The Many Quirks of Phantom Thievery
by PsychicBeagle

Summary

Delving into the hearts of criminals and fighting heart demons is all well and good, but there's no way the people that do it are normal. Let's see what they get up to, eh?

(Pretty much just a bunch of cool ideas for shorts I have over the course of a play through. Don't expect anything long and complex, this is just for fun. I'll write these as they come to me, so it should be chronological.)
Fledgling Thieves

He might have been a little presumptuous to think so, but Akira thought he had a solid grasp on this whole Phantom Thief thing. Morgana had drilled the basics into his skull over the last week, he had grown used to his enhanced mobility in the Metaverse, and he was now tearing through what had to be his fiftieth hoard of Shadows alongside his equally adjusted team. With Skull at his side and Panther and Morgana providing healing and long range support, it would only be a matter of time before King Kamoshida’s reign ended.

The second to last Shadow popped like an over stuffed bubble, and the last, down to the dregs of his health, dropped to his knees and groveled. Watching such an arrogant thing as this imp lose its confidence was oh so satisfying, especially after nearly half a year of being looked down on himself. A small part of his mind was alarmed by the sudden onset of sadism, but he allowed himself to forget his worries and go with the flow for the time being.

“O-okay, I surrender! Don’t kill me!” He grinned predatorily at his crestfallen foe, a rehearsed facade to hide the turning of the cogs. He tallied the healing items in his pack and the yen in his purse, both of which would have surely been overflowing had it not been for the Metaverse’s expanding influence on containers. Weighing possessions against power, the latter struck him as the worthier investment.

“Join us, and we’ll spare you.” The imp’s head raised enough to look him in the eyes, and his clasped hands turned from begging for his life to praying to his new lord.

“Yes, I accept! You drive a hard bargain, just like…” His eyes lit up, the haze of the lustful king’s corruption clearing away. “Wait, I remember now!” His posture straightened, and he hovered before the thieves once more, certain of his safety in their presence. “My name is Incubus, and my real home is the sea of souls.”

“I am thou, thou art I.” The vow rang through Akira’s soul, chains that bound a forgotten aspect to his greater whole. Blue flame erupted from Incubus’s being, his skin dissolving until all that remained was his pure essence. It flooded towards Akira all at once, and when it met his mask, he accepted it as he had many wayward aspects before.

“Alright, dude!” It was no more than a second after the light faded into the background of Akira’s mind that Ryuji rushed in to celebrate his pal’s newest acquisition with a hardy pat to the back. Akira kindly refused to let him know how much it stung. He couldn’t ruin the pearly white smile on his first mate’s face. “At this rate, all of that bastard’s lackeys are gonna be on our side!”

“That’s unlikely.” Morgana had no such compunctions, however. Piercing blue slits of eyes looked condescendingly up at Ryuji. “The sea of souls is infinite in length and depth. As long as Kamoshida’s Shadow is strong enough to draw others in, his Palace will be filled to his liking. Chances are he already has a new Incubus recruited to fill the old one’s armor.” He turned to Akira, ignoring (at least visibly) the way Ryuji steamed at the joy assassination. “Still, today’s gains have been impressive. If it does come down to a fight with Kamoshida, we’ll be ready.”

“If you say so…” Ann was averting her eyes from the rest of the team, twirling a lock of hair around her finger. The uncertainty in her eyes drained the joy from Akira’s latest conquest.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s just…” She looked at him closely, her eyes running over him skeptically. “You said
getting new Personas was like taking in a new personality, right?” He nodded, still not seeing what made her so uneasy, “You did see what you just took in right? That thing was just…” He could see her struggle to keep her eyes pointed above his waist, a sliver of disgust worming into her expression whenever she failed. “And from Kamoshida’s heart, too…”

“Actually, Panther, it’s perfectly fine.” Morgana hopped up onto a nearby table, giving himself some extra height and, in his mind, authority. “Incubus is a spirit of lust, but lust is a perfectly normal part of the human spirit. Without it, there wouldn’t be much drive to make more humans. As long as it doesn’t become the focus of the spirit, it’s healthy.” Akira nodded in agreement and tapped the side of his mask.

“Arsene’s still in here, too. It balances out.” Ryuji slung an arm around his shoulder, snickering under his breath.

“I don’t know, Joker, he sorta has those hungry eyes going, too. Did you see the way he was looking at that lady Shadow before?” Akira rolled his eyes.

“He looks that way at everyone.”

“Hey, I don’t judge tastes.” Ann was next to get that devilish look, her earlier discomfort forgotten. Whether it was from Morgana’s explanation or Ryuji’s joke, no one knew.

“He is pretty handy with those chains.” Ryuji’s laughter abruptly cut off. He cautiously looked at where his hand was, the tip of a finger brushing against a link draped over Akira’s shoulder.

“You up for some experimentation, Skull?” He leaned in close, his grin sharp enough to cut through concrete. “The safe word is Shibuya.”

“Nope. Nuh uh, not happening.” He abruptly stepped away, grabbing Morgana and putting him on Akira’s shoulder. “Do that kinky shit with Mona. I’m vanilla, dude.” He shuffled stiffly down the hall, and Ann and Akira’s laughter haunted him the whole way.

“But I’m not into bestiality.”

“I told you, I’m not a cat!”

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Ann tapped her foot impatiently, looking down from the marble rafters with the rest of the team. Well, two of the three.

“I think that’s enough, Joker.”

“Hold up, I know there was something else.” His eyes darted across the room only slightly slower than the rest of him, checking every nook and cranny for a hint of treasure. The Third Eye was starting to cramp up like nothing else, but the extra weight of loot on his back would soothe it real quickly.

“Ugh…” As Morgana cleaned his fur and Ryuji balanced his lead pipe on his forehead, Ann wondered if it would be more expedient to wait or whip their de facto leader into surrender.
“Come on, just a little higher!” Akira strained under Ryuji’s weight, but he wanted to see the results of their hard work just as much, so he persisted. He even dealt with the occasional glob of glittery gunk dripping down onto his slick overcoat. “You almost got it up there, Panther?”

“Yep! Just a few more strokes.” Morgana stared at the Phantom Thief totem pole and groaned.

“I thought you were above these idiots’ pettiness, milady?”

“She is. Literally.” If he hadn’t been the base supporting his precious Ann, Akira was sure Morgana would have clawed his face up. Totally worth it.

“There we go!” Ann backflipped gracefully from the top of the tower. The sudden shift in gravity knocked Ryuji off balance, and he fell to the ground, his thick metal spine carving into the marble tiles. Akira was too enamored with their masterpiece to bother with such things as falling.

Above them, Kamoshida’s unholy statue had been reborn. The scarlet lipstick brought out the dopiness of his smile, and the eyeliner highlighted the soullessness in his eyes.

“The blush was a nice touch.”

“Why thank you.”

“Take that, douchebag!”

“Are you three done yet?” Morgana had ran ahead of them, taking a perch on the rafters above. “We have bigger fish to fry, you know. Hurry up.” He scurried away over their heads, scouting out the next area as the others looked on. Ryuji hummed as a thought struck.

“You know, that probably would’ve been easier if we just rappelled down from there.” A silence spread through the group, only broken as Ann smiled at their handiwork.

“Still worth it, though.”

“Hell yeah.”

“Definitely.”

“I look forward to working with you.” Succubus touched a finger to her lips, a smoky moan sliding through. “It will be… pleasurable.” Her flame was sealed away in Akira’s mask, and he could feel the eyes on the back of his head. Ann gave up, staring straight ahead.

“No comment.”
“There’s no shame in being in touch with your inner woman.” Akira glared back, and Ryuji avoided the red hot coals that were his eyes with a smirk on his face.

“Don’t make me call Arsene.”

Chunks of meticulously carved stone fell like sand, but the thieves couldn’t hear it over the blood pumping through their ears. Ryuji and Ann were panicking, their running akin to puppets being dragged across a windy stage. They only found comfort in how composed their leader looked, but beneath the mask, Akira was the most terrified of them all. He constantly glanced back, both to check on the advancement of the crumbling castle and monitor his ragged teammates.

Ann was quickly running out of breath, but the will to live burned brightly in her eyes. She would be fine. Ryuji was much the same, but a hint of doubt clouded his determination. Akira didn’t like the way he kept glancing down at his leg, either. He remembered what had happened to it all too clearly, and it would be too fitting for the injury to haunt him at this moment.

The fates weren’t blind to the perfection of present circumstances, and they were historically swift to the cruelest decisions. A speck of light made itself known at the end of the hall, just within reach, when Ryuji yelled in agony.

Akira ground to a stop. Halfway between him and the ravenous abyss was Skull, toppled and clutching his right knee. His screams strained through clenched teeth. Ann had been quicker to stop, trying in vain to heft her fallen teammate onto her shoulder.

He knew it was a fruitless effort. The Metaverse’s amplifications mostly hit her agility and dexterity. She didn’t have the strength necessary to haul the brunt of Ryuji’s weight, and that was without factoring in his heavy, metal garb and the matter of seconds before the floor collapsed under them both, sealing them away in the depths of Kamoshida’s rotten heart.

“Joker, Panther, hurry!” Morgana called from near the exit to reality, regret poisoning his every word. “We don’t have enough time to help him! If you don’t get out while you can, it’ll be a party wipe!”

“I’m not leaving him behind, damnit!” Her body might not have been the strongest, but her spirit was unwavering. She managed to get Ryuji’s arm over her back, but that was the farthest she could go at more than a burdened shuffle. He tried to push her away, but his strength had left him behind, a muffled weep escaping him at the realization. Akira could only watch as the floorboards beneath them started to come undone.

‘No, this can’t…’ In that moment, his mind was a hundred miles away. The ramshackle supports he had built were cracking and waning, his one comfort amidst a cold, uncaring world collapsing at his feet.

‘I won’t… I can’t be alone again!’ Suddenly, the uncertainty and terror in his heart turned to flame, brighter than all the stars above. With a guttural roar only found in those most desperate of beasts, he tore the mask from his face and hurled it into the darkness.

“ARSENE!” The mask bursted into blue fire, and his rebellious spirit’s voice rang through his mind. And then came the chains. At first, it was only the normal ringing, but then something
pulled them taut. No, not pulled, pushed. The iron ground against the outside of his skull, and the moment Arsene materialized, a resounding crack echoed into the depths of his mind. His thoughts had scattered in the wake of inhumane pain, his body locking in its summoning stance.

Even without his greater whole’s input, however, Arsene acted all the same.

“I have heeded your desperation. Phantom Thieves that struggle against the binds of corruption, I shall shatter this wicked fate!” Azure light tore through the hall, headed by two slits of crimson. Ann only had the time to glance before it passed, and the chains that served as its tail ensnared both her and Ryuji. She was forced to squint to protect her eyes from the blinding light, but through that slim peephole, she could have sworn that the red of Arsene’s coat had been burned away, exchanged for a regal white.

Arsene’s hands swept down, grasping the still paralyzed Akira by his shoulders. Morgana had the mind to stay clear of the incoming fireball, diving through the exit into the gateway back to reality. When the others followed, Arsene’s body was dissolved by the touch of the real world, leaving only the light of day to carry them home.

“Hmm, how curious.” A voice like chiming bells flittered in Akira’s ears. He tried to open his eyes, but all that he saw was a fog of deep blue. “It was only for a moment, but the inmate’s Fool gave way to the World.”

“That can’t be right!” The second was more akin to a pair of cymbals crashing through his eardrums. “Master was clear, a change like that should only be possible at the end of a journey, but the inmate isn’t even close to rehabilitated!” Both were silenced by an unearthly chuckle, and Akira felt like he was drowning in the thickest oil.

“It seems the trickster is quite special, beyond even his own ilk. We must watch him closely.” The blue fog parted, giving way to a thinner golden haze. A streak of bright yellow stood out from the rest, and it was in observing its movements that he realized he was being shaken. A voice poked through the cotton padding his mind.

“-ude, wake up! You can’t go saving our asses and kick the bucket, it’s not fair!”

“The only thing that might kill him is you throttling him like that, you big ape.”

“Shut your trap, cat! Not like you care about a few of us dropping as long as you still have one to work with!”

“Ryuji, sto…” Akira tried to speak, but the flow of air triggered the most violent coughing fit he had experienced in his life. He knew he must’ve hacked right in Ryuji’s face, but he was too ecstatic to hear his leader’s voice again to care.

“Yo, Ann, he’s up!”

“Thank God!” She rushed into his line of sight next, and it was only when his breathing settled that he could see both of them were on the verge of tears. “Are you okay? I have some water in my bag somewhere if I can just…”
“M’fine, really.” The exhaustion was clear in his voice, and his hair had devolved from organized chaos to complete anarchy, but he was alive, *they* were alive, and that was more than enough to define as fine to him. “Don’t blame Morgana. He was trying to be realistic.”

“Like he said. I thought you were down for the count. Heck, I saw you trying to shove Ann off of you!”

“Doesn’t mean you have to be so blunt about it!” Said the guy with the lead pipe. Maybe that sentiment was shared among the quartet, or maybe the fact that they had just escaped certain death with the treasure in tow was finally hitting them, but, whatever they were thinking at the time, all they could do was laugh tiredly. The sun was going down, but for the Phantom Thieves, things were looking brighter than ever.
In the Ruins of Decadence

Chapter Summary

"I'm not gonna let you sleep tonight!"
That's what he said. That's what he meant.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Come on, no need to fight it. We both know what you want!” The hideous, bug eyed form of Kamoshida’s Shadow loomed over Ann, his slimy, purple tongue dangling from parted lips. His pink skin was dyed a flushed red, the fly in his web too alluring to hold back.

“Stop it! Back off!” Ann struggled in his grasp, but his massive hands had pinned her arms in place. She couldn’t reach her mask, and without the ability to remove it, Carmen was locked away where she couldn’t intervene.

“Oh, I see. You don’t want to take the spotlight away from that friend of yours. What was her name? Shiho?” Bile rose in Ann’s throat, her failure to save her best friend from this monster’s advances sickening her to her stomach. “Don’t you worry, there’s more than enough men here for both of you. Hell, for every lovely little lady in my harem! But for now, let’s focus on you.”

Kamoshida leaned in close, and Ann couldn’t stop the tears from flowing as his tongue met the hem of her shirt…

“AAAAAGH!” Ann’s shrill scream filled the halls, and she was up before she could remember where she was. She wasn’t in that castle. She couldn’t be in that castle. It was gone for good, she had worked hard to make sure of it. No, she was in her own bed, home alone, as she often was. No perverted teachers taking advantage of her, no demons forcing themselves on her…

…No friends to help soothe her troubled heart…

Forgetting how late it surely was, she grabbed her phone, desperately hunting for her group chat.

Ann: Hey, guys, are you still up?

A moment of lucidity made her regret the message. Her phone said it was nearing two in the
morning. No one sane would be up that late, not even on a Sunday.

Ryuji: Yeah. I’ve been, uh, studying and junk. What’s up?

Thank God her friends weren’t sane.

Ann: Same, but I’m not having much luck. It’s hard to think straight after all we did yesterday.

Ryuji: I know, right? I’m, like, this close to just throwing in the towel. I can’t handle English normally, but now? No way.

She wasn’t dumb. Something was up. Ryuji never studied English without being actively pushed, and his mom wouldn’t be up at this hour to do it. Even so, she couldn’t claim honesty in this case. Maybe she could keep up the act a little longer.

Ann: Hey, how about you come over to my place tomorrow? I could help you with that.

Ryuji: Sweet! You’re fluent, right? I could totally use a hand.

Akira: Same.

Ryuji: Whoa, you’re up late, too?

Akira: Nah, Morgana was eavesdropping and woke me up when he saw Ann needed help.

And Akira knew something was up. They only met a few weeks prior, but that was long enough to say that he was sharper than most. Shit.

Ryuji: Figures. Drop everything to help his crush, but when I’m about to die.

Ann quickly revoked the swear. She almost forgot who she was dealing with. Those two were too soft on the inside to chide her for little white lies.

Ann: You’re not letting that go anytime soon, are you?

Ryuji: Not until he fesses up and apologizes.

Akira: Mona says he’s very sorry.
Ryuji: I don’t believe you.

They had left the chat after about ten minutes of Akira trying, and failing, to convince Ryuji that Morgana had actually said sorry, and Ann hadn’t slept a minute since. She couldn’t. Whenever she closed her eyes, she was back in that castle.

She was back there, looking Kamoshida in his wanting, horrible eyes…

The doorbell rang, and Ann jumped in her skin. She had been waiting for it for so long, but a lapse in her focus had made it a terrifying intrusion. She quietly prayed she could get through a study session without breaking down in front of the others. She didn’t want to be the weak one of the lot. Just once in the real world, she had to be strong. She just needed them around to calm herself down. That’s what she told herself, at any rate.

“Come in, it’s unlocked!” Ryuji was quick to take the invite, but Ann could tell he wasn’t quite himself. His movement was less springy than usual, and his slouch was too deep to be a punk thing. On top of that, she noticed a little speck of black under his eyes, a sign that he hadn’t quite applied his coverup layer right. He hadn’t expected Ann to be right there in the living room, but when he noticed, he straightened himself out. Not that it helped. Now his stance was too straight.

“Morning. I’ve got my books, and, uh…” He blinked a couple of times, the flicker of his eyelids sluggish. “You do know you’re still your PJs, right?” Her heart jumped into her throat. She was, indeed, still in her sleepwear, a set of pink, fluffy pajamas.

“Uh… Yeah! The rest of my clothes are in the wash, and…”

“Right, got it. Need to keep all that designer stuff clean.” He plopped down on the couch next to her, his bag carelessly dropped near the coffee table. “Huh, here I thought Akira would show up before me. He’s pretty on point with meet ups.” True. Whenever they planned a study session at a cafe, he was always there first and preemptively ordered everyone’s preferred drink. If she had gone to sleep, she would have half expected to wake up with him in her kitchen putting something together for her. You know, in the friendly way.

“He’s probably still recovering from the heist. After that stunt he pulled with Arsene, he needs to sleep in a little.” Though she doubted he slept at all, if the pattern held.

“That was crazy, even by our standards. Speaking of…” His voice trailed off, going uncharacteristically soft, but it didn’t seem to be out of exhaustion. “I never got a chance to thank you. You know, for coming back for me. I really appreciate it.” The sincerity of his confession hit her right where it hurt.

“Oh, please, if it wasn’t for Akira, neither of us would have made it.”

“That doesn’t change what you tried to do. Most people would’ve been happy to drop the dead weight.” His hand slid over his right knee, hiding his shame. “Kamoshida was, and the rest of the track team…”

“Well screw them anyway!” The burst of anger shocked even her, but she knew better than to bottle it up now. “If they couldn’t tell how hurt you were, how bullshit all of that was, then I say…"
they didn’t deserve you in the first place. The Ryuji I know is a standup, courageous guy that sticks
to his guns, and there’s no way in Hell I’d leave you to rot with the rest of that bastard’s heart!”

“Well said, Lady Ann.” They both nearly jumped out of their skins when Morgana commented from atop the nearby recliner.

“Whoa, when did you get here!?”

“Same time as him.” Ann glanced over to the front door, which was slowly creaking open to admit Akira. She was about to greet him properly, but once he stepped out of direct sunlight, the gleam on his glasses passed. His eyes were ringed with darkened skin, and the inch beneath them was marred by heavy bags. It was like the drop of some emotional shield, the strength to hold up a calm public image waning.

“Dude, what the Hell’s up with…?” Ryuji gestured to his own face, the right words not coming to him. Akira shrugged.

“Probably the same thing up with all of us.” Unaware of just how much everyone else knew, Ryuji tried to play it off.

“What? Come on, man, we’re not as messed up as…”

“Ryuji.” When Akira’s cool tone withered, it was clear they couldn’t just overlook this. “I know you both have makeup on. Ann’s is almost convincing, but not quite.” He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to them. “Sleep deprivation makes it hard to focus.” Ryuji looked at her, and both of their false fronts dropped at the same time. He took Akira’s offer, and when he finished, his eyes were every bit as troubled. Ann had her own wipe on hand, and she didn’t need a mirror to tell that hers weren’t much better. She nodded towards the chair Morgana was already lazing on, and Akira gratefully accepted the seat. Ryuji broke the awkward silence.

“So, none of us got any sleep, did we?”

“Well, Akira was technically asleep, but it wasn’t that restful.” It was the first time Morgana had been so openly concerned about someone else outside of combat. “He was tossing and turning all night, and that little ping from chat was enough to wake him up. He didn’t try at all after that.” From the sounds of it, he had been too preoccupied looking out for his caretaker to sleep himself. The only reason it wasn’t obvious was because no one knew how to read the signs from a cat. Akira pushed his glasses back into place before speaking again.

“What was it for you two? Nightmares?” They both nodded at the same time, but Ann let Ryuji go ahead.

“I couldn’t get it out of my head that I almost dragged you guys down with me. Almost biting it was bad enough, but you going out with me because of it? That’s the sort of shit that haunts you forever.”

“You didn’t drag anyone anywhere.” Ann put a hand on his shoulder, smiling supportively. “We chose to risk it all, and nothing you could have done would have stopped us.” He snorted disdainfully.

“Besides getting back up myself.” He let the pain sink back to the depths of his heart, brightening up a little at his friends’ insistence. “Well from here on out, I’ll be working out twice as hard.” He slapped his knee, the jolt to his system waking him up. “We just took Kamoshida down, and there’s no way I’m letting him come back to bite us again.” His energy was infectious, a smile
forcing its way onto everyone’s face, but the mood was still dour enough to drain it away. Akira nodded to Ann, an unspoken signal.

“I… I kept dreaming I was back in that castle, but it was like the first time I went in. I was powerless, and Kamoshida was there, and he…” She gasped, the image coming clearly to her mind. She fought to hold the tears back. She had to. After what she let Shiho go through, what right did she have to cry? “And he kept talking about Shiho and me like we were his property. He… I know he said he wouldn’t let us sleep, but this is just…”

“Ann.” That tone again. Defeated, hollow, nothing like the collected Akira she had come to know. When she looked up, he had pulled his glasses off, and the vulnerability in his eyes shook her to the core. It was like he didn’t have the energy to show what he was feeling inside. “You don’t have to hold back here. It’s only human to be hurt, and we won’t judge you for being human.”

Sincerity. In Ryuji’s hands, it was a club, hitting her with the force of a freight train. In Akira’s, though, it was an arrow, and it cut clean through her mask. That cracked second skin fell from her face, and the tears followed it.

“I… I just…” Her hands flew up to her eyes, but they couldn’t stem the flood. It flowed all the same, running down her arms and cheeks in streams. Someone sat down on the couch on her unoccupied side, Akira, in all likelihood, and both he and Ryuji slid in close, giving her their shoulders if she needed them. A weight settled into her lap, too, and the soft bristles of cat fur brushed against her. She opened her eyes to look, but all she found was Akira’s handkerchief again, held out in front of her. She took it without regret and held it up in place of her hands. It was far more effective at stopping the tears.

“Kamoshida is down for the count, and even if he’s not, I swear that if he, or any two-bit Casanova, tries something, I’ll be there to back you.” A laugh broke through the showers.

“Back me? Most guys would go straight for the creep’s nose.”

“If you want first shot, the honor’s yours. You’re not defenseless.”

“Besides. You’ve got that whip going on, and I don’t want to be caught up in it.” She abandoned the effort to bury her eyes, throwing a hand around both of their backs and pulling them in.

“You two are the best!” She didn’t know what she did to deserve friends like these, but she wouldn’t complain. She looked up to smile at them, but when she saw the bags under Akira’s eyes, she remembered that he hadn’t come forward yet. “So, what about you?” He seemed confused for a second, but it came back to him soon enough. He deflated at first, but he perked himself back up.

“Don’t worry about it. Already in the past.” Her hold on his shoulder tightened, her nails leaving thin lines in his skin.

“Oh no, you don’t get to let us vent and keep all your junk to yourself at the end. This is my home, and as such, I say you need to spill it.” He turned to Ryuji for some support.

“Don’t look at me, dude. Her other hand’s way too close to my throat over here to argue.” Akira knew better than to try with Morgana. He sighed, leaning back into the stuffing, half hoping to sink out of sight.

“I was afraid of being alone again.” Of all the things they could have expected, nightmares of overusing Personas, almost dying, any number of the demons they had faced, this was surprisingly mundane. “Before I met you, I spent the last six months on my own. Everyone I thought I knew left
me behind. One bad day, and I lost everything I had.” Ryuji, despite popular opinion, wasn’t dumb, at least not with topics like this.

“And you thought yesterday would be another bad day.” Akira nodded.

“The worst. I thought I found somewhere to belong again. Somewhere that’d accept me for me. And then I almost lost it.” He gently touched his cheekbones, his fingers probing for a mask that wasn’t there. “But now, I can do something about it.” Life returned to his body, and in his eyes, a quiet flame smoldered.

“This power, Persona, it lets me stand up again. For myself, for you. For the first time in my life, I have some sense of control. Almost losing it was horrible, like weights crushing my lungs, ice in my veins, but now that I know I can fight back, I’m more determined than ever.” He turned to them, and his eyes had flared to the impassioned red of Joker. “We made it through this, we can make it again. It took a whole night and hearing you now to learn that. That’s why I said I’m fine. As long as you’re strong, I can be, too. That’s all I need.” Hearing him speak was enthralling, and with his conviction, the spirits of rebellion in their hearts laughed heartily. “That’s why I want to keep doing this.” Ann raised an eyebrow.

“What do you mean?”

“This Phantom Thief thing. If it works and Kamoshida repents, it means we have a way of fighting back. We helped our school today, but what about students elsewhere? What about employees being played like puppets to line some fat cat’s wallet? We can stick our flag in the ground and tell them all that enough is enough. I can’t do it alone, though. I’m not strong enough.” He stood up, and just as quickly, he bent over, bowing to all present. “I can’t demand that you put your lives on the line for this, but if you still have the will to fight, please help me.” The three on the receiving end of this bizarre show of conviction shared a knowing look, and Ryuji was chosen as their representative.

“On one condition.”

“Name it.” Ryuji stood parallel Akira and pulled him back up by his collar.

“You be the leader. You’ve got more guts than the rest of us put together, and after yesterday, I think we all know we can put our lives in your hands without worrying.” Ann took her place next to him with Morgana on her shoulder. All three grinned expectantly, and Akira relaxed.

“You didn’t plan on stopping in the first place, did you?”

“Nope!” The answer was unanimous and swift. He smiled to himself, and when he nodded, he was promptly tackled and pulled into the first official group hug.

“I love you guys.” Ann tapped him playfully on the shoulder.

“Right back at you, leader.” He rolled the title around in his mind. He could get used to it.

“Well, if we’re done being all touchy-feely…” Ryuji dove for his bag, and he pulled out something that was decidedly not studying material. “Let’s have a party! I picked up the first season of a new show I’ve been waiting for, and we’re supposed to be here ‘studying’ all day, so why not make this Phantom Thief thing official? Nothing brings people together like an old fashioned binge session.”

“Say no more, I’ll get the snacks.” Ann was up and off to the fridge, where she had a smorgasbord of packaged croissants, chocolates, and puddings stashed away.
“I’ll set up the TV!” Ryuji was on the BluRay player with the practiced hands of a veteran binge watcher. Akira took it upon himself to retrieve the remote.

“And I’ve got the controls.”

“Hey, what about me? I want a job, too!” Morgana had hopped off Ann’s shoulder and onto the coffee table. Akira thought about it before pointing to his shoulder, still red with nail marks.

“Ann did a number to me, and I could use a hot water bottle.” Morgana rolled his eyes, but he knew he was trying at least. He accepted his role as the team’s healer and proudly draped himself over Joker’s friendly fire wound.

“You guys ready? This is gonna be one Hell of a bash!”

Within four minutes, all four were fast asleep as the long night caught up to them. Within a week, Kamoshida was in prison for his crimes. And within a year, everyone knew of the Phantom Thieves.

Chapter End Notes

You have to wonder how the Persona kids don’t have PTSD. I’d wet myself at the sight of a teddy bear after Shadow Teddie, and the less said about Mara, the better.
Coffee and Criminals

Chapter Summary

In which Sojiro contends with the smoothest crime boy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was another slow afternoon at LeBlanc. Most of the regular clientele had already found their way in and out of the quaint little cafe, and Sojiro accepted that it was once in a blue moon that someone new hunted it down in the reclusive backstreets it was nestled away in. For once, though, he was thankful for that, because he didn’t need his customers hearing the heavy thuds echoing from the ceiling.

It was an irregular pattern, sometimes ten minutes apart, sometimes ten seconds, but it wouldn’t stop. He already suspected he knew who was doing it, but the what and why alluded him. When enough was enough, he groaned, dragging himself up the stairs to his new ward’s room. When he reached the top, he was about to launch into a tired tirade about the noise, but then he noticed that the kid wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

Then he heard a squeak in the rafters, and he looked up. Akira was clinging to one of the beams, pulling himself up and down. His technique was good, but the movements were shaky, likely due to how long he had been at it. Weirder still, the cat was up there, too, staring down at the kid like some sort of spotter.

Sojiro got one good look at the scene before him, and he slowly plodded back to his familiar spot behind the counter. Maybe he would let the kid off with a warning about working out while the cafe was open later.

With Akira out for school and the rain chasing away his customers, Sojiro decided it was as good of a chance as he would ever get to head up and dust the attic. The kid had done an admirable job making the place habitable again, but that and comfortable were two different things. He didn’t let it show too much, but he was soft at heart, and he couldn’t abide by a student under his care living with the dust bunnies. If Akira asked, he would just say the dust was starting to drift down to the shop proper and something about the health code.

The decor was sparse, but the kid had found a couple of things to liven the room up with. There was the plant, which, frankly, was so well taken care of that he refrained from touching it for fear of throwing off some natural balance, a poster of an idol, which was normal for a teenager anymore, and… an almost fancy bowl? It was some sort of soup bowl, and it did look nice, but… Who decorated with a soup bowl? He chalked it up to desperation for some color and continued on his way.
The bed was fine, and the stool next to it, too. It was the corner desk, however, that caught his eye. On it, halfway chiseled out of a plate of firm tin, was a lock pick. Sojiro had been in government work long enough to know what one looked like, and this was shaping up to be just that, and a high quality one at that.

Next to it was a set of four glassy spheres, each with a different colored insignia on the front. Red, blue, green, and yellow, the last of which looked vaguely like a thunderbolt. He picked the red one up, and he found it was filled with powder. Chili powder, if he had to guess, but there was no way he was tasting it to make sure.

“What the Hell is this?” He didn’t know, but he knew what he was going to do about it. Time to dust off those old interrogation skills.

It was a grueling couple of hours before Akira returned from school, and he knew something was wrong when Sojiro scowled at him. Then he played his hand, revealing the confiscated items in question.

“Care to tell me what these are all about?” The cat mewled loudly, but Akira quieted it down with a pat on the head.

“I’m helping a classmate with his cosplay.” Sojiro raised an eyebrow. He delivered the line like he was telling the truth, and his eyes weren’t wandering. None of the usual tells were showing up. Akira gestured towards the top of the orbs, where little metal loops were welded on. “He’s dressing up as a well armed rogue, and these are supposed to hang from his sash.”

“Hmm, then what about the stuff inside them?” It’d be weird to fill them up when they were just for looks.

“That’s just to give them some extra weight so they bounce around right when he walks, and if one does break somehow, it’ll still look flashy enough to play off.” Oh. It was just one of the kid’s side jobs. He had a number of those, so it really shouldn’t have been surprising.

“Ah. Guess I jumped the gun a bit, then.” He relinquished everything back to the kid, holding onto the pick a bit longer than the rest. “Just be sure to blunt this thing a little. Don’t need your customer getting any funny ideas about what he could do with your accessories. It’d be too easy to track this back to the source.” Akira nodded, and Sojiro let go. Maybe he was being too harsh on the kid. It was about time to loosen the lead a bit.

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Sojiro knew how kids were. Give them an inch, and they would run with it all the way home. He knew he was setting himself up for disaster when he gave Akira the key to LeBlanc, but waiting for the kid to get back from whatever he kept himself occupied with during the day was starting to wear him out.

The night he took his leash off, he ran all the way back to town and didn’t get back until just after ten. He didn’t know what would happen next. He had managed to slip a cat into the shop right under his nose. What would he try to get away with smuggling when he wasn’t around? Granted, he didn’t have a lot of carry room to work with when Morgana took up most of his bag, but he didn’t want to underestimate how crafty Akira might be.
Good thing Akira didn’t count on Sojiro being every bit as crafty. The promise of a new magazine subscription he could barely afford was enough to convince Futaba to set up a wireless surveillance system. Which he had to install himself, given his daughter’s aversion to being outside, but her directions had been precise enough to get by with.

He was back home in his favorite plush rocking chair (God he felt old) and watching his shop through a laptop screen. If the kid tried anything funny, he would have the evidence in high definition.

It was half past ten when Akira made his way home. Sojiro’s attention locked on the screen, and he noticed something odd immediately. He was talking to himself. This in and of itself wasn’t too unusual, as Sojiro had heard him do so many times before, but it was always too softly to make out what he was saying. It was easy to assume he was just muttering reminders or song lyrics or whatever kids were into these days, but with the illusion of being all alone, Akira was talking at a more normal, audible volume.

“I know, I know. I really should get more sleep, but this is important.” There was something else coming through, but it was quick and quiet. Sojiro strained his ears, and he thought he heard the meowing of a cat. “To you, maybe, but unlike you, I pay back my debts.” He was already primed to hear it this time, and it was definitely that cat filling in the spaces between Akira’s thoughts. “That doesn’t count. He’s teaching me to make coffee, fair trade.”

He was talking about Sojiro. He was talking about him to the cat. Not in that cutesy pet owner style. This was a full blown one-sided conversation, and the cat was responding like it was actually the other half. Had he taken in a mental case?

He was running through the list of disorders that could lead to such behavior when he saw Akira put something on his counter. It was a box, short, no wider than the kid himself. It was wrapped in maroon paper, and there was a tag on top. ‘To Boss.’ The red flag turned to undefinable confusion, and he decided it was time to intervene. Fortunately, he had planted the perfect excuse beforehand, just in case he needed a hands on investigation.

The trip back to LeBlanc was short, but by the time he arrived, Akira was already reheating curry on the stovetop, sneaking a few small pieces of rice to the cat. He turned at the sound of the bell, surprised to see Sojiro back before dawn.

“Forgot my smokes here, and the convenience store’s already…” He stopped, feigning surprise at the sight of the box. Akira smiled softly.

“I picked you up a little something in town.” Still somewhat cautious, he unwrapped the apparent gift. Inside, there was a box set of silverware. Not the commonplace steel stuff, actual silver, albeit probably just a thin coating or alloy. The handles were engraved with wavy lines that were almost floral, and they were bent just right to sit comfortably in the hand.

“Kid, I… I’m touched, but…” Before he could ask if it was stolen, he found the receipt thoughtfully stuck to the back. The price was cut off, but it was still enough to prove it was legitimately bought. And suddenly, he felt bad for questioning Akira’s actions. He quickly thought up a replacement for the accusation. “…You didn’t have to do this for me.”

“You didn’t have to take me in, or trust me with the shop keys. I’ve been bringing in a fair bit with a night job I took, so I thought I should pay you back somehow.” His craggy exterior faltered, and Sojiro could only replace it with a warm smile.

“Well, thanks. Just make sure to keep some for yourself. Don’t need your parol officer
thinking I’m using you for free labor.” Akira nodded, returning his attention to the curry. Sojiro rounded the counter, grabbing the pack of cigarettes he left under the register and tucking his new utensils somewhere safe until morning. The bell rang on his way out.

“…Night, kid.”

“Night, Boss.”

A week later, he decided he didn’t need to check the cameras anymore. LeBlanc was in good enough hands already.

Chapter End Notes

I know he's not supposed to warm up to Akira for a few more months, but to heck with that. I'm putting him on the fast track to endearing old man, and you can't stop me. Mostly because I already did it.

And yes, there will be more LeBlanc shorts, but later. I thought the Dojima household in P4 was welcoming, but then P5 came by and was just incredible. Didn't even need Nanako to do it.
The inmate was an impressive one. He had reached The World almost a year ahead of schedule, even if it was only temporary, and he managed to keep his original Persona, Arsene, a feasible element of his arsenal, a near impossibility going by records from both previous Wild Cards. For a time, the sisters thought they had been blessed with an easy first assignment.

Then he got used to them.

“Hey, guys, need some fusion over here.” Caroline snarled and whipped the bar near his hands.

“What you need is to show some respect, inmate!” Akira looked at his very uninjured hand, bored.

“Pretty sure it’s not my lack of manners that’s trying to kill me in the museum. So…” He smiled coyly at them, enjoying every second of Caroline’s toothless fury. Justine muffled a sign, opening the Compendium.

“Very well. Please choose which Persona you desire.”

“Hey, what’s the holdup?” Akira tapped a foot impatiently, the ball and chain around his ankle ringing with each strike.

“That’s none of your concern, inmate!” Caroline put everything she had into trying to shove the lever ahead, but for all her struggling, the blades of the guillotine didn’t budge.

“I worked hard to put confusion resistance on that Slime, so I think this is my problem.” Leanan Sidhe was a fairly squishy Persona, so having some status ailment protection would go a long way towards shoring up her defenses. If the fusion would just happen already.

“Please be patient. Fusion, though powerful, is an imperfect process. Trying to force one’s way through such occurrences could lead to wildly sporadic results.” Justine’s appeal to his sense of proper operations seemed to appease the inmate somewhat, but her sister was less reasonable.

“THAT’S IT, PLAN B!” From nowhere came a chainsaw with a large V insignia on the blade. She tore through the bags containing both Personas before anyone could attempt to dissuade
her, and from them came streams of soft blue light. Caroline smiled to herself, satisfied that whatever
the result, it would be far from what the inmate wanted in the first place. It was a petty victory, but a
victory nonetheless.

They weaved together in the center of the room, emerging as a figure that was most certainly
not the simply dressed sorceress Akira had hoped for. In her place was a stern faced, red winged
angel, clad in armor that brought about images of the Crusades of old.

“I am Archangel. May my holy light guide you evermore.” Light turned to flame, and the
angel burned away, leaving behind a mask. Akira was dumbfounded at first, pleasing Caroline
greatly, but then an ecstatic smile broke out.

“Sweet! Never had a chance to grab one of those before Kamoshida’s fell!”

“Oh come on!” Caroline slammed her head against the leg of the guillotine, the chainsaw
hanging limply from her arms.

“So, how much for another Slime?”

“Congratulations on your newest acquisition, Trickster…”

“Let me guess.” Akira cut Igor off from the relative comfort of his bed, not even bothering to
open his eyes. “Something about getting a new ally, something about avoiding ruin, and then you
give me more Persona slots. That about sum it up?”

“Learn your place, inmate!” Caroline forwent the whip, stomping on the bars of his cell
directly. The whole room shook under her heel.

“Justine, please calm your sister. We needn’t have the Velvet Room collapse atop us.” She
didn’t have to intervene, their Master’s wishes being enough to stay her hand, albeit begrudgingly.
“This exchange has been done before, and if all goes correctly, it will happen again. Your familiarity
should hasten all future occurrences, a benefit to us both, I am certain.”

‘Just you wait, inmate.’ She had returned to her station and her face was unmoving, but
inside, she fumed. ‘We’ll see how that attitude holds up on examination day.’

Chapter End Notes

I like the sisters well enough, but their thing wore off quickly. I already have a sassy
Velvet Room attendant, thank you very much.

(Also, am I the only one who figured out their "secret" well before "Igor's"?)
Chapter Summary

Who says nothing fun happens at museums?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Goddamn, Fox, that was hard freaking core!” Ryuji kept watch over the top of the car, but he couldn’t help looking back at the newest thief’s injury. Even as Morgana and Ann worked their magic, Yusuke’s fingers steadily dripped with blood. It was fortunate Akira noticed the moisture leaking through his gloves before they doubled back to the real world, where Dia was notably less effective.

“It was probably the adrenaline.” Akira served as a secondary lookout, though his main task was holding Yusuke’s gloves as he recovered. “The human body is strong enough to pull itself apart, but without a pain inhibitor, our nervous system keeps us from pushing ourselves too far.”

“Dude, you spend way too much time with that doctor.”

“Remember that the next time you need medicine.”

“There, that should do it.” Ann released her hold on Yusuke, letting him stretch and get a feel for his magically mended digits. “I thought an artist, of all people, would take better care of his hands.”

“I have toiled for years under Madarame’s horrid tutelage.” He was still reeling from having his eyes opened, to the truth of his mentor, to Persona, everything. His tone was devoid of that hint of whimsy that set him apart, but his cold anger was no less otherworldly. Akira tossed his gloves back, and he caught them smoothly, already accustomed to his Metaverse enhanced mobility. “I say there is no more appropriate way to sign my resignation than with the first drops of blood he can’t syphon from my veins.” The last word was accompanied by the harsh snap of his gloves retaking their rightful place.

“Hard. Core.”

“Careful, Skull.” Morgana hopped on the hood of the car for some extra stature. “Goemon is a physical bruiser. Fox might just be taking your spot.”

“What!? No way! Me and Captain are the powerhouses around here! Plus, I’ve got attack buffs. Does he have attack buffs? I don’t think so.” Ann couldn’t help but giggle at the flustering.

“But he does have more than a thimble of SP.” Ryuji deflated like a popped balloon, but Akira pulled him back up by the shoulder.

“And I have coffee, so that’s irrelevant. Besides, his shotgun’s the hardest hitting firearm we’ve got.” Ryuji pulled his boss into a bone crunching sideways hug.

“Yeah, see? I’m still totally useful!” Akira glanced over at Yusuke, who was starting to doze
off. The aftershocks of awakening were never gentle.

“We should head back, prep for tomorrow.”

“Indeed.” The order seemed to rouse Yusuke from his half sleep. He pulled himself up by the mirror, using his sword and sheath as a walking stick. “I swear on my honor, this temple of vanity shall fall.” Akira grinned as only he could, a new torch flaring to life before his eyes.

“Seriously, guys?” Morgana’s expression was downtrodden, to put it lightly, as he watched the rest of his elite thieves form a pyramid in front of the towering, golden statue of Madarame, their newest member planted at the very top. Yusuke loosely meditated on Ann’s shoulders, and she stood on the locked arms of Akira and Ryuji. They barely managed to reach Madarame’s smug face, but it was close enough for their needs.

“Chill, cat, this is important stuff!” Ryuji smirked, an almost childish giddiness running through his body.

“I must agree with Skull. Graffiti is a staple of rebellion, a means through which we may show those swept away by meaningless dazzle the faces of those in power as only the victimized can imagine them.”

“Besides, Mona, this is a signature for us! You know, leaving a rose at the scene of the crime, like in the movies.” Morgana’s scowl deepened, and he turned a pleading eye to Akira.

“Joker, talk some sense into them. Once Madarame’s Shadow sees this, the Palace’s security level will skyrocket!” Akira shrugged with his free shoulder.

“Gives us a good chance to hunt for treasure Shadows.” Outvoted four-to-one, Morgana was left to surrender reason to the whims of his teammates, holding his head in his hands as Yusuke applied thin lines of black paint in lieu of mascara.

“So, Fox, real talk?” As Akira worked away at the lock on a treasure chest, the others were left to their own devices, within reason. Ryuji took that time to address something that had been bothering him for a while.

“I was not aware speech itself could be fictional, but of course.”

“You remember back when you were stalking Panther, and how Joker and me blocked you?” Yusuke raised an eyebrow at the phrasing, but he nodded. “This is kinda weird to say, but if you had actually touched her there, I probably would’ve busted your nose. Now that we’re working together and all, I thought I should fess up and apologize for that, so, sorry.”

“Water under the bridge, though I struggle to follow your line of thought.” He put a hand to
his chin, mapping out the lay of his cheekbone with his thumb. “I meant her no harm, so violent retribution strikes me as incongruous.” Ryuji muffled a groan. It was clear that Yusuke was genuinely unaware of how his actions looked from the outside.

“I get that now, but back then, she had just gotten through some heavy stuff, and, well…” He leaned in close, cupping a hand around his mouth and Yusuke’s ear so Ann didn’t have to hear her experience with Kamoshida parroted back to her. The meaning hit him in the stomach, his breath leaving him for several seconds.

“I… I had no idea.” He recoiled at the severity of his transgression made in a misguided pursuit of art. “Everyone, I must thoroughly apologize for my actions. To place someone who had already endured unwanted attention back in the lion’s maw, not to mention supporting that placement with the threat of legal consequences…”

“Whoa, chill, dude. You didn’t know any better, but now you do, so…”

“So I can properly make amends for my actions. Is that not what you were attempting to do a moment ago, mending a fence broken by misunderstanding the opposing party’s history?” Ryuji tried to think up a rebuttal, but Yusuke was right. He was doing the same exact thing, if a lot more robustly. Yusuke looked around for Ann, but she had left with Morgana to skim weaker Shadows for change while Akira worked. Instead, he turned to the figurehead of the group.

“Joker, as leader, it falls to you to decide how deeply I have crossed the Phantom Thieves, and to what degree I must reimburse you for my mistake. Tell me, what are your thoughts?” Akira looked up from his work, but he went back to it with a shrug.

“Doesn’t matter. You didn’t do anything too bad in the end, gave us an inroad to a new target, and are fighting with us on the front line. That’s payment in full if you ask me.” The tension in Yusuke’s shoulders dissipated, and he let loose a breath that had been stagnating in his lungs.

“I thank you for your benevolence, and I assure you, I will not be forcing anyone more into such uncomfortable positions again.” With the weight of guilt lifted, he was allowed the room to grow curious. “Though, I must ask, Skull said he would break my nose if I had gone further. From your perspective, before knowing my true nature, what form of punishment would you have wished to dole out at the time?” Akira, to both Yusuke and Ryuji’s surprise, lost his cool for a moment, fumbling the pick in his hands.

“Again, doesn’t matter.”

“I daresay it does. It would give me a firm idea of the consequences of failure to uphold my vow. I can accept whatever you have to say.” Akira was clearly uncomfortable with the question. In the end, he answered, but it was in a throaty whisper almost too quiet to hear.

“They would have never found the body.” With that, he blocked out the world around him, all of his attention tied to the lock and the subtle clicks it emitted as he fiddled.

“That is, uh…” Subconsciously, Yusuke found him sizing up his leader, an instinctual relic from an age where humans were little more than animals that had to observe the food chain as any other. Whatever his findings, they made his tongue go painfully dry. “…quite the conviction.”

“Right, you don’t know his story.” Ryuji slapped him on the back, knocking him out of his intense staring match with Akira’s spine. “For now, let’s just say he really respects women, and he really disrespects people that don’t.”
“A fair stance, certainly, but I was told the Phantom Thieves have a policy against murder. That is what he was implying, correct?”

“I mean… Kind of? You asked what he’d want to do, not what he’d actually do.” Ryuji sighed, sliding his mask up enough to wipe sweat off his forehead. “Look, I swear it’s not as bad as it sounds. Dude’s been through some messed up stuff and he’s still trying to sort it all out.”

“I’ll tell you when we get back to the hideout.” Akira stood up, stretching and dusting off his coat.

“If it is truly as sensitive as Skull suggested, then…”

“Fox, you’re putting your future in my hands as your leader. You deserve to know what baggage might be holding me back. Especially after my… comment.” He closed the distance between them, putting a hand on Yusuke’s shoulder. “Actually, change of plans. I’ll tell you over dinner, my treat. Think up somewhere you want to go, and I’ll make it happen.” Any possible denial he might have put forth was silenced by a deep growl from his stomach, more fearsome than any Shadows they had faced thus far.

“That would be delightful. Thank you.”

“Hmm, how delightfully amusing.” As soon as Akira saw a branch in one of the walk-through paintings, an idea had come to him and wouldn't let up. He had to release it to the world to have any peace. He summoned Slime and draped it over the branch, watching as its body oozed down and its face stretched. The joke was not lost on Yusuke.

“I thought this place could use a little real culture.” Meanwhile, the other three were completely lost. Ryuji was the only one who could voice it.

“I don’t get it.” Akira rolled his eyes, returning his mask to its proper place.

“Uncultured swine.”

A hive of Shadows swarmed around them, a flurry composed entirely of Jack Frosts that left little room to breathe. For the most part, Ryuji, Yusuke, and Akira, aided by Orobas, had managed to keep the worst of it off of their weaker members, but it was only a matter of time before one found its way through the cracks.

“AAAAHH!” A blast of cold rolled over the party, the worst of it centered on Ann. The cold sank down to her marrow, and her body locked up, toppling like a house of cards.

“Hee ho!” A Frost was quick to take advantage of the opening, grabbing her before retreating behind the line of his brethren. “Hmm ho, what to do with her…” His gaze drifted across her body,
and his blank, black eyes grew lecherous. “Well, to the victor goes the spoils, unless the rest of you…” He looked up in time to come face to face with a ten foot tall raging shogun. It delivered a devastating punch to the Shadow’s stomach, and it dispersed into goo before touching the floor.

Yusuke followed Goemon’s frozen path, extending a hand to Ann. Warmth worked its way back into her body, letting her take the offer. As soon as she was back on her feet, though, the situation reversed, the indignant flames of Carmen igniting in her heart. She threw her mask into the midst of the remaining Jack Frosts.

“Maragi!” Using her discarded mask as a gate, the fire leapt from the depths of her soul to the battlefield, and it swept over the cloud as a raging typhoon. When the smoke cleared, not a single pointed hat remained in sight. She panted from the effort of using so much SP at once, but she still had enough awareness to throw a grateful smile to Yusuke.

“Thanks for the save, I thought I was a goner.” Goemon returned to his face in synch with Carmen, but not before the spirits could share a firm nod.

“Think nothing of it. One does not cross the Phantom Thieves, especially in such a crass manner.” He glanced at Akira, their earlier conversation still fresh in his mind. Yusuke was perfectly happy coming to his new friends’ aid. They needed not uphold their own moral codes alone anymore.

“Woo freaking hoo!” Ryuji downed his ramen in one loud slurp before slamming the bowl back down to the table. The others had more of a mind for etiquette, but only so far as it kept the attention off of them. On the inside, they were all as wired as him. Akira watched his first mate celebrate, and more than a little pride for him emerged.

“Didn’t even stumble on the way out. Way to go, Skull.” Ryuji slammed a hand down on his leg, taking pride in how muted the pain seemed to be.

“I told you, dude, never again. I’m back up and swinging for the stars!”

“I believe we all feel the same. I haven’t known such relief in many years.” Yusuke ate his more slowly and carefully, savoring every bite. Ann was somewhere between the two. That is to say, eating at a normal pace.

“So, once your sensei comes to, what are you going to do?” It was an unspoken understanding of the arrangement. Madarame would be going to prison, just like Kamoshida before him, and since the shack was in his name, it would be repossessed in short order.

“I have been looking into living arrangements in the campus dorms. Cautiously, of course. I will only make an overt maneuver once the general public becomes aware of his actions.” Morgana nodded, silently proud he had instilled their recruit with caution that went beyond that of certain senior members. Member. “I feel the need to ask, once this sordid business is concluded, will the extra position in your club remain open, or…” A low chuckle rolled over the group. Akira leaned over the table.

“We just walked through the valley of death together. If you want to come along the rest of the way, we won’t stop you.” Yusuke broke out into a brilliant smile, and he bowed deeply to his
new, more permanent, manager.

“I thank you for accepting me, despite our rocky start.” Akira returned the gesture.

“And I thank you for accepting me, despite the rocky middle bit.” As the team laughed over their leader’s sudden civility, the ties that braced the Phantom Thieves against the world grew ever stronger.

Chapter End Notes

Am I the only one who thinks Goemon looks incredibly dopey in that awakening scene? His eyes are crossed! He died from being boiled, not from a faulty laser eye surgery.
Akira had long grown used to the eternal rumble that permeated Tokyo’s air. It wasn’t pleasant by any stretch, but it wasn’t the headache it had been when he first arrived either. Now, he could go about a day on the town in relative peace.

‘No one’s available, so hanging out’s off the table. Could turn in for work, but…’ His wallet felt like a lead weight against his thigh. ‘No idea why Shadows carry so much money, actual legal currency, but I’m not complaining. Maybe a movie, then. Morgana might appreciate…’

“Hey, don’t look now, but you’re being tailed.” The cat in question was an excellent assistant that deserved some time off. Surely he could find something more enjoyable to do than keeping Akira from getting mugged. He kept walking like nothing was wrong, waiting for the noise of the crowd to jump a bit before responding.

“Who?”

“It’s that student council girl again, twenty paces back, face in a book.” Akira glanced towards a window, and in the reflection, he saw her, too. He tried getting upset, but he couldn’t. It was almost adorable how she tried so hard to be sneaky, hiding a notebook in a bigger book like that, but he didn’t even need the Third Eye to see through it. Still, having her record his every move was a threat, especially since she had been investigating the Phantom Thieves specifically. “Try to ditch her down a back alley.”

“No, that wouldn’t work. She’d just pick up the trail again later.” She had every day for the last week. How she spent five hours a day tracking him and still managed to keep her grades up was beyond him. No, it was time to do something more long term. He looked through his playbook. She still, in many ways, looked down on him as a criminal or troublemaker. Breaking that image and making her see him as an actual person might just shake her off for good. He grinned to himself.

“I know that look. What’s the plan?”

Makoto would have been tapping her foot if her ankle hadn’t tired of it already. Kurusu had slipped into the bookstore on central street half an hour ago, and she had expected him to be in and out quickly. He never spent too long anywhere besides the convenience store, where he worked, or the gym, where he worked out. The bookstore usually wasn’t more than a bump in the road, but today, it was a wall.
She was at war with herself as to what came next. If she followed him in, she would learn what this irregularity in his pattern meant. But it also opened up the possibility that she would be seen over something like indecision with a purchase or waiting for a book from the back. In her mind, she flipped a coin. It landed heads, and she discarded her hesitation, marching forth to the lion’s den.

It wasn’t a large store at all. As long as one of the bigger shelves wasn’t in the way, everyone there could see everyone else. She figured that was why she could feel people watching her. Even so, she couldn’t find Kurusu. He wasn’t out in the open, but she knew he was there somewhere. She rounded a corner between two of the taller racks, and she came closer to her target than she had hoped.

“Oof!” She walked directly into what felt like a solid wall, only the rustle of his clothes giving away that it was, in fact, a person. She lost her balance as she backed away, falling and dropping her book on the way down.

“Oh, sorry. I should’ve watched where I was going.” She saw a hand lower to her, and it was connected to the apologetic face of Akira. “Hmm? Niijima-senpai?” Well, it was too late to escape the situation now. She would have to roll with it, maybe use this chance to get a little more hands on in her approach.

“No, it was my fault. I shouldn’t have been walking and reading at the same time.” She accepted his help, suppressing the urge to comment as he pulled her entire weight up with one hand and little input on her end. “I must say, I didn’t think you would be into reading, Kurusu-kun.” He shrugged, kneeling down to the floor.

“Don’t judge a book by its cover.” He gently picked up her book, which, much to her relief, had closed with her all important notes firmly sealed inside. If he felt the presence of a second book hidden in the first’s cover, he didn’t mention it, instead focusing on the outer layer. “Baccano. Heard good things about it.” He handed it back, and she gave a small bow, barely more than a tilt of the head.

“You’ve heard right.” She was lying through her teeth. She hadn’t had a chance to read it herself between everything that had been dropped on her plate recently, but she knew that would sound off since she had been pretending to read it for seven days straight. “Though, that hinges partially on your tastes. What sorts of books do you prefer?”

“Sorry for the wait!” A clerk called out to Akira, hurrying over his way with an almost real smile on her face and a bag in her hand. It strained under the weight of three books. “This isn’t really a manga specialty shop, so the managers thought it best to push these behind the hotter products.”

“It’s no problem, really. Hard to demand perfect service in a niche like this, right?” He opened his wallet, and when Makoto covertly glanced inside, she was floored by what she saw. There were some very large bills, and more than a few of them. Not to the degree you would expect of a millionaire or the like, but a not insignificant amount for a high schooler.

“Thank you, sir, have a good day!” The exchange completed, and Akira fanned the contents out for Makoto to see. Two of them were Konosuba, volumes one and two, but with the way they were held, the third had its title obscured. Even so, its poppy art style was very eye catching.

“What’s that yellow one about?”

“Ryuji recommended it. It’s about a group of teens solving supernatural crimes in a foggy small town. And somehow, an amusement park bear suit is involved.” That sounded quite fun. A little silly with the bear part, but some goofiness could serve to lighten the…
“What am I thinking? Focus, Makoto!”

“Interesting. If Sakamoto-kun would read it, it must be high quality.” Akira almost looked offended, but it was more so resignation and, in part, agreement.

“Well, he actually played the video game version, but he’s heard good things about the books.” That explained it. “Say, I feel like I should do something to make up for knocking you over like that. There’s a diner down the street with a good menu. Let me grab you something.” Oh, well, that was generous. Almost too generous.

“You aren’t trying to… ‘hit on’ me, are you?” He tilted his head curiously.

“If I wanted a date, I would ask for a date. You don’t even have to stick around to eat if you don’t want. There are take out bags.” Her mind hunted for other ulterior motives, until it landed on the most obvious one.

“Then perhaps you are trying to gain sway with the student council.” Akira snickered, but she thought there was something more to it than amusement. A deep line formed under his eyes, and resignation planted itself in them.

“No offense, but unless you were Jesus Christ himself, you wouldn’t make a dent in how the school treats me. And even then, you’d need to make a lot of wine.” She had read about this before. He was hiding how he really felt with jokes. She had heard it could be quite a thorough facade, only broken when the loose board was pushed directly. She was doing just that by assuming he wanted something from her.

“…Alright, I accept your offer.”

He was right. There were a number of attractive items on the menu. In the end, she only decided on the salad with a tea because they had been the least expensive options in their respective categories. He tried to convince her to splurge a little more, but she was able to wave off the idea by citing her figure. A common tactic, but not an ineffective one. When he once again pulled out an overly full wallet to cover the bill, which he still managed to account for less than half of by ordering only a soft drink, the question of his funds returned to her mind in full force. She waited until she was a third through her meal before broaching the topic.

“By the way, I’m taking a survey for the student council. We’re compiling a list of the jobs held by Shujin students in order to present those with difficulty choosing an idea of their options. Would you be willing to contribute?” He finished his current draw on his drink.

“Sure. Just the jobs, right?” She nodded, unfolding a pocket notepad she had prepared in case her primary notebook ran out of pages. “It’s all part time stuff, but I guess that’s what most students do anyway. There’s the convenience store down the street for one, and the beef bowl place right over there.” She nodded, jotting down what he was saying in small print. She had already noted this much beforehand. “Then there’s the flower shop down in the subway station.” She paused for that one. Flowers were quite calming, so perhaps it was a positive influence for someone with an assault charge. “Oh, and I help out my guardian at his cafe in Yongen, LeBlanc, but I don’t think he’d want students asking him for a job.” So, he was buttering up his temporary caretaker.
“I’ll enter that as something non specific. Does he pay well?”

“You mean besides taking me in and putting a roof over my head? Yeah. It’s like an apprenticeship. I help out from time to time, he shows me the secret of his special coffee and curry.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “Hey, don’t doubt the power of the curry. It’s the one thing I woke up for at first.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Nope, now this is personal. I insist, come over some time. I’ll cover your first plate.” She couldn’t help but laugh at the sudden cool intensity.

“So you’re his chef and marketer?”

“Officially, just the first one, but I say it’s a shame he doesn’t get a lot of traffic.” With that sort of dedication to his work, it was no wonder he brought in a healthy income. Employers were quick to reward hard workers, mostly because they were few and far between with the newer generations.

“Okay, that should do nicely. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Thank you for letting me spread the word about Boss’s curry.” He gestured to the surrounding tables, a few of which were subtly listening in. “Even if you don’t take my offer, I might have just earned him a few new customers. He deserves the attention, so thanks.”

Despite him being the subject of a serious investigation, and a registered criminal besides, she couldn’t help but find him a pleasant individual. He was earnest, dedicated, well mannered, most of the positive traits she looked for in students. Maybe it was that combination that brought him into the crosshairs of the now notorious Kamoshida, and, from there, the principal. The right person in the wrong place and time. She finished her salad and washed it down with the last sip of her tea.

“I know your hopes about your school life aren’t exactly shining, but I’ll see if I can get the rumor mongering to lighten up somewhat. It will take some time, but I’ll let you know if I make any head…” Suddenly, his eyes focused on something towards the back of the diner. She tried looking back, but he held up a hand in a way that the back of her seat would block it from view.

“You’re being watched. Closely.” In a bout of inspiration, she angled her glass to show a reflection of the shop behind her. It was blurry, but it was just as he said. A trio of rough, dingy teenagers were looking between themselves and back to her, grinning suspiciously. “Come on. Let’s see if they follow us.” At first, she was going to question what he meant by ‘us,’ but she figured it out quickly. He wasn’t going to leave her to deal with them alone.

They left the diner, Akira ahead of her and just to the side. He had his phone out and the camera on, letting them see behind themselves without looking. Sure enough, they left moments later, and they scanned the road until they found her again. Her hold on her bag tightened. Living with Sae, she had heard about plenty of cases of women getting stalked and taken advantage of, but she had never thought she would be in such a situation herself. The reality hit her all at once, and she quietly started to panic.

