across the room. “For some of us more than others.”

Akira nods. “I get it. I’m sorry things had to turn out like this. We don’t get to gather everyone like this as often as we used to back then, so we thought we could use today to finally straighten things out.”

“I just think it’d help if we have some real evidence.” Ann turns to Goro, a little apologetic. “Hey, Akechi… do you have any proof you can show us? Short of talking to Shido himself, that is.”

Goro is quiet for a moment, contemplating. Then he straightens."May I ask something of you, Takamaki?"
By her startled expression, she isn't expecting his personal address to her. "Uh, sure! What is it?"

There's a certain sense of nostalgia to the way Goro holds himself right now as he conducts one of the few things he's known for — interrogations. "When was the last time you had a general medical examination?"

"A...general medical examination?" she tests out the words on her tongue, like a new language. "You mean a health exam? I guess...a while ago? I've never really needed one since I first signed a contract with my modelling agency a few years back."

"I see," Goro hums, turning to the blond standing closest to her. "And what of you?"

"Huh? Whaddaya need that kinda shit for?" Ryuji narrows his eyes at the former detective and shoves his hands into his pockets.

Goro's expression doesn't change. "Please answer the question, Sakamoto."

"Guh..." he scowls, scratching the back of his head roughly as he swears. "Fine. I never been since my leg injury two years ago. Hospitals ain't really my kinda thing."

There is a shadow of empathy underlying the brunet's eyes as he regards the delinquent before him. "Understandable. How about you, Kitagawa?"

"It hasn't occurred to me." Yusuke answers simply. "Unfortunately with my limited funds, a hospital visit is quite low on my priority list."

"Tell us something we don't know," Futaba says lowly, snickering. "Everyone and their grandmas know that his top five priorities are just art, art, eat, sleep, and art."

Goro raises an eyebrow at the girl next to him. "Futaba?"

"What?" she sees the subtly accusing stare he's levelling at her, and she glares right back. "Should you really be asking a former shut-in if she's gone out to a place with a bunch of nosy adults who poke and prod your skin with needles like they own you for a living?"

"I haven't asked you anything yet." It's quick and brief, but Futaba catches the twitch in the corner of his lips and smirks.

Honestly? She never thought they would get this far. Their previous relationship had been contrived and replete with feigned congeniality, and she was so certain that not even their shared affection for Akira could help them fix it. It was really nothing short of a miracle that things turned out the way they did. And now, in this newfound bond that they've taken great care to properly nurture from ground up, she's discovered fairly early on how easy it is to amuse (and annoy) him. It was never this easy with Akira.

Makoto is next in his line of questioning. "I believe it is your turn, Niijima."

"I have an idea of where you're going with this," Makoto says. "But I'll go along with it, regardless. The thought has crossed my mind for the past few years or so, although due to my studies, I had no time to go."

"I would expect nothing less from Sae's sister." he says, eyes drifting to the person beside her. "And...Akira?"

He shrugs, a smirk playing on his lips. "What do you think, detective?"
"I think you and Futaba are making this much harder for me than this needs to be." Goro huffs, shaking his head. "But I suspected as much." Then his eyes fall on the last remaining person in the room.

Futaba gulps.

*Please don't let them please don't let them please don't—*

"I certainly have," Haru says brightly. "When my father was still alive."

*Crap.*

Goro winces. "Okumura—"

"So!" Futaba interrupts before the room descends into unforeseen chaos once again. "Are you thinking of what I think you're thinking?"

It's only for a split second, but his expression when he looks at her is heartrending. But he's assumed a semblance of lucidity by the time she blinks. "If it's suggesting we all set an appointment for a general exam, then yes. Judging by everyone's answers here, it's about time that we all paid the doctor a visit."

Her face morphs in confusion. Last week, they—"But didn't we already—"

"Are there any objections?"

"What's this have to do with anything?!" Morgana snaps from his place on Haru's lap. "Even if a doctor's visit proves that you're Futaba's brother, it doesn't mean we have to treat you as such."

"I...I'm not sure. Morgana may have a point." Ann says. "There's still something we have to figure out... but yeah, don't we need to set up an appointment, like, a week in advance? Especially with such a large group like us..."

"That won't be an issue." Akira replies easily. "I know a doctor who can accommodate all of us."

Morgana seethes at them, lashing his tail back and forth. "How are you all so calm about this?"

"Do we have a choice?" Yusuke asks calmly. "We've been presented with new information, we must now adapt to it."

Makoto purses her lip, eyeing Morgana carefully. "Yusuke has a point, being calm now would prove to be the best course of action."

"And you think going to Takemi about this is a good idea?"

"Takemi," Yusuke interjects suddenly. "does this person happen to be one who customarily provides us with medical supplies on our forays into the Metaverse?"

"Used to, but that's right." Akira nods. "I think I can work something out. How does tomorrow sound?"

"Are you sure that's okay?" Makoto intones. "I'd rather we didn't impose on such short notice."

"I wouldn't worry. She owes me a couple favors, anyway."
Goro furrows his brows at him. "This sounds strikingly dubious."

"It is exactly as dubious as it sounds." Akira says, grinning. "Do you want to know?"

He shoots him a look. "No, as a matter of fact, I don't. But considering how you've survived this long, I'll trust you."

"And I trust her, so it's settled." Akira nods. "Let's meet up here again tomorrow, and we'll all go together."

By the time they get there, the sun is already high in the sky. Futaba groans about being forced out of her bed in the AM by an amused Goro and an irritated Yusuke, who in turn, found it amusing to no end that Futaba had been awake until at least four in the morning watching reruns of Neo Featherman, stating that it was her own fault that she was exhausted and that its ‘style is hardly aesthetically pleasing’. This triggers a chemical reaction from Futaba that was loud enough to wake the dead. The bickering between the two of them was enough to drive the others slowly insane. As they walk, a realization bubbles onto the surface — Yusuke and Goro seem to be on civil terms with each other.

Her feet feel lighter and before she knows it, she's propelling ahead of them.

Thankfully, the clinic wasn’t too far from Leblanc. The door opens with a familiar jingle as the large group shoves themselves inside the tiny waiting area.

Takemi merely raises one eyebrow in inquiry as her dark lidded eyes search for Akira in the sea of people that is now her waiting room.

“Hello, Takemi. Always a pleasure.” Akira says smoothly, making his way to the front of the small crowd.

She doesn’t respond immediately, her eyes lingering on Goro and Futaba. She gives Akira a brief nod and jerks her head in the direction of the exam room.

“It’s good to see you, Kurusu.” She holds the door open for him, and addresses the group as a whole. “I’ll be taking a blood sample from each of you, as well as conducting a regular physical exam.”

They all nod in unison, and Takemi continues with a wry smile, flashing a large syringe. “I hope none of you are afraid of needles.”

One by one, they all entered the exam room. Akira, ever the fearless leader, goes first. Makoto follows, then Ann, Ryuji, Yusuke, Haru, Goro, and finally, Futaba.

Futaba knew this was going to be a challenge. Sure, she was never a people person. But she couldn’t remember her last doctor’s appointment...ever. Too many rude people, too many sharp objects and diseases for god’s sake. She was supposed to willingly hand herself over to that?! But she knew that she had to do this. In order to level up, she had to defeat the mini boss. But that thought didn’t help her hysteria when Takemi pulls out a suspiciously large needle.
It had taken Goro and Akira to eventually calm her down and get her into the exam room, and that was only after they’d promised to go in with her.

Mini Boss achievement unlocked; brothers as back up support *rocks*.

When she’s finished hyperventilating and the cursed needle is removed from her arm, she finds herself back in the waiting room with the others. Takemi returns a few moments later, holding several file folders.

She hands them out to each of them accordingly, before Takemi fixes Akira a glare. "Guinea pig. You’re in charge now. I’m going back in to fix up the mess you kids made in the room, so don’t break anything." And with a last, sweeping glance, she exits their vision.

Ryuji leans towards Akira once he’s sure the doctor is gone. "Man, she’s hot, but damn if I wanna get castrated."

"Try saying that to her face," Akira chuckles as the blond shudders from head to toe. Leafing through his file, his eyes catch on a text table. "Huh. Never knew that."

Before he knows it, Haru had sidled up to him. “What blood type are you, Akira?”

He vaguely takes note of the fact that Goro is at the far end of the room, huddled behind his folder and engaging in surreptitious conversation with Futaba— he has a feeling that Haru is trying to keep herself as far as physically possible from him.

Akira holds up his paper. “Apparently I’m an O.”

“Ah,” Yusuke nods sagely. “I understand now why I feel a sort of kinship with you. We share the same blood type.”

“I’m not surprised!” Haru claps her hands. “People with type O are usually very laid back, though their best traits are natural leadership and self-confidence, among other things. You fit the bill perfectly!”

“Then what about Yusuke?” Ryuji snickers. “He’s gotta be an anomaly.”

“How rude!” Yusuke glares at someone other than Futaba for once.

“Don’t take him seriously, Yusuke,” Morgana quips, rolling his eyes. “He obviously doesn’t know what he’s talking about. You’re passionate and ambitious about your art; that’s an O trait.” Then he mumbles. “Including the part where you’re a self-centered and unpredictable workaholic...”

Yusuke looks up from his papers with a befuddling expression. “Come again?”

Ann wisely intervenes. “So...how do you guys know all of this? Is it public knowledge or something?”

“Oh, that’s right. Ann, you spent a majority of your childhood abroad, so it makes sense that you wouldn’t know,” Makoto replies. “In Japan, we have something called *ketsueki-gata*, which is basically blood categorization. We tend to be more ethnical and homogenous than other cultures so we sometimes are known to use blood types to evaluate each other. I’m sure you’ve seen reality TV shows and newspapers that offer blood type horoscopes, am I right?”

She ponders on it for a moment before lighting up. “Actually, I’ve seen something about that on TV the other day! Wow, I never realized that was a thing.”
“Everyone here is obsessed,” Futaba says without looking up from her papers. She squints at a set of numbers. “Japanese people think that blood type determines your personality. That’s why one of the first things they ask you is usually your type.” Scowling to herself, she proceeds to fold the top part of her paper.

Of course. Why she still bothered looking is a mystery. She had been expecting as much, but seeing it on paper still stings ever so slightly.

“I get it now,” Ann hums, oblivious to the petite girl’s eyes burning holes at her exam which she was gesturing with casually. “Where I came from we used to ask each other our star signs instead.”

“Anyways!” Ryuji cuts in, grinning. “Whaccu hidin’ there, Futaba?” And with a finesse that is almost entirely unlike the blond, he leans over her shoulder and snatches the papers from unsuspecting hands.

In that very instant, a bloodcurdling screech rips from her throat —poor Goro who had been standing innocuously beside her recoils horribly— as she lunges at him. Unfortunately for her, being the shortest puts her at a clear disadvantage; if the lobster incident with Yusuke last year was any indication. “You ass! Give it back!”

Ryuji’s eyes widen like saucers as he catches a glimpse of the folded part amidst fending her off. “Whoa, Futaba! Chill out, your measurements ain’t that bad! For your size, you’re actually—”

Futaba unleashes a ghastly wail and hurtles at him with lightning speed — in her haste, she miscalculates her trajectory, missing the papers and landing a solid hit to Ryuji’s stomach instead, causing him to fall backwards with a loud whoosh, knocking the air out of them as she follows him down.

“Can you be any more inconsiderate, you imbecile?” Makoto sighs as the two of them knock over a chair mid-wrestle. She pries the documents from Ryuji’s hands, and he whines in response. As Makoto does so, a second document slips out from behind Futaba’s and glides to the floor. “Oh no, I’m so sorry! I wasn’t expecting there to be another— wait, this is Akechi’s?” she picks it up.

He smiles affably as he tucks a lock of hair behind his ear. “Indeed, it is.”

“This can’t be,” Makoto leans closer as she inspects the documents. “Not only do the both of you share the same blood type, but you also share the same Rh factor?”

She is met with a myriad of confused faces and mouths left agape.

“You two are both AB(Rh-),” Akira says as he looks over Makoto’s shoulder. “Huh. Go figure.”

“The Rhesus blood group is extremely rare among Asians. About 15% of Caucasian people are RhD-negative, while in Asians the RhD-negative blood type only occurs in 0.1% to 0.5%.” Makoto continues, falling into a deep concentration. “A blood type is considered rare if fewer than 1 in 1,000 people have them. Only 1 in every 5,000 Asians have it, which means for people in Japan there’s only—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!” Ryuji blurs. “Seriously, dude. What the hell?”

“I’m sorry, Mako-chan. Can you go a little slower, please?” Haru says, her expression one of complete loss. “What is rhesus?”

It snaps the former council president out of her slight trance, and she looks around apologetically. “Um—”
“Allow me,” Akechi, who had remained largely passive, says. His voice is succinctly polite and firm, and there is a distant curve to his lips as he speaks. “As you all know, your red blood cells are divided into four different types. Think of rhesus as a subcategory of those types. Everyone has 2 Rh ‘factors’ in their blood; they can be either positive or negative. Simply put, whether or not one possesses the Rh factor depends on the inherited protein found on the surface of red blood cells. If your blood has the protein, you’re Rh positive. If your blood lacks the protein, you’re Rh negative.”

“There’s only 10% of people in Japan with the blood type AB,” Futaba chips in. “And less than 15% of those people have a negative Rh. So basically, me and Goro are the rarest of the rare!” She attempts a fist bump with Goro, who looks entirely too disinclined to respond. She pouts, retracting her hand and clasping them behind her head, muttering under her breath.

“Interesting,” Yusuke muses, placing his hand on his chin. “Although I must inquire as to how this correlates to your claim of blood relation to each other.”

“You kids are still going on about this?” Takemi reemerges at the back of the receptionist’s desk, clipboard tapping on her lab coat. Her tone is sharp as always, but her eyes twinkle with amusement. “Like the pretty boy just said—” Akechi shoots her a withering look as she continues unfazed. “—just as you inherit a blood type ‘letter’ from each parent, you also inherit one Rh factor from them as well, either Rh+ or Rh-. Most of you are positive. The only way to be negative is for both parents to have at least one negative factor and for you to have received it from both of them. If you received one Rh+ ‘factor’ you are Rh+. Only people with two Rh negative ‘factors’ are considered Rh- blood type.”

“Oh my god.” Makoto breathes. She leans back into her chair, eyes darting between the two of them.

Takemi rummages through a file cabinet behind her. “Akechi.”

He looks up at the sound of his name, away from Futaba who was trying to discreetly poke at the back of Yusuke’s head with her folder. “Yes?”

She fishes something out and tosses it on the desk. “That’s for you.”

“You actually took one?”

Akechi offers the cat a brief glance. “Yes. I wanted—no, I needed to see for myself how much truth there was in Shido’s words. It seems only rational to pursue an affidavit.”

“What’s all this mean?” Ryuji squints as he leans in close, ignorant as always to the concept of privacy and personal space. “There’s a bunch of A’s and B’s above your name and Futaba’s.”

Morgana hops on the desk, ignoring Takemi’s affronted hey as he stares at the file suspiciously. “You actually took one?”

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“On the genetic scale, only identical twins share 100% of their DNA since they come from the same fertilized egg. Full siblings are first-degree relatives and, on average, share 50% of their genes out of those that vary among humans. Half-siblings are second-degree relatives and have, on average, a 25% overlap in their human genetic variation.” Takemi explains. “According to the results of the test, Goro Akechi and Futaba Sakura both share 50% of their genes.”

“Unbelievable,” Makoto mutters. “I can still understand their consanguinity being of agnate nature, but this is...”
“I don’t really get it,” Ryuji cuts in, scratching his head. “But this sounds like really effed up shit. Sounds to me like Shido’s even more of a lunatic than I thought.”

“Since your sister also shares your blood type and RH, there’s a high probability that your parents possess the AA- and BB- genotype. Be that as it may, it’s also possible that they may instead have AB, BO, or AO- genotypes; which would have, in all likelihood, given Sakura different results.” Takemi cracks her neck. “And that’s all it is; a contingency. I’d like to give you a more concrete answer, but considering the lack of a DNA sample from your alleged parents, I’m afraid this is the most I can do.”

“I understand. Thank you, Dr. Takemi. This is more than enough,” Akechi nods, bringing his hand up to his chin in consternation. “So, hypothetically speaking, had they been both AB-, there was a 50% chance for either of us to be AB-.”

“And there’d be a 25% chance of getting either A- or B-.” Futaba says, successfully getting Yusuke's attention. He glares at her, swatting the folder away. She lets out a snort and pokes at him again, continuing, “And if they were AO- or BO-... that’s pretty much a no go.”

“It’s even less likely,” Akechi agrees, feeling pity for Yusuke. “It’s a flat 25% chance of us getting AB-, AO-, BO-, or OO-.”

“Enough, Futaba!” Yusuke commands, standing up and towering over her. “I fail to see what you gain by continuing this annoying activity!”

“Relax, Inari. It’s called fun. And that’s what you get for doubting me.” Yusuke’s glare gets sharper as she ignores him. “In any case, that settles it!” She yawns, stretching her arms high over her head. “You guys satisfied now? We’re— whoa,” her eyes widen as she finally turns around and takes in her surroundings. “You guys okay? You all look like zombies.”

“Basically,” Akira chuckles as he looks across the room to the throng of faces blank and unseeing. “What most of us got from this conversation is that we really don’t need a blood test or DNA test to see that you two are related.”

“My head still hurts from all that blood type crap.” Ryuji moans, shoveling curry into his mouth at breakneck speed. “It don’t make much sense anyway.”

“Honestly, chew with your mouth closed. It’s poor manners in front of company.” Morgana rolls his eyes. “And it’s not that hard to grasp; did getting your blood drawn make you lose brain cells too?”

“Shut it, you stupid cat! Or I’ll stab you with my chopsticks!”

“Try it, you big blonde ape, and see what happens!”

“Enough, you two!”

In an act of reflex, Ryuji ducks down into the booth at Makoto’s shout, accidentally smacking his head into the table. Raucous laughter breaks out, and even Makoto’s annoyed frown cracks into an begrudging smile.
Akira smirks and reaches over to scratch Morgana behind the ears. “It still proves what we’ve been saying all along. Goro and Futaba are related.”

The sound of awkward munching greets him.

Haru takes a pointed sip from the coffee mug in front of her. “Yes it does. But it goes back to Morgana saying that we don’t have to accept him.”

Akira nods as his shoulders slightly droop. Futaba and Goro had retreated back to the Sakura residence after leaving the clinic, with Goro claiming he was tired and wished to rest, and Futaba being insistent on him not being alone. She had promptly dragged him away, paying no heed to his objections, nor theirs.

Even Akira hadn’t been aware of how close they had actually become. And this time, the raven-haired boy had almost nothing to do with it.

“No, we don’t,” Ann says, bending over the table to get some salt. “But, in the end, he sacrificed himself to save us...Don’t we owe him the chance to prove himself?”

Morgana swipes a piece of Ryuji’s curry, whose eyes are currently preoccupied with Ann’s cleavage.

“I ain’t sure we owe him anything, really.” He says in between bites of stolen curry. “We dealt with a lot because of him. Is he really worth it? Figured it was good enough that he’s still alive.” It is only then he realizes that a chunk of his curry had gone missing; zooming into the only perpetrator that could pull off such a stealthy feat, he cuffs Morgana’s ears. “Oi! That was mine!” Morgana yelps and hisses at him as he continues after shoving more curry in his mouth. “Anyways. The guy was all sorts of crazy, but he didn’t deserve what happened to him. For real, if I were in his spot, I’d want a way out too. But that don’t mean we should just welcome him with open arms.”

Makoto sighs, taking a sip of her coffee. “Akechi certainly is a complex topic. But I have to agree with Ann. After everything he put us through, and everything he sacrificed, I believe he deserves a second chance.”

“Well, I don’t!” Haru says suddenly, her mug meeting the table with a crash. She stands, and her voice resembles steel when she continues, “I will not forgive the man who murdered my father, so easily. If Akechi truly believes he deserves a second chance, then I want him to regret what he did!”

She blinks, realizing that she was standing and immediately tucks herself back into her seat, eyes glistening.

“I believe,” Yusuke starts in a composed tone and he places a hand on Haru’s shoulder, “that Akechi has committed some truly unspeakable things. Before all else, it is his blatant disregard for social welfare that ushered him down that baleful and wayward road. That much is clear. However, if I may be blunt, I am of the sentiment that what he truly needs...are people like us. Had I not met all of you after Madarame... had I continued to revel in my erroneous beliefs... I fear that even I would not be exempt from such similar deeds.”

Haru looks up at Yusuke, her expression torn.

He continues. “I speak of companionship, one that he desperately needs. Only then, will he slowly start to heal from the terrible maltreatment that has been inflicted upon him.”

“And who better to look after him than us?” Makoto says as she reaches across the table and takes Haru’s hand. “We know him better than anyone, and we know what he’s capable of. This way, we
can make sure that he won't hurt any more people.”

No one responds right away.

Haru sniffs and dabs at her eyes. Morgana works his way into her lap and begins to purr. Ann rises as well, and gently takes a hold of Haru’s arm, leaning her head on her shoulder. Akira reaches out and gently rests his hand on her forearm.

Ryuji eases himself out of the booth, and claps a hand on her other shoulder with a smile. “We’ll keep him in check, and if he takes just one step out of line, you get first punch!” he pauses. "Well, technically, second punch."

A watery laugh escapes her as she swipes at her eyes. “You’re right. I won’t allow myself to be consumed by the same bitterness and hatred that drove my father to his end. I will never be able to forgive Akechi, but perhaps, in time, we will reach an understanding.”

“Take your time, Haru. We’re all here for you.” Akira smiles. He gives Haru’s arm a squeeze before retracting his hand. “Why don’t we all agree to meet up tomor—“

“Oh! But what do I tell my dad?!” Ann squeals suddenly, stretching her arms out in front of her. “Does this mean we’re going?!“

Blank expressions mirror back at her. A beat passes before everyone seems to remember.

“I am all for it.” Yusuke says confidently.

“W-well… wait, what do we tell Akechi?!” Makoto says with wide eyes, “After everything we said — does this mean we should take him with us?!”

A chorus of panicked voices greet her. Was it a good idea?! Would it be too much?! Too quickly?! What happens if something goes wrong?! What—

“I believe,” Akira says cooly, effectively cutting through the haze of voices, “that we still need more time to process everything. Involving Goro would be a huge step, and I think it needs more thought some individually, and then we can come back as a group.”

Morgana bobs his head. “Akira is right. Lady Ann, how many days do we have left to decide?”

“Um… three, I think.” She runs a hand through her blonde locks, “I can call my dad when I get home and make sure, if it’s not too late.”

Akira nods and stands. “Then it’s settled.” He gathers everyone’s dishes and promptly empties them into the sink.

Morgana yawns and hops into the counter next to Akira. “It’s been a long day, I say we all get some rest!”

Yusuke nods serenely. “Yes, some sleep would definitely be well deserved.”

They all clamber up from the table, pulling on miscellaneous jackets before waving goodbye and trooping out the door into the darkening streets.

Akira turns from to the sink to find Makoto leaning on the counter, dark eyes shrouded in deep-seated concern. Morgana was suddenly nowhere to be found.

“Are you sure about all of this, Akira?” She asks, crossing her arms. “How do we know this won’t
backfire horribly?”

He wrings out the rag he’s using. “We don’t. But I’m choosing to believe that Goro isn’t evil, and that he can change.”

“That’s a beautiful sentiment, but you mean to tell me with one hundred percent certainty, that nothing bad is going to happen? That you and Futaba have everything under control?”

Akira doesn’t answer, scrubbing at the dishes in the sink.

Is it possible to rehabilitate him? Akira didn’t like that word. It isn’t what Goro needs. Goro needs friends, people he can rely on. But was it safe to have him this close to everyone? Especially after what happened the last time? Was he helping Goro for his sake? Or Futaba’s? Or maybe for his own selfish reasons?

Makoto sighs and straightens, running a hand through her short hair. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

The door closes behind her and his quiet voice seems to echo in the now empty cafe.

“I hope so too.”
Chapter Summary

_The Phantom Thieves are forced to come to terms with their old ally? Acquaintance? Friend?_

Chapter Notes

We’re back! Sorry for the long wait! Both of us had finals but now we’re finally done! This chapter as well as the next one are acting as intermissions of sorts, therefore there will be no art! Sorry! But the next chapter should be out fairly soon, as we’re almost done with it!

Enjoy~!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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The familiar *ding!* of the elevator catches her attention. She glances up from her phone and presses herself gently against the wall as more people file into the confined space. Lately, it seems that her apartment complex had been attracting more and more tenants — she couldn’t remember the last time there were this many people frequenting the elevators.

Or maybe it’s the fact that she’s just coming home earlier than usual — her agency had been so exceptionally receptive to her (almost) final decision to participate in the international competition that they had let her off work early to get a head start on preparations.

She only wishes their exhilaration was more infectious.

The doors open once more and she eases herself out of the cramped elevator, subtly breathing in relief. Not only was the elevator filled to bursting, but it had stopped at every other floor to let out its occupants; making what should have been a short trip all the more excruciating.

She supposes that’s what she gets for landing a suite on the sixth floor of the building with an incredibly breathtaking view of the city beyond. Not to mention at night when the neon lights adorning the cityscape more than make up for the starless night, like an endless planetarium on the ground. Her parents had wanted that for her before they left, told her that even if they weren’t there, she’ll never have to feel alone — she lives in the city that never sleeps.

Whenever you feel sad or lost, look out the window. Look at this big city, at the billions of stars shining on the ground. Can you see how they illuminate the faces of countless young dreamers like you? Borne of fire, survivors in the night. When you think all hope is lost, when your mind is in turmoil; look toward the sea of constellations closer to you than the stars in the sky will ever be. They return nightly, coming alive in the darkest of skies. They remind you that nothing is impossible.

Ann had been young, on the precipice of puberty and shedding her last remnants of innocence when her mom had gently narrated in her florid voice. She didn’t understand; she thought her mom
was just being silly as usual. Her mom always did have a flair for the dramatic.

Oh, Aïti. Ann scrunches her eyes shut briefly in the middle of fumbling for her door keys. If only you were here.

For some reason, finding her apartment keys was taking longer than usual. Maybe it’s the fact that her hands are strangely cold and clammy. She sincerely hopes she isn’t catching a fever.

She finds her phone instead, and lets herself be distracted by the messages she had sent earlier that day; all three of which had never been replied to.

If it were anyone else, she wouldn’t mind. But it was Ryuji. Of the whole group, he should be the only one who’s not doing anything productive enough to reply. Looking at it again isn’t helping the pangs running full course in her stomach —maybe she’s been eating too many sweets— so she opens a new chat conversation.

Ann:
Hey!

Ann:
Sorry to bother you so late, but have you heard from the rest?

Ann:
I'm kinda worried about Haru… I don't want to pressure her by asking in the group chat.

Her keys clatter to the floor and she hisses out a curse that the blond would be proud of. Damn, she’d been spending way too much time with him if she was starting to sound like him. Her phone buzzes as she inserts the key.

Makoto:

Haru's not the only one you need to worry about.

Ann:

Yeah, I know... I've been texting Ryuji but all I've gotten is radio silence. He seemed on board with us about Akechi earlier but now I’m not so sure. He's usually not this unresponsive.

Makoto:

It's okay, Ann. I'll take care of it. We still have two days. And I don't think Ryuji is the type to break promises.

Ann:

You're right... I'm sorry for troubling you. I'd deal with this myself since I'm the one who brought it up, but I'm a little tied down with applications and the agency...

Makoto:

It's no trouble at all. I understand that you're feeling stressed. We all are.
Ann:
Yeah, I guess...

Makoto:

It might help if you give Akira a call. I find he can actually be useful in times like these.

Okay, Ann has to admit that the thought hadn’t really crossed her mind. And if Makoto of all people was saying that, then it had to mean something, right?

Ann:

LOL that’s a good idea. Maybe I will. Who knew he would actually prove to be useful?

Makoto:

Shocking isn’t it? And if you’re still feeling troubled...at the risk of sounding like a certain feline: try going to bed early. Sleep might prove to be most helpful.

Ann:

Yeah, you’ve got a good point. Thanks, Makoto.

Makoto:

Any time.

The door opens and Ann drops onto the couch, her bag long forgotten by the front door. It is then that she finally allows herself to embrace the thought that had been nagging at the back of her mind this whole time.

Goro Akechi is alive.

He is still breathing.

She couldn’t believe it. He had walked into the room and Ann thought she’d seen a ghost. She had honestly thought she was hallucinating until Futaba had stepped in.

The others may not have been aware of it—except for Akira, of course— but her fear had been real, one that she had painstakingly attempted to hide. Her fear of Kamoshida, her fear of losing Shiho, her fear of losing the friends she now holds so dear, her fear of the world as they knew it ending, her fear of failing… all of it, she’d manage to bury it a long time ago.

Seeing Akechi again, after they were certain that he’d perished in the depths of his father’s palace — it had brought that fear crawling back to the surface, clawing and slipping through the wrought iron chains she’d so carefully bound it in.

How could she have fallen so far, so quickly?

Get a grip. This is the situation; now deal with it.

She gives herself a firm shake. She was too old to worry about monsters that appear in her mind as soon as she closes her eyes.
Goro Akechi wasn’t a monster. Of that, she was certain. He was just as much a victim of society as they were; only they had each other and Akechi had no one. But maybe it was time they changed that. Futaba and Akira had asked—no, had practically begged for them to give him a second chance, to forgive him.

Ann knew that the end goal was for Akechi to be accepted into their group. It hadn’t been stated outright, but that’s where everything was headed. Is it her place to offer such forgiveness? Is it her place to be accepting? Akechi had tried to put a bullet through Akira’s brain, and had tried to murder them all. If Akira and Morgana hadn’t caught onto his sinister plot so quickly, who knows what could’ve happened. Would Akechi have really shot Akira in that interrogation room? Would that malicious god have slowly taken over? And they all would have been none the wiser?

She rubs her temples and heads into the kitchen. Maybe tea would help her think.

The kettle whistles as she glances at the clock: it’s eight in the evening already. It might be too early to call her dad. But then again, she doesn’t normally call him so early when he usually has meetings. And what is she supposed to tell him? That she still hasn’t made up her mind?

The group was still debating, and Makoto had said that she would keep her updated. But according to her, they were still waiting for responses from Ryuji and Haru. They hadn’t even agreed on going, and now they have to worry about possibly dragging Akechi along with them. He is clearly a different person now than the one she remembered, but that doesn’t excuse his past. Ann isn’t one to judge people by who they used to be, but she finds with Akechi everything’s not as cookie-cutter as it seems. Then there’s the question of how partial he’d be to this whole arrangement.

Ann doesn’t even know if she can consider him a friend yet.

She sighs and sets her now chilled mug of tea onto the coffee table in front of her. So much for that.

She jumps as the clock on the wall lets out a loud chime, signaling quarter past. She places her hand over her heart, willing her heart rate to return to normal. Why is she so skittish all of the sudden? Her anxiety is going through the roof.

She pulls out her phone, scrolling through past messages and pointedly ignoring Ryuji’s.

Finding who she’s looking for, her finger hovers over the familiar icon.

_Breathe, you can do this._

Her shaking finger presses the call button. One ring. Two rings. Three rings. Maybe he won’t answer… maybe, she doesn’t have to do this right now. Maybe she can put it off, just a little bit longer…

“Hello?”

Her courage fails her. She slams the end call button and chucks the phone across the room, and it hits the wall with a loud _thwack_ before landing on her bag by the door.

She flinches. Her parents really wouldn’t be happy if she accidentally broke it. But the case was sturdy, it could make it, right? Stupid anxiety.

Hesitantly, she tiptoes over to the door, staring down at the phone as if it were a snake. She shouldn’t be so worried, he would surely understand.
It buzzes, and his name lights up the screen. It was a ‘you called?’ text. With a heavy sigh, she gingerly picks up the phone, his face already lighting up the screen as the phone begins to ring.

This time, she won’t let herself fail. She takes another deep breath. “Hey, Akira.”

“Ann! Is everything okay?!” His voice frays over the cell connection, but just hearing him gives her strength.

She bites her lip. She shouldn’t have hung up on him, it had only made him worry. “Yes, everything is fine.”

“Are you sure? Please tell me you’re alright.”

“Really, everything’s fine.” Ann insists. “I just got home, so I guess I’m just really tired, ha ha. Sorry I called you pretty much out of the blue. I know I saw you at school today, but I guess I didn’t really think about it until now. I’m just…”

“Worrying about Akechi?”

Ding ding ding, he knows her so well. “Yeah. I’m glad he’s back, but I guess I… I’m struggling. A little. After everything that happened…”

Akira doesn’t respond right away.

Ann grips the couch cushion, feeling her anxiety take root yet again. Why did Akechi have to come back now? Not that she wishes he was dead; that’s not it at all! She doesn’t wish death upon anyone, not even Kamoshida. But having him back had thrown her off balance. She felt as though the ground has suddenly turned to glass. One misstep, one mistake, and everything would shatter. The world would crackle and burn, and everything would crumble, just like that.

“Ann? ” His voice is gentle, barely more than a whisper. “Are you afraid of him?”

Her eyes squeeze shut and she feels her breath catch. It sounds so much worse when uttered aloud. She wasn’t! She refuses to be afraid!

...And yet, every time she thinks of what he was, of what he had done, and of what he could do… Just the mere thought alone causes her heart to hammer against her ribcage, burning like an effigy in a wicker statue emblazoned in wrought steel.

“Yes,” She breathes, “I’m afraid of him.”

“And that’s okay. Being afraid is natural. We’ve all been through a lot.”

She bites her lip, suddenly feeling indignation bubbling in the pit of her stomach. “I know that! But why me?! Why am I having such a hard time?! Everyone else seems to be having it easier than I am! You, Futaba, Yusuke, Makoto! How?! H-” Her voice breaks. “How is this not messed up to you?!"

The guilt hits her almost instantly. What is she saying? That was obviously not true. There’s still Haru — granted, she had the most reason among them to feel that way. But Akira had done nothing to deserve her tirade. He had been there for her in the darkest hour, helped her stand up to Kamoshida’s abuse and save the life of her closest friend. He didn’t deserve this as much as he didn’t deserve everything else that happened to him.

She closes her eyes, pretending that she wasn’t about to cry. “…I’m sorry.”
“Don’t be.” The line goes quiet for a moment. “Fear is a part of life. Everyone deals with it. I know that this is messed up. Hell, our entire lives have been messed up since the moment the Metaverse app first appeared.” A pause. “I’m not fearless, Ann.”

“What?”

“Honestly. Would a fearless person wake up every now and then wishing that app never appeared on his phone? A part of me was sick and tired of the world playing me like some kind of puppet on strings. I was only sixteen. I just wanted to live a normal life, yet apparently it was too much to ask for,” He chuckles self-deprecatingly.

Ann grips her phone a little tighter. “Akira…”

“But you know what?” his disembodied voice suddenly reinforces itself. “I don’t regret any of it. Even if I end up having nightmares of you guys and lose sleep over it. Even if I can’t sleep some nights thanks to my brain deciding that reenacting our whole interrogation shtick leading up to Sae is a fucking fantastic idea. I’m actually kind of grateful it happened. If it weren’t for that, who knows what would have happened to you guys? We wouldn’t be alive right now; and we sure as hell won’t be talking this very moment.”

She can feel conductive heat seeping through her skin from how tightly she is holding her phone. Any harder, and it would definitely crack. But she can’t find it in herself to care.

Last year, Akira had come back to Leblanc with a plexiform of bruises and welts mapped on his skin like the constellation of lights outside of her window, and yet the first thing he did when he saw them was crack a stupid pun.

_How are you feeling?_ Ann had asked, her smile a little too wide.

Akira had looked at her, his eyes too dark to make out.

Then he grinned.

_**Ghostly.**_

And in that moment, everyone latched onto it. Too terrified were they to face the traumatizing torture they were responsible for putting him through that they were quick to move past it. Not even sparing a second thought to how it might have left a lasting scar on him. Or how he was feeling underneath that devil-may-care mask of hollow ataraxia.