“Don’t worry, I can handle this.” He opened his bag, and to her surprise, a black cat popped out. He whispered something into its ear and slipped a small, metal box into its collar, and it almost looked like it nodded before bounding off into the crowd. He tracked its movement closely, and when it ducked into an alleyway, he turned to follow it. Against her better judgment, she did the same.
The space between these buildings was a cluttered mess. A dumpster stood halfway through surrounded by metal scraps and rusty chains, and when they passed it, he pulled her down behind it.

“Stay here. If you see an opening…” He reached into his bag, and she nearly had a heart attack when he retrieved a knife. Then she saw the way it reflected light. It was little more than heavy plastic. “Hit one with this, right in a soft spot. Good thing I was picking this up for my collection, right?”

“I don’t… You’re going to fight them?”

“Trust me, those guys aren’t worth much when they don’t have numbers on their side. Three on three, they’ll lose every time.” He winked, and his grin could only be described as sharp. He walked back to the other side of the dumpster just as the three thugs stepped into the alley.

“Well, if it isn’t lover boy. Send the little lady off, did you?”

“Little lady? You’ll have to be more specific than that.” The one on the right snarled, revealing the twisted abomination that was his dental work.

“That preppy bitch you was talking up over food.” She noticed the skin around Akira’s eyes tightening, and his pupils had retracted a couple of nanometers.

“Ooh, you struck a nerve.” The short, stumpy one to the left snorted in amusement. “Let me guess, you’re pissed she didn’t let you take her for a ride after you spent all that cash on her, right?” Again, a sliver of his calm outward demeanor slipped away, a slight quiver in his breathing.

“You look like a reasonable guy, so let’s cut a deal.” The tall one in the middle, whose hair was slick with grease, stepped forward. “Show us where she went, and we’ll let you in on the action. Who knows? Maybe we’ll add you to our little group for the long haul. What do you say?” Makoto’s heart rate spiked. She had been trained in Aikido, but she didn’t favor her chances taking on four people at once. She had already seen and felt how sturdily built he was once that day, and backing that up with three others…

Her downward spiral of thought ended when Akira spoke up. Then again, ‘speak’ wasn’t quite right. Cackle like a hyena high on laughing gas was a bit closer.

“Ha ha ha, oh, oh God this is great!”

“Yeah, it is a pretty sweet deal. Aren’t we the best?”

“No, no, not that.” He removed his glasses, snapping them onto the collar of his shirt so he could wipe the tears from his eyes. “It’s just, after what I’ve been dealing with for the last month, I couldn’t believe anyone would be so blatant about how warped they are, but here you go proving me wrong, outright admitting to attempted sexual assault. Oh God, my lungs…” He snapped his fingers, and a ball of fur dropped down from a nearby fire ladder onto his shoulder. He retrieved the box from its collar, and it was then that she saw what it was. A compact camera.

“Show us where she went, and we’ll let you in on the action.” The looks on their faces were synchronized. First, confusion, then, ‘oh crap.’

“Here’s what’s actually going to happen. You’re going to turn around, walk away, forget any of this happened, and never bother the nice ladies around here again. Do anything besides that, and I send this itty bitty very incriminating video to the police. And before you think about jumping me later and taking it back, I’ll be spreading a copy of it to all my friends, just for the heck of it, with instructions to report it for me if I go missing. So…” His grin said it all, and his cat mirrored the
expression. He had played them like fiddles and everyone knew it. “What do you say?” They sputtered for a retort for a minute, but then their composure returned, and they reached into their pockets.

“I say you give us that tape right now or else the boys and I are going to carve you up like a pumpkin.” All three pulled a pocket knife out in unison. Makoto was about to panic again when she saw that the grin on Akira’s face had only widened.

“Wrong answer!” A foot shot out, hooking one of the lengths of chain on the ground and throwing it up to his hands. Most of the middle stretch wrapped around his shoulder, the rest trailing down his arm, his hand twirling two and a half feet of it. He twisted the other’s fingers mockingly.

Bucktooth proved to be the least patient one, charging forward with his knife poised for an overhead swipe. The cat leaped from Akira to his neck, where it promptly chomped on his ear. He yelled out in surprise more than pain, turning his attention long enough for Akira to close the distance. He planted a foot firmly between his legs, and when he screamed with the agony only a man could understand, he found his mouth clogged with the barrel of a pistol and his neck yanked back by chains. He froze, dropping his knife in terror.

“Look what we caught, Mona, a deer in the headlights!” Makoto found her attention drawn to his eyes. Before, they had been a passive grey, unassuming and mellow. Now, they burned an almost volcanic scarlet. “Would you two be so kind as to drop those knives? They’re making me kind of nervous, and a guy’s hand can get awfully jittery when he’s pushed.” He made a point of wiggling his gun around in his hostage’s mouth, letting it click against his teeth. He muttered incoherently around the intruding steel, tears in his eyes. The others, clearly knowing that they were next, dropped their knives before running off, disappearing into the main streets where they were safe from the armed maniac.

“Wow, how anticlimactic. They don’t make thugs like they used to, you know?” Akira pulled his pistol from Bucktooth’s jaw, giving him only a second to breathe normally before booting him away. The chains slid across his throat, leaving thin trails of red behind. He didn’t have a response to offer beyond whimpering like a kicked puppy, running off to join his equally cowed compatriots. “And stay out!” He reveled in the afterglow of victory, but soon his temperament cooled once more. He slipped out of the chain sling he had improvised, and when he turned back to Makoto, his eyes had cooled back down to grey. “Are you holding up alright, Niijima-senpai?”

“A… A little shaken, but I’ll be fine.” She hadn’t noticed until then that she had been clutching the model knife closely. She forced herself to hold it more naturally before emerging from her hiding place. “That’s a model, too, right?”

“Yep, it’s fake.” He held it up in the sunlight, and it, too, had a plastic sheen instead of a metallic one. “Good thing they didn’t notice.” He tucked it back into his bag, and Makoto took the initiative and packed the knife for him. “I’d say to call if they bother you again, but I think you’d be just fine.”

“What do you mean by that?” She was flattered he thought so, but from her perspective, she had been shaking like a leaf in monsoon season the entire time. He held out the camera, its screen pointed at her.

“I’ll scrub this part out before sending it to the others, don’t worry.” That was probably a good idea, because the way the footage had caught her was less than flattering in the eyes of the law. It was a split second cut from when his cat had rejoined him, and in the corner of the frame, she saw what he meant. Her body was tensed, but not in fear. She looked ready to jump into the fray at the drop of a hat, and she held the fake dagger with the intensity of a career criminal. Her eyes didn’t
have the same bloody hue as Akira’s, but the fire behind them was almost as strong.

“That’s… me?”

“People are stronger than they give themselves credit for sometimes. The only reason you didn’t take them out yourself was because you didn’t think you could. If our positions had been reversed, I’m certain you would have dealt with them just as well.” She had truthfully only heard about half of what he just said. She was enraptured by her own image, the strength it exerted. She felt a longing, like the Makoto in the film was what she really wanted to be. “Should I send you a copy, too, or…?” She straightened herself out, blushing at how childish she must have looked.

“No, that’s quite alright. I would rather forget most of this happened.” Most of it? Why not all of it?

“Can’t blame you there. I thought I was done dealing with sex freaks after Kamoshida got canned.” She nodded in agreement.

“Regardless of what I could have done, I suppose I owe you for your assistance.” He held a hand up, literally waving the offer off.

“Nah, I got plenty out of it. Can’t stand scumbags like that any farther than I can throw them.” She refrained from pointing out how far that likely was.

“Very well.” She glanced at her phone, and her heart almost stopped when she saw the time. “I should be going. My sister will freak if I’m out too late, and I think they made me miss my ideal train route.”

“Okay. See you around, Niijima-senpai. And let me guess, this never happened?” She almost laughed at how corny the line was.

“It did, but no one else has to know about it.” He nodded, and when his cat reclaimed its spot in his bag, he was off. She found herself smiling, thanking goodness that he hadn’t been the sketchy character she thought he was.


- Once she was alone with her thoughts, she realized exactly how sketchy he really was. He had started off so passive she didn’t think he’d have a pulse if checked, but then he turned around and became a completely different person. Somehow, the mask of a polite, hard working high schooler was hiding the reality of a combat sadist that walked around with model weaponry in his bag.

And speaking of the bag, what was with that cat? It was too intelligent to be a normal cat, and he didn’t regard it like a pet. They were more like close friends or partners, trusting of one another enough to pull off combination techniques on the fly. And she didn’t want to begin thinking about how he was so proficient with chain.

Worst of all, however, was the change in eye color. She knew it was normal for the color of the iris to change somewhat, but that only applied to colors close to each other on the spectrum. She wouldn’t have looked twice if they had turned brown or maybe a dark blue, but red? And only when he was fighting? That wasn’t normal. It was almost supernatural…
…Hyper-intelligent animal companion, unreal physical strength and technique, instantaneous anatomical changes, and the ability to conceal all of the above. Could he be…?

But then, he had gone out of his way to help her. He had hidden those abilities, but he used them to fend off criminals, ones that were after her at that.

The same could be said of Takamaki, who Kamoshida had confessed to trying to coerce, and Sakamoto, whose leg had been broken by the same man. And there were signs that he was spending time with Kitagawa from Kosei, an apprentice of Madarame. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

But was he really a villain? When she thought about it, the Phantom Thieves only targeted those who had themselves committed extreme crimes and gone unpunished by the law. It fell in line with Akira’s earlier behavior, and it was vigilantism, but was it wrong? She needed more evidence to link him to the notorious group, and, from there, to judge their morality. She needed a test.

The next day, both evidence and a test fell into her lap. A month later, she would rank among them.

Chapter End Notes

Is it bad I didn't notice her following you around until my second play through? To heck with tunnel vision, I have high powered microscope vision.

Fun fact, Akira's purchases are based on my most recent Barnes and Noble excursion. And yes, the books are quite nice. I recommend them.
Confidant Conga

Chapter Summary

Akira knows some really... colorful individuals.

“Alright, kid, that’ll do for now.” Akira stopped wiping, closely scanning the rest of Untouchable’s front window.

“Still a few spots.”

“It’s fine. A little grime gives this place character.” Akira smirked, half glancing Iwai’s way as he discarded the rag.

“That why you don’t clean the bathroom?” As much as Iwai tried to play himself off as gruff, he had to admit the kid could make some decent quips.

“Nah, I don’t clean it because it’s disgusting, and I don’t make you clean it because you’d quit on the spot.” There was also the small matter of saving on the water bill by scaring people away from using it, but hey, that’s just smart business.

Akira shrugged and rolled his eyes, and Iwai couldn’t help but like his confidence. Most kids his age were all ego, no effort, but he walked as good as he talked. You wouldn’t expect a high schooler to have the guts to skim intel from Yakuza types, but here he was joking at a retired one’s expense. Iwai couldn’t help but wonder where he got his nerve from and if he could grab some himself.

Actually, come to think of it, there had been a story going around the underground lately. Supposedly, a kid in dark clothes with a black cat kicked three other kids’ asses in because they were messing with his girl. Akira’s clothes always included a black jacket or the like, and he had seen a cat that fit the bill in his bag. Normally, it wouldn’t be any of Iwai’s business, but the kid in the story supposedly did it all with some chain and a gun he didn’t fire. It didn’t take too much to connect a gun he didn’t fire to a gun he couldn’t fire, like, for example, a realistic fake.

“Before you leave, I’ve got a question for you.” Akira stopped just short of the door, responsibly listening even though he was technically off the clock. “There’re stories going around, kid, some vigilante type beating up crooks around Shibuya. You know anything about that?” He looked out the newly cleaned, almost clean window before nodding. Yep, it was him. “And this guy thought it was smart to use a certain airsoft shop’s products to do his thing. That sound about right?” Again, he nodded. “I get it, protecting your girl’s important, but next time, try not to leave a tie back to me. I don’t need that sort of attention.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. It was a specialty piece, anyway, completely untraceable, and they thought it was real. Even the guy who ate the barrel.” Well, that move sounded familiar, like the sort of thing he would do in his heyday.

“Let me guess, kick to the groin, rope around neck, gun in mouth?” He made a so-so hand gesture. So that was how the chain was involved. This kid was alright. “Fine, just keep me out of it, and I’ll stay out of it. And you’d best take care of that girlfriend. Don’t need an ex with dirt on you.”
His eyes narrowed despondently, a ‘don’t I know it’ look if there had ever been one.

“Got it. And not my girlfriend. Wouldn’t even say friend.” There was a nonchalance with how he said it that made Iwai believe the old denial routine, but that was where his business ended with the case anyway.

“Go on, get out of here, and keep the trash out of my alley.” Another smirk and eye roll, and the kid was gone. Iwai unwrapped a fresh sucker, idly wondering what Akira could do with some real weaponry. If things went South soon, he might need a bodyguard.

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Kawakami strained under the weight of the laundry basket. She thought it was weird going out to the local washers, the shirts being covered almost completely in dirt and muck and some sort of gold slime, but it was even weirder coming back. Some of this stuff was low-key armor, plated around the joints and especially thick at the collar. Where did Akira go to find this stuff?

Well, it really didn’t matter. He paid well for her services, so serve she would. The cafe’s owner barely gave her a second look as she passed through his establishment, an overflowing basket in tow.

“Master, I’m back! And I have your…” She stopped when she saw that her bubbly act wasn’t being heard. Akira was curled up on his futon, back facing out. His cat was draped over the back of the cushions, halfway to slipping away himself until he noticed her. He scrambled to sit up, like a student trying to sit up straight as she entered the classroom. She set the basket aside before scratching behind Morgana’s ear, using him as an excuse to lean over and observe Akira.

It wasn’t the face of an afternoon nap or a random doze. She recognized the deep creases too well, desperation to get any kind of rest before the next of seemingly infinite responsibilities fell on his shoulders. It was a look that had found a home on her own brow more times than she could count, but she was a woman with financial troubles nearing middle age. It was normal for her. Why did a student look like this?

She put a sympathetic hand gently on his shoulder, and she made two discoveries. First, he was a lot more muscular than you would think. It was a lithe sort of musculature, unnoticeable through most long sleeved clothes, but it was still impressive. Second, those impressive muscles were knotted like a ratty pair of sneakers. She had provided massage therapy for any number of overworked businessmen, despondent divorcees, and even a few professional weight lifters, but none of them had been as tied up as this. How was he still able to function with his back practically a sheet of solid bedrock?

She set out to correct this issue immediately. Surprisingly, he didn’t wake up throughout most of the procedure. His sleep was too all-consuming to release him. All he responded with was the occasional hard puff of air as she unwound the worst of the knots. After the better part of an hour, she only managed to undo about half of the damage. That was when he awoke, his eyes instantly focusing on her.

“Huh? Kawakami?” Fortunately, she had been practicing an excuse as she worked.

“Good morning, Master! You seemed tense, so I thought it would be a great chance to give
you a trial run of our massage service! After today, it will only be our standard rate for a session, if you so desire.” At first, it looked like he had too many questions to voice properly, but then he realized how little he wanted to move. He rolled over to his front, giving her better access to the rest of his back. She took that chance to get at a few of the harder to reach muscles, and she noticed how much easier they were giving way. It was almost like being awake had dropped a mental barrier, letting her more easily mold his body back into health.

It only took her twenty minutes from there to finish the job. He stood, and when he stretched, he was dumbfounded by how easily the movement was coming to him. He hadn’t felt so nimble in months, not since his time on the stony mattresses of prison. She saw this, and she giggled playfully.

“It seems Master is satisfied! All in a day’s work for a maid.” She did a curtsy, raising the sides of her dress, and when she came back up, it was with the stern eyes of a teacher. “I don’t know what you get up to, but you need to take better care of yourself. Any more tension and your body would have snapped itself in half. If you can’t ease up on your responsibilities, then I recommend setting aside time for regular deep tissue massages, monthly if not every other week. Understood?” He looked suitably chastised, answering with a bow.

“Yes, Kawakami-sensei.” She nodded curtly, letting her false energy drain away and her shoulders slouch.

“The laundry you ordered is over there. And, for the record, I think you should get a more fitting wardrobe. All that constrictive, heavy padding isn’t doing you any favors.” As she left, she was struck by a sense of nostalgia. How long had it been since she let herself care about a student?

Once again, the medicine had knocked him out cold. Normally, Doctor Takemi would have been cursing. She had worked out that particular kink in the formula ages ago, thanks to her guinea pig, of course. A regression would have been a major wrinkle in her plans.

Thankfully, this effect was both expected and desired. For one, she knew Akira didn’t get nearly as much sleep as he needed. If he asked, this would be her only reason, and she would distract him from poking further by prescribing him a sleep aid. In the meantime, she had some suspicions to follow up on.

Her guinea pig was wincing a lot during examinations lately. It came and went, and he did his best to mask the automatic reactions as discomfort with the procedures, but she was no fool. She rolled up his sleeves, and it was just as she had suspected. Bruises ran up and down his arm, but they were mild, almost completely healed. Next was his shirt, and the ones there were a little more fresh. Especially on his chest. If she didn’t know better, she would have said a few of them looked like the work of a large knife or claw.

It was strange, though. Scaling the wounds up to how they would have been upon infliction, many of them looked like they would be just shy of lethal. He gathered them in spurts, though, and the accumulation should have killed him on the spot. How was he still alive?

She applied some pain numbing lotions to the affected areas and put his shirt back on how she found it. She juggled ideas in her head, explanations for what had been happening behind her back. It couldn’t be abuse. Sojiro was too soft to inflict abuse like this, and that was assuming
someone as fit as Akira would allow it in the first place. It was definitely someone stronger, she concluded, but that did little to explain who or how he recovered so quickly.

She put on a pair of sterile gloves, which also had the bonus of blocking finger prints. Maybe his possessions would explain what his body wouldn’t. She checked all the side pockets first, and it was all normal stuff. School supplies, small knick knacks from around town, some drinks, usual teenager affair.

It was the main pocket, though, that hid the real secrets. She knew he usually had a cat in there, even without the cat hair clinging to the fabric, and it was no normal cat. It acted with an intelligence equivalent to a human, at least if she was correct about it reading some of her documents a month prior. If that was the case, then it stood to reason that it would guard the most important of his items.

As she suspected, there was a corner dedicated to her medication. A small hoard of bottles and IV drips, though it wasn’t too surprising since she had gladly sold them to him. Everywhere else, though, was a mystery. Stacks of cards that glowed dully and hummed when touched, glowing baubles she was afraid to touch, but above all else, it was the equipment that caught her eye.

They were makeshift, but there were a number of what appeared to be smoke bombs and lock picks. A few of the bombs were labeled with colored marks. Digging deeper, she found odd sprays that had a crossed off crown on the front. Further still were the weapons. Fake, as she discovered, but realistic in make, and stuffed at the bottom of everything else for a good reason.

Actually, no, there was something else. It was easy to miss, but under the glowing cards was a small collection of normal cards. They were designed with red and black rings, and right in the center was a logo. It was a hat atop a burning mask, labeled with the phrase, “Take Your Heart.”

Recognition sparked. She rushed to her computer and hurriedly opened two search windows. In each was a report about a mysterious unsolved case. One was for a gym teacher, the other an artist, each targeted by a group that addressed themselves as the Phantom Thieves of Hearts. The most pertinent similarity, however, was that each received a calling card shortly before turning themselves in. The cards in Akira’s bag were identical in all but the reverse side which had yet to have a message pasted to it. The connection was clear and immediate.

She could have turned him in. The evidence was irrefutable, and being arrested was surely safer than whatever encounters in his work inflicted those wounds. However, she couldn’t bring herself to do it. It wasn’t because he had just as damning things to say about her and her practices. No, that was an afterthought.

She hesitated because she knew Akira. His only stake in her business was getting his hands on medicine, he didn’t owe anything to her, and yet it was his pushing that got her to take up the mantle of a real doctor again. He pushed her to save a little girl. He pushed her to try saving one she had failed to once before. He pushed her to feel like something other than the Plague again. He had been a blessing in disguise, and there was no way, in her mind, that someone like him could be the criminal the police made him out to be. She turned to him, and a fond smile graced her lips.

“Your secret is safe with me, my little guinea pig. You just sleep for now. There’s more tests to be run and real criminals to bring to light.” She closed his bag, discarded her gloves, and, for all intents and purposes, she had no idea who the Phantom Thieves were.
Coronation of a Queen

Chapter Summary

Because I knew I had to write at least one of these scenes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Makoto knew she shouldn’t have been following Akira so closely anymore. She had her evidence, and her test and terms were in place. Her position was secured, but her curiosity was not. Whenever she tried to just let the Phantom Thieves do their supposed thing, her mind always flashed back to that day in the alley. The sudden flare of red in his eyes. It was unnatural, undocumented, as best as her research could tell, and it was eating away at her. She had to know more.

She almost regretted following her gut when it lead her to the depths of Shinjuku, the local hub of debauchery, in the middle of the night. She was only able to justify it by telling herself that she had to be there. Both Akira and Ryuji, two Shujin students, were there. If asked, she would tell authorities that she was investigating student activity in the area. She wouldn’t technically be lying.

The trip was, by and large, uninteresting. The two evaded a number of sleazy characters and, to her surprise, two officers who were actually monitoring student activity, but that was as much as she saw. She lost the trail temporarily when Akira entered a bar, which she wouldn’t risk being found in, and he seemed to be making his way back to the station afterwards. Whatever business he had been attending to was known only to him.

It was when he reunited with Ryuji, only a stone’s throw from the subway, that she got something to work with. It started when a pair of male partiers became infatuated with Ryuji. She suppressed the urge to chew them out for being poor examples of a minority in need of a little respect, but, fortunately, Akira was there to speak for her. As soon as they made their move, his posture became more rigid. It was hard to tell in the neon glow of Shinjuku, but his eyes had once again turned red.

“Excuse me, gents.” He threw an arm around Ryuji, pulling him in and away from the unwanted attention. “I think you’ll find this one’s already spoken for.” His smile was only friendly on the surface. The edge under it seemed capable to drawing blood if given a chance. “And no, I don’t like sharing.”

“Oh poo, I thought it was weird for such a hunk to be on his own.”

“Don’t worry, dear, the night is young and the ocean is wide!” The two wandered off somewhere, playfully poking at each other, and as soon as they were gone, Ryuji slipped out of Akira’s hold.

“Thanks man, but, uh, let’s not tell anyone about that. Okay?” Akira smiled, his eyes grey once more.

“Aw, but we’re such a great couple.”
“Come on, dude, you know I don’t swing that way.”

The rest of their conversation became white noise as Makoto summarized her findings. The change was definitely tied to conflict, though not combat in particular. It only surfaced when presented by a threat, but it receded in a more friendly environment. If she had to liken it to anything, it would be putting on a mask, but that wasn’t quite right. It seemed to still be the real him, not a performance if the ease of transition was anything to go by. She needed more data, but the small sample size was a major impediment.

Then she realized the error in her thinking. Akira wasn’t the only Phantom Thief.

- Ryuji was, admittedly, a hard mark to track. When he was in town on his own, he was invariably running. To places, from places, or just running to run, it didn’t matter. And he was fast, especially considering it had been less than a year since his encounter with Kamoshida.

That day, he had been training. It was a routine circuit around the less heavily populated neighborhoods around Shibuya, one that he would likely conclude with a trip to buy ramen. She had witnessed this exact pattern many times, but this time, there was a wrinkle in his plan. She could tell his leg was bothering him more than usual. It was only a matter of time before it acted up on him.

Nearing the last stretch of his rounds, his leg gave out entirely. He narrowly avoided collapsing to the ground, catching himself on his good knee. Makoto was tempted to help him, but then she saw the look on his face. He was hissing in pain, but he wasn’t defeated. No, he was angry, furious even. He slammed a hand down on his injured knee, and it was like taking jumper cables to a car. The jolt ran through his body, and he shot back up to his feet, powering through the last part of his run as sweat cascaded down his face.

As inspiring as it was, that wasn’t what she recorded. The moment he was up again, his eyes had changed. Their base color was the same, but there was a sheen to them. If she squinted, she could have sworn she saw red in his pupils.

- Ann’s contribution didn’t come from such a direct incident as the other two. Hers came about while passing through a crowd. Many of them had their eyes on her. They ogled her relentlessly, but she went about her business as though nothing was wrong.

Then one decided to catcall her. A sharp whistle rang out, and her head whipped in its direction. It wasn’t clear who had done it, but every man caught in her gaze had recoiled. The unwanted attention suitably frightened, she returned to her own matters.

Once again, it was a very mild change, barely more than a glimmer in her eyes, but it was still there.
Yusuke wasn’t quite as forthcoming with evidence. In fact, he didn’t provide any. His days were spent watching people in Shibuya for artistic inspiration. It was a passive hobby, one that apparently didn’t meet the criteria to cause the change.

Still, it gave her time to compile what she had gathered. Most of these instances, she concluded, came with one related trigger: limitations. Ryuji was bound by the long term effects of his leg injury, a reminder of when he had tried and failed to rebel against crooked authority on his own. Ann was viewed as an object of desire by those who didn’t know her beyond her looks, those who would devalue her as a piece of eye candy and little else.

When their eyes glowed, it was like those things that weighed on them melted away. Ryuji’s leg worked stronger than ever, as if spiting its own weakness. Ann repelled those prying eyes, a rose baring its thorns.

Akira, though, was still the most striking. His changes were always linked to more direct conflict, and it was never when he stood on his own, she noticed. It only triggered when he was in a protective role. Their strife became his power. Why his physical change was so much more outstanding was still a mystery, and she didn’t know whether his history provided as definite of a trigger as his friends, but everything else lined up.

The strength of the Phantom Thieves was found in encountering what was meant to be a ceiling, things that seemed insurmountable, and it allowed them to shatter those binds. They were told they couldn’t, so they proved that they could. No matter what came to them, they proved with their actions that they were their own people. They were free.

This discovery brought Makoto no comfort, however. It only highlighted just how heavy her own shackles were. Even then, as she held all the cards, doubt gnawed at her mind. If she was in control, why were they the happy ones?

The world inside Kaneshiro’s heart was stifling indeed. It was like the sky itself looked down on Makoto, judged her, laid her lack of worth bare. It was the world of a man who viewed himself as above it all. Everyone else was worthless, and his world set out to make them feel it.

The Phantom Thieves, however, were unshaken. She found herself staring at them unabashedly. They all moved with a confidence she could only dream of. They wore their true selves on their sleeves and dared anyone to object.

Akira, or, as he was called there, Joker, was still the most standout example. Where his team took their new strength in stride, he reveled in it. Every hand movement was a flourish. Every word he spoke was certain. He radiated the confidence that defined the Phantom Thieves, and it was clear then why they followed him. Not even the thing at the core of the distortion made his spirit waver, the Shadow that embodied Kaneshiro’s boundless greed.

“I’m the understanding sort. I would be happy to give you a loan, at a ten percent daily interest rate, of course…”
“No, that’s okay. We'll manage.” Joker circled the table, taking in the offered pile of money. The guard watched him like a hawk, especially as he brushed a hand against the bills.

“Are you sure? Most customers tend to struggle without my kind offer.”

“Trust me, we can handle it. Still, three million yen…” His head snapped to look the guard in the eye. Before it could respond, he unsheathed his pistol and fired, the bullet popping its head and sending what remained of its body into a boiling puddle.

“What do you think you’re doing!?”

“Getting started! Hey, Skull, would you say all the cash he’s trying to take from students on the streets would be about enough?” Another guard ran into the room, and he was quickly ejected by the end of a shotgun.

“I’d say it’s exactly enough.” A cocky grin spread throughout the group, and as they drew their weapons, Kaneshiro started to sweat.

“If you think you’ll survive long enough to collect, then you’ve much to learn. Kill them all, you incompetent…!” The screen shattered under a hail of rounds from Panther’s SMG.

“Finally, I thought he would never shut up.”

“We have our way in.” Joker drew everyone’s attention, walking towards the door. “Let’s clear out while we can. Saturn formation. Makoto, stay in the middle.” He bolted from the room, and everyone else followed him.

Makoto did her best to keep up, and when she got a chance to watch, she was amazed by spectacle. They had taken a twin ring configuration, Joker, Skull, and Fox on the outside, Panther and Mona next to her on the inside. Any reinforcements that got too close were shredded and bludgeoned, and any that tried to keep their distance were burned to a crisp.

She had been warned about the beings they could summon, these Personas, but seeing them in action was still overwhelming. A shameless dancer, an unwavering shogun, a headstrong monkey, all the spitting image of their masters’ greatest virtues. They knew who they were, and that knowledge gave them strength.

“So, you just going to hang back this time, too?” Joker kept her in the corner of his eye, the split in his attention not dulling his lethality.

“What do you mean? We both know I couldn’t keep up with…”

“People are stronger than they give themselves credit for.” The advice made her remember the last time he said it. Back in the alley. The picture of herself, knife in hand, was burned into her memory. “Will you hang back again, or will you see just how worthy you can be?” The question rang in her mind, and that perfect image of herself started to smolder.

“Joker, the exit’s right there!” Skull bolted for the door, but when he pushed, it refused to open. “The Hell?”

“Fools, all of you.” Kaneshiro’s demeaning voice echoed down from the balcony, and a stream of guards rappelled down to line the room. “All you had to do was give yourselves to me and you could have lived, but now, you leave me with no choice.” He raised a hand, fingers poised to snap. Makoto ran forward, yelling up to him.
“Wait, don’t do this!”

“Don’t worry, my dear. I know you’re not one of them. Why would I harm such a perfect product, especially before I can capitalize on the bundle?” Bundle, what did he mean by…?

“No…”

“The Nijima sisters are quite beautiful. You two should hold my attention for a long time to come. Although, you could always start working right now and save sister dearest the pain. I could line up a buyer for such… fresh goods in a heartbeat.” He chuckled in amusement, and Makoto’s muscles tensed.

“Shut up…” To use another human so callously, and for what? Baseless pleasure? Hollow profit? This was the sort of scum that her father would have hounded to the ends of the Earth, but without him, he had been allowed to run rampant on the students of Shujin. She, sat pretty on her pedestal, had done nothing to slow him, but now, she was done being a display piece. He had escaped the law, but now, he would never escape her.

“Shut your damn mouth you money-grubbing asshole!” A bolt of pain shot through her mind, and her body tensed. The picture of herself in the back of her mind moved, and then it smiled.

"Have you finally decided to walk the path of strife?" The pain was immeasurable. It felt like an inferno was building behind her eyes. It clawed at the inside of her skull, throwing itself against every surface to find a place to escape. Most would have been terrified, but she knew what was coming. And she welcomed it.

“Yes, now come to me!” The energy thrummed through her whole body. She stomped to relieve the intense pressure, and the ground shattered at her touch. She grabbed her face, and she found a mask had formed. Her fingers curled around it, and as flesh started to tear, her perfect self came forth.

"You have finally found your justice." The last remnants of the obedient little girl tore away. Though the false adoration heaped upon her fell from her grasp, the fire of rebellion was swift to embrace her in its place. She rose from the ground, above her own limitations, and her real self roared. “Please do not lose sight of it again.”

“I won’t, Johanna!” She revved the engine, and a tidal wave of raw magic poured forth. “Never again!” It tore through the room, eviscerating any who would dare oppress her. The magic hummed in her soul, and she grinned. Hearty laughter came up beside her, and Joker discarded his mask as well. His Persona rose from the ashes of their enemies, and Arsene tipped his cap to acknowledge his newest ally.

“Welcome to the Phantom Thieves.” He smirked once more, and she finally understood what it meant. “How does it feel to be free?”

“Incredible.” She gripped her handlebars resolutely, and her eyes finally reflected what lied within, the crimson flame of life.

Chapter End Notes

Next time, Makoto being badass. Because motorcycle.
Also, am I the only one here that really hates those two weird guys? Maybe I'm just having flashbacks to Shadow Kanji or something.
Bank Breakers

Chapter Summary

Because there's always a bank level.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Makoto knew she could be useful now. Professionals in her field with two Palaces under their belts had praised her combat abilities, and she felt more confidence welling up within her than she had known in her entire life. She was ready to make an impression, which is why she was completely caught of guard when the eloquent conclusion to their job description was…

“…And then we beat the shit out of them!” She was utterly baffled. The smooth, collected career criminals she had worked to the bone to catch had all the planning expertise of an ice cream parlor in the South Pole.

“Well, this should be easier than I thought. From now on, I’ll be the strategic mind behind this operation. Am I clear?” Normally, she was able to contain the Nijima family glare, their most prized weapon, but this Metaverse made it far harder to hold back. Although, she couldn’t disagree with its application in this case. There was a certain thrill to commanding respect out of someone like Ryuji this far into his element.

“Y-yes, Queen!” She could get used to this Phantom Thief thing.

“Oh, but I would still recommend leaving combat direction up to Joker.” Morgana flinched when she looked at him. She pushed the glare back, knowing that he wouldn’t vouch for him without a reason.

“He was quite skilled yesterday.” She might have broken through the first wave of guards, but his instructions had let them bide their time until she could bust them all out. “Has the Metaverse enhanced something vital to the role?”

“Kind of.” Joker tapped his mask, and it hummed at his touch. “I can hold up to ten Personas in here. On top of the versatility that allows, each Persona brings its own perspective and suggestions to the table. It lets me adapt to almost any situation on the fly.” He called himself a Wild Card for a reason, it seemed.

“Very well. I’ll take an advisory position, and a spot on the frontline, naturally.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way. In fact…” He crossed his arms, looking quite satisfied with himself. “I have an idea.”
“Are there any signs of the intruders?”

“Not yet.” Guarding the hallway in front of the elevator control station was a dull assignment, but it was relatively safe. No one would be getting so far into Mr. Kaneshiro’s bank. Even so, it was their job to keep an eye open. “Stay sharp. You never know what to expect.”

The last thing either of them expected was the harsh squeal of tires. They spun around just in time to look a very angry motorcycle in the eye. They barely managed to scream by the time Johanna’s front wheel busted through them, leaving nothing behind.

“Alright, Joker, we can call the Battering Ram maneuver a keeper.”

...

“So, uh, how long’s this gonna take?” Ryuji’s lack of patience, for once, was a blessing, giving voice to a concern no one else was comfortable raising.

“It could be a while. In all the time we’ve been here, the elevator was only used once.” Everyone sat around on the roof of their makeshift ride, waiting for someone to use it and inadvertently give them unseen passage into the basement. It was a solid plan by Makoto’s reckoning, but it wasn’t an expedient one. Ann, however, knew just how to pass time. Getting to know the new girl.

“So, Queen, do you have any hobbies?”

“I enjoy reading a fair bit.” Joker raised an eyebrow.

“You mean like reading reading, or “Baccano” reading?”

“Coming from the guy who thought it was bright to flash model weapons in front of an investigator.” Joker smirked. She was going to fit in just fine.

...

“Seriously, not even one!?” Morgana and Makoto looked on in disappointment as Ryuji ran up and down the corridor, nearly tripping every camera he passed. “That can’t be right, every Palace so far has had at least one!”

“Do I want to know?”

“These idiots have some sort of fetish for defacing every statue they come across. I don’t know what’s worse, waiting for them to finish or watching them freak out without one to work on in the first place.”

“It would go quicker if you helped us!” Ann was a bit more careful in her approach, at least avoiding the heavily secured corridors. Joker hummed calmly to himself, slipping a heavy can out of the folds of his coat.
“Chill, guys, I’ve got this.” Calmly, he strolled up to the nearest giant piggy bank, eased the lid off his can, and threw the entirety of its contents into its face. The metal dyed a sickly purple. It took all of three seconds for Ann and Ryuji to catch on.

“Panther, masquera!”

“On it!”

Soon, the first pig of many was adorned with an approximation of greasy hair and a mustache that screamed windowless van.

“By the way, there’s one more occupational hazard you should be aware of.” They were catching their breath in a safe room, so close to the Treasure they could taste it.

“And that would be?”

“Akechi.” Ryuji glanced up from his soda.

“Oh yeah, he has been talking about trying to find us, hasn’t he?”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.” When no one made an effort to try again, he groaned to himself. “You guys seriously didn’t catch it?”

“Catch what?”

“Not you, Fox, you weren’t there. Remember when he stopped to talk with us in the TV station?” Ryuji rolled his eyes.

“How could I forget? I hate talking to smug bastards like him.”

“That’s right, you three took a social studies trip to the station when they interviewed him.” Makoto steepled her fingers, taking her new name in stride. “I presume Mona was with you as well?”

“Yeah, and he’s what clued me in.”

“Normally, I appreciate having my hard work pointed out, but I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Seriously, you, too?” Akira buried his disappointment, keeping in mind that he was the only one constantly on watch for these things. “Remember the last thing he said before leaving? I thought I heard something about delicious pancakes.”

“So he has good taste in breakfast, what of it?”

“The only one of us that said anything about pancakes was Mona. We told him about Dome Town and never brought up its shape again. Get it now?” Makoto leaned forward, her eyes focusing intently.

“He can understand him. That would suggest that he's heard Mona speaking in the Metaverse
before, which would, in turn, mean that he’s watched you on the job.”

“Oh crap!” Ryuji suddenly became very distrustful of the walls. “Do you think he’s listening in right now?”

“Safe rooms are inherently separated from the rest of the Palace. As long as we don’t leave the door open, we’re completely muted from the outside.” Morgana’s eyes sharpened as he drew on his knowledge of the Metaverse. Ann realized something else of note.

“Didn’t Madarame mention someone else being in his Palace before? Do you think that was Akechi?” The thought of the black masked intruder had been lingering at the back of their minds since, though they hadn’t had anything concrete to link it to until now.

“It’s certainly possible, but there’s no definite proof of that connection. We do, however, know enough to say that Akechi is able to access the Metaverse and is at least aware of your identities within it. Whether he knows your real names or not and if he’s this black masked character are unknown.”

“I knew there was something fishy about that douchebag!” Makoto flinched, the eruption of emotion the was Ryuji too much to take. “What do we do? We could hunt him down if he’s here now and show him not to mess with us. I’m ready to fight whenever!”

“Calm down.” The simple direction from his leader was enough to make him set aside his eagerness, though it didn’t dissipate, turning into an impatient tapping of the foot. “For now, we just have to make sure that he doesn’t know that we know. Once we’re back in the Palace proper, we act like this conversation never happened. In the meantime, we should develop a counter surveillance plan. If he’s going to be gathering intel on us, we should do the same right back.”

“Those have worked well for you in the past.” Makoto’s stare turned pensive, the gears of an honor student going to work. “We should start with a silent communication system.”

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Less than a week after the debt was issued, it was gone. Kaneshiro was in police custody, all incriminating images were destroyed, and another victory went to the Phantom Thieves. Akira felt like he was on top of the world, even if he was dinged up a fair bit. As ridiculous as it was, ten tons of Piggytron made for a painful encounter. A night spent licking his wounds sounded lovely, if only a certain cat could stop treading on them through the blankets.

“Have some confidence in yourself.” He had lost count of all the times he had caught Morgana staring off into the distance like a mid 2000’s antihero. For once, he decided to speak up about it, and Akira had some choice words. Morgana glared at him with all the ego he could muster.

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” He swatted Akira’s hand with his tail before smiling smugly to himself. “I must be human. After all, I’m the core of the Phantom Thieves. Only a real man can say that!”

“Morgana.” Akira sat up, looking him square in the eyes. He didn’t need to look, however, to know that his bluster was a front. Ego built on such shaky ground never stood for long, and Akira had a policy about taking care of his friends. “Let’s face it, ‘human’ is a relative term anymore. A year ago, I thought I was a normal human. Today, I summoned a blue giant to smack a fly piloting a
pig. My number one advisor is a red coated fire demon that hangs out in the back of my brain. Our new teammate’s soul is represented by a motorcycle. Humanity or a lack thereof seems less and less important.”

“I can’t say if you were a human before or not. Cat, human, demon, Shadow, Persona, it doesn’t matter. All I know is what you are right now. You’re Morgana, a snarky, intelligent guy who I’d gladly call one of my best friends. Nothing’s going to change that.” Morgana stared up at him for a while, eyes wide and a little watery. When his senses came back to him, he wiped at them with the backs of his arms.

“That… That means a lot to me. Thanks.” When his eyes dried out, from dust, he claimed, he shot a harsh look back. “Don’t think this gets you out of helping me in Mementos, though. I’m going to find out exactly what I lost.”

“You got it. And whatever it was, whatever you were, you’ll still be a Thief to me. We outcasts have to watch out for each other, after all.” He held out a hand, and Morgana put his paw in it.

“And even if I am someone important, I’ll still be around. You’re hopeless without me. Now.” Akira never knew a cat could look devilish, but here he was. “Let me show you a thing or two about real thievery. My partner should be at least half as talented as me.”

Chapter End Notes

Behold, my answer to that whole Morgana subplot. I was genuinely ticked that Akira wouldn’t open his freaking mouth. I get the point behind it, but that doesn’t change the fact that it was a rift caused by people not talking about stuff that needed to be talked about, and I hate plots propagated like that. So there, begone, angst. No longer shall you hamper Haru's introduction.
Mementos Mania

Chapter Summary

Who doesn't love that deep, dank subway thing?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mementos. The Palace of humanity. The collective unconscious given form. Tracks were its bones, tunnels were its veins, and the harrowed screams of things unknown were its breath. It exuded a malice all its own, daring the living to wander within its halls. No one of sound mind would approach such a place, let alone enter it, without a reason of the utmost importance.

“That’s another thousand yen!” Ann happily dumped an armful of her most recent kill’s loot into the large sack in Morgana’s trunk. The clink of hard earned money was a satisfying chime for all involved, cleansing their minds of the poisonous bog that was Kaneshiro’s pit of ill gotten gains. Morgana’s frame bending under the weight of that money was much less pleasant.

“Come on, why can’t they just drop bills? It’s always coins with these things!” The weight finally settled, and once the sack was closed, the burden on his back lifted. He let out a sigh of relief, thanking the Metaverse for being merciful on pack mules.

“I can see why your wallet is constantly full. This is one of the most lucrative pastimes I’ve ever partaken in.” Makoto leaned against Morgana, slamming his back door shut with the finality of a vault. “What was it you’re fundraising for again?”

“I told you about how the Wild Card works, right?” She nodded. Applying logic, it made little sense, but abandoning that, the concept was simple. The stronger Joker’s bonds with others, the more powerful the Personas he could create. He tried explaining the creation process, too, but that one was far harder to digest. She knew there was a place that helped him accomplish it, but that was all. “Some of my confidants need help money wise, and it would do well for those bonds if I helped them.”

“Also, you’re a soft guy that can’t walk ten steps without trying to help someone.”

“Guilty as charged, mister let me help you get your cat from the tree.”

“It was a little girl! With puppy dog eyes! You would’ve gone up if I didn’t.”

“And I wouldn’t have fallen fifteen feet onto my ass. Get good.”

“I like guys.” The response was out of the blue. Joker said it without a hint of hesitation, and the Mokoi he pulled it on was caught in the spotlight.
“Oh, really? That’s, uh…” It glanced around the room, weighing its options. “I just remembered, I have… things to do. Uh, you do you, guy!” And it was off, gone in a puff of smoke.

“Didn’t want you, anyway! I have a real man!” He threw an arm around Ryuji, who promptly threw it off.

“Dude, again, straight.”

“So’s spaghetti before it gets wet.” As the others either participated in or idly watched the scene unfold, Makoto was caught up by the statement that preceded it. Maybe she could have let it go if it was a one time thing, as she had before, but that was it. This was regular, cracking a joke before draping himself on Ryuji. He’d done it to Yusuke a few times, but he gave up on that after finding the response less dynamic. Once again, Makoto was curious, and she had to know. Saying it outright would be awkward and easy to misconstrue, though. She had to be smart about it.

“Don’t you think the gay jokes are a bit excessive? You’ve had at least one every floor.”

“With this guy? Nope. Never gonna be less than a fun time.” He patted him on the shoulder, a contact he put up with. “Besides, no better way to scan for a homophobic Shadow. You think I want that garbage in my head? No thanks.”

“Oh, well, that makes sense.” The result was inconclusive, but that was as far as she could push it without raising suspicions. At the very least, she could eliminate the worst possibility, not that she saw it as possible in the first place. They didn’t seem the sort to…

“Queen, you’re trailing off again.” She threw a hand over her mouth, once again caught by Akira’s keen eye. “If you want to ask if I’m gay, no. I just like messing with Skull.”

“Oh! Okay, um, thanks for clearing that up for me. I just thought, you know, that’s not the sort of thing you just bring up…”

“The Phantom Thieves are an open forum for its members.” Yusuke was perched atop Morgana, attempting to ‘capture the essence of Mementos,’ as he put it. “We will not assume the worst from an innocent question.”

“If there’s something you want to know, ask and you’ll know it.” Akira straightened himself out, discarding his comedic tone for his more composed self. “If there’s one place we should feel comfortable, it’s with each other. Do my jokes make you uncomfortable?” Everyone was looking at her, but not looking down. They were equal parts concerned and friendly, as always. They respected her as an equal, someone who belonged with them, and she got the sense that they wouldn’t be revoking that membership lightly.

“…No. If you have a problem with something, you make a much bolder statement.” She put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it just a touch too tight. “Besides, if you’re as smart as I think you are, then I think you know exactly why being actually offensive is a bad idea.”

“You said it, sister.” Ann did the same to his opposite shoulder, her off hand tracing circles on the handle of her whip.

“You, too?”

“I’m not gay, specifically. I like the who more than the what. It just so happens the who in this case is a girl.” Everyone had a guess who that was, but no one said anything. She still had a hand on the whip.
“This is fitting.” Ryuji got between everyone else and Morgana, letting him hide his sudden onset melancholy. “We all got together because we were tired as shit of being told what to do and who to be. Kind of one of those matter of time things, you know? Here’s to being different.”

“Oh, are we putting forth our deviancies?” Yusuke tore himself away from his art, now fully invested in the conversation.

“Why the Hell not? Come on out, no judging around here.”

“I don’t ask for my sake. I was simply making sure before capturing the moment as such. These small details are what give a painting longevity, and I feel this moment deserves to be preserved to the best of my ability.” It wasn’t exactly coming out as most would define it, but it was an apt display of his uniqueness.

“I don’t know how you capture asexuality, but I’m looking forward to what you come up with.” The statement was so smooth, as per usual for Akira, that it almost passed without note. Then Makoto noticed it.

“I honestly wouldn’t have guessed.”

“No one does. I keep quiet, I pass off as a picky straight guy.” He shrugged, winking. “But I’ll still happily stick up for the other guys, so it balances out.” Yusuke carefully memorized the way everyone was arranged as they turned Akira into the epicenter of a group hug, which he was certain would be including himself momentarily. He would need to generalize their features to maintain anonymity, of course, perhaps offset the detail loss with a powerful theme. Hope and togetherness in the midst of oppressive darkness seemed the perfect fit.

“My Lady Ann…”

“Do not fret, my friend. Love shall arise when you least expect.” Morgana sniffled, hiding it with a rev of his engine.

“But will it be as sweet?”

“Do you guys hear chains?”

“That’s your outfit, man, get used to it.”

“No, I hear it, too.” Makoto stepped out of Morgana, sweeping the hair from her ear. “They sound heavier than Joker’s. And is that… moaning?” It was deep and carried far, like a submarine breathing its last as the ocean crushed the life from it.

“Guys, we need to run, now!” Morgana revved his engine, but he remained in place, stuck until someone drove him.

“You said something about a powerful Shadow when we first came here, right?” Joker shifted the rearview mirror, getting an eyeful of the hulking mass pushing through the tunnels. “Is that…?”
“The Reaper!” No sooner than he said it, a sonic wave blasted through Mementos, and all noise became a high pitched whine. Makoto grabbed her ears, and through a clenched eye, she saw the shell of a bullet planted in the ground at her feet.

“Look out!” Ann’s yell was lost on Makoto’s overloaded mind, but she was more than a bark. She dove out of the van and into Makoto, pushing her out of the way as another round passed through where her head used to be. The jolt upon landing was enough to shake Makoto out of her reverie, and she switched gears to survival mode. She banged against the driver door, catching Joker’s attention.

“Floor it!” She punctuated the order by summoning Johanna and pulling Ann on board. The message was received, and Joker slammed his foot down on the gas. Both took off, and the Reaper wasn’t far behind. Whenever they thought they had put distance between themselves and it, the shrouded figure would appear once more and fire another round. Makoto did her best to cover with walls of flame, the closest they had to a smokescreen, but it was as relentless as it was menacing.

“How far to the rest area?”

“It was a floor up!” Makoto could remember that well enough, but she had no idea if they could get there. They had gotten lucky so far, but with the mass and velocity of its rounds, she could tell that one good hit would be a death sentence. They needed an ace in the hole.

“Queen, catch!” Yusuke threw something out the window. Ann grabbed it, and she found herself holding a can of spray paint.

“What are we supposed to do with this!?”

“Wait, that’s perfect! Throw it back as hard as you can!” Ann knew better than to question the schemes her teammates cooked up. She just reeled back and chucked the paint with all of her might. The Reaper stopped for a moment, expecting an attack, but it proceeded as soon as it saw it was only a can.

“Dead on!” Makoto pulled Johanna into a hard spin, throwing her into reverse and stabilizing. She unsheathed her revolver and let loose one shot. It hit home, puncturing the can as it bounced near the Reaper’s face.

The leased pressure tore the can apart and it detonated, a cloud of red paint engulfing the Reaper. It cried out in pain, and Makoto returned to her original course. The Shadow of death grew distant in the mirror, its voice sounding only in their waking nightmares.

After half a minute of the most tense driving of their lives, they reached the safety of the small glass hut and immediately crashed. The Thieves laid strewn about the seats, almost all physically and emotionally drained. Ann didn’t stay standing long enough to be anywhere besides right next to Makoto.

“So, Queen?”

“Yeah?”

“If I didn’t have an eye on someone already, I’d totally be kissing you right now.” Makoto let out a tired laugh.

“The thought’s appreciated. It’s the bike, right?”

“Could be. If you drove up and dropped a pickup line on one of those IRL, I’d hop on in a
heartbeat.” Joker raised a limp finger.

“That’s what she said!”

“Hell yeah I did.”

Chapter End Notes

Has anyone on this site done asexual Akira yet? I know how much gay, straight, and bi there's been, but none of the other guy. I get why, because gosh darn it I want to hug all of my teammates, too, but here, have something new. Unless I'm wrong, in which case, please let me know.
Yes, I am proud of that title. It's, like, a third of the reason I went through with this.

Makoto thought she had heard the last of students going up to Shujin’s roof, but there she was, climbing the stairs once more. Rumors had spread that a reclusive third year slipped away after classes ended and spent upwards of two hours there, coming back looking somewhat tired and happy. As bad as that sounded, she would limit her questioning to the student’s presence rather than their activities until sufficient evidence presented itself. Which she would weed out to the best of her abilities, but that was beside the point.

Not that she needed to anyway. As soon as she opened the door, she found the roof had been transformed in her teammates’ absence. Three long troughs of dirt stood in the center, each filled with orderly rows of plants. They were all still in an early part of the growth cycle, but Makoto was familiar enough with botany to pick out the immature tomatoes and carrots.

Kneeling over and tending to one she couldn’t quite identify was the student under investigation. Her back was turned, and her wide, light brown hair blocked the entirety of her face from view.

“Excuse me, but you do know students aren't allowed here?” It had been posted on the door, but she found opening with questions instead of accusations tended to create less unnecessary complications.

“Oh!” She hurriedly rose to her feet, wiping her hands on her grass green apron as she turned around, and Makoto’s internal clock, usually precise to a fault, stopped. Her features were small and gentle, not unlike a kitten, and they were framed splendidly by poofs of curly hair. One look in her eyes, as rich as caramel, was enough to leave Makoto speechless. “You’re President Niijima-senpai, right?” The formal address was a small spark in the ocean she found herself lost in, but it was enough to push her back into action.

“Yes, but please, you don’t have to be so formal. I’m attempting to soften my image somewhat so the student body isn’t so hesitant about approaching me.”

“Is that how they see it? I find a somewhat stronger projection is more reassuring.”

“That’s what I thought before, but then I heard that many of them call me robotic.”

“My, that’s a bit harsh. A little authority is necessary to push things along.”

“True, but it’s difficult to find what needs to be pushed if no one is comfortable bringing matters to my attention.” It was then that she remembered that there was a point in being here. She had almost completely forgotten. There was something about this student that made talking to her so tempting. “For example, it was only through overhearing rumors that I found out you were coming
here. You are aware access has been restricted to only staff ever since the incident in April?” The
student looked at her in confusion.

“Yes, but I gained proper clearance from the school board. I have the signed permission slip if you need proof. I understand why you can’t take me at my word.” She went over to a nearby table and started sifting through her bag, set against a tall pile of fertilizer sacks. “I’m surprised no one told you. Is this what you meant earlier?” Any number of the things she just said could have come across as hostile or condescending, but there was an innocence in her tone that assured Makoto that she was nothing short of genuine.

“I’m afraid that might be for something else entirely. My standing with the school has diminished somewhat since I failed an assignment directly from Principal Kobayakawa.”

“I heard he expected you to single handedly take care of the crime ring in Shibuya. I would call that his failure well before yours. Why, if it wasn’t for the Phantom Thieves, poor students would still be getting exploited.” She knew it shouldn’t have been so shocking that their name had become something of a legend around the school after taking care of two targets that preyed upon it, but the indirect praise for her hard work made her heart skip a beat.

“I take it you’re a fan of theirs?”

“Oh yes, it’s simply wonderful that there are some people out there still willing to watch over the common person. I know they may technically be criminals in some sense, and that it’s irresponsible of me to vocally support them, but I find the good they accomplish to far outweigh the possible illegality of their actions. Ah, here we are!” She pulled out a simple slip of paper and brought it over. Makoto accepted it and acted like she was looking it over, but as soon as she saw the official signature on the bottom, she let her attention drift back to the student. It was even harder to focus on being serious when she was this close.

“…Everything seems to be in order. I’m sorry to have disturbed your work.”

“It’s no bother, truly. I actually enjoy a bit of company, so feel free to visit whenever you please. Oh, that’s not selfish of me, is it? You must be quite busy with your own responsibilities.”

“Not at all. Taking an interest in student activities is vital to earning their trust. If anything, it would be beneficial for me, too… um…” Makoto realized something else, something that should have been second nature. “It seems I never even asked your name. How rude of me. I’m Makoto Nijimma, though Makoto would be fine. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She bowed, and she worried the whole way. Had she lowered herself enough? Too much? Was this too formal? Her worries were assuaged when the student bowed back.

“In that case, please call me Haru. I hope we can get to know each other better, Mako-chan!” Makoto’s breath caught, and her cheeks lit up. Already such familiar terms? Was Haru really so kind, or…?

‘Oh God, I must look ridiculous!’ When she looked up, Haru had already returned to her garden. She apparently hadn’t even seen the shameful display. She hummed cheerfully to no one in particular, and Makoto finally pieced together why she was acting so unlike herself. ‘I need to see the others.’
Akira had been more than happy to call everyone out to LeBlanc on Makoto’s request. She still hadn’t cashed in her one free plate of curry, after all. A study session was the perfect time to introduce her to the fine cuisine he had been living off of since coming to Tokyo.

When she showed up well behind everyone else with no school supplies on hand, though, he knew something else was up. That was without factoring in the way she shrank into herself with a hint of pink dotting her cheeks. She hurried over to them and stiffly sat down.

“Guys, I need help.” She sounded out of breath, like she had ran the whole way there from the station, though she wasn’t sweaty in the least.

“First, calm down. Breathe.” Makoto did just that, and her color palette reverted to normal over time. She was still fiddling with her hands, though. Ann deemed it to be close enough.

“So what’s up? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Makoto swallowed hard, her mental filter failing to stop the first thing that came to mind.

“A spirit of beauty, maybe.” As soon as it came out, she covered her mouth and instantly wished she could put it back in. Ryuji’s eyes went wide.

“Wait, is miss uptight herself…” Her eyes sharpened, the daggers she stared held a hair’s width from his throat.

“Finish that sentence and I will throw you under a train.” He locked up, looking to their leader for protection.

“You know he doesn’t mean anything by it. No need to be hostile here.” Makoto realized how easily she had lost it and recoiled, shrinking even further into herself than when she arrived.

“Yep, you’ve got it bad.” Sojiro looked out from behind his counter, a knowing smile on his face. “You need relationship advice, right? Tell us about him.”

“Um, actually…” She looked to Akira, and he nodded calmly. “…It’s a girl…”

“Really? Even better, then. I know a thing or two from back in my day that might help. You made sure she’s, you know, swinging the same way, right?”

“That’s just it, I don’t know!” She grabbed large handfuls of her hair, tugging on them like pull strings. “She’s so friendly and nice and pretty and she’s already calling me Mako-chan so I don’t know if she’s just being nice or if she’s interested or what!” She slammed her face down onto the table, narrowly avoiding a plate of curry. “Why does this have to be so hard?”

“And that right there is why I’m halfway bald. Find a stress ball as soon as possible, trust me.” He plodded his way to their table, bringing along a cup of warm tea to replace her coffee. She didn’t need the caffeine. “For now, start small. Invite her out with some friends, get to know her. If you start feeling like you know each other well enough, bring it up, but don’t sound too desperate about it. At this stage, it’s all about not coming on too strong. That’ll scare girls off ninety percent of the time, and you should be careful about nine of the other ten, too.”

“Okay, okay, friends. I can do that.” She looked up, her eyes casted pleadingly towards them. “You can do that, right?” They glanced at each other, and Akira nodded.

“Sure. Let us know when and we’ll be there.”
“Alright!” Ann stood up, her coffee held high. “Time for Operation Date Night! Don’t worry, Makoto, we’ll be the best wingmen ever!” Sojiro shook his head, going back to his station. He hoped that girl had more patience than he did.

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It was around noon the following Sunday, and the Thieves had convened in the usual walkway. The only people missing were their strategist and her plus one. They had all dressed as casually as usual except for Ann, who had downgraded her top notch fashion to something a bit more normal. No tassels, no flashy belts or accessories, just a nice yellow t-shirt and jeans that stopped a bit above the knees. She wasn’t stealing Makoto’s spotlight if she could help it.

“You remember the plan, Mona? We can’t reconfirm it after they get here.” Akira opened his bag a little more, and Morgana looked through the opening.

“Please, me forget a plan? Inconceivable.”

“That’s them, right over there.” The ladies of the hour finally arrived. Makoto wore her normal casual attire, which was still formal enough to be easily mistaken for a school sanctioned uniform. Haru, meanwhile, was in a very simple white blouse with a light green skirt that went down to her ankles. “Everyone, this is Haru.”

“It’s nice to meet you! Makoto has spoken highly of all of you.” She bowed slightly, and Ryuji scratched the back of his neck.

“No need to be so formal, we’re all friends here. Name’s Ryuji.” Despite his request, everyone that knew him saw how he struggled to not slouch. It was about as formal as he ever got.

“I’m Ann, and I have to say, I love your outfit!”

“Agreed. The understated color and design is quite lovely.” Haru looked at Yusuke curiously as he framed her with his fingers.

“Don’t mind him. Yusuke always gets like that when he starts thinking art.” Akira pushed his glasses back into place, nodding. “I’m Akira.” He was interrupted by a loud mewl, and a black hairball leaped from his bag. He landed on Makoto’s shoulder, nuzzling her cheek and purring. “And that’s Morgana.”

“Aw, he really likes you, Mako-chan!” If they hadn’t been battle hardened, the sight of her happily scratching Morgana behind the ear would have overloaded their cute-o-meters. They stopped that from happening by focusing on how their little ploy improved Makoto’s image. Haru paused for a moment, a thought coming to mind. “He was in your bag, which means…” She looked to Akira, and recognition hit her. “You’re the transfer student, aren’t you?” A chill ran through both him and Makoto. They had forgotten the negative stigma attached to him.

“Yeah, afraid so.”

“Don’t trust those rumors they spread about him. He’s actually a really nice person.”

“I don’t put much faith in gossip. Besides, I don’t see how someone with such a cute pet could be the monster they say he is.” She cupped Morgana’s face, touching him nose-to-nose, and
they let out a silent sigh of relief. When she backed up, he meowed happily.

“I like her already!” It was a unanimous decision. She passed the initial test with flying colors.

“So, what will we be doing today?” Akira shrugged.

“Just hanging out in general. Maybe head to Shibuya and wander around for a while. Plenty for a group of teens to get up to in town.”

They eventually decided to start with a movie. It was some corny action flick revolving around baked goods. They had managed to set things up so that Haru was right next to Makoto, and she unwittingly squeezed Makoto’s hand during the really intense bits. Her blush was almost bright enough to act as a beacon in the dark theater, and her friends found it just as entertaining as the film. After they filtered back out onto the streets, the simultaneous growling of stomachs decided what was next on the to-do list.

“Anyone want something in particular?” Ryuji checked his wallet, making sure he had enough on hand for himself. Akira’s eyes went to a glowing sign a ways down the street.

“Could go for a Big Bang Challenge.” The casual way he brought it up caught everyone by surprise, except for Haru.

“Oh, that does sound quite nice! Seconded.”

With votes from their two most important members, the gang crowded into Big Bang Burger. The thought of what was to come kept all but those two from ordering. Four workers brought out their trays, struggling under the mass of the order, and when they set them down, the tables quaked. Two pillars stood defiantly before them, each standing over half as tall as the customer with patties bigger than their heads.