When they had settled down in Leblanc after welcoming back their leader, Ann remembers stealing glances at him from her spot on the barstool, thinking how good it was to have him back. Everything was going to be okay now.

And then she would notice how his breathing would catch, how he’d subtly clutch his side when he thought no one was looking.

Ann looked away.

Everything _will_ be okay.

“I think…” he continues, oblivious. “Akechi is a... complex topic. A part of me doesn’t even know why I’m trying so hard to help him, minus the good it would do for Futaba. I’m still trying to figure it out myself. But right now, I’m just doing what I think is right.”
Ann can’t help the smile blooming on her face. Benevolence doesn’t even begin to describe
Akira. For all the distorted hearts he had stolen; after seeing how people can raze through battlefields,
setting themselves ablaze in the conflagration of their own misguided ambitions until it is naught but
smoldering ash, he still truly believes that everyone deserves a second chance. Ann can only hope
one day she’ll be as altruistic as he is. “You see so much good in people, Akira. I envy you.”

She hears him snort. “I’m not sure I’d go that far. I think that there are a lot of people out there
who deserve the life they live, but…” He pauses, and she swears she can hear the wheels turning
inside his head. And when he speaks again, his voice is quiet and brittle, on the brink of splintering,
and so terribly unlike the confident friend she had grown to love and adore. “Akechi… is the one
person I couldn’t save.”

It’s like a knife has been gouged deep through her heart, puncturing the hallowed eburnean
carapace of her soul. It rends through her flesh and lodges deep in her gut like a gunshot wound.

Everyone had always been engrossed in their own issues, and Akira had always been there to
help them collect the pieces. No one ever really thought about his problems, too caught up in their
own to care. It was easy to think that he had everything going for him. How else could anyone
juggle more than one persona and proudly bear two sides of the same coin? Demure in mannerisms
and thought, he is a man of few words, attentive and conscientious when the situation called for it;
and yet, he is also the cool, confident leader with an infuriating smirk engraved on his face like it was
meant to be, endlessly taunting.

Sometimes, just sometimes, she almost forgets he’s human, just like the rest of them.

“Akira…” her voices trembles as she fights the tears threatening to spill. “You can’t save
everyone.”

A humorless laugh follows. “I can try.”

He goes quiet for a moment before muttering a hasty goodbye. The dial tone reaches her ears.
She carefully places her phone face down on the couch. Her heart splits in two. He’s trying so hard,
so very, very hard. He’s so determined to save Akechi, a turncoat rebel who thinks he knows
everything and yet nothing of the world he so desperately clings to.

He had sat in the corner of the booth, away from the others, surreptitiously sneaking his hand
under his clothes to touch some unseen wound, breathing hitched so small for anyone to notice.
Hunched over in his uniform, no one could see the tiny tremors rippling occasionally through his
skin.

She had stayed silent, consumed by a throbbing sensation of impotence. In the face of Akira’s
overwhelming charisma, she felt like an ant. There was no way she could have helped him. Words
only meant little from someone who had cowered in the shadows, watching Akira and Shiho
weather through abuse that she rightfully deserved in their place.

But that was enough moping. This time, it was going to be different. Enough of fearing who she
is, or what the future may hold. This burden he had claimed for himself wouldn’t be his to carry
alone; she’ll make sure of that.

And maybe, just maybe, they would be able to do it. Together, they’d be able to save him.

She reaches up to touch her face, finding her cheeks wet. She looks out the window at the
cloudless sky and wonders when it had started to rain.
“I’m home.”

Makoto looks up from her laptop, breaking off her razor sharp focus just in time to see her sister emerge from the foyer. “Oh, welcome back, sis!”

Humming in acknowledgement, Sae hangs up her coat and pads into the kitchenette. “Have you eaten dinner yet?”

“Yep,” the brunette answers as she turns back to her laptop, scrolling vigorously down. “I put yours in the microwave for you!”

She finds the gallery and clicked on the first image, scrolling through one impeccable room after another, all of which would easily qualify for premium shooting locations befitting celebrities and high-profile businessmen than ordinary students like them.

Makoto never thought she would ever find herself on a hotel tourism website, of all things. The last time Ashe had done this was when Shujin had requested she go as a chaperone to pinch-hit for some of the second year teachers. It had been a last minute request, and if there was anything that vexed her more, it was people suddenly popping expectations on her like they did sake bottles.

It wasn’t going to happen again, she thought with a note of bitterness as she begrudgingly and painstakingly scanned their itinerary ten times over, called reservations, and compiled their assets for the trip.

Ann had assured her that she wouldn’t have to lift a finger and that everything would be taken care of if they actually did agree to go, seeing how her agency would cover most of the expenses (who would have thought model agencies had their own means of air transportation — a private jet? Really?). But the way Ann had flaunted her arms and laughed in airy effervescence planted a seed of doubt in Makoto’s gut. Ann is certainly the most happy-go-lucky person she’s ever met, so any assurance coming from her isn’t really what Makoto would call... model grounds for security.

A snort escapes from her before she can think twice of it, and she smothers it with a cough. She narrows her eyes, imagining Futaba cackling maniacally at her. She really should stop doting over that girl; she was rubbing off on Makoto like the viruses she contends with on a near daily basis. Come to think of it, Yusuke was quite of an epigrammatist himself, if his rodent puns back in Shido’s palace were anything to go by...

“Are you okay?” Sae emerges from behind her and settles on the couch adjacent from her with a plate of steaming gyūdon, looking at her with a twinge of concern.

“I’m fine! Really,” Makoto laughs, waving it off. “How has your day been, sis?”

She breaks open her chopsticks. “I’ve seen better days, for sure. The new SIU director is a little slow on the uptake — but I’m not going to complain. Compared to the catastrophe that was last year?” she shakes her head. “Frankly, work has actually been rather mundane; as it should be.”

Last year. When the mental shutdowns and psychotic breakdowns had sent the public and investigations department spiralling into a chaotic frenzy. When the Phantom Thieves had been loved and hated by the public. When they’d discovered the dark and twisted world that lurked just below the surface of their own. When Goro Akechi played a vital role in the rise and fall of a politician who tasted just a little too much power.
“How about you, Makoto?” Sae interrupts her line of thought, her food half finished. She blinks back into attention. “Is university life treating you well?”

“Well...it might be too soon to tell. The semester just started, after all.” Makoto glances down at her class schedule laying innocently beside her. Sae follows her gaze, before looking back at Makoto in silent solicitation. “Oh, here you go.” Makoto passes her file and fidgets as she watches Sae purse her lips in scrutiny.

She had consulted her sister throughout her senior year at Shujin about the programs she was interested in for university and compared them to Sae’s personal recommendations; and after thorough weighing, she can’t say she’s followed her sister’s directives completely. After all, Sae always had her eyes set on becoming a public prosecutor, while on the other hand, Makoto...

“Introduction to Administration of Justice… Introduction to Forensic Science… most of these are common rudimentary courses. I remember taking these when I was your age,” she nods in approval, before her eyes catch on something. “But what’s this? Psychology of Prejudice and Discrimination? Do they offer this for freshmen?”

The younger bites her lip. “Not really. It’s a directed elective; I had to seek approval from the Department Head for it.”

Sae gives her a cursory glance. “Judging by the CRN number, this looks like an Upper Division Elective. It’s fairly advanced for your level. Doesn’t it have prerequisites?”

“There were, but an alternative prerequisite is demonstrating how those courses are relevant to our criminal justice studies,” Although it was clear that the prerogative wasn't open to just anyone. Thankfully with her stellar high school resume, it wasn’t hard at all to gain their approval. Makoto offers a small smile. “I believe I was fairly convincing.”

Sae looks at her for a long moment. “You’re just like Dad, you know that? And now you’re following along in his footsteps.”

It had become sort of a habit for Makoto to rarely be able to decipher what her sister is thinking. It mattered little whether she was at her office or at home, her expression is always molded in professional, rhadamantine austerity; with its only exceptions being when she’s extremely livid.

(Much like her high school detective counterpart, as Makoto has come to realize, though that is a topic for a later time.)

It isn’t easy to forget the time when she had dwelled on their father’s ideology and how pertinent the Phantom Thieves were to it. Sae had promptly fulminated, smoldering scathing philippic which had regret following immediately in the wake of its destruction; her face distorting from candid resentment to poignant remorse. She had packed up instantly and walked away, but the accusations remained. Even now, it still rings, hollow yet inexorable like chronic eczema on her skin.

The person in front of Makoto now seems like a far cry of that person she used to be. After all of her prior asseverations, woebegone sentimentalism seems oddly out of place on her sculpted features. Now her eyes are unusually heavy-lidded, her body sagging and hands clasping loosely in a gesture that can only truly be described as acquiescent.

This is all wrong.

“Hey...sis?” Makoto tries gently, watching Sae’s crimson eyes blink and refocus on her. “I’m sorry, I really don't want to sound like a shill, but... Dad really was an exemplary cop. One that
Japan didn’t deserve. I may be naive, but I’m no stranger to the ugly truth of the world. There is no such thing as an organization that isn't muddied by corruption of some level, even within the scope of judicial law; but Dad had always been above that. He never cared about pride or glory. He had so many offers for promotion that he consistently turned down... he kept saying how they would make it harder for him to do what he needed to do. I couldn’t ever forget the way he said that; how he looked like he was going to take over the world and nothing was going to stand in his way...I guess from then on I put him on a pedestal. I vowed that I’d grow up to be like him and make him proud. Even if that dedication led to his own ruin, I don’t think I can ever let that go…” She chews the inside of her lip. “But if there’s one thing I did hate about him, it was that he was away from home so often. He was so focused on his job that he...neglected us.”

“Is—,” Sae’s voice is thicker now, a little choked. “Is that why you chose to stay here instead of moving into the dorms? You know I would have covered your expenses nonetheless.”

Hitotsubashi University isn’t close, by any means. It takes roughly an hour by train from where they live in the suburbs of Shinjuku to Kunitachi Station, and that’s not taking into account the walking distance to the main campus. It would take Makoto nearly two hours to reach the main campus. Anyone in their right mind —barring financial complications— would choose to relocate to the dorms to minimize travel cost and time.

Makoto isn’t stupid enough to turn a blind eye to such glaring merits of moving out and subsequently reduce stress for her elder sister —hell, with all of her loot from the Metaverse, she can even pay for her own housing, and maybe even work her way into contracting her own apartment post-graduation— but there are more factors to reconsider.

“That shouldn’t be an issue. I’ve tailored my classes so that most of them would be at the campus in Kanda.” Makoto offers her a rueful smile. “I’m sorry, I’ll be troubling you for a little longer… It’s not much, but I already have my own means of—”

“Makoto.”

“—supporting myself, and I’m already applying for a couple—”

“Makoto.” Sae’s voice is the crack of the whip normally reserved to put many a subordinate or defendant in their place — the brunette shuts up immediately, staring at her with wide, cinnabar eyes as the ivory-haired woman puts aside her empty plate on the coffee table and shifts closer towards her.

Oh, dear. Did she somehow cross the line? Was it too much? Makoto stares down at her hands, trying not to clench when she feels a hand on her shoulder, and she looks up a tad fearfully.

Sae looks anything but angry, her eyes looking at her wistfully. “I know we haven’t seen each other eye to eye lately. Come to think of it, I’m not sure we ever did. You always seemed so reserved and obedient; listening to whatever I told you to do and did without question, up until sometime last summer.” Sae closes her eyes, a small smile gracing her face and she exhales. “I suppose that’s when you gained the power to stand up for yourself.”

A sharp pang runs through her. “Sis…”

“Mom died when you were too young to remember her, and as a consequence, Dad devoted most of his attention to you when he wasn’t working.” Her eyes take on a more distant quality — Makoto wouldn’t have been able to reach her if she tried. “Even when he was alive, you and I weren't all that close. At the time, I was old enough to understand the responsibilities I bore as the older sister, and I always knew the risks of having a cop as a dad. You could say I was prepared.”
she winces. “With trying to maintain our household, studying for college entrance exams, and subsequently upholding my career, I never really had time to pay attention to you. I only ordered you around like I knew better. I thought maybe I should— no, I needed to be a parent, not a sister. For your sake.” A weary, timeworn sigh. “I was a fool. There was no way I could have replaced our parents. It’s just not possible. And that’s when I ended up keeping it all inside, letting it fester and...eventually lashed out on you.”

Makoto opens her mouth to say something, anything, but Sae shushes her. Even if she hadn’t, the ferocity on her face was more than enough to stun the younger sister into speechlessness.

“I still feel remorse for what I said that day, Makoto,” Sae starts with a slight hitch of one who is inexperienced in the prosecution of herself and not defendants. “You didn’t deserve to hear any of that. I was wrong. I can say from the bottom of my heart that I just wanted the best for you. I really do. And if that means you have to fly out of the coop, then so be it; the reason why I urged you to move into the dorms in the first place was so that I wouldn’t have to weigh you down anymore. But honestly? I'm done trying to pucker up and deal with whatever hand I get dealt with. If I'm going to be selfish, might as well go all the way.”

Her tone becomes sharper, but no more crueler as she cups Makoto’s face with firm hands. “Listen. The choice is yours. I want you to know that you will always have a home here. I don’t care how late it is; I would do absolutely anything for us to start over and have another chance at a real family. This time, I want to support you properly as a sister. I’ll have your back in this rigged world of corruption and power. That'll be my way of making amends.”

“Sis, I…” Makoto has a hard time fighting back the tears threatening to spill over her face and onto the hand that is stroking her cheek, just a little stiffly. “It doesn’t matter who you were or what you did or who you are now. I love you. I don’t ever want to leave you. I’ve been so helpless this whole time, I couldn’t do anything, I wanted you to rely on me, and—”

She doesn’t know how long it goes on; after a certain point, it all becomes a blur of messy repetition and fumbling consolation. The hand on her face slides to the back of her neck, and the next thing she knows is that her sister’s embrace is not as chilling and frigid as she is led to believe. On the contrary, it’s warmer than anything she’s ever experienced — a blanket heat encompassing every insecurity and reservation. It’s warmer than she could have ever imagined, and she despairs at the thought of being deprived of something right in front of her for so long.

When they separate, they don’t go too far; a comfortable silence falls between them as Makoto makes an excuse to work and pulls her laptop towards where she is snuggled against her sister, who looks entirely too drained and is now sinking into the couch cushions with a long suffering sigh. Sae idly switches through channels, legs pulled up on the couch with a leisure of the likes Makoto has rarely seen; at least, not since Dad was still around.

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees her phone screen light up. Looking down, she sees Ann’s reply to their private conversation.

Their group chat —sans the current root of their problems— had been uncharacteristically silent, save for Yusuke's sporadic inquiries of European architecture and cuisine, which were mostly filled by Futaba's buoyant and witty remarks. Even their resident loudmouth delinquent’s presence was surprisingly minimal, which is a great deal of concern.

And if she started to worry, then the person who had known him the longest would indubitably be the most perturbed of them all. She supposes it was only natural that Ann would come to her about it, especially seeing how they apparently had similar concerns with Akechi to begin with.
Reintegrating himself back into society would be a dicey situation. Anyone could see the hazards involved with one who used to be a household name among many. Fortunately enough, he was given the same treatment as the leader of the Phantom Thieves. His identity was never disclosed in Shido’s trial; though not for want of trying. The administration had allowed the mass public a level of plausible deniability; only propagating the fact that there was a hitman involved who had long been missing in action and was unable to testify. The implications were clear — he was presumed dead.

According to her sister, she had assembled a missing persons investigation unit for the late detective (despite knowing the truth, she had claimed it was mere protocol) in the period leading up to the court trial — searching his apartment and credit card accounts gave no hint to his whereabouts, and any meager trail they procured on him was all but cold. The second the search hit the 72-hour mark, everyone had been forced to cede the case in favor of moving forward; they had already found a predisposed witness in the form of Akira Kurusu. There was no need to waste any more time or resources for a dead man.

After some online digging, she had stumbled upon a handful of people who went as far as to consolidate Akechi’s untimely disappearance from publicity to the anonymity of this missing hitman, but those remained only conjectures from the likes of conspiracy theorists. Either way, it didn’t answer the question of how the law would react should he re-emerge again. Surely his crimes, though largely non admissible in court given its cognitive nature, are grounds for another proceeding. As much as Makoto detests the idea, crafting Akechi a new identity is a foregone conclusion — that is, if he didn’t already have one. A passport, amongst other identification papers... No doubt Shido’s intricate network of conspiracy had taken care of those necessities. But would they still work despite all that has been brought to light? Thinking about all of it makes her head pound.

It would only be expedient to rely on Futaba to forge new documents for Akechi, but the thought leaves a bitter taste in Makoto’s mouth. Obviously, it had nothing to do with her phenomenal abilities — Makoto knows for a fact that the tiny girl is a one man army capable of dismantling a maximum security behemoth organization in just a matter of hours.

The problem lied within the timing. As wonderful and miraculous as their caper as the Phantom Thieves had been, they had already moved on. Enlisting Futaba’s help when the orange-haired youth had already started to acclimate to her brand new life as a perfectly normal freshman at Shujin is the last thing Makoto wants.

Sae might be able to provide answers...but does she dare ask Sae? Her older sister was too perceptive for her own good. And if she found out that Akechi was actually alive, it could bring in a whole slew of new consequences that they would then be forced to deal with...but does she have any other options?

It takes her a lot of mental coaching to work up the courage to ask Sae if she found out anything about Akechi post-trial, disguising her curiosity as an assignment for one of her criminology classes. Asking about rights and procedures associated with investigation, adjudication and sentencing of criminal cases; post-conviction processes, and other matters related to trial is easier when she isn’t constantly worried about implicating his continued survival.

“What’s this all about?” Sae pauses. “Makoto, is something going on?”

“Nothing! Nothing at all!”

Sae’s eyes narrow and she squares her shoulders. Makoto has come to interpret this as her ‘work persona’. It meant trouble. She mentally braces herself.

“Is there something you’re not telling me?”
“Uh, sorry, Sis! No, it’s nothing like that.” Walls of reasons are running through her head a million miles per second, and the timer is ticking down to the millisecond. “To be frank… there’s been something on my mind.” She takes a deep breath. “...The reason I’m taking certain classes this semester is because I’m still thinking about the court case.”

It seems to work; she watches as Sae’s expression sharpen in understanding, before relaxing a fraction. “You mean the one revolving around Shido and Akechi?”

She nods her head as the older frowns slightly. A beat passes; Sae seems to mull over her words carefully. “That case...was —and still is— hard on all of us. I think that it’s best if you leave it in the past and focus your attention elsewhere.”

“But—”

“Trust me, Makoto.” Sae cuts in, not unkindly. “It’s not worth your time anymore. It’s been dealt with. What happened, happened. No use dwelling on it any longer.”

And they speak no more on the matter. Makoto knows that Sae is only trying to do what she deemed best.

But it isn’t helping their resurrected, living conundrum.

She looks at her phone, her eyes lingering on the last two of Phantom Thieves who still haven’t answered her.

Makoto sighs, sneaking a glance at Sae. Now seems like a good a time as ever. “Hey Sis, this might be a little out of the blue...but, Ann has offered to take us abroad with her this summer.”

Sae looks up in surprise, clearly expecting anything but that. “Abroad? You mean to America?”

She shakes her head. “Europe, actually —Switzerland, to be more precise.”

Sae looks as her as if she’s unsure whether to take her seriously or not. “And you’ll be able to afford this while still attending university?”

“Yes, I’ll make sure of it,” she replies, mustering up all the confidence she can. “We’ll be back before the start of term. It’s just that...”

“What is it?”

“After everything we talked about, here I am, absconding before it’s even begun.” the younger’s smile is grim. “You know what? This really wasn’t a good idea, after all. I don’t know what came over me; I knew it from the beginning, but—”

Her sister’s gaze softens, and she reaches out, placing her hand over Makoto’s smaller one. “If you can afford it, and it won’t damage your studies, then go for it. It’ll be a great experience.”

“You...can’t be serious.” Makoto gapes. “You know, it’s okay to decline. Really. I know it’s stupid, and I really do want to spend the summer with you. Like I said—”

“Did you already forget what I said so soon? This isn’t like you, Makoto,” Sae tsks in what seems to be mock disappointment. “Didn’t I say I was going to support you from now on? We’ll have plenty of chances together after you come back.” her hand migrates to the top of Makoto’s head, patting it lightly. Makoto doesn’t know what expression she’s wearing now, but her sister seems to receive it warmly. “So don’t worry about me. I’m sure I can manage on my own for a
“while,” her smile grows impossibly wider, “as long as you call to check in from time to time.”

Makoto doesn’t bother hiding her excitement as she leaps to her feet. “Thank you! I promise I’ll call! And I’ll bring you souvenirs!”

Sae gives her a rare laugh, and Makoto can’t help but think how far they’ve come in such a short while. Who knew that there would come a day when her sister would let down all her inhibitions, to see her capable of smiling so freely, and laugh with such ease? She had never been more grateful that Sae’s Treasure remained intact. Sometimes, stealing isn’t the only way to change hearts— anyone is capable of their own change.

And if Sae could do it, why not Akechi?

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Four days.

It has been four days since the day she saw him. Someone she had never expected to see again.

It’s the fourth day — the last day she can put off her decision.

She had been excited to meet up with her friends. It wasn’t very often that they got together anymore, considering some of them had graduated and had become busy with their own lives. She’s had her insecurities; she knew she was the last to join the group, therefore her time with them was shorter than the rest. Yet in that brevity of time, her bonds were no less real — she finally had people she could call her true friends, people who would never take advantage of her kindness for their own personal gain like she had been used to growing up. She knew, even if they no longer shared a unified goal and had nothing else to do but move on with their lives, they would never abandon each other.

Haru came to the gathering under the pretense of discussing their plans for the Phantom Thieves’ first anniversary (how regrettable that her own career only lasted for less than half a year) but honestly, she couldn’t care less. She knows Makoto wouldn’t approve of her line of thought, but nothing mattered to her more at this point than spending time with the people she had grown to be so very fond of. Having it at Leblanc was just the icing on the cake.

Ann suddenly bringing up the prospect of traveling abroad certainly put a surprising twist to things, but it’s hardly proving to be an issue. In fact, if she had to be completely frank, she was hoping it would happen. Yusuke had been rather vocal about his approval —mostly thanks to Ann’s claim that their tickets would be accounted for— but Haru had to admit she was eager as well.

Her mind had already fast forwarded to board meetings with her business associates and coordinating with President Takakura for her scheduled leave in the summer. She was certain everything would go off without a hitch.

Oh, how wrong she had turned out to be.

It’s too much to think about. Still there, it’s lingering at the back of her mind, waiting for her to acknowledge it. But she couldn’t. She can’t. Letting it surface would be like opening a can of worms. She isn’t ready. Why would she? She was perfectly fine with letting bygones be bygones. So then, why?

Fortunately, it had been easy to distract herself from that particular subject, what with the reports she needed to submit for her business seminar class and club activities. She had managed to get into her first choice university — Hosei University, which not only boasted an exemplary business
administration degree, but was also only a quick drive from her company building. She knew it was her calling from her freshman orientation day, when she had accidentally stumbled upon a sizable bed of fertilized soil even larger than her makeshift one at Shujin’s rooftop. She quickly discovered it belonged to a respectable gardening club, a community that quickly accepted her and provided her with companionship that she had not expected from very few people aside from Akira. It became a second home for her in no time at all, the perfect place of therapy when the hustle bustle of society grew too burdensome on her. Suffice to say, she had spent more time there in the past three days than in the comfort of her own residence.

Unfortunately, she could only distract herself for so long. It takes a single text from Makoto to remind her that Haru was one of two she had yet to hear from.

They’re scheduled to meet up tomorrow, and she’s no closer to her resolve than she was three days ago.

Haru isn’t used to being the odd one out, and she hates it. She can’t help but feel that everything was turning out to be quite unfair, although there was nothing she could do about it now. As the saying goes, there’s no use crying over spilt milk.

It wasn’t Akira nor Futaba’s fault that they kept Akechi a secret for so long. Despite what they said about their familial circumstances, she knows, deep inside, they kept him away out of consideration for her and the others.

Seeing Futaba and Akechi getting along so well made her stomach roil. Haru would have never imagined the only other person she knew whose parent’s death rested on Akechi’s shoulders would be on such cordial terms with him. Was it even possible? Haru refuses to believe that every time Futaba looked at his face, her first thought wasn’t, *oh, this is my mother’s murderer*. She wonders what could have possibly happened between them that led to a point where not even the anamnesis of a heartrending tragedy could interfere with their blossoming relationship of just a few weeks. (*A few weeks!* Haru has a feeling there’s something they still hadn’t told her, but she wasn’t in the position to pry.)

In light of recent events, it was perhaps inaccurate to portray Futaba as the only victim. In a way, Akechi must be a victim himself, if not even more so than Futaba — more than any of them, really. Stigmatized from birth, rejected by the government, bullied, abandoned, abused, forced into things against his will; being treated like a tool; to tread the desolate path of vengeance which took from him more than he expected to ever give.

You either die a hero, or live long enough to see yourself become the villain.

In the end, he transformed from villain to victim — the terrible poetic justice of it all is almost too much for her to bear. Thinking of it like that, there is no possible way she doesn’t feel for him. If the brunette put aside her animosity for just a second; if she let herself be pulled back to the moment when Akechi was at his most vulnerable, she would understand him. She would empathize with him. And she still does. Betrayal was a romantic concept that she had fancied for so long under the iron hand of her father. And yet, with no power and no resources, it had remained yet another fleeting fantasy. Freedom was but a beautiful abstraction to gaze upon from within the birdcage she had resigned herself to stay in forever.

In many ways, her father and Shido were alike...although nowadays she chooses to remember the good over the bad. Because her father was *good* once, even if it is all but a distant memory now. Was it the same for Shido? Can Akechi reminisce upon days when he was ever a kind and loving father?
Sighing, she takes out her phone.

She considers Futaba’s contact for a second, before shaking her head and scrolling down. She’d rather not invite unnecessary attention at the moment.

It’s not hard to find the contact she’s looking for. All she needs is to scroll down through her archived messages all the way back to the month of November of last year, and…

Taking a deep breath, she presses call. She hears five rings before the line opens.

“Hello, this is Haru Okumura,” her sweet voice intones, clear and resolute. “Please pardon the short notice, but would you happen to be free today?”

She is let off on the side of Central Street in the ever busy roads of Shibuya, despite her driver’s insistence to be dropped off directly at their store branch. She’s already getting enough attention as it is from the pedestrians gawking at the bodyguard opening her door and letting her out. Without much ado, she thanks them and heads on her way.

_Yusuke was right. It really is good weather for a picnic,_ she thinks with slight remorse. High sunlit clouds drift across a clear blue sky, fresh air filling her lungs with every breath she takes. She sees the rose and salmon-pink buds peeking through the branches of winter-worn trees lining the sidewalk, dancing in the gentle breeze of warm sunshine.

Big Bang Burger comes into view, its bright red neon sign beckoning hungry customers inside its spaceport-inspired construct. She immerses herself in a cluster of teenagers parading in as they bicker over their levels in the Big Bang Challenge, and smiles entreatingly at the staff member who does a double take at the sight of her. She turns the corner before he could say anything and immediately spots her contact.

Goro Akechi sits at the far end booth, looking out the window at the passing crowds, a deeply pensive look on his face. His hands are clasped in front of him, fingers drumming against his knuckles in what she recognizes to be a nervous habit. He seems to be too lost in thought to notice Haru’s arrival, jolting back into reality when she clears her throat and takes a seat across from him.

“Okumura-san,” he starts, with a slightly strained smile. “I wasn’t expecting to see you today.”

Neither did she, but life has a funny way of playing with someone’s head. “I’m sorry for calling you here out of the blue,” Haru nods. “I’m sure you must have had other matters to attend to.”

“It’s really not a problem. I hadn’t planned on doing much else today.”

“I see.” she says.

From the corner of her eye, she notices one of the staff members mincing towards her — considering it was supposed to be a fast food restaurant where you order at the front counter (unless you are attempting the challenge), it is safe to assume that the first employee she met had notified the others of her presence. She tries not to let mild exasperation show on her face.

“Oh, well. It's not as if she wasn't aware of what she was doing when she chose this place for them to rendezvous.

“Good day, Okumura-sama,” the waitress squeaks as soon as she arrives at their table. “May I trouble you with something to eat or drink?”
“Just sweet tea is fine. My apologies, but I’ve already eaten.” Haru replies, a polite smile on her face as she turns to her companion. “Perhaps you’d like something to eat, Akechi-kun?”

“A-Akechi?” the waitress’ head swivels to the detective in alarm, who also fixes her with a similarly pleasant smile. She yelps, noticing her outburst, and almost visibly shrivels up. “Oh! I-I’m so sorry for my rudeness! Is there something I could get for you too, sir?”

He waves a hand. “I’m quite alright. I apologize for making such poor patronage today; we simply thought this establishment would make a fine avenue for our business.”

The waitress stammers, giving him another once over before murmuring she'll be right back with Haru’s tea and scurrying away.

The brunette watches her until she’s gone, and turns back to Akechi. “I have to admit, I’m a bit surprised that you agreed to meet with me here. Judging by her reaction, it seems that you’ve been enjoying your anonymity for quite some time.”

“Yes, well… I must attempt easing back into society’s good graces at some point,” he manages a small laugh. “Moreover, if an Okumura of all people is asking for me, it would be remiss of me to not oblige.”

It is an invitation to cut to the chase, one that she had no problem indulging. “Very well then. If you don't mind, I’d like to get this over with.” She takes a deep breath. Here it goes. “First of all, I have no intention of apologizing for what happened when we first met. I truly believe you deserved it.”

“I thought as much. If you must know, I expect nothing of the sort,” he says evenly. “I'm well aware I deserved it, although your candor is appreciated.”

“I'm glad we’re of the same understanding.” she says, letting out an inaudible breath. That’s the first hurdle down. “Let me be honest with you. Asking to meet with you like this is very difficult for me. I’ve been avoiding this matter for these past three days now, but I’m hoping that seeing you will help clarify everything.”

“I understand. Is there anything I can do to make it easier for you?”

She scrunches her eyes shut. She wasn't expecting him to be this agreeable. “No, I don't need you to explain yourself. Just listen, please.”

He nods, waiting for her to continue.

“Akechi, I…” She opens her eyes, and she's met with a steady dim crimson gaze as gravid as it is indefatigable. “I must admit: I am at a loss. It never occurred to me that I would see you again. I was—” she falters, then shakes her head quickly and continued, “—content with the fact that you were presumed missing, likely dead. I didn't want to face the repercussions of your existence. I didn't feel it was necessary. Up until recently, I thought about how nice it was to simply forget all of the bad, and focus on the good. To bury the past forever and move on. And I thought I did. But then you came back, a fragment of the past, and everything else came back along with you.”

“A part of me wanted to keep it that way.” Akechi admits quietly. “I knew what effect my returned presence would have. You've all gone through enough, thanks to me. You and Futaba, most of all.”

“And Akira,” she adds pointedly. “You attempted to assassinate him.”
“...Yes, Akira as well.” he concedes, bowing his head. “I found it hard to avoid him, in particular.”

“You couldn't hide forever.”

As if on cue, a loud, obscene ringtone booms out from somewhere nearby, and she jerks back. She scans the room, but no one looks familiar. Odd, she must have imagined it.

“So it seems.” There is a certain ambiguity to his words, a polysemy she isn’t quite sure what to make of as she studies the boy who keeps his gaze away for a little longer before returning to Haru. “I’ve also grown rather tired of running.” he smiles faintly, shaking his head as if reminiscing over a fond memory. “Which is why I’m here now, Okumura-san. Don't let me stop you from doing what you want to do.”

He’s so willing, and it stings. If he weren't so subservient; if he put up even a sliver of a fight or sought to bring up his defenses, maybe all of this would be easier for her.

Like a boon, her respite comes in the form of tea, warm and inviting. She thanks the server and brings her hand gently around the cup, nursing warmth radiating into her palms, calming her fraying nerves.

She sighs. “Akechi-kun… I’m not here to punish nor condemn you. I simply don't have the right.”

He looks like he’s been hit by lightning. “Okumura-san, I—”

“Please, call me Haru.” she cuts in, her voice genteel but laconic. “I’d rather not be reminded by my late father, if I can help it.”

“...I’m sorry.”

So much weight behind two simple words.

“That's not going to change anything, and you know that.” Her voice is quieter, an almost-whisper. “But all the same, I do not bear a grudge against you. I can't.”

“I’m afraid you've lost me.” he frowns, not sounding the least bit relieved. “This all sounds very contrarian. Is there something holding you back?”

“The past.” she blurts out, unable to keep it in any longer.

It feels…. good. Even more so when she sees the bemused expression he is making at her, positively at a loss for words. She fidgets in her chair, trying to make herself comfortable for the exposition that is soon to follow.

She takes a deep breath. “I’m sure you already know this, but for most of my life, my father had kept me on a tight leash. His expectations for me were always clear, and my life revolved around living up to them. Choice was not something that was allowed for someone like me. As the heiress of Okumura Foods, it was my duty and obligation to obey the man I called my father. The freedom to do what I wanted to do, to feel whatever I wanted to feel, to make my own decisions for my own sake… that was something that came out of a fairy tale. It didn’t seem realistic to me until I managed to attain it for myself.” She looks up from her hands, her eyes glassy as she meets his eyes. “I don’t know what to do with this much freedom. What do I do with myself? The moment you come back, I begin to realize nothing is as clear cut as it seems.”
“If I may be so presumptuous,” his eyes soften just a smidge. “Are you realizing this newfound freedom of yours is shackling you to the past?”

She nods, blinking to clear her vision. “As much as I want to despise you, I can’t. Even if you took my father’s life. We share too much in common, as I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

He does. She sees it in the look in his eyes and the curve of his shoulders, the weight of his words. “I’m flattered that you think so, but it shouldn’t influence how you feel about me.”

“Oh, don’t misunderstand. Even if I can’t despise you, it doesn’t mean I don’t dislike you.” she purses her lips. “Before you returned, I was only able to remember my father fondly. When I thought of him, I thought of the days before he became obsessed with his wealth and his ambitions. I remember the father who still spent time with me. We would pour heart and soul into the recipes that my grandfather passed down onto us, and hope that it would bring joy to others as it did to us. My father would stay up late into the night to cook food for family reunions using ingredients that we grew together in our own garden, and his face would light up when he saw others enjoy it.”

She placed a hand on her chest, trying to pull herself together. “Those are memories I hold dear to my heart. I was scared of forgetting them, so I let myself forget everything else — all the employees that suffered at his hands years later, the crimes against business competitors he sponsored through you, the political marriage he coerced me into with a vile fiancé, the way he used me and countless others as instruments to further his own material profit. Everything he did that I was too weak to fight against. I’m ashamed to admit that I’ve been acting like none of it happened. I simply ran away, leaving my father’s mess to the next president of the company to clean up. So that’s why I’ve come to a decision,” she swallows. “I don’t like you, and neither do I trust nor forgive you. But I understand why you did what you did, and I know you have no reason now to hurt us. So I’ve come to believe that being around you will ground me to the truth.” There is a prick at the back of her mind, like an itch she can’t reach.

“How can you be so certain?” Akechi replies, not quite looking at Haru. “As long as it would further my own personal goals, I wouldn’t hesitate to do whatever it takes. What makes you think I won’t hurt you again?”

“May I ask you something?” Haru sets down her tea, folding her hands in her lap. “Why did you come back to us?”

The lines of his face grow taut in confusion. “Akira and Futaba...strongly recommended me to.”

“So it seems,” Haru nods. “But Akechi, the final decision was still yours to make. They didn’t force you to walk through that door; you walked in yourself. You faced us of your own accord.”

“I did. But I fail to see how that affects anything,” Akechi replies. “As far as you’re concerned, it could all be part of another ploy.”

She looks at him then, watches as he tries and fails to keep a smile on his face. In those eyes, nothing but an endless swirl of jaded defeat. The eyes of man that had come to seek neither salvation nor penance, merely retribution. Haru doesn’t know if she’s ever seen eyes so lackluster, even in the eyes of those whose corrupt hearts they had changed.