“Oh, you’re a captain, too?” Akira nodded, smirking.

“I make weekly visits a point. Won’t be able to gorge like this for long, so I’m taking advantage of my stomach while I’m still young.”

“Indeed. In that case, let us commence!”

A bell rang, and the race began. Akira tore into his, the food going down his gullet almost as soon as he bit. Haru managed to match his pace without matching his savagery, each bite a little more delicate and proper. Slowly, the towers began to crumble, vanishing into the cavernous expanses that were their stomachs. Ten minutes later, the plates were clean, down to the last sesame seed. Each reclined, a fulfilled look on their faces, and Akira went so far as to cross a leg over his lap.

“Looks like a tie.” Haru nodded, careful not to move her torso.

“You are a worthy opponent.” The silk covering slid back into place, but no one present would be forgetting the display. Soft on the outside, as determined and capable as any Thief on the inside. She was a perfect match for Makoto.

“Congratulations! You’ve both already conquered the third tier before, so here’s your reward.” Two sacks covered the recently cleared tables, each filled to the brim with burgers. Ryuji lit up.
“Sweet, free burgers!”

“Go ahead, I’m stuffed.”

“Likewise. I couldn’t eat another bite.” Ann was about to take one, but a wink from Akira stopped her.

“Oh, what are we thinking? We need drinks to go with these. Come on, let’s go.” She essentially dragged Makoto with them, the group only stopping long enough for Akira to throw some yen Yusuke’s way. He wouldn’t be worming his way out of a proper meal on his watch. When Akira and Haru were alone, he dropped the cool facade.

“Hey, I need to tell you something about Makoto.” She giggled, covering her mouth.

“I see, that wink was a signal. How sneaky. Is it important?”

“Yeah. I’ll be honest, today was mostly about sizing you up, so to speak, making sure you were a good person. Congrats, you passed, so you should know that Makoto’s been crushing on you pretty hard.” Haru paused.

“You were all acting as her support. She was right, you are nice!” She crossed her hands on her lap, her expression going thoughtful. “Hmm, things are a bit complicated on my end, and I’ve never considered getting involved with another girl. Although, she is otherwise the sort of person I could see myself being with…” The cloud of thought passed, and she smiled his way. “I’ll talk to her about it later.” He nodded, knowing that it was all he could ask. Soon, the others returned with drinks in hand, and the rest of the day passed in friendly comfort.

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Akira was about to tuck in for bed when his phone went off. He opened his chat, and what he found made him grin.

Makoto: So, it looks like I now have a girlfriend.

Ryuji: Alright, Queen!

Yusuke: Congratulations. It pays to have some confidence in yourself.

Makoto: It was all thanks to you, so, thank you.

Ann: What are friends for?

Akira: Glad to help, but don’t underestimate yourself. It was you she chose to date in the end.

Makoto: And I couldn’t be happier, but now… I have a new problem.

Ryuji: …You have no idea what to do now, do you?

Makoto: I honestly didn’t think I’d get this far. I know going out on dates is important, but I don’t know where I should take her.
Akira: Like Boss said, it’s about starting small. Somewhere nice, but nothing fancy yet. I know some places.

Makoto: Thank you, you’re a lifesaver! Should I start doing research?

Akira: Nope. What’s important isn't a perfect date, it’s about you both having fun with each other.

Ann: That’s what he said!

Ann: But seriously, he’s right. Go with the flow and things will work out.

Makoto: Okay, I trust your judgment. I hope I won’t be too much of a bother with this.

Akira: Anything for one of our own.

Chapter End Notes

Is it an original pairing? No. Is it an adorable pairing that both wipes away the necessity for Morgana's thing later on and puts the two most dangerous Thieves into the perfect deadly duo? Oh yeah. OTP material right here, and I plan on running all the way home with it.

Happy Fanworks Day, or Valentine's Day, or Singles Awareness Day. Whatever is more relevant to you. Didn't even realize what day it was when I went to post the romance chapter, of all things, but it worked out nicely.
“Hmm, you have interesting friends, Akira.” Hifumi, for once, found it difficult to focus on her shogi practice. How could she when, from her seat in the frontmost pew of the church, she had the perfect angle of her shogi partner being made into a model? His stance was somewhere between the holy posture of Christ on his cross and a scarecrow in its field, and every little wrinkle in his clothes was being recorded by Yusuke. Akira would have shrugged if he wasn’t supposed to hold still.

“What can I say? Normal’s boring.”

“Please refrain from moving. The shifting light on your jawline is distracting otherwise.” With the very act of speaking cut off from him, Akira resigned himself to his fate as a temporary statue. For Hifumi, this was an interesting experience. Yusuke Kitagawa tended to be aloof during school hours, solitary and reclusive, and now she saw what he was like in a new environment. He was both passionate and demanding when his mind was set. She wondered what else she could find out about him given this opportunity.

“I must say, you are quite casual for being on holy grounds, Kitagawa-kun.” She had seen more than a few people in the pews staring at him in shock. Most who entered, herself excluded, were reverent in manner, but he seemed content streaking around Akira like a line of static.

“In truth, I’ve never put stock in higher powers, but I can admire the artistry displayed in the name of faith. I hope I can attain even a fraction of the passion poured into their work. Anything less would be an insult to art itself.” His words carried far, and the reaction was mixed, but Hifumi was intrigued above all else. Did Akira surround himself with loud and dedicated individuals to make up for his own mellowness? Or perhaps doing so allowed him to mask his intentions? She had to admit, he knew his way around a ploy quite well. A little more experience stood to mold him into a worthy opponent, but who could say whether he had shown his full hand to anyone?

However, even as she thought it, the look on his face seemed to counter her ideas. There was a quiet contentment, as though standing over a warm hearth. He was truly happy right where he was. Or perhaps that, too, was a ploy, a facade to…

‘…Perhaps I do spend a touch too long immersed in the cloak and dagger shogi community.’ She packed away her shogi supplies, instead settling in to observe another’s passion for the day. It wouldn’t be until near sundown when Yusuke finished, and no one involved felt that their time had gone to waste.
Chihaya stared pensively at her set of tarot cards. The arrangement that stood before her was nonsensical, and any images she derived from it were scattered and obscured, the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle set to float on the surface of a lake. The only part that made any sense was the stem card, the Fool, the patron symbol of Akira Kurusu. She had been seeing the Devil card often, too, and it was slowly growing closer to the Fool in sequence, though what that meant, she couldn’t say.

‘Perhaps this means his fate is uncertain, haunted by demons of some sort? That can’t be, though. Even for those he has redirected, the cards read some future before he meddled in the results. How could his own reading come up so…?’

‘He-ey~!’ A woman, thin, in dark, unassuming clothes, sat across from her. The air around her smelled as though it would detonate with so much as a lit match, and yet, slurred speech aside, she carried herself as well as anyone sober. Chihaya knew all the signs of a practiced alcoholic. “What’s with the long face? Got some troubles, miss magic lady?” Chihaya composed herself, used to dealing with many drunken customers, though none so peppy in their inebriation.

“I am having some personal issues at the moment, though I shouldn’t burden you with them. Have you come to have your fortune read?”

“Honestly, I don’t trust you voodoo types farther than I can spit, but a kid I know’s talked pretty highly of the one outside the Crossroads, which I’m thinking is you, so you know what? Screw it. Kurusu’s never steered me wrong before.” Chihaya’s eyes opened wide.

“You know Akira?” She nodded, and Chihaya started to recognize the aura around her. It was the same that followed the Devil in her recent readings. Was this a sign? “Well then, I suppose that changes things. You see, I’ve been running tests with him lately, and the results have been fascinating so far, but whenever I try to read his fate in particular, I come back with nothing. It’s as though he’s missing from the web of fate…”

“Oh God, you seriously believe you can read fortunes.” Her guest’s sobriety seemed to return, disbelief painting her features. Then she threw her arms up, leaning back almost far enough to fall from her stool. “You know what? That kid’s a magnet for weird, so sure. You can actually see the future. Easier to believe than some of the stuff he’s shown me.” She leaned over the table, though she couldn’t make heads or tails of the seemingly random spread of cards. “From what I gather, you get this stuff straight from the, what did you call it? Web of fate?”

“Yes. Think of it like a long, weaving tapestry that foretells of all events. With the correct focus, I can skim knowledge from the threads yet to be sewn and, as you put it, see the future.”

“I don’t get most of this magic stuff, but I know a thing or two about tight lipped sources.” She put a hand over the table. “The name’s Ohya, investigative journalist.” Chihaya politely returned the gesture, taking her hand.

“And I am Chihaya, seer.”

“Good to meet you. Now.” She laced her fingers together, putting her elbows on the table. “From what it sounds like to me, I think whoever’s giving you these visions doesn’t want to speak up about Kurusu. Go on, read me for a trial run.” Normally, she would have called this out as an attempt at getting free service, but the connecting thread of Akira was too alluring to not follow. She reshuffled her deck and set the stage, flipping the cards over one by one. As the last one fell into place, the reality before her began to unravel with a blue glow, and behind the loosened weave, a vision was made known.
“…One in power seeks your downfall. Your Tower has inverted and Death draws near. It can only be righted through the intervention of…” Her eyes trailed to the final card in sequence. Once more, as though mocking her, came the Fool. “…"

“It’s the kid, isn’t it?” She nodded hesitantly. “Thought so. Should’ve just said it when he asked for the name. Totally buying him a round when he gets old enough.” Ohya shook her head, focusing on the point of the exercise. “So you can read what he’s doing in relation to other people, but you get zilch when you read him directly?”

“Exactly. It’s quite troubling. His ability to alter fate is cause enough for concern, but this…”

“Hold up, you said fate was absolute. Were you lying to me?”

“No! I mean, I don’t think so. It’s as though when he puts his mind to touching the threads, all of fate’s decrees fall silent.”

“And there we go.” Chihaya was left speechless as Ohya slammed a fist into her other hand like a gavel. “Whoever’s in charge of the web is afraid of admitting that they aren’t totally in control. This rogue element threatens their power, and they want to sweep any threats under the rug. My advice, push the issue. Now that you know their game, they might be afraid that you’ll abandon them. Nothing makes people in power sweat like a leak of information.” She thought on that, and she eventually agreed.

“Very well. I’ve never tried to force a seeing, however. Would you be willing to watch in case something goes awry?”

“You got it. Don’t worry, I’m way too drunk to pickpocket you if you pass out.” She giggled, and then she got to work. Once more, an array of cards met the table, and she turned them over. The Fool, at first. Then Chariot, Magician, Lovers, Emperor, Priestess, Hermit, Hierophant, and Empress. She hesitated at the final card, but she persisted. She turned it over, revealing…

A pulse ran through her mind, and her sight grew blurry. She saw Ohya saying something, but she couldn’t hear her. It was like her ears were full of cotton, and her stool, usually an anchor when her mind wandered, felt like open air. She vaguely felt her center of gravity shift, and everything went dark.

When sight returned to her, it was dyed a deep, all consuming red. She couldn’t make out much else, but, in the distance, there was a loose pillar. It stretched far into the sky and ground, chains making up its borders. At the center was a man, his face obscured by shadow, his body hidden by a flowing cape. Slowly, groggily, he grabbed for the chains nearest to his hands, and he pulled. He yanked at them with all the strength his captivity would allow. Soon, they began to loosen, and she thought, briefly, that he could shatter his binds.

Then the fire came. It almost matched the rest of the space, a deep blood red, but its presence became all too visible. The man writhed in agony, his progress on the chains slowing, if not reversing. His screams carried far into the abyss, and she tried to cover her ears, to look away.

“…don’t…” Through the agony, a voice rang. Deep, demanding, firm. “Don’t ignore my plight.” She turned back, and he stared directly at her. His eyes burned a striking scarlet, cutting through the flame and piercing into her soul. “Let my suffering be known, and their sins unveiled. Let them be seen, and us be FREED!”

His last word struck like thunder, and with it, the fire turned. In a blink, all that touched his skin became a searing blue. It spread up the chains, and as his influence grew, the light of the space,
too, became blue. Then came the wisps. One by one, they flickered to life, then expanded. Eight in number, they encircled the man, and when he fought back his pain to once more grab the chains, they flared stronger yet. In the distance, eleven stars flickered to life. The chains creaked, and then they snapped…

Chihaya’s eyes opened, and she was back in Shinjuku. Her body felt unnaturally warm, and there was a haze over her mind. Ohya was above her, and she realized that she was laying in her lap. Her conscious mind was still trying to catch up to her body, and her intuition as a seer took the reigns.

“The Fool stands at the edge of oblivion, and that which binds him threatens to devour him whole. He shall writhe in agony, his wings shall burn, but forth will come the bonds he’s forged, those he has freed, who shall in turn grant him the strength to reclaim a future lost.” The fortune told, Chihaya’s body went limp, her right mind slowly returning. Ohya looked down at her, eyes wide.

“Oh, okay. I want whatever you’re drinking. It sounds like it’s got a punch to it.”

“Trust me, the hangover ain’t worth it.” Ohya didn’t question the slip in dialect. A composed stage voice wasn’t that uncommon. She helped her back to her feet and onto her stool, exchanging her shoulder for the table. From there, she saw the last card she pulled. It was Justice, in reverse.

“So, to translate, Akira's in deep shit and his friends are going to help him out of it?”

“I believe so.” Chihaya massaged her temple, each rub taking a little more of the pain away. “It seems fate once dictated that he would fall, but in surviving, he proved that he stood subservient to none.” She remembered the cocky grin he had when he first told her that destiny wasn’t absolute, and the flare of anger that he attempted to hide. On some level, he was aware of his status, though how precisely was a mystery to her.

“And now fate’s got a bone to pick with him, so it’s trying to screw him over again.”

“Fate bears no malice, it simply is. More likely is the idea that another higher power has noticed his transgression and targeted him thus.” Ohya snorted, shaking her head slowly.

“I really got myself in deep with this one.” She dug around in her pocket, and she pulled out a card of her own. “Here’s my contact information. If we’re going to play a part in pulling his butt out of the fire, then we should stay in touch.” Chihaya accepted it with a bow.

“Thank you. I know it’s not easy to involve yourself in forces beyond our scope such as these.”

“Save it. I got involved when he started telling me about the Phantom Thieves. Take care, magic lady. I’m going to get a drink. As interesting as this was, it ruined my buzz.” As Ohya walked away, Chihaya pondered her words. The Phantom Thieves? Surely no better group existed to oppose what was meant to be absolute order.

She made to reshuffle her deck for her next customer, but she noticed something strange. The Fool no longer stood on her table. In its place was a card she barely recognized. It so seldom saw play by the hands of fate. In her mind, given the context, it was nothing short of an admittance of defeat. Where there once was the Fool, now there was only the World.
Doctor Takemi took in the smell of LeBlanc, old wood forever marked with the aromas of coffee and curry. It was like an oasis in the middle of the dingy back alleys it found itself nestled in, and its out of the way position made it the perfect staging ground for the mysterious Akira.

She liked him well enough, so far as to trust him with her career, but she couldn’t in good faith trust him to himself. With every visit, the wounds he hid had been growing in severity. She had managed to track down certain informants within his… organization that were likewise concerned for his health. She learned that he was often, if not always, at the head of the pack, which also marked him as the most tempting target for whatever form of beasts he combated.

Fortunately, she also learned the best way to circumvent his natural selflessness: the cat. She had long known of Morgana’s intelligence. No normal cat skimmed through stray documents for fun without leaving behind confetti, and she had never found so much as a nibbled corner on any of the carefully chosen bait she laid out. Now that she had confirmation and suggestions from a very concerned strategist, she knew exactly where to strike.

Sojiro was out at the moment, and Akira had gone out without his beloved ‘pet’ for a change. Her mole had performed her part splendidly. Now it was her turn. She took a seat at the booth closest to the stairs, set up a small pocket fan, set aside one photo, and pulled out her peace offering. She pulled the tab at the top of the can, and the breeze did the rest. An overwhelming scent drifted into the attic, and before she knew it, a black hairball had bolted into the cafe proper and nuzzled against her leg.

“Hello, Morgana, you seem to be healthy.” He looked up at the table, his nose twitching. “Oh, do you smell this?” She scooted it closer to the edge, letting its label come into sight. She had to concentrate, but she could see the sparkle in his eyes. “I thought I would experiment a little, see if I could pull of a makeshift tuna curry. As soon as Boss gets back, in this goes.” The panic set in, and he mewled in a way he thought was low key.

“Or, maybe you want it?” He instantly perked up, and the sparkle was back. “Hmm, perhaps I could be convinced, though I don’t really feel like leaning all the way down there…” Right on cue, he bounded up the opposite seat and onto the tabletop. He sniffed the air, so close to the source that he was drooling, but then he caught wind of the photo. He turned to it, and his jaw dropped. It was unmistakable, a picture of him going over a paper, a focused look in his eyes.

“Let’s cut to the chase, I know you’re not what you look like. You possess an intelligence on par with if not exceeding a human’s, at least in certain fields.” Her trap went off, and Morgana knew he was caught. He sat, looking up at her. “That means you know exactly how much I owe Akira. I’m unable to dissuade him from his current line of work, but I’m still concerned of the effect it’s having on his health. That’s where you come in.”

“I want you to act as my proxy while you’re on the field. I know he refuses to touch the medicine I provide himself until after his teammates are taken care of. Loyal, to be certain, but also suicidally stupid. I want you to make sure he gets his fair cut of the supply. I can pick up on when he’s returned from an operation, and if during those examinations I deem his state to be within an acceptable threshold…” She nudged the can towards him. “…I’ll be certain to insert a little something more for my assistant. Do we have a deal?”

Morgana glanced back and forth between her and the tuna. He acted like he was mulling it over, trying to appear professional, but the look in his eyes was anything but indecisive. He extended a paw, and she did the same. One shake, and the contract was sealed.
“Excellent. I look forward to the results.” She stood, packing away her evidence and fan.
“Consider that a down payment.” She scratched him behind the ear and walked away, smiling as she heard him dig into the sweet fruit of cooperation. As she neared the door, the bell rang, and Akira entered. She had finished just in time.

“Hey, Takemi. Coffee this late at night?”

“Maybe, if Boss had been here. I guess he's on a supply run or something.”

“I could get you a cup.”

“No, that’s fine. It’s a little too late for one now. I’ll be sure to stop in soon, though. See you.” He held the door open for her, and by the time he made it to Morgana, the cat had disposed of the evidence of his dirty dealing.

“How’d it go with Yusuke?”

“About how you’d expect. Ankles are a little sore.” Morgana darted up the stairs ahead of him, but before he could follow, his phone went off. He opened the chat, and a yellow flag went up. The icon of the messenger was an eyeless cat head, split by a wide, sharp toothed grin.

?: Greetings, Akira Kurusu.

?: I am Alibaba.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, that stinger means what you think it means. To Egypt!
Ruins Romp

Chapter Summary

Favorite dungeon time!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ever since beginning his work as a Phantom Thief, Akira had been keeping a list of all the things he was hoping to run into. He knew not to discount anything in the infinite potential of the Metaverse, but he found the reverse was a good way to have fun. It was like bingo, and he had filled in a lot of boxes. Museum, bank, laser security grids, a hook to descend on and grab treasure. It had been a wealth of childhood fantasies, but the center square had remained blank.

The last thing he thought would give him that square was an antisocial pharaoh, but when she floated away and a giant, glowing boulder dropped at the top of the stairs, even as his teammates screamed in terror, he found himself grinning wider than he had ever grinned before. He didn’t even need to be prodded to turn around and book it.

Maybe his excitement wasn’t as much of a drive as the others’ fear. They all made it to and across the pit at the bottom of the pyramid first, but as the last one crossed the skipping stones, they crumbled away, leaving nothing but a very large hole. Akira instantly looked up, and when he spotted a rocky outcrop, his eyes lit up like diamonds.

“Panther, your whip!” She quickly unhooked it from her belt and tossed it over. He grabbed it, swung it up, and, as though it was driven by his dreams alone, hooked the rock on his first try. He leaped at the edge of the stairs and swung across the hazard with all the glee of a kid on a tire swing. He pulled himself into a backflip, and when he stuck the landing, he stayed that way for several seconds, smiling into the distance. Not even the boulder falling into the pit behind him broke his bliss. Everyone looked at him like he was a madman, especially Ann as she pried her weapon from his grip.

“You know you have, like, three Personas that can fly, right?”

“Don’t care, having fun.” A month later, he vowed to buy Futaba anything she wanted that he could afford.

The bandit stopped, his dead sprint leaving all of those suckers in the dust. He laughed to himself, content in the fact that no one would ever take his loot from him.

He strolled around the next corner, putting a little more distance between him and them, and he found himself face-to-face with a very angry motorcycle. He screamed, and Johanna screamed louder before lunging at him, crushing him under tire. His body popped, and when he boiled away,
all that was left was a rolled up piece of papyrus.

“I love the Battering Ram.”

“That’s what she said!”

“Hell yeah I did.”


Ryuji and Yusuke panted heavily, their shoulders sore and stiff. Never had they been forced to melee attack so many times in a row. It was too risky to sacrifice the health to make their Personas do it for them.

“Those stupid… dog things… and their no… weaknesses…”

“I believe those… were based on Anubis… the God of Death.”

“Doesn’t mean they have to be so hard to effing kill!” Akira looked at the loot from the encounter, a blob of melted metal.

“Morgana, how much liquid mercury did that special lock pick need?”

“Uh, ten portions.” Ryuji dropped to his knees, hands pressed together, at Makoto’s feet.

“Please don’t let him do this! It’s inhumane!”

“That pick would be a major upgrade for our equipment, and the experience they give out is considerable. Besides, I thought you liked exercise?”

“This isn’t a work out, it’s a wear out!”


“Now I hate those dogs, too.” Joker had managed to stop just before getting skewered by Anubis’s ‘curse,’ but his long coat wasn’t so lucky. It was torn out in three long strips, and his badass image was likewise damaged. Morgana was right next to him, patting his back.

“Don’t worry, those will mend themselves when we leave.”

“Guess this is divine punishment for killing so many of them, right?” Ryuji looked quite smug, and Yusuke only slightly less so. Akira’s eyes narrowed.

“Arsene!”

It was several minutes before Arsene stopped laughing at his greater whole’s misfortune.
It was the last of the three layers before the treasure chamber, and Akira noticed a break in the brickwork. Everywhere else, they were in the standard pattern, but in this spot only, they were arranged to create a perfect rectangle. He slid a hand across it, and when he found a loose brick, he pushed. A hidden mechanism clicked, and that section of wall screeched into the ground.

Immediately, everyone felt the cold blast of air. It was like this one room had been vacuum sealed and opening it drained the heat from the rest of the pyramid. Ann crossed her arms, trying to cover the hole in her thief outfit.

“Um, guys, I don’t like the looks of this. We should just keep going.” Most of them were happy to oblige, but no one moved when they realized they were short a leader. They squinted into the darkness, and they found him standing there, staring ahead. Morgana was the first to follow him, the others slowly filtering in.

“Joker, is something…?” When he saw it, too, he lost his voice. There were only two things in the room. At the far side, facing the wall, was a statue of Futaba. She was curled up, knees tucked under her chin, her arms wrapped around her legs. Most of the detail was downright lifelike, but there was no color, only sandy yellow, and her eyes were blank, devoid of life. Hanging down from the center of the ceiling, the end just reaching the level of the statue’s neck, was…

“Guys, that rope…”

“Yeah.” Ryuji stepped in front of Ann, gently pushing her out of the room. It was a topic she had already faced enough. “C’mon, let’s just go.”

“No.” It was only then that anyone looked at him directly, and their breath ran cold. His body was tensed, fists clenched so hard the fabric of his gloves started to tear. His back was ramrod straight. His mouth was a hard line, and behind them his teeth locked together. And his eyes, usually either understanding or playful, burned like the pits of Hell. Even Makoto thought twice about staring directly into them. The Phantom Thieves knew better than anyone the power of anger, but that day was the first they had ever known their leader’s true fury.

His hand launched forward and grabbed the rope by the loop. He tore it from the ceiling, and as it left his grip, it erupted into azure flames. Even as it fell to cinders, he stomped down on its remains, snuffing out every trace of it from existence. Yusuke put a hand on his back, and, though he jumped at the touch, he didn’t push him away.

“Morgana, mark this room on the map. We’ll need supplies for this one.” He turned abruptly, marching from the room. Morgana hurried to follow, confusion in his eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“You know our policy regarding statues.”

Futaba’s Shadow was performing its usual journey, wandering aimlessly through the cold...
tunnels that comprised her world. It was the same every day, lonely and cold. That was her existence, and she accepted that.

But soon, she noticed something off. The chill of the third layer had dissipated somewhat. It was a minor shift, but one of concern nonetheless. She knew where it stemmed from and went directly to the source. To her shock, the forbidden chamber had been opened, the one place she dared not venture. She entered the room, and her eyes were opened.

The halo of dismay was gone, all that remained of it dust on the ground. The idol to her sadness had been defamed as well. Around its shoulders hung a sheet, a bright orange comforter that could have doubled as a sleeping bag if given a zipper. Beneath it, her skin and clothes had been painted, colored so close to the true Futaba that she had trouble distinguishing it from her.

Shadow Futaba circled around to her front and found that her eyes, too, were filled in, bright brown orbs staring out from behind a pair of glasses. She could have sworn that the statue was smiling, or perhaps it was a trick of the light casted by the lamps now occupying all four corners. Set in her lap, propped up against her legs, was a red and black card marked by a hat atop a burning mask. Shadow Futaba picked it up and began to read.

“Futaba Sakura, victim of sin, we know of your plight. You hide in darkness, a shadow bleaker than midnight hanging over your crown. Know that we are not blind to your suffering. Thus, we vow to free you of this tomb and allow you to enter the sunlight once again. Wait for our arrival, for the warmth of we who choose to care.”

“Signed, the Phantom Thieves.” By the end of it, she had a hand placed over her heart. “This feeling… Is this what it feels like to care?” A tear trailed down her cheek, and she had no intent of stopping it. “It’s been so long.” She made to leave, but first, she took the blanket from the statue’s shoulders. This facsimile needed not its comforts any longer. “My real self deserves to know. My real self must know.”

Chapter End Notes

See, graffiti isn't always for the laughs.
In which I contend with a multi chapter event that twists the game's canon like a pretzel. Wish me luck!

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sojiro had been having a rough week. It all started when that prosecutor showed up and started threatening his guardian status. Then it got worse when, somehow, the kid and all his friends found out about Futaba. He was lucky they were understanding enough to drop the issue, and it was a relief to get some of the weight off his chest, but it had still been a hassle. He needed a smoke. When he went to grab his pack, though, he found that his pocket was empty.

“Must’ve forgot it at home.” There was no way he could get through the day without his nicotine, thanks to some bad choices when he was just a brat, and he didn’t have that much change to spare on another pack. Nothing to do about it besides going all the way back home for the one he left behind.

At least it wasn’t that far, but with his old bones, it certainly felt like it. The years weren’t kind to him. He couldn’t help but think of the good old days, when he was a… Well, strapping wasn’t the right word, but he was fit enough to be a government instated informant and bodyguard. That had to count for something. Not anymore, though. Now, he was just an old cafe owner.

Still, he had enough experience left to know when he was being watched. There were a lot of eyes on him as he neared his house. The only reason he didn’t do anything about it was because he hadn’t felt any real intent behind the stares. Probably just some damn kids getting spooked by a stranger out in the backroads of Tokyo.

The strangeness kept getting worse, though. The front door wasn’t how he left it. He always closed it a certain way, lifted just enough so the pin rested in an extra notch he added to the doorframe instead of the normal one. Sure, sometimes that meant it would slip open a bit, but it was a decent covert way of making sure no one got in his place when he wasn’t looking without his knowledge. If there had been a crook, first, he had to see if they were still around, and if not, he had to make sure Futaba was alright.

Then he saw that whoever had entered left their shoes in the front box. What sort of burglar observed proper customs? And he recognized them, too. They were the one pair Akira had to his name, all scuffed up from his long, busy days on the town. What was he doing in his house? He knew better than to suspect him of any wrongdoing, but he had promised to give Futaba space after his earlier intrusion.

After sweeping the first floor, he concluded that Akira could only be in one place, upstairs. He walked along the left side of the steps, where the boards weren’t loose, and peered around the corner at the top. Down the hall, sitting casually next to the door to her room, was Akira. He was talking, too, softly, as though to a startled animal.
“I get what you’re going through better than you’d think. You’ve been burned, and now you’re terrified of what else the outside world could take from you. Am I right?” His phone dinged in his lap. His eyes hadn’t left the screen once since Sojiro arrived. “If I had to narrow it down, I’d say it’s partly because we’ve got one thing in common.” Was Futaba texting him from inside her room? It was something she did a lot on days the hallucinations were especially bad. The glowing screens of her phone and computer were the few things she could focus on that wouldn’t distort when her grip on reality started slipping away.

“We’re both bastards.” Sojiro started seeing red when he used that… slur in reference to his little girl, but then he realized he was talking about himself, too. Ding. “Yeah, really. Some jerk came through town, promised my mom the world, but as soon as she started showing pregnancy, he screwed off to Satan knows where. I did what I could to help her out over the years, but, you know, what can a kid do? You probably get the gist from there.” Ding.

“No, she’s still around, I’ll give you that over me, but it was a close deal. Depression isn’t the sort of thing to give up easily, speaking from experience here.” Sojiro couldn’t believe his ears. The kid had always been so cocky when he wasn’t rolling with things, but here, he was letting his guard down. Under the bluster was a fragile frame, one he worked tirelessly to hide. All Sojiro’s talk about kicking him out was coming back to bite him. He’d have to apologize sometime. Ding.

“Not really sure how myself. I’m told stubbornness runs in my blood, so that might have something to do with it. Here, you sound like you’re getting tense.” He pulled out a pack of gum, sliding a thin piece under the door. “Mint. Should calm your nerves.” It was pulled in the rest of the way, and a spell of silence followed.

“…Thanks.” Sojiro’s eyes shot open. She was talking to someone new? Through a door, sure, but there were days she wouldn’t do that much for him. “You seem to know a lot about me. How?”

“Sorry, but that one’s a bit complicated. I could demonstrate a little face-to-face, but I know you’re not…” The door clicked, and it opened just a crack.

“If you promise to tell, then come in. Slowly!” Akira smiled warmly, using the wall to get to his feet.

“Sure. I’m coming in.” He nudged the door open, just wide enough to enter, and he was sure to close it behind him. Sojiro got closer, just enough to hear them through the wall. “Look, see this app here? It’s what lets us operate. All you require is three keywords.”

“You mentioned those before. What are they?” Sojiro was lost. What were they talking about? How did keywords have anything to do with understanding Futaba?

“The app’s styled like a GPS, so think of the keywords as the address of your heart. First, a name. If it’s accepted, then a location’s next. It would be a place the target has a warped view of, so since you never leave it, that would be your house.”

“Oh, so you can only take someone’s heart if they have a distorted cognition?”

“Exactly.”

Wait, this talk of hearts was familiar. It couldn’t be. Was Akira…?

“So what’s my distortion?”

“That would be the third keyword. It’s what you think of the location as. In your case, you
told me that your house was…”

“…My tomb.” The more he heard, the less he wanted to hear, but the more he had to hear. He thought he had been helping her by giving her space, but was he really only solidifying her isolation? “Does it actually look like a tomb?”

“Pyramid, actually, all the way in the middle of a desert. Subtext aside, it’s kind of cool. One of the traps was this big rolling boulder, and I’ve been wanting to see one of those for a while. So thanks, I owe you one for that.” She snorted, the closest he’s heard to a laugh in years.

“Wow, the big bad leader of the Phantom Thieves is a little kid at heart.”

“Guilty as charged.” So he was one of them, the people in the news so much lately. The Phantom Thieves. That would mean that sudden group of friends he collected was the rest, and that group was after his daughter’s heart. He didn’t know how to feel. It was a horrifying prospect, and yet it sounded like she was welcoming it, and this was the healthiest she had acted since the incident. What was going on?

“You said you needed something else from me to finish, right?”

“Already got it. See, sometimes the heart links obstacles to things in the real world. In there, your distortion is tied to a central Treasure, and taking it makes the distortion fall apart. The Treasure chamber is behind a door that looks just like your bedroom’s, and it was locked tight. Now that you’ve let someone in, though, that should change.”

“Should I leave it unlocked for a while, or…?”

“You should be fine now. You know your room isn’t airtight, so it won’t be in there. The only step left is this.”

“A calling card?”

“As soon as you read it, your Treasure will materialize, giving us a small window to steal it. Once we do that, our end of the deal will be fulfilled.”

“And I’ll be healthy again?”

“You’ll still have problems. Years of social isolation will do that, but the crippling anxiety that set it all off will vanish. And from there, I’d be more than happy to help you the rest of the way, if you’d let me. Like I said, I can sympathize.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Sojiro had heard enough second hand. It wasn’t helping him, only confusing him further. He needed to confront Akira directly about this, but not right then. He wouldn’t risk making Futaba retreat into her shell by starting something in front of her. He backed out to the living room, and when Akira left, he followed. He opened the door, and low and behold, the people he suspected to be his accomplices were all around him. It would make things much easier.

“Kid, we need to talk.” He spun around on his heels, staring at him with shrunk pupils.

“Boss?”

“Beginning navigation.” A wave rippled by, and Sojiro’s world went fuzzy.
When he came to, he felt the sun beating down on him. The air was unspeakably dry, and the ground under his feet was coarse with sand. Looming over him was a pyramid of old, its tip pointing skyward towards the sun. Akira’s earlier description ran through his mind, and any dizziness from the trip was vanquished by the thought of where he was.

“Is this Futaba’s…?”

“Your daughter’s heart, yes.” Behind him was a small mob of teenagers in an array of costumes, and he only needed a second to link them to their real world counterparts.

“What the Hell are you kids wearing?”

“We’ll explain later.” Akira stepped forward, pushing his mask up to his forehead. “For now, just know that we’re helping Futaba overcome her trauma and that this place is dangerous for the unprepared. You need to leave.”

“Joker, we’ve got trouble!” A tiny, two legged cat thing ran up to him. Its fur pattern almost reminded him of…

“Oh come on, the cat’s in on it, too!?”

“What’s up?”

“The Treasure’s materialized, but the signal’s weak. If we don’t go now, it’ll disappear before we can take it! There’s no time to escort him back without leaving us short a member.”

“Wait, how’s that possible?” Ryuji’s bewilderment was group wide. He was just the loudest about it.

“Joker must have told her too much about the process and mitigated the shock of the calling card.”

“It was the only way she would let me in. What was I supposed to do, break down the door? Boss would’ve killed me more than he’s already going to.”

“I won’t do that on one condition.” Somewhere along the way, though he was lost in unfamiliar territory, his practicality triggered. If they didn’t act now, this means of helping Futaba would be lost to them forever, and she would go right back to the way she was if not worse. “You get in there, do your thing, and make sure she comes out the other end better than she entered. When you’re done, we’ll talk this out like adults.” Akira seemed surprised by his offer, but he didn’t reject it. His mask slid back into place with a firm nod.

“We’ll need to build a formation around protecting Boss.” Makoto procured a piece of papyrus from their stock, marking it with a chunk of charcoal.

“Why can’t I just stay here?”

“Once we take the Treasure, this whole pocket world will fall apart. Since we’re the only ones who can trigger the exit, the only way for you to leave when we’re finished is with us. Don’t
worry, we’ve done escort work before. You’ll be safe.” She passed her rough blueprint to Sojiro before tearing her mask off and throwing it to the ground. It shattered like glass, and the air under her exploded, clearing to reveal a burning motorcycle. “Panther, Skull, you’re on security detail. Mona, be ready with heals. Joker, Fox, we’ll be the head. We’re cutting straight through to the Treasure.”

“Like a big arrow, smart. Anything I can do?” Sojiro wasn’t fine with being dead weight. Akira unhooked a pouch from his belt and tossed it over.

“That’s part of our medicine stock. If you notice someone’s hurt before Mona, pass some around. There’s also coffee for when anyone wears out.” Sojiro checked. Amongst the bottles of pills and fluids was a thermos of coffee, and he recognized the smell of his beans from a mile away.

“So that’s why you were so eager to learn how to brew it.”

The heat eased up once they were inside, but the atmosphere was almost suffocating. It felt like the walls had a will of their own, each brick staring at the intruders with all the malice it could muster.

“How do you kids take this?”

“We get a lot of practice.” Ann looked back for just a moment to explain, but that moment was enough for a dark mass to come barreling through a side door and towards her. Quicker than Sojiro could register what was happening, she ripped her mask off, pelting the monster with it. “Burn, Hecate!”

The mask shattered, and from its smoke rose a horned sorceress. The dog heads she commanded grabbed their opponent by the wings, pinning the large, blue gryphon in place. Hecate tilted her head back, and the beast went up in flames, leaving her dogs with mouthfuls of ash.

“Nice shot, Panther!” Ryuji ripped his pipe out of the Anzu’s backup, letting it collapse into a steaming puddle.

“What in the…”

“We’ll explain later.” That was a recurring theme with these people, but Sojiro understood why. They were in a hurry, and stopping to lay out all the intricacies in the middle of enemy territory was a bad idea anyway. He kept his glasses on straight, making sure to take in as much as he could on his own.

“This place, it’s…” Futaba was at once elated and overwhelmed. Just as Akira said, her heart was a pyramid, and she its pharaoh. It seemed to bend to her will, providing a bridge as she approached the pit, shortening the felt distance between floors on the stairs, opening doors in her path.

Then it closed. At the very top of the stairs, the entryway that matched her bedroom had locked tight in front of her, and the door to her left opened in its place.

“This way.” Her heart jumped into her throat, and her eyes jittered around, trying to track the sound of her own voice. “All will be made clear. There is much for you to see.”
“O-okay, weird queen version of me. I’m trusting you on this!” She didn’t know why she was. She didn’t know why she jumped into her own cognitive world. She didn’t know why she had tricked Akira into telling her how to use the app, or why she let him in. All she knew was that hearing him talk about his life made her realize just how stagnant hers had become. She had stayed in one room, terrified of everything she didn’t know for years, her nightmares waiting in every shadow, forcing her to stare into the blinding light of her monitor until it was all she knew.

She couldn’t take it anymore. She wanted to feel something besides emptiness and grief. She wanted more, and if she picked up one thing from what he was saying, he reached out and grabbed more for himself. Why couldn’t she?

A whole passageway spanned out in front of her, a bridge cut off from the end platforms by gaps, but her eye was drawn to the wall. She saw only a brief moment of her other self there before she vanished into the room beyond.

“Hey, wait up!” She dashed in after her, but her other self was nowhere to be seen. Instead, she was met by a massive screen that spanned the length and width of the opposite wall. It was restyled by way of Egyptian art, but she could never forget that setting or the men in suits. The letter they brought with them…

“It seems you caused your mother a great deal of trouble, Futaba-chan.”

“Stop it, please…” She covered her ears and shut her eyes, but it didn’t help. In her head, it kept playing, no matter how hard she tried to force it back. “Mom, Mom, I’m…”

“Do not look away.” The phantom in white that she had been chasing appeared behind her, blocking the doorway. “In turning your back, you’ve only allowed the fog to cloud your mind.” She waved her hand, and the screen changed. Now it was the day prior, the scene of the accident. Her mother’s twisted body in midair, an image forever burned into her atrophied heart.

“Why are you showing me this? I’m trying to get away from this guilt, not make it worse!”

“In forgetting your past, you have allowed your mother as she truly was to fade. Tell me, what were her final words?” Futaba tried to remember, with every cell in her brain she reached, but whenever she almost had something, the static would intensify and bar her entry. “Their machinations run deep, but you are the master of your own soul.” Her Shadow warped in front of her, kneeling to her level and holding her head up by the chin. “Look into my eyes, and think.”

Those eyes, no matter how greatly the body they belonged to matched her own, they weren’t hers. They were spotlights of gold, and when they met hers, they cut a swath through the clouds in her mind. A thin fracture appeared in the static, and through it, she listened.

“…Futaba, stay back. I…” She flinched, the screech of tires failing to stop in time and the heavy crack of bone ending the vision. “Wait, if she hated me, why would she tell me to get out of the way?”

“Precisely.” Behind her Shadow, the screen changed again. Now it was yet another day back, when her younger self had bugged her mother for attention. “What can you tell me of this day?”

“I yelled at her, saying she didn’t love me as much as her work, and then she scolded me.”

“And?”

“And, she said that when she was done, we would go out to eat as a family, wherever I
wanted.” That promise fell to the wayside, silenced with the rest of her life by tragedy, but now that she heard it, she could recall the love in her mother’s voice, the warmth of her smile. “Mom… loved me?”

“She among many others.” She waved her hand, and the screen raised. “You have drowned yourself in grief, and when your lungs began to burn, you cried out for help.” She paced towards the statue once hidden by the screen, and from its lap, she took a piece of card stock. Looking closely, she could see that it was a calling card. Her Shadow held it close enough to read.

“Futaba Sakura, victim of sin, we know of your plight. You hide in darkness, a shadow bleaker than midnight hanging over your crown. Know that we are not blind to your suffering. Thus, we vow to free you of this tomb and allow you to enter the sunlight once again. Wait for our arrival, for the warmth of we who choose to care. Signed…” A drop of fluid hit the card, followed by another, and another. Her breath caught in her lungs, and she was forced to choke out the rest. “…the Phantom Thieves.” Her Shadow draped a blanket over her shoulders and wiped the tears from her cheeks.

“This is a token of their love, granted as a promissory of their intent. Even now, they fight to break your heart free of this Palace’s yoke.” The floor began to shake, and a harsh screech rang through the halls. “By the sounds of it, I would imagine they face the keeper of your prison. However, your nightmare is swift and merciless. On their own, they will surely fall.”

“No!” Futaba held the blanket firm around her neck and slid the card into her pocket before turning and taking off. They had promised to help her find her sunlight, he had promised to help her back into the world, and she wouldn’t let anyone else die before keeping their word.

Chapter End Notes

The keen among you probably know where this is going. I haven’t exactly been subtle. But then again, neither is the game, so I guess it all checks out.
Anguished Awakenings

Chapter Summary

In which Sojiro and Futaba contend with trauma.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The rest of the path up had been as treacherous as they suggested. More Shadows, as the kids called them, kept popping out of every crack in the wall, and when they left the main corridor, the spiraling mess that was supposedly Futaba’s room refused to be kind on Sojiro’s old bones. He had been forced to let Joker ferry him across the bigger gaps and down farther jumps.

He couldn’t help but notice just how little he was doing. Mona was an adept hand at patching injuries, sealing them almost as soon as they were made with the help of Zorro. He had passed what used to be a simple house cat a cup of coffee at one point, and he applied some strange ointment to dispel what looked like psychic brainwashing before Skull could bludgeon anyone, but that was it. He was the seventh wheel on a six wheeler.

Sojiro knew, looking around at the arrow formation they had taken just to protect him, that he was more of a liability than a help. They would have denied it if asked, but he wasn’t that blind yet. If they could have, they would have sent him back to the real world at the entrance. He couldn’t blame them, and it made him sick. Here he was in his daughter’s heart, closing in on the one thing that stood a chance of making Futaba better, and he was little more than a supply pouch. He couldn’t help her, just like he couldn’t help her mother.

The kids, though, these Phantom Thieves, were almost tireless. Queen and Fox flanked their leader, mowing down any that tried to slip around as Panther covered the pack’s rear with fire. But for all they were doing, Akira was doing more. Where the others stuck to one of those Personas, he was actively switching between several and covering just as many roles. A blue teardrop that mended wounds, a cat warrior that bent the wind, an armless beast that called down thunder.

Among them, though, his favorite seemed to be the burning demon, Arsene. His chains were almost alive, weaving inescapable webs when they weren’t directly skewering opponents on arrival. Sojiro was shocked anyone else had a chance to fight, but that went to show how dangerous these Palaces were, and how little a cafe owner could accomplish.

“Do not degrade yourself so.” Suddenly, Arsene was looking directly at him. His crimson eyes were searchlights, cutting through the mire of thought to Sojiro’s core. “In coming, you have displayed bravery few can muster. In standing, you show that you have the will to fight. It is up to you whether you grasp it or remain grounded.” Before he could start deciphering his words, they pushed through the last flight of stairs, entering a pitch black room. In the middle was a stone box, that which the tomb was made to protect.

“T-T-Treasure!” Mona zipped up to it, pushing futilely against its lid. “Someone give me a hand, it’s right in here!”

“Stand aside.” Fox was up to bat, unsheathing his sword as Mona cleared the way. In one
thrust, he plunged it into the thin gap between box and lid, and the temple rumbled around them.

“GET OUT!” A strike like thunder rocked the complex, almost sending Sojiro to the ground. Joker caught him as he stumbled, providing support as the quakes became more frequent.

“What’s going on!?”

“AAAAAHHH!” Panther pointed to the ceiling as bricks fell away. Beyond them, a titanic eye leered into the pyramid, and as it met theirs, it shrieked loud enough to break away more layers of rubble.

“Do not disturb the Pharaoh’s tomb!” Something else busted through just south of the eye, tearing away more stone. Deep claw marks were gouged into the ceiling. The figure on the other side leapt away, but the Thieves were on high alert. Joker put a hand to his mask, ready to swap or remove it at any time.

“Mona, can you track it?”

“No!”

“But Shadow tracking is your expertise!”

“I know, but it doesn’t have the same aura to it. That thing’s not a Shadow!”

“Then what is it?” Skull was swiftly answered as a blast of wind tore through the structure, taking with it what remained of the ceiling. Dust scattered over Sojiro’s face, forcing him to shut his eyes so they didn’t fill with the glass-like particles.

“The pharaoh must pay for her sins! You won’t awaken her!”

“Guys, what is that!?”

“It’s part of Futaba’s cognition!”

“They can get that big?”

When Sojiro’s eyes opened, he was faced by a waking nightmare. Looming over them was the sphinx, the guardian of ancient Egypt. Its skin was pulled taught over musculature impossible in a real lion, and its wings threatened to eclipse the sun. Its head was human, clashing with its animalistic body, but that wasn’t what made it so disturbing for him.

“Wakaba?”

“That thing’s Futaba’s mother?” Queen dropped to a starting stance, ready to unleash Johanna at a moment’s notice. Mona backed away, pushing Sojiro back with him.

“Her guilt must have compounded with her wish to see her mom again, creating that.” Wakaba turned her head, a ray of sunlight reflecting off her glasses and making the Thieves squint. She watched their attention waver, and she dove, smashing into the pyramid with all of her weight. It was only by his track background that Skull managed to avoid the blow. Joker rushed in to retaliate with his dagger, but she retreated into the sky, blowing him back with the gust of wind. “Hey, that’s no fair! We can’t hit her if she’s up there!”

“Fox, spray and pray!” Panther and Fox leaped to the front, dropping to one knee and unloading their automatic arms. Joker and Queen joined them, and Mona and Skull were on standby
for when she drew too close. Wakaba was agile for something of her size, though, ducking and weaving through the storm of lead. She glared angrily down at them, watching for her next opportunity. Sojiro’s patience was at its end.

“Why are you doing this? The Wakaba I remember loved her daughter more than anything! You can’t be her!” Her eyes widened in recognition, and then they narrowed.

“You fumbling old fool! I warned you of what was to come, but you ignored me. You are as much to blame for my death!” Her decree was punctuated by a thrust of the wing, a thin wave of air blowing out from the feathers. It was too fast for Sojiro to avoid, too sudden for the Thieves to react. Joker ceased his assault, turning and making a break for him.

“Boss!”

“Sojiro!” A streak of orange rammed into his side, pushing him to the ground as the wind cleaved through where he once stood. His vision went blurry from the impact, but he could never mistake his little girl for anything else.

“Futaba?”

“You came into your cognitive world!? I warned you of what was to come, but you ignored me. The tangling of her psyche could pull this place apart any minute.”

“FUTABA!” The sphinx was as quick to recognize the interloper, and her already sizable rage swelled. “You dare defy me again? Have you not done enough?” Futaba squeaked, and the light in her eyes dimmed. Her breathing quickened. Her heart rate spiked.

“No, not now…”

“Murderer!” She grabbed her ears, trying to block out the noise, but it was futile. What was once confined in her own mind now echoed in the air around her.

“Demon!”

“Why won’t you say something?”

“I… I…” Sojiro wrapped his arms around her, his eyes fruitlessly searching for the source of the voices.

“Shut up, damn you! She hasn’t done anything wrong!” It was a reminder of where she once was. He had been present that day, seen her relatives turn into rabid animals out for blood.

“It seems you caused your mother a great deal of trouble, Futaba-chan.” Next was the cause of their monstrous devolution. Sojiro recalled all too well the bile that rose to the back of his throat as those government lapdogs read the supposed suicide note, and signed Futaba’s death wish in the eyes of her family. In his eyes, it was little more than an excuse to direct attention away from her death. They had turned his little girl into a scapegoat.

“Shut your damn mouth! That letter is bullshit and you know it!”

“Post maternity neurosis, it seems. A shame…”

“Mom, I’m sorry. I… I…” Her hands moved from her ears to his shirt, holding onto it like a life raft in the ocean. “I killed you. I deserve to die.”
“Futaba, no…”

“Futaba Sakura, remember.” His head whipped around. Floating in the air above them was a near duplicate of Futaba, but this one was dressed in a facsimile of Egyptian royal garb.

“But I…”

“You know how she truly felt, what love she held in her heart. Would a soul like hers ever produce such a venomous rag?” Futaba’s fingers loosened. Sojiro looked between the two.

“Who are you?”

“I am the truth that has long been buried. Futaba Sakura, will you allow what your mother once was to be forever lost?”

“No…” Her legs were wobbly beneath her. Sojiro acted as her support, slowly rising to his feet, too. “She was a kind, beautiful, brilliant woman. She wouldn’t have said such horrible things. She couldn’t have killed herself!” Her other self lowered a few meters, her head tilted low enough to shade all but eyes that glowed like burning amber.

“What about the suicide note?” Futaba pushed away from Sojiro, her hands balled up at her sides.

“A total lie!”

“They used you.” Her face twisted in anger, and she looked down, heavy puffs of breath straining through her teeth.

“You need to take it easy, your body can’t handle this much…” Sojiro backed away as her head shot up, her tear stained eyes staring into the sun above.

“I will never forgive them!” The raw emotion washed over the Thieves like a wave. Most didn’t know what to make of it, Sojiro included. But he saw Joker’s reaction.

He was grinning.

“Enough of this foolishness!” A great shadow overtook them, Wakaba diving once more, her talons outstretched as though to pluck Futaba like a weed. They expected fear, Wakaba and Futaba both, but there was none to be found. When Futaba’s head pivoted her way, she saw only contempt in those russet eyes.

“You’re not my mother.” Her Shadow warped, taking the space between Wakaba and her prey, and she threw a hand forward. At once, all the wind in the desert fused into one mighty gale, pushing the sphinx back into the sky.

“Contract.” A gentleness overtook her Shadow, her voice soft like an automated announcer. Words hovered at the edge of Futaba’s mind, and she reached out to grasp them.

“I am thou, thou art I.”

The air over her Shadow glitched. It jittered and buzzed like a shorted out television, and in the space of a frame, the image changed. Gone was the pharaoh, and in her place was a saucer as black as pitch. Green runes, somewhere between cryptic and modern, were engraved on its sides, and a gargoyle was perched at the top.
“The forbidden knowledge was been uncovered.” Tendrils descended from the craft, gently wrapping around Futaba. “The path to the truth lays open before you.”

“Whoa, freaky!”

“Are you alright, Futaba?” For his part, Sojiro was lucky to be following along thus far. He knew what was happening, but he was having trouble coming to terms with it. His daughter was ascending to whatever plain these kids had attained and leaving him behind.

“More than alright.” She gave him a determined smile and a thumbs up. The tendrils drew her upwards, and she vanished into the neon light. Her voice echoed from an unseen speaker elsewhere. “Just have to clear out the belfry and I’ll be set.”

“You heard the lady. She’s the director of this mission, after all.” Joker loosened up, balancing his knife on the tip of his finger.

“That’s right! Phantom Thieves, objective updated. Take out that faker!” The group nodded in unison, the air of combat taking hold.

“Right.”

“Fools, one and all!” The sphinx pulled out of her tailspin, once more glaring down at the Thieves. “I will put you back to rest, and this time, your slumber shall be eternal!”

“Not happening. This is my Palace, and it listens to my command. With a little hacking, that is. Let’s do it, Necronomicon.” A light shined down from her craft, taking hold of the bricks scattered by the sphinx’s earlier assault. They raised from the ground, coming together and melding into one continuous whole. When her light abated, what was left behind was a fully armed ballista.

“That’s amazing! We can use it to knock her down to our level.” Joker nodded at Queen’s analysis.

“Skull, cover me.” Joker bounded towards the armament, but the sphinx had no intentions of letting him reach it. She dove after him, claws outstretched. Skull attempted to block her attack, but she knocked him away easily and moved in for her real target.

“Dude, look out!” Joker heard the flap of wings and turned to face her, dagger in hand.

“Take-Minakata!” He swiped a finger across his mask, but he didn’t have a chance to remove it. She rammed into him, barely fazed as he plunged his knife into her chest. She crushed him against the central beam of the ballista and pinned him in place with a paw.

“You who dares awaken the pharaoh, die!” Sojiro didn’t know what he was thinking. He didn’t know if what he was seeing was real anymore. All he knew was that the kid he had been tasked to watch over was about to die at the hands of someone he couldn’t save, and with him, his hope of saving Futaba would turn to ash in his hands. His greatest failure had returned to spite him, and there was nothing he could do. Once again, he was useless when it really mattered…

“You choose to pity yourself even now?” A chord snapped in the depths of his mind, its twang a sour note. “You are their guardian, are you not? Is it not insulting to have them guard you instead?” Suddenly, his eyes focused on their own, caught by the gleam of Joker’s knife just out of his reach. He threw himself forward, grabbing its hilt with both hands.

“You dare raise your hand against me? Your inaction killed me once before!” He glared up at her, and she recoiled from his crimson gaze.
“You’re not Wakaba.” His grip on the knife tightened, and he shoved it as deep as it would go. “And you’re not taking these kids from me!” He planted a foot into her ribs, using her own mass as leverage to tear steel from flesh. She cried out in pain, and Sojiro knew better than to rest on his laurels.

He eked out all the speed his old bones had to give, hitting the lever at the back of the ballista. An arrow flew, the force of a point blank shot tearing cleanly through the sphinx’s shoulder. Control over that leg waned, and, with it, the strength she could levy against Joker. When the pressure on his arm loosened, he was quick to tear away his mask.

“Assault Dive!” The grey monster appeared before him and charged into the sphinx, breaking her unstable balance and throwing her away from his greater whole. She landed in the center of the platform, a manic eye hunting Sojiro down.

“You… filthy traitor!” Her wing lashed out, another blade of wind launching towards him, but he felt no need to dodge.

“The only betrayal here is yours.” A weight settled against his head, and an instinct he couldn’t describe told him what had to be done. He grabbed it, the metal burning to the touch, and he tore it away. A moment of agony coursed through his veins, glass cutting at his every muscle, but it passed as a wave of flame overtook him.

“It has been many years since you’ve flirted with rebellion.” The attack faltered, only blowing away the fire before breaking against what it hid. From the inferno rose a knight in ebon armor. His vizor was a deep red and stretched across his helm as webbed wings, a motif shared by his shield and coattails. “I am Thaddeus. They who keep the night are kept by me.”

“So this is why you’re always so cocky, eh, kid?” Another knight strode forth from the blaze. His armor, too, was dark as night, but where Thaddeus’s mail was marked by spikes and sharp corners, his was smoothed. A cape flowed from his back, but it was charred, reduced to a thin, mangled strip of red hanging from the back of his neck. His armor was likewise damaged, thick cracks webbing out from the left side of his chest plate. Rust liberally coated every piece of his shell. Battle had not been kind to him, but he stood all the same. Joker saw this and couldn’t help but laugh.

“Thought you said you were done with the rebellious phase?”

“What can I say? You kids are a bad influence.” He gave as good of a smirk as he received, a finned helmet finding its way to his head as Thaddeus returned. At once, the contract was sealed.

“Alright, Sojiro!” The runes on Necronomicon brightened, a thin wave of red pulsing from its hull. Every Thief it touched felt their muscles expanding, a rush of energy overtaking them. “Give that imposter a piece of your mind!”

“I plan on it.” He tossed Joker’s knife back to him, reaching for a more fitting weapon. From its hilt came a silver claymore, matching the highlights on his greatshield.

“You wouldn’t…!” Before she could finish her taunt, he charged forth, every step thundering like a freight train. His sword cleaved through her hide, and the other Thieves took this as a sign to descend upon her. Blades tore away the thick outer layer, a whip struck wherever vulnerable skin was exposed, and a club and brass knuckle circumvented the hide entirely, delivering force directly to the bones. Before long, much of her fur was stained red with her blood.

“Enough!” With a flap of the wings, the Thieves were pushed back, giving her a window to
reclaim her throne in the sky. She lifted above the pyramid on unsteady wing, but Necronomicon was quick to respond. Green light overtook the ballista, a new arrow taking form.

“One more beatdown like that should do it!” Sojiro grabbed the lever, waiting for Futaba to line up his shot. With a snarl, the sphinx sent out a skin curling cry, and with it, the floor beneath their feet started to shift. It felt as though the tiles were floating on water, rising and falling with the current.

“Guys, trouble!” Mona opened fire with his slingshot, striking a black blob as it pushed through the cracks. All around them, thick, oily goo bubbled to the surface, any sizable clumps trying to merge into proper shape. Skull made use of his shotgun, taking out large chunks of the gunk with its spread.

“What’s going on!?”

“She’s called out to the Palace’s Shadows. If we don’t hurry, we’ll be swarmed with everything this place has to offer!” Phantoms of the dreaded Anubis ran through the team’s collective mind.

“We have to hurry! Futaba, how long will that take?”

“I don’t know! I swear, it’s like these controls are inverted!” Queen swore under her breath, summoning Johanna to crush the Shadows under tire.

“We’re going to be overwhelmed before we get her back to the ground, forget about taking her out.” She threw a hand up, experimentally casting Freila, but the sphinx glided just out of magic range.

“NYAH!” Mona panicked and unloaded three rounds into the head of an Anzu that bit at his tail. It was a narrow miss, but it made it all too clear that they couldn’t hold off the faceless mob forever. Before long, whole Shadows would form, and then they would have to face an army of devastatingly powerful enemies on top of the boss. Joker saw his team’s distress, and his teeth grit, the corner of his eye locked on the sky. It was weak to physical attacks. If he only had a way up there…

An idea struck him. It was insane, but that was par for the course. Sojiro had summoned Thaddeus again, using his magic to buff the party’s defense. He tried his hand at curbing the population, but even his Persona’s massive sword did little to stem the tide. He was struck by disbelief when, out of nowhere, Joker jumped onto the arrow.

“Boss, get me up there!” He pointed at the sphinx, and Sojiro stared in disbelief.

“Are you nuts!? The fall would kill you!”

“And if I don’t try, the Shadows will kill you!” He looked over his team, the firestorms and thunder strikes they called losing potency as the war waged. They were practiced for single encounters, not siege warfare. It wouldn’t be long before they were totally exhausted. “I can’t lose them here. Please.” His bravado broke, the desperation that festered in his heart staring out through the cracks. Sojiro saw this, and he nodded, his face going stern.

“You’d better come back alive, damnit.” He put his weight against the lever, ready to fire on command.

“Futaba, give me every buff you’ve got.”
“What!? I just got this system! I could, like, fry your brain or something!”

“Don’t care. I’ll deal with the consequences as they come.”

“Fine, but I don’t want a peep from anyone if this goes wrong.” A white stream of light came down from on high, and when it touched his skin, every cell in his body screamed. It was like awakening to Arsene all over again, but this time, the fire that fought to break through his skull tore at his entire body.

“Now!” Sojiro threw the switch, and the arrow flew. It streaked through the sky, wind whipping through Joker’s hair and pulling at his long coat. If his grip fell for so much as a second, he would be sent flying. He squinted his eyes, bracing for impact as he neared the sphinx.

But at the last moment, her course changed. She wove around the projectile, only suffering a thin graze on her flank before the arrow, and Joker with it, was carried off into the blinding sunlight.

“Kid!”

“Joker!”

“It serves him right. Let him burn, like all life in this cursed land.”

“Think again, you Cirque du Soleil reject!” Above, the light of the sun was tinted blue, and from its orb came the source. Arsene’s jacket fluttered in the breeze, mirroring Joker’s as he dropped in tandem. “You can’t shake us that easily!” The sphinx growled and flew higher, weaving between the two and raising her wings. What she meant to do was cut them, master and Persona both, in twine, but they had expected as much. She learned that when she heard the rattling.

As she passed, her shadow blocked the sunlight, and with it, the glare reflecting off the chains vanished, revealing the links running in spirals between them. They turned their backs to her and pulled, their snare locking her in place and pinning her wings to her body. Her ascension halted, and she joined them in plummeting to the ground.

“Illusory beast, specter of sins long passed, begone!” Arsene’s wings flared, and flame overtook the mass. They became as a comet, sphinx crying out as her feathers turned to ash, Joker grinning as he passed through the bonfire unscathed.

“You, who profanes the sacred memory of the fallen, do not belong here. Let my rage cleanse you once and for all!”

“Damn you, damn you all to…!” A chain around her throat tightened, her death knell stifled into sputtering from a slashed tire.

“Tut, tut, no swearing in front of the children.” Joker looked her in the eye before glancing down, the ever nearing pyramid making him smirk. “Looks like you need to be…” His hold on the chains lessened, letting him kick off of her and wave mockingly with two fingers. “Grounded!” Arsene blazed around her, letting Joker halt his descent by hanging off his chains.

The moment granted by the loosening of her bonds was ill enough to halt her descent. She instead used that sliver of time to scream as loudly as she could, her pain swallowed by the uncaring dunes before being silenced with the heavy crash of impact.

The Thieves had all managed to retreat to a lower tier of the structure’s walls, and when they looked again, they saw that the force of landing had pushed the oncoming Shadows back into the depths of the tomb, the tiles pushed shut by pressure. All that remained of the sphinx was smoke and
a plume of cinder touched feathers. Above it all, looking down on the fruit of his guts, was Joker, slowly drifting down with the aid of Arsene. Necronomicon hovered near him, the part of its hull inscribed with an angry face pointed firmly at him.

“That was reckless, stupid, and completely insane.” It rotated, the happy face opposite the first coming out. “Do you do this sort of thing every time?”

“More or less.” Sojiro pulled himself out of hiding, getting back to the top platform in time to greet Joker as he landed and Arsene faded away.

“We’re having a talk about this later.” He looked around at the pyramid, at the lack of life threatening monsters remaining. “But that was a bold move, using her light trick against her like that. Well done.” Joker smirked, pushing his mask up before tapping Sojiro’s shoulder pad with a knuckle.

“Not all of us have heavy armor to carry the day. We live and die on our wits out here.” He scanned the suit with a critical eye, hoping his smug commentary was distracting enough to let him get his steam back in peace. “It is a nice set, though, if a bit too edgy.”

“Says the guy in blood red gloves.” Necronomicon vanished, Futaba reappearing on the ground in a flash of light. Joker and Sojiro were both taken off guard by her outfit. It was like a programmer had forgotten to apply textures to a character model, leaving behind a black figure with green grid lines. She raised an eyebrow at their stares, following their lines of sight down. “Whoa, where did this come from? It’s totally skin tight!” While Sojiro had a minor crisis with that thought bouncing around in his head, Skull had a hearty laugh.

“Tron called, they want their fashion sense back!” Panther swatted him with her tail.

“Says Baron von Ascot himself.”

“It’s not an ascot! What do I look like, Freddy?”

“Certainly not.” Yusuke was fiddling with his fingers, making sure that they were all still functioning at peak performance. “His hair was stylish at the show’s premier. Yours is pointedly against mainstream trends. That said, your style is far more fitting for your current profession.”

“Ugh… Okay, at least that one was a compliment. I think.”

“Guys.” Makoto shushed them all, pointing at the figure rising from the pile of smoldering down. Her skin was pale from sun deprivation, and her clothing palette was comprised of the direct opposite shade of black. Futaba could recognize her anywhere.

“Mom?” She stepped forward, cautious of the spirit. “Is it really…?” Her eyes opened, and when they met Futaba’s, a warm smile adorned her face.

“Hello, my beautiful little Bug.” Futaba’s eyes welled up, her mind’s reaction to the long unspoken nickname.

“Mom, it’s you! I…!” She made to run over when Wakaba held a hand up.

“Not yet, little one. You have a long life to live, far too long to spend idling on the dead and gone.”

“But…”
“Now now, aren’t you being selfish?” A cloud of emotion hung over Futaba’s mind, pushing through as a few drops of water and a choked up tone.

“I, um… I love you.” Wakaba smiled at her long estranged daughter.

“I know, and I love you, too. Thank you for remembering me as I truly was.” Futaba sniffled, wiping her eyes on her sleeve.

“I’m going to find the people that did this to you, and I’ll make them pay. I swear it.” A heavy hand touched her shoulder, welcomingly warm despite the metal coating.

“Not without some help, young lady.” Reluctantly, he looked towards Wakaba, his eyes weighted by regret. “Wakaba…”

“Hello, Sojiro. I hope you’ve been well?” The normality of the greeting was a cool breeze in this desert. The world could be falling apart around her, but she would still be as unflappable as ever.

“I’ve been better, but I’m managing.” He pulled his helmet off, the creases under his eyes a touch deeper than the day before. “…I should have listened to you back then. You warned me something was wrong, but I didn’t do anything. If I had taken you seriously…”

“Don’t blame yourself. By the time I told you, the damage had already been done. There was nothing you could have done to change my fate.” She looked caught between her earlier decree of separation and comforting him somehow, but her daughter putting a hand on his fulfilled the role. “What you can do is make sure my legacy lives on. Take care of her, Sojiro.”

“I will, with everything I have left.” He replaced his helm, and Thaddeus nodded resolutely in the back of his mind.

“Thank you. With that, my work here is done.” Flecks of white rose from her skin, at first sparingly, but it soon became a swarm of lights brighter than the desert sun. They quickly obscured her form, carrying her away into the sky.

“Goodbye, Mom.” She slid her goggles over her eyes, giving her a small barrier to help internalize her emotions. When Wakaba was long gone, she straightened out, her expression becoming robotically focused. “Oh right, Medjed.” She walked towards the stairs, heedless of Sojiro’s befuddled look.

“Wait, where are you…?”

“Home. I know how to use the Nav now.” As stunned as he was, he made no effort to chase after her. As soon as she was out of sight, though, the ground began to quake with a ferocity that put the earlier battle to shame.

“I thought this wasn’t supposed to happen until after you took her Treasure!?”

“Don’t you see? Futaba was the Treasure.” Mona looked at the empty coffin, somehow left unscarred throughout the chaos. “In the end, the only thing holding her back was herself.”

“That’s really sweet and poetic and all…” Ann grabbed him by the scarf, hauling him up and bolting down the side of the pyramid. “…But we have to get out of here!”
“God, kid, warn a guy when the landing’s going to be rough.”

“Sorry.” Akira had already shaken off the shock from crash landing in front of LeBlanc, but Sojiro’s old bones weren’t nearly as spry. There was a noticeable hobble in his step as he followed along, searching for Futaba. They had already swept everywhere else in the vicinity of Yongen, meaning the only place left was the origin of the Palace itself.

They ascended the steps to the Sakura household’s second floor, and they both knew something was up when they saw Futaba’s door wide open. Within, they found her fast asleep, curled up in a bright orange comforter that Sojiro didn’t recognize. He saw the flash of joy in Akira’s eyes, though, before the kid went and gently tapped her shoulder.

“Futaba? Hey, are you alright?” He knew the awakening could be rough, but everyone else so far had managed to stay awake for more than five minutes after returning.

“Don’t worry, this is normal.” Sojiro ran through his usual list: heart rate, breathing, temp, it all checked out. “Her energy doesn’t work quite like most people’s. She can stay up for days at a time, but once she runs out, she’s down about as long. After all that excitement, I wouldn’t be surprised if she slept through the week.”

While he busied himself getting a pillow under her head, Akira’s eye was drawn to her computer. Big boxes full of code filled the screen, and there was a note on the keyboard.

“Yo Phantom Thieves, if you’re reading this, I’m out cold. Hopefully it’s because you succeeded and not for, you know, something else.” The wording was vague, but Akira had a hard time forgetting that one room. He had to shake the memory off before continuing. “Don’t worry, I trust you guys, so I put everything together ahead of time. Just hit the enter key (NOTHING ELSE!) and watch the show. (Oh, and DON’T OPEN ANY OTHER FOLDERS! I’M WARNING YOU!!!)” He rolled his eyes, making light of the likely very serious threat, before following the instructions. The key clicked loudly.

Suddenly, all the lines started scrolling by, each box at its own speed. It reminded Akira of a syringe, injecting its package into whatever poor sap had a needle in his arm. When most of the code was through, a new window popped up, an internet browser, and Akira smirked.

The URL said Medjed, but the page said Phantom Thieves.

Chapter End Notes

Yep, been dreaming up this one since almost the beginning. Let's play a game. First one to find what I'm referencing with Sojiro's Persona gets a shout out in the notes of the next chapter. Remember, I love wordplay.
Coffee and Criminals Redux

Chapter Summary

In which Sojiro contends with being a smooth crime boy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What followed that outing to Egypt was uncomfortable in multiple senses. After laughing victoriously over the grave of Medjed (with a quick explanation from Morgana for the hysterics), Akira all but clocked out, his half functioning body having to be corralled to his bed by Sojiro and Morgana, where he immediately collapsed. Futaba had warned him about taking on such a strong buff, and now he was paying for his arrogance.

Sojiro was spared having to wrap his head around his cat now talking by him keeping an eye on Akira, letting Sojiro go home and get some shut eye himself. After a night recovering from the most exercise he had gotten in years, he decided it would be a good idea to get some coffee going before Akira woke up. They would need the caffeine to get through explanations.

"It would be wise to use a potent blend.” That was the one thing he could accept without much trouble. Thaddeus was a constant presence in his mind, but he felt enough like an extension of it to seem natural. It was like he had always been there, but muffled. Putting it to words was beyond Sojiro, but it felt… right.

When Akira did rouse, somewhere around noon, he came down to Sojiro sitting in one of the booths with two cups of coffee. He nudged one towards the opposite side of the table, and Akira got the message, taking the seat and a deep draw on his drink. It was stronger than he was used to, but it was a welcome kick in the pants.

Akira spent the next hour detailing the general history of his little group, from origins to general operations. Morgana chirped in for a few of the more technical points, but Akira was versed enough in his line of work to get the important points across. He seemed hesitant to go through the parts concerning how he got in contact with Futaba to begin with, but when he was prodded into doing so, Sojiro chuckled to himself.

"Sounds like she tapped into the security system I had her help me with. Haven’t used it myself in months, but I never thought about her getting her hands on it. Guess I’m partly to blame for you guys getting found out. Sorry about that.”

“Don’t apologize. If she hadn’t heard, she’d still be dealing with her problems on her own.” His eyes clouded over, watching the wisps of steam rise from his second cup of Joe. Sojiro was caught between wanting to understand his daughter and leaving the past where it was.

“That’s all dealt with now, right?”

“She’ll still be socially stunted, but the worst of it should be gone. There’s work to be done, and I intend to do it. Never leave a job half finished.” Sojiro sipped at his coffee, thinking back to before he got whisked away to the Metaverse.
“If I’m being honest, I overheard a lot of your chat with her yesterday. Including the more… personal parts.” Akira’s shoulders drooped.

“So you heard about my…?”

“Yeah.” They both decidedly avoided each other’s eyes, finding anything else in the room more interesting. “I know it must be a tough topic, but you’ve done me a good turn. You’re a good kid. If you ever need to talk about stuff, I’m here.”

“Thanks, but I’ll be alright.”

“I know you’re trying not to be a burden, but I’m serious. I’ve been around the block, and I know just letting something like depression sit is the worst choice you can make.”

“Actually… I wasn’t talking about me.” A lump settled into Sojiro’s throat.

“Oh, I… I see.”

“Don’t worry about her too much. She has medicine for it now, and I’ve been sure to stay in touch.”

“Good to hear. I know some people can be touchy about needing pills.”

“You learn to be practical about things when times are tough.” Sojiro nodded, the tension loosening up some. He felt like he understood the kid better, him and his need to help people. The need that drove him to start his big project.

“So, as far as your group goes, when you do finish helping her reintegrate, what’s next for Futaba?”

“We’ll give her a choice. Whether she joins or not is wholly up to her.” Akira took his glasses off, setting them aside. “But I’m pretty sure she’ll accept. She has a lead for her mother’s killer, and she’s smart enough to know that her best chance at getting to them is with a good team. Enemy of my enemy and all that.” That was the one thing he had asked Morgana about the night before. Futaba’s oath struck him as surreal, but with what he already knew paired with the evidence they had accumulated, he couldn’t deny the claim that Wakaba’s suicide was more likely to be a homicide. It was almost a relief, in an odd, guilty way, knowing that he hadn’t pegged her wrong for so many years. “We’ll give you that choice, too.”

“Huh?”

“Persona users are few and far between. One that we already know and respect? Even more rare. So what do you say?” He held a hand out welcomingly, Morgana peering over the table. “Want to be a Phantom Thief?” Sojiro leaned back in his booth, taking in the offer.

“…Kid, I’m an old, old man. I don’t have it in me to go running off to Palaces and doing what you do.” Akira wilted a bit, but he nodded understandingly, slowly taking his hand back. “But I still want to help you.” Sojiro smiled, reaching out and snatching his hand.

“You went out of your way to help my daughter. You’re doing good most people can only dream of. I might not be a fighter, but there’s no way in Hell I’ll be sitting on my ass and letting you kids do all the work. From now on, consider LeBlanc to be your base of operations. Just try not to bother my customers, alright?” Akira lit up, and from that look alone, Sojiro knew he had made the right choice.
“Yo, Boss, how’s it going?” Ryuji sauntered in, his voice a more effective indicator of his arrival than the bell could ever be. Sojiro couldn’t help but note how informal he had become ever since he opened his shop up as their HQ. A breakdown of social walls must’ve been part and parcel of being a Phantom Thief.

“Real quiet. Thanks for fixing that.” Ryuji pulled a face on par with the first time he sipped coffee. He didn’t know how to react to an old guy living up to his ward’s legendary snark. Speaking of which. “If you’re here to see Akira, you might want to wait.”

“Uh, why?” A heavy thud echoed through the ceiling, and Sojiro sighed.

“Morning workout. He agreed not to make too much noise during the lunch rush, so he likes working one in before breakfast if he can.”

“So he just gets out of bed and hits the ground running?” Sojiro nodded, and Ryuji looked up with newfound respect. “See, this is why he’s the leader. Can’t top that dedication. I’ve got to see this.” Sojiro rolled his eyes, following behind as Ryuji bounded up the stairs, skipping every other step.

At the top, they found Akira dangling from a ceiling beam by his knees. His hands were behind his head, and he pulled himself up by the abs in regular intervals. Morgana was the first to notice them, looking down from his parallel spotter’s beam.

“He’s on the last set. It’ll just be a second.” Ryuji didn’t seem to hear him. He was too busy admiring his leader’s rigorous routine.

“Damn, I need to step up my game.”

“Good luck. Kid’s going four months strong.”

“Boss, I’ve got a question for you.” It was still early in the day, so Sojiro didn’t have a problem with Morgana taking one of the counter stools. He could have done without him setting his head on the countertop and staring off straight ahead, though.

“Shoot.”

“You saw me in the pyramid. I was… useful, right?” Sojiro raised an eyebrow, stopping in the middle of his prep work to make sure that he had heard correctly.

“Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know, I just…” He groaned, melting further into himself like a depressed ice cream cone. “You know that feeling when someone comes along that does the thing you pride yourself on, but better?”
“I was a lady’s man when every other guy had a slick suit and a list of pickup lines.”

“Right, dumb question.”

“Is this about Futaba?”

“No. I mean, kind of. It’s complicated.”

“Try me.” And by that, he meant he had thought a lot of things more important than they really were. Hindsight was a blessing and a curse.

“When I put the Thieves together, it felt like I had it all. I knew how the Metaverse worked, I knew how to go about things, I knew exactly what had to be done to accomplish our goals. Now, I’m completely lost and just going with everyone else, Makoto has our strategy down pat, and Futaba just blew everything I thought I knew about Mementos out of the water. It feels like all I’m doing anymore is telling Akira to get some sleep.”

“Hey, that sounds pretty important to me. He’d work through the night if you let him.”

“Tell me about it. I’m sure he would’ve tried making a pick or something the other night if we didn’t wrap him up like a mummy.” The amusement slowly drained from his face, devoured whole by his self loathing. “All I’m good for is being his reverse alarm clock. Can I really call myself a part of the team?” Sojiro slammed a mug down, the loud smack scaring him up off the counter.

“Stop that, right now.” Morgana was about to question him, but the sharp look in his eyes would have made a Niijima proud. “Good people don’t work in hard numbers by how much you contribute. They work on how much they like you, and I didn’t need to hear the whole conversation these last few months to know how much Akira appreciates your guidance. You give your all, and that’s what matters to him. I promise if you go up those stairs and ask him, that’s exactly what he’ll tell you.” Morgana sat and stared, internalizing the harsh scolding and the kindness running under it.

“You really think so?”

“I know so.” Morgana’s muscles relaxed, and a small, genuine smile worked through his feline biology.

“I think I’ll do that. Thanks, Boss.”

“Anytime. Now run along, it’s about opening time.” While Morgana speeded off to the attic to reconfirm his place in the Thieves, Sojiro wondered if he should take something up to ease things along. Was there in anything in his curry that a cat shouldn’t eat? Coffee was probably out, too…

…Weird didn’t begin to describe his life anymore, and he was okay with that.

“Oh, this is lovely!” Once more, his bell was rendered useless in the face of his new patrons, though this one differed from the rest. He had been briefed on who was and wasn’t in the know, and this one was firmly in the latter.

“I knew you would like it.”
“Don’t go judging yet. You haven’t tried the food.” He waved casually to the couple, Makoto returning it promptly.

“Hello, Boss. I hope we’re not too early?”

“Not at all. Come on in, I’ll get something together for you. A preference on drink?” Haru’s eyes intently scanned the many jars of whole beans filling the back wall. It was clear she didn’t recognize many of the names, but her enthusiasm almost made up the difference.

“Blue Mountain, please.”

“Sure. This’ll just be a few minutes.” He scooped out a level cup, dumping them into the hand grinder. As he fiddled with the knobs, he noticed Haru tracking his every movement. The focus she displayed rivaled Akira, which was no small feat. He hated to interrupt her informal study, and Makoto silently fawning over her girlfriend’s studiousness, but he was curious. “You interested in how the place runs?” The interruption shook her from one focal point and latched her instantly to another.

“Why yes, there has always been something comforting to me in the way small businesses are operated. There is a care and passion you rarely see in large chains.”

“I know what you mean. Made the mistake of trying to get coffee at one of those Starbucks places, haven’t gone back in years.” Kids being paid minimum wage never put out their best work. Maybe being suboptimal was fine for a big brand with name recognition, but Sojiro was a one man stand. Quality was his lifeblood. “I take it your family’s caught up in one of the bigger properties?” Almost instantly, storm clouds set in, hiding her sunshine behind a torrent of doubt. Makoto wrapped her hand in hers and tried to covertly shake her head at Sojiro, but Haru noticed.

“No, it’s okay. I can’t keep it a secret forever.” She took a deep breath, squeezing Makoto’s fingers for support. “My full name is Haru Okumura.” It took Sojiro a bit to recognize the name, and when he did, he figured out why she was so touchy about the topic. There had been a lot of bad press surrounding the company for years, and at the center of it all were policies passed down from the top, which he could only guess was her father.

“As in Okumura Foods?” She nodded, eyes shut. They weren’t tight, suggesting that she had been practiced enough in bad reactions to not lock up. Sojiro would have bitten clean through his cigarette if he had been smoking one. “Relax, it was a question, not an accusation.” He had to fight to keep his tone on the lighter end, but it was worth it. She eased up on the preemptive bracing, eyes opening slightly.

“You mean you don’t mind?”

“Whatsoever’s going on with the higher ups is messed up, but that’s not on you. I’ve always thought the whole sins of the father schtick was too broad to judge by.” He looked her in the eye and smiled casually. “Besides, you have the Akira seal of approval. That’s a free pass around these parts.” The clouds parted, letting her smile come through.

“You trust him a lot, don’t you?”

“Enough to bunk him above my livelihood. Well, I did that before I trusted him, but keeping him there this long has to say something.” He shrugged, transferring the fresh grounds to his coffee rig. “Just need to let this simmer for a bit. A good cup’s worth the wait.”

“Of course.” She glanced around, her legs a touch closer together. “Pardon, but would you
happen to have a...?"

“Right next to the stairs. Lock’s a bit finicky, but it’ll work if you give it a good tap.” She bowed, excusing herself politely. Once she was gone, he gave Makoto a wily grin that only he, as an old man, could pull off. “Don’t think I didn’t see any of those looks you were giving her.” She immediately lit up in bright pinks and reds.

“Is it that obvious?”

“You were following her around like a lost puppy and doting on her like a mother hen.” She buried her face in her hands, though it failed to cover the glow of her embarrassment. “I remember being that age. Made a lot of stupid choices in the name of young love.” He turned his attention to his coffee pot, carefully monitoring the flame.

“If I had met someone like her, maybe I could have avoided a lot of them.” She looked up at him in surprise, and he nodded assuringly. “You take care of her. We have enough snippy teens running around these days. I should know, most of them are under this roof.” She rolled her eyes at him, but they both laughed.

“Thanks, Boss. For everything.”

“Don’t mention it. I might look like a grizzled tough guy, but I’ve got a soft heart under the jade.”

“The man who took in a convicted felon out of sentimentality, soft? Say it isn’t so.”

“Yuck it up all you want, we both know he’s your responsibility on the job.” The restroom door clicked open, and Haru rejoined them shortly after.

“Thank you for waiting for me, Mako-chan.”

“Of course. Here, I kept a seat warm for you.”

“Aww, you’re so sweet!” She darted in and planted a kiss on her cheek. Sojiro’s practiced eye could see Makoto’s heart of iron turn to putty in Haru’s hands, her movements going slow and floaty. It was then that he realized how dangerous of a power she wielded, the ability to control a Niijima. He shuddered at the thought.

“”

“What’s with the hand wrap?” For once, he was able to hear the bell over the kid that rang it, but that was the least of Sojiro’s concerns. Yusuke was paler than normal, and his drawing hand was bundled in what looked like a paint catching towel. The question drew the eyes of the rest of the Thieves, who had all arrived specifically for a summons from the boy. Even Futaba, with some prodding, showed up.

“It would seem our activities have had a more drastic impact than we imagined.”

“What are you talking about HOLY HELL!” Ryuji was practically bellowing by the time he finished unwrapping his impromptu glove, revealing that the flats of his fingers were all encased in thin ice. He bent his fingers, and the frost bent with them like a second skin. “What’s going on
"That is what I would like to know."

"Here, let me see." He held his hand low, letting Morgana get a better view. "What were you doing when this started?"

"I was sketching, a preliminary stage for an upcoming painting. The ideas weren’t flowing as freely as I would have liked, so I began tapping my pencil to the tune of a metronome. Soon, I began to experience a chill, and when I found it too intense to ignore, I tried to change the thermostat. Fortunately, I noticed the ice before I could run up the dorm’s heating bill. I swiftly decided to call you all for advice and came here, taking only a moment to ensure my condition remained hidden."

"Hmph, that’s not much to go off of…"

"You said you were thinking when it happened, right?" Sojiro put a mug in his hand, letting him relish in the warmth of freshly brewed coffee. He could deal with any excess water later. "Maybe it has something to do with what you were thinking about."

"Perhaps." He took a small sip of coffee, letting it warm him from within and without. "I was reflecting on our most recent venture into Mementos. The dark structures and heavy atmosphere are intriguing enough to trigger inspiration much of the time. I recall getting caught by the image of attempting to force a Treasure Shadow to freeze in place with Goemon’s aid…"

"Could that be it?" Morgana glanced at Akira, as though he would have the answer. He didn’t know if he did for sure, but he had an idea.

"Try doing a small flourish, like when you’re summoning."

"Should I focus on casting Bufu again?"

"That would be helpful." Yusuke nodded, setting his cup down and putting a hand to his forehead. He flipped it around, pointing upwards with two fingers.

"Goemon!" The tips of his fingers sparkled, and then the ice that remained expanded an inch outwards.

"No way!" Ann grabbed his wrist, staring in awe at what had just occurred. "Did he just invoke his Persona in the real world?"

"It could be from your cognition getting crossed." Futaba tapped away at a keyboard with her off hand, the other balled up and supporting her head by the cheek. "Stuff we do over here can mess with stuff in the Metaverse, so maybe it works the other way around?"

"Are you certain?"

"Just a guess. Let’s face it, Inari’s artist brain is bad at putting a wall up between real life and fantasies. It makes sense that he’d lose touch the first out of all of us."

"Hey, that gives me an idea!" Ryuji rolled up his sleeves, grinning like a madman. "This is all based in how we see things, so now that we see that it’s possible, maybe the rest of us can…!"
snapped his fingers, but nothing came. He clapped, rubbed his hands together, and even did wiggly wizard fingers, but still no luck. “Come on, he makes it look so easy!”

“Hey Ryuji, maybe you just need something to start with.” Ann scooted in closer, whispering in his ear before nodding towards Akira. He grinned wide, nonchalantly sliding into the booth right behind Akira and, to his surprise, running his hands through his hair. Dark curls wrapped around his fingers, and both could feel the static charge building up.

“Moment of truth!” He pulled his hands straight up, and he gasped. Akira’s hair followed him, small trickles of electricity trailing between the two. It moved as he did like a biological Tesla ball, and he started giggling. “This is amazing!”

“And dangerous.” Makoto tucked her hands into her pockets, all too aware of what her Persona’s key element entailed. “We should try to catalogue what in total we’re all capable of, for safety’s sake.”

“H-Hey, don’t go doing that down here! If someone sees you kids doing magic, your cover’ll be blown!” Sojiro pointed at the stairs, keeping the door in the corner of his eye. “Just be careful not to burn down the place, okay?”

“Don’t worry, Boss!” Ann trailed behind the others as they went up, Ryuji still giddily toying with Akira’s hair. “We’ll figure this out in a snap!” She snapped her fingers, and a tiny flame flickered to life on the tip of her thumb. She panicked, blowing it out like a candle. “Whoa, okay, no more doing that for a while. Thanks a lot, Ryuji!”

Sojiro groaned, wondering how much weirder things could get. Despite himself, once they were gone, he couldn’t help but wonder the same thing. Cautious of customers, he snapped his fingers, and a thin blue field settled in over the skin. He tapped them against the counter, not feeling so much as a twinge of pain.

“Huh, that should be useful next time a plate breaks.” A ring made him jump out of his skin, but then he noticed that it was his phone and not the front door. He shook his hand, dispelling the protective field, before grabbing for his cell. It wasn’t a number he recognized, but it didn’t look like a telemarketer.

“Hello?”

“Is this Sojiro Sakura?” It was a woman’s voice. It was firm, but polite.

“Yeah. Can I help you?”

“You most certainly can. I’m Akari Kurusu.”

“Oh, the kid’s mom.” No wonder he didn’t know the number. Even though he was watching her son, the two had never spoken. Their only tie beyond Akira was a shared acquaintance. “To what do I owe the pleasure, Kurusu-san?”

“Please, Akira’s had nothing but good things to say about you. Call me Akari, I insist.” So this was where he got the informality from. He shrugged, though no one was around to see it.

“Alright then. Were you checking in on him?”

“We just had a long talk this morning. He told me all about taking his friends to the beach. Honestly, I’m kind of jealous. This little town of ours is landlocked pretty hard.” He couldn’t get past how bubbly she sounded. She had abundant self respect and dignity, but her energy was through the
roof. He had trouble believing that she was related to the infamously laid back Akira.

“Did he tell you about getting dragged around by one of those friends trying to get a date?”

“Sakamoto, yes. We were all at that age once in our lives.”

“Tell me about it. With how many girls he’s surrounding himself with, I’m surprised he hasn’t put the moves on anyone. He has the right attitude for it, and I’ve been showing him a thing or two about cooking.” Which he was almost regretting now that Futaba was using him like a security blanket, but if it had to be anyone…

“I bet his friends are a jealous he has what they’d need but will never use it.”

“What do you mean by that?” There was a short span of quiet.

“He hasn’t told you? He’s asexual.”

“Really?” If he thought about it, for the longest time, there was a wall between them. Plus that wasn’t the sort of thing you just brought up out of the blue. “I never would have guessed.”

“No one does. This one time in middle school, a girl kissed him on the cheek. He came home glowing like a Christmas tree.” He had to choke back his next breath to not chuckle at the thought of the ‘smooth criminal’ getting flustered.

“Well, it could have been more awkward. Could have been a guy reading the wrong signals.”

“Actually…” The fight was lost, a snort breaking through his defensive barrier.

“Sorry, sorry, I couldn’t help myself.”

“Don’t be. He was confident enough with himself to walk that one off. He was only glowing like a cherry tomato this time.” They both took a second to recompose themselves. “Any who, as fun as it is poking fun, I just called to let you know I’ll be coming down around early September to visit. You have no idea how hard I had to fight with my bosses to get the week off.”

“You could have told the kid. He’s good about letting me know what’s up.”

“Actually, I was hoping to keep this a secret, surprise him by being there when he gets back from school.”

“You’ll probably be waiting longer than that. He has a lot of side jobs.” Among other things, but she didn’t need to know about his new career.

“You run a cafe, right? I can wait.”

“Well then, I’ll be sure to have something good ready. Swing in as soon as you get here.”

“Can do. I have to get going now. Overtime’s a pain in the neck, but a necessary one.”

“Alright. See you in a few weeks.” He hung up, and just as quickly, he opened his text messenger.

Sojiro: Don’t go ruining the surprise, you hear?
Futaba: Oh man, how’d you know?

Sojiro: Paternal instincts. You can’t sneak your fancy spy programs by me, young lady.

Futaba: Heh heh, I’ll take that off in the morning…

Sojiro doubted it, but he could be wrong. Maybe she had a new one to replace it with.

Chapter End Notes

Before my usual goofiness, I have a winner to announce. Good sir Lakiu correctly said that it was Alfred, the stalwart butler of Bruce Wayne. Or, to give him his full name as provided by the wiki, Alfred Thaddeus Crane Pennyworth.

Secondary kudos to Critical Warrior for educating this apparently unread author of yours in the rabid Americanization of the first Persona games, Dway_Shaglaha for coming exceptionally close (guessing Medieval Batman), and everyone else who took a crack at the pinata. It was a blast, finding out exactly how many times the name Thaddeus actually crops up in fiction. We should do this again sometime. Double thanks for not peeking at each others answers and keeping the game going. Y’all are great sports!

Next, something a bit less cheery. I have come down with a stomach bug and have been less than productive for several days. I should be over it soon enough, no worries there, but I'll have plenty of work to make up once I'm back in good health. Might be a slightly longer wait before the next entry. Sorry for the spontaneous short hiatus, blame the viral infection.
A Day in the Life of a Bug

Chapter Summary

Content Warning: Depictions of sensitive subject matter imminent. If you get the feeling you know where something's going, you're right. Feel free to skip as needed. It's all finished before the break to scene 2, so consider that the cutoff if you need one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Futaba’s room was her fortress, devoid of any and all light that she didn’t put in place herself. Even so, recent events had worked their magic on her internal clock, and it, in turn, pushed her to consciousness at an almost reasonable hour. She glanced at her clock, and the numbers made her groan.

“It’s not even noon yet.” She turned over, squirming until she was buried up to her nose in her orange comforter. True to its name, the warmth it provided was, indeed, comfortable. More than that, though, it carried a lot of memories in its stitching. It reminded her that, even with everyone off in America doing American things, she wasn’t alone anymore. The thought made her smile.

Then it made her curious. Akira was such a well adjusted person, and yet he said he sympathized with her. She knew only the surface level details about his past, about being abandoned by his father and living alone with his depressed mom. So far, so familiar, and there was that whole bullshit assault charge thing, but that was as much as she knew. Supposedly the others knew more, but he refrained from letting her in, going so far as to avoid mentioning it near anywhere she might have bugs planted. Maybe he was trying to protect her from something she didn’t need to hear, but being told she couldn’t know was tantamount to a challenge no matter how she looked at it.

“You wish to know a hidden truth?” From the depths of her mind, Necronomicon whirred to life, and that little bit of activity made her mind feel like it was expanding from the outside in. With it, so, too, did her drive swell.

“Yeah I do, I just don’t know how to get to it.”

“You forget, I am the tome of forbidden knowledge, and you are the Oracle. I can show you all so long as I have a chapter to turn to.” Well, that was handy. But what did it mean by chapter? Did it need an index or something? “Simply hold your desired topic in mind and think of all possible related subtopics. If it is sufficient, you will know what you desire.”

“Alright, you’re the eldritch UFO thing here.” She closed her eyes, letting images of Akira flow through her thoughts. The way over the top flips he pulled whenever he ambushed a Shadow. Him riding a ballista into the sky to strike down her falsely perceived mother. His gentle voice and smile waiting for her when she finally woke up. The way he stood between her and prying eyes at… Well, everywhere they went together. It was like he considered himself his friends’ personal shield. Something drove him to protect those close to him no matter the situation.

“Chapter located. Opening file.”
At once, all feeling in her limbs ceased, and she felt light and floaty. It wasn’t numbness, per say, as much as it was disconnection. If she tried, she could still move, but she didn’t feel it necessary to do so. She lay there in silence as Necronomicon worked, pulling her deeper into her own mind. From there, they went deeper still. The space around her grew in pressure, as though she was being pulled down into the sea. Then it vanished, and she found herself on her feet.

“Destination reached. Playing memories.” She opened her eyes, and she was in an unfamiliar room. It looked like an apartment, dark and quiet. She thought it should feel more inviting, but there was a lingering presence in the air, as though the atmosphere was tainted. She heard the knob on the front entrance turn, and the door opened.

“Mom, I’m home.” A kid walked through the door, water dripping from the slick sheet of raw rubber wrapped around his shoulders in place of a raincoat. When he pulled down the makeshift hood, she instantly recognized his fluffy, black hair. His eyes were different, though. They were the same grey, but they were colder, unfocused. If she had looked in a mirror the month prior, she would have found those eyes looking back. He glanced around curiously, an eyebrow raised. “Mom?”

He threw aside his sheet and removed his shoes, the clothes and socks under them ragged and worn out, any light surfaces stained black or brown. Slowly, his body sagging under his own weight, he treaded through the apartment towards the hall at the back. At the far side, a door was cracked open.

“I managed to get five hundred yen putting up tarps. That’s enough to make rent, right?” Halfway through the hall, he froze, a chill running through his bones. From where they were, neither could see anything, but Futaba felt the same panic. The corner next to the door was empty. A single frame from the day before blinked by, almost too quick to see the short stool that used to be there. He hurried forward, putting a hand to the door and pushing.

“Mom, are you trying to sleep? You said you had more work at…” His hand clamped on the door frame, and his breath ran short. Futaba poked her head around the corner, and her hands went to her mouth. The ceiling was supposed to be bare, but a hook had been hurriedly installed. From it, a rope dangled down, a lure she was too familiar with.

From it, a woman hanged, and though she couldn’t see any features, a word came unbidden to her mind.

“Mom!” Akira stepped forward on trembling knees, hands up at his sides, but still clamped there. Fear locked his muscles in place, and his already troubled breathing turned to short gasps. “Mom, no, please…” His voice echoed through the silent room, and with it, her eyes shot open. Her hands started to tremble, but they wouldn’t rise. She was still alive, but barely.

“A… Aki…” Tears pushed their way through her ducts, and in the span of a moment, Akira changed. The exhaustion that weighed him down disappeared, and in its place, a boiling fury broke free. He dashed to the stool she had kicked aside, setting it up and climbing it. He barely came up to her torso, but that wouldn’t stop him. From there, he leaped, barely making it high enough to grab the rope.

“No, damnit, you can’t leave me here! I don’t… I can’t…” His eyes clamped shut, and when they opened, there was a fire within them. Every breath was a growl, and when he yelled, it was a guttural roar, a firestorm tearing itself from the maw of a volcano. “I can’t be alone!” His arms yanked down, his weight rending hook from ceiling and casting both mother and child to the ground with a spray of drywall. They landed in a heap, and as his mom struggled to breathe, he bolted out of the room.
“Please, hold on, I’ll get help!” She heard the dialing of a phone, and that was the last she knew before darkness took her once again.

Light returned, and she was in her room. She couldn’t focus, all strength robbed of her by the vision. For hours, she simply laid there, cherishing the warmth of her comforter.

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“Extra spicy, please.” Sojiro chuckled from LeBlanc’s kitchen as he reached for the spice rack.

“Coming right up.” He spooned a hearty helping of curry onto the rice, and he followed it with two large pinches chili powder. “You know, most people wouldn’t be brave enough to eat this stuff the way you like it.” The fumes off the plate would have made his eyes water if he hadn’t grown accustomed to them already.

“Most people don’t fly around in gothic alien spaceships, either.”

“Point taken.” While she was talking the good talk like usual, her heart wasn’t quite in it. Her thoughts were stuck in that dark apartment, and what it implied about her leader. Everything it implied. She wanted to know what made him tick, and now she knew, whether she wanted to or not. She knew she had more than enough reasons to shut herself away back then, but now that she saw what he had been through and kept moving from, she felt kind of pathetic.

Well, no more. She was on the path to being a healthier person thanks to him, and she wasn’t going to let a bit of moping stop her. First things first, expressing how she felt more openly. When Sojiro bent over to drop her afternoon breakfast off, she wrapped her arms around him.

“Thanks, I love you.” The look in his eyes was one of shock, but his smile was no less real.

“I love you, too, Bug.” He returned the gesture, and when they parted, she felt worlds better. With her vigor renewed, she scooped up her spoon and dug in, the intense heat flooding from her stomach out and warming her entire body. So caught up was she in the sensation that she didn’t bother looking up when the bell rang.

“Welcome. Let me guess, a kid told you about us?” Futaba smiled over her mouthful. Akira had been nothing if not a perfect little crier boy, bragging about Sojiro’s shop at every opportunity. She dared say half of the new business they got was from good word of mouth on his part.

“In a way.” It was a woman’s voice, and something about it tickled at Futaba’s memory. It was an odd sensation, one she had never encountered before. It almost reminded her of one of her hallucinations, but it was undoubtedly real. Was it tied to one she already had somehow?

“Oh, it’s you. Sorry, but I didn’t know what you looked like.”

“No worries. I must say, Akira wasn’t kidding about your cafe. Classical and warm.” Her curiosity peaked, making Futaba break her focus on her meal. The woman was slim, but she had an energy about her that made her feel much larger. She wore her heart on her sleeve, a wide smile on her face, a strong, confident posture, and a spark of life in her eyes. Her hair was dark, either brown or black depending on the light, and it it dropped down just passed her shoulders in straight strands. She carried a brown leather bag with her, slung over her right shoulder.
“Wow, he’s even advertising to his own family, eh? Good taste, that one. Here, I’ll set you up with his usual.” Sojiro retreated to his kitchen, setting up a new plate of curry without the extra trappings his daughter loved so much. That love, however, was postponed, backing up to Sojiro’s phrasing.

“Wait, family?”

“Futaba, this is Akari Kurusu, the kid’s mom. She’s every bit as good as him, so give her a chance, okay?” A rock hit the bottom of her stomach. This was the same woman she had witnessed almost committing suicide earlier that morning. How did she not recognize her voice? She was usually great at that! She nodded, using her mouthful as an excuse to gather herself.

“Okay, I’ll try.” She watched as he nodded proudly at her and as Akari took up a stool at the bar. She was close enough to talk to at a normal volume, but far enough away to not trigger her social instability.

“Hello, Futaba. My son’s told me a lot about you. I know you’re uncomfortable around strangers, so don’t feel pressured to make nice right away if you don’t want to.”

“No, I need to step out of my bubble if I want to get passed this. The family of one of my friends should be easy XP.” Akari laughed into her hand and, tentatively, moved over to the opposite side of Futaba’s table.

“That’s video game lingo, right? I don’t have a lot of time for games myself, but I’ve heard you like them a lot.”

“Understatement of the year. They were the only things I was okay doing for a while. The screens help keep me from seeing things that aren’t there.”

“You mean hallucinations?”

“Pretty intense ones. I know they’re not real, but they feel like it while they’re happening. And they always give me wicked headaches.”

“You’re surprisingly open about this. You’ve gotten used to them, haven’t you?” Futaba had to stop and think about that one. This was a complete stranger, but there was something about her that made her easy to talk to and confide in. She wanted to say it was because she was related to Akira, but it went beyond that. Had he picked up his technique from her?

“Kind of. They haven’t been hitting me all that often lately, so it’s a little easier to talk about. Is that weird?”

“Not at all. Troubles are always much smaller than you remember when you look back.”

“Personal experience?” She didn’t know what she was thinking, broaching the topic like that. She didn’t want to tap into bad blood this early on! But, to her relief, Akari took it pretty well. There was an extra hint of sadness in her voice, but that was the extent of the damage.

“Money can stretch thin for a single mom. It was rough for a few years, I won’t lie, but we made it through.” Whoo, okay, crisis averted. She had to be careful with her wording from here on out. As far as anyone knew, this was Futaba’s first exposure to Akira’s mom, and she would keep it as such.

“I know how it is. Back when it was just me and my mom, I usually just had pre made bento boxes.” The sadness deepened for a moment, but it was buried in a blink. Did she already know?
“Well, I certainly hope your diet’s expanded. A kid needs all sorts of food to grow up right.”

“Yep, I’ve made sure of it.” Sojiro broke back into the conversation with a fresh plate of curry and a mug of hot coffee. “Now whenever she decides to stay in, I make sure she gets the ramen with vegetables. No more plain noodles for her.”

“Hey, it’s very convenient when you have stuff to do!”

“More important than eating right?”

“Big talk coming from the guy that only eats curry and coffee.” Their little spat was interrupted by a hearty laugh from the third party present.

“This is very familiar. Either we got lucky with our arrangement or my little Kiki’s really rubbed off on you.” Sojiro sighed, leaning back against the counter.

“He’s the worst influence in the best ways.” Meanwhile, Futaba was holding back a cackle that would’ve sent the wicked witch packing.

“Uh, Kiki?”

“It’s my job to embarrass him in front of his friends, right?” Futaba jammed another spoon of curry into her mouth, but it was barely enough to muzzle her. The tears in her eyes weren’t at all related to the spice. Sojiro saw this, and his grin grew wily.

“You know I have that right, too.” After choking down the last of her chortles alongside a sizable amount of rice, Futaba playfully stuck her tongue at him.

“We both know you don’t have much ammo. You love me too much.”

“And that’s why I have all of the ammo. Should I tell her about how you tie your hair in bows and pretend it’s a fancy hood?” The reaction was immediate, an onset of reddened skin and bug eyed disbelief.

“Dude, I will dox you, don’t test me!”

“Go ahead. I have nothing to hide.” He shrugged off the threat, safe in the knowledge that he was the one man she wouldn’t raise a line of code against in malevolence. He walked away coolly to polish off his dishes, leaving her to hide her face behind her knees. Akari was both amused and intrigued.

“So, should I worry about the doxing, too, or…?”

“No, no. I only do that to people I really don’t like. Friends get off with a phone bug.” Her phone chose that moment to ding, and she took the excuse to change topics wholeheartedly.

“Speaking of, my Hawaii Cam says Akira’s taking pictures. Ooh, even better, its video! Come on, let’s see what your kid’s up to.” She scooted over, giving Akari enough room to slide in and get a look.

The screen displayed a large statue of a man with a spear holding a hand out towards the sky. In the corner, Yusuke had his fingers held up at it, framing it for later use.

“Yes, this will do nicely. The local culture is a treasure trove of ancient inspiration. Your thoughts?”
“Oh, Akira, move the camera like this, and…” A hand overlaid part of the lens, hot pink nails guiding it until the free hand appeared to be holding the sun up in the sky. Yusuke noticed this, and once he checked the angle, he quickly centered himself on screen to get the same view.

“Even better! Prosperity, as modeled by the heart of life itself!”

“Yes yeah yeah, just don’t stare too long. Dude, over here!” The view spun around, this time showing Ryuji as he leaned backwards in just the right way to look like he was relaxing on the side of a distant mountain. “Does this look awesome or what? I’m like the king of the mountaaAAH!” His balance gave way, letting him flop on his back. Makoto’s disappointment was palpable all the way in Tokyo.

“Don’t go hurting yourself. I’m the one that has to deal with any injuries while we’re out here.”

“Ryuji’s built to last. He’ll be fine. You good?”

“Yeah, dude. A little help?” A hand reached down from behind the camera, hefting him to his feet. “Thanks. I’ll film you if you want to try it?”

“No thanks, I’m good.” Ryuji shrugged, and then he flinched. Akira pointedly moved the camera, not wanting to get caught up in a patented Makoto chastisement. “You watching this, Bug?” Futaba popped open a small messenger window, letting Akari snoop conspiratorially.

Futaba: You know it, Kiki.

“Oh god, you talked to my mom, didn’t you?” Akari held a finger up to her lips.

Futaba: Just eavesdropped on a call she had with Sojiro. Couldn’t resist. Sorry not sorry.

“What, what’s the big…?” Ryuji bulldozed his way out of his lecture, his hand covering up the lens completely as he forced his way into seeing the chat. “Wait, your mom calls you Kiki?”

“Not another word, Flash.” The hand left as soon as it came, and a guilty whistling replaced it.

“Okay, easy there. Nothing wrong with a guy loving his folks.”

“I think it’s adorable!” The lens went blurry, and when it cleared up, it was filming from the ground up. Ann had thrown an arm around Akira’s shoulder and was pulling him into a sideways hug. “Shame on you, trying to make this precious sweet heart feel bad.”

“I didn’t say anything!”

“But you were about to!” Even caught up between the spat, Akira looked happy with where he was. He saluted to the camera with a goofy wink.

“Behold, my life now.”
“Futaba, send this footage to the police. We have a case of cinnamon bun abuse to report.”

“I’m not certain the Japanese police have the jurisdiction to arrest for crimes on American soil.”

“No, I’m afraid not. That means we’ll have to take this case into our own hands. I am the chosen authority delegate, after all.” Ann’s eyes flickered to the side, and a devilish grin sprawled across her face.

“Uh, what’s with that look…?”

“Get him!” She broke into a sprint, and the sound of a light scuffle followed.

“Guys, guys, put me down! Damn it, Yusuke, how are you this strong!?”

“Quick, dunk the criminal!”

“What!?! No, no, let me go! Please, mercy!” Akira shook his head, reclaiming his phone from the ground.

“I think that’s enough free theater for now. See you tomorrow, Bug.” The video feed cut off, and Futaba was quick to save the footage for later use.

“Can I get a copy of that?” Akari had lost much of her energy, her hands crossed contemplatively.

“You okay?”

“More than okay. You know why he’s in Tokyo, right?”

“That bullshit assault charge.” Sojiro’s hairs stood on end at the blunt profanity.

“Language, young lady!”

“There’s literally no other way for us to address the thing. Anything less would be an insult and you know it.”

“Oh my…” Akari’s eyes sparkled with a moisture, but she wiped it away promptly. “You’re so passionate about it.”

“Of course I am! Someone like him getting a record because of some influential jerk wad is the definition of injustice. Literally no one in this group has a nice thing to say about all of that. Heck, Inari, that weird artsy guy in the footage, snapped his brush in half the first time he heard about it!”

“If only his old ‘friends’ were so defensive about it.” She slid her curry over to her new seat and pushed some of the larger clumps in the topping around with her spoon. “They couldn’t cut off ties with the ‘dangerous criminal’ quick enough. It hurt him more than he should ever have to hurt. That video was the first time I’ve seen him really put his heart into a smile in months, but I can always hear it in his voice when we talk about you all.” She cast Futaba a grateful look, accompanied by a warm, motherly smile that made her heart swell. “Thank you for taking care of him.”

“Honestly, we should be thanking you for keeping him afloat long enough to get to us.” Futaba was about to stuff her face again, but she reconsidered her diversion tactic, putting her spoon
down. “We’re all in a similar boat as him. Ryuji had his leg busted by a teacher and, until recently, he was the one looked down on because of it. Ann’s best friend and crush almost killed herself because of the same teacher. Yusuke was exploited for years, and Makoto was nothing but a golden statue for both her sister and the school. And my Mom was…” The thought flashed through her mind, the lingering dregs of her old self silencing her. She wilted, her emotions drained by the effort it took to push through the block.

“We were all wronged, thrown away for someone else’s benefit. We’re outcasts, so when he showed up and started reaching out, caring about us for us, we couldn’t help but gravitate to him. He’s… like a big brother to us. He’s always looking out for us, like he’s hardwired to be the most caring person on the planet. How could we not do the same?” Her words were the finishing blow, a few tears finally breaking through Akari’s defenses.

“That’s my boy.”

“He’s a great kid.” Sojiro brought over a handful of napkins, setting them on the table in front of her. “I can already tell he’ll be a great man, no matter what anyone says about him.” Akari dabbed at her eyes, silently thanking him for the gesture.

The next half hour passed in comfort. Akari couldn’t stop complimenting the curry and coffee combination, interspersing the praise with guesses as to what went into the mix. Sojiro could tell she wasn’t a practiced cook herself, but he was impressed by how close she got with some of the spices.

Futaba, for her part, found talking to her to be relaxing, a lot like being with Akira, but she also saw shades of herself in there. The energy was real, but she could tell it wasn’t an original part of her personality. It was a product of trying to improve herself, throwing away the sadness and replacing it with happiness. She had to work at it where it seemed to come naturally to her son. Futaba was close with her earlier guess, but she had the chain of inheritance backwards.

Eventually, the group had to part. Akari said she had to get some sightseeing in before Akira got back, though she couldn’t leave before Sojiro all but demanded she take their spare bedroom (or, as Futaba knew it, the living room.) No sense in wasting money on a price gouging hotel, after all.

After Akari left, Futaba’s gears started to turn. A lovely woman thrown away because the guy refused to take responsibility for his actions. It struck her far too close to home, and she decided that this would be the star item on her new promise list. It was too late to do anything about her own absentee father, but she could make his pay dearly. First, she would need to track him down. It would be a struggle, but not impossible. Good thing she had read up on molecular biology in her years of isolation, because it was about to come in handy. It and Necronomicon.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I told you it would get bleak back at the chapter summary, and I meant it. I don’t pull punches, but I have the decency to telegraph. Next chapter, we’ll actually be in Hawaii. Spoiler alert, there are sea turtles involved.
Hawaiian Hoedown

Chapter Summary

Because vacation chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The warmth felt so much more… real than in Japan. The temperature was only a few notches hire than the depths of Summer, but it felt like it was coming down from the sun rather than radiating from the city as a whole. Ann took her opportunity to bask in that authentic Hawaiian light, sprawling out on a folding chair with a tanning mirror. Meanwhile, Akira was quickly roped into some scheme on Ryuji’s part.

“We’re seriously doing this?”

“Come on, man, we never got a chance back home. This is, like, a staple of goofing on the beach!” Akira sighed, admitting to himself that it was hard to say no to his first mate’s enthusiasm. It didn’t take long for Yusuke to notice their activities, taking in the scene as he approached.

“May I ask why you’re burying our leader? I assure you he is quite alive.” It was hard to tell with all the sand covering everything below his neck, but it looked like Akira was shrugging.

“Sandcastles are outdated.”

“You couldn’t have been so sheltered that you never heard of this.”

“No, I am aware of this activity, but I fail to see its value.” He framed the scene, finding it devoid of interest beyond Ryuji’s jubilation, which, in any other setting, might have saved the image. “I thought you would be quick to try finding a date?”

“After last time? Hell no.” He shuddered, the crooning of his personal stalkers ringing in the bleakest depths of his soul. “I can find someone without being a creeper. I’m cool enough, right?”

“You’re at least the third most charming guy I hang out with.”

“Well, you hang out with everyone, so that’s probably a good sign. Hell, I’m surprised you’re not, like, blood brothers with one of the locals or something.” As they bantered away as always, Yusuke found himself drawn to a far more inspiring sight. Makoto hurried by the group, not even stopping to acknowledge Ryuji being Ryuji. “Hey, where are you off to in such a hurry?”

“Can’t talk, have to get to Haru before these melt.” In her hands, their contents dripping over her fingers, were a pair of ice cream cones. The desperation over something so simple spoke to Yusuke, and he refused to stand idly by as her determination was thwarted by the heat. He snapped his fingers, his eyes locking onto the bodies of half frozen dairy.

“Goemon.” His voice was a whisper on the wind, and it carried the gentle touch of winter. Makoto shivered as it brushed by, but any surprise was blotted out by gratitude as her ice cream solidified. She gave a backwards thumbs up, hurrying along before she needed any more magic. His
work completed, he returned to a resting stance, stopping himself short of placing a hand on his
currently nonexistent sheathe.

“Wow, smooth. When did you get so good with your RL powers?”

“I have been practicing in the comfort of my dorm. You would be surprised how many
applications ice has in artistry.”

“Probably helps with keeping it subtle.” Even mostly covered in dirt, Akira’s mind kicked in
as soon as Thief activity became a part of the situation. He could only praise Yusuke’s performance,
and it gave him an idea for later. “Think you could put up with amateurs’ hour?”

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“That was your third plate. Do you really need more pancakes?” Ryuji leaned further into his
hand, tapping his foot impatiently as Ann signaled for another round.

“You know it! Americans know how to make breakfast, so sweet!” A new plate was set
down in front of her, and she swiped a little bit of the whipped cream and pineapple spread off the
top.

“That’s probably very high in sugar. Are you sure your body can handle it, Ann-chan?”

“Ann is an anomaly among women. She can eat as much as she wants and not gain an
ounce.” Makoto picked away at her salad, balancing out her earlier ice cream splurge. She couldn’t
completely hide her jealousy, the envy in her eyes only countered by her guilt for feeling it in the first
place. Haru saw this and, in a bout of quick thinking, gave her a peck on the cheek.

“I think you’re perfect just the way you are.” The cloud hanging overhead was banished, and
Makoto raised her a peck to the lips.

“I suppose I don’t need sugar when you’re so sweet.”

“Get a room, you two!” Ryuji snickered to himself, having sat on the oldest line in the book
until the perfect moment. Makoto, to his delight, lit up like a fireworks festival, but Haru was
nonplussed.

“As it so happens, we are sharing a room. It was decided that having all the third years in the
same general vicinity in the morning would help with planning.”

“Um, that’s not quite what he was implying,” Makoto cupped a hand around her mouth,
explaining the undertones to his comment so no one else could hear. Haru hummed in understanding.

“I see. Well, I’m afraid that’s not an option. The walls are awfully thin.” Makoto’s blush
intensified, and Ryuji was utterly befuddled.

“…Is that the only reason?”

“That and the fact that I wouldn’t know where to begin. I’ve heard certain equipment helps,
but I wouldn’t know where to look for a reputable vendor.” While Makoto was spared exploding in
embarrassment by the fact that they were the only Japanese speakers in the room, Ryuji masked his
own jealousy with humor.

“Why don't you ask Akira? I'm sure he knows a guy.” He glanced over, and when he saw Akira scratching his chin in thought, he totally blanked out. “Oh my God, you can't be serious.”

“Not a guy, exactly. Just an all purpose site.”

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“Isn’t this, like, disrupting the natural order or something?”

“Don’t care. Protecting babies.” Akira’s eyes locked on a diving bird, and he chucked a pebble. It hit home with the might of bird Zeus, knocking the predator out of its attack run. The tiny newborn turtle that was almost caught under claw obliviously crawled over the shoreline, reaching the relative safety of the deep blue. “Take care, little guy.”

“What are you, guardian deity of the turtles?”

“I am Kurusu, keeper of all things unspeakably adorable. Sacrifice to me thine kitten videos.”

- 

“Ann, get away from that volcano!”

“Don’t be such a worrywart, Makoto. See? Perfectly fine.” To prove her point, she held her hand out further than her marshmallow stick, letting it catch the smoldering air rolling off the active lava flow. “Thanks to Hecate, I’m practically fireproof. I haven’t burnt my tongue on a Hot Pocket in weeks!”

“The work of a witch, indeed.” Yusuke was seated as far away from the vent as possible, careful to not let the heat warp his canvas and paints. “I must thank you again for helping us put this excursion together. The glow of lava against the night sky is a striking color gradient.”

“It was mostly Akira’s doing.” Makoto, along with Sojiro, had been keeping tabs on who Akira associated with, so when he managed to get Kawakami to look the other way for their nighttime outing, she was only moderately taken off guard. “I hope Haru isn’t too lonely. Those rooms can be awfully empty when you’re by yourself…”

“If it were anyone else, I’d be making a dirty joke right now.” Ryuji fiddled with a mess of wires and a radio, cranking away at a hand generator he had invested in while the shops were open. “You should chill. She knows you have your hands full watching us, and you’ll have the whole plane ride back to talk or hold hands or whatever.” Akira watched from the sidelines, digging in their bags for a package of hotdogs to roast up over an open magma vent.

“She’s the same age as you. I’m sure she appreciates the concern, but I don’t think she needs a bodyguard twenty-four seven.”

“…Of course not. I suppose I’m being silly, aren’t I?” Akira’s eyes narrowed. Where the
others saw a self-deprecating jab, he saw the hint of shock in her eyes. He knew it well. It was the same look that he had when she played that voice clip of Ryuji.

“Argh, this piece of junk!” The boy in question tore the generator from its cords, throwing it aside in frustration. “Is it too much to ask that the things you buy work?” His anger subsided, and he looked at the severed tips of his wires and powerless radio glumly. Then an idea struck him. He put on his best puppy dog eyes and turned to Makoto. “So Queen, do you think you could lend me a hand?” He held the wires up, and Makoto balked at him.

“You want me to use my powers to charge your radio? Electricity is your thing.”

“You know I can only make static!” He snapped his off hand’s fingers, a small thread of juice briefly flowing between his pointer and thumb. “Stuff doesn’t take that kind of juice. But pure, clean nuclear power…”

“Fine, point taken. I’m honestly amazed you remembered the difference between types of electricity.” She pulled a length of plastic out of her pocket, the same material used in hazmat suits. She held the wire firmly in a clenched hand and wrapped it up, making sure the seal was airtight. “Starting now, don’t get too close.” She breathed deeply, snapping her unoccupied fingers.

“Anat!” A thrum ran through her arm. Her skin hummed and vibrated ever so slightly. Her eyes glowed a light blue. Static sputtered through the radio’s speakers, and soon, that turned over to the strumming of a ukulele.

Alright, way to go, Queen!” He turned up the volume as loud as it would go before kicking back, head bobbing to the rhythm. “This superpower thing is pretty effing rad.” Akira snickered, though it took Ryuji a bit to figure out why. “Damnit, now you’ve got me doing the wordplay thing. I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

“I’m positively radiant.” Ryuji started whistling, trying to noise his way through. “Come on, it shouldn’t be that shocking.”

“And that’s my limit.” Makoto cut her magic, the glow ceasing as she unwrapped her hand. “That should give you enough charge for the next hour. I’m going for a walk to cool down.”

“We’ll be sure to save you some snacks.”

Makoto slid down the rocky hump they had set camp on, and Akira watched her the whole way. When he was sure she was out of earshot and the others weren’t paying attention, he slid his way out of the group, too, following her trail. The Third Eye made it almost too easy to track her. She was seated by the ocean, her feet submerged in steaming water.

“So, care to tell me what that was about?” Makoto slouched over, refusing to look directly at him.

“I hoped you hadn’t seen it.”

“It’s my job to be perceptive.” He sat down beside her, giving her enough space to not feel cramped, but not so much to alleviate the fact that she was cornered. “Is there something you haven’t told us?”

“Look, it’s not that I don’t trust you guys. Far from it, I’d have any of you at my back any day of the week. But I promised her I wouldn’t tell anyone about what’s going on. Please, just let me handle this.” Understanding hit him, empathy. He looked up at the vast, blackened sky and reminisced.
“Someone made me promise something like that once.” Makoto turned to him, the calm in his voice a well known signal. He was laying his heart bare. “She wanted her business to stay her business, to not be judged more than she already was. You know what good keeping quiet did? It almost killed her. The only reason she’s alive is because I squealed to the right people.” His gaze dropped to the ocean, to the chaotic swirl of the waters as they crashed along the shore.

“People always think they know what’s best, and if they don’t, it doesn’t matter. It’s easy to convince a loved one to go along with it, because they love you.” He turned to her, his glasses raised enough to peer out from under them. “Sometimes, a broken promise shows how much you really care.” His glasses slid back into place, and he stared back to the sea. Several minutes passed in silence.

“Her father is trying to sell her for political favor.”

“Seriously?”

“It gets worse. The guy she’s supposed to be marrying is a creep, worse than that host we took on. He thinks he’s entitled to her, like she’s some toy to be played with until he gets bored! She deserves better than that, dammit!” A geyser erupted from the ocean, a detonation under the surface sending water countless yards into the air. Akira rose to his feet, his expression giving nothing away.

“Well.” His head snapped to her, a wicked grin crossing his face. “Sounds like we have a new target!” He held a hand out, and she took it, relief blooming to the surface.

“We’ll have to work fast. She’s scheduled to be sent to his household within the year, and after that, there’s no telling what he’ll coerce her into.”

“Not on our watch.” Makoto knew better than to think the smile meant he was happy. His eyes were burning coals, and his left hand was clenching as though around the throat of whoever had his ire. “You trust her explicitly, right?”

“Enough to say I want to spend my life with her.”

“Then tell her who we are.” She was knocked out of her forward momentum by the request.

“Are you sure?”

“We’ll hold a vote with the others. If they all say yes, we let her into the loop. She dated into this crazy family of ours, and if she wants to stay with us knowing the truth, then we have no choice but to give her our full protection. Rule one, don’t screw with a Phantom Thief, or the others will kick the crap out of you.” His phone dinged, and when he pulled it out, they found that they weren’t alone.

Futaba: Sojiro Mona and me were listening in. It’s a unanimous yes on our end. Also, he says to watch your language.