“You may be right.” she finally says. “It’s clear that you don’t believe in change. But I do. And I’m not sure if you’ve realized it, but the proof is right in front of me.”

“What?” Akechi looks at her then, eyes wide.
“It’s true. Whatever it is that happened between you, Futaba-chan, and Akira-kun, I will not inquire. But even I can see the good it’s done you.” she nods. “I’m grateful that you decided to face us again, in spite of how poorly I reacted.”

Disbelief mars his features. “Grateful…? That’s preposterous. How could— ah, that’s right. You people have always been beyond my comprehension.” He puts two fingers to his forehead, shaking his head slowly, a helpless smile on his face. Then he looks back at her. “Forgive me if this is peremptory, but after everything that happened, you want me to be your moral compass?”

She sighs internally. What did she expect? She knows that someone like Akechi would never accept such a modest excuse. What’s worse — she can’t find it in herself to fully disagree with him either.

Maybe she’s been going about it wrong from the very beginning.

“I suppose it’s not exactly the matter of you being my moral compass,” she threads her fingers together in front of her, recalling the adrenaline rush she felt when she first saw Futaba come back into the room with him in tow. Everything after that point had turned into pure static, the people around her emitting white noise in lieu of words. In her head, all she could hear was his voice, his smarm, every syllable that came out of his mouth that reeked of vice shrouded in virtue. Her heart had started pounding akin to a bout of expressive aphasia, and all she could think about in that very moment was to break free from it by any means necessary, even if it meant striking him. Not to mention for the rest of the day afterwards, everyone had borne witness to her faux pas — a flurry of thinly veiled jabs and unadulterated conniption at the man whom she had once yearned to save. It was utterly shameful. When she remembers everyone crowding around her, soothing her like a pigeon with broken wings, she feels bile rise at the back of her throat. “It’s for myself. I simply no longer wish to be a nuisance to everyone else.”

The ensuing silence that claims them is like a sponge, soaking in the tenor of her words as she basks in the implications of what she had just said.

She doesn’t know if saying all that was a good idea. What if it stacks the odds against her? Then again, it was bound to come out eventually. She doubts it takes much for a detective as brilliant as Akechi to deduce the true reasoning behind her motives, even if all of his cases were rigged in his favor. His intellectual prowess in Sae’s palace was truly something to behold.

But still, she had said too much. It had sounded so much better in her head, but when it came to talking about it, she couldn’t control herself. It was as if a dam had broke, and now she is left picking up the pieces strewn about in its destructive aftermath. Whatever sway she had over the conversation is now all but lost, and now Akechi—

“I understand.”

She blinks. “Huh?”

His hands are folded in front of him, head bowed not in surrender, but in humble supplication. “I am not doing this for the sake of one day earning your forgiveness. Even if I was granted it, by some outrageous miracle, I cannot allow it. I want to be able to take responsibility for my actions and atone by my own terms. If I could turn myself in, I would have done so the instant I came back. If the Metaverse still existed, I’d pursue a conviction without a second thought.”

“If the Metaverse still existed…” she echoes. It may have been possible, but she doubts things would have gone as well as he’d expect. Depending on how far Akechi is apparently willing to go
for the sake of his own castigation, broadcasting the Metaverse may very well have given rise to unprecedented levels of anarchy; the likes of which they have never seen before. It seemed evident that expunging the cognitive world was the only way to resolve things, yet still...

“There is a punishment worse than having to live with blood on your hands. And that’s not being able to get prosecuted for it.” he finishes her thoughts, and raises his head. “Thank you for telling me all of this. Really. It’s more than I could have ever hoped for. And while there’s absolutely nothing I can say that will alleviate your problems, I will insist on subserving you in any manner I can.” His eyes flash. “I know I can’t ask you to trust me. But you have my word, nonetheless.”

“Why?” she breathes. She wasn’t expecting anything from him. Her original intention in seeing him was only to reaffirm her own motives. There is no reason for him to suddenly become outspoken, no reason to—

“Because,” he says slowly, like he wants every syllable to sink in. “I am all too familiar with the feeling of being a nuisance to others.”

She fights to say something, anything. Nothing comes to mind. She had come equipped with the knowledge of his behavior, and organized her words based on how she believed he would react. She knows the pompous Akechi with a predilection for decorum. She knows the resentful Akechi scorned violently by the injustices of the world. But an obsequious and repentant Goro Akechi is a true novelty.

She looks into his eyes, replete with a crimson-tinted ardor she can only wonder if he is aware of. And that’s when she can finally see it; the restless searching, the scouring for the loophole, the bright twist in the dark tale that reversed his story’s course. She wants to tell him there’s no point, it won’t regress — not for her, for him, or for anyone he’s ever wronged.

And yet, there is no need. From what she has witnessed of him today, his sombre acceptance of his own dereliction and transgressions rings true. And within that acceptance, therein lies a seed.

It’s too early for judgement, and Haru decides to stay her hand. But one thing is for certain — this is only the beginning. Whatever may come henceforth may be a mystery, but something visceral inside her is telling her that maybe, just maybe this whole meeting had been worth it.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a long one, and the next one will be too! 50 pages and still going, can you imagine??

Thoughts? Feelings? Hit us up on Twitter! We’d love to hear what you think!

Somnicordia: @makarakaja

Veeran: @toomuchstressha
Chapter Summary

Well, didn't see that one coming.

Chapter Notes

So sorry for the long wait! But we are now college grads! CAN WE GET A HELL YEAH! Art will start up again in the next chapter, hopefully won't take us as long.

Enjoy the 43 page update!~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s the same old, same old.

Ryuji’s uneventful days usually go like this: he wakes up and goes for a morning jog at 5AM, then fixes breakfast for him and his Ma and wakes her up before he goes out to do god-knows-what — she doesn’t really care what it is he’s up to as long as he doesn’t come home bloody and bruised. Or cuffed.

Contrary to popular belief, he almost never commits public misdemeanors. That usually opens a whole big, ugly can of worms that neither of them care to deal with, even though said can of worms had already left the house long before Ryuji hit puberty.

In any case, he’s had a lot of pent-up energy to spare, given the circumstances of the past few days. Since jogging doesn’t really cut it, off to the gym he goes.

After an hour of cardio, an hour and a half of weights, and an additional hour of cardio, he thinks he’s ready to call it a day. He’s sweating and all worn out, his muscles throbbing in the way he likes best. Maybe he can chill at a manga cafe or arcade now.

He’s just leaving the gym when he spots him. The ostentatious gleam of Big Bang Burger attracts most of his attention at first — who doesn’t love a good double decker burger? But then he spots the thin boy who moves so carefully that he seems to almost blend into the backdrop. If he didn’t already recognize him, there’s no way he would’ve noticed.

What is Goro Akechi doing walking willingly into an Okumura-owned business? Guy must have a death wish or something, because if Haru catches him there…

After a few moments of confusion, his eyes freeze on a petite girl standing out from the busy crowd as she heads in a couple moments after him. Her gait implies a sort of gentle conviction, gossamer golden brown hair bouncing after every step.

He does a double take. That was Haru!

Ryuji smirks. Oh boy, this was going to be a bloodbath. No way was he going to miss this!
He throws up his hood, shoves his hands into his pockets, and makes his way towards the restaurant. Maybe he should text Akira or Futaba to warn them that their new golden boy is about to get slaughtered…

Still, if it gets too bad, he’ll probably step in. But Haru could be really scary when she gets mad and Ryuji doesn’t want to be next in line on her shit list. He’ll just keep watch for now, and if things get ugly…well, then he’d figure that part out later. Who knows, he’s probably just overthinking the whole thing. Maybe Akechi’s just getting regular takeout like a normal, functioning teenager now, rather than eating just an apple and some celery like some kind of health obsessed nutjob, and they’d never have to cross paths. Neither of them would be none the wiser.

But… better safe than sorry.

He enters without any problems, peeking around from behind a group of loud teenagers. There! Hold on a minute… Is it just him or is Haru making a beeline straight for Akechi? Did she know from the start that he’d be there? That seems pretty weird, unless it’s a meeting of some kind?

Nah, that can’t be. Akechi would be a dead man walking as soon as Haru caught sight of him. He can only see the the back of Haru’s head, but the girl doesn’t seem as homicidal as she did the other day. Akechi looks as calm as ever, sitting with his hands folded in front of him.

He looks up and sees her, smiling with all the airs of televised charm as he talks to her. There’s a subtle nod of her head as she takes a seat across from him.

Ryuji feels like he’s suddenly in the Metaverse. There’s really no explanation for what he’s seeing in front of him. His thought process grinds to a halt.

They were on speaking terms? The hell? When did that happen?! A few days ago, she wanted to blow the guy’s brains out! Now they were suddenly all buddy-buddy?! The hell was up with that?!

He takes a deep breath. He’d need to get closer to be sure. It ain’t wrong to eavesdrop on them right? As long as he didn’t get caught, Haru ain’t gonna kill him. What they don’t know won’t hurt them. Yeah! And Morgana says he’s an idiot, psh, as if! He’s gonna get some intel!

He pulls his hood down farther and slinks into a seat at the table adjacent to them, a partition wall separating the two. A pretty waitress swings by the table, asking if he’s attempting the challenge. He flashes her a toothy grin, but she rolls her eyes and repeats her question.

Well. That sure put a bit of a damper on his mood. He can’t even get the waitress to like him. Damn it, why was everything so hard?

Wait, that wasn’t why he’s here in the first place. Focus!

He leans back in his chair after he shoos her away and closes his eyes. He can just make out their voices over the constant chatter of the joint.

“–wanted to keep it that way.” They both have soft voices, but that’s definitely Akechi’s. “You’ve all gone through enough, thanks to me. You and Futaba most of all.”

“And Akira,” Haru’s voice sounds from the other side of the booth, “You attempted to assassinate him.”

He peers over at them in time to see Akechi bow his head and agree with her, murmuring that he just couldn’t seem to avoid the other boy.
Ryuji curls his lip, fighting the urge to stomp over to the booth and strangle him. That was such total bullshit; Akechi making it seem like he had no choice in the matter of killing Akira, who was probably the coolest dude he’d ever met in the first place.

He jumps as his phone suddenly screams in Samuel Jackson’s loud voice *Surprise Mouthafucka!* Ryuji’s frantic hand dives into his pocket as he silences it.

*Shitfuckshitfuckshitfuckshitfuck.* No, no, no, no!

He quickly glues his eyes to the tables and shuffles down into his seat. He can feel their questioning eyes on him. He reaches for one of the fries on his plate, the plate that had been previously untouched as he was too engrossed in his task to realize it had been delivered.

He hesitantly looks up, and holds in his sigh of relief when it seems that Haru had returned her attention to Akechi. That was too fucking close. His life just about flashed before his eyes.

When he’s sure that Haru’s attention is elsewhere, he pulls his phone back out of his pocket. He had multiple missed texts from Ann. Shit, now she’s gonna lecture him. But that wasn’t what had caused the disturbance. It’s a new message from Makoto:

**Queen:** Hey, I need your decision about the trip by tomorrow.

Oh yeah, the trip. Ann’s modeling thing in Europe. He’d almost forgotten about it. He types out a reply, keeping Haru and Akechi in his line of sight.

**Skull:** uh huh, itll be okay, i just gotta talk to ma about it... should be fine

**Queen:** Just reminding you to factor in the possibility of Akechi accompanying us, too.

**Skull:** that frickin guy is comin along aint he? what if he blows his top or somethin?

**Queen:** I’ll remind you that you are well known for doing that as well.

**Skull:** yeah but ive never tried to kill anyone

**Skull:** well………

**Skull:** u kno what i mean

**Queen:** Just make up your mind and get back to me.

**Skull:** yes maam

Ryuji sighs and pockets the phone, munching on the now cold, soggy fries. Is it really a good idea to bring the lunatic along? He did remember consenting to it… but at the same time, what if something happens and he gets detained at the airport or something? Do they know for sure that word of Akechi’s involvement in those cases hadn’t gotten out, the same way Akira’s identity was kept a secret at the time of his testimony? Seems like an unnecessary risk to take. But at the same time, all of them disappearing abroad and leaving him here alone, unsupervised?

He kicks absently at the floor. They’re literally just going to be glorified babysitters.

He looks back to the booth where Haru and Akechi were sitting, only to find it empty.

*Shit!*
He’d been paying so much attention to his phone and they’d up and left without him noticing. He also didn’t catch the last part of their conversation.

*God fucking damnit.*

He just has the worst luck.

He mumbles some more choice swear words and shoves the last few fries into his mouth as he makes his way to the door. Maybe, if he was quick enough, he could still catch up to them!

He pulls his hood back as the doors fly open before him; *damnit*, where were they? He didn’t see any familiar heads in the crowd. They couldn’t have gotten that fa–

He spits another curse as he collides with someone walking into the restaurant. There was no way he would catch them now. He turns to glare at the person who cost him valuable time, but then stops short.

Akechi smiles back at him.

He literally ran into Akechi. God damn. Why?

Mr. Perfect raises an eyebrow and smooths the non-existent wrinkles on his coat. “Ah, Sakamoto-kun. Fancy running into you here.”

Ryuji is so surprised that all he can do is stutter out some kind of half-assed response. “Ah, uh, hey... Akechi. What’s up, man?”

Akechi glances behind Ryuji before looking back to him, though it looked more of a formality than anything. Ryuji thinks he sees a trace of smugness buried underneath those layers of practiced comity. “Have you been here long?”

*Shit.* “Uhhhh... not really, but I was just headin’ out actually.”

“Alone?”

“I was just—” Ryuji begins. “Uh, getting take-out, yeah. Take-out!”

Akechi tilts his head and looks down. Ryuji internally curses.

“You’re not carrying anything.”

“Yeah, can’t a dude change his mind? What’s it to you?”

“It’s nothing, really.” Akechi smirks. “Haru and I were just here actually. You barely missed her.”

Ryuji can feel the tips of his ears turning red. “No shit? Well, that’s too bad then.” He’d give anything to be able to wipe that smirk off Akechi’s face.

Akechi’s smile is almost creepy and Ryuji shuffles his feet awkwardly. “You don’t seem very surprised. We were having an important meeting. Did you manage to hear any of it?”

Ryuji glances at the floor, the wall, the door, anything but Akechi’s face. “What makes you think that?”

“Call it intuition.”
Bastard. He could feel his anger surging now. He shoves his hands into his pockets. “What if I did? What do you care?”

Akechi chuckles before his face grows somber. “I assure you, I don’t care. Haru however, might be a different situation.”

“I-uh, well, that’s not…” Ryuji can’t suppress the shiver that runs through him. How did this happen again?! He had the upper hand just a minute ago! He can already see Haru’s angry face in his mind. “Ugh, I can explain!”

Akechi raises an eyebrow, and a small smile plays at the corner of his lips. “I’m sure you can, but may I suggest moving out of the entrance way first?”

Ryuji looks up, startled. But he was right — they were blocking traffic, judging by the myriad of stink-eyes he’s been getting as people try to maneuver around him. “Yeah, whatever, man.” He mumbles, shuffling along after Akechi, who had turned and walked away.

The two of them walk out to Central Street, careful not to get swept away in the bustling crowd. They linger on the edges, almost unseen by those who pass by.

“So,” Akechi begins carefully, “Did you just happen to be in the restaurant? Or did she tell you to spy on us?”

Ryuji shrugs his shoulders, leaning against a store front. “It’s none of your business, dude.”

Akechi smirks once more and pulls his phone out of his pocket. “Perhaps, but what would Haru think? I could inquire if you’d like. I’m sure that Big Bang Burger takes security measures, what if she were to see you on one of the surveillance videos, just at the exact moment we were conducting an important meeting?”

“No!” Ryuji leaps forwards, attempting to snatch the phone from his hand. But the other boy had been expecting it and nimbly moves out of the way, almost causing Ryuji to faceplant into the pavement. Catching himself at the last moment, he pivots around to glare in parts anger and terror at Akechi, who had now taken his former position against the storefront — though at this point his desperation wins over. “Don’t tell Haru! I won’t last two days if she finds out! I’m too young to die!”

Akechi tilts his head. “Seems like you took an awfully big risk then.”

Ryuji grinds his teeth and clenches his fists. The overwhelming need to hit something was at the forefront of his mind. Stupid Akechi, always making them look like fools. The guy always seems to have some kind of trick up his sleeve. “Well... you weren’t supposed to see me.”

“With that ringtone? Honestly, Sakamoto, it’s a miracle on its own that Haru didn’t take notice of you.”

Ryuji pauses, staring at the other boy, the dots slowly beginning to connect in his mind. “Wait a sec... you knew I was there?!”

Akechi pockets his phone with one swift movement. “Of course I did. I’m a detective, remember?”

“Ex-detective.” Ryuji growls, aiming a kick at a discarded soda can nearby.

Akechi’s expression hardens, before melting away into a passive smile. “Yes... ex-detective.”

The can that Ryuji kicked ricochets off the sidewalk, bouncing along until it disappears into the
throng of people making their way up and down Central Street.

Ryuji pulls his hood back up. So who cares if Mr. Fancy Hair had known that he was there. Not like it changes anything. He still managed to slip past Haru. Although maybe Akechi was right about his ringtone... But his mission had still been a success! Sort of. He didn’t get to see Akechi get the living daylights beat out of him– but there was still plenty of time and possibilities for that later. But he did learn that maybe the asshole wasn’t that bad anymore. But could a single person really be capable to changing that much? He’d have to alter his whole personality...well, maybe not all of it, but a good portion of it.

Ryuji peeks at the other boy out of the corner of his eye. Akechi is standing calm and composed as always, watching the crowds move by. He seems different than the last time Ryuji saw him. It’s like the crazy had all been drained away from him. All that was left was this broken, bitter shell. But does that mean that Ryuji owes him a second chance?

No. He doesn’t owe Goro Akechi anything. But maybe Akechi deserves it. Akira has a habit of gravitating towards people like that; people that need help. Hell, if he hadn’t come along and found him when he did… Ryuji doesn’t even wanna think about where he’d be now. Probably expelled for deckin’ Kamoshida to Jupiter and back.

So if he had earned his second chance, did Akechi earn his as well? After all, he’d sacrificed his life to save them in Shido’s palace.