Akira: Sojiro, Mona, or you?

Futaba: Yes.

He rolled his eyes, but his smirk was more lighthearted than before.
“Time to hold a meeting.”

After explanations, the vote was swift and decisive. As always, Ryuji spoke for the lot with an outraged outburst. It was decided; after a night to recover from jet lag, they would all meet up at LeBlanc to plan their next move, Haru included. In the meantime, Sojiro would be hard at work rearranging Akira’s loft into a sanctuary. Akira was both excited and nervous to see what setup an ex-government man in charge of security with a techno wizard daughter could put together.

He arrived back at LeBlanc the next day, a bright lei about his throat. Aside from Sojiro, Futaba, and Morgana, there was only one customer present, though he couldn’t tell that much about them from only the back of their head. He wondered why Mona was allowed in the cafe while it was open, but no one was raising a stink, so he didn’t question it.

“Yo, how was your trip?” His face was a plasticine front, and beneath it, Arsene grinned from ear to ear. Akira threw up a hand, his thumb and pinky pointed straight out.

“Aloha.” Futaba’s smile melted, and she looked like she was in the cheesy stinger scene of a B-movie.

“Oh no, he’s been influenced.”

“Hey, kid, hate to make you work right when you get back, but could you take that order to table five? My knee’s starting to act up.” Akira was instantly suspicious. Despite all his bellyaching about being old, Sojiro had always been without the creaky bones that characterized the elderly. Mona was watching him out of the corner of his eye, and Futaba couldn’t broadcast her mischief any louder if she had a megaphone and a neon sign.

‘Guess this is the punishment of the ‘influenced.’ Let’s see what sort of medicine they’ve got.’ He straightened himself out, carefully picking up the plate so that his hands were far from the food itself. He carried it over with practiced steadiness, not taking his attention away from his route until his cargo was safely deposited. “Here’s your curry, ma’am.”

“Oh my, such a gentleman.” His heart leaped out of his chest, and with bulged eyes, he found the last face he expected to see in Tokyo smiling back at him.

“Mom!” In unison, they threw their arms around each other, and Futaba was quick to take a few stealthy snapshots. “What are you doing over here? I thought your bosses hated giving out vacations.”

“A Kurusu is a stubborn beast, and a Kurusu mother even more so.”

“…You put in a lot of overtime, didn’t you?” She winked slyly, and Akira let out a sigh. “Apparently Kurusu’s are also possessed of a strong work ethic.”

“You can say that again. I hear you’re keeping yourself plenty busy these days. Cafe work, convenience store cashier, flower shop arrangement guru, political aid…” She took a small bite of her curry as Akira bashfully absorbed the praise. He got compliments all the time, but from his own mother? That was his Achilles heel.
“Well, Yoshida-san hasn’t needed my help for a few months now…”

“Thievery.” His elated heart instantly shriveled, the look in her eyes turning sharp, hawklike. Her normal smile was replaced with a thin, neutral line. He knew his number was up, but Sojiro didn’t get the memo. He was still intent on covering for Akira as best as he could.

“What are you talking about? He’s had his nose clean since he got here.”

“So you are an accomplice. I knew your daughter was in on it, but I didn’t have too much definitive proof for you.” She reached into her bag, tossing a thick manilla folder onto the table. Its contents sprawled out haphazardly, a series of documents, notes, and, most strikingly, photographs, all connected with red strands of yarn.

Three chains in particular were troublesome. Furthest out were locations: Shujin, the exhibit, Shibuya. Next, people, faces he recalled all too vividly. Kamoshida, Madarame, Kaneshiro. They were linked to more individuals, Ryuji and Ann, Yusuke, Makoto. They, in turn, were linked to a photo of Akira himself, and it lead back to one point further.

At the center of the web, linking out through every other page either directly or indirectly, was a red and black card marked by a burning mask and top hat. Akira looked up at Akari, whose eyes began to smolder.

“Is there something you haven’t told me?”

Chapter End Notes

There was way more actual plot here than I thought at first. Weird how these things play out sometimes.
Mother Knows Best

Chapter Summary

Smoothest crime boy gets chunky.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Akira flipped through the presented evidence, and it was thorough. There were photos of everyone who had been sent a calling card before showing a change in personality. It had to be about ninety percent of their targets, without a single miss. Many of them linked to people he knew well, Doctor Takemi, Ohya, Chihaya. Many of his closest Confidants, all linking him and the calling card. Even those they found through the Phan-site were connected to him by string, running through the intermediary of…

“You even found Mishima.” Futaba panicked, slapping both hands over Akira’s mouth. Morgana’s fur stood on end, and his expression was lost between chastising anger and confusion.

“What are you thinking!”

“I know this looks bad, but if you just give us a minute to explain…”

“Are you going to claim that it’s mere coincidence that many of the Phantom Thieves’ changes of hearts have directly aided his friends? We both know him better than that. If he can help, he will, and if that means stepping over some boundaries, so be it.” Her personality had turned on its head. Gone were the pleasantries and upbeat attitude, exchanged for a sharp tongue and lethal application of logic. Sojiro knew the type well. She wouldn’t be an easy one to shake.

“Let’s all just settle down. We won’t get anywhere running around like headless chickens.”

“Well said.” Akira decoupled himself from Futaba, her short stature keeping her from replacing the seal on his lips. “Let me talk to her. Alone.”

“But Akira…”

“It’s fine. She’s my mom, not a cop.” He wasn’t technically lying, but Futaba wasn’t convinced that it was much of a difference. Her overclocked thinking ground to a halt with a pat on the head. “We’ll be okay, Bug.”

“…Promise?”

“Promise.” He tilted his head towards the stairs, and Akari followed him up. As soon as they were out of sight, Futaba sprung into action, almost rending the lid of her laptop as she tore it open. Her hands worked independently, one opening a video chat feed as the other tapped into one of her many spy networks.

“Sojiro, lock the front. Things are about to get classified.” He rushed around the counter, already primed to act. The light on Futaba’s webcam went green. “Guys, code black and red, repeat, code black and red.”
“Something happened to Joker!?” Ryuji was the first respondent, his yell echoing harshly through LeBlanc.

“His mom’s here, and she dug up all our dirt. She knows he’s a Thief.”

“Whad? We’ve been sho careful!” Ann was next, her mouth half filled and muffled by some snack.

“Obviously not careful enough.” Makoto was already in Queen mode, firm and demanding. “How complete is her proof? If there are any holes, I can find them.”

“No good. Akira went all soft and confirmed everything.”

“What!”?

“He is normally the most composed among us.”

“For once, I agree with you, Inari. I don’t get it, either.”

“He knows her the best out of all of us.” Sojiro returned to the vicinity of the chat, looking at the screen as Futaba furiously clicked and typed. “Maybe he knew there wasn’t a point in arguing.”

“We’re about to find out. Opening camera KA.”

“KA?”

“Kurusu Attic.”

“That’s a violation of privacy! Your phone bugs don’t even come close to…”

“Trust me, I’ve done way worse.” Makoto’s questioning was cut short as a video feed went out over the network. The camera in the corner right of the stairs went live, giving a wide angle shot of the whole room. Akari was seated on his couch, Akira cross legged on his bed.

“So, where should I start? The beginning, general ops, a target in particular, what?”

“I’d like to know why you thought bringing international attention to yourself was a good idea after already being arrested.”

“It’s not really on me, though. We’re anonymous.”

“For now. What happens if someone follows the same trail I did? One wrong pair of eyes and you’re back in prison, maybe for life. Is that what you want?” She reached into a side pocket on her bag, pulling out a heavily wrinkled, slightly mangled document. “Akira Kurusu is hereby released to the custody of Sojiro Sakura. Any violation of the law will result in immediate arrest and the full charge of the prior criminal act as well as an additional sentence befitting the new charge and the breaking of this legally binding contract.”

“Those court types really like hearing their own voices.”

“This is serious!”

“I know, but I don’t have to worry. I’ve gone over the legal code of Japan, and nothing I’ve done breaks any law listed on the books. One of my teammates has studied this stuff inside and out and double checked, we’re in the green.” Makoto was warmed by his certainty in her work.
“He’s technically correct, but…”

“That doesn’t matter. You know how these people work. They’ll bend the wording somewhere or write a whole new law before your trial that will make you what they want you to be. You can’t win against them in their field.”

“Why do you think I’m doing this my way?” The flippancy in his attitude vanished. His muscles loosened and he started to bend under his own weight. It was like a flower after days without water, tired and impossible to see as anything but. “If we let them keep bending people around their little fingers, then they’ll just keep doing it. Again and again, people like me will be thrown away to line the pockets of and build roads for people who are already immeasurably above the common citizen. Would you have me stand aside and let more kids suffer like I have?”

“I would have you not get burned a second time. I know how you feel, but as your mother, if you got hurt because this Phantom Thief business ticked off the wrong person, I would never be able to forgive myself.”

“So you want me to hide as their soldiers march through the streets and drag off everyone that gets in their way? It’s already too late for me. My reputation is already ruined. Anything they do to me now is just icing on their cake. If nothing else, then if I fall now, I might actually inspire someone to stand up in my place.”

“Then they’ll get put down, too. This cycle never ends.” Akari, too was worn beyond her years. The skin around her eyes sagged with every passing breath, the color of her irises fading. “We can build ourselves a new life, out where no one cares about your record. We can still be happy. So please, put aside this foolish revenge quest and…”

“Foolish?” At once, the weariness was expelled from Akira’s body. He sat straight, his hands clutched tight around each opposite elbow. “You think it’s foolish to stop them from abusing their power? You think it’s stupid to save people from pricks waving their privilege around?”

“I think it’s a mistake to…”

“You think it was a mistake to save you?” A flash of frost coursed through her veins as Akira rose to his feet, uncrossing his arms with his hands balled at his sides. She managed to break through before he could keep going, though, catching a second wind.

“That’s different. You saved me from something I did to myself because you’re a good person. I know you mean the best, but…”

“I only saved you because I got lucky!” Every limb tensed, his muscles seemingly swelling as they pushed through the baggy clothes he carefully employed to hide his physique. “If I hadn’t been heavy enough to pull down that hook, if I had been too afraid to do something, if I had been working just one minute longer…” A pulse of pain struck his temple. He put a hand to his head as his eyes closed, holding back the torrent of rage that roared to life in his mind.

“If one tiny, insignificant thing had been different that day, you would be dead right now. You would be gone and I would be alone.” His voice cracked at the last word, but before Akari could rush to him, realizing what he was really feeling, the anger returned in force, tears pouring through his clenched eyes as it burned him from the inside out. “All because some well-to-do jackass used you and threw you away-ay-ay…!” Ryuji backed away from his speakers, hands clamped over his ears.

“Shit! What the Hell’s going on?!”
“I don’t know! It’s like when we try to use cameras in the…” Inspiration came to her, and she put a hand over the laptop’s shell where its core processor was stowed. “Give me a second, I have an idea.” She pressed down, and her hand pulsed with energy. Her veins started to glow a neon green, running up and down her arm like circuits. The video feed returned moments later, and they stared at their screens in disbelief.

An untraceable wind blew through the room, Akira’s hair billowing, lit by deep blue embers that rose from the flames that encircled him. Akari was likewise stunned, her first exposure to magic as sudden as it was jarring.

“What is this? What are you…?”

“All my life I’ve been a burden, an outcast, a mistake.” Akira turned, pacing to stare out his window. The flames followed him, leaving the floor under his feet untouched. “You couldn’t handle the stress of raising me, so you tried to find an easy way out. I can’t blame you for that. In your shoes, in your position, I think anyone would have been just as overwhelmed. You’re as much of a victim in this as me. But it still stung, knowing that you could only just put up with me.” Tears came to her eyes, her breath running short.

“Akira…”

“Then I was arrested, all for sticking my neck out where they could see me. I could have died in that prison, and no one but you would have batted an eye. I was just another piece of trash, and Death would have been saving them the trouble of sweeping me under the rug by taking me away.” He put a hand to the glass, his reflection staring back with all the misery in his heart.

“I’m nothing. A burden, a bastard, a criminal. Akira Kurusu can talk the talk, but in the end, he’s worthless.” His hand slid shut, nails leaving a thin scrape on the pane. “But the Phantom Thieves? They’re something else. They’re unshackled by the burden of being on the bottom. They float free of all control and strike back at those too high for their victims to reach. They save people who can’t save themselves before it comes to the noose.”

“Akira Kurusu is powerless.” He turned, and in a wave of flame, he was replaced. Standing before Akari, as resolute as the day he came to be, was a figure in black, hands capped by gloves as red as his eyes, face obscured by a burning white mask. “Joker can change the world.”

“What the fuck!?” Ryuji’s yell threatened to blow out the speakers, and it nudged a few more decibels up when he saw the pools of pink ripple out from his footsteps. “Futaba, what the fuck is this Metaverse shit doing here!?” No answer came, her eyes locked on screen as Joker advanced, his shadow cast over Akari as the room became awash in blue.

“Most of the innocent faces you brought before me today, your proof of my activities, they would be gone or buried had I not acted. Ryuji, forgotten where not spited. Ann, pursued by a man of infinite, unrequited lust. Yusuke, starved and one foot in the grave. Makoto, an unmoving idol. Futaba, suicide.” The word clawed its way through his maw, and it was even less gentle as it entered Akari’s mind. He closed his eyes, processing the typhoon of emotions within him and descending back to calm. His flames likewise receded, and the light returned to its natural state.

“Right now, there is a bright, kind woman being pursued against her will. Those around her, her supposed family, are pushing her towards a life of captivity for their own gain. If we don’t act, her future will be lost. I will not stand aside as she follows in my footsteps. The less that tread the road of the abandoned, the better.” His monologue was silenced as arms clamped around him. No words came to him as his mother cradled him, burying his face in the crook of her neck.
“Akira, honey, don’t you ever call yourself worthless. You’re more of a man than the asshole that left us behind, or the one that had you arrested. You’re my strong, brave Akira, and I’m worried that I’ll lose you forever.” A few seconds passed, and he hugged her back.

“I know. I’ve thought a lot about it myself. Maybe this is just my way of lashing out. Maybe I’m that same scared little boy at heart. Even so, I can’t stop now. There are people depending on me, whether they know it or not. I’m Joker, leader of the Phantom Thieves. I steal the hearts of the wicked because there’s nothing else I can do.” He untangled himself from her arms, putting some space between them. “I need rest. Our next major operation begins tomorrow, and the sooner I deal with the jet lag, the more prepared I’ll be.” Reluctantly, she nodded, making her way to the stairs. She knew when she could do nothing more.

“…Come back to me alive and well, okay?”

“I promise.” The cloth fell from his skin in patches, turning to smoke as his thief outfit unraveled. Before he made it to bed, he looked once more over his shoulder, his eyes back to the grey she knew. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, Kiki. Now and forever.” The response was instant and true. Worry and doubt clouded her eyes, but she knew he didn’t take oaths lightly. As she came down into the cafe, Morgana bolted up, but she didn’t notice. “Pardon me, Sakura-san. Is your couch still open?”

“Of course.” Sojiro could only empathize with her concerns. Had he not awakened alongside Futaba, he knew he would have reacted much the same. Akari gathered her papers, making sure they were all in the folder before stuffing it carelessly into her bag. She gave a polite bow on her way out. Sojiro’s attention returned to the screen, where Akira’s now normal, unburned room had acquired a new occupant.

“Do you need to talk to someone?” Morgana jumped up next to him, curling up at his side as he stared towards the ceiling.

“You were all watching, weren’t you?” Morgana nodded, but Akira expected as much. “Not right now. Need some time. Figure out how to put it.”

“I’m here whenever you’re ready.” He nuzzled Akira’s wrist, and he reached down to scratch behind his ear with a warm smile.

“I know. Thanks.” Futaba cut the connection to the camera, and a thoughtful silence fell over the group.

“Guys?”

“S’up, Queen?”

“We should all make ourselves ready for when he wants to talk, too.”

“Of course. Such negativity must be shared to be alleviated.”

“Also, we’re hugging the shit out of him.”

“You know it, Oracle.”

“So is this an official mission statement for you guys?”

“Operation Hug a Lug is a go.”
Lots of bombs in this here chapter. I'm surprised Demo Man hasn't filed a cease and desist yet.
Chapter Summary

You don't let a wound sit for long before getting some antiseptic.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a bit past ten when Ryuji and Ann made their way to LeBlanc. Sojiro gave them both a friendly nod as they entered, an eyebrow raised.

“You awake there, Ryuji? I actually heard the bell that time.”

“Kind of. Jet lag is a real bitch.” Ann nudged him in the ribs with a playful half smile.

“Don’t insult dogs like that. What’s wrong with you?”

“Uh, what?” Sojiro rolled his eyes.

“You know that ‘bitch’ is what you call a female dog?”

“Seriously? Then why is it an insult? Dogs are awesome.” It was still disarming how downright innocent the most punk-like Thief could be. “Anyway, the others here yet?”

“Everyone but Makoto and Haru, but try to keep it down. Akira’s still out cold last I checked.”

“Wow, that stunt he pulled must’ve taken it out of him.”

“What did you expect?” Ann snapped her fingers, sparking up a flame that barely filled her palm. “Just this much is putting a strain on me. Could you imagine how much worse it is going full Thief?”

“Alright, enough magic. This place is open to the public, you know.” Sojiro nodded towards the stairs, and, after bashfully extinguishing her hand, the two made their way to Akira’s room. Just as promised, Akira was asleep. Morgana was wide awake, but he didn’t dare move, Akira’s hand settled on his back.

“Hey guys. Glad you could make it.”

“Wouldn’t miss this for the world.” Ryuji half sat on the table across the room from Akira’s bed. Ann stood next to him, watching Yusuke as he skimmed through the shelfful of carefully arranged knickknacks.

“Having fun over there?”

“Indeed. Nowhere else have I seen such a varied collection in such a small space.” He respectfully refrained from touching anything, though he had to actively keep his hands from wandering towards the lamp of Sky Tower.
In the corner, seated at Akira’s work desk and cloaked in her comforter, was Futaba, who had cleared off a space for her laptop. Her eye flickered briefly towards them, and she pushed the left side of her headphones up to expose her ear.

“Ready to put your noses back to the ol’ grindstone?”

“Anytime.” She spun around in her seat, watching as Akira raised from his slumber.

“Morning, Kiki, you sleep okay?”

“Like the dead, Bug.” He reached over to his bedside table, fumbling for his glasses. When he noticed that it was more than just the two of them in the room, though, he stopped, leaving his eyes uncovered. “Man, I really slept in, didn’t I?” Ryuji shrugged.

“Can’t blame you for it. After all that crazy Metaverse stuff you…” He caught wind of Ann’s stink eye, choking back his statement. “I mean…”

“I imagine you guys are all pretty curious about that, huh?”

“Well, yeah.” Ann toyed with one of her pigtails, trying to channel her nervous energy outward. “But we can wait until you’re ready to talk about it.”

“I appreciate the thought, but this isn’t exactly a molehill we can just step over.” Akira swiveled his legs out over the edge of his bed, realizing a bit too late that he had clocked out in his day clothes. “I said it before, and I meant it. You all deserve to know what’s going on in your leader’s head.”

“A decent idea, considering your position.” Yusuke straightened himself out and tilted his head curiously. “However, I do have to wonder why you haven’t brought something so clearly self destructive to our attention before.”

“It’s hard to bring stuff up when you don’t even realize it’s there.”

“You mean in the same sense as my old self?”

“Something like that.” Akira gestured in front of himself, waving his hands about as though painting the image in his head. “Imagine you’re driving a car. When you push the gas, you don’t think about the engine spinning or the gas combusting under the hood. You just think about going forward until something decides to break.” Ryuji subconsciously put a hand on his knee.

“You have a chance to look under the hood yet?” Akira nodded.

“I could use a comparison, though. Tell me something.” He laced his fingers together, hunching over. “What did your Personas tell you when you first got them?”

“Uh, why?”

“Don’t you remember your contracts?” Of course they did. They could never forget. Those six words were forever branded in their souls, locked in place by the memory of the preceding agony. “I am thou, thou art I. But that’s not where it ends. No, that was the signature. The stuff around it? That was the vow. So, what were yours?”

“Let me think.” Ryuji looked up, nudging Seiten Taisei for some help. “I don’t remember it exactly, but it was something like, ‘They already look down on you, so why not raise the flag and wreak havoc?’ I guess that means I signed up to be a big middle finger to messed up adults.”
‘How can you avenge her like that? Nothing can be gained by restraining yourself.’ I was breaking free of the stereotypes and sticking up for Shiho.”

“Mine was to forget the lies Madarame forced upon me and separate the beautiful and the profane.”

“Uncovering the truth the crooked try to hide, that’s my role.” Morgana sidestepped his own missing awakening, turning attention back to the questioner.

“What was yours?” Akira’s eyes trailed off to the side, but still, he spoke.

“Death awaits him if you do nothing. Was your previous decision, a mistake then?” Akira’s legs trembled beneath him, his stance only saved by the armored hands pinning him to the cell’s wall. In his mind’s eye, he recalled the night that led him to Tokyo, to this castle. The bastard that sent his loyal police dogs to lock him away. Now, he was restrained yet again, and all he had done this time was exist. It was as though the world would always spite him, no matter what he did.

‘No, never. If these rats think they can do whatever they damn well please, then I’ll never stop!’ He struggled and writhed against his bindings, but his strength was nothing compared to the soldiers. They didn’t so much as glance his way, ignoring him even now. Somehow, the barrier he had constructed between his thoughts and actions had broken down, and all the anger that had been building his entire life was spewing forth. ‘I’ll show them, for looking down on us, for thinking they can do whatever they want to us. We are not their playthings!’

“Excellent. I have heeded your resolve.” His pulse doubled, the rush of blood straining his veins beyond all limits. He cried out as the flow reached his brain, even the vessels in his eyes swelling. “Vow to me. I am thou, thou art I.” Every bone in his body shook, cracking as something tried to break free.

“Thou who art willing to perform all sacrilegious acts for thine own justice!” With every beat of his heart, his muscles tore from their roots. They bulged obscenely, his skin stretching to the breaking point. It wouldn’t hold much longer. Whatever clawed its way through him refused to yield its assault, not until it was free of the restrictive shell that was Akira’s bastard flesh.

“Execute him.” Akira’s attention returned to the so-called king, this Kamoshida. The kid he had followed to this place was on the ground, tears in his eyes. He quaked in fear as the soldier standing over him raised his sword.

“You will never get away with this.” All movement stopped, every pair of eyes in the room turning to him.

“What was that?”

“As long as I breathe, you will never get away with this. As long as I live, I will fight. Go ahead, spill his blood, and I’ll wring you of every drop in your body.” Kamoshida sneered, a deflated, limp excuse for a grin sprouting.

“You wish to be killed that much? Fine!” He nodded, and his executioner stepped forward. Akira tried to pull his arms away again, but this time the guards responded, slamming him with their
shields. He hardly felt the blow, the beast laughing as his shattered ribs ignored their strike. Their grip released, and his glasses were sent to the floor, breaking into shards of glass and twisted plastic. No longer would they hide the intent burning behind his eyes.

“A resilient little malcontent, aren’t you? This should be…” Kamoshida’s breath caught in his throat. In the span of a blink, Akira had changed. Resting across his brow was a white mask, the holes lined by black ridges. His eyes glowed, the pupils therein shrunken, manic. He didn’t like those eyes. They weren’t human, not even Shadow. “Kill him, kill him now!”

“Call upon my name and release thy rage!” Akira’s hand snapped to the mask, the boiling fury driving his actions. It closed around the frame, and as a corner pulled away with a spurt of blood, a wave of power flowed forth. Intense wind pounded against the knights, staying their hands for but a moment longer. “Show the strength of thy will to ascertain all on thy own, though thou be chained to Hell itself!”

‘Chained to Hell? Don’t make me laugh.’ He pulled at the mask with all the strength available to him, ribbons of skin ripping away with each inch of progress. Spurts and trails of blood sputtered from the wound, dripping down his face. ‘If anything, it’s Hell that’s chained to me!’

“Then prove it! Show that thou possess the will to conquer!” With the voice reverberating in his soul goading him on, all restraint fell away and he freed himself of the cover of normalcy. The mask dropped to his feet, and from the hole into his spirit, the beast found its escape. He felt it surface, prickling at his skin, and its approach excited him. He showed the king what a real grin looked like before being engulfed in azure flame.

“What are you waiting for? Obey your king!” His executioner heeded the command, charging forward with his blade primed to skewer the intruder. It was stopped as suddenly as it began, the fire cloaked demon rounding his strike and returning one of his own. His hands cut through gold armor like air, fingers clenching the heart that lied within.

The beast was pleased with its work, crushing the organ in its bare hands and watching as the knight melted before its very eyes. Soon, all that remained was red, proof of Akira’s first kill dried to his gloves. The fire peeled away from his body, and from it came the beast. Clad in red, cloaked in ebon wings, draped in chains, peaked in horns befitting the Devil himself. They desired a demon, and so would he be.

“I am the pillager of twilight, Arsene!” He crossed his arms, smiling proudly upon his emancipated greater whole, devilishly upon those who would oppose them. “I am the rebel’s soul that resides within.”

“Whoa…!” The kid looked up at them from the ground, still shaking. He was clearly terrified, and yet there was a glimmer of admiration, reverence.

“Dammit, another one?” Kamoshida grabbed his last two knights by the collar, throwing them to the burning dogs. “Kill the big one first. Show them why you don’t screw around in my castle!”

“He believes these two are a worthy challenge? Pathetic.” Arsene spread his wings, the smallest movement stirring a gale that threw the knights off balance. “They should be fine for cutting your teeth. Go, run wild to your heart’s content. Kill them however you wish!”
“Hold, Arsene specifically ordained that you murder them?” Yusuke had pulled out a sketchbook, though his hand movements weren’t of a drawing artist. They were more in line with a psychologist taking notes. “That is a mite disconcerting.”

“No kidding.” Akira had stopped moving a short way into the story, all of his attention pointed inwards. Arsene, too, was motionless, meditating on his birth. “A Shadow is your repressed self, the feelings you want to hide from the world. A Persona is that Shadow made to cooperate.” Morgana nodded along.

“And your feelings weren’t exactly sunny.”

“No, not at all.”

“--

Akira chuckled as Kamoshida threw himself against the bars, a king made prisoner in his own dungeon. There was a beautiful irony to the situation, and, looking back over the last year of his life, Akira found it unspeakably fulfilling. He crossed his arms and took great joy in the way Kamoshida gnashed his teeth.

“How’s it feel on the other side?”

“You’ll never know. When I get my hands on you, I’ll have you killed for your insolence!”

“I guess that means I can’t have you catching me. I think I can manage.” A hand rose to his mask, and he gripped it tightly. He could feel Arsene pushing against the boundary, ready to finish what they started.

“How do we make an example of him? My fire, your blade? Perhaps hang him from his own gallows with chain?”

‘No, let’s save that last one for a… special occasion. I know just the guy.’ But first things first, the crooked king. ‘He’s kindly provided a brick oven. It would be a shame to let it go to waste.’

“Yes, I agree. Release me, and I shall reduce him to ash!”

“--

“Weren’t you as against killing him as me?” Ryuji had moved to Akira’s side, running a hand over his back.

“Part of me, maybe. But there, standing over him, watching him grovel, I could only remember when I was the one behind bars. Someone like him getting the same punishment as the guy who had done nothing? That didn’t sit right with me. It was unjust, and I wanted nothing more than to fix that imbalance.”
“But you didn’t go through with it.” Ann was next, though she kept her hands to herself. “Did you change your mind?”

“No. When I left that day, I still wanted him dead. The only reason he’s still alive is because…”

—

“Shit!”

“Intruder! Halt, or face immediate prosecution!” The yells echoed down the hall, breaking Akira’s concentration and making him loosen his hold on his mask.

“Why have you stopped?”

‘Sounds like the kid from earlier’s in trouble. Ryuji, right?’ He was too loud for his own good, and his self control was nonexistent. It wouldn’t take long for a pair of lungs like his to bring in every guard in the area.

“That doesn’t matter. He has his affairs, and we’ve ours.”

‘He can’t defend himself against those things. We leave him, he’s as good as dead.’

“What difference does it make? The only thing that matters is the excuse of a man before thee. He has wronged us, and we must rectify this error in judgment. Doth thou not desire thine justice?” Akira looked down at Kamoshida. He had stopped responding to the King’s ranting, and when he realized the position he was in, he started to sweat. His guards weren’t coming. He couldn’t protect himself. He was at the mercy of the lowlife he had just tried to execute. His true colors were showing, the flag of the coward. It would be easy. A flick of the wrist, and Arsene would tear him apart.

“Someone, help!” The desperation in that voice snapped Akira out of his thought, and he turned to it on instinct alone.

“Thou wouldst flee from thy foe?”

‘I would not turn my back on a friend.’ Akira refused to forget what Ryuji had done. He made himself as a decoy, drawing Kamoshida’s attention before telling Akira to run. He tried to save him with his own life.

“But he failed!” Every word pounded through Akira’s head, Arsene tearing into his side of the barrier.

‘He tried. That’s more than anyone else in this screwed up world has done, and I don’t forget my dues.’
“Never thought I’d be the one to save Kamoshida.”

“You know me. I can’t say no to someone in need. That’s just not me, but I almost forgot.” Akira stared at his hands, envisioning the blood red gloves that had become his icons. “One little thing. One small push, and I would’ve killed him. A bit more anger, a bit less morality, you not being there. I’d be a murderer, and I wouldn’t even care.” Ann slid closer, nudging him with her shoulder.

“But you didn’t. You helped us bring him to justice without killing him. You changed.”

“Is that what you think?” Akira smiled ruefully, leaning away from her. “When you were talking down to him after the fight, I was waiting for you to finish him off. He might have tried to kill me, but after what he did to you and Shiho, I resigned myself to letting you get the last shot. Imagine my surprise when you spared him. Arsene and I were arguing late into the night on how we felt about that.”

“Wait.” Morgana stood up, staring him in the eye. “Is that why you couldn’t get any sleep?”

“I was too busy figuring stuff out to. It took until the next day for us to get anywhere though.” He smiled softly to Ryuji and Ann, his eyes shining with gratitude. “When you guys asked me to be the leader, that’s what made me realize what I did wrong. Joker has the power to save people, give them hope. I’m just the spiteful little shit that tried to use that power for personal gain.”

“I made a new vow then, to not let my anger control me. I directed it to Joker, and he used it to do what I never could.”

“I don’t understand.” Yusuke flipped to the next page in his notepad. “You and Joker are the same person.”

“If you’re being literal, yeah. I am Joker, and Joker is me, but if I didn’t put up a wall, I know all of my issues would try to surface through him again. Low and behold, that’s exactly what happened here yesterday. I let myself get pissed and almost burned down LeBlanc. Thank God Arsene was there, or those flames would’ve spread fast.”

“So Arsene learned from Ann’s demonstration?”

“He took it to heart real quick.”

“That means you learned, too. He is a part of you, after all.” Yusuke’s web of logic was difficult to escape. It seemed his attention to detail didn’t end at the use of color.

“You think I mean something without Joker? Let me ask you then, would you care about me if it wasn’t for him?”

“Of course I would. I consider you a dear friend.”

“Up until I showed you what was going on with your mentor, I was just a nuisance to you. If you hadn’t been dragged to the Metaverse with Ann, our paths would have split there.” Akira turned to her next.

“You stuck around long enough to start liking me because we had a way to get back at Kamoshida, and Ryuji wanted me along because, at first, I was the only one he knew that could fight in there. And Morgana, you outright said you were only interested in the first place because I could be useful in your exploration of Mementos.”

“I love all of you, and I know you care about me, too. I will never doubt that. But if it wasn’t
for Joker, we would have kept walking our separate ways. Without Joker, I wouldn’t have you. Without you, I would still just be that angry, lonely little criminal that no one wanted around, the one that would have killed Kamoshida without a second thought. Akira on his own is less than worthless.”

Suddenly, a loud slam echoed through the attic. Futaba pushed herself out of her chair, her blanket hanging loosely around her shoulders, and walked towards Akira. Ryuji and Ann backed away nervously. A wise decision. She looked down at him, expression blank up until it contorted in anger. In one swift move, she slapped him across the face, leaving behind a deep red mark on his cheek.

“You idiot! You’re supposed to be the suave social butterfly here, and yet I’m the one telling you how much bullshit you just spat out!?” Akira looked up at her, a hand on his new wound, but he was forced to lean back as she closed the gap. “Yeah, I only contacted you because you were a Phantom Thief, but do you remember why I let you into my room? It wasn’t your ability to shoot Shadows and steal hearts. It wasn’t your style or your rebellion. It was because you opened up to me, and I saw someone there I could trust. Joker might be a mega badass, but you, Akira, you cut straight to people’s hearts the old fashioned way. You make people come out of their shells and like you. Just being around you makes us better than we were before.” Akira’s heart sank as she started to cry, tears streaming down and dripping onto his lap. “You’re telling me the guy I’ve been idolizing is worthless? Do you know how much that hurts?”

“Bug, I…”

“Bug nothing!” She jumped forward, but before he could flinch, she had wrapped her arms around him as tight as she could. Her blanket fell over both of them, trapping him in place. “You’re a great guy, the greatest I’ve ever known, Persona or no Persona. You helped me realize what I could be. You gave me my life back. I won’t just sit there and let you tear yourself down, not after you did everything you could to break me out of that spiral.”

“She’s right, you know.” Ryuji scooted back in, putting an arm around his shoulders. “Joker helped me knock Kamoshida down a peg, but you helped build me back up. What good’s revenge if you’re still broken after?”

“And we met before the Thief stuff, remember?” Ann came next, joining Futaba in camp full hug. “You came to me, a total stranger, and talked with me about my problems just because I sounded upset. Everyone else in that station ignored me, but not you. That’s the Akira I know. That's the guy I chose to lead the way.”

“I make four.” Yusuke’s lanky arms were long enough to ensnare the entire group at once, even reaching down to set a hand between Morgana’s ears. “You helped me rediscover myself after purging the lies. We humans are beings of dual natures, vice and virtue. Your anger is chaotic, yes, but your kindness, too, knows few bounds.”

“Fifth down here.” Trapped as he was by the mountain of affection above him, Morgana was left to nuzzle his stomach. “Every time I started questioning myself, you were there to shake me out of it. I came for your talent, I stayed for your personality. If I’m being honest, whenever I try thinking about what my human self was like, I kind of hope he was like you.”

“Damn, fuzzball, that was cheesy.”

“So? You’re all just as soft.”

“I can concur. From where I’m standing, you are all pleasantly plush and warm.”
“If I didn’t know you, Yusuke, I’d think you were talking about my weight.”

“You want weight? How about those two fluffy things you’ve got shoved into my back?”

“We’re both girls here.”

“And you’re pan. I’m starting to question my sexuality down here.” Akira snickered, doing his best to hug back with his arms pinned by the mass of four people.

“Stop trying to convert my little sister.” His voice was wavering and quiet, but it made everyone smile nonetheless.

“Aww gross, you’re getting all your sob juice on me.”

“You started it. You’re still doing it.”

“I’m a girl. I’m allowed to be emotional.” In reality, Futaba didn’t mind. It felt like she was starting to pay back the massive debt she owed him. He was there for her, and she would be there for him, for as long as he needed her. Didn’t mean she wouldn’t mess with him a bit. “So is this the part where I start calling you Onii-chan?”

“If you’re okay with your dad suplexing me.”

“That old softy? He loves you like a son, you know.”

“But would he say it out loud?”

“Good point.” Slowly, hesitantly, Operation Hug a Lug drew to a close, the mass of teenagers detangling. Futaba stretched when she was freed, immediately plopping back into her chair. “That was draining. Think I’ll just idle till Haru and Makoto get here.” Everyone respectfully let her be, and she reopened her laptop, clicking on the messenger window.

Futaba: You get all that?

Akari: Yes, I saw plenty.

Futaba: And?

Akari: I will be disposing of the evidence shortly. On one condition, that is.

Futaba: Are you going to threaten us if we fail to protect your little boy?

Akari: Heavens no, I saw the video. If something does happen to him, I want you to send me as much information about the one that did it as you can.

Futaba: Revenge rampage?

Akari: Let me put it like this. If someone puts a Kurusu in the ground, they had best be prepared to put the other in jail if they plan on living to brag about it.

Futaba: Best get a few more seats installed on that revenge train. I know at least seven more peeps that’ll want in. It’s right in the rules, don’t mess with a Phantom Thief.
This one was draining to write. Worth it, but I need a nap. See y'all when I wake up.

Next time, Haru. You can figure out the rest.
From Highest Tower

Chapter Summary

Dear Haru, dear Haru, let down your hair.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was with no small amount of trepidation that Haru entered LeBlanc. If Makoto hadn’t been by her side, she doubted she would have made it that far at all. The bell rang overhead, and Sojiro gave them a welcoming smile.

“Everyone’s already upstairs. I’ll be up in a bit with some grub.” Haru bowed, eyes closed.

“Thank you, Sakura-san. I can only hope to repay your kindness one day.”

“No need for the honorifics. You’re one of us now. Call me Boss.” Despite her sullen mood, she couldn’t suppress a small giggle.

“I thought Akira-kun was the leader?”

“Maybe, but I’m the one who pays the bills around here.”

“Very well. Thank you, Boss.”

“Come on. Do you need help?”

“No thank you, I can manage.” Haru’s steps were slow and laborious as she climbed the stairs. Makoto stood right behind her, ready to catch her if her strength gave out. True to her word, though, she made it to the top, where everyone had gathered as promised. They were spread about the perimeter of the room in an almost roundtable layout, leaving two spots on the sofa open. Ann was the first to take note of her condition.

“Are you alright, Haru? You look worn out.”

“I’m…” She didn’t quite know how to react in the face of genuine concern. Makoto noticed her hesitation, and only then spoke up in her stead.

“Sugimura tried to jump her in the station before I got there.” Haru absentmindedly pulled her long sleeves down over the balls of her wrists, avoiding eye contact as the memory passed by. “We managed to give him the slip, though. Turns out he doesn’t have a subway pass.”

“Serves the bastard right. So we going in to shit-can his heart now?” There was a general air of tension about the group, only lifting slightly as Ryuji voiced what seemed to be a shared consensus. Haru was floored. She was used to the servants and corporate heads around her simply writing off her confrontations if not scolding her for acting out of line. The real, almost physical concern they showed so openly was heartening, to say the least.

“I already tried that. He doesn’t have a Palace.”
“What!? The prick’s totally distorted!” Morgana grumbled at Ryuji’s outburst, but since they all looked at him like a participant in the conversation, Haru could only guess he was speaking to them. How she wished she could understand him, too. “Seriously, this shit doesn’t make any sense sometimes.”

“May I ask what he said?”

“Right, you can’t hear him. Sorry.” Akira flicked his eyes between her and Morgana, who jumped up to her lap without a second thought. It was odd, knowing the animal in her lap was as aware as a human, but it didn’t lessen the charm or comfort of having a kitten to pet. “He says that Sugimura must have been raised from the beginning to be so entitled. A distortion is a warping of cognition. His desires can’t be a distortion if they were that way all along, therefor, no Palace to infiltrate.”

“Oh, I see…” She deflated somewhat, but Makoto and Morgana tag teamed, the latter nuzzling a wrist as the former put a hand over the other.

“Don’t worry, we’ll take care of this. I promised we would.” Morgana meowed in confirmation, and Haru was almost brought to tears. Her composure held, though, letting her lean into Makoto without ruining her blouse. She was rattled by the twinge of pain that ran up that arm, but she managed to keep her reaction internal. “I guess that only leaves one option.” Haru frowned into her sleeve, but nodded nonetheless.

“You checked her father, too?”

“Yes, and I can confirm that Kunikazu Okumura has a Palace. I even managed to find all but his last keyword.”

“Alright, Queen! Way to use that head of yours!” Ann harshly bumped Ryuji’s arm, pointing to a progressively more downtrodden Haru. “Ah shit, sorry, forgot he was your old man for a second there.” Haru felt Akira’s eyes on her before she saw them, and when she looked, they were glowing bright yellow. She had been warned of the group’s tendency to change eye colors, but Makoto’s explanation hardly did the otherworldliness of the phenomenon justice.

“You’re sure you want us to go through with this?”

“Yes.” She sat up straight, recollecting her dignity. “My father’s actions have harmed many more than just me. His workers are withering away under his direction, all to satisfy his desire for prestige. For their sakes, he must be made to see the error of his ways, no matter my hesitation.” She held up a closed hand to show her determination, squashing another cringe as it attempted to surface. Akira’s eyes widened.

“Mona, right arm.” The cat was a blur, pouncing up to her shoulder with the rim of her sleeve in his mouth. As the fabric pulled up, the light brown beginnings of what promised to be a sizable bruise were revealed. It didn’t take long for everyone to realize that they conformed to the shape of a hand enclosed around her arm. “Haru, is that…”

“He…” She looked pointedly away from them, using a hand to futilely hide the injury. “He grabs me quite regularly. You don’t need to worry. I’ve grown used to it, and…”

“Being used to it doesn’t make it less abusive.” Yusuke crossed the room before anyone knew he had even stood up, placing a hand over the bruise. “Goemon.” His hand dropped below freezing, encasing her arm in an instant ice pack. “This should help with any swelling that may occur.”
“Thank you. I must say, these powers seem quite…” She was stopped in her tracks when she saw his eyes. His hands were ice, but his irises were flame. She began to feel small pinpricks all about her body, and when she looked, everyone present, barring Futaba, shared the change. Ryuji’s hands were clutched tight, Ann only keeping him from exploding with a hand on his shoulder. Morgana’s fur stood on end, his claws instinctively protracting. Futaba was typing at a speed she could hardly comprehend. Makoto couldn’t stop staring at the bruise, and the air around her was climbing in temperature.

“Phantom Thieves.” Akira, though his posture and expression remained the same, was far from calm. His voice strained to remain neutral, and his eyes were almost swallowed whole by the scarlet glow. If she stared into the window behind him closely enough, she thought she could see a burning figure in a top hat reflecting back. “All in favor of targeting Kunikazu Okumura.”

“I.” The attic shook under their unified voice.

“All opposed.”

Dead silence was his only answer. When no detractors rose, his face twisted into a smirk.

“Then it’s unanimous.” He hopped off his bed, kneeling over and pulling out a wide case from under the frame. He made short work of the three padlocks along its lid, and he opened it to reveal an organized stash of weaponry. Each member took a turn to retrieve theirs, giving their melee arms a test swing to get back into the rhythm of battle. Something about the sight of Makoto sparring with an unseen opponent made Haru feel warm inside.

“That was quicker than I…” Sojiro stopped dead in his tracks, one glimpse of the iced over bruise enough to tell the whole story. “Take some curry with you. The sooner you take care of this mark, the better.”

“Thanks, Boss!” Each member took a covered bowl off his tray on their way down, Makoto stopping long enough to give Haru a reassuring hug.

“We’ll be back soon. You get some rest, okay?” Haru smiled, hugging back with all the strength she could muster.

“Thank you, all of you. I’m truly blessed to have such amazing friends and family.” Makoto’s cheeks were tinted pink, and they shared a good luck kiss. She nodded resolutely to Sojiro as she passed, and then she was gone, off to fight in Haru’s name. Her heart was aflutter with affection, but she knew she couldn’t stick around too long to see them back. She rose to her feet, rolling her sleeve back into place.

“Got something to do?”

“I really must be returning home. Father doesn’t like when I’m out too long.”

“Now hold on.” Sojiro stood at his spot in front of the stairs, but he kept enough space open to assure her he wasn’t forcing her to stay. “You said you got in a fight with this fiancé of yours, right? If I have Okumura pegged right, which I think I do, he’s the type that would make you apologize to him for starting something so their deal doesn’t go sour.” Haru was stunned by the accuracy of his judgment.

“How did you…?”

“I used to work in government, security detail. You wouldn’t believe how many sleazy businessmen I ran into, trying to buy their way through. Made it easy to set up sting operations,
though.” He set his tray down on the nearby table, replacing it with the last plate of curry left behind. “For all we know, he’ll have the date pushed forward to tomorrow to reimburse his troubles. If you’re here, though, I can make sure he doesn’t have the chance.”

“But I couldn’t possibly impose…”

“I took in Futaba and Akira of my own volition. The kid brought in a cat behind my back. Everyone else just showed up and made my shop their personal den. If I wanted to complain about being imposed on, it would’ve been six months ago.” He handed her the plate as she sat down, the love he put into this batch in particular evident by smell alone. “At this point, those kids are practically my kids. You’re dating one of them, so that makes you an in-law, and I don’t throw family out on the street.” Once more, tears fought to break through her years of etiquette training, and this time, they won handily.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to…!”

“Don’t worry about it. See? Not a scratch on me!” It hadn’t been long before the group came back, regretfully informing Haru that her father’s Palace was protected by a gene locked door. Without someone of Okumura blood, they couldn’t get more than a stone’s throw deep.

Once more, they put together one of their tried and true kill circles, but this time, a Shadow managed to slip through the outer ring. Haru had been too surprised by the Black Ooze’s approach to dodge its strike, leaving it to Ryuji to do his job as her human shield before the others turned and tore it to shreds. Morgana let out a breath, sheathing Zorro.

“And even if it was that big of a deal, you’ve got the best medic in town on your side.” Akira rolled his eyes, leaning against a wall as everyone licked their wounds.

“I’ll be sure to let Takemi know that you’re feeling a little…”

“Joker, I swear to God if you…”!

“…Catty.” Morgana slapped both paws against his forehead. “You’re the one who codenamed me. No complaining now.”

“Is it too late for us to elect a different leader?”

“Sweet, more time to make jokes.”

“Now you’ve done it, fuzzball.” Ryuji put a hand between Morgana’s ears, leaning against him like a tall stool or a short cane.

“You’re all very… casual for having just been in a fight.” Yusuke shrugged, reloading his assault rifle.

“It was an event the first two, perhaps twenty times. Now, it is simply Tuesday.” He passed the sack of automatic rounds to Ann.

“This job doesn’t have any water coolers, so we have to work in the smalltalk wherever we
can, you know?"

“I see, a way to maintain team morale.” This was an unorthodox working situation, but many of the components behind it were quite mundane. Deadlines, stretch goals, occupational hazards, fierce market competition (the last one being much more direct than usual.) In effect, what the police labeled an organized crime ring operated much like a small business, only with model weaponry and melting muck monsters.

“Speaking of, are you holding up alright? The first time in a Palace is always the most overwhelming.” The cold iron mask did nothing to hide Makoto’s ever-present worries.

“I’m fine. You are all excellent in your field, after all.” If she had to admit it, though, she was most stricken by Makoto’s style, though she would never say it aloud and diminish the others’ efforts. There was simply something about the raw, brutal expression of self present in her fisticuffs combat technique that spoke to Haru on a deeper level than Akira’s impressive acts of dexterity or Ann calling down firestorms.

And there was the motorcycle. Paired with her overall aesthetic, it radiated the freedom they had each been starved of. Now, she used it to fight and free Haru of her binds. Until recently, she had never considered that she would be dating another girl, but now, the word beauty could only conjure images of Makoto donning the immovable mask of Queen.

“Alright, you’re up.” Akira gave her a thumbs up, the door in front of him not opening at his approach. Haru hurried to the front, and the camera mounted atop its frame bathed her in sterile, almost intrusive light. It dinged, and the door slid out of their way. “Open says she. Let’s move.”

“Halt.” That had been the first non robotic voice they had heard from the Palace, but it was difficult to distinguish through the heavy air filter it ran through. Behind them, wrapped in a thick spacesuit and glass bubble helmet, was Okumura, sitting in a throne that carried him above the ground. Even with the constant supply of air pumping through his suit, his skin had been tinted blue as though deprived of all oxygen.

“Father?”

“Now Haru, what have I told you about associating with those beneath your station? To think, my own daughter mingling with such uncouth thieves.”

“Better than being a stuck up, backstabbing prick like you!”

“Is this the sort of guy she spends her time with?” Haru’s skin crawled, a voice like half dried earthworms squirming through her consciousness. The deep brown mark around her arm started to throb. Sugimura sauntered out from behind the throne, the sneer on his face more repulsive than any variant of Slime. “Okumura-san, I don’t know if I can accept someone like her as an official lover. My reputation would be left in tatters.”

“Calm yourself, there may be more than meets the eye.” Okumura reclined, head held aloft by his arm. “I heard about your little spat earlier today. This could be a form of peace offering.”

“Oh, you mean undesirables to do with as I wish! That would certainly mend fences. Haru darling, did you round them up just for me?” He stepped in closer, and as soon as Haru took a step back, Makoto lodged herself between the two with her revolver in hand.

“Back off.” Her mask started to glow white, the magic stirring within her heating it beyond the limits of normal iron. “She’s not your slave, or some sacrificial lamb.” She looked straight past
Sugimura, her attention firmly on the one she knew meant something more in this world.

“I suppose I was mistaken. No matter.” He waved her away, eyes half lidded. “You may take her as an unofficial lover or concubine, whatever you wish.”

“Why thank you, I can only accept your most generous offer. Come now, Haru. Let’s head back to my place.” He licked his lips, and the light around him faded until he was completely obscured. A thin line of red cut through the murk, and when he was visible again, he had been reborn as yet another robot in Okumura’s factory. With the deal signed, he was only another underling to further his master’s designs. “Mmm, a school age mistress, what a turn-on!”

“Father, you mustn’t be serious!” Okumura openly yawned at his daughter’s pleas.

“You should be overjoyed. With this, you will be fulfilling your role as an Okumura daughter, pushing me beyond this meaningless stage and to the next. Now run along, satisfy his every desire. Carefully, if you would. An ill performance would reflect poorly on me.”

Haru tried to find it in herself to be upset. She tried to be surprised, even a little bit. But such a feeling didn’t come. She had known for years. The man her father used to be was gone. What sat before her, throwing her to the hounds, this was what he had become. This was the spirit of the one who would grind his workers to dust if it meant a little more fame.

“So that’s it then.” One last tear trickled down her cheek, a token in the name of the man he used to be. “Thank you for coming before me now, father. With this, I have no more doubts about what must be done.” Deja vu washed over the gathered Thieves, and excitement trickled into their hearts.

“Have you finally realized the truth?” The echo in her mind quivered with excitement. As it revealed itself, its strength filled her body, pushing against the inside of her skull as her vessel reached its capacity.

“The life I lived, the man who I thought cared for me, neither was true. I have been betrayed.”

“Ooh, yes, you finally understand! You have been a marionette on another’s stage for far too long, dearie. Are you ready to dance on your own two feet?”

“I have been for a long time. But the dance I seek is not for one alone.” The pressure eased as she shared a meaningful look with Queen, waiting for her on the other side.

“A tango then? Excellent choice, ma cherie. Now, let us form the contract!” The pressure heightened to searing agony, the years of indignation, of spited whispers, of bruises and cuts, of licentious looks and gropes fueling the pyre. She threw them all away with unbridled glee, grin crossing her face as the words came forth.

“I am thou, thou art I.” At once, a thin crack appeared in the fragile framework of her mind. Her world was narrow, too little to contain the growing might. It needed to be released!

“I’ll play with you until you break!” The false Sugimura charged, twin pronged hand spinning as he raised it for a strike. This time, though, Haru was prepared. The mask peeled from her face like soggy paper, a bandaid left in place for far too long. The power tore through its new opening, escaping into the world and becoming real.

“The show has begun! The spotlight is ours, Milady!” His hand came down, and a mask raised to meet it. Sparks flew from the point of contact, illuminating the pink folds of the dress that
was her heart’s true form.

“Tsk tsk, no touching~!” The right eye of the mask flared, and at once, all of the force imparted upon it was reflected, sending Sugimura back on his heels.

“Grah, you ungrateful bitch!” As though summoned by his anger, Haru appeared before him. Her sweater, donned to cover her wounds and hide her shame, was gone, and in its place was the regal wear of a French nobleman, recut to fit her feminine physique. A wide brimmed hat, decorated with feathers, shaded her eyes, though it did little to diminish the brilliant, crimson glow of her intent or her excited smile.

“Alright, let’s…!” Makoto’s order was cut short as Haru threw a hand up, one more wave of the awakening flame arming her. She swung down, and though he raised an arm to block her, it was quickly severed by the head of an ax.

“AAA-A-a-a-a…” His voice fell short with a second swing, seemingly cleaving through the source of his speech.

“How long I’ve waited to silence those crass lips of yours.” With a shiver of fear, he lashed out with his only remaining arm, and she leaped over it, summoning her new side arm and aiming straight down. She pulled the trigger, and with a heavy thunk, a grenade was sent flying. It detonated on impact, blowing away the upper half of his limb as the updraft carried her into the air. She managed two more shots, each preceded and followed by an elegant midair flip. Cracks ran about the entirety of his chassis, and his head struggled to turn and meet her line of sight before she leveled her newly minted grenade launcher between his eyes. “Consider this my annulment.”

One more thunk, and in a scream of twisting metal and flying sparks, the robot was no more, thrown to the far corners of the room in pieces too numerous to ever reassemble. Haru turned to where her father’s Shadow once was, but when she found him long vanished, she lowered her weapons.

“Hmm, I was hoping to end this here and save everyone the trouble. Nothing to do but track him down, I suppose.” With a lilt of laughter, Milady vanished, her mask settling onto Haru’s face, finalizing their partnership. She let out a sigh, skipping to Makoto and pecking her lips.

“I guess this means I can help you from here on out. This way, yes?” She continued on her merry way, heedless of the baffled stares from her new teammates. Akira was the first to shake himself free of the shock of her brutality.

“You sure you’re good to go? Not tired or anything?”

“No, I feel absolutely divine! In fact, I haven’t had this much energy in ages. You all worked so hard to get us this far, so let me handle the next few encounters, okay?” She hummed into the distance, and Ryuji finally managed to pick his jaw up off the floor.

“Okay, not saying this cause I want to steal your date or anything, but that was kind of hot. And scary.”

“Yeah…” Standing where there was once a Queen was a statue, its heart and mind returned to the rooftop where it first laid eyes on true beauty. Futaba snapped her fingers a few times, eliciting no response.

“Good news, we now have two murder machines. Bad news, Queen.exe has stopped working. Does anyone have a spare towel?” Akira cocked an eyebrow.
“Save it for when she’s actually drooling.”

“Wrong end, you innocent little dingus.”

“You’re a foot and a half shorter than me.”

“Yet I’m the one that knows what Niagara Falls springing a leak looks like!”

“You know, you’re the second member who lasted more than an hour after the awakening without crashing.”

“Really? Who was the other?”

“Me.” Haru stroked Morgana’s fur in the dim light of Akira’s attic, the cat finding her soft hands an interesting change of pace from Akira’s dexterous, but kind of averagely built fingers.

“Don’t let Joker puff up too much. He was like the walking dead for a week after.”

“And that’s why I now have a crippling addiction to coffee.”

“Also because Sakura… Pardon, because Boss’s technique is masterful.”

“Certainly doesn’t hurt.” Akira curled up to better fit on the relatively small couch cushions, padding out the harsher corners with his blanket.

“You know you don’t have to give me your bed.”

“You know I have an alarm in my brain that goes off when I’m not as helpful as physically possible.” He managed to make her crack a smile. “Besides, whether you feel it or not, you had a long day, and there’s going to be more to come.” Haru nodded, their mission firmly engraved in her mind. She would not falter, not when they worked so hard to give her this chance.

“Oh, and that package you ordered through Tanaka’s came in. It’s stashed under the firebomb and spare ammo materials on the desk.” Because those were far easier to explain. He had to remember that his mother was just down the block.

“Thank you, Akira-kun! Mako-chan will need some quality stress relief once we’ve stolen the Treasure.”

“Just be sure to send me a warning if you two try it out up here. Don’t need me walking in and ruining your buzz.” Morgana’s fur bristled.

“Joker…!”

“No pun intended, for once.”

Chapter End Notes
Of course, letting down your hair has more than one meaning. And with this, the team is complete. You know what that means; time to break a new Palace over their knee. Where are the statues?

And sidenote, I forgot to mention something in last chapter's notes where they would be more appropriate. Oops. Did you know that all of Akira's issues from there and the story as a whole are reworked from an "Akira has a Palace" oneshot I was working on before seeing how many people had that idea? Yeah, I actually had the Palace, Shadow, and big chunks of the plot finished in my head before scrapping it. Hit me up down below if you want some free ideas to work with. You have express permission to use whatever you want as long as you link me to the end product.
Space Race

Chapter Summary

SPaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaee!

I'm in space.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Arahabaki’s eyes flashed before leasing a beam of concentrated light. Anat sprung into action, standing between it and Milady with her arms crossed, letting it come within inches of her titanium shell before the Makarakarn triggered. The left eye of Milady’s mask lit up, and her barrier absorbed the blast before throwing it back from whence it came. The holy light merely grazed its earthen hide, but it was just the distraction Milady had been waiting for.

“Psio!” Her lady’s order sent a shiver of excitement down her back, and with a wave of her mask, it was done. A flurry of mentally manipulated orbs swarmed the stunned idol before descending upon it, knocking it off its feet and leaving its hide cracked and fragile. Anat turned, offering a hand to her favored damsel who accepted it with a small curtsy. Their skin touched, and at the point of contact, their power hummed.

At the tips of Anat’s fingers, Milady twirled, a flower petal in the breeze. The air shook with their magic, and as Anat gently dipped her over, supporting her with a hand on her lower back, it ignited, the pink and blue flames of their union washing over the battlefield and leaving not even a speck of their foe behind. Anat leaned in, pressing her lips against the upper crook in Milady’s mask, before both vanished in a shower of sparks. They reformed on the brows of their masters, who shared their show of intimacy, heedless of the other Thieves looking over their display.

“Such style, such grace! Truly, this is the spirit of unbound love.” Yusuke had already procured his sketchbook, hurriedly drawing the explosive background before its glow faded from his eyes. Ann watched over his shoulder, pointing out where to best highlight their signs of affection as only an experienced model could. Morgana nodded approvingly.

“It looks like their shared cognition of each other’s abilities is making them both stronger. Or maybe it’s just that fighting together is giving them more confidence. Either way, this should be beneficial to us moving forward.” Akira stroked his chin, taking his ideas into consideration. Slowly, a smile began to creep along his face.

“I have an idea.”

“…”

“You idiots locked that door, right!”
“Y-Yes, sir, we…”

“AHEM.”

“I mean, Ch-Chief Director! Sir, the intruders won’t make it this far.” He would have grinned if he had the facial constructs for it. He had a cushy job under Lord Okumura, all the subordinates to order around he could ask for, and the best security of any below his Lord’s personal ring.

He allowed himself a moment to dream of capturing these so-called Phantom Thieves. Not on his own, of course, his lackeys would do it for him. With that sort of prize in hand, he would surely rocket to an even more lucrative position, just as he had dreamed of as a lad. This was a fine day for business.

Suddenly, a detonation tore through the building, but it was hard to hear over the roaring of an engine. The Director hadn’t even the time to yell at his underlings before the source sped by the far end of the hall, a silver motorcycle with two occupants. The driver’s eyes were firmly on the road ahead, a smirk sculpted in place under a slab of iron.

At her back, clinging to her and looking down his side hall, was a breathing contradiction. Her smile was cheery and bright, her eyes upturned, but in her hand was a piece of heavy artillery, held up with one arm. Her head tilted slightly as she pulled the trigger, and in the span of half a second between when they appeared from one end and when they vanished down the other, everyone in the room was reduced to slag. On the wind was the faint echo of, “I love the Battering Ram!” A red gloved hand reached into the wreck, surfacing with a somehow undamaged keycard.

“Well that was easy.” Futaba covered her ears as another explosion rippled through the station.

“Should we tell them they can stop now?”

“Not yet. Let them have their fun.”

“Damn, man, these elevators take way too long.”

“We’re in space. What’d you expect, Skull?”

“I don’t know, not this much waiting around. Ugh…”

“…”

“…”

“So Noir, did you know Queen said you look like a kitten?”

“Panther!”
Towering atop one of the adjacent rooftops was the most perfect thing the Thieves had ever laid eyes on. It had to be a hundred feet tall, cast in a combination of brass and marble. Scale and color aside, though, it was a perfect replica of Shadow Okumura, right down to the control panel and bubble helmet. It was alluring, like a big red button waiting to be pressed.

But no one took the bait. They glanced at each other awkwardly, fiddling with their hands or kicking their boots against the ground. It took more willpower than he liked to admit for Joker to give the order.

“Alright, let’s get moving guys.”

“Oh, we aren’t going to paint it?” Haru stood at the ready with a borrowed brush and palette in hand. “I brought my glossy makeup kit, too.” Ryuji struggled to restrain the beast rising within.

“You mean you’re okay with it? It’s your old man and all.”

“Queen said it was your tradition to leave your mark on the face of the Palace, literally, and I will not stand in your way. Besides.” She giggled, painting hand trembling with excitement. “If I’m being honest, I’ve always wanted to prank father somehow, but I never had the nerve in reality.”

“Well, in that case…” Ryuji unraveled a sheet of blue paper, Akira holding the other end as they formed a conspiracy circle with Haru. Yusuke, Ann, and Futaba quickly joined them. “We were thinking Christmas ornaments from the antennas, and a twirly little villain mustache on the glass.”

“And now they’re corrupting my girlfriend.” Morgana patted Makoto’s back.