He nods to himself. That was it. He’d give this new version of Akechi the benefit of the doubt. He’d give him his second chance. But if he wasted it, no way in hell was he going to get a third.

He feels himself relax against the storefront, his mind wandering.

“So,” Ryuji starts, mirroring Akechi’s stance, “you really comin’ with us on the trip? You sure you’re ready for somethin’ like that?”

Akechi turns and stares at him, a flicker of confusion across his face. “What are you talking about?”

Ryuji blanks, digging his hands back into his pockets. His mind grinds to halt before quickly backtracking. The others hadn’t told him yet?!

“Shit! Oh...it’s nothing! Don’t worry about it!”

Akechi’s eyes narrow and he takes a step towards him. “Sakamoto—”

Ryuji whips his phone out of his pocket. “Oh! Look at the time! I’ve gotta get going or else Ma’ll kick my ass! And that— that ain’t good, ha ha— See you later, Akechi!”

He ignores Akechi’s confused calls and shoots him a wave, disappearing down into the subway. He jumps onto the train bound for home, and sees no sign of the familiar detective he was talking to. With a sense of relief, he settles into a seat and pulls out his phone. That was too close. He really needs to learn to watch his mouth sometimes.

Skull: im fine with the wacko comin along i guess

Queen: Does he know you call him that?

Skull: no, u really think i’d call him that to his face???

Queen: Of course not. But still…

Queen: Have you spoken with your mother yet?
Skull: nope soon tho

Queen: Alright. Keep me updated.

Skull: kk

Skull: oh btw have u mentioned this to him?? abt him comin along?

Queen: No. We wanted to make sure everyone was on board before we brought it up.

Skull: oh

Queen: Did you tell him?!

Skull: ofc not!! i was just curious is all

Skull: hav a little more faith would ya

Queen: Well…, actually nevermind, just tell me what your mother says.

Skull: yea yea

He slips his phone back into his pocket as the train comes to his stop. He knows his Ma would be fine with him going as long as he promised to do well in school next year so he could get into a good university.

Ugh, university. The whole idea of four more years of torture just sucked balls.

He waves hello to his Ma as he shuffles into their small apartment. He’d talk to her about it, but after dinner. She was making his favorite kind of ramen! Food now! Worry later!

He’s been told that the pace in which he inhales food is scary and unnatural. Eh, they’re all just jealous. If there was a ramen eating competition, he’d totally blast the others out of the water. Pun intended.

His phone vibrates in his pocket and he sneakily checks it under the table. Makoto, again, asking for his answer.

He gulps. The impatience leaking through her words is warning enough, and he isn’t exactly eager to see how much he can push it. It’s now or never. Turning towards his Ma, who’s picked up her chopsticks and started to dig in, he brings the topic up casually, noticing how her eyes widen slowly.

A glimmer of sadness and guilt twinges in his stomach. She’d always wanted to travel, but had never gotten the chance to since his asshole of a father had left all those years ago. She would be alone too… He’s almost afraid that she’ll refuse. But then she gives him that dazzling smile, the one that always makes him smile in return, and says that she’d love for him to have the chance to go abroad—as long as he stays out of trouble and brings her souvenirs.

Mission success! He types off a quick affirmative to Makoto as his Ma sets down another bowl of ramen in front of him, and smiles as she ruffles his hair. He digs into the ramen with renewed vigor. It didn’t even matter that Akechi was coming. This was going to be one hell of a trip.

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It’s falling, Yusuke ponders absently as a petal lands on his fingers stroking fine lines across the smooth white paper of his sketchbook.

Meaningless scribbles they may be to most, but to him, they tell much more. Quick, gestural strokes signifying fluid lines of action, the rough essence of a figure itself captured in all its marvelous simplicity, to be later rendered after the shades of the backdrop have been established, to enhance the subjects and give them a sense of purpose. A sense of being.

He looks up for the nth time that day, quietly observing the visitors swarming the usually quiet and tranquil Ueno Park. On the grassy areas closest to the trees, mothers are yelling after their children to behave as they set up blue picnic blankets for their spring feast — the soft blue contrasting wonderfully with pastel pink. A group of close knit friends are chattering and giggling amongst one another as one claims yet another lovely sanctuary beneath the trees, another complaining about carrying all their foodstuffs thanks to a bet he had lost; another trying but failing to use a tree as cover from what seems to be her perceptive love interest, who tilts his head wondering if she has inhaled too much pollen — rather insensitive, if you ask Yusuke. Middle-aged men with their rambunctious voices as they clap one another on the back and present bottles of expensive sake specially bought for the occasion, to which some of the more conservative people seem to disprove of as they edge further away.

He nods at the turbulent scenery before him, satisfied as one shouldn’t be. It is exactly what he has come here for; the discordant harmony enabled only by a mutual, iterative idiosyncrasy shared by many from all walks of life. Not quite the people themselves — although he derives pleasure from people-watching in itself — but the tempestuous fervor they all possessed with each other. A phenomenon he can only observe looking in from the outside.

A phenomenon that, under normal circumstances, would not occur without a catalyst. Many would be disinclined to spend time at a park filled to the brim with so many other intrusive beings unless they sought to seek shelter underneath the blooming trees and participate in a hanami — Yusuke cannot help but digress.

He is not there for a picnic, as was the assumption made blatantly obvious by the curious yet impersonal looks thrown his way by various passersby.

Whatever could a young man be doing wasting such a beautiful day by himself, with nothing more than a sketchbook to keep him company?

With those kinds of dashing looks, you’d expect he’d have a girl or two on his arm.

You want to try talking to him? Maybe he’ll want to join us!

He hears them all, but listens to them he does not, for he has another goal set in mind; one he fully intends to see through the end. The words in the background blend into pleasant, white noise, a soft hum of a sound that keeps him focused.

The nylon bristle of his brush pen glides across the paper, full and slow, then fast and disconnected like tiny black comets raining down on white. He immerses himself in a staccato of fine movement, a thoughtful tour de force of the highest grade. In time, he lets himself succumb to the lure of automatism. His arms move involuntarily, and he ceases to think altogether.

After an indeterminable amount of time, he steps back and assesses his work, nodding to himself with a hand on his chin. It would do for now. He takes a deep breath and lays down his sketchbook.
as he looks up, breathing in the fresh, spring air and the gentle aroma that wafts through the air.

Working amidst nature certainly gives a different atmosphere compared to working at his own abode, one that he cherished. He has grown far too accustomed to the sweeping cacophony of the city, clamoring hordes of bodies traveling to and fro that rarely gave way for respite. However, he finds that he is unable to work outside for long periods of time before becoming inevitably distracted by the machinations of his environment. But instead of feeling the familiar twinge of regret in the pit of his stomach, he feels elation. A joyful catharsis.

He suspects it has something to do with his original intentions of coming here in the first place.

There comes a time when a person is faced with a seemingly insurmountable obstacle in their life, or an unforeseen event capable of disrupting the very marrow of their worldly perceptions. After affiliating with the Phantom Thieves, Yusuke had slowly begun to break free of his coolly segregated observations of others’ emotions and opinions. He’d come to notice how Ryuji’s method of coping is to engage in fits of vigorous cardiovascular activities, one that Yusuke would sooner give up free curry (no offense to Boss, of course) than attempt. Not to mention during their many excursions into Mementos, Haru, as well, had confessed to considering slaughtering shadows as an ideal form of recreational activity. Akira was the same; although Ryuji’s acute bewilderment to the former had struck Yusuke as rivetingly peculiar.

In any case, Yusuke would much rather surround himself in the comforting embrace of solitude as he allows his hands to pull at the crest of his thoughts, to untangle them with delicacy.

His gaze falls upon a gargantuan structure in the distance, and on its face an intricate, golden emblem proudly glints in the afternoon sunlight, awing those who lay their eyes upon its historical splendor. Large white pillars adorn the entrance to Tokyo’s University of the Arts, which looms a ways away before him; large stately buildings that looked less unembellished and more minimalistic than he had imagined.

Yusuke never expected to be able to get a chance to enroll. He had never thought that far in the first place.

A few days ago, a succinct and formal letter forwarded to him on behalf of Kousei’s Fine Arts Division had brought him to the doorstep of the esteemed university. The invitation was cordial enough, and Yusuke found no reason to refuse as his feet carried him to the President’s Office.

It did not take long for the true purpose of the invitation to be revealed. Cutting to the heart of matter, the President, Kazuki Sano, had asked him how he would feel at the prospect of attending their university as a full-time student; his enthused smile hiding no faults that meet the naked eye.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” Yusuke had inquired politely, although an inkling of a reason already bore fruit. He had already turned down Kawanabe-san’s invitation of goodwill in regards to the Japanese Art Support Foundation. It wouldn’t surprise him in the least to find that they would still strive to recruit him somehow, even if they had to use their professional connections to do it. No doubt they had people of influence residing in such a prestigious university.

“"It is the mission of this university to scout for potential talents. One of your calibre cannot simply be overlooked. " His fingers tented in front of him. "As I'm sure you may be well aware, we are affiliated with the organization responsible for hosting a number of national art competitions in Japan. I do believe one of your pieces emerged victorious in one such competition. Hope and Desire, was it not?”
"Ah," Yusuke bows. "I am duly humbled, sir."

"Raise your head, Kitagawa-kun," he says. "I am as delighted and humbled to be in your presence. Your name is well known in the art community after your style that takes after the beautifully detailed Sayuri."

"Yes. That." Yusuke replies. "I'm afraid Sen—Madarame has also been a significant cause of my renown. Quite frankly, my reputation precedes me. I still have much to learn before I can consider myself worthy of such a distinguished honor."

"Madarame..." he repeated the syllables slowly, thoughtfully. "Indeed, he did have a significant role to play in all of this."

Yusuke tilted his head. There was feeling—a something in his words that reminded him of Kawanabe. A sense of familiarity?

Perhaps it was time to be forthright. "Forgive me for being so bold, but would you happen to know Kawanabe-san personally?"

"Ah, Akiko-san," he let out a small chuckle. "I am well acquainted with him. He is, after all, the director of that organization. I am his senior advisor; although, quite frankly, it is more of a titular designation than anything else. He is a very responsible man, and I feel it is not my place to inform him on how to run his own organization, especially after Madarame had stepped down from his seat as co-founder. To be quite frank, Kitagawa-kun, " his eyes crinkled as he regarded the young artist before him. "He does not know that I have extended my courtesy to you today."

Yusuke blinked. That was unexpected. "Pardon?"

"You may think otherwise, but he is not the reason I invited you here."

"Although he did lament of your decision to me. Between you and me," he leaned forward, his chair creaking. "I believe you did the right thing, turning him down. His goal in his life is his, as is yours. I wholeheartedly encourage you to pursue your own path in life."

"And one such path available to me would be right in front of me, I presume." Yusuke remarked.

"Precisely," Sano agreed. "You needn't worry about tuition, either. Tokyo University of the Arts is offering you a full ride scholarship." He smiled, showing a perfect grin.

A long silence settled for what seemed like hours. Time seemed to slow down. Yusuke closed his eyes. Opened them, and took a deep breath.

"It would be the greatest honor to be accepted into your program, sir."

A lull as the president stared at him, eyes an inch wider.

"...But?"

A flash of confusion flickers on Yusuke’s face as he tried visibly to process that word. "...But? I'm afraid I don't understand. I accept your offer."

There weren't many things that could make Yusuke distinctly uncomfortable, but he never imagined
"Interesting," he said, brows unnaturally high on his corrugated forehead. "Very interesting. I did not expect you to accept so readily."

The artist had a feeling he could finally understand everyone's plain discomfort at being observed so thoroughly as though they were a sort of exotic specimen at a zoo.

"Have I been called here as some sort of social experiment, Sano-san? " He asked bluntly, a distant tic on his brow.

"Definitely not! Oh, heavens, no," Sano shook his head vigorously, his hands waving along with him. "I assure you, I have nothing but the best intentions. I sincerely desire nothing but the most favorable decision from you. However, from what I have perceived so far, you seem to be the type of man who refuses to accept any form of charity that would assist in your artistic endeavors."

He heard what was not spoken.

Have you finally learned to accept the reality of art in a world where one needs to learn to make a living with their passions?

Yusuke's finger itched, and he tried to resist the urge to fiddle with his keys.

When he spoke, he imagined in his head a concept of Identity, or the lack thereof. The notion of it filling some other body — the sun, the moon, the sea.

"I was of the opinion that clouding one's art with worldly desires is repulsive and does not equal true beauty." he began. "I could not imagine painting for money, fame, or recognition. I had sworn to live solely by my passion and drive to capture the essence of the human heart. However, my arrogance had blinded me to my own misguided perceptions." His eyes flickered downwards for a brief instant. "After Madarame confessed to his crimes, I quickly reached an impasse — I detested painting for the sake of income, and yet without money, I could not survive. I lost sight of my limited self and proceeded to drown in the duality of my own desires. I started to wonder: what is true beauty? Is it merely a sheer phantasm in the individual? Or is it an autonomous quality that inheres in an unobserved artwork?" In his wonderment, he raised his hand, splaying his fingers in front of him as if marveling a tangible concept. "I believed myself to be a capable artist, and yet I only yearned to express myself. I was an adolescent, writing sentimental verses without artistic validity. If a work of art expresses only the subjectivity of the artist, it remains arbitrary and does not penetrate into reality itself. It became imperative that I overcome my ego so that I may open the door to communication and rapport with others." His hand closed into a fist before lowering it once again. "That is my revelation, an understanding gifted to me by friends whom I hold most dear."

Sano bowed his head before letting out a deep breath. Then he looked at him again, a pensive look on his face.

For a few indescribable seconds, he stared.

Yusuke stared back.
“I can see now why he took such an immediate liking to you,” he broke the silence, his chair scraping along the floor as he stands. “I must say, for all his bribery and deceit, his eye for good character and talent is truly a sight to behold.”

A flash of a memory — Kawanabe said almost the same thing right after the artist had come to his revelation. He didn’t understand how it held such profound meaning to them, that they would praise Madarame so.

He was no stranger to the fact that artists possessed an enlarged ego; he himself was proof of that. These egos would enable them to embark on a journey to seek their true self, and subjugation of the ego was only part of the process. It was nothing special — or so Yusuke believed.

Was it truly uncommon for artists to achieve enlightenment? Who, to the best of their ability, had liberated themselves from the fetters of their own selfish desires?

As he flipped through documents and signed the paperwork necessary for enrollment, he spotted a signature through one of the forms, an imprint of sharp sophistication he knew better than the back of his own hand. It reminded him of praise and affection, of a loving family. It reminded him of vanity and deception.

With slightly shaking fingers, he looked up at the director, who had nothing but the kindest, most guileless smile he had seen.

“It seems that an ego, once overcome, can bestow enlightenment to even the worst of cynics.” He said, and spoke no more.

Those words echo in his mind even now, as he stands up and stretches the kinks from his body. The pang in his heart is no longer as harrowing as it had been that day, and his throat feels significantly less clogged.

He could never forgive Madarame, but he can never truly hate him either. No matter how hard he tries, Yusuke can never forget the acts of kindness and care the elder had shown him when he was still under his watchful eye. Despite his unforgivable actions, Yusuke already knows deep down how Madarame used to be a good man.

After all, no one is ever truly evil —only ignorant and misguided. Ignorance begets a weakness that allows for one’s heart to be consumed by distorted desires. When they hurt others, they are under the sway of a powerful belief that hurting others will, in the end, bring them true happiness. They are simply acting under the influence of delusion.

In his journey to unravel the deepest recesses of the human heart, he discovers a fundamental truth. Deep down, people simply yearn for acceptance. Below the level of all the strategies they employ in order to find comfort and escape suffering is this basic need for real happiness.

Goro Akechi, he realizes, is one of these people. In a very similar manner, the detective had grown up without a family, no father or mother figure to give him the affection he deserved. In a way, Yusuke and Akechi are not much different at all.

Had Yusuke discovered extraordinary powers without the guidance of his friends, where would he be? Surely he would go down a similar path. There would be nothing stopping him from exacting vengeance upon the mentor that had indirectly murdered Yusuke’s mother.

Contradiction of the heart is a funny thing. Often times, contradiction is brought about as a consequence of circumstance, an extraneous judgement fostered towards one forced down a solitary
Yusuke is endlessly fascinated by Akechi, that much is certain. In the two meetings where they were once again reacquainted with their former ally, Yusuke had not expected to see his development in the aftermath of what he believed was a fatal confrontation… especially where Futaba was concerned.

He is not Madarame, just how Akechi is not Shido. He is confident in what he wants; to bring hope to Akechi the way his friends had done for him and bring out his true self. Once, he had told Akira of his resolution. He wonders if he will ever get the opportunity to tell Akechi as well: if he is lost, Yusuke will not hesitate to extend his hands. If Akechi is wrong, he will chastise him. As long as he has people to guide him, not control him, then he will persevere.

Though his sins run deeper than the labyrinth of Mementos— to the world’s very essence, and no amount of lifetimes can atone for the deeds he had committed, he can already see it. He can already see that beneath it all, Akechi is a good man. Perhaps one day, he may be able to properly capture the desires of one such as his on canvas.

Futaba squints, peering at the price tag. One hundred thousand yen for a computer with two slots of RAM at ten GB? Puh-lease, her phone can outdo that. She shakes her head and moves farther down the aisle. Flashy technology greets her at every turn, and she resists the urge to jump up and down in joy. Akihabara, a metropolitan of multimedia and electronics, as well as anime and manga stores that have become overwhelmingly popular in recent years. She glances around and sees nerds stuck like glue to the newest gaming console, parents attempting to pull their children away from their favorite manga, and university students talking in not-so-hushed whispers over some powerhouse live action movie about some alchemist made of metal — she isn’t sure if they meant that literally or if the dude’s head was just full of lead.

She takes a deep breath. Nothing smells better than new electronics and manga! These were her people! Her kingdom! They could never be defeat—

“Hey, are you done daydreaming yet?!” Morgana’s annoyed voice cuts through her rampantly chaotic train of thought.

She snaps out of it and glances down at him. Poor kitty, he must be having separation anxiety from Akira already. And it had only been a few hours.

“I do not!”