“It’s okay, you can get through this…”

“Actually, I had another idea.” Haru took up Yusuke’s pen, sketching her thoughts into the margins of the page. A series of cheers and whoops erupted as she finished. Makoto threw her head into her hands, completely and utterly defeated.

Shadow Okumura gazed over his station, the twitching of his left eye the only sign of his vast irritation. The Thieves’ accursed symbol, the mask and top hat, was spray painted onto every building, scattered and tilted as though they were the shrapnel of a maddened artist’s hand grenades.

His glorious statue had been entirely tainted, not an inch of its surface left unmarked. His suit had been left a painful hue of pink, and his helmet had been painted all black, a sharp toothed grin scrawled across the bottom and a pair of cat ears affixed over his communication antennae. He struggled to imagine how seven children and a cat had managed to get up there, but the piece of resistance was on another tier entirely.

Far above him, painted into the dome of his private metropolis, was a series of messages. To the left, the text was red. To the right, that same damned pink.
Princess Okumura,
Do you take the low born
Phantom Thief known as
Queen to be your lawfully
Wedded wife, to have and
To hold, in sickness and in
Health, till death do you part?

I do!

Then by the power vested
In me by my sick long coat,
I pronounce you wife and wife.
You may twist tongues
With the bride.

With pleasure!

The last word trailed off, as though the brush was fumbled. He could only imagine why, and his imagination was forcibly vivid indeed. He clutched his arms behind his back, the worker at his side cowering in fear.

“Tell me, how did they do this?”

“According to the spy drones, the one known as Joker rode an unidentified flying object. The one known as Noir was still on the ground, but she appeared to be controlling the paints telekinetically. She then grabbed the one known as Queen and…”

“That’s. Quite enough.” The worker bowed before fleeing for its life, leaving Okumura to watch as his drones tried and failed to wipe away the damage. “This can’t possibly be happening.”

“So, uh, they’re still going at it…”
“Yep.”

“Should we tell them the elevator’s about to stop?”

“Nope.”

“You’re really proud of what you started, aren’t you?”

“You know it, Skull.”

“Oh, I think I hear the elevator slowing down.”

“Just a bit more. Please? For your pretty kitty?”

---

Swoosh

“I really hate this place!”

Swoosh.

“Seriously, like a lot!”

Swoosh.

“I would shoot this place in the face if it had one!”

Around and around Akira went, each pass through the space tunnels making him more irritable than the last. After they wiped out the Shadow population of the sector, he had offered to go about the tedium of switch hunting on his own, telling the others to rest by the final gate. After about twenty minutes of fiddling with airlocks, he was well and truly done, screaming his lungs out as he zipped from door to door. Haru watched in amazement through the window as he hollered into the emptiness of space.

“I’m surprised he has the courage to do that in what should be a vacuum.”

“I’m not. He’s always been stupidly gutsy, right from square one.” Ann moved a pawn forward. Ryuji scratched his chin, thinking about how to counter.

“Wanna know his great idea for recruiting a pixie way back when? Running up and hugging the thing.”

“Really?”

“And it worked! He walked out of that castle with a small army of pixies. And a succubus. All by hugging the shit out of them. And he would’ve had an Agathion, too, if its arms weren’t so damn short.”

Swoosh.

Futaba looked, and she saw the angry gleam in Akira’s eye. She knew it too well. It was the
same look she got when she was about to go on a tirade. She summoned her control panel, prepared to rewrite reality as fast as he could create it.

“Son of a censor guzzling censor beast, why the censor does all this censor censor happen to me!? Censor my life! It’s like this whole world just likes to bend me over and censor me in the censor!”

“God censor, man! I can only bleep out so many words per minute!”

“You censored me! You censored me you monkey censor!”

“And now he knows what I’m doing and is censoring with me. Great.”

“This is it, then?” Haru stared at the blob hovering above their platform. The source of her father’s distortion it may have been, but there was something… normal about it. The rest of the station, the Palace to his greed and pride, was warped and mad, but this thing that rested at the center of it all was different. If she thought about it, she supposed desire was a natural part of being human. It was what sprung from it that could become problematic.

“Once we send the calling card, this whole place will crumble, and your arranged marriage with it.” Morgana paced by the railing, brow tilted in thought. “The only question is how.”

“I could go in and set it directly on his desk.” Haru reached into her pocket, finding her key to the house right where she left it, even through the clothing distortions of the Metaverse.

“You’ve been gone nearly a week. His goons are probably on high alert.” Akira had acquired a pair of binoculars, scouting out the scaffolding far above. “Chances are he has a retrieval order out. It’s too risky.”

“Then what should we…?”

“Already on it.” Futaba had been sitting on the sidelines with her laptop, giggling to herself every so often. They should have suspected she was working on something. “Looks like Okumura Foods sends out a weekly newsletter to its staff. All I have to do is slip in the message, maybe a little custom Phantom Thief emoji, and the buzz should travel up to him quickly. People talk about the grapevine all the time, and now we’re weaponizing it!”

“Sounds devious.” Akira hopped off his perch, looking over Futaba’s shoulder as she put the finishing touches on her code injection. “I love it. How long until it’s ready?”

“I don’t know, three weeks, maybe a…” She slammed down on the spacebar with the finality of a judge. “Nah, just screwing with you. It’s already done. Go on, praise me.” As Akira obliged with a pat on her head, Haru found herself smiling. Just a few days more and she would be free, truly free. Makoto slipped her hand around hers, squeezing it supportively.

“Are you ready? The last infiltration is never a cakewalk.” Haru already knew her answer in her heart of hearts, but one more affirmation wouldn’t hurt. She gazed deep into Makoto’s eyes, and when she saw her own reflection in them, she knew exactly where she wanted to be.
“Yes, let’s finish this.”

Chapter End Notes

Well that was a blast to write. Really upbeat stuff. Can you believe this is my first swing at writing romance? Okay, what’s next on the list...

...Oh. Right. Now I remember why I cranked up the happy this chapter.
Chapter Summary

In which Pancake Man contends with the smoothest crime boy.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Down below, the Phantom Thieves stood over the prone, defeated Shadow of Kunikazu Okumura. It was a clean encounter, that much was certain, but there was one fatal error in their technique; they used each other as crutches. The bulk of their healing was relegated to the cat, their defense, the new princess. The ones who were competent in battle often found themselves on the ground, dependent on their fellows to pick them up. It worked as long as everyone did their job, but one bad actor, one loose cog, and their machine would have come crumbling down.

That was, if not for Joker. No, he was different, special. He never fell like the others. Though he might have gotten hit, he never took a finishing blow. Then there was his arsenal, the Personas he tucked up his sleeves. He could cover any roll he so desired with a swipe of the hand. Offense, defense, recovery, subterfuge, the possibilities were limitless. If he could only cut himself free of the dead weight, he could be so much more.

As it stood, though, he let himself get dragged down, and, though he begrudged the wasted potential, Akechi had no choice but to let him be. If he saw fit to rot with the trash, then who was he to get in his way? He had a job of his own to finish. If only Niijima would quit yammering.

“…and you will cut off the arrangement with Sugimura.”

“Of course. No amount of money is worth my daughter’s happiness.” Akechi groaned under his breath and rolled his eyes. If there was something he hated more than selfish adults, it was this sanctimonious drivel. Each was a form of arrogance as far as he was concerned, and it could all go burn in Hell. That would have to come later, though. He could put up with it for a while longer.

With nothing else to do, tucked away in the rafters, Akechi amused himself by watching how the other Phantom Thieves put up with this long winded diatribe. Joker was, as always, passive, never revealing his real hand, and he could respect that. Noir and Panther hung on every word like good little sheep. At least Oracle had the guts to interject with a passive aggressive quip every now and then. Fox was surprisingly silent, staring off into literal space. It was odd, but he had come to expect as much at this point.

Skull must have gotten hit harder than usual. He was constantly rubbing his neck, tilting his head until Akechi could see his opposite ear. It wasn’t the first time he had seen this method of pain relief, but this frequency was unusual. It was almost like some sort of signal…

It was with the sound of a stretching rubber cord that Akechi figured out his mistake. Sometime during the fight, he had lost sight of the cat, and he had failed to relocate it.

“Hands where I can see them, Black Mask.” Was it really so daft? If it had any mind, it would have fired when it had a chance. Now, Akechi was going to skin the cat. He spun on his
heels, pulling his silenced handgun, but before he could fire, he heard the thunderous, unified crack of weapons cocking. The cat grinned, pocketing its ammo before back flipping off its perch. “Light him up!”

‘Of course it couldn’t have been the real attack. It’s using a slingshot for god’s sake!’ Akechi dived after it, hoping that keeping his course close would hamper their aim. The air above him filled with metal, a wave that descended quicker than him. He gritted his teeth as they struck his legs, but once he reached the ground, he ducked and rolled into cover behind one of the larger scrapped robots. He had managed to get through with only a light grazing of automatic fire and, thankfully, no head-on encounters with grenades. ‘Wait, I didn’t hear any go off!’ He dove for the next heap just in time, the last getting torn to shreds in a plume of smoke.

“Father, you have to leave!” Okumura rose to his feet at his daughter’s request.

“I recognize this one. He’s the man who executes the mental shutdowns.” The bastard was squealing. He should have expected as much from the coward who hid behind his tinker toys, in both worlds. “I only need a moment. My elite guard might be gone, but I still have a few workers left to…” An explosion shook the station as the booster on the spaceship lit up. Without its core, it didn’t have nearly enough power to make it to Utopia, but it could still launch just fine, wiping the base from its ruler’s cognition.

“There’s no time.” Queen stepped in front of him, sparking her iron knuckles together. “You need to get back to your other self. We didn’t come this far just to let you die and take your sins to the grave with you. We’re not that merciful.”

Akechi grimaced at the foul turn of events. He had to finish his mission and leave as soon as possible. His helmet was, unlike the Thieves’, complete enough to hide his identity, but that meant anything that could remove it was out of the question. He knew he could take almost any of them one-on-one in any situation, but the whole group without access to Loki? It was a tall order, even for him, and he couldn’t risk any of them finding his real identity. He was no fool. Their hacker would have him strung up by the gills by the end of the week one way or another, and if he was found out, he would lose all the distance he had made with Shido. Two long years of effort, gone with one careless mistake.

He had no choice but to act. He sprinted out of cover, his crosshairs right between Okumura’s eyes, but before he could pull the trigger, his vision was filled with the smug grin of Joker.

“Too slow, Masky.” Akechi threw himself back, narrowly avoiding a swing from Joker’s knife. “Come on, enough with the covers. Show us that pretty face!” Joker tore off his mask, flinging it as it transformed. Arsene held onto the momentum, chasing and slashing as swiftly as he could. Akechi managed to dodge, but he noticed that the attacks were concentrated towards his face. He really was trying to unmask him. He tried unloading a few rounds into Arsene’s head, but they plinked off his mask harmlessly and did nothing to slow his assault. All it did was make him laugh.

“You fancy yourself an assassin, and yet you can’t best a simple thief? It seems your quest is bound for failure!” Suddenly, Arsene’s speed doubled, allowing him to grab Akechi by the arm. The touch burned like fire, and when he pulled himself free, he found that his sleeve had been reduced to ash, replaced by a length of chain that dug into his flesh.

“This is…!” A piercing whistle drew his eye up, letting him see just how close he had been driven to the launch platform. Towards the edge, Joker pointed up, showing him the ridge on the spaceship he had tied the other end to.
“See you around, Masky. If you make it to the moon, bring us back some cheese, would you?” Akechi repressed the urge to swear him out as the main thruster fired, carrying the craft towards the vast emptiness of space. The chain pulled taut, and though he fought it, he didn’t have nearly enough strength to halt a fully powered space cruiser. He found himself lifted into the sky, the chains biting deeper into his arm with each passing moment. Joker saluted the sky bound Black Mask before turning back to his crew. The structure beneath their feet shook, another explosion sounding in the distance.

“This place is about to blow. We should move. That goes for you, too, Okumura, and don’t forget your promises.”

“My real self will be rescinding any and all destructive orders he put into effect over those in his charge. You have my word on that.” He bowed as deeply as his suit allowed, a hand over his heart. “I can only hope to atone for my sins in my lifetime.” He rose once more, and, though it pained him, he looked to Haru. “I cannot expect you to forgive me for my actions, nor should I hope that you would return to oversee my rehabilitation. All I ask is that, wherever you have been these last few days, you take care of yourself. You clearly know what that entails better than I.”

“Father…” She ran to him, hugging him with tears in her eyes. “If you truly regret your actions, I would be glad to come home. As horrible as your crimes were, you deserve a chance to redeem yourself. That is the core belief of the Phantom Thieves.”

“You… You are certain?” Haru nodded into his chest, and he hugged her back. “Haru, I swear I will be better. No more exploiting employees, no more crooked deals.” He glanced towards Queen. “No more arranged marriages. Furthermore, I will be exposing the heads behind the mass mental breakdowns and shutdowns. They will not escape un…”

A small thwip. A gasp. A sharp pain. Haru put a hand to her shoulder, feeling a thin line of ripped fabric and a trickle of her own blood along the top. Then more blood, this from above her. Her heart stopped, and when she looked up, she saw the hole in his chest. The outside of his suit was slick with blood, and he clutched his heart, his breathing troubled and erratic.

“Father!”

“Haru, run!” His voice was a hollowed croak, but he still found the strength to shove her away, turning to face his attacker. The skin on his firing arm was raw and red, deep chain marks coiling atop fresh burns, but Black Mask could still shoot just fine. Wordlessly, he aimed at Okumura’s head, and, beneath his mask, he grinned to himself. He pulled the trigger, certain of his victory.

Then Joker jumped in the way, arms spread protectively. The bullet struck him just beneath the left shoulder, and he recoiled as he rolled to a stop. Before Akechi could try again, Joker pulled his own pistol and opened fire, forcing Akechi back into cover. Morgana summoned Zorro and pointed towards Okumura’s open wound.

“Diarama!” Zorro swung his blade, and a bright green light washed over him. When it passed, though, the wound was still there, and his breathing only grew more troubled. “It’s… It’s not working!!” Joker growled under his breath, not taking his eyes off of his target.

“Okumura, you’ll bleed to death if you just stand there. Get back to the real world, now!” Morgana’s eyes shot open.

“But he’s critically injured! There’s no telling what effect that could have on his other self.”
“We know exactly what’ll happen if he dies here. Now go!” Okumura looked to his daughter, the fear in her eyes making his reborn heart ache.

“I will be fine. A real Okumura survives all hardships, and I refuse to disappoint you.” His skin pulsed with white light, and when it dispersed, he was gone. Akechi heard it all, and he screamed in his mind.

‘Damnit! That piece of shit escaped!’ He heard a heavy thunk, and he abandoned his cover before it exploded like the rest. In the corner of his eye, he saw Haru, but he had difficulty recognizing her. She had discarded her soft outer shell, the rage of the Phantom Thieves burning brightly. The next explosion shook everyone in the room, nearly knocking them off their feet as one of the factories outside crashed to the ground.

“We need to leave, too.” Makoto took Haru’s hand, pulling it away from the trigger on her launcher.

“But Black Mask is…”

“The least of our concerns. If we die here, there will be no one left to make him answer for what he’s done today. We will bring him to justice, I swear it.” Haru bit her lip, but she acquiesced, holstering her gun and letting Makoto pull her atop Anat. She looked over the room, the others all loading onto Morgana’s bus form, but Akira stayed put, his eyes focused on where Mask last disappeared. “Hurry up!”

“You guys go ahead.” He held up a hand, and pinned between two bloody fingers was a steaming bullet. “This was lodged in my shoulder, a real bullet, not like ours. If he hits anyone, it won’t be like the Metaverse attacks we can just heal.” His mind jumped back to Okumura’s wound and how Morgana’s spell did nothing to it. He shuddered to think what it would be like if he managed to hit anyone in a vital spot while they fled. “I’ll keep him busy, so go on, get a head start.” A thousand retorts spun around Makoto’s mind, but she knew they wouldn’t do any good. Her leader was as stubborn as anyone when it came to his friends’ safety.

“Come back alive.”

“Always.” She nodded, and, with a signal to the others, she was off, Morgana hot on her tail. Joker returned his full attention to the room, throwing the bullet aside.

“They’re gone. It’s just you and me now.” A slow clap answered him, Mask pacing out of his cover. Akira couldn’t see most of his face, but the furious look in his eyes was on full display. He stopped as Akira put a hand to his mask, answering his preparations by removing the silencer from his handgun.

“I’ll admit, you’re strong. You’ve been doing alone what’s taken us a whole team. But you made a few key mistakes. I’m sure you can figure most of them out on your own, but I’ll let you in on the biggest one.” A tower of flame and smoke rose in the distance, and in its light, the shadows crossing Akira’s face grew sharp.

“You hurt my teammate.” He crushed the mask where it sat, its shards digging into his skin before setting it ablaze. He charged forward, and before he could level his gun, Akechi found himself grabbed by the throat as they both were sent falling off of the platform.

Akechi tried to take his chance to shoot him at point blank range, thrice into the chest, but as they passed through, somehow not ricocheting off of Akira’s ribs, all it seemed to do was enrage him more, the fingers tightening around his neck. Akechi swore he could feel them hardening, and
soon, it felt like a hot brand against his exposed skin. His arm throbbed at the familiarity. Before Akechi could piece together why, the flames about Akira’s eyes expanded, the azure mass highlighted by a domineering crimson grin.

“You who have crossed the Phantom Thieves, know that you shall not escape us forever. The day of reckoning comes.” He glanced behind Akechi, and Joker’s long coat split, a pair of blackened wings breaking through the fabric. He released his hold, and the wings expanded, catching him while Akechi plummeted.

As the distance between them expanded, he was able to see the full extent of Joker’s change. It was as though pieces of Arsene had sprouted from his flesh, his fingers turning to jagged brimstone and his normal mask replaced by a black, horned plate. In desperation, Akechi attempted to fire another round, but he was too slow, Joker drawing his own gun and pulling the trigger. A sharp pain dug into Akechi’s shoulder, and his hand locked up, preventing him from returning fire.

“Joker, where are you!?” Joker’s head turned to regard the call, Ryuji’s voice carrying far into the ruined station. The flames cooled, and the black stone began to crumble away. He glanced once more at his falling opponent.

“We’ll finish this another time.” With a flap of the wings, Akira ascended, leaving Black Mask to his free fall. Despite the horrible failure, a harsh laugh tore itself from his burning throat.

‘So, he thinks I can survive this? Good, I’d be disappointed if I was beaten by a moron.’ He reached into his pocket with his one good arm, and he blindly pressed at his phone’s screen. ‘I’m not finished yet, not by a long shot.’

“Returning to the real world. Please standby.”

Chapter End Notes

*nudges corpse*

Welp, I think I finally killed it. Rest in Pancakes, canon storyline.
Chapter Summary

Medic!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything was pain. His ears were ringing. His skin was horribly warm and tingly. His head was stuffed with cotton, or, rather, balls of barbed wire. There was a pressure on his chest, wrapped around it and holding fast. He tried to wave Morgana off, but his left arm locked up at the shoulder, and something was holding down the right.

“…ake u…” Someone was talking to him, but he could barely hear them through the fog over his mind. His eyes were too heavy to open and look. Maybe he should go back to sleep…

“Thou will go nowhere by surrendering to nothingness, now AWAKEN.” Arsene’s power was like a caffeine drip straight to his bloodstream. The pain throughout his body grew sharper, his chest and arm screaming for relief, but his mind was acutely aware of the fretful voices in the room.

“Come on kid, wake up!”

“Please stand back, Sakura-san. Even if he could hear you, it would only stress him out.” She had that right. It took all the willpower he and Arsene could collectively muster, but he managed to pry his eyes open, letting the sterile white of Takemi’s office burn its way into his brain. “Oh, hello there, sleepy head. I was starting to think you weren’t going to wake up.”

“Don’t say that…”

“Just kidding. I thought he’d like a little humor to wake up to.” His mind struggled to focus, and when it finally pulled through, he saw both the Doc and Sojiro standing over him, the latter pushing his way in once he saw the clarity return to his ward’s face.

“Are you really there, or are you still delirious? What’s the secret sweetener in my curry?”

“Apples. Sliced a quarter inch, two pieces per serving.” His throat felt raw, almost burned, but he could still speak, and Sojiro let out a sigh of relief. “How’d I get here…?” Takemi was writing on her clipboard, poking and prodding as gently as medically possible.

“Your friends brought you. The blonde boy had you on his shoulders and came running in, rambling about you being shot. He, Takamaki, and Futaba are out in the waiting room, sleeping. You’re lucky, not everyone would be willing to get drenched in their friend’s blood and sit around for hours waiting for results.”

“Hours? Blood?”

“By their testimony, you were out cold for about an hour before you got here. That was nine hours ago, so you’ve been asleep for ten total. And…” She picked up a small, clear bucket and shook it. A copper bullet rattled about inside. “I found this lodged in your ribs, but there are signs of
two others making a clean exit through the cage and one being roughly pried out of your arm.” She
put it back, the harshness of the transfer denoting just how peeved she was under her professional
exterior. “You’d best be thankful you didn’t get a punctured lung or heart, and that you made it back
here without bleeding out.” As if on instinct, Akira smirked.

“You think this is bad, you should see the other guy.” Other guy. Who was that again?

‘Right, Akechi. I really hate to say it, but he packs a punch.’

“And he’s every bit as tenacious as thee. I sensed him escape the Palace before impact. We
shall meet him again.” Even if that did mean more trouble for them in the future, Akira was glad. He
wasn’t a murderer, no matter how much the other guy rightly deserved it. His eyes widened, a
thought occurring.

“Did the others say anything about a Kunikazu Okumura?” Sojiro cringed, and Akira
instantly knew something was up.

“Haru was planning on sticking around herself, but she got a call. Her father apparently had a
heart attack and collapsed. It wasn’t really a heart attack, was it?” Akira felt his stomach turning, and
his skin went a ghostly white. Sojiro backtracked, putting a hand on Akira’s uninjured shoulder.
“He’s alive, he’s alive! Damnit, sorry, I spoke before I thought. He’s unconscious, but he’s still
kicking.” Akira relaxed, the color coming back to him.

‘Thank goodness. We screwed up, but he’s still alive.’

“So, he’s the one that did this to you?” A new voice entered the discussion. Akira struggled
to lift his head, and he saw his mother sitting in a chair on the far side of the room, hands crossed, a
reserved, unreadable look on her face. “He’s the one that hurt my baby?” Akira shivered, the inner
bear rising behind her eyes, and he rushed to put together an explanation.

“No, not him. It was in his Palace, but we were fighting to keep someone else from killing
him. We were being tailed by an assassin, and…” His poor, overworked heart stopped, the pieces
finally clicking together. He threw off his sheets, ignoring the stiffness of the cast around his chest
and fighting against Takemi’s attempts to push him back.

“You need to rest, you’re not recovered!”

“The killer’s still out there! If I don’t hurry, he’ll get to Okumura in the real world!” He may
not have seen what magic he had access to, but it didn’t take magic to shoot a real gun. His bones
screamed at him as he stood, pushing his way through Takemi’s restraints. Sojiro hurried to block his
path next.

“What are you going to do about it? You’re an arm short, and you think you can take
someone on in a fight like that?” Akira could see Sojiro’s eyes glowing, the scarlet stare of a driven
Thief. Akira clenched his hands, and the pain on his left side flared up, making him double over. His
body was weakened, but his spirit was willing.

‘Arsene, do that thing again. I need all we’ve got here.’

“That was a desperation move. The only reason I invoked it was because of thine reckless
leaping from buildings. Thou would race towards the grave again?”

‘I’d prefer it to letting Akechi win!’ Akira’s anger boiled over, and from his skin came the
azure flames. Sojiro took a step back, raising his arms and snapping his fingers. The skin down to his
elbows flashed orange, the faint hum of a barrier resonating outwards.
“I won’t let you go out there and get yourself killed!”

“I won’t sit here and let someone die because of my mistakes.”

“That’s enough!” The shrill cry was followed by a hard slap, Akira’s head snapping to the side and his body dropping from the impact. That same hand reached out, pulling him up by the right arm so that he was forced to look Akari in the eye. “You said you regretted letting your anger take control of you. Were you lying then?” Akira lost his composure, the flames extinguishing.

“No, I…”

“Then prove it. Show me that you meant what you told them and think this through.” She pulled him back into his bed, and the pain immediately dispersed when he returned to his back. From there, he could see the tears in her eyes, and the hatred that had raged through him abated, replaced by leaden guilt. “You silly boy, don’t you realize you’re more than your magic? Joker might steal hearts, but you have the power to make people give them freely. You hear? You have people that love you and want to help you.”

“I…” His mind went to the waiting room beyond, to the three people who were waiting there for him to recover. To the friends that had waited for him as the Palace fell apart around them and apparently dragged him to safety. To the people he owed his life to. “…I know. Thanks for talking me down, I wasn’t…”

A new piece linked to the rest of the puzzle. What he needed was a bodyguard or two willing to keep an eye on a controversial figure. Who else did he know that met that description once upon a time? It was a shot in the dark, but it was his best bet. His eyes went to the bedside table, grabbing his phone and dialing up an old friend. The phone rang a few times before getting answered.

“Ah, Kurusu-kun, it’s good to hear from you. I’ve heard of some rather… dire news surrounding your friends. I trust it’s a lie?”

“Yes. We’ve been set up, but we were there. We know who’s really responsible, and I know he won’t be giving up just yet. I hate to ask, but you wouldn’t happen to know any good personal security providers, would you, Yoshida-san?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. I can get them in place by morning, but I’m not sure this is the sort of role that would permit them to carry arms legally.”

“If you can get them there, I can get them the next best thing, and I can cover their fee myself if you…”

“Nonsense. From what I understand of your operation, you will need all the resources you can muster to get at the people behind this attack. Wherever you’re acquiring this secondary option, bring me a receipt and I will cover that as well. I can officially list it as a move against organized crime and to protect the due process of law. That should keep the vultures off both of our backs. I will call again when they’re on their way, and I won’t hear any further disputes over billing, understood?” As though to finalize his point, Yoshida promptly hung up, and Akira found himself welling up as his arm dropped listlessly to his side and a relieved smile sprouted.

‘I’m… not alone anymore…’
“Good morning, Taro-san, Jun-san!”

“Morning, Okumura-kun. Morning traffic treat you alright?”

“It was a little dense, but that’s to be expected at this time of day.” The hospital, however, was quite open. Haru was pleasantly surprised to not have to squeeze through crowds while visiting for once. It was the perfect day for it, too.

“Those flowers should brighten up the room some. The cleaners they use around here start getting to you after a while.”

“I know, there is a thing as too clean. A little natural touch can do wonders. That said, here.” She carefully pulled a few from the bouquet, slipping them into the space between their shirts and bulletproof vests. “Those should help you get through your shifts.” The one on the right took a few small sniffs, the pleasant aroma making him smile.

“You’re too kind. Go on in, we shouldn’t take up too much of your visiting time.” They exchanged a few parting words, and Haru slipped into the room, letting the pair resume their duties with renewed spirits. Around the corner, Akechi’s own spirits had dropped.

‘Looks like they’re settled in for the long haul. Damnit!’ The only thing that kept him from gunning them both down before moving onto Kunikazu Okumura as intended was the environment itself. If there weren’t too many people to get in through, there were too few, leaving him on a short list of people present at the time of death. And the hospital itself wouldn’t be bending to Shido’s machinations, either. It had already had enough scandal after its head doctor was arrested for malpractice, thanks to the Phantom Thieves.

Akechi’s blood boiled at the thought of those do-gooders, and yet, he couldn’t stop himself from smiling. He felt his mask slipping, so he hurried into the nearby restrooms, locking the door behind him. As soon as it was shut, his face fell into his hands, and a thin, wispy cackle slipped through his teeth.

“You’re good, Joker, better than I expected.” He pulled off his outer vest, throwing it aside and pulling back the sleeve on his undershirt. There, on his left shoulder, was the remains of a bullet wound. He had questioned it at first. He tested it himself; airsoft pellets fired in the Metaverse shouldn’t have created an effect like that, or left a real bullet behind, and yet the one he had dug out of there was as true as his own. When the truth finally settled in, he had lost himself to a fit of laughter, much like he was doing again now.

“Just you wait, I won’t be underestimating you again. It’s time to go in for the kill!” His reflection began to warp as he called upon his other Persona. He had long thought it useless compared to the terrifying majesty of Loki, but it looked like he would get some use out of it after all. If Joker could change his appearance to match a Persona, why couldn’t Akechi? He was the superior of the two, and he would prove it. His reflection started to solidify, a blood red mask staring back from the mirror.

“Let’s do this, Robin Hood!”

Chapter End Notes
Would you look at that, I finally found a thing for Yoshida to do. You could say he's Akira's... ray of sunshine.
Thieves United

Chapter Summary

In which a peacock gets plucked.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“I do hope my staying here won’t be a bother.”

“Hasn’t been for the last week, won’t be for a few more. Stay as long as you need.” By doctor’s orders, Akira had been forced to exchange where he was sleeping with Haru, now resting in his own bed, but beyond that, there was no problem with the arrangement they already had going. “I wouldn’t want to be by myself in a house like that, either.”

“I cannot thank you enough. If there’s anything I can do to repay the favor…”

“You mean besides pulling my broken, bleeding butt out of that Palace?” Ryuji and Ann had given him a more complete recounting of what had happened after he blacked out. Apparently, Arsene had carried him to the entrance and, from there, Ryuji and Haru swapped responsibility every few miles until they made it back to Yongen. Couldn’t exactly take a guy with open gunshot wounds onto the subway. “We’re friends and teammates. Businesses work on trade, but friends help friends, period.”

“I know, but it’s just… An odd transition. You understand, yes?”

“One hundred percent. Going from alone to drowning in people that love you is like being thrown into a river after walking through the desert.” Morgana snorted from his seat on Haru’s lap.

“Cheesy as ever.”

“Hey pepper jack, name’s cheddar, find any places you belong lately?” Morgana rolled his eyes, rubbing back against Haru’s hand. For her part, Haru watched the friendly poking contently. As a matter of fact, she had. “Anyway, the others should be getting back with your stuff soon. Need me to move anything around to fit it in?”

“Tsk tsk, Akira-kun. Takemi-san was quite clear. No being physically helpful for at least a week more.” She hid a chuckle as he groaned loudly.

“Well, at least I can be emotionally helpful.” His phone pinged, and when he looked, his eyes lit up. “Speak of the devil. That inside man of yours struck gold.” Haru’s mood instantly brightened, picking Mona up and moving to Akira’s side. Her father might not have had a chance to rescind the orders as promised before going comatose, but, step by step, she could undo some of the damage. With a little help, of course.

“He found the contract?”

“Even better. Get a load of this.”
It was a peaceful evening in LeBlanc. The Phantom Thieves were scattered about the cafe, a table in the back reserved for Makoto and Haru. There was one other customer, seated across from the couple, but him aside, it was like a peaceful night out for the group after a stressful week of Palace plundering.

Then the door was thrown open, a sharp ding admitting Sugimura in a heavily wrinkled white suit. Sojiro seemed to ignore the way his eye twitched.

“Welcome, what can I get you?”

“Shut up, old man. I know you’ve been keeping her here. You think you can get between me and my…” His tirade petered out as he saw her in the back, exchanging a kiss with Makoto, and his powder white skin turned an indignant red. “You little bitch!” Haru’s heart shriveled at the yell, her second nature making her flinch away. Every eye in the room took notice, though Sugimura didn’t seem to care. “Not only are you cheating on me, but you’re doing it with a woman? You ungrateful dyke!” He marched forward, a hand balling up at his side, but Akira quickly put himself between them. His face was a slab of granite, eyes hidden by the glare of his glasses.

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to calm down or leave. This is no place for foul language.”

“Get out of my way, you low born filth! You have no idea who you’re dealing with!”

“No, Sugimura-kun, you don’t know who you’re crossing.” The one customer rose from his seat, and the elderly man was only a degree of professionalism away from staring daggers. Sugimura recoiled, his rage falling by the wayside as he realized who he was speaking to.

“Vice President Takakura, what are you…?”

“I’m looking into some rather unflattering rumors surrounding a potential business partner, and, frankly, I am disappointed. That our president’s daughter was almost wed to such a foul mouthed miscreant is a shame like no other.”

“W-Wait, I can explain!”

“There is no need. After your display here tonight, I can say with certainty that Okumura Foods does not need the further damage that being connected to you would bring about.” Once it was clear that he would not budge, Sugimura’s face twisted in anger, turning an even deeper shade of red.

“Now you listen here, that contract is binding, and I will not hesitate to seek reparations for this breach of terms!” Takakura calmly straightened his tie.

“What contract? You are as aware as I that no formal document was signed, and I have made certain that everyone present here today is just as aware. If you try to press charges, you can be certain that the testimony against you will be as mountainous as it is relentless. Good day, Sugimura.” The boy sputtered, his overwhelming rage leaving him short on response, but when he took a threatening step forward, Akira matched it.

“I repeat.” He pushed his glasses up, revealing to Sugimura the unwavering scarlet in his
“Take your homophobic slander and leave. It’s not wanted here.” Before he could respond, he finally noticed the eyes on him. Everyone in the room had turned to him, and their attention had fused into a crushing wall of pure fury. His primal instincts were screaming at him to leave, before one of those blood hungry predators decided to pounce.

“...Fine. I can’t stand this outdated decor any longer anyway.” He promptly turned and left, and as soon as he was gone, it was like a switch was flipped. The group’s anger vanished, and they all jumped out of their seats to gather around Haru. It was a disorganized, chaotic flurry of celebration and congratulations, which Takakura and Sojiro politely refrained from jumping into.

“I must thank you, Sakura-san, for allowing us to use your establishment for this little confrontation.”

“Don’t worry about it. Honestly, I kind of missed pulling off stings on high and mighty peacocks like that.”

While everyone was busy celebrating a job well done, Akira noticed that Makoto was still staring at the door. Her shoulders were tense, and a hint of red licked at the corners of her eyes.

“Hey, I need someone to run to the corner shop and pick up a few things. We need to throw down right. I’d do it myself, but, you know.” Makoto instantly jumped on the opportunity, worming her way out of what had almost become a group hug ball.

“Sure. What did you need?” Akira grabbed a pen and napkin off the counter, scribbling a bit on the front before passing it over. When she came in close, he leaned over and whispered into her ear.

“If he says something about revenge, put the fear of Queen in him.” She smiled, taking the note.

“Rule one, don’t screw with a Phantom Thief.”

—

“Damnit, that bitch!” Sugimura slinked through the alleys, thoroughly lost as night fell on Tokyo. He only cursed his lack of direction momentarily, though, his ire returning to the one that had forced him to tread so far into the slums in the first place. “She thinks she can get away with humiliating me like this? I’ll show her. Her, and that dyke she’s hanging off of now.”

“Is that so?” He whipped around, a shadow blocking the far end of the alley. It took him a moment to recognize the outline.

“You... I remember you now! You’re the one that pulled her onto the subway back then. So you like stealing a guy’s stuff, huh? I’ll show you what I think of thieves.” He took a step forward, holding his hands up for a fight. Makoto was unmoved.

“She isn’t property to be owned.” At once, her eyes lit up a neon blue, and the temperature skyrocketed. It stole his breath and brought him to his knees, and while he was down, Makoto shot forward, grabbing him by the neck and hauling him into the air. This close, he realized she was no longer wearing the white blouse and skirt from before. She had exchanged it for black leather and shoulder spikes, her face covered by an iron mask. Before he could question it, his neck began to
burn, the blood that passed through it almost reaching the boiling point as all the fluid in his mouth evaporated.

“That was a dose of two hundred rads. You can expect the cancer to set in within the year. Get to a doctor in time and you’ll live, though not before the treatment makes you lose all that greasy hair.” She tossed him aside with little ceremony, turning her back to him. “You should be grateful. I hear being a guinea pig for a worthy cause can be quite fulfilling, more than anything else you might have achieved with your useless existence. Keep bugging my girlfriend, and I’ll take even that from you. Trust me, you don’t want to see what two thousand rads does to a person.” Sugimura coughed and wheezed, trying and failing to push himself back up to his feet.

“I… I’ll…!”

“Press charges? What will you say, that I irradiated you with a wave of the hand? Please.” A wave of fire overtook her, and when it passed, she was atop a silver motorcycle. “Who would believe such a ridiculous story?” She revved her engine and took off, leaving him behind as the cells in his neck slowly succumbed to the genetic degradation.

“I’m back, and I brought the…” Words failed Makoto as she looked at the scene before her. Futaba was shivering, skin pale and clammy, supported on each side by Haru and Ann. Ryuji and Yusuke were with Akira, who was doubled over and clutching his head, hyperventilating. “What happened here?”

“Futaba’s uncle. That’s what happened.” Akira’s voice was a low growl, his eyes jittering violently in their sockets.

“What…?”

“He’s been trying to extort me for years now.” Sojiro set a cup of tea in front of both panicking teens, knowing there wasn’t much else he could do at the moment. “He came in here drunk as Hell and took a swing at her. Akira pushed her out of the way, he tripped and fell on his face, then he had the gall to say he’d sue for assault.” Makoto’s heart sank. That sounded painfully familiar.

“Every time.” Ryuji lowered Akira into a booth, getting him off his feet so it didn’t agitate his wounds. It didn’t stop him from muttering angrily to himself. “Every damn time I think things are looking up, someone like that comes along and ruins it. Every. Damn. Time!”

“Not on my watch.” Sojiro put a hand on his shoulder, a hard look settled onto his face. “As long as I’m here, I won’t let him put a finger on either of you. I’d pin my life to that.”

“Candidate found.” All eyes jumped to Yusuke as his phone broadcasted exactly what he was up to.

“It seems that repugnant man has a Shadow, not that it should be a surprise. I believe we are already unanimous in this matter, correct?” A devilish grin crept over Akira’s face, one that slowly worked its way through the room.

“I think we’re overdo for a Mementos run.”
This chapter was brought to you by the Rathalos Ruby, which finally had the good graces to drop after slaughtering two and a half dozen dragons with a butter knife. Seriously, a one percent drop chance? What the actual heck were the Monster Hunter devs thinking!? I mean, I still went through with it, but hot damn did that take a while.

And yes, that last line was foreshadowing. To the depths!
The room seemed to bend with Youji Isshiki’s breathing, his rough cackling sending ripples through Mementos. He licked his lips intermittently, and his eyes stared sightlessly into the distance, lost in visions of grandeur.

“Just one good win. Just one, and I’ll be in the money. I just need the cash to get a ticket, and then all my troubles will be over!” He rubbed his hands together, dreaming of what he could do with that fortune. What he would do, as soon as that old bat Sojiro forked over everything he had.

“Thinks he can get away without paying me for my kindness, I’ll show him…”

“Is that what you call it? Could’ve fooled me.” He turned around, the ghostly echo ringing through his domain. He couldn’t pin the source, but he recognized the voice. It was younger the last time he heard it, but he knew the sound of his obstinate little piggybank anywhere.

“Is that you, Futaba, sweetie? Did you come to me all on your own? Such a good girl, come give your uncle a hug!”

“Shut the Hell up!” That voice was new, like the thunder that heralded a coming storm.

“You believe her to be a route to wealth and prosperity, and to that end, you deprived her of her humanity.” The next was like the breath of winter, frostbite given audible form.

“You would deny her the gift of life, merely to satiate your own greed.” A scolding mother, seething with disappointment.

“She is more than something to be used and thrown away!” Two at once, combining into a scalding tirade.

“To think this slavering beast is even distantly related to you. My condolences, Oracle.” That one squeaked a bit, but it didn’t lessen the feeling that it was looking down on him more harshly than any of the others.

“Don’t remind me, Mona. Let’s just get this over with so we can get out of here. Being near him is making me sick.”

“A agreed.” Youji turned one more time, and now, staring from the shadows of his chamber, there was a boy in a midnight black trench coat, his few words dripping with barely contained disgust. That this punk, of all people, would wave him off as a nuisance was all he could take, his human facade melting, slowly swelling until a new sickly purple hide grew in its place.

“If you aren’t going to pay due tribute, then you can just…!” Joker drew his gun, and the click of a dozen more cocking echoed through Mementos.
“Light him up.”

The rest of the encounter was a blur, a madman’s tapestry filled with fire and lightning and bullets. So many bullets. And grenades. And more than a few kicks to a place no man should be kicked, accompanied by a declaration of, “I’m not letting some dick like you have kids just to ruin their lives, too.” When he came to some time later, he found a note lodged where there used to be his Treasure. He only barely managed to read it before being syphoned back to his real self.

“That was for making our Bug cry.”

“Dude, why are you in swim trunks?” Ryuji leaned out the window of the Mona Mobile, looking up at the roof where his illustrious leader was reclining in a pair of colorful Hawaiian style beachwear.

“The leather was starting to get too sweaty. Freaking warm down here.” Makoto rolled her eyes, only kept from staring at him by her responsibility to drive.

“Okay, then how are you in them? The Metaverse should instantly put you in your thief outfit.”

“I’ve been practicing rewriting cognition. So far, this is the best I can do without draining SP.”

“So you’re saying we can change our appearances manually?” Makoto cut in, now increasingly interested in the topic. Before she could prod further, though, Ann had climbed through the sunroof to join Akira.

“Please tell me you can teach the rest of us how to do that? Mine is starting to get a little tight around the chest, and there’s no way in Hell I’m unzipping and exposing myself any more than I already am.”

“Sure. We’ll have a training session later.”

“Hey, stop climbing up there! I can only take so much weight up top at a time!”

“Whatever, cat, make room.” Ryuji was next to join the roof party, kicking back alongside Akira. “So what sort of stuff can you do if you push it?” Akira stared up at the ceiling, looking inwards for the answer.

‘Can we show him the transformation thing?’

“As I said before, at this stage, the Twilight Cowl would leave thee unconscious almost instantly without the aid of adrenaline.”

‘Then maybe just part of it, like the hands? Or even one hand? Enough to give him something to work towards. If any of us can master this, imagine how much easier our jobs would be.’

“Very well, though be prepared to recover most of thine SP. Raise thy right hand.” Akira
followed through, a hint of giddiness in his heart, and with a flex of the hand, it was enveloped in flames. They ate away at his skin, leaving behind a hard black surface tipped by clawed fingers. Ryuji shot up, his jaw dropping.

“Holy shit!”

“Tell me about it.”

“Where did you learn you could do that?” Ann grabbed his wrist, turning his hand about to get a more complete look at the change. A quick glance showed that the car had stopped, everyone now staring at their demon handed leader.

“During the fight with Akechi. Got so pissed off that I threw both of us off of the platform.”

“You did what!” Makoto bursted through the sunroof, her hands clawing through the paint. “You could have gotten yourself killed!”

“It’s cool, Arsene did some messing around and sort of melded with my body. Ended up with claws, horns, even wings. Can’t do the full thing now, too much energy, and this is about as much as I can get out of him.”

“Please stop moving it around so much.” Somehow, Yusuke had slipped onto the roof, too, his canvas already prepared. “A man so taken by his desires that they have changed his very flesh. Yes, this is excellent!”

“Pardon, Fox.” Haru peeked her head over the back of the car, watching intently as he experimented with different postures. “Isn’t that an intense simplification of the Hulk’s themes?” Yusuke paused in mid pencil stroke, his eyes glazing over.

“The inspiration, it is gone.”

“Oh! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to…”

“So… Heavy…!” The metal of Mona’s car form started to whine painfully, and before anyone could retreat, it buckled beneath them, flattening his chassis under their combined weight.

“Oh my God, are you okay, Mona!?”


“I love the Battering Ram!” Queen and Noir’s combined shout blared through Mementos, louder than even Anat’s engine or the whistling song of grenades in bloom. Ann and Ryuji hung out Mona’s windows with large nets, scooping up the trail of lightly smoked yen they left in their wake. Futaba methodically tallied every coin that fell into their laps.

“At this rate, we’ll all be swimming in Scrooge McDuck style money pools.”

“Wouldn’t that be physically impossible?”

“Don’t harsh my buzz, Inari.”
“Finally, I’m somebody!” Yuuki Mishima shivered at the thought, his arms crossed over his own chest. Dreams of glory danced about his mind, of the legions that bowed to him around the world, all gathered by his loyal servants. No longer was he just Mishima, the zero only worth looking at on a bad day to make yourself feel better. No, now he was Admin, the real head of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts!

“Is that how you really feel? How pitiable.” The voice shattered his concentration, echoing through the room in a way that made it nigh impossible to trace.

“Who’s there? Show yourself! No one gets to taunt me without paying the price!”

“Awful big talk. What are you, a king?” Whoever it was, he sounded bored, dry. Mishima clenched his hands, searching for the one spewing this heresy.

“As a matter of fact, yes! I am Admin, king of the Phantom Thieves. Bow before me, or your heart is forfeit!”

“You sit on a throne of other’s sweat and blood, demanding tribute as a god from his people. It’s been a long time.” A puff of hot air blew across Mishima’s neck. “Kamoshida.” He wheeled around and threw a fist, but he stumbled as he swung through empty air.

“How dare you compare me to him!? He was nothing, no, less than nothing. He messed with me, and my Thieves crushed him.”

“They brought down Kamoshida for his arrogance. He took the lives of others as his trophies, reducing them to trinkets in his pockets. Can you truly call yourself any different?” He jumped as a thin knife was planted at his feet, a tape recorder strapped to its hilt. The play button had already been pressed.

“Do you see this, Kurusu? They love us! Mm, man, so good. See, this is the type of food we’ll be eating all the time once those donations really ramp up.” Mishima crushed the box underfoot, a spike in anger granting him the strength. How did this guy get that recording? Had Kurusu betrayed him? Or…

“Akira Kurusu only nodded and smiled as you spoke, hoping it to be a short phase you would soon grow from. He thought nothing of a small indulgence of pride. Had he known what you would become, he would have stopped you before it could consume you. For that inactivity…” The taunting figure landed before him, a man clad in black and red with a presence far larger than his body. He seemed to tower over Mishima, the shadow he cast long and imposing. Mishima readied himself for an attack, though he didn’t know if he could take him on directly.

…I apologize.” He froze, looking closer at the man before him. The look in his eyes was one of regret, focused, but entrenched in thought. He didn’t carry himself as a combatant so much as a messenger, his shoulders relaxed. There was something familiar about him, but Mishima couldn’t quite pin it until he realized he knew that hairstyle.

“Kurusu? What is this? Why are you…?” He froze, and a thin, almost whispered laugh came. “I see, you’re here to steal my heart. I… I’m your target.” He laughed more, backing away, his eyes growing distant, deranged. “See? I must be important. Not… Not everyone can say they’ve been…”
Akira bolted forward, and Mishima tried to evade, but he wasn’t nearly fast enough. A hand landed on his shoulder, but nothing more came of it. It was a simple, gentle gesture.

“Yuuki, stop this, or one day, your regret will haunt you. Believe me, I’ve been there. The power is intoxicating, but it will ruin you if you let it.” He let go, turned, and began to walk away. Mishima jolted out of his stunned silence, chasing after him.

“Wait, come back here! We’re not finished.” Akira reached into his pocket.

“Remember why you started this, and don’t forget it again.” His hand pulled free, and he dropped a ball. It popped on the ground, releasing a cloud of thick, choking gas. A coughing fit took Mishima, and when the smoke cleared, Akira was gone.

“Damnit… Stop ignoring me! Damn him!” He reached into his pocket, fishing out a piece of paper. He needed to calm himself. He held it up, reading the last line on the page.

“I owe you my life. Thank you. Signed, Natsuhiko Nakanohara.” A smile crept across his face, but when his focus waned, his eyes drifted to the top of the letter. “I don’t know what I would have done if not for your help. Madarame’s influence almost ruined me, but the Phantom Thieves pulled me back before I could do something I would forever regret. I owe you my life. Thank you.” The page fell from his hands, and Mishima grabbed his head.

“This, this is…!” Memories flooded back, staring up from the cold floor. Kamoshida stood over him, moments from planting a boot in his already bruised stomach. He could still feel the blood trickling down his face. He recalled far too clearly his days as the victim. “No, it couldn’t be. Have I…?” Flecks of light drifted from his arms, slowly draining back to the real world.

“Have I really become like Kamoshida?” He fell to his knees, the energy leaving him as his anger passed. “Kurusu… No, Akira. I’m sorry. I let you down.” The last of the Shadow vanished, and with it, the chamber crumbled away. A wind blew through Mementos, but now, it seemed to have one less hollowed scream behind it.

Chapter End Notes

You know, Mementos is like a double edged sword for writing. The place itself doesn’t get that intensely interesting until December barring certain request targets, but it’s a great platform for just having the Thieves interact in their natural environment. If only it had more set pieces besides creepy tunnels and the Reaper.
A Day on Tokyo

Chapter Summary

In which I contend with a certain comment challenge.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Akira watched as Haru’s hands carefully operated the heat valve on the coffee brewer. Something about the hesitance, the way she jumped whenever a bubble suddenly swelled and popped in the brewer, reminded him of himself a few months prior. Her hands shook slightly as she poured, and Akira and Sojiro both gave their cups a small blow to cool them down enough for a sip.

“Hmm, not bad, but…”

“Could use some work.” Sojiro swirled it around and watched as slight waves of uneven coloring drifted across the surface. “The flame was too low, making you brew it longer than it should have taken.”

“And when you did bring the flame up, it was too sudden. It shouldn’t have bubbled up like that.” Haru bowed, absorbing the criticism but unable to ward off the disappointed pout. Akira immediately set about lifting the mood. “It was better than my first try. Nearly scalded my hand.”

“You think that’s bad? It took me most of a year to regrow the whiskers I lost.” Sojiro gave Haru an approving smile. “You need practice, but this is a promising start. I’d be happy to teach you what I can while you’re staying here.” Haru sprung up like a Spring daisy, clasping her hands in front of her green barista apron.

“Thank you, Boss! I promise, I won’t let you down.” Her eyes went to the table behind them, where Akari had risen from her own drained cup. “Would you like anything else, Kurusu-san?”

“I’d love to, but I should really get going. I need to catch my bus back out of town before the crowds get any thicker.” Akira spun around on his stool in time to match his mother’s hug. “Take care of yourself, Kiki, and remember. If you ever need to talk about anything, be it with your, ahem, work, or anything else, I’m a phone call away. I know Futaba can encrypt communications, so you have no excuses.” He chuckled, knowing full well that the young lady in question was probably listening in as they spoke.

“I will, I promise.” The hug held on for a few moments more, but soon enough, it had to end. Akari said her goodbyes before leaving, stepping out into the cool Tokyo morning. Her phone rang in her pocket, the small electronic jingle telling her exactly who it was.

Futaba: Even if he doesn’t come through, I will. No one escapes the all-seeing eye of Alibaba.

Akari: I appreciate it. That boy is as stubborn about not worrying people as he is about helping people when he’s worried.
Futaba: Preaching to the choir. Oh, by the by, that intel you dropped me is going somewhere. Shouldn’t be too long before I’ve got a ping on our guy.

Akari grinned, her heart riding on a breeze of exhilaration. Was this how the Phantom Thieves felt when they closed in on a mark? She could get addicted to the rush.

One, two, one, two, one, two. That count rolled through Akira’s mind, occupying it so it could not interfere in the work of his body. An errant thought could affect his pace, and that, in turn, could send him crashing into the conveyor belt below before being flung into the wall behind him. That wouldn’t do, for a number of reasons.

“And stop, that’s it!” He tapped a few buttons, and the treadmill spun out the last of its remaining energy. Akira was breathing heavily, and sweat thoroughly soaked his workout gear, but he gave Morgana a thumbs up regardless.

“So… How’re… Haru’s… reps going?”

“Look for yourself.” Morgana nodded to the other side of the gym, where the other patrons stared in awe of the petite heiress. A few spots of moisture on her sweatband were the only indicators of any physical exhaustion as she bench pressed her weight of choice. Makoto smiled pridefully over her girlfriend’s tireless efforts.

“You’re doing great. Very smooth reps, Kitten.”

“Thank you… Mako-chan. You’re doing… quite well… yourself.”

“Please, all I have to do is hold still.” Akira’s head bobbed up and down, following the rhythmic rise and fall of Makoto as Haru showed exactly who would be carrying who come the inevitable wedding.

“How many reps is she at?”

“I lost count somewhere around seventy.”

“Hey kid, that a friend of yours?” Akira nodded, a man with biceps almost as wide as his head staring at her enviously. “What’s her secret?”

“Pushups, sit-ups, and plenty of juice.”

“Lala-chan, another whiskey, please!”

“You know you’re almost at your limit. Do you want to get cut off before midnight?”
“Fine, fine. Just bring me some water, then.” It was a standard evening in Shinjuku, the Crossroads getting a healthy flow of customers and Ohya planted firmly in her favorite stool.

“Aka-chan, can you handle that? I’m mixing something for table three.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Now, Ohya was straight as an arrow, but she had to admit that the new help had a charm about her. The black and grey kimono was thin enough to not burden her tall, slim frame, but heavy enough to leave what was under it to the imagination. A very tasteful gift from her employer, no doubt, along with the scarf that trailed behind her like wisps of mist.

How did she know it was a she? The voice. It was way too soft and sweet to be someone like Lala. She moved with an almost natural grace, transferring the frosty glass to the counter without sending a single ripple through her water.

“Your drink.” Again, straight, but something about the way she pushed her long, black hair out of her eyes and held the tray flat across her waist was enthralling.

“Thank you. So, when did our lovely host recruit you to the team, if I may ask?”

“A few months ago.” Ohya perked up, raising an eyebrow.

“That can’t be. I’m here every night, I would have noticed you before. Unless I was already blackout drunk, but that doesn’t happen often.”

“No no, you are correct. You’ve seen me on the job before.” Aka-chan giggled into her hand before reaching into the folds of her kimono. “Perhaps these will help you recall.” From a hidden pocket came a pair of glasses, and as soon as her soft grey eyes were hidden by the glare, Ohya recognized who she was speaking to.

“Kurusu!?” His soft smile turned into the sharp grin she had come to know, though only for a moment, changing back as he stowed his glasses away.

“Almost magical, right?” Lala returned to the counter, looking over her handiwork. “A little lipstick and blush in just the right spots and some smart clothes can do a lot, but I never thought she could get her tone that high.” Aka-chan bowed modestly.

“In truth, I had much help in speaking softly.” That obviously wasn’t the only help she had. Her hair had been straightened, leaving the only curls at the ends so it cascaded down just so. Her lips were scrunched at the right spots to hide how broad they usually were. Her sleeves were just long enough to hide the muscles that would have broken her gentle facade. Somehow, they had managed to hide someone Ohya thought she knew fairly well at that point right under her nose.

“Well I’ll be damned. Note to self, ask your friends the next time I need a makeover. Witchcraft is what that is.” Aka-chan winked, returning to her bar duties. Lala cleared her throat, snapping Ohya out of her trance.

“You’re staring, hon.”

“I think I’ll take that whiskey early. I am questioning so many things right now, and I don’t know in which direction for any of them.”
Mishima stared at the pond, his eyes half lidded and shrouded by thought. The Sun had been high in the sky when he first arrived, but now it was well below the horizon. He had moved once to make a call, but besides that, he had been still the entire time. His ears perked when he heard footsteps coming closer, and when they stopped beside him, he glanced over to see Akira sitting on the wood fence that separated the path and the water.

“Hey, Mishima, you wanted to talk?” For the first time all day, he managed to smile, the calm presence an infectious one.

“Yeah, I…” He blinked, noticing the bundle of clothes under Akira’s arm. “Is that a kimono?” He glanced up, his confusion growing. “And your hair’s straight?” He blinked a few more times, sluggishly, before a possibility clicked. “Oh, were you…?”

“Never a bad day for something new. Turns out I make a pretty convincing woman. Who knew?” Akira shrugged, careful not to put too much pressure on the clothes. “Enough about me, though. You look pretty wiped.” Mishima, embarrassed, rubbed his eyes, trying to wipe away some of the weight.

“Yeah. Ever since Okumura went comatose, the Phan-site’s been flooding with accusations and trolls. You have no idea how tiring it is sifting through all that for people who need help, and there are still a few hanging around, so I can’t just step away to let it cool down on its own.”

“I hear you.” That was, in part, exactly why Akira had taken up Lala’s originally joking offer. It felt nice to step out of his skin for an afternoon. “So, any requests on the table? No offense to what you’ve been giving us, but the last few haven’t really been appropriate to the operation.”

“That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about. You can go ahead and cancel those last few.” Mishima’s eyes went back to the pond, but his focus was broken by a hand on the shoulder.

“You want to talk about it? Getting this stuff off your chest helps a ton.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t. You’re probably way more stressed out than me, and I couldn’t make you listen to my whining, Kurusu-senpai.”

“Hold up, honorifics?” Akira pulled off his glasses, but Mishima couldn’t tell if the look in his eyes was one of amusement or disappointment. “Dude, we’re friends. Relax. I’m worried about you, and when I’m worried, I get persistent.” Mishima was stunned, and he found himself taken back to outside Kamoshida’s office. He was scared witless of getting expelled, and he was shaking in his shoes. Akira, the delinquent, the guy he had started a rumor mill around, looked him dead in the eye and said, “Everything will be just fine. Trust me.”

“So this is what it means to be a Phantom Thief?”

“…Alright, you win. I’ll talk.” Akira smiled at him proudly, tugging on his sleeve.

“Let’s go grab a bite to talk over. A bit of good food can ease things along.” Akira stood up, his shoulders squared and confident. As he made to take off, Mishima spoke up.

“Kuru… I mean, Akira?” He looked back, smiling softly.

“What’s up, Yuuki?” The sound of his first name was like a wakeup slap, sending a jolt of courage through his system.
“Just… Thanks. For everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Am I the only one who really misses the crossdressing outfit from P4 Golden? Say what you will, Yu rocked that skirt.

Also, a small question for you lot. Of those of you who have played both, which do you prefer, Persona 4 Golden or Persona 5, and why? I'm still trying to suss it out personally, and that new Shenpai video has me thinking again.
Delinquents in Destinyland

Chapter Summary

Didny Wurl!
I mean, Dedny Lan!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The air smelled of sugar and berries. Vibrant balloons bobbed from the ends of every handrail, thin trails of recolored light cast about the sidewalk. At the center of the park was the castle, a towering structure that could be seen for miles and recognized in every corner of Japan.

The only thing missing was the mob. The employees were used to torrents of people passing through from sunrise to sunset, the constant rumble of their presence punctuated by the piercing shrieks of excited children. Today, though, it was a much smaller clientele, but considering the amount of money these ten individuals represented, none of the workers were going to let their performance slip. An immaculately dressed butler, complete with curled coattails, slid the last chair into place, bowing to the heiress that had requested its move.

“Does this please, madam?”

“Yes, thank you, sir.” Haru quickly passed along a single bill, a spark of shock passing through the man’s eyes as he saw the impressive numbers on the corner. He held onto his professionalism by the skin of his teeth, retreating behind the nearest corner to recompose himself. Meanwhile, the group took their seats around the relocated table. Ryuji couldn’t keep the glimmer of childlike wonder from breaking through his rough punk exterior.

“This is sick, Haru! And your company’s all cool with it?”

“As I said, the returns for cancelling would have only constituted half a percent of the initial payment. It wasn’t that large of a request.” No one felt it necessary to bring up how that half percent consisted of at least nine digits. They were too busy taking in the view.

“Wow, the brochures don’t do this place justice…”

“No kidding, Taba-chan.” Futaba and Kana shrunk back in their chairs, the already tiny girls feeling magically microscopic. Somehow, the latter was a bit smaller than her reclusive friend, her size only inflated by the heavy sweater and baggy pants she favored.

“Ooh, check it out, Shiho, they have ice cream towers! We should totally split one!”

“That sounds great.” Shiho’s reserved contentment served to balance out Ann’s hyper charged excitement, though she was just as happy to be there.

“Thanks for letting me come with you guys. This is incredible.” Akira gave Mishima a thumbs up.
“No problem. You’ve been working as hard as the rest of us lately. A little vacation was in
order.”

“That reminds me.” Makoto rose from her seat, reclaiming her commanding presence in the
group. “First thing’s first, everyone present is aware of our… shared profession, correct?”

“It wasn’t all that hard to figure out honestly.” Shiho shrugged. Kana, blushing enough to
make her freckles blend in, nodded in agreement.

“Those changes of heart were too convenient to be a coincidence.”

“I admit our record for secrecy is a little spotty.” Makoto pointedly glared at Akira, who
hastily averted his eyes. “But I thank you all for agreeing to maintain that secret. It means a lot to
have people that trust us despite recent events.”

“And that is why we hope you enjoy this excursion.” Haru stepped in, adding her positivity
to Makoto’s formality. “The entirety of the park is open, though I would ask that everyone returns
here at sundown. The staff is going through much trouble to make sure the parade goes smoothly,
and it would be a shame to let their hard work go unappreciated.”

“Meet back here later, got it, can we roll now?” Ryuji kept glancing at the nearby map,
unsure of which attraction to go to first. Haru giggled into her sleeve.

“Of course. Have fun everyone!” As the group slowly dispersed, roaming off in small packs
in every direction, Haru was quick to pull Makoto along. She gave a small wink to Akira, and he
smirked back.

“Go get her, go getter.”