Oops, she’d said that aloud? Oh, well. People had been giving her strange looks all day anyway, she might as well live up to it. She bends down and pulls on his cheeks, cooing, “Don’t worry! We’ll be back home soon! And then you and Akira will live happily ever after!”

Morgana sighs halfheartedly, “You are so dramatic.”

She flashes him a cheeky smile. “Come on! I want to go into the new video game store!”

She grabs him by his scruff, ignoring the loud wail of protest, deposits him into the backpack she’s carrying, and makes her way through the crowd and into the store. She scans the shelves, looking for something specific. It had to be perfect! It was her sole duty as a sister to get Goro addicted to video
games. Anything else was simply unacceptable. The boy hadn’t even blinked when she’d made a sarcastic Fortnite reference this past morning. She shudders at the memory. Akira and Ryuji had thought it was hilarious.

But what would he like? RPGs? Multiplayer? Stealth? Horror? Open world? There were so many options! She plucks Horizon Zero Dawn off the shelf. She’d beaten it in a day, and platinumed it in two. But perhaps Goro wouldn’t take to a female lead straightaway. He’d want something more relatable? Right? She swears she read that on the web somewhere… but she isn’t used to choosing games for beginners, or for anyone else that isn’t herself. She sadly places the game back on the shelf and keeps going.

“Aha!” She shouts victoriously, snatching a game from the shelf and shoving it into Morgana’s face, “This one is perfect! He’ll love it! It’s one of my favs!”

Morgana wrinkles his nose, his tail twitching. “NieR: Automata? I’m not sure...I don’t think I’m the one to ask…”

Futaba pouts, and shoves it back into its spot on the already cramped shelf. It’s not long before she finds another. “Okay! What about this one?! I’ve played it and I liked it!”

“Er...I’m not sure I know what Akechi will like…”

“Oooh! What about Pokémon? It’s a classic! Everyone in the whole world knows about Pokemon!”

Morgana hesitates, “I-I don’t–”


“Enough, Futaba!” Morgana snarls, leaping out of the bag and onto the ground. His tail lashes back and forth as he continues to growl at her. “I don’t care, okay?! I don’t care about what he’s going to like!”

Her mouth snaps shut as she stares down at him in shock. He takes a seat in front of her and lets out a long sigh. “I’m sorry...I didn’t mean to yell at you.”

Futaba nods, still at a slight loss of words. It had been ages since Morgana had gotten angry with her...actually, she thinks that this is the first time it’s happened. When he had taken off earlier before they’d met Haru, it had mostly been Ryuji and Akira he had been angry with. He’d never been upset with just her, and she suspected that he was angry with the situation they’d recently found themselves in more than he was at her.

“Let’s go someplace a little quieter, okay? Especially since I don’t think this place allows animals...” She asks timidly as an employee gives her a nasty glare.

Morgana bobs his head and they make their way out of the store and into the crowded streets of Akihabara. He follows mutely behind her and eventually they come to a quiet café, away from the humdrum of the main streets. Futaba is surprised that the waitresses don’t object to Morgana being there— usually she has to insist that he’s some kind of service cat before they can even enter the building.

She orders a cappuccino and waits patiently for Morgana to speak. He sits on the tabletop and stares out the window before turning back and giving his chest a nervous lick, meeting her eyes.

“I...I’m not sure I agree with everything that’s going on… regarding our new... acquaintance.”
Futaba glances at her lap, feeling awkwardness tinge the air. Does this mean that Morgana would refuse to accept Goro? That she’d have to choose between her brother and her only friends? Did they all feel like this? She knows Akira didn’t… Akira is accepting of Goro, after all, he’s the one who brought them together. He wouldn’t turn his back on them… would he? The damage that Goro had inflicted had been devastating…and everything that Akira was forced to go through to prevent it… She remembers the gut clenching horror she felt when he’d returned home, covered in cuts and bruises. She’d promised herself then and there that she’d never make him suffer through anything like that ever again.

But Goro is the one who suffered, and still does suffer, more than any of them. She still sees the ghost of Shido’s influence haunting his every step. She sees it in the heartbeat of hesitation before he speaks to the group, sees it in the smiles that don’t reach his eyes, and in the doubt that’s seared its way into his soul. But he knows how much she cares for him, knows how much he matters not only to her, but Akira as well. In the lifetime of abuse he was dealt, he deserves his second chance. All of the Thieves had gotten their chance, it was only fair that Goro gets one as well. He’d only been back with them for a short time, but the levels overcome and the change he was already going through was as plain as day. And Futaba would defend him until her last breath.

“But he’s changing!” She blurts out and almost immediately regrets it as Morgana’s expression darkens and his hackles rise. Maybe she needs to think through her words a little more carefully… “I mean…he’s in the process of changing…He’s—he’s getting there.” She amends lamely.

Man, this all sounds so much better in her head. She still really needs to up her stats...

“How do you know that?!” He demands as he digs his claws into the tabletop, “Because he told you?! Because the guy who tried to kill us told you that he changed?!”

Futaba shoves down the sudden burst of protective anger that ignites in her stomach. “That—that was in the past! He’s different now! He’s…he’s trying!”

“Trying,” he scoffs, pacing back and forth, “How do we know that he won’t turn on us again?! We can’t trust him!”

Futaba frowns and brings her knees up to her chest, shrinking in on herself. Morgana seems unusually anxious. “Mona, why are you suddenly being like this? Back in Shido’s palace, you seemed to understand him the most…what changed?”

Morgana pauses, staring at her with wide eyes before curling his lip and stalking to the far end of the table. “Nothing changed! I’ve never trusted him. That was— that was just—”

Futaba reaches over and scoops him up, “Come on, tell me!”

“Let me go!” He hisses, trying in vain to wriggle out of her grasp.

“Tell me what’s wrong, Morgana!” She tightens her grip, hugging him to her chest and pointedly ignoring that bizarre looks they were receiving.

“Put me down right now!!”

“Not until you tell me what’s wrong!”

“Let go!”

“Mona, plea—”
“I said let go!”

Futaba yelps and abruptly releases him, causing Morgana to land on the table with a loud thud. She stares at him, eyes wide behind her glasses, before looking back down at her arm. Thin claw marks run along her forearm already beginning to dot with tiny beads of blood.

She stares at it a moment, everything else around her seeming to have gone quiet. She robotically reaches to her right and grabs a handful of napkins, pressing them to the bright crimson that’s contrasting her pale skin. When was the last time she bled from an actual wound? Not counting the Metaverse? It’s been years...

Morgana’s dilated eyes crack as he takes a few steps back, crouching low onto the table. “I-I didn’t mean to…”

Futaba can’t find it in her to be anything but shocked. Poor Mona is probably close to bursting with all of the emotions that he’s keeping locked away inside him, especially due to the history that Goro has with Akira. “Mona–”

His fur is standing on end and his frightened eyes dart between her and her arm, “I-It w-was... an accident! I-I would never–”

“Hey! This girl’s bleeding!” A man to their left calls to a passing waitress.

“No, it’s–”

Futaba doesn’t have time to react as two waitresses close in on her, asking what happened and if she needs further assistance. She reaches out as Morgana gives himself a startled shake before bounding off the table and out the door. The noise in the café drowns out her shout as he vanishes from her sight.

She glances back down at her arm, blood still pooling in the delicate wound. Odd, considering she doesn’t register any pain. Maybe her brain was still ringing from the accidental K.O? Her mind flickers back to Morgana, and how much pain he could see in his eyes before he’d fled. How long had he been keeping all of this inside? It’s toxic, to keep stuff like that hidden and pretend that it doesn’t exist. After all, she knows the most about burying emotions.

It must have something to do with Akira... Mona would hardly be this protective of just anyone, except maybe Ann. He was probably feeling betrayed, after all, the two of them lived together. Up until now, Morgana probably believed that he knew all of Akira’s secrets.

She purses her lip. *Secrets*, that was what got them into this heaping mess in the first place. Maybe they should’ve come forward with everything after the encounter with Wakaba, or when they had discovered that Goro was alive in the first place. She didn’t realize the pain it would bring to the others. But it wasn’t her fault! She couldn’t see into the future, she hadn’t gained that ability yet!

She dabs at the scratches, pleased to see that they were already beginning to scab over. In a few days, they’d be nothing more than a memory. She politely declines the numerous offers of assistance. She can feel her anxiety tugging at her, whispering lies in her ears and causing her nerves to fray under the curious eyes of all these strangers.

She steels herself. This was a boss she’d taken down a long time ago. She could do this, she has to do this. She has to find Morgana. If he’s really as conflicted as he appears, then this was something that needs to be talked out, and as much as she dreads confrontation, she can’t ignore his feelings. He’s her friend after all.
With a final courteous smile, Futaba quietly makes her way out of the café. She squints in the glare of the setting sun. It’s going to be hard to find him, especially if he doesn’t want to be found. Hunting for him at night would be near impossible, and she doesn’t want him to be alone. She loves the cat dearly, but he often has a tendency to overthink things. That’s how he and Akira balance each other out so well.

If Futaba doesn’t find him, Akira will worry, and the situation will only worsen. In addition, she’s supposed to drop him off at Leblanc after they were done in Akihabara. It’s not too late yet, she still has time! She’s gained enough experience and she’s at a high enough level, that this task will be easy! All she has to do is navigate the crowded streets...at night...alone...it’s basically just a small side quest. And side quests are easy, right?

She takes a deep breath and pokes her head around the corner of a dark alley. Akihabara is still lively, the lights from the various store fronts illuminate the streets, making them bright as day. They would be closing soon though, and then the streets would be abandoned and cloaked in darkness. That was something she hopes she wouldn’t have to navigate. Necronomicon wouldn’t be able to help her out here. She whips out her phone, checking the train times and eyeing the declining battery bar in the top corner... She doubts the station will close soon, but the later it got, the more people that seem to flock to the trains. She doesn’t want to deal with more people than necessary. And if Morgana is gone overnight...

She pushes her glasses up. The last time he disappeared, the others had their worry gauges at the max. But she was pretty sure that this time he wouldn’t come back with a new addition to the team.

*Think. If I was a cat, where would I go?*

Something she would never admit to Morgana out loud is that whenever his emotions get the better of him, he gets more *catty* — pun intended.

Ha, she’s hilarious.

So, given the current state of things, he’d probably go somewhere he feels safe. Some place dark and quiet. Maybe he’d go back to Leblanc on his own? No...that didn’t seem very likely. She needs outside input. Time to call a friend.

She scrolls through her contacts. Should she really bother the others with this? No doubt they were all preparing for the upcoming trip, as well as having their own shit to deal with. Akira would be closing up Leblanc, Makoto and Haru would be dealing with university stuff, Ryuji would be doing God knows what, Yusuke...

That’s it! Yusuke could help! Her finger hovers over the familiar icon, and something nagging in the back of her mind makes her pause.

Why is she always calling for help? She’s perfectly capable of dealing with all of this on her own, so why is she sitting here like some damsel in distress?

Screw it. Time to level up.

She opens the flashlight app on her phone and marches off into the darkening streets.
The bell jingles, and Akira looks up.

"Hey," he greets warmly, wiping his hands off on his apron. "You want your regular before I close up shop?"

"That'd be wonderful." Goro says with a sigh as he tucks his briefcase in a nearby booth; not the countertop like he used to. "Sorry. I hope I'm not imposing."

"Anything for my favorite detective." Akira teases, heating up the coffee siphon. He hears the light scoff coming from the corner of the room. "Although to be honest, I wasn't expecting to see you today. Didn't you say you needed to finish something up for one of your online classes?"

"I finished it this morning, thankfully." Goro says, although he doesn't sound very thankful about it. "I met a few of your friends afterwards."

"Oh?" Akira pauses, looking at him. He'd correct the man to say that they're his friends too (sort of ambiguous at the moment; they'll work on that soon) but he's a little surprised. The first thing that comes to mind is a certain midget, but he shakes it off quickly. Futaba had told them she was going to some Comiket event in Akihabara with Morgana — she'd usually tell Akira if she had planned something with him. Plus, he was under the impression that none of the thieves really wanted to interact with Goro until after they thought over their decision.

Goro doesn't answer for a while, and Akira doesn't nudge him. He takes off his apron and hangs it, two warm cups of coffee in each hand as he plods towards Akechi's booth and sets it down, taking the time to flip the store sign right after before sliding into the seat across from his.

Goro's hand curls appreciatively around his cup, eyes watching the steam rise and dissipate.

"It's Haru."

Akira can't say he saw that coming.

"Oh," he says, for lack of a better way to express his surprise. He blinks. "Wow."

"Shocking, isn’t it?" the brunet stifles a tired chuckle. "She called me out of the blue and asked to meet up. It was jarring, to say the least, but I acquiesced."

"Did it go well?"

"All things considered, yes. Somehow, we managed to come to a mutual understanding." his eyes crinkle a little around the edges as he looks at him. "You don't have to look so concerned, Akira. We had no reason to fight."

Akira could still hear the sickening impact of a fist against a jaw so loud it felt like a firecracker had erupted in the room. He could see the blood trickling out of Goro’s nose as he swiftly attempts to stifle it. He could feel the burgeoning tension that had immediately spiked the air tenfold, the prickle in the air as everyone simultaneously held their breath, muscles clenched, eyes wide and darting; a gut reaction. Was it not a fight when the resulting atmosphere resembled one?

He knows that the man before him no longer has a reason to oppose them. Having found a new purpose, he’s as pliant and receptive as Akira has ever seen him. Haru, on the other hand, had every reason to oppose him — if the other day’s events were any indication.
In the thrall of today’s events, however, he is inclined to believe it was less of an altercation and more of much-needed closure. Akira quirks a brow before slowly nodding, “That’s...refreshing. I’m glad to see you guys trying to get along.”

“Are you aware you sound like a parent?”

“It’s my day job.” Akira replies in sing-song voice as he eyes the mountain of dishes that have climbed higher and higher in the sink over the course of the day. With a resigned sigh, he makes his way towards it. The hot water comes out with a hiss.

The minutes tick by in comfortable silence. Akira whistling quietly as he works, and Goro pretending not to watch him out of the corner of his eye.

“So,” Goro begins with practiced ease, “Haru isn’t the only person I ran into today.”

Akira pauses, turning his head towards him. “You did say you met a few people. Who else did you see?”

He almost takes a step back when he realizes Goro has moved to the counter. Almost. He didn’t even hear him move, didn’t hear the stool scraping across the wooden floor.

Goro eyes him carefully, shoulders ramrod straight and says coolly, “Sakamoto in particular. He mentioned some...interesting things.”

Oh, he’s pretty sure Ryuji says a lot of interesting things. That alone wasn’t much cause for concern, except when the Phantom Thieves were involved. Thankfully, that time has long passed. No, the reason Akira’s heart is dropping into his stomach is from something else. Namely, the insinuation from Goro’s slow pause and thoughtful emphasis at the end.

“He spoke of an... excursion that your group is planning on partaking in.” His overly casual tone betrays his interest, and Akira would have laughed if he isn’t slightly concerned about the verbal beatdown he’d receive in return.

He can almost see Makoto hovering the the shadows, needle sharp stare burning holes into his head with unparalleled precision. He should consult her before giving away any information...but in this current situation, he has two options. One is to play dumb and hope to the high heavens that Goro doesn’t see through it, and the second is simply tell the truth. Goro’s previous occupation as a detective may have been mostly a charade, but his keen intellect rings true. It runs in the family; Akira begrudgingly remembers the times he tries to outsmart Futaba, which is…. never. The last thing Akira needs is to dig himself a hole by attempting to put up a front.

“It’s...something that Ann offered up a week or so ago. She’s doing some modeling and invited us to come see her show.” Akira manages, drying his hands and shoving them into his pockets. Well, he’s not lying. At the very least, knowing why they’re going should be harmless. “It’s... out of town.”

“He spoke of an... excursion that your group is planning on partaking in.” His overly casual tone betrays his interest, and Akira would have laughed if he isn’t slightly concerned about the verbal beatdown he’d receive in return.

“Ah, that sounds like something everyone would enjoy.” He idly sips his coffee, his face set in a perfect neutral mask. “However, I fail to see why and how I would be included in this affair.”

Akira fights back a sigh and braces himself. This wasn’t the discussion he was planning on having tonight, but when had fate ever decided to be kind to them?

“That’s up to you. It’s true that we are planning on inviting you to come along, given that everyone in the group agrees.”

“I see...and you were planning on discussing this with me, correct?” Goro’s eyes harden, voice
echoing with bits of cold steel, “Or did you just assume that I’d follow you anywhere you asked me to?”

The venom in his voice still surprises Akira — he thought they had moved past this. He feels his own temper steadily rising. “Of course not.” He says with exercised precision, something he picked up from the Nijima sisters. “We thought that it would be fun for everyone if you came along.” He tries to suppress a wince. Okay, maybe he could have worded that better.

“Now I thought,” The air prickles instantly as Goro scoffs and half shoves his half empty cup of coffee towards Akira, the liquid inside sloshing angrily. “I made it perfectly clear that I am not a charity case. Please Akira, why don’t we drop this façade of your group welcoming me with open arms?”

His reply is instant. “Maybe not with open arms, but considering...everything, I think they’re taking it rather well.”

Goro snorts and mumbles something under his breath as Akira checks his phone. It was getting pretty late, Morgana and Futaba should be back soon. Maybe with Futaba’s help, Goro would be a little more agreeable.

He turns back to him. “I think that you’d really enjoy this trip, so why don’t you come with us? I think it would do you some good to get out of Japan.”

Goro abruptly sets the mug down on the counter. “Is that what you think?” He says softly. Akira can’t see his expression behind the locks of brown hair that cover his eyes.

He knows immediately that he had said the wrong thing as Goro stands and clenches his fists at his sides, “You think I can’t function here anymore? That I’m too unstable to leave behind?!”

Akira frowns, this was a different kind of anger than the ones’ he’d seen in the past. He almost wouldn’t call it anger, it’s more like...fear.

He walks around the counter and comes to stand in front of him — and before he could think better of it, Akira puts his hands on Goro’s shoulders. “That isn’t what I mean,” He says softly, “and you know it.”

In the back of his mind, Akira registers that this is the closest they’ve been since that night in the alley. The same thought must have crossed Goro’s mind as well because his eyes widen and he takes a step back, and Akira’s hands fall to his sides.