“Attention guests, the Tunnel of Love is temporarily out of order due to technical difficulties.
We apologize for any inconveniences.” Akira heard that announcement over the loudspeakers, and
he smirked once again. It looked like his gift was finally going to see some use.

“So you’re actually fully sapient, huh? You can understand every word I’m saying?”
Morgana mewed with annoyance, nodding for the hundredth time. Mishima knew he shouldn’t have
been so awestricken, but it was hard for him to rewrite the way he thought about what he used to see
as just a particularly smart and loyal cat. “Well, I guess it’s no wonder how you sneak into school
every day. Smuggling must be easy street for a Phantom Thief.”

Morgana’s tone changed, now reminding him of a prideful snicker. He repositioned the way
he was laying on the table, revealing the wallet tucked under his stomach. Mishima jammed a hand
into his pocket, but there was a disturbing lack of wallet.
“Hey!” He snatched it back from the tiny pickpocket, but him moving out of the way revealed the flash drive tucked into the other side of his collar. “Give that back!”

“Okay, what did I miss?” Akira strode coolly into the scene, contrasting Mishima’s panicked sprawling over the table after a failed leap for Morgana. He shook his head at both of them.

“Mona, we don’t steal expensive computer stuff unless Futaba gives you permission. We both know you don’t want another earful from her.” He kneeled down and held a hand out, which Morgana, deflated from the chastisement, gently set the drive into. “Yuuki, we don’t flip out when Mona’s being a little hobgoblin. It feeds a bad habit.” He passed the stolen possession back to its rightful owner, who accepted it with a bow.

“Thanks. He does that a lot I take it?”

“Mostly to people who keep treating him like a normal cat. He says the embarrassment of being bamboozled by an ‘average feline’ is fair trade.”

“Hey, has anyone seen my phone? I know I had it on me before we got on the coaster.” Ryuji’s voice carried over the entire park, and Morgana snickered evilly. When Ryuji retrieved it an hour later, he found his background picture changed. It was now a photo of a very smug Morgana, with Ryuji walking off towards the roller coaster in the background.

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“C-come on, it’s not th—that scary.” Futaba didn’t know if she was saying that to Kana or herself. The haunted house maze was very well made, creaky and crooked in just the right places for maximum unnerving. The wooden walls and floors all had a faint hint of green to them, as though the rot had fused with the building’s frame, and the furniture was caked in dust and cobwebs.

“Maybe not for you, but normal people spook easier.” Kana matched Futaba step for step, each pressed against the other and watching their side for jumpscare happy staff. “I knew I should have played that Freddy’s game sooner. Maybe it would’ve prepared me for this…”

“I-I doubt it. This is a h-haunted mansion. No metal m-mons-sters in sight.”

“You sure about that?” Both girls jumped at the intrusion, backing away from the suit of armor they had almost passed obliviously. It rattled with light chuckles. The arm came up to push the faceplate out of the way, revealing the cocky grin beneath it. Futaba’s face went beet red, and she shook as the fear turned to indignation.

“Akira! You scared the snot out of us!”

“Sorry, couldn’t help myself.” He pulled the helmet all the way off and cracked his neck. “Heard Ryuji would be heading this way soon, so I came in first to see if I could join in on the fun. You just happened to get here before him.”

“Oh, in that case, I saw him and Yusuke trying one of those shooting galleries a few stations over. They should be along soon.”

“Why thank you, Lady Kana.” Akira popped his helmet back on, resuming his ramrod straight stance. Futaba, still more than a little miffed, lightly kicked at his heavy plated shins.
“You know you’re probably gonna get startle punched in the nose, right?”

“That is an occupational hazard I am willing to risk.”

Three boys left the gate to the haunted house, each in a unique state of discomfort. Ryuji was sheet white, even his hair devoid of its vibrancy. Yusuke looked ashamedly at the ground, his knuckles still reddened. Hobbling along just behind them was Akira, his face covered by a handkerchief wrapped around fresh ice cubes.

“My apologies.”

“It’s cool, Yusuke. Nice reflexes.”

“Whew, so dizzy~!” The teacup spun out the last of its energy, leaving three dazed kids in its seats. Ann stumbled off of the ride first, her hair frazzled and tangled from the intense spinning.

“You shouldn’t be getting up so quickly.”

“Oh stop being such a party pooper, Akira.” She lent Shiho an arm, letting her use it to get up, too. “That was so much fun, right?”

“Yeah, but I could use a minute. I’m feeling a little lightheaded.” Ann guided her to a bench along the path, helping her sit down as her vision slowly stopped spinning.

“Here, I’ll go grab us some drinks. Iced tea, right?”

“Oh, your hair…”

“Can wait. Our throats are all sore from the screaming.” Ann strode off in search of a concessions stand, and Shiho rolled her eyes, sighing affectionately. This didn’t escape Akira’s notice.

“Wild guess says you’re crushing?”

“That obvious?” Akira nodded, sitting next to her on the bench. “Actually, I think ‘crush’ is a bit weak. We’ve practically acted like a couple since grade school, just without anything that would make it official.”

“Well, you are in a big, flashy park right now. Last I checked, these places are great for proposals if you want to take a crack at it.”

“And steal the wind out of Ann’s sails? Knowing her, she has some big ideas about a perfect way to ask. Probably with crepes. I won’t take that from her.” Akira’s eyes widened.
“Actually, she’s been waiting for you.” Shiho turned to him, head tilted.

“Really?”

“Yeah. She thinks that popping the question right now would be leveraging a rough time in your life for what she wants. She doesn’t want to make you feel like you have to say yes.”

“Aw, Ann…” Affection bloomed anew in Shiho’s eyes, and she held a hand over her heart. Then she raised an eyebrow. “You know, this sounds like the sort of thing that comes with a promise of secrecy.”

“Sometimes, breaking a promise shows how good of a friend you really are. Case and point, this stalemate.” Shiho nodded in agreement.

“One I fully intend on breaking. The only question is how.”

“Attention guests, the Tunnel of Love is now open again. We thank you for your patience.” Akira smirked at the announcement, checking his phone clock. He was no expert, but four hours was pretty impressive. Then he had an idea.

“Let me make a quick call.”

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“Attention guests, the Tunnel of Love is temporarily out of order due to technical difficulties. We apologize for any inconveniences.” Makoto looked up at the nearest loudspeaker curiously, her attention only broken by a residual spark of sensation that almost made her legs buckle under her.

“That’s odd. An actual issue after all of that?” Haru and Akira glanced at each other, winking conspiratorially. Haru rubbed Makoto’s back, giving her a sturdy shoulder for when her legs gave out.

“It could be that they needed to clean their primary raft. The smell can be quite pervasive from what I’ve heard.”

“Haru!”

Chapter End Notes

Why don't you just fuck alread...

Oh, there they go. Carry on.
Shinya leaned against the arcade’s wall, staring up into the sky, processing Akira’s guiding words. His knee-jerk reaction would have been calling him out for the stab in the back, chewing him out for siding with those jerks at school, but he knew Akira better than that. The guy was never anything less than real with him. He respected him like an older brother.

But he also loved his mom, and her advice was the polar opposite. Win, win no matter what. There is nothing worth more than victory. Akira instead preached about the morality of the conflict, why you fight over the fight itself. Strength was important, but it alone didn’t mean anything. Shinya was torn.

“How are you so sure about that? You’re a strong guy yourself, so what do you know about being the loser?”

“…You want to hear a story?” The response was so distant from the question that Shinya almost laughed.

“Seriously?”

“I know, sounds kiddy, but it’s a good one. A history lesson, you could say, the origin story of a Phantom Thief.” And like that, he was far more invested, his eyes locking on Akira. “Actually, not just any Phantom Thief. It’s about their leader.”

“For real?” Akira nodded, and all opposition fell silent.

“For obvious reasons, I can’t go using real names, so we’ll use his code, Joker. He’s about what you’d expect on the job. Slick, cool headed, loyal, and strong like you wouldn’t believe. His team calls him the cornerstone of the organization, holding everything together just by existing.”

“But the truth is, he wasn’t always that way. No, he used to be just a normal guy, and an unlucky one at that. He grew up in an apartment that might as well have been a shoebox. There was rarely enough food, so he went to sleep hungry more than he’d like to recall. As soon as he was old enough to, he went to work, doing chores around the neighborhood for all the spare change in a neighbor’s pocket to support his dear mother.”

“Wait, shouldn’t his dad have been doing that? He had one, right?”

“If by that you mean a snake that slithered away as soon as it had a chance, then yeah, he had one. He says he’d like to forget that if he could, though.”

“So, he was like me?” Akira nodded, and Shinya felt a ping of warmth.
“Every day was a struggle for him, but he soldiered on. See, that’s one of his real strengths, he’s as stubborn as they come. Knock him down, and he’ll pick himself up every time.” Akira’s expression wilted, and his tone took on a somber edge. “Then, one day, he decided he’d stay down. He tried to stop a sexual assault in progress, but, as it turns out, the guy doing it was some big wig politician, and he got Joker locked up and stamped with a record, all for being a decent person.” Shinya gasped, too enthralled to care about how he looked to outside observers.

“He got shipped out to the big city for parole, where the police could keep tabs on him. He resigned himself to his sentence, waiting it out without hope for anything better in life. He thought it was all over. But then, he found something that turned it all around, an opportunity he couldn’t pass up.”

“The Phantom Thieves?”

“The very same. He stumbled upon the power to steal hearts, and he was thrilled. Finally he had a fighting chance, a way to push back. He could win. But that’s not all he got.” Akira crossed his arms, his fingers clenched tightly around the opposite elbows. “The method the Phantom Thieves use has two ways of working. They can steal the heart, force criminals to recognize their mistakes, or they can break it, killing them outright. The first time he could use that power, he was swept up in his fantasy. You know who was first, right?”

“The abusive gym teacher.”

“A real scumbag, to be sure. He knew all of Kamoshida’s crimes, and he asked himself, ‘Why should he get off with being imprisoned when I had been locked away for far less?’ He didn’t think it was fair. He almost killed him.”

“But that’s against the rules.” Shinya had carefully memorized the code of conduct Akira had told him before, and he could pull up the major points without a second thought. “The Thieves don’t kill people, they make them take their medicine.”

“That’s right, but this was before the Thieves. The only thing he knew was that he had been wronged, and he was furious. He was in a position where he could win, and he wanted that victory, just one thing to go his way after a life of being stepped on.”

“What changed his mind?” Akira turned to Shinya and smiled with a tenderness the younger boy had long gone without.

“At the same time, someone else, another victim, was in trouble, and there was only time to act on one. Joker had a choice, finish Kamoshida or save the innocent. He decided giving up the win that day was worth saving a life, and you know what? He was right. That person he saved became the second Phantom Thief. The third ran into them shortly after. Then a fourth, and a fifth. Soon, he had a whole team at his back, all because he gave up that one pointless win.” Shinya looked away, back at the sky, and slowly pieced together the unspoken moral.

“He chose to lose the battle to win the war. Even though he wanted it, he knew it wouldn’t do as much good as it could have and let it go.” Akira put a hand on his back, unspeakably proud of the kid for figuring out the last step on his own.

“And now, Joker has everything he could ever wish for. A team that sticks with him through thick and thin, a purpose in life.” His grip tightened a little, and he glanced around to make sure no one was listening in when he came in close to Shinya’s ear to whisper. “And something like a little brother to keep from making that same old mistake that would have cost him everything.”
The words took a second to click, and when Shinya looked up at him in amazement, he found Akira had relaxed against the wall, too, staring off into the sunset with a peaceful smile. Shinya followed his lead, relaxing next to his idol and letting all of his worries float away. Somehow, he felt like he had just experienced the greatest victory of all.

Sojiro tapped his fingers on the counter impatiently. He had hollered nearly half an hour ago, but Akira, Morgana, and Futaba were still upstairs. He loved the kids dearly, but it was hard to not be irate about two bowls of quickly cooling curry and two cups of already lukewarm coffee. The clock struck seven, and Sojiro decided he had waited long enough. He trudged his way up LeBlanc’s stairs, and he was already formulating a long chewing out.

“What are you three doing up…?” His script withered and died in his head. Akira and Futaba were both on his bed, but something was up with her. She was shaking like a leaf, curled up in the fetal position on Akira’s lap. He had both arms around her and let her rest her head in the crook of his neck. Looking closer, Sojiro could see the emptiness in her eyes and the faint trails of tears. Morgana peeked over Futaba’s arm, but he made no effort to move from her lap. “Is she…?”

“Yeah.” The cat nuzzled her hand, letting her weakly pinch at his cheeks. “I wanted to come get you, but either of us losing contact makes her panic.” Sojiro sighed, forgetting his irritation about dinner. His daughter’s recurring hallucinations were more important.

“Did she give you any idea what she’s seeing?”

“Protective services.” The deep rumble of Akira’s voice stirred Futaba, making her lean further into the source. “She saw a couple of officers charge into the room and try dragging her off. She needs to know that we’re right here for now.” Sojiro swore at Youji’s name under his breath. He had seen the video of the kids giving his Shadow the spanking it deserved, but, watching his daughter losing herself in the nightmares he inspired, he was inclined to think he had gotten off too easy.

But he knew getting angry about it wouldn’t do any good. Instead, he walked towards them, making sure his footsteps weren’t too loud.

“Futaba, it’s me, Sojiro. Can you hear me?” Her eyes widened, and she reached a numb arm out in the direction of his voice. He gently took hold of her hand, and when she closed down around his, he could feel how her strength waned. “Don’t worry, Akira and I aren’t going anywhere. Mona’s here with us, too.”

“Sojiro, I’m… I’m scared…” His heart sank, her voice deflated and lifeless.

“It’s okay, you’re safe. We’re all safe. You’re in Akira’s room and no one is coming to hurt you.” She pulled at him, and he complied, moving closer until she could feel his body heat. “See? I’m right here.”

“Stay… Please, stay.” He sat on the bed next to them, and when he saw her comforter sitting behind them, he pulled it over the entire assembly, making sure she had a corner all to herself. That’s where they stayed for the rest of the night, waiting for her panic to subside.
Kawakami’s eyes opened, and the bright light struck her with the force of a hangover. A sharp sting rolled through her brain. The worst sensation, though, was the sheer weakness. She didn’t even have the energy to move the thin clinic sheets. She hazily remembered being brought in, but everything between then and waking up was a blur.

“Kawakami-sensei, are you awake?” The voice that greeted her was soft, and it struck her as unnatural in two senses. In that he was still there at least a few hours later and in how fragile the usually confident Kurusu sounded. If she didn’t know any better, she’d have thought he was the one in a sick bed.

“I’m okay, I’m…” Suddenly, her airways clamped up, and she found herself in the midst of a violent coughing fit. There was a gloved hand on her back holding her up in a sitting position almost instantly, making it easier to breathe.

“Maybe save the good health act for when there isn’t a doctor in the room to call you out. Kurusu can tell you exactly how well that works with me.” Her eyes drifted open, and the doctor in question looked about as professional as Kawakami herself. Still, studded collar or no, she had been assured that she could keep a secret and help her health wise, and that was all she could ask for. When her breathing returned to normal, Kawakami thought it pertinent to know what just happened.

“Do you have a diagnosis for me?”

“You say that like you don’t already know.” Doctor Takemi scowled like an angry mother, off handedly flipping through her clipboard. “Severe physical exhaustion, sleep deprivation, slight malnutrition, and you seem to have a minor infection in your wrists. I will be prescribing antibiotics for that last one, and you’re on an IV drip right now, but if you keep up the workload you’re taking now, you won’t make it through the year.” She lowered Kawakami back onto the bed, pulling her sheets back over her. “For your health, I recommend you not leave this bed until the headaches pass at the very least. This could take upwards of two days if paired with…”

“What!?” She tried to push herself up, but her strength was still gone. All she had left was being funneled into hyperventilation and an increased pulse. “You don’t understand, I need to work tonight. If I don’t, I’ll never have enough money to…”

“Whatever you’re trying to pay off, the consequences can’t be as bad as dying.” Takemi set her notes aside, nodding to someone outside of Kawakami’s field of vision. “Make sure she stays there for a few minutes. I need to prep a new drip.”

As soon as she was gone and the only one left was Kurusu, the floodgates began to creak open. She tried to fight them back, but it was a fruitless endeavor, the small trickle of tears turning into turbulent streams as the weight of her predicament fell atop her.

“If I can’t pay the Takases back, they’ll… I’ll…” She turned to Akira, desperate for something, anything. “What do I…” When she saw him, though, her mind ground to a halt. His skin had gone a ghostly pale, his hands shaking even though they were flat on his lap. His face was blank, akin to the facade he wore against the rumormongers and taunters she saw hound him daily, but those eyes were different.

One lens was blocked, completely obscured by reflecting light, but the other was clear, and the eye behind it had shrunk. It was constricted, focused, and his iris had turned a bloody red. It was
a look that could kill.

“Sadayo, what are their names?” His voice sent a jolt of terror through her. It was as though it came from two sources. One was the student she knew, pushed to the ends of his patience, like the handful of times he had used her services only to talk through some earlier hardships. The second was far deeper and coarse, the roar of a flame as it tore through the countryside. He noticed her fear and forced himself to relax, his gaze returning to the mellow Kurusu’s she knew. “Pardon my manners, sensei. What are the Takase’s full names?”

“They’re…” A lingering hesitance remained. Should she tell him? A lot could be done with a name, and, though she knew him to be a kind and compassionate person, he also held onto an anger and frustration that would put the surliest drunkard to shame. But she couldn’t take it anymore without breaking. “…Toshio and Hiromi Takase.” He nodded and made to stand up. “Wait, what are you planning?”

“Me? Just going to expose a pair of hustlers. Nothing I can’t handle.” He opened the door and stepped out just as Takemi returned. She recognized the look in his eye and stepped out of the way, quickly walking in before the door could close.

“Looks like you just got yourself a guardian angel.”

“Do you know what he’s up to?”

“Normally, I don’t divulge my patients’ secrets, but if he’s going out of his way to help you specifically, he must trust you. Here, I think I have some pictures you’d be interested in.”

- 

The night air was tense near the shore, all coming from four people. A rough looking man held a well dressed student at gunpoint, keeping an eye on him and the two that had come to retrieve him. There was a student over there, too, plain looking, probably just a witness. He wasn’t a concern, one quick pull of the trigger away from being dealt with. It was Iwai that interested the man. If only he had accounted for Kaoru being such a sap.

“I don’t care about what you were, because now you’re the best dad I could have asked for.” It was a tender moment, one that should have happened somewhere more comfortable than a holdup.

“Oh gag me, shut up already. Fine, we can do this the hard way.” He pulled back the hammer on his gun, and Iwai bristled.

“Don’t do it, Masa!”

“I don’t think you’re in any position to be calling the shots here. Don’t worry, he’ll make it out alive, but only if you cooperate. Just give me my guns in, say, two weeks, and he’ll be all yours, no worse for wear.” Everyone present knew it was a lie. Why keep a loose end untied?

Iwai’s mind raced for a solution, but in his peripheral vision, he saw Kurusu readjusting his glasses. He covered the frame with his hand for a moment, hiding an awkward half blink. It was some sort of code, and the way his pointer finger pointed up towards his forehead was suspiciously particular. The only thing up there were Iwai’s ear guards, but, if push came to shove, they could
make decent goggles. He knew the kid had some fighting experience, God knows where that came from, but he trusted him to have something workable if he was suggesting it.

“Fine, you win.”

“Dad, no!”

“Don’t worry, Kaoru, everything’ll turn out fine, trust me.” He put a hand up on his head, pretending to scratch the back of his neck. “Here I thought I made it out clean from this sort of crap.”

“Sorry, old timer, but business is business.” Akira’s hand moved, closing in on his bag. He would have chastised the kid for it if he could, but then he saw he wasn’t reaching in. No, something was reaching out, a black paw handing a small black pellet up. “So, will you need the full time? I know these things can be pretty hard to put together, but I’m sure you’ve got what it takes to…” Akira grabbed the ball, and Iwai sprung.

“Kaoru, eyes!” He emphasized the point by bringing his ear guards down, bending them awkwardly until they covered his eyes completely. Kaoru, surprised, quickly followed with his hands. Masa saw Akira doing something and leveled his gun, but he was too late. Akira crushed the pellet in his palm, and a blinding flash punched through his vision, making the shot go wide as Masa fumbled. He fired two other rounds blindly, both getting buried harmlessly in the dirt.

“Damnit, when I get my hands on you, punk…!”

“Too slow.” Iwai had all but blinked when Akira closed the distance. His bag opened, and his cat flew out, biting down as hard as it could on Masa’s wrist. His hand loosened to throw it off, but he also lost his hold on the pistol, sending it several feet away. He got the cat off and brought his arms up to block, but it did nothing to stop the leg sweep. He came crashing down, a yell of agony ringing out as his arm bent under his own weight. His vision only began to return when Akira stood over him and pinned him to the ground with a boot to the back. “You really suck at this whole organized crime thing, you know that?”

“Either that or you’re just good at it. You know how to pick the help, Munehisa.” A lumbering man crept out of the bushes, a firearm of his own getting returned to the pocket hidden inside his suit shirt.

“Tsuda?”

“No time for small talk, I’m afraid. This little louse isn’t alone. Turns out our whole old branch is rotting. I’d hoped to be here to stop the first line, but there’s nothing I can do against that many goons.” If he had been eating one, he would have bitten clean through his sucker. As soon as they heard about Masa getting his ass handed to him, they’d be out for revenge. There was a chance the still honorable sort around them would intercept, but would that happen in time?

“Dad, is it possible for us to hole up in Untouchable? The store’s security is top notch.”

“I wish. Assuming they don’t have anything special to bust in with, we can only hold so much food in there, and the water lines have seen better days.” He was surprised by his own swiftness in collaborating with Kaoru. He was actually considering the idea, all the slapdash mods he’d have to do to make his shop a fortress. Kaoru was good with numbers, so maybe together they could come up with something.

That was, if the Kurusu kid didn’t first. He was whispering to himself, or that’s what he thought at first. He was kneeling down, talking at his cat, and the way it meowed and purred almost
sounded like responses. He knew it was a smart animal, but could it understand human speech?

“Nothing else for it then.” He stood back up, retrieving a pad of paper and pen from his bag. He tore out a sheet and handed it to Tsuda. “You know who’s coming after us, right? Put their names on that paper, and don’t leave anyone out.” He tore out another sheet and jotted something down on it himself. “Iwai, take Kaoru to this address. You’ll find a cafe there. Tell the guy behind the counter that Joker sent you.” Iwai looked at the note, seeing it pointed at somewhere in Yongen-Jaya.

“I hate to ask, but what sort of ring are you running?” He had been suspecting it for a while, but all this code talk sealed the deal. Kid couldn’t have been Yakuza if he needed Iwai to supply model weaponry. No, it was some upstart operation. Akira smirked at the question as he skimmed Tsuda’s list.

“The most infamous gang in Tokyo. Keep it to yourself though, okay? Any more attention might just break our hearts.” He pushed his glasses back up his nose before walking off, pulling out his phone and putting it to his ear. “You heard all that, right? Oh, they’re already…? Sweet, this is pretty urgent. Let’s meet up at the entrance. Time for a midnight sweep.”

Iwai tried to keep things simple anymore. He cut off from the crime game for a reason. Trying to figure out what Kurusu meant by any of his double speak was well down his list of concerns. At the top, keeping his family safe, and the kid had promised a way to do just that. Yongen wasn’t the worst back alley in Tokyo, but it was well out of the way. Maybe hiding out there for a few days would work.

“Hm, didn’t think he was into French stuff.” He made a passing quip about the cafe as they approached, trying to lighten the mood.

“Well, I didn’t think he could beat up someone with a gun empty handed. Using a cat.”

“Fair point.” The bell dinged as they entered, and the clientele was a diverse bunch. A punk lady with a studded choker, a middle aged woman with bags under her eyes, some magician, and a half drunk journalist looking type. They all gathered around a table far to the back, chatting amicably amongst themselves. Behind the counter was a guy that looked the part of a barista, from the pink shirt to the pointy beard.

“Welcome. Let me guess, a kid told you about us?” The casual way he brought it up spoke to a lot of experience in shaded deals or a lot of experience in Kurusu bringing him customers. Both worked, meaning he was either a professional or a good friend to his helper. Kaoru took the lead, hoping his more proper demeanor would score some points.

“Yes, sir. Why, we never would have made it without Joker.” Sojiro sighed, letting down an emotional guard of sorts.

“Kid can’t go a day without pulling someone’s ass out of the fire, I swear.” He pulled out a menu for each. “Stick around for a few hours and your problem should be cleared up. The kids work quick. In the meantime, you might relate to the others over there.” He went back to the kitchen, and, seeing nothing better to do, the two pulled up seats. The journalist waved exaggeratedly.
“Well hiya there! You getting your problems solved by a weird kid in glasses, too?” The breeze coming off her smelled like fruity alcohol with a hint of the strong stuff. Iwai relaxed a little, letting the evening finally take its toll.

“I hope like Hell.”

“Don’t worry, Mister Grumpy, he’s the best at what he does. Then again, I think he’s the only one that does what he does, so that doesn’t mean much.” The doctor groaned under her breath.

“You know your liver is going to end up like a lump of coal in your lower torso at this rate, right?”

“Bah, I’ll be fine. You’re just jealous your job doesn’t let you drink.”

“No, that would be mine.” The only normal one in the group gave them a half awake nod. “You’ll have to excuse Ohya. We don’t have enough people to pull off an intervention yet.”

“I can stop whenever I want!”

“Should I consult the tarot to see if she’s being truthful?”

“Excuse me, madams, but what exactly does Kurusu-san do?” Ohya giggled a little at Kaoru’s honest question.

“Oh a bit of this, a bit of that. Flower shop stuff, steal hearts, crossdress…” Something clicked in Iwai’s mind.

“What was that last one?”

“Crossdress, jeez, it’s like you weren’t listening. Or are you transphobic? I mean, I don’t think he’s actually trans, but still…” How much had this girl been drinking? Before he could correct his wording, his phone rang, and his caller ID couldn’t tell who it was. Hesitantly, he answered.

“What’s up?”

“That kid of yours pulled through.” It was Tsuda, and he sounded worn out. “Got a message from the family heads, a whole bunch of the guys that were planning on jumping you just squealed. They’re bringing down the hammer on the rest as we speak. You’re safe.” Iwai balked at the news, and Ohya picked up the signs.

“Looky there, girls, that’s what we looked like when we figured it out. So, what do you think?”

“I think…” Words were hard to come by. He thought he had made a clean break, but he had willingly been, and was going to continue, supplying arms to the Phantom Thieves. “…I just made a long term contract with the most dangerous criminals in Japan.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right. If this keeps up, we’ll have to start holding official AA meetings.” Takemi took a sip of her coffee. “Hello, my name’s Tae Takemi, and I’m friends with Akira Kurusu.”

Chapter End Notes
Did Akira just get in a fight and maybe violate parole? Perhaps. Will the others present admit to it? Not a chance.
To Catch a Mockingbird

Chapter Summary

In which smooth crime boy is a little shit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Akechi was having a splendid day by most counts. He had finally closed the rope around the Phantom Thieves. Either they complied and cooperated with him, following him directly into his trap, or they refused, giving him reason to get them caught anyway. Their decision was out of his hands. Logically, he hoped for the latter, cutting out the middleman of pulling them through a Palace in lieu of just arresting them. It would be better for Shido to have them caught on the job, but he didn’t much care for the rat’s long game.

However, he kept coming back to the idea of working alongside them. He found it increasingly difficult to act towards Joker without his feelings rising to the surface. He stared into the bathroom mirror, rotating that fateful bullet in his hands. Nothing else had been able to injure him so severely. The Thieves were by and large children leaning on luck and brute force, but Joker was different, and Akechi wanted a chance to dissect just why that was up close and personal. He stowed the bullet back behind the hidden panel on his briefcase, closing it away alongside his own handgun and silencer.

He stepped out of the restroom and back into Shujin’s auditorium, and he found himself facing a much larger crowd than he had evacuated from. It wasn’t quite on the same scale as the one watching his speech, but it was clear that whatever event was happening now was a favorite among the student body. A host with a somewhat goofy inflection called out to them over the microphone, hunting for a volunteer. Akechi thought it best to make himself scarce before he was noticed.

“How about you over there, with the fluffy black hair!” A spotlight ignited, and, curious, Akechi glanced its way, stopping when he saw where it fell. Akira looked like a deer in the headlights, the blonde one and a scrawny, meek looking one slowly sidling away from him. After a moment of hesitation and a quick exchange with the two, he gave in with a sigh, making his way down to the stage. As he approached, though, the host seemed to recognize him.

“W-wait, you wouldn’t happen to be the trans… I mean, Kurusu-kun, would you?” A glimmer of mischief passed through Akira’s eyes, and Akechi suddenly became very interested. He put on a stern expression, the scowl of a man on death row, and he nodded with a grunt. The students’ mumblings became much more concerned. It was almost as though his mere presence terrified them. The host tried to straighten himself out and rectify his apparent error in selection.

“W-wait, you wouldn’t happen to be the trans… I mean, Kurusu-kun, would you?” A glimmer of mischief passed through Akira’s eyes, and Akechi suddenly became very interested. He put on a stern expression, the scowl of a man on death row, and he nodded with a grunt. The students’ mumblings became much more concerned. It was almost as though his mere presence terrified them. The host tried to straighten himself out and rectify his apparent error in selection.

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“Well, you wouldn’t have anything school appropriate to share, would you?” The way he spoke seemed to suggest he thought Akira’s life to be rated R as a baseline, but he was visibly shocked when he nodded. He gulped, fighting to push the words out. “Alright then, go ahead and tell us what’s on your mind.” He shrunk away from the mic stand, flinching as Akira’s arms tensed, exposing a sliver of the muscle hiding under his uniform. He breathed in deep, nostrils flaring, eyes bulging, until it all fell away into the cheerful look of a school girl.
“I love you, Ryuji!” His voice rose an octave as he spoke his name, and the initial uncomfortable giggles soon grew into uproarious laughter. Many started searching for the boy, finding him glowing red up in the stands.

“Go on, give your boyfriend a kiss!”

“Oh god, the delinquents are breeding.”

“Run, track traitor, run!”

And so he did, breaking into a sprint for the nearest doors.

“Don’t run, you can’t escape my affections!” The laughter renewed, and Akechi couldn’t help but chuckle a little himself. If there was one thing Joker knew, it was how to put on a show. He turned to leave, resuming his collected stage face, but he failed to see Akira’s eye tracking him the whole way.

Akechi found an out of the way corner in the subway station before stopping and pulling out his phone. He dialed up a number that had become muscle memory to call.

“You have a report for me.” His stomach churned at the sound of that voice. He had been hoping to speak to an intern for once, but he could compose himself enough for one brief conversation.

“You will be glad to know that the plan is proceeding smoothly. They are desperate and quite likely to turn to me for assistance. I expect it will be less than a week before they choose to cooperate.”

“And you’re certain they haven’t found you out?”

“Quite. As you suspected, they are but children in far over their heads. Their leader will be in your hands well before elections, and the blame for your operation’s practices will die with him.”

“You had better make sure of it.”

“You have no need to worry. Everything is under…” The line clicked. A twitch of irritation surfaced as his hand tightened around the phone. Would it be too much to ask for a thanks every now and then? He pocketed his cell and regathered himself, turning to catch the next train. Suddenly, he found himself bumping into someone, and he heard them fall to the ground. “Oh, my apologies.” He reached a hand down, offering it to the young lady he had accidentally toppled.

“It’s okay, I should have watched where I was…” She took his hand before her grey eyes widened in recognition. “Oh my, excuse me, Akechi-san, I shouldn’t have…”

“It’s quite alright, really.” He helped pull her to her feet, and she bowed to him, her straight black hair partially covering her eyes. “I imagine your kimono is a specialty wash item? Here, allow me.” He passed her a small handful of bills, more than enough to cover the cost of dry cleaning. It paid dividends to have someone with a personal positive image of him.
“Thank you, sir, I will remember this.” He smiled warmly, leaving her with a friendly snapshot of the encounter. He returned to his original path, and when he was gone, Akira smirked. Counter surveillance was going to be easier than he thought.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, just a short one I'm afraid. Not much to work with for the school festival, you know? Still worked some more Aka-chan in there, so I'm happy with it.
Rolling the Dice

Chapter Summary

In which Akechi contends with several little shits.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Of all the Palaces they had seen thus far, Sae’s was far and away the flashiest. The lights on the slots that lulled the spinner into a zombielike trance, the flipping of cards that could cut dealer and dealt alike, and, above all the others, the clacking dice that came together like a sack of firecrackers in the ear. It put forth the feeling that this was the place to be for a thrill.

And yet, it was also the most disturbing. Looking past the glamour, what did it all really mean? People won, but far more people loss. Who were those people? Some were lawyers or prosecutors climbing the ladder, but the majority were just everyday citizens. With luck, most of them were criminals that deserved to lose, but Akira knew from experience that it couldn’t be a one hundred percent certainty. Seeing the lives of the innocent treated as a game to be won sickened him in a way no other Palace could. Everyone noticed the way he scowled at the playing floor below, but the Phantom Thieves knew well why that was. Makoto was right there with him, mourning what her sister had become.

“We’ll stop this abuse of the justice system, right, leader?”

“As a whole, I don’t know. A corrupted machine has more than one bad gear.” He backed away from the edge of the rafter, putting his game face on. “For your sister, though? Definitely.”

“Alright, let’s go again! Put it all on eleven through eighteen!” The Shadow operating the dice game had seen a number of ploys in his time under Madam Sae. He had seen a streak one hundred victories long come crashing down on the gambler’s head. He had dealt for more than a few who failed to recognize how little they stood to gain after a hundred subsequent losses. No one ever seemed to learn that luck was never with them. The men behind the scenes were as devious as they were tightfisted.

This, though? This wasn’t a ploy he was familiar with. The red suited guest had been at his table for hours. He expected her cockiness to be shattered in one decisive move ages ago, but no. Eighteen. Eighteen. Eighteen. That was all she seemed to roll. Maybe this time would be…

“Eighteen!” Covertly, he glanced to the stations beside his own. To the left, a man in white was framing the table with his fingers as the dice landed with three sixes. To the right, a cat slammed its paw on the table, demanding another roll even as the tokens from its last victory still flowed into its account. The dealer put a hand to his ear, hitting the button on his communicator and whispering.
“Is the monitor broken? At this rate, they will walk away with every coin in the house.”

“Don’t worry so much. We have this lot right where we want them.” The operator must have changed shifts. The new one was much higher pitched, whining like a teenage girl, but he had his orders. What she said went. Alongside the riches in their vault.

—

“Thank you for your assistance, Skull.”

“Hey, I’m the m-muscle around here. It’s what I do.” Though he really wished Akechi had singled out Yusuke for wheelbarrow duty instead. He had about the same strength as him, and he wasn’t held back by an old wound. Plus, it would’ve been funny as Hell seeing Akechi try to deal with Yusuke’s eccentricities. He was a great dude and all, but damn if he wasn’t hard to get along with at first. Especially if he didn’t want to get along with someone.

“Ah, so you all have a role you fulfill within the team hierarchy?”

“Uh, what?” Akechi sighed, remembering who he was talking to.

“You all have an assigned task to carry out when the need arises?”

“Well, kind of. I’m just really strong, so I help with the stuff that needs it. We don’t get assigned to do it, we just know what we’re good at.” So it was more of a loose coalition then? Interesting.

“I imagine that helps you adjust as Joker switches what areas his Personas cover.” Ryuji knew exactly what Akechi was up to. He was trying to weasel some information out, learn how to get an upper hand. He could be dense, but not that bad.

“Look, man, I’m really not the guy to be asking about strategy and shit. You’ll have to go to Queen or Joker for that.” Akechi deflated a bit, though it was only noticeable if you were looking for it.

“I see. Oh, what about Oracle? She specifically overlooks all of your activities.”

“Uh, I guess, just don’t piss her off if you go interrogating her. Either you’ll make her upset and she’ll ruin your life herself, or you’ll make her cry and then we have to stomp you into a bloody paste. Trust me, bad idea.”

—

“Why the Hell are the Shadows here busty?” Ryuji’s question was like another attack as the team was winding down from combat, taking everyone off guard. Ann was quick to give him a glare for it.

“Are you seriously looking at their boobs? Time and place.”
“Actually, I was wondering the same thing.” Yusuke scanned the slot machine floor. The majority of the Shadows’ pre combat forms were feminine, the standard casino rabbit design that left none of the wearers’ modesty intact. “I had believed Sae to be a proponent of female empowerment, but these outfits enforce female objectification. Even, I dare say it, Madarame, for his countless faults, refrained from creating such a twisted perception of individuals beyond his students.”

“It could be her perception of the system’s views on women.” Makoto wanted desperately to avert her eyes from the scene before her, the senseless decadence and gratification, but it was a truth that needed to be engraved in stone.

“I believe that plays a part in it, but it’s not the entirety.” Akechi put a hand to his chin, his gaze unwavering. “You quoted her once as saying that winning and advancement is all that matters, yes? Perhaps this is how she views women as doing just that. If you recall, her Shadow has even less decency than these servers, and note how they’re growing in frequency, among other things, as we advance to higher paying rooms.” Makoto’s eyes darkened, shaded over by her mask.

“What do you mean ‘harshing your buzz?’ Last I checked, the staff wasn’t allowed to serve you alcohol.”

“Argh, see, this is what I mean! No sense of humor. God, you’re worse than Inari.”

Futaba Sakura was, far and away, the most capable among the Thieves in the real world. Not only had she effectively claimed them by the scruff of the neck while operating as Alibaba, and wiped away a branch of the government operating under Medjed’s name in a single afternoon, but Akechi had reason to believe that she was the originator of that group in the first place. Medjed was a name feared across every nation and tongue. The world wide web encapsulated the globe, and she could bend it around her little finger on a whim. How could such an imposing figure be cast by such a petulant child?

“I only wish to know how the group operates from your perspective so that I might be better suited to…”

“Keep yapping my ear off and I swear to Prometheus I will censor you.” Inside, Akechi gulped. He had seen her reduce Akira’s vocabulary to nothing while stalking them in Okumura’s Palace. He knew she was dead serious, but he wasn’t allowed to give away anything that would imply he knew more than he let on. The pains of keeping up an act were infinite.

“What do you mean by…?”

“That’s it, say goodbye to your favorite word!” He could feel the static in his lungs, one that wouldn’t dissipate no matter how he coughed.

“You’re blocking my speech simply for asking a question? That hardly seems censored.” He covered his mouth, realizing the difference between what he thought and what he spoke. Ryuji covered his, too, but only to hide the snickering.

“You took away the word justice, didn’t you?”

“And its variants. Mess with me, and you get censored in the censor.”
“Cool. Hey, can you make him say stuff besides censor?”

“I dunno. Let’s see.” Akechi groaned, knowing it was too late to fight it.

“Must you really be so baguette?” His scowl deepened with every laugh out of them. “I fail to see the humor in this waffle. To think the most feared people in Tokyo are so bacon as to be amused by crepes.” At this point, Ryuji and Futaba were leaning on each other for support as they laughed their heads off.

“Dude, he sounds like a mad lib!”

“I know, right? I love my job.”

“Are you quite done yet? If you recall, we have a mission at pancake.” Akechi’s voice caught in his throat. It must have been just a random selection of food item, yes? She couldn’t have been taunting him with a reference to his one grand slip-up, right? Akechi’s mouth went dry as Futaba licked her lips.

“Ooh, that actually sounds delicious. Joker, can we stop for pancakes when we’re done here?” Akira sighed, patting her on the head.

“Sure, if you give Crow his voice back.”

“Aw, really?”

“I think we’ve hazed the poor guy enough.” Futaba grumbled to herself, waving a hand in Akechi’s direction.

“There, no more censors. But they better have some whipped cream on tap, you hear me!?”

Akechi let out the breath he had been choking on. He learned a valuable lesson that day. Never cross Futaba Sakura.

Not without a plan.

-

A slow, constant breathing permeated the safe room. Akira was out cold, curled up on the corner couch. He insisted he was good to go for another hour or so, but it was a unanimous vote to have him at least take a nap after his colosseum debut. He obviously needed it, too. Ann hadn’t even needed to hit him with a Dormina to enforce the decision.

“Stupid Joker, always pushing himself so hard.”

“Yeah, but that’s why we love him.” Futaba had volunteered to act as his pillow, smoothly combing his hair as he rested on her lap.

Akechi watched as they all doted on him in their own way. Morgana, forgetting his pride, curled up against him as though he was still in his normal cat form. Yusuke sketched him, putting great care into his depiction of the dormant power. Haru made herself busy heating up a pot of coffee as Ann and Makoto helped. Even Ryuji was careful to avoid his louder nervous ticks, constantly catching himself before he could start tapping his foot.
“It’s as though he’s the center of your solar system.”

“Well, yeah.” Ryuji was horrible at whispering, his voice almost as loud as if he was talking normally. “If it weren’t for him, half of us would be dead right now.”

“That seems a bit hyperbolic.”

“No, he’s right.” Futaba gently slipped her headphones onto Akira, fully blocking his ears. “I would’ve given up months ago if you guys hadn’t come for me.”

“I’d still be getting hounded by… You know. I might have turned out just like Shiho…”

“His Shadow would’ve executed me way back when.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Madarame had starved me to death by now.”

“And I would still be pursued by Sugimura.”

“He saved us, each and every one of us.” Makoto summarized it all, thinking on the nature of the team. “If he’s going to act strong while he’s awake, the least we can do is make sure he sleeps well.”

“You have no idea how many times I’ve had to drag him away from making thief tools because he was starting to black out. I have a strict ‘no crafting past nine’ rule for a reason.”

The conversation quickly broke down into scattered stories about how each of them pushed Akira into taking care of himself, but Akechi found himself as intrigued as ever. This was the secret of the Phantom Thieves. Their reliance on each other was born of a willingness and desire of each member to aid their fellows. That’s how they could trust each other so completely, why none of them turned out to be bad actors. They had absolute faith in Joker, and he, in turn, believed in them. He was the pin that held it all together. That made it so much easier to pull them apart.

And yet, that excitement of discovery was muted, muffled. Above it all, Akechi felt something else, something heavy and choking, a pressure in his chest that wouldn’t dissipate no matter how he denied it.

‘Why do I feel so… envious?’

“Ow!” Akechi scurried back as Akira jumped. He reached back to rub where Akechi’s mask had jabbed him. He looked mildly irritated at first, but then he started to smirk.

“Et tu, Crow? Then falls Joker!” He threw himself to the ground, sprawling out like a freshly slain corpse.

“I appreciate the reference as much as the next, but the theatrics aren’t necessary. Joker?” Akechi nudged him with a foot, but he refused to budge. Morgana’s eyes went wide.

“He killed Joker!”

“You bastard!” The facade didn’t hold long enough for Ryuji to finish his line with a straight
face, both breaking down into giggles. Akechi sighed, looking forlornly at Makoto.

“At least some here have a bit of professionalism.” Makoto glanced at him, and then she marched towards Ryuji. She shoved a finger into his chest, and he looked up at her in confusion.

“You are already dead.” A glimmer of amusement passed through his eyes.

“What?” He grabbed at his throat, puffing up his cheeks. “Blah!” He threw himself to his back, miming Akira’s still prone figure. Akechi groaned at their childishness.

And yet, he couldn’t help but laugh a little, too.

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“Joker, look out!” Akechi moved before he could think. All he had registered was a ray of blinding light coming down atop Akira, the flutter of charms. His heart jumped before his head, and he shoulder checked him out of the way. The light instead struck him, but the charms bounced off harmlessly. He turned an enraged eye to the golden clock before tearing his mask off.

“Robin Hood, obliterate!” The spirit sprung into action, drawing his bow as soon as he was summoned. He leased a single arrow, striking Norn where its hands came together. Its face cracked and compacted from the attack, fragments of gears bursting out the other side. The rest of its case crumbled to dust, leaving Akechi to breathe hard as Robin Hood returned to his mask. “Joker, are you…?”

“Damn, dude, that was sick!” Ryuji threw an arm around his back, taking Akechi off guard. He hadn’t been touched by anyone so directly in years, and yet, he couldn’t say he disliked the contact. Joker straightened himself out, nodding in appreciation.

“Thanks for the save. I could have died there.”

“Oh, it was nothing. What are teammates for?” Then he realized what he had done. Why did he save Akira? If he had fallen, there would have been a delay in plans, but he knew Makoto would have quickly taken over in order to finish the mission. She would have taken the fall in Akira’s place for Shido, and he would have one less to hunt down later. It would have been perfect. Why did he save Joker?

As he questioned it, though, he couldn’t deny the warmth he felt, how good it felt to be acknowledged.

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Makoto sat outside of a darkened doorway, head buried in her knees. Akechi’s earlier deduction of Sae’s cognition had been correct, and she had just found her cognitive twin. Sae had big plans for her, and those plans demanded she be an even greater spectacle than her elder sister. Her attire was being tailored as she wept, hewn from gaudy golden cloth that would barely pass as twine when sewn together.
“Sis, how could you…?” Haru hugged her tighter, letting her bleed out her sorrow. “Is that all I am to you, some prize to be shown off when I’m ready, just to make yourself look better? Why?” Akechi bit his tongue, but he had some ideas.

“If I am correct, this began as a desire to see you supersede her own success. Filtered through her distorted meaning of victory, however…” His heart sank as she sobbed. It was a new feeling, one he could not recognize. It was like lead grinding against his veins with each heartbeat. Something had to be done about it. He looked over the floor around them, the countless slot machines and glory blinded patrons.

“None of this is her fault specifically. At her core, she wants what’s best for you, but she has jaded too severely to realize how far from that ideal she has drifted. In other words, this place and all it represents is to blame.” He glanced at Haru’s grenade launcher, and she picked up on his idea. She hauled it off the ground and placed it in Makoto’s lap.

“We will be bringing this place down soon, but would you like to leave your mark beforehand?” Makoto looked up, her eyes red from both emotional exhaustion and righteous anger.

“You said it was cathartic to deface your father’s Palace, right?” Haru nodded, and Makoto accepted her offer. The other Phantom Thieves, having given her some space, drew close, a mischievous grin on each. “I suppose I should partake in our tradition, just this once.”

 Akira and Akechi watched over the others’ project from the rafters, a content smile on each. Down below, the spinning reels and lights were blown apart, Makoto standing on Anat’s shoulders and methodically eviscerating each row of machines. Haru hauled the scrap back to the center of the room, where Yusuke instructed the rest in how to put it together. They had formed the bulk of an effigy to their host, a metallic monster to match what her heart had become.


“Aside from the final takedown, this is always the best part of a heist.”

“I see what you mean. It bolsters team morale while depleting that of your target. Quite well calculated for an act of vandalism.”

“What can I say? We Thieves do our jobs with style.” A hint of melancholy brushed by Akira. “Shame this is probably the last one.” Akechi had to think for a moment before remembering what he meant.

“Yes, but it is a necessary step. To allow you all to meddle in the hearts of the populace, no matter how well intentioned, would be a grave offense on my part. They would have no guarantee that you are truly acting in the name of justice.” Akira sighed.

“You know, this doesn’t have to be the end.” Akechi looked at him, curious. “Once you clear our name, you could announce a partnership between the Detective Prince and the Phantom Thieves. You have enough clout and good PR to carry it through the public, and then we could benefit each other. You make sure we stay on the up-and-up, we get at the criminals you can’t reach with traditional methods. It’s a good deal, right?”
Akechi didn’t know what to say. He would have the public’s adoration for finding the murderer, and he could, indeed, push for that partnership. Since they would rely on him, though, maybe he could safely come clean to a degree, reveal his knowledge of Shido’s conspiracy. If they could take it out from the inside, together, maybe he could free himself of Shido’s influence. He could start anew.

But then, what of the last two years of work? He would be abandoning that plan for another, wasting so much effort. Wouldn’t that be childish?

“…A tempting offer, but I must decline.”

“I see. Well, I can’t promise how long the others will hold out, but you know my number. Let me know if you ever change your mind.”

The conversation ended there, but both knew the unspoken agreement. Whatever happened next between them would be the last they crossed paths.

Chapter End Notes

I figured that last one was small, so why not push the next up a day or two? Aren’t I a benevolent memester?
Coffee and Criminals Electric Boogaloo

Chapter Summary

Good times at LeBlanc. Enough said.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sojiro had been keeping an eye on all the Thieves’ activities since the day he joined. He knew who they were after, why they were after them, and how close they were to getting them at every step of each operation. He knew who their current highest goal was and all of his crimes.

Which is exactly why his skin crawled every time Goro Akechi waltzed into his shop. For years, he had been tormented by his failure to protect Wakaba, and now her murderer was sitting at his counter, drinking his coffee, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it. If Thaddeus hadn’t been there to remind him of the bigger picture, he would have reached over the counter and strangled him to death himself.

“Mm, excellent as always, Sakura-san.” He broke himself out of his rumination, knowing any stray thoughts could break his act.

“My dedication to my craft is the only thing putting me ahead of those cheap chains you see everywhere.”

“I know what you mean. I fear I won’t be able to return to the average cafe any longer. Compliments to the chef.” Akechi took another long draw of his cup, and Sojiro entertained a fancy about slipping cyanide in the next time he visited. He wouldn’t actually do it, health and safety codes to observe and all, but it was a lovely dream. “Before I forget, I must thank you for allowing us to use your establishment as our staging grounds. The subway from here is the perfect distance to nearby libraries for research.”

He wanted to laugh so bad it hurt. It was a likely excuse, some group schoolwork they were helping each other with, but it was a limp explanation by most standards. Some Detective Prince he was, using such a cheap hand wave. Sojiro was just glad it kept his involvement with Thief business hidden, making him the ace up their sleeve.

“Well, school can be rough for kids these days. Especially since you’re so busy with your investigation. If it helps you out and makes things easier for Akira at the same time, why not?”

“You are truly a kind man, Sakura-san.”

“You’re truly a snake in the grass, Black Mask.”
“You’re doing great, kids, keep it up!” Akira and Haru were both running low on breath. Sojiro was spotting for both of them, though he knew he probably wouldn’t be able to lift those weights if he tried. He was better with ones that didn’t talk back.

“Keep going, Kitten, you’re almost at your record.”

“Dude, how the Hell’d you talk me into this?” Sojiro smirked at Ryuji’s grumbling.

“Because you thought it’d be ‘awesome’ to see who could do more human reps and no one else would volunteer.”

“I volunteered!”

“No offense… Bug… but you’re… only… a hundred pounds.”

“Don’t make me sit on top of Ryuji. Then we’ll see how much a hundred pounds can do.”

“Yo, Sojiro, you have a minute?” Futaba and Akira crept down the stairs, her back pressed into his chest to hide something between them. Morgana padded down after them, a knowing smile on his face. There weren’t any customers at the time, so Sojiro didn’t see the harm in playing along.

“Sure, what’d you need?”

“We’ve been trying to think up a way to pay you back, for all you’ve done for us, and…” Sojiro held up a hand, smiling warmly at Akira.

“You don’t have to do anything for me. You kids are already the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and you know it.” He saw their hearts melt, but they persisted anyway.

“Well, you didn’t have to go through the trouble of pulling me out of prison.”

“And no one was holding a gun to your head and telling you to adopt me.”

“So we’re going to do something anyway. Well, technically we already did it, and we don’t feel like unraveling all the cloth.”

“Unravel? Just what did you…?” His voice softened as they walked apart, stretching out their gift between them. It was a long, dark orange banner, almost like a cape in how its ends smoothly capped. In the center was a shield crest, emblazoned with a fleur-de-lis. Circling around it were eight symbols, each in the shape of an animal. A yellow monkey, a red wildcat, white fox, blue tiger, pink peahen, grey cat, light orange ladybug, and a raven.

He could tell that neither of them were particularly great at knitting, but the difference between them in dexterity came through clearly in a few of the figures. The raven was very clean in make where the ladybug was rough and blurry, though not to a distracting degree. Futaba’s eyes shimmered with pride.

“Do you like it?” Sojiro pushed up his glasses, wiping preventatively at his eyes.

“It’s… It’s amazing. Here, give me a boost.” He came around the counter and grabbed a
stool, using it to reach the beam where the menu hung. Careful as to not sever any threads with the tacks, he pinned the banner up, easing himself back to the ground to admire Leblanc’s new flag. Futaba pushed herself under his arm, and he didn’t hesitate to hug her close. “I love you kids.”

“We love you, too, you old softy.”

“Morning, guys.” Ryuji chimed into LeBlanc, yawns into his hand. He was only half awake, but he knew his way to his barstool by heart. He kicked back against the counter, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. “You’re all being weirdly quiet. What’s…?”

It was then that he noticed the behavior amongst the Thieves. Morgana was the same as always, just cleaning his front legs, and Boss was tending to the coffee brewer. Ann and Futaba were giggling to each other. Makoto was as still as a statue, staring dead ahead with a light pink tint to her cheeks. His only hint as to the cause came from Yusuke, who was framing the kitchen with his fingers.

Ryuji turned to see what was up, and he found that LeBlanc had a new cook. She was a young one, and classy, too, if the black and grey kimono was any sign. She moved with an almost familiar grace, but he couldn’t pin exactly why he recognized it. All he knew was that she was a pretty one.

“Hey there, Boss just hire you?” She smiled softly and nodded.

“Why yes, this is my first day. You are Ryuji-kun, yes?” So Boss told her about him? Sweet.

“Yep. And you are?”

“Aka-chan. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” It was a little weird that she referred to herself with an honorific, but no one in his little group had much right to point out personal quirks, and her delicate tone was more than enough to compensate. “Would you like some curry? It’s almost finished.” And there were the magic words.

“You bet! With extra rice, please.” She swiftly put together the order, just the way he liked it, and brought it over on a silver tray. She set his plate down in front of him and held the tray flat over her stomach as she bowed.

“Please enjoy, sir.” And there was the final straw. He didn’t know if Boss would approve, but he was a Casanova type himself. He would probably understand.

“Thanks. Say, I know this is a bit sudden, but do you want to go out sometime?” He heard the snickers behind him ramp up, but he ignored it. Aka-chan’s cheeks turned pink, but she nodded wordlessly. “Alright! Here, let’s swap numbers so we can set something up.”

“What on Earth do you mean?” He raised an eyebrow. Did she not have a phone or something? Her smile widened, and she looked him dead in the eye before speaking again. “You’ve already got it, dude.” Ryuji nearly jumped backwards off of the stool, the deep, masculine voice like a foghorn straight to his face.

“Akira!?” The floodgates broke, Ann and Futaba clinging to each other as they cackled like a
“Oh my God, that was amazing!”

“I didn’t know how much longer I could hold it in! Good show, Kiki!”

“You knew the whole time!? Traitors!” Ann wiped the tears from her eyes, but they were accruing too quick to stop.

“I’m sorry, but he made us promise to stay quiet.”

“I knew you loved me.”

“Shaddup!” Ryuji curled into an embarrassed ball, poking at his curry. “I can’t believe you let him do that to me, Boss. How could you?”

“If you grew up when and where I did, you’d’ve learned to accept that people will love who they love.”

“This ain’t about love!”

“Apologies for the delay. I’m here for my shift.” The stairs squeaked as someone new joined the group. The voice was deep, composed. Its owner was on the short side, his brown hair swept back in a loose ponytail and topped by a fedora. His black suit was slick and pristine, exuding an air of control.

“I am Harumi-kun, and I will be your waiter.” He leaned down towards Makoto, whose whole face had gone cherry red. “What can I get for you today?” Makoto tried to speak a few times, but she only managed to stutter. “Hmm, just like when we first met, Mako-chan. I knew you would like it.” He pecked her cheek, and she nearly swooned into his arms. Aka-chan watched the whole exchange, smiling knowingly.

“Will you be needing the room tonight?”

“Akira!” Makoto’s eyes went from him to ‘Harumi’ a few times before she looked down, her hair covering her eyes. “Yes, please…” Ann had finally stopped laughing, now sighing at the sight of true love.

“I guess Makoto isn’t gay after all. She’s Haru-sexual.”

All the while, Sojiro could only smile. He could get used to this new routine.

It was an early morning in LeBlanc, not even sunrise yet, but Sojiro hadn’t slept a wink. It all started the night before, when the kids came back without Akira. Futaba and Haru assured him it was a necessary step of the plan to throw Akechi, but he couldn’t help but worry. A morning without the kid there just didn’t feel right.

He busied himself with his normal daily routine, sans Akira, prepping the shop for business. He turned the TV on for some background noise as he worked, putting away the dishes he had set to dry overnight.
“This just in, the leader of the Phantom Thieves, who was recently detained, has committed suicide while in police custody. Reports show he stole the firearm from an officer, and…” The end of the sentence was drowned out by the smashing of a plate. Sojiro stared at the screen in disbelief, his mind crawling to a stop.

“That… That wasn’t part of the plan…”

Chapter End Notes

How’s that for tonal whiplash?
Chained by Fate

Chapter Summary

You know what this is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sae’s mind was swimming in data, uncertain of how to process it. Everything she had just heard seemed to connect with what she already knew, right down to details Kurusu should have had no knowledge of unless he was being truthful. The theft of her laptop’s hard drive information and their implementation of its contents lined up too perfectly to deny.

The magic, though? Shadows, Personas, demons, cognitive shifts, it was all so farfetched. She needed time to run him through the ringer, double check to see if his second telling deviated in a way too drastic for the drugs and injuries to account for. But, checking her watch, she knew she was going to get pulled at any moment.

“Well, Kurusu, it seems we’re out of time. You’re sure that…” She looked up from her papers, and the boy was showing signs of slipping away again. She couldn’t blame him. There were two emptied needles, syringes dripping with pink fluid, on the floor, and what few wounds she could see were severe, the bruising about his head possibly indicating a concussion. Still, she couldn’t have him passing out while there were still small crumbs she could get from him.

“Hey, wake up!” He jolted in his seat, and he immediately doubled over, grasping at his ribs. She would have a report of undue brutality to file later, but for now, she had work to get done. “Now, are you sure you won’t cooperate? A few names would make much of your troubles disappear.”

“No… Won’t…” The longer they went, the more short form and tired his speaking got. He began well, almost eloquent, but by the time he began recounting the Okumura incident, he had devolved drastically. His voice rarely rose beyond a coarse whisper.

“So be it. Let the hammer fall as it will then.” She pushed her chair back and began to stand.

“Wait, one more… One more thing.”

“I’m sorry, but if I don’t leave now, the guards will…”

“I remember… Remember, Black Mask’s identity.” Sae stopped in her tracks, her attention focused.

“Who, who is it?” He had shown signs of knowing, but the haze over his mind had prevented him from tapping into those memories. Was he finally breaking through?

“Traitor, the traitor. Not a Thief. Could have been. Should have been. Wasn’t.” What did that mean? Wasn’t a Thief, but should have been… “Show him. Show…” He began to waver in his seat, his eyes fogging up.
“Stay with me, just say it! Who is Black Mask!?”

“It… He…” His eyes shot open, and he gasped once before collapsing. His head slammed into the table. She threw her hands down, but the jolt to the surface and bang did nothing to rouse him.

“Kurusu, wake up!” She reached over and pressed two fingers to his neck. He still had a pulse, thank God. The day had taken its toll on him, and he had no more to give. “Damn it, so close.” Just ten more seconds and she would have another lead, the real murderer. She began to gather up her things and reached for his phone. “It looks like I’ll have to use what I managed to gleam already, but that isn’t much in terms of his identity.”

“Thou art quick to surrender. Were we truly caught by such a slothful foe?” Sae spun around and put her arms up, responding to the hot flow of air on her neck, but she found nothing but a solid wall behind her.

“Who’s there?”

“Only two humans are in this room. Come, recall the tale. Thou knows’t who I am.” The tale? Did he mean Kurusu’s? “And thou call thyself an investigator. Truly a disappointment.”

“Enough! Who are you, and how did you get in here? The cameras will find you even if I can’t.”

“Thou art certain of that? Take a look.” Hesitantly, she looked to the wall above the door, and the camera had frozen. It was usually at a constant swivel, automatically going from corner to corner over the entire room, but now it was motionless. Naturally, she should have thought it was just a mechanical error or tampering, but this didn’t feel natural. Now that she was paying attention, the room felt warmer than before, as though fire raged just beyond its walls.

“What is this? Show yourself!”

“Hah, very well, I’ve had my fun.” Suddenly, Kurusu was awash in blue flame. It rose from his back, and when it was at eye level with her, it began to take a shape of its own. Its peaks twisted in on themselves, hardening into black spikes and a mask like smoothed iron. Red clothes wove from the flame beneath it, and the front of the plate cracked open to form eyes and a twisted, gnarled grin. He crossed his arms and tilted his head. “I am the pillager of twilight, Arsene.” He grabbed the rim of his hat with two fingers and tilted it forward. “Perhaps I prove sufficient evidence for Akira’s claims?”

Sae took a step back, still prepared for anything, but panicking on the inside. This was the monster he had referred to as his true other self, above the many demons he had described taking into his being. If he was real, then Kurusu’s recounting of events was at least partially true, but that was the least of Sae’s concerns. If there was one thing that stuck out from his description of Arsene, it was his penchant for mayhem. If she couldn’t keep things diplomatic, it would end poorly for her.

“What do you want?”