Akira takes a step back as well, allowing Goro to regain his footing. A small part of his brain is smirking at this apparent influence that he had over the ex-detective, and the rest of his brain is stomping it flat and calling him an asshole for even acknowledging it in the first place.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.” Goro says stiffly, attempting to school his features back into neutrality. “I simply find it difficult to believe that after everything I’ve done, that any of you want me around. But yet again,” a small smile plays at the edge of his lips, “I never have understood any of you people in the first place.”

Akira can’t help but grin. The way that Goro has been acting with the others, hell, even parts of his speech, is starting to sound just a touch like Futaba. He wonders if the other boy is aware of it at all.

Goro raises an eyebrow, “Why do you look so smug?”

Akira waves his hand, “Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing.” He walks back behind the counter and
begins cleaning the coffee siphons. He can feel Goro’s expectant stare and with an overly dramatic sigh, he gives in. “I was just thinking that despite everything, you seem much happier now. When I found you, I was... worried about you.”

Goro snorted. “I’m still trying to deduce as to how you found me. I was so careful in covering my tracks, I made sure that there were no records left… I no longer existed.”

Akira smothered his smile as he thinks back to that shift at Crossroads. Ohya had staggered out and he was almost done refilling the liquor bottles when Lala had offhandedly remarked that an interesting young man was taking refuge in one of the bad apartment complexes on the outside of Shinjuku. When Akira had remarked on why should he care? Lala had merely winked and told him to check it out for himself.

How she had even known was beyond him. But then again, Tokyo’s network was undeniably massive, and bars are probably the best way to catch wind of gossip. “Let’s just say that I have connections.”

“How do I want to know how you acquired these connections?”

“Probably not.”

“Duly noted.” Goro sighs and takes a sip from the now cold coffee sitting in front of him. “As to this trip, I suppose I’ll have to consider your offer, if it’s serious...”

“It is.”

“I was afraid of that.”

Akira grins. Victory! A maybe was better than a no. And he had a suspicion that once Futaba turns her big, pleading eyes onto him, her brother will give in without too much of a struggle.

Speaking of Futaba, Akira checks his phone once more. No new notifications; she should have been here ages ago.

“Hey Goro,” the boy jumps at the mention of his name, “have you heard from Futaba recently?”

Goro shakes his head and checks his phone, “No, I spoke with her a few hours ago when she said she was going to Akihabara.” His eyes narrow, “Why do you ask?”

“She was supposed to be back here with Morgana an hour ago. She usually tells me if she’s going to be out late…” Worry gnaws in his gut. Something was off, he could feel it. “I’m going to try calling her, give me a sec.”

He turns away, noticing the concern growing on Goro’s face. It seems that he genuinely cares for her, just as Akira knew he would once he was successful in bringing the two of them together. He dials the number he knows by heart and sets it to speakerphone.

It goes straight to voicemail.

“She would never let her phone die, and I doubt she’d be careless enough to part with it either.” Goro murmurs softly, getting to his feet. “Something must be wrong.”

Akira hits redial, and again, no answer.

He can’t deny that it’s odd for her not to pick up, let alone twice. Her phone is usually surgically
attached to her hand. “Maybe she left it somewhere on accident?” The excuse sounds feeble, even to him. The withering glare he receives in return is enough to convince him that it’s time to take action.

He finishes the last bit of cleaning duties quickly, and soon the two of them have locked up the cafe and are making their way towards the train station. Akira glances at the sky, no moon tonight, and once the sun sets all the way… It would be no place for someone like Futaba to be out on her own.

Goro walks steadily beside him, his face carefully blank. The only sign of worry being the way his eyes narrow just a fraction as they pass people headed home from a long day at work. Goro wordlessly boards a train bound for Akihabara, not even checking to see if Akira follows him. Honestly, Akira could probably head back to Leblanc and the other boy wouldn’t even notice. Not that he would though, not with Futaba and Morgana out alone at night. Tokyo isn’t the safest city in the world and it sets his teeth on edge just thinking about it.

No, he’s not going to jump to conclusions.

When they reach the gaming hub, shops are already beginning to close for the night. Akira scours the crowd, but finds no signs of the familiar flash of orange. Panic takes root in his stomach as they make their way up and down the streets.

“We’re splitting up. Meet back here in ten, and don’t be late. I’d rather not have to go chasing after you as well.” Goro orders tonelessly, and before Akira could put a word in, he turns a corner and disappears into the thinning crowd. Akira sighs, shaking his head at the retreating figure. A miniscule pit of warmth blooms in the base of his gut at the detective’s words, but he ignores it. He can dwell on Goro’s uncharacteristic concern for him later, right now he has other worries to focus on.

He doubts that Futaba is still in Akihabara. She would have no reason to stay so long here, and he knows she gets bored easily. But she should be with Morgana, and the cat dislikes changes in routine… so what could have happened?

He scowls as he navigates around everyone. He stops in front of a popular video game store. There’s no way that Futaba could have passed that up, so maybe the employees had seen her? It couldn’t hurt to ask…

“Excuse me,” Akira says quietly as he approaches the counter. “Have you–”

“We’re closing up soon.” The employee answers in an annoyed tone. “You’ve got ten minutes.”

Akira grinds his teeth, fighting down his rising frustration. He has to stay cordial, getting angry will get him nowhere. “No, I’m actually looking for a girl. I was hoping you might have seen her. She has—”

“I don’t know, dude,” the guy waves his hand, “lots of girls come in here.”

Akira takes a deep breath. It’s a very good thing that Goro hadn’t come into the store with him. He would’ve torn the man to shreds by now. “She has orange hair and glasses, and is carrying around a cat. Seen anyone like that?”

“Huh.” The employee’s eyes widen in recognition. “Oh, yeah! There was a girl like that in here a few hours ago. Although she started talking to the cat, like really talking. Kinda weird if you ask me.”

“Did you see where she went?”

He shrugs, “No clue. Although I think she said something about finding a quiet place…”
Akira thanks him before heading back towards the meeting spot. Some place quiet, huh? She’d probably have been hungry too… so maybe a food court? Nah, those aren’t quiet.

He voices his discovery to Goro when he finds him. The brunet’s eyes light up and a ghost of smile breaks through his features. “There’s a small café not too far from here, perhaps there?”

Before Akira can get a word in edgewise —again— Goro has bolted.

He sighs as he stares tiredly at the spot which he had just occupied mere milliseconds ago. So Goro is that type when it comes to his sister, huh….

By the time Akira catches up to the older guy in front of the café, the streets had faded into darkness. The sun had set about half an hour ago, and the lights from the city are left to guide them.

Goro makes quick work of the café, and Akira has to admire his detective skills. It takes him approximately zero point two seconds to corner a waitress, and a few minutes later, they learn that Futaba had indeed been there. Akira finds himself blinking in disbelief when she tells them of the incident. Apparently, the cat she had with her had become violent and managed to give her a few good scratches before taking off. She assumes that the poor girl had left the café to find her runaway cat.

Akira makes the mistake of looking at Goro’s face. What he sees is pure, unbridled fury. It hovers over him like a thunder cloud. He doesn’t bother to thank the girl as he storms out of the café, the door slamming shut loudly behind him.

Akira mutters a hasty thanks to the bewildered girl before darting off after him. Things were starting to get slightly more tense than he anticipated. Goro’s anger is starting to get out of hand. Futaba wasn’t completely helpless, she did manage to survive Yaldabaoth’s apocalypse with them. The girl was smart, and wasn’t overly prone to reckless decisions…usually. However, Akira values his life, and isn’t about to tell the angry ex detective that he may be overreacting just a tad.

He lets out a huff as he trails after Goro. How did he always end up playing peacemaker? He isn’t even that good at it. The brunet had cut directly back through Akihabara, and if Akira had been any less observant, he most certainly would have lost him in the maze of Tokyo’s streets.

He doesn’t know how to explain it, but as he shadows the detective, he feels something prick the back of his neck; something so faint it was only detectable through the long hours spent honing his skills in the Metaverse. His hand twitches towards his side, and he can feel the ghost of the knife that had stayed so loyally put during his time as a thief.

They’re being followed.

He feels his heart rate lower on instinct and his breathing dip into silence. They’re almost to the train station. There’s a good chance that if they caught a train at the precise moment, they could lose this unwanted intruder. His footsteps mutely hit the pavement, and he fights the urge to drop into a crouch. He can’t afford to tip either of them off; the intruder or Goro, whose running on too much adrenaline to even notice they are being tailed. It isn’t that Akira doesn’t trust him… but he isn’t comfortable enough in the situation to let Crow loose.

So he takes a deep breath, lets his arms hang at his sides, forces his footsteps back to normal, and doesn’t look back. He’s completely defenseless. It’s a rushed gamble, especially if this stranger turns out to be dangerous. But he doesn’t have time to worry as they enter the station.

He finds Goro staring at a map of the subway, hand positioned at his chin and his eyes endlessly
scanning the different routes. It flashes through Akira’s mind in that moment that the boy looks absolutely exhausted.

He positions himself closely at Goro’s side, keeping an eye on the stairs they entered from. Akihabara is a small station, there’s only one entrance and one exit. There’s also a chance that Goro is the intended target, and if that’s true, Akira has to be close enough to intercept.

If anyone dares lay a finger on Goro’s perfectly groomed head; there will be slow, torturous, hell to pay. Akira would make sure of it.

“Ahah!” Goro exclaims victoriously, startling Akira out of his thoughts. He reluctantly looks away from the stairs, focusing on the tiny dot that Goro’s finger was hovering over.

“Kanda?”

“Precisely!” Goro nods abruptly, “It’s close enough that Morgana can get there by foot… and from what I’ve gathered, Futaba’s injuries appeared to be an accident.”

Akira catches the hitch at his words. He can tell that the boy is still furious with Morgana, but at least he’s still thinking clearly enough to acknowledge that this was all a misunderstanding. Or so Akira hopes. “But why Kanda specifically?”

Goro stares at him a moment before pinching his nose and letting out a sigh. “Tell me, Akira, you and Morgana have been to Kanda before, yes? Often?”

His mind darts back to his strategic shogi games with Hifumi. He hasn’t seen her in a while, now that he really thinks of it. “Yes, but not so much recently.”

Goro nods, as if trying to encourage him. “And…?”

Akira’s blank stare is met with another sigh. “Honestly, Akira,” Goro says as he brushes some stray hairs out of his eyes. “Morgana was most likely horrified with himself and his actions. The waitress at the café said he fled.”

“Okay, so…?”

“…It seems we must work more on your deduction skills.”

With a massive amount of effort, Akira manages to hold his tongue. Snark would get him nowhere in this situation. His eyes flicker back to the stairs for a brief moment…nothing so far. “Goro… just get to the point.”

His sass is rewarded with a raised eyebrow. “Every creature on this planet has two instincts ingrained into them at birth: fight or flight. Mona is clearly demonstrating the latter, along with what I’m assuming is a large amount of remorse. He’s been around humans long enough to understand our customs. So tell me, what would you do in this situation? If you were too ashamed to face her?”

Akira wracks his brain, only to come up empty handed. He knows his answer is clear on his face, and his eyes meet Goro’s cold and bitter ones.

“You would go and confess your sins.”
Now that he thinks about it rationally, it’s a little dramatic, not to mention unlikely. But they’ve gotten this far, and Goro seems strangely set on it, so what’s the harm in checking? He couldn’t possibly be right, as Akira was pretty sure that Futaba would spontaneously catch on fire if she so much as put one toe inside a church.

By the time they reach Kanda, Akira has come to the conclusion that this suspicious man tailing them poses absolutely zero threat. When they had caught the train a few minutes earlier, he had stepped on at the last second. Akira had kept his eyes trained on the door, and thankfully Goro had found a few seats at the far end of the train, meaning there was no threat from the back.

The man looks out of breath, and his eyes scan the car in an almost frenzied manner. When he catches Akira watching him, he hurriedly sits down at the opposite end, keeping his eyes on the floor. His movements are sloppy and uncoordinated. He’s untrained, and likely a civilian. But then why take an interest in two students? Akira looks at Goro, then back at the man.

It’s when he takes off his hat and runs a nervous hand through his short black hair, that recognition hits Akira like a bus.

Oh yes, Akira has most definitely seen him before. Although no name comes to mind, they have spoken before, multiple times in fact.

He’s an intern— only a few years older than themselves, and currently working under one Sae Niijima. Akira swears under his breath. She could have just called him. He knew that they wouldn’t be able to keep Goro a secret forever. But assigning a tail? Honestly. Will he ever be free of Niijima theatrics? Not to mention that she decided to do this at the worst possible time.

He runs a hand over his face. Why him?

He feels Goro stand next to him as the train pulls into the Kanda station. Akira slowly gets to his feet as Goro flies forward, still oblivious to the man who freezes as he passes him. Akira frowns, watching the other boy blindly making his way out of the Kanda station. Could he really be that oblivious? Was he so focused on Futaba that he couldn’t see what was right in front of him?

Akira catalogues this new information in the back of his mind. It may prove useful in the future. At the very least, it would give him something to tease him about once this was all over.

He dutifully follows Goro, not sparing the intern a glance as he glides smoothly past him. He senses rather than sees him get up and trail after them. Kanda is a quiet area, with the small, decorative, church being the center point of attraction. Akira feels the tension drain away as he spots a familiar orange mop sitting on the steps, cradling a small black cat in her arms.

Goro’s actually right?! His sense of relief is overshadowed by the disbelief that Goro is actually right, and that Akira himself is wrong.

He makes the mistake of checking up on their tail, and looking away from Goro. The next thing he hears is a loud squeak from Futaba and a furious yowl from Morgana as Goro marches up, grabs him by the scruff, and hauls him out of her arms.

“What the hell were you thinking?!” He spits at the cat, “You left Futaba to chase after you by herself at night in the middle of Tokyo!”

Morgana curls his lip and snarls, his fangs glinting in the darkness as he curls in on himself. “Put me down this instant or~”
“Or what?” Goro growls in a frenzy, giving him a firm shake, “you’ll scratch me?! Make all of us go chasing after you?! Do you honestly believe you’re that important?!”

Morgana lets out a feral hiss, hackles rising as Goro continues to shake him.

Futaba pleads and pulls on Goro’s arm, “Goro! Put him down! It was all a misunderstanding, please~”

But he ignores her, all his ire and malice focused directly on Morgana. “What if something happened to her? What would you have been able to do?! NOTHING!”

“Goro, everything’s fine.” Akira interjects with as much calm as he can muster, coming to stand next to him, “Put Morgana down pl–”

Goro whirls on Akira, looking eerily akin to the crazed thief they had fought in the depths of Shido’s palace months ago. “Stay out of this, Akira!” He hisses, “It doesn’t concern you!”

“Goro, please!” Futaba begs, still pulling desperately on his arm, “I’m fine, Morgana didn’t do anything wrong! Please!” She sniffs, her eyes wet.

Something inside Akira snaps as he sees red. He can’t explain it. In all the time he has known Goro, he’d never been angry with him– not when they’d fought in Shido’s palace, and not when he learned the detective planned to kill him. He’d felt sorry for him, he’d wanted to help him. But seeing him treat both Morgana and Futaba in such a way, it sends him over the edge.


Time comes to a standstill. All three of them are gaping at him. In all his time as leader of the Phantom Thieves, he’d never once so much as raised his voice at any of them. Hell, he’d never even let them know when he was angry. He’d learned the hard way that anger led to nothing good.

But now was different. It’s as though a blistering inferno rages through his blood. It's takes all of his self control to not escalate the situation even further. The seconds tick by in thick silence as he visibly struggles to get his emotions under control.

“You need to calm down, and think.” Akira snaps trying to keep his voice down as his anger reverts to the calm before the storm. He releases the other boy’s arm and pries a frozen Morgana out of his grip. He takes the trembling cat in his arms, and strokes him slowly. Morgana’s eyes are fully dilated, his ears pressed to his skull, and his fur standing on end. Akira pulls his bag over his shoulder and slips the shocked cat inside.

He turns back to Akechi, eyes hard and unflinching as steel. “If you had been paying attention and using your so called prime deduction skills, you would have noticed the man tailing us since we left Akihabara.”

Akechi’s eyes widen a fraction and dart behind him, and Akira is almost certain he can see the poor intern duck his head behind the newspaper he’s pretending to read. Akira turns his attention to Futaba, and says gently, “Are you alright?”

She nods mutely, eyes wide and cheeks wet behind her glasses.

“All right.” He says softly to her, “Time to go home then.” He picks up his bag. Morgana has poked his head out and is watching them all through narrowed eyes. He appears to have calmed slightly, but Akira can hear the uneven catch in his breathing. He scowls as he feels his rage simmer back at the surface.
He faces Akechi. He can read the other boy pretty well at this point, and his expression is carefully blank, but Akira can see the shock and hurt reflecting in his eyes. But he can’t find it in himself to care. There was a line, and for the very first time, Akechi has crossed it.

He’s released the wrath Akira has so carefully kept sealed away under lock and key.

So he says coldly, “You’re more than welcome to come back when you have your anger under control and can apologize to Morgana.” *Hypocrite*, the voice inside his head whispers.

He turns back to Futaba and offers her his hand, and she takes it without hesitation. She glances between them nervously, but compiled when he leads her towards the train station. He doesn’t look back, but can feel when Futaba does.

He stops beside the intern, who looks up and almost jumps a foot in the air when Akira speaks to him. “Tell Sae I’ll give her a call tomorrow, but for now, you need to leave immediately.” The last thing he needs would be him foolishly approaching Akechi.

He gulps and slowly nods before taking off in almost a dead sprint for the station.

Akira lightly tugs Futaba to follow him. She falters and looks back to the steps of the church, where Akechi is still staring after them, as though in some kind of trance.

When they board the train, Akechi doesn’t follow.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for that whiplash from Ryuji to Yusuke to Futaba. It was intentional, although probably nothing compared to Goro’s whiplash *badum tss*.

Also, Ryuji’s thought process 99.99999999% of this chapter.

Yusuke: —penetrates into reality.
Futaba, cackling and poking her head out of nowhere: Nooooooot a good enough reason to use the word *penetrate*.

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