“Art thou afraid, Niijima?” He chuckled to himself, basking in the warmth of dominance. She could feel the daggers in his eyes, the burning point of intent, but he refrained from acting on it. “I assure thee, I mean no harm in this exchange. Only to fill in gaps Akira had not the time to finish.” He put a gentle hand on Akira’s shoulder, the tension in that one arm loosening. “Poor child, my brave greater whole. Such a shame that the jaws of death tighten upon thee.”
“Death? What are you talking about? This facility is perfectly secure and fully medically staffed.”

“Perhaps, but if they who lurk in the shadows have their way, he shan’t leave this room. Whether that comes to pass rests with thee.” He lifted off the ground, drifting around to her side of the table. She tried to get away, but he was already behind her by the time she could react. “One who joined only to destroy. One who, perhaps, had the makings of a Thief, but chose a bleaker path. One who we all know, but, at once, do not know. He is our killer, and he comes thus. Should he arrive in this place, Joker shall fall.”

Slowly, his cryptic words began to come together. It was a male, one with access to the station. He was a recent teammate, but not a full member. It was someone who both Kurusu and Sae herself knew, or at least thought they did. And, from the way Kurusu and Arsene’s words lined up, it was someone integral to his confession. The pieces fell into place, and the spotlight narrowed to one suspect alone.

“No, do you mean…?”

“He comes thus, but if thou hast an inkling of justice left in thine bones, thou can spare us this maddened fate.” He took the phone from the table and held it up to her. “This is the key, you its wielder, Black Mask the lock. Show it to him, and events will turn. Don’t, and the pieces shall fall as they may.” The heat began to disperse, and as his hands began to disintegrate, Sae hurriedly grabbed the phone before it could fall. “To save, or to condemn. Justice, or victory. The decision is thine, the consequences on thy shoulders.” The burning heat of his presence dissipated along with him, and soon she heard the camera whirring back to life.

“Was that real?” She could still feel the embers of his near touch, the heat he imparted on the phone in her hand. And she viscerally remembered the anger he stowed behind his mask. Unless she herself had been injected with a similar substance, she knew no way her mind would persist in recognizing the signs of his passing. There was no mistake, it was as real as the floor she stood on. She looked back at Akira, the boy who had been brutalized unjustly, and her view on the forces she worked for began to unravel. A banging on the door tore her from her pondering.

“Niijima-san, time’s up. You need to leave.” The door began to open, and she quickly stowed the phone in her document folder.

‘I hope you’re right about this.’

Akechi strolled through the halls of police HQ, and he couldn’t stop himself from smirking. The station’s occupants had evacuated on his order. Sae had fallen for his innocent act and was on her way out. That only left him with one piece of collateral between him and Joker. It brought him no small sum of pleasure to know that, of the two, he would be the one to come out on top. He composed himself, putting his stage face back on before nearing the guarded door to his cell.

“Excuse me, sir, would you be willing to accompany me? I’m not certain how safe I feel being alone in a room with the suspect at this stage.” The guard nodded curtly, turning to unlock the door. As soon as it was open, Akechi ripped the gun from the guard’s belt and fitted it with his personal silencer. He tried to reclaim it, but one clean shot to the head brought him down. Akechi
stepped over the body, and found himself face to face with his mark.

Except, he could tell he wasn’t all there. It was Akira, but at the same time not. His body was wilted and bruised like a stepped on flower, barely moving to acknowledge Akechi’s entrance. His breathing was thin and troubled, rough as though filtered through a sheet of sandpaper. His hair was damp with sweat and, most likely, iced water, clinging to his scalp, mingling with the blood dripping from a handful of open wounds about his head.

His eyes were empty, dulled, devoid of the cocky spirit Akechi had hoped to see one more time before extinguishing it forever. It was Akira, but it wasn’t Joker. Akechi growled at the sight, scowling at the mess of a man before him.

“And here I thought you would be too strong for the likes of Shido’s men to break. I suppose without those precious friends of yours, you are as fragile as the commoner. You can’t even tell that I’m here right now, can you?” Akira’s gaze drifted up to him, but no recognition arose. The coldness in those eyes sickened him. “No matter. You and he both will fall by my hand either way.”

Akechi aimed his gun, but as he touched the trigger, he found his motivation from before had left him. This wasn’t a victory. It was stepping on the shell of what used to be a worthwhile opponent. The only one he had ever encountered. It wasn’t the climactic finally he had dreamed of, only another job to be finished at Shido’s behest. Killing Akira brought him no joy, because he wasn’t Joker.

Still, if denying himself that pleasure would bring about his ultimate goal, he supposed it was still important to see his job through. He realigned his sights, looking glumly down at Akira as his eyes fought to close themselves.

“Goodbye, Joker. Your ‘justice’ ends here.” He pulled the trigger, and a sharp thwip popped through the room. Akira’s eyes opened slightly more as warm blood drained over his face, and he fell, a splatter drenching the table. Akechi checked himself for drops, and when he found none, he removed the silencer from his gun, slipping the latter incriminatingly into Akira’s hand. He quickly stashed his own equipment back into his suitcase, and he left, oblivious to the cloud of black mist scattering where there had once been a corpse.

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Sojiro’s thoughts were a blur. He tried to pour himself a cup of coffee, but his hands were shaking too terribly. In a fit of frustration, he shoved both cup and pot aside, the former shattering as it tumbled off the counter.

He needed to calm down, but everything around him was just another reminder. The extra green apron with the kid’s name sewn into the tag. The intricate silver utensils he had replaced the former set with. The flag that flew above him. They were all Akira’s mark on LeBlanc, tokens of the kid that had changed his life forever, and now he was gone.

He had intentionally kept his knowledge of the specifics thin so Akechi didn’t have anything to worm out of him in a worst case scenario, but he knew the broad strokes. Akira was to get caught, get interrogated by Sae, and convince her to help him break out while the villains behind the scenes thought Akira was still locked up.
This, though? No, this wasn’t in the script, and he knew damn well the kid wouldn’t go and kill himself. They killed him. They buried him while Sojiro sat on his ass and did nothing.

Once again, his inaction had gotten someone he loved killed.

“GOD DAMNIT!” He slammed his fists into the counter, but it hadn’t even been enough to hurt himself, let alone scratch the surface. He was a weak, pathetic old man, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do. He lowered his face into his hands, and he sobbed. But as he cried his eyes out, his mind was ablaze. The rage was blinding, his already fuzzy vision getting worse, and so lost was he that he didn’t recognize the electronic ring tone of his phone. He merely glanced at it before returning to his mourning.

Then he looked back at it. He grabbed his phone, and, with a quaking hand, he closed the text window and opened something else. The red eye expanded, and three text fields were presented to him. He brought it close to his mouth and spoke through clenched teeth.

“Sae. Niijima.”

“Candidate found.” His hand tightened. This was the path Akira had walked into their trap. This Palace, this effigy of sin, was, for all points and purposes, his grave. And its owner was the gravedigger. In the real world, Sojiro was weak, but not there. No, there, he could do something, rip the truth out of his one lead.

“SIU Headquarters.”

“Candidate found.” And then, he would tear his way through the ranks. This shadow group, this conspiracy, it had to go all the way to the top, and whoever stood above it all had orchestrated every loss he had suffered for the last decade. He couldn’t lose anyone else. They would, without doubt, want the rest of the Thieves’ heads, and he would be damned if he were to lose another kid to those bastards.

“Casino.”

“Candidate found. Please increase proximity to location to begin navigation.” Sojiro balled up his apron and threw it aside. As furious as he was, though, he knew he needed to make preparations. Akira had kept him up to date on the arsenal updates he made every month or so, and he knew he could get a good deal himself from the same source. It was still pricy by his standards, but no cost was too much. It helped that he already had his sidearm accounted for. He just needed to get back to his place and…

“Sakura-san, open up!” The door shook under a barrage of knocks, and the voice made Sojiro’s hair stand on end. How convenient that the woman he wanted to see just so happened to show up at his front door. Thaddeus rose in the back of his mind, and he felt his magic starting to seep into his tired bones. He knew just how to use it, too. He had the location set. All he needed was to drag her to SIU HQ and they would be off. He would show her just how rotten she had become. He ripped the door open, and at once his mountainous fury crumbled.

He almost forgot about Sae entirely, for in her arms, just barely standing with her assistance, was Akira. He shook like a dog left in the rain, a combination of exhaustion and paranoia. His eyes were foggy and distant, but the twitching of his nose told him where he was.

“Niijima… This…”

“Yes, it’s LeBlanc. You’re safe now.” Akira’s violent jittering slowed, and his breathing
“Kid, you’re...” Sojiro tried to put a hand on his arm, but Akira jumped at his touch. The yelp that escaped his lips warped into a growl towards the end, and Sojiro saw the red flare up momentarily in his eyes. “It’s me, Sojiro! Don’t you recognize me?” Akira’s battered mind slowly processed the voice, and its familiarity let him relax.

“Soji... So...” His eyes drifted shut, and he almost collapsed into LeBlanc. Sojiro caught him in time, but as soon as he touched his ribs, he knew something was wrong. They were loose, and as he wheezed in pain, he inadvertently let Sojiro feel the thin cracks along their surface. His fury returned to him, a cold flame in the pit of his stomach. These symptoms weren’t just from a brutalizing. There was something chemical at play, and he didn’t like what they reminded him of.

“What did they do to him?”

“Apparently they decided no lengths were too far for interrogating a Phantom Thief. I don’t know how long they were at it, but he was slated to have been in that room for six hours before I arrived.” He grit his teeth, restraining the embers before they forced their way into the real world.

“What was there anything else?”

“Well...” Sae averted her eyes. “There were two emptied syringes on the floor. I can only conclude that they attempted to use some form of truth serum to make him talk, but all it did was decrease his awareness and block access to a number of vital memories.” Sojiro’s eyes widened, and the flame swelled to consume the entirety of his lower intestines.

“What color was it, what color!?” Sae was shocked by the sudden outburst, but she complied swiftly, sensing his expertise in the field.

“Assuming his blood didn’t dye the remaining fluid, pink.” She almost jumped as his eyes lit up, his scarlet irises shaking manically.

“Damnit, no!”

“Are you familiar with the substance?”

“I used to guard the lab where they tested the original formula. It was deemed a failure because of the high outcome of total organ failure.” The gravity of the situation hit Sae hard, and she held onto the boy as though he would slip from her fingers with the slightest breeze. “The bastards must have thought that was fine, since he was slated to die anyway.”

“Please tell me there’s a cure or treatment options?”

“Yes, but I need supplies to make it. I need...” He ran through his list of contacts, and he was fortunate that his first pick was right around the corner. “His room is upstairs. Get him to his bed, but don’t let him fall asleep. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“My little guinea pig, how could they do this to you?” Takemi almost found the sight before her too appalling to look at. Sae had managed to get Akira’s shirt off, and his chest was lumpy and
malformed, the bones beneath it jutting out at odd, unnatural angles. She could see the skin stretching to indicate a few were sliding apart as he breathed, signs of a complete fracture of numerous ribs. Paired with the intense bruising over most of his body and the experimental drug injection she had been informed of, she was amazed he could still breathe at all. If she had ever seen the devil’s work on Earth, this was it.

“There. It’s a bit ramshackle, but it will have to do.” Sojiro rose from the workbench, a syringe of clear fluid in hand. “Now we just have to inject it, but…” He looked at Akira’s eyes. They were in a constant cycle of drifting shut and snapping open, the pupils beneath them dilated. If he was even a fraction as defensive as when he arrived, this could be a dangerous operation, especially considering it was a needle that put him on death’s door to begin with. “Sae, you investigator types are trained to fight, right?”

“Yes, Aikido. Do you believe he’ll grow hostile upon injection?”

“The kid’s instincts are sharp. He could be dragging himself along on his chin and still try to fight back. But your martial arts aren’t going to help us much here.” He stood next to Akira, slowly pushing him until his legs were hanging off the edge. He put all his weight into Akira’s arm, pinning it to the bed.

“We’ll need to hold him down. Takemi, get his legs. Sae, other arm, and whatever you do, don’t let it up.” Both followed his instructions without hesitation. Akira cringed under the intense pressure, but he forced himself to stay calm. This was LeBlanc, he was safe here. “Sorry, kid, this is going to hurt me a Hell of a lot more than it’ll hurt you. Maybe literally.”

He pressed the needle into Akira’s skin, and his eyes instantly snapped open. He yelled in pain and struggled against his binds, and Sae found out just what she had signed up for. Even drugged and beaten, the strength he could exert from one limb was staggering, almost lifting her whole body off the ground. She redoubled her effort, putting her all into holding him down. Sojiro pressed the plunger, and the makeshift antidote flowed into Akira’s veins.

He screamed again, and his skin ignited. Blue flame covered his bed, and despite Sojiro’s warning, Sae flinched. Akira saw his chance, tearing his arm free. He swung at them blindly, and when his knife materialized in his hand, Sojiro jumped back, pulling Takemi and Sae with him. The flames devoured Akira whole, melting the syringe into a metal and plastic slurry before reforming into his Thief attire. Even with the mask in the way, though, Sojiro could see that his conscious mind wasn’t present in those eyes. He was running on mental fumes, but that was enough to prove dangerous. He raised his hand, fingers brushing against his mask.

“Get back!” Sojiro dropped to a defensive stance. Thaddeus pushed against the barrier between his world and the real, and it broke. A wave of flame overtook Sojiro, leaving behind his midnight black armor. He ducked behind his shield, prepared for whatever Joker might summon. The boy recognized him as a threat and wrapped his fingers around his mask, pulling it from his face.

“Arse…!” Suddenly, he stiffened, and his breathing stopped. His outfit unraveled, and Akira, in his normal clothes, fell to the floor. Sojiro let out a sign of relief, the loss of tension making him revert as well.

“Thank God that antidote hits like a truck.” Takemi, unshaken, went to pull Akira back into bed, but Sae stayed right where she was. Her mind struggled to comprehend what she had felt, the intense, vicious presence that, at that moment, had crashed down on her.

It was the same force she felt lurking behind Arsene’s gaze.
Sojiro sat and watched over Akira, now sound asleep. He was bound almost completely in gauze, his breathing was still unsteady, and he would be stuck like that for several weeks, if not longer, but he was alive. At some point during his watch, Sojiro remembered that his phone had rung earlier, and when he checked it, he found a string of messages.

Futaba: Wait, it’s alright! This is all part of the plan!

Futaba: Sojiro, don’t! We can’t have anyone in that Palace right now!

Futaba: Screaming, I can hear him screaming, in my head. So much pain, so much…

Sojiro: Futaba, are you alright? Say something.

Futaba: Pardon, Boss, it’s Haru. She couldn’t get the camera to function, so it seems she attempted to use Prometheus to see what was happening at LeBlanc. What she saw triggered a panic attack. I’m not certain if I wish to know the cause.

Sojiro: Is she okay now?

Futaba: Yes. She is still unresponsive, but she has calmed down. I will stay here and watch over her, do not worry. Mona will be over as soon as Taba-chan is okay without him.

He let out a sigh of relief. He was more than thankful to have those kids around. They watched each other when he couldn’t.

And yet, this still happened to Akira. He was his guardian, and yet he had allowed his ward to almost die. If he had been a minute later, the damage could have been irreparable.

“You know there is little we could have done to prevent this. The Black Mask’s actions are beyond our control.”

‘If I had been there helping in Okumura’s Palace, there’s a chance I could have stopped him from getting shot and going comatose. If he was still awake, the kids wouldn’t have been backed into a corner in the first place.’
“You believe your service to be incomplete then?”

‘I believe I’m a coward that just didn’t want to risk getting back in the fight. I could have stopped this, I know it, but I was content staying here and playing head chef instead.’

“You sound as though you’ve found a new resolve.”

‘Yeah. This is the last time any of them have to suffer, I’ll make sure of it personally. I will not fail them again.’

As that thought passed through his mind, he felt Thaddeus’s presence within him shifting. His armor grew loose, brittle, unable to contain the power flowing out from within. Sojiro’s old bones embraced the swell in power. He felt his youth returning from the inside out. It was like being born anew.

“The Boss is back.”

Chapter End Notes

Jacksepticeye joke.

This chapter was brought to you by platinum, both a type of metal and the type of trophy I just earned. That’s right, your boy’s in the top 2.2% of P5 players! On top of already having the P4G platinum! I am the no-life elite! Anyone else who has also done so, speak up now, let this spotlight be ours.

Alright, next up on the hit list, Persona 3 Portable. Hmm, twenty bucks on PSN, eh? Let me just... *looks in empty wallet* ...Darn it.
“Good morning, Boss.” Yusuke bowed as he entered, and Sojiro nodded back. He had long
learned that it was about as informal as the kid got without actively being an enemy. He also thought
he learned to not try talking to him until after he’s had five minutes to observe the Sayuri, but he
seemed to ignore its presence entirely. “I hear Akira has awoken. Is he fit for visitors?”

“Yeah. The others are already up there.” He smiled warmly at the memory of Ryuji sprinting
into LeBlanc at sunrise the day before, looking to make sure his friend was alright. He had been
disappointed to hear he was to be left alone to recuperate for the time, but he bounced back once he
heard Futaba needed help. Akira surrounded himself with good people, to be certain. “Just go easy
with the questions, alright? He’s not quite all there yet.”

“I understand. After the ordeal he went through, I would be surprised if he wasn’t a bit
dazed.”

“Actually, it’s something…” Yusuke’s mind had locked on another track, though, one
carrying him straight to his friend’s side. He didn’t hear the rest of Sojiro’s explanation, or the sigh he
let loose when he realized the kid wasn’t listening. He didn’t even take a moment to appreciate the
collection of knickknacks scattered about Akira’s room, his eyes going straight to their owner. He
stared aimlessly at the ceiling, blinking slowly.

“Good morning. I apologize for being late, I didn’t quite have enough for the subway.” Akira
turned his head towards the stairs, and when he saw Yusuke, a smile oozed over his face. Yusuke
was surprised by the lack of natural charm within it, and that feeling only grew as he spoke.

“Oh, heeeey Yusuk… Yu… Foxy. Wasup?” Yusuke genuinely had no idea how to respond.
Akira didn’t notice his discomfort, turning back to the ceiling with that same dopey smile. “The
stars’re pretty.”

“Are you… feeling alright?” Akira glanced back at him, still as chipper as ever.

“I’m feeling jus fine. I tricked Pankechi, saw the Doc, and now everythin’s jus great.”

“He’s been like this since we arrived.” Makoto sat by him on the bed, periodically checking
his forehead for signs of a fever. “The medicine he’s on has left him feeling a little loopy.”

“Loopty loo…”

“I wasn’t aware bodily painkillers had such a powerful side effect.”

“They don’t.” Sojiro plodded up the stairs behind him, a tea tray in hand. A small bottle of
pills sat in the corner. “This is from the antidote I had to give him.”
“Antidote? As in a counter to poison?” Yusuke’s voice suddenly went cold, and his eyes narrowed.

“They gave him an experimental truth serum. It was supposed to numb his self control so he would be more willing to speak, but the formula often oversteps its original purpose, killing vital organs one cell at a time. The only way to counter it is to temporarily disable parts of those organs so the drug doesn’t register them as active cells and passes harmlessly through the system.”

“So he was effectively dead?”

“More or less.” Sojiro set the tea tray down on the table, pouring a steaming cup. “His body is waking up now, you could say, but it’s a gradual process. His conscious mental functions will be dulled for a day or two. In other words…”

“He’s high as a kite.” Futaba raptly filmed Akira’s every move, snickering to herself as he ‘ooh’ed and ‘ah’ed at the stickers on his ceiling. Sojiro raised an eyebrow at her.

“You’re not posting any of that online.”

“Of course not. I just figure he’d want to see what he was up to while doped up.”

“I’m holding you to that, young lady. Now help me hold his head up. He’ll appreciate having some actual painkillers in him when he starts coming to.”

- 

“Sho, you’re tellin’ me they have an evil tochure chamber under there, and you almosht got killed in there?”

“Yeeeaah. It shucked, I’ll tell you wut.”

“No kidding. When yer twenty-one, I’m takin’ you drinkin’ to make up for it. I’d do it now, but Lala would kick my ash.”

“Your ash? I think you mean ash. Uh, ash. Heh, I can’t shay it either.”

Kawakami rolled her eyes as she gently kneaded Akira’s shoulders, the one part of him that didn’t elicit a sharp yelp on contact and wasn’t wrapped up under half an inch of casts or gauze. Unsurprisingly, high Akira and drunk Ohya got along like old drinking buddies.

“If you rot his liver at any age, I’ll kick your ash. And I do mean ‘ash.’”

“Why’re the women in yer life sho shecary?”

“I dun know. I blame me mum.”

-
“You know the drill, drink up.” Akira obediently sipped the tea, letting it wash down a few tablets. He only stopped once the cup was empty, letting Sojiro pull it away with a hard exhale.

“Can I have shum coffee now?” Sojiro rubbed his hair, careful not to let any tug on his scalp.

“Sorry, kid, the caffeine would hurt more than it would help. You’ll have to go without for a while.” He groaned loudly, and Sojiro had to stifle his laughter.

“You go an get me hooked on the shtuff, then you cut me off. Yer mean shometimes.”

“Tell you what, I’ll talk with Haru and see if we can get you a bag of black ivory beans once you’re back on your feet. How does that sound?” The carefree smile returned, and Sojiro found himself copying it.

“You guysh are the best. Hey, I shaid’n esh without shlurring. Gettin’ better aready.” Sojiro fluffed his pillow and pulled the sheet back over him before gathering his things to take back down. “I love you, Dad.” Sojiro’s heart stopped, and he struggled to respond.

“W-What was that? I didn’t hear you.”

“I said I love you, Dad.” He didn’t quite know how to feel. He wanted to chalk it up to his drug addled state, but for that brief moment, he actually sounded lucid. A warmth filled his heart, and he softly patted his head.

“I love you, too, kid.”

Futaba: AAAAAAAAHHH DID HE REALLY JUST

Sojiro: It’s not nice to spy on people.

Futaba: THAT WAS ADORABLE, WTAH JOKER!?!?!?!? I”M THE CUTE ONE IN THIS HOUSE!!!!!

Sojiro: He’s in LeBlanc, not the house, so he’s fine.

Futaba: Oh my God, does this make Akari, like, new Mom or something? I’m not sure how I feel about that.

Sojiro: Me neither, so let’s not talk about it.
“Oh man, then there wash the thirteenth Big Bang off. Haru almosht got me on that one, but my shtomach held out.” Sae didn’t know why, but Akira seemed to be perfectly fine talking about things with her. She would have thought there would be a bias against her after being interrogated and almost assassinated, but he was rolling along as though it was a normal conversation.

“She is quite the strong willed girl. To go through so much but still be able to operate on your team is an astounding feat.”

“I know, wer lucky to have ‘er.” Even burdened by his wounds and chemical after effects, he still wore his heart on his sleeve. The way he glowed while talking about his friends and comrades was all she needed to see to know that he wasn’t the criminal she had pegged him as before. Still, there was one more thing she needed to get out of him. She just had to be delicate about it.

“Speaking of Haru, there was one small question I had regarding her. She seems awfully close to…”

“Yesh.” Sae paused, not expecting to get interrupted.

“I didn’t finish the question.”

“Yesh she’s dating Mako. I’m loopy, but I’m shtill sharp.” Sae failed to reply to his explanation. She steepled her fingers, staring pensively into space. She thought that was the vibe she was getting from those two, but she had to make sure. All things considered, she couldn’t blame Makoto for keeping it secret for…

“How long?”

“It wash a bit after she joined, shooooo… Five, six mons? I think.” Half a year, both of dating behind her back and working alongside the Phantom Thieves. Did she even know her sister anymore? “You should’ve seen those two back then. It wash, like, sheshual tension the series for a while. Then we god to Dednylan, and…” His rambling trailed off, and his lack of speech was more distracting than his previous meandering train of thought.

“Kurusu, are you there?”

“You sure bout that? Mako’d kick your ash if you scarred her or something.” He was focused on his workbench chair, but Sae didn’t see anything.

“Who are you talking to?”

“Yeah, I’ll tell her. Sho, Arsene wants to talk.” She could feel her heart seizing at the memory of the twisted fire spirit, the passive aggression in his actions and words. She feared what he would do now that he no longer needed her assistance. “Startin to drift a lil here, so I’ll let you two be. Dun worry, I won’t let him…” His eyes slid shut, and he started to snore almost instantly. A plume of azure fire rippled over the workbench, and there sat Arsene. She stood up, readying herself for anything, but he halted her with one raised hand.

“Do not be alarmed, I wish only to add my own thoughts to thine predicament.” His off hand framed his face, and he lazily rotated his seat with a leg on the floor. “A tale as old as humanity, the
lovers hidden in shame for the ideals of their families. I believe the most recognized would be Romeo and Juliet, correct?” He gestured for her to sit back down, but she stayed on her feet, though she compromised by forcing herself out of her defensive stance.

“I know you’re only making small talk for the sake of politeness. There’s no need to be so indirect.”

“My nature is that obvious, then? I suppose this is why I leave deception to Akira. That is more his sphere than my own.” He stood to match her, weaving his hands behind his back. “Tell me, why doth thou suppose she hid so much from thee? Her membership to the Phantom Thieves notwithstanding, of course.”

“If I were to guess…” She would need to break it down into its most basic elements first. Why would she hesitate to tell Sae about dating at all, and why further for dating another woman? “…I would say it’s because she was afraid of what I would do.”

“Elaborate.” His voice gave away no intention beyond that of a mentor trying to make a pupil think.

“You sound like you already know. Why don’t you tell me?”

“Such is not the way of the Phantom Thieves. We make thine sort reveal thine own sins.” If nothing else, he clarified what he was hoping to accomplish in this exchange. He saw his operation with her distortion to be yet incomplete.

“She felt that, as both a distraction from her studies and a mark against her in certain entrenched sectors of society, I would have forced her to terminate the relationship. She hid it out of fear of persecution.”

“Ah, an excellent conclusion.” He lifted off the ground, reclining on ebon wings. “She felt no safety from thee, her own family, and so masked her true self at thine behest. Thine actions threatened to repress her true self, seal her away as an idol on her pedestal instead of an individual in her own right.”

“That’s absurd!” She lashed out without a second thought, and Arsene saw the flecks of yellow in her shade. Her Shadow had arrived. “I’ve only ever done what I thought best for her future. I admit now that I went too far, but it was because I wanted her to go somewhere in life.”

“Is that what thou believe? Truly?” There was a hard edge behind his false joviality, enough to shake her certainty in her motives. “Thou can lie to thyself as much as thou please, but thine heart rings naught but true.” He waved his hand, and a wall of fire sprung to life around them. In the flames, the light twisted, forming faint images.

‘Yes, this is perfect. Soon, you will be prepared for your debut. Don’t disappoint me now, Makoto.’ She began to see figures form. If not for Akira’s earlier description of her Shadow’s appearance, she wouldn’t have recognized herself in that skimpy, unabashed dress and makeup.

‘Are you certain this is an appropriate display?’

‘No, wrong!’ She lashed out, and the other girl yelped. ‘You will speak to and about me with due respect. Am I clear?’ Sae’s eyes struggled against the glare and unfamiliarity of the scene before her, but when she discerned who she was looking at, her stomach clenched.

‘I am sorry, Sae-sama. It will not happen again.’ For as thin as her Shadow’s clothes were, she could at least still call them that. What she called ‘perfect’ would hardly pass as a swimsuit. Why
was Makoto in that ridiculous garb?

“All that matters in thine world is victory and prestige, at any cost. What would Makoto’s success be but an extension of thine own?”

“No, that can’t be. I would never…”

‘All you do is eat away at my life!’

The memory returned to her in a flash, and it stole the air from her lungs.

“Oh my God…” It wasn’t as direct, but that moment was, in intention, a mirror image of the despicable display before her. Makoto simply asked if the path she was on was the right one, and Sae instantly crushed the attempt under her heel.

“To lie to thyself so completely is the first step in mortal sin, but it is far from thine only transgression.” He waved an arm, and another scene was woven into the glow of his flames. It was some form of control room, and Sae’s Shadow stood behind the operator with her arms crossed.

‘Pardon, Madam Sae, it says this man here is to win the jackpot on machine twenty-seven. Should I rewrite the outcome?’

‘Is that even a question? None may win against the house.’

‘Hmm, how familiar this scene is. One meant to win his freedom, halted to preserve thine reputation.” Sae reflected on the scene, asking herself which case of the many she had directly or indirectly rigged it had been. How many innocent people were behind bars because of her actions?

“Ah, now for the crown jewel.”

A snap of the fingers, and the fire expanded. She backed away as it enveloped her, but she found it didn’t burn to the touch. The room around her was replaced by the phantasmal memory, placing her in the cafe proper. Another her, the real her, stood at the counter, her stance ramrod straight and unbending.

‘Should I look into the fact that you would allow a known convict into the same household as her? That’s the sort of report that would revoke your guardianship…”

‘Damn, stop! I yield, I yield.’

‘Excellent. I knew you could be made to see reason.’

Sae heard a throaty growl behind her. She turned to the stairs, and hiding a few steps up, out of sight of both Sojiro and her illusory self, was Akira. His teeth were bared, his hand threatened to tear through the wood of the wall, and his eyes burned a bloody red.

“He stood aside then in fear, uncertain of what he could do against thee. If he had known thy name in a more timely manner, known the full extent of thine transgressions, he would have acted much more promptly. It is thee and thine kin, above all others, that he despises the most.”

The world warped around her once again, and she found herself in the middle of an unfamiliar town. It was dark, but across the street, in the light of a streetlamp, she saw Akira. He was more gangly than she knew him to be, and he was with two others, a woman with terror in her eyes and a man with spite in his.

‘Damn brat, I’ll sue!’ The fire dispersed, and the illusions fell in favor of the real world. She
was dizzy, lost in the sea of information Arsene had flooded her with.

“It was here that I came to consciousness. It needled at my unformed mind a number of times before, but in this moment, I was conceived.” Arsene had moved, looking out the window with his hands still clasped behind his back. He glanced sideways at Akira, but she couldn’t read his motionless mask. “I am the spirit of rebellion that burns within, the hatred forced to simmer where none may see. When his burdens became too great, my shackles were loosened, and I was allowed to be born, hatred that walks thine Earth.”

“Those sinners that would turn justice against the just. They who would use it as a tool to rise above their fellow man. They who treat the lives of the innocent as tokens to be gambled away.” With every word he spoke, his grip tightened, his claws ripping through the fabric of his sleeves. He turned to her, and the cracks that formed his eyes widened. Beneath them, deep in the flame, were orbs of white, spotlights that left no corner of her being unseen.

“It is thee that I despise most.” He returned his attention to the window, and his hands loosened. “And yet, I may not act on this hatred, the reason for my being. Were your Treasure to be stolen now, it would draw the eyes of the conspiracy. And so I must stand aside, and allow that den of sin to fester.”

“Then why not just kill me?” Sae spoke before she could think, the first words that could come to her shaken mind. “You have the power, and it would remove a threat to justice that you recognize. Why not end it now?”

“Hmm, an excellent question.” Sae hadn’t so much as blinked when he closed the gap. He lunged at her with a speed she could barely comprehend, a claw coming for her throat. She put her arms up, but she felt like she was moving in relative slow motion. She could turn such a sweeping strike back on a human opponent, grabbing their arm and throwing them over her shoulder, but Arsene was no human. He operated on a scale of strength that was nothing short of alien to her. By the time she could get into position, he would be wrist deep in her flesh and blood.

Suddenly, he stopped, halted in his tracks. Sae was frozen, in shock and confusion, when she heard the straining of chains. The links around his wrist were glowing white, pulling him back. The trail lead back to Akira, who, though still unconscious, had his hand wrapped tightly around the chain.

“That, Niijima, is why.” He relaxed his muscles, and at once, the bind loosened, returning to the passive cloud of chains that flowed in his fire. “A spirit of wrath I may be, but I am tied inexorably to a kinder soul. He believes that sinners, such as thyself, should be granted a chance at redemption. He believes, despite all he has endured, that humans can change.” He returned to Akira’s side, running his claws through his hair. “Do not disappoint the boy, Niijima. We may not be able to change thee, but now that thou hast seen thine errors, perhaps thou canst correct thine own path.” The steady flow of Akira’s breathing broke, and his eyes opened groggily.

“Arsh… Arsene, did you jus try to kill shumone?”

“Nay, I simply showed why I could not. I hope I did not interrupt thine rest too greatly.”

“Nah, I’m good. Can’t sleep all day. Hey, I shstopped shhurring again. Wait, did I jus…”

“The rest may do thee more than thou think.” Arsene glanced over his shoulder, looking directly at Sae. “I pray that when next we cross paths, thine shall be a mended soul.” The flames that composed his body overtook his form, and when they passed, he was gone. Sae was left breathless, even more lost than she had been before.
“Yeah, he isn’t exactly gently with people, is he?”

“I… struggle to see him as an extension of you.”

“You can choose your friends but you can’t choose yourself. Uh, wait, is that how it…?” He quickly gave up on that line of thought, laughing to himself. Despite the existential panic rising within her, she found even his diluted spirit to be a dampening influence on life’s woes. “Aaaaaah God, Bug’s gonna kill me.”

“May I ask why?”

“Told ‘er I’d flip off a police cam for her, but I pushed out a’fore I could. I’m a terrible brother.” Sae thought about it for a moment before pulling out her phone.

“Technically, I am an element of the police force, which would make my camera a police camera. Would that suffice?”

“Oh sweet, yer a life shaver.” She turned it on and started recording, nodding to him. “To the guy whosh boot print is on my left lung.” He threw an arm up, its movements akin to a half cooked noodle. The only controlled portion of it was a single finger flying high. “Go f*ck yerself. Hehe, don’t tell Sojiro I shed that under his roof.”

“Yep, the kid is still out of it.” Sojiro idly watched the recording, the bulk of his attention on the meeting snacks he had been assigned to provide (specifically, the usual coffee, curry, and cocoa.) The rest of the Thieves plus Sae had already convened, ready to go over all of the evidence and clues they had on tap. They would have a definitive target by the end of the day.

“Hey, he pulled through with the goods. Guess I owe brother mine something.” Futaba blissfully ignored the contemplative glimmer in Sojiro’s eyes, tapping away on her computer and phone in tandem. It was a more efficient search system, she claimed, at least until the phone started to ring. She gulped at the ID, knowing it was only a matter of time. She hushed the others, switching it to speaker mode before answering.

“Hey, what’s up, Akari-san?” If her hushing earlier didn’t shut them up, her using a formal honorific in a quivering voice did.

“I’ve heard a few… interesting reports recently. I was wondering what Akira thought about them.” Even Sae found herself shivering at the coldness in her voice. She was well beyond the borders of Tokyo, but this Akari’s presence was suffocating.

“About that, he might not be in quite the right position to talk right now…”

“And that means?”

“He’s alive! Just gonna throw that out there, but he’s…”

“Proof.” Futaba swallowed hard, and, after getting silent permission from Sae, she sent the video files. A minute passed. “Futaba-chan?”
“Yes?”

“I’m going to be taking a trip to Tokyo by this time next week. I trust that your friends will have a plan to pay whoever did this back for their… hospitality. One that includes me.” Futaba’s mouth had gone dry, so Sojiro took the reins.

“We’re all in the usual place right now to talk about just that. We’ll fill you in when you arrive.”

“Thank you, Boss. I will see you in one week.” The other end of the line hung up, and Futaba let her arms dangle uselessly at her sides as she recovered. Sae noted the general discomfort among the group, and she had only one guess as to its cause.

“Am I correct in assuming that was a relative of his?”

“Kiki’s mom. Scariest lady I know. No offense, Haru.”

Chapter End Notes

Akira has some great pals, putting up with him while he’s on his trip like that.
Mockingbird Adrift

Chapter Summary

In which smoothest pancake boy plays PT with the PTs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Congratulations, Akechi-kun.”
“Great work, Detective Prince!”
“Suck it, Phantom Thieves!”

Such was the mantra being endlessly repeated to Akechi. He had heard naught but praise ever since the suicide announcement, from both interviewers and passersby on the streets. People practically worshipped the ground he walked on. It was one piece shy of everything he had ever wanted.

And yet, it was a far cry from those dreams of grandeur. He didn’t feel an ounce of fulfillment, only the same tired hollowness. The death of Joker was meant to be the first domino in the last stretch of his grand plan. Instead, it felt like a door locking behind him.

Akechi tried to shake off the feeling, but it lingered in his mind. It was a cloud that ever followed him. He was tired. So very tired…

“Come on, you shouldn’t be in here.” Akechi didn’t budge. He didn’t even acknowledge the officer’s presence. He stared blindly ahead, his sight consumed by the shadow just beyond him. Its source waved back and forth from the center of the room. The creaking of that rope was his metronome, and he would listen to it for as long as it persisted, until another officer came to cut her down…

“Entering Yongen-Jaya station. Repeat, Yongen-Jaya.” The boom of the intercom startled Akechi out of his sleep. He wiped its remnants from his eyes and departed the train, making for the stairs up to that familiar alleyway.

He was about to turn when he realized where he was going. Something in his subconscious
mind had driven him towards LeBlanc, forgetting entirely that it was a place he was no longer allowed. He clenched his hand painfully, trying to forget the allure of Sakura-san’s coffee as he returned to his intended route.

It was before dawn, and no one else walked the streets. It was an oddity in Tokyo, but not an unwelcome one. The less witnesses, the better. He long ago scouted out a nearby building as a vantage point. The theater officially reopened recently, but it still had suitable unused portions that he could make use of after hours. A simple credit card in the crack between double doors popped open the latch, circumventing the outdated locks and granting him entrance.

From there, he ascended to the roof, and he checked the angle once more. The Sakura residence was a stone’s throw away, and he had a perfect view of its entrance. As expected, his target was outside the gate, sitting with her knees tucked under her chin. When not online, Futaba Sakura was a creature of habit, as vulnerable as the rest. If he did not take advantage of that fact, he knew that she alone could tear the cover from the conspiracy and render his years of work meaningless. This he could not abide by.

He made to open his briefcase, fiddling with the hidden panel when he saw someone else join the scene. He ducked behind the lip of the roof, watching as Sojiro joined his daughter in the night air. Akechi swore under his breath. Killing anyone but a primary target was out of the question. Shido did not tolerate sloppiness on the job. Overstepping his allowance would put him back by months, if not more. He had to bide his time.

He watched as they had a conversation, though he couldn’t hear them from so far away. They were both melancholic, he could tell, and her usual excitability was nowhere to be seen. He could hardly call her the Oracle he knew, a running theme he had swiftly tired of. They exchanged a hug, and bile rose to the back of Akechi’s throat. Even on the back foot, they had more than him.

Eventually, Sojiro departed, likely to open LeBlanc, and Akechi saw his chance. He attached the silencer to his pistol and took aim, accounting for falloff and wind as he aligned his shot. His finger pushed at the trigger, but when he saw her face down the sights, he froze. He could only see her laughing at his expense, having replaced his words with various baked goods. His hands grew unsteady, and his palms began to sweat. What was he…?

“Why hast thou stopped?” A cold breath tingled at the back of his neck, and he scoffed at it.

“It’s been a while since I’ve heard from you.”

“Thou have not needed my guidance in quite some time.” Spindly, pinstriped fingers wrapped around his shoulders, and the chill sank into his very bones. “Why doth thou hesitate? This is a necessary step in thine plan.”

“I am uncertain myself. Perhaps some element of my mind still wished to see her as an ally.”

“That fool Robin Hood, no doubt. I advised thee to discard him long ago for that reason. The preening archer doth corrupt thine mind with childish notions.” The hands descended his arms, as gradual as encroaching glaciers. “Shall I remove him? T’would be but a moment’s inconvenience.”

“No, leave him be.” He had been prodding for Robin’s dismissal for as long as they shared the space within his mind, as long as he could recall having a Persona at all. He could see the logic in his suggestion, but whenever he considered it with any degree of seriousness, it felt like his heart was being torn in two. “He’s trouble now, but he could also provide the insight I need to hunt down the rest of the Thieves when the time comes.”
“Very well, but forget not our solemn vow.”

“Not likely. I am thou, thou art I.”

“Thou who defies the order of this crooked world and would tear it asunder. When it at last falls at thine feet, all shall know of the injustices piled upon thee.” The hands had made their way to his wrists, and they held him steady. “Destroy this one that opposes thine reward, and let no other deny thee the fruits of thine labor.”

“I won’t, Loki.” The spirit chuckled, fading back into the fog of Akechi’s mind. He aimed once more, steeling his heart against the memories that threatened to consume him. Futaba was in his sights. He touched the trigger. Behind him, he heard a piercing click.

“Hello, Akechi. Wonderful weather this morning.” Akechi cursed himself out, letting someone sneak up on him in the middle of a job. An amateur mistake. He turned his head enough to see, finding Makoto with her revolver leveled at him and an eerily serene look in her eye. “That was an interesting Persona. Has Robin Hood lost weight?”

“Come now, we both know that piece of plastic in your hands isn’t a real threat here.” He stood fully, safe in the knowledge that the only one who used a real firearm was Joker. “It was quite brave of you to confront me anyway, I must admit.”

“Joker left quite the position to fill after he found that knife in his back.” Akechi smirked at Makoto’s quip.

“I assure you, if they found the implement, it wasn’t me. More importantly, I should have guessed you would take up his mantle. I don’t foresee you being nearly as successful, however.” He pointed his gun at her, smile widening. Perhaps he would kill an actual Phantom Thief after all. “You always did have a knack for getting in over your head. Tell Joker I said hello when you get to Hell.”

“And I assure you, I will not be failing in my duties so soon. Not until I properly repay our debt to you.” She fired, and a ripple of pain ran through his arm. The revolver’s barrel smoked. A warm fluid ran over his skin. In the corner of his eye, he saw a dark stain expanding out from his bicep, and his left arm went limp. His confident expression fell.

“How the Hell…”

“It seems you’re not the only one here with tricks up your sleeve. Thank you for revealing how little you know of cognition shifting, by the way.” She returned his earlier smirk, and blue fire overtook her. Akechi bolted, quickly figuring out what she was doing if not how.

She blocked the only stairway down, which left him with one option. He leaped from the roof, landing on the next, one story lower. His ankles strained with the impact, gimping the first few steps as he kept running. If her transformation was as complete as he thought it to be, he would need a way to counter an enemy Persona.

‘Loki, come to me!’ His call heeded no response. In the back of his mind, he felt Loki sitting. He made no attempt to move from his rest. No matter what he tried, Loki remained where he was. Akechi’s only salvation would be the Metaverse, where he could force his Persona into action.

“You won’t escape, traitor!” An engine roared, and tires screamed. Makoto ramped from her roof after him, the red skull of Anat staring at him through the front windshield.

Akechi ran the numbers in his head. Mementos could only be accessed from a subway terminal. The nearest was less than half a mile away, but the average motorcycle could travel in
excess of one hundred miles per hour. He had no means of determining Anat’s top speed, but, judging from the apparent strength of Queen’s heart and the evident rage therein, he knew he couldn’t make it that far by speed alone.

He hurried for the next edge. If he could get back to street level, he might force her to abandon pursuit as to not draw attention in a closed space. She still had a secret identity to hide, after all, and if she was seen, it would look like a mysterious figure attempting to assassinate a celebrity instead of the other way around. He could defend his gun ownership by his rank easily, but she had no such cover.

When he could see down clearly, however, he found that it was an occupied route. Skull looked back at him, the clothes and skin of an average teenager surely a paper thin mask that he could burn away in a moment. His real self lurked in those eyes, the scarlet of an enraged Thief.

Akechi had paused for only a moment, but it was all Queen needed to close the gap. Before she even touched him, he could feel her presence, the ghost of her hand. An ungodly heat neared him. Makoto’s hand was outstretched, her eyes glowing a vibrant cerulean. It took him less than a moment to determine that she was tapping into her nuclear abilities, and less time still to know that direct contact was a death sentence.

She lunged for his neck, and he dove from the roof. He had no idea what the next building over was, but he knew that a human traveling at his velocity could smash through a window. He ducked behind his arm, enduring the biting glass as he broke into cover. Before he could even catch his breath, he pulled himself out of view from the outside. He scurried through what he found to be long abandoned halls, ducking into the first room he could find.

It was cleared of most furniture, only an old, wooden cabinet and a table remaining. He didn’t think twice before slipping into the cabinet and closing the door most of the way, leaving only a sliver of light to take stock of himself with. As he had suspected, between the gunshot wound and glass, his left arm was nearly useless. He would have to rely on his right until he could get to Mementos and heal himself. Fortunately, the rest of his body, aching in his legs aside, was serviceable, at least.

He heard footsteps in the hall outside his room. He closed the door, and through the gap between the two, he peered out. Noir didn’t bother with the pleasantries of starting in normal attire, already in full Thief mode with axe in hand. She scanned the room, her eyes bloody spotlights searching for him. When it turned up nothing, the line of her lips tightened and she lashed out, hacking the table in two. Had he not been tempered by years in the Metaverse and its horrors, Akechi would have given himself away with a gasp of fear, though it was a narrow margin.

Soon, she carried on, continuing her search. When he was certain she was gone, he slinked from his cover, decidedly avoiding the path she had left on. If there wasn’t an exit in that direction, at least there wasn’t an armed maniac. He was certain that, after all he’d done, Noir was in the sort of mood to ignore her group’s policy against homicide.

He worked his way down the building, sticking to the outer walls and hiding at the slightest disturbance. He had no guarantee if he was beyond Noir’s scope, or if she was the only Thief in the premises. He would imagine they had at least one member guarding the exit, so a window on the second story would have to suffice.

On the fourth floor, a crackling echoed in the hall behind him. He glanced back, and his heart sank. Ice spread over every surface, reaching for him in a glacial pursuit. On the floor, he noticed what had lead it to him.
“How careless, to allow your own blood to give you away. It seems you fail to operate when your original plan goes awry.” Fox showed no discomfort, from neither the slick ground beneath him or the biting cold that floated about him, a miasma of his will. “Come quietly, and I will ensure the damage Noir inflicts will be minimal.”

Akechi didn’t answer, swiftly aiming and firing three rounds. Fox only narrowed his eyes and drew his blade, though he relaxed when the air started to shimmer. The bullets crawled to a stop, engulfed in a pinkish aura. Noir’s voice echoed through the building.

“A shame. Then fall where you stand.” The air popped. Akechi dropped the floor, narrowly avoiding his returning rounds. Fox broke into a sprint, gripping his sheathe and hilt.

Akechi took note of his situation. For how malnourished he was, Fox was monstrously strong and swift, and he performed maintenance on his equipment after every outing. A normal human might as well have tried to fight a blizzard for all the good it would do against him. Akechi was far from normal, but with his Persona cut off from him and Noir prepared to return any gunfire he gave, his prospects were rather thin. It left him with only one option, foolhardy though it may be.

He threw himself to the side, smashing through yet another window. He tried to right himself midair, but the ground came up too quickly. He met it arm first. The glass shards from both prior escapes became further embedded in his flesh, a few painfully snapping against his bones. He fought to get back on his feet.

“Guys, he’s down here!” Skull followed the sound of his exit, and when he saw him, he discarded his human disguise. He sprinted for Akechi, years of track and field granting him even further agility beyond what his Thief alter ego bestowed. Akechi turned and fled, hoping his own training to be at least comparable.

At that moment, he heard them all behind him. Skull’s footfalls on his tail. Queen’s engine on the roofs. Fox’s ice and Noir’s axe clearing their way through the insides of the abandoned buildings. All that were missing were Panther and Mona, though he had no doubt that the latter was in his own silent pursuit. That damn cat loved ambushes. Akechi found his eyes darting to every shadow, moving or otherwise. Paranoia filled his heart.

The Phantom Thieves were upon him.

Then, in the distance, he saw the terminal. It, too, was devoid of people, the far flung corner of Tokyo drawing no traffic that morning. He pulled out his phone, a shaking thumb prodding for the MetaNav. Even as he prepared his getaway, the Thieves’ voices followed him.

“You can’t escape us, you bastard!”

“We will avenge my father.”

“Our leader.”

“Our friend.”

“YOU CAN’T HIDE FROM THE PHANTOM THIEVES.”

The voice recognition software finally activated. Akechi held it close to his mouth, his voice quivering in terror.

“Mementos!”
The blackened tunnels accepted him, and as soon as he felt his assassin suit’s embrace, he turned to the entrance and tore the mask from his face.

“Loki!” The twisted spirit rose from the helm’s ashes, prepared to strike whoever entered after them. Minutes passed in silence. Were they toying with him, lurking in the corners until the blood loss caught up with him? His eyes darted around the chamber, and in the moment his back was fully toward the entrance, a knife dug into the floor at his feet. He jumped back, but when no second strike followed, his gaze dropped to the first. Pinned to the ground by the blade was a note.

‘Stay out of Yongen-Jaya.’

Akechi gritted his teeth, rolling up his left sleeve. Piece by piece, he pulled shards of bloodied glass from his skin and tossed them aside. When he thought he had gotten the last of it out, he drew a pocket knife, digging into the hole in his bicep. From the wound came a bullet. It hit the ground with a metallic ring. It was real, just like Joker’s before it. His fists tightened.

“Loki, why didn’t you come to me? That damned Queen could summon Anat, so why couldn’t I summon you?” Loki looked to him, but he did not answer. All he gave were his short, rasping breaths.

Akechi’s own breathing grew ragged, choked, and when he knew Loki’s silence was absolute, he dropped to the floor. They had it all. The strength. The support. The love. Even without Joker, they were still more than he could imagine. His hands nearly cracked against the concrete as he pounded it in frustration.

“Why the Hell are they better than me!?” His rage echoed through Mementos, swallowed by the uncaring void.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know why I randomly had the idea of turning the Thieves into the cast of Outlast, but I'm glad I did.

Actually, scratch that. It was definitely Haru being scary that sealed the deal.
Akari stood at the top of the attic stairs, choked by the bile rising to the back of her throat. As soon as she entered the room, almost every eye in it turned to her, flaring red for the brief moment before they recognized her. All of the Phantom Thieves were present, a barricade against the outside world.

Makoto and Haru stepped aside, letting her past the forward guard. Ann and Morgana, off by the workbench, avoided her gaze, a haze of regret over their eyes. Ryuji and Yusuke nodded as she entered the inner circle of their guard. In the middle of it all, his hand held softly by Futaba, was Akira.

The sheets were down, revealing the extent of his injuries. The rise and fall of his breathing had a hitch, a brief spasm every few cycles. His ribs were bound tightly by gauze. What little of his stomach she could see was almost bruised a uniform brown, broken by thin patches of pale or blue. His arms were meticulously straightened, and the marks on his wrists were only now starting to fade.

“My God…” His ears twitched at her hushed outburst. He tried to turn to her, but his neck locked in place. He cringed from the pain. Futaba rubbed at the muscles, helping him return to his old position.

“You need to stay still. We can’t go and let your wounds open back up, can we?”

“Right. Sorry.” His voice was a meager croak, spoken through split lips. He pushed his eye alone as far over as it could go. “Hey, Mom. What’s up?” He smiled softly, and the sight broke Akari’s heart.

“I thought I told you to stay safe.” She kneeled at his bedside, taking over the neck rubbing. Her stronger fingers kneaded the muscles far more thoroughly.

“Told you I’d come back alive, and I did.”

“ Barely.” Ann’s voice was deflated, devoid of her usual perkiness. “If Boss didn’t work at the lab that made that stuff, you’d be dead right now. We got lucky.”

“I know. I don’t think I can ever thank him enough for what he’s done for me.”

“You can start by healing up right.” As if on cue, Boss plodded into the attic, a tray of painkillers in hand.

“Sojiro, can I have some more of that loopy juice? I promise I won’t almost attack you again.”
“Sorry, kid, but I think your mother would skin me alive.” He went about preparing a cup of tea, glancing back at Makoto. “By the way, your sister just got here. She says she wants to talk, with you and Haru.” The girls shared a look. Nervousness ate at Makoto’s gut, but Haru took hold of her hand.

“We can make it through this, Mako-chan. Everything will be alright.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.” Akira’s harsh croak reached out to them. “Your sister might have been distorted, but there’s a good heart under the muck. I know it’ll shine through.”

“And if it doesn’t, I have everything I’d need to blackmail her. Want to know what type of underwear she really likes?”

“Futaba…”

“What? She poked into our business. I think it’d be fair.”

Makoto and Haru found her seated in the corner booth next to the stairs. There was a cup of coffee on the table in front of her, and two on the opposite side. Haru went in first, still holding Makoto’s hand as she followed. If Sae thought anything odd about it, she didn’t show it.

“Good morning, Haru-chan. I’m glad you could come.”

“Of course. I have no reason not to.” Haru and Makoto were both familiar with this sort of conversation. Haru from smaller, insulated business meetings and Makoto from interrogations. However, they could also tell that this one was missing its teeth. Sae was forcing herself to appear as nonthreatening as possible, the rigidity in her posture sanded away.

“I assume you already know why I asked to talk?”

“Our… relationship, right?” Makoto’s prods were tentative, nervous, as though edging closer to a lioness. Sae bit her lip, her only recourse. That her own sister was this terrified of her spoke volumes to her unclouded mind.

“So Kurusu wasn’t pulling my leg. You two really are dating.”

“Indeed.” Haru’s hold shifted, more completely encapsulating Makoto’s hand. “Mako-chan and I are quite happy together.”

“I can see that. I haven’t been paying as much attention as I should have, but she has seemed much more at ease in recent months.” Sae reflected on how that other self inside her reacted. Her Shadow beat against the walls of her heart, screaming about betrayal and ingratitude, the gall of going behind her back to fool around. Now that she had looked in the mirror, her reflected self shook her to the core. Before she knew what she was doing, a thin line of tears pushed free from her eyes.

“Sis?”

“Makoto, I’m sorry. Everything I’ve done to control you, to try dictating your life for you, I
regret all of it. You shouldn’t be afraid of your only family, but I drove you away. I’m sorry, I’m…!” Makoto almost lunged over the table, pulling her sister into her arms.

“No, Sis, you just… You wanted what was best for me. I should have realized the stress you were under sooner. Maybe if I did, it wouldn't have gone so far. I should be the one…” Sae returned the hug.

“Makoto.”

“Sis.”

They stayed like that for some time, crying into each other’s shoulders. As the tears flowed out of their hearts, they found something else hidden beneath the receding tide: elation. Relief. After so many years, in their arms, they had their sister back. Hesitantly, the embrace came to a close, each returning to their seat. Haru put an arm around Makoto, and Sae smiled at her warmly.

“Haru, I should have been open to saying this sooner, but welcome to the Niijima family. I would be honored if you were to see our home as yours as well.” Haru’s heart swelled at the words, and she stood to bow properly.

“Thank you, Sae-san. The honor would be mine.” Sae was likewise touched, the resentment she thought she deserved nowhere to be found. Haru’s was a kind soul. If she was as smart as she knew she was, Makoto would hold onto her.

“Foolish girl, doesn’t she know this makes her a target!? Stop her!” Sae put a hand to her head, the voice of her repressed self cleaving through her thoughts. Makoto took notice, circling the table to be by her side.

“Are you alright, Sis?”

“My Shadow, it’s growing restless. It’s trying to tell me that this is a mistake.” She looked over them both, pushing back harder against the rising shade. “But I know it’s wrong. Don’t worry, I won’t fall to its deception again.”

“But… It’s not trying to deceive you.” Haru turned contemplative, her tone softening with thought. “A Shadow is as much a part of you as your conscious mind. All repressing it will do is make it lash out more violently. That’s what Mona said, right?” Makoto nodded.

“The only way to truly silence a Shadow is to confront it directly, though that, too, could make it act in desperation.” Sae thought on it, feeling the serpent of her other self writhing in the depths of her heart and mind. If she let it be, she risked allowing it to lash out when her defenses fell.

“Then I have no choice.” She stood, her dominant figure returning to her. “I have to confront her. I owe it to both of you to see that I don’t turn back into what I was. Can one of you take me to her?” Makoto glanced at Haru, who nodded back.

“Yes, but we should be prepared. Give me a minute to see if our medic would be willing to join us.”
“So this is what a Palace looks like.” Sae stared in disbelief. Her grand casino towered over her, the garish lights burning her retinas. Akira hadn’t spared any detail in his description. “At least, my Palace.”

“It’s one of the flashier ones, that’s for sure. Not even Madarame’s gold museum comes close.” She was mildly unsettled by Morgana’s anthropomorphic form, but after Arsene, her tolerance for the paranormal had increased radically. She still wasn’t quite sure where he kept his scimitar and slingshot, though.

“Be on your guard. As soon as we enter the boundary of the Palace proper, your Shadow will be aware of your presence.” Makoto’s shift in demeanor, however, was a shock. The firmness and inflexibility she passed down morphed into absolute dominance, and the reddened eyes enhanced the Niijima glare immeasurably. It was no wonder her codename was Queen. “Are you ready, Sis?”

“There are some things you have to deal with regardless of readiness.”

“Well said, Niijima-san.” Sae held her tongue, trying not to comment on the axe Haru held as casually as a gardening hoe. “If things do get out of hand, however, we have the benefit of already having fought her once before. We will support you as best we can.” Sae nodded, taking a deep breath. Never did she believe she would be interrogating herself.

She took a single step forward, and the fabric of the Metaverse rippled underfoot. The air turned an oppressive red, as though painted by blood. Pins pricked at her skin, piercing eyes watching her from every direction. She felt like a fly trapped in her Shadow’s web, the strings plucking as the spider approached. Where it caught her off guard, though, the others were prepared, hardening against the incoming wave. They were used to the palpable intent. Their support meant the world to her, a vote of confidence where she had none. She made to take another step, but a column of red-tinted ink blasted up from the ground in front of her.

“Welcome to my casino.” The ink thinned, and at the center of it was the ruler of the Palace, clad in black. Shadow Sae’s golden eyes narrowed, and she lifted a long barreled revolver to her real self’s face. Before Sae could so much as register the threat, Mona fired, knocking the weapon from her hand. “Agh, insolent cat!” She raised a hand, streams of ink filling her palm, but whatever she had planned was cut off by Sae grabbing her wrist.

“That’s enough. If you were really me, you wouldn’t be playing the part of the executioner.” Her Shadow growled under her breath.

“It is my job to separate the innocent from the worthy, and only a criminal would raise their hand against me. That’s what you mean to do here, yes? Bring my domain crumbling down around me?” Sae recognized the behavior. It was that of a cornered suspect, scrambling for whatever they could get no matter how irrational they became.

“I only want to understand you. You’re the darkness within me, and if you keep pushing for this twisted idea of victory, you’ll bring both of us to our knees.” The Shadow’s eyes shrunk, a web of red weaving through them.

“That’s all I am to you, a disease to be cured? A curse to be purged!? I almost lost my place because of that damned brat once, and I won’t come so close to losing it again!” She tore her arm away, and her skin liquified. Makoto barely managed to grab Sae and pull her back before the blot expanded. The darkness swirled around itself, and when it settled, a rusted, iron monstrosity stood in its place. “I’ve worked my ass off to get us where we are, and I won’t let some wretch who isn’t willing to put in the work to achieve it away!” Sae’s muscles clenched, and she threw herself
forward, slipping past the decayed great sword and grabbing her other self by the throat.

“Makoto is a brilliant, gifted girl, and I won’t let you turn her into a puppet for your fame.” The metal waned under her fingers. Her Shadow kicked her away, leaping back to put some distance between herself and the backup. Sae tried to stand and give chase, but the arching pain in her gut stopped her in her tracks.

“Zorro, Diarama!” A soft green light enveloped her, and at once, the ache ceased. Haru dropped to one knee in front of her, a grenade launcher balanced on the other.

“Your armor has weakened, hasn’t it?” A pull of the trigger. The whistling song of a grenade reverberated through the Metaverse, and it raised into an explosive crescendo. The front of Shadow Sae’s battle suit cracked. Her wrists gave way, weapons falling to the floor and revealing the human hands beneath. As she hacked from the engulfing smoke, Makoto rushed into the opening.

“And you’ve slowed down.” She reared back and struck like lightning, all of her strength poured into an uppercut to the chin. The base of the helmet tore from the neck, sending it flying. Shadow Sae’s head was exposed, terror in her eyes. At once, Makoto let her guard relax, realizing that the once imposing iron maiden had rusted away. “This is why you’ve been harassing Sis. Your strength is waning, so you tried to reestablish yourself in her mind.” Sae watched in shame as her other self was reduced to crawling on her hands and knees, struggling against the weight of her own armor to stand.

“I… I can’t be…!” Her arms gave out, and as she crashed to the ground, a small notepad fell from the metal. She reached out for it, desperation drawing the last of her power in its pursuit, but Mona was faster. He snatched it away and retreated, sniffing at the book.

“This smell… It’s her Treasure!” They had seen it once before, the notepad hiding in the primordial fog. But besides that, it seemed off. It wasn’t a police pad as they had thought. Its cover was decorated by a black and white cartoon panda, its page-binding spiral brightly colored plastic. Makoto could recognize the character anywhere.

“Is that… Buchimaru-kun?” She took it from Mona and opened to the first page. There was a childish sketch in crayon of two people. One was short with brown hair, the other taller with silver. The latter was holding up a trophy, and both were smiling. At the top, a dark haired man smiled down from a cloud. Makoto read the text at the bottom, written in big, bubble letters. “Great Prosecutor Sis. This is the Treasure?” Sae came up beside her, a memory returning from the distant past.

“You drew that for me after my first case. I remember being so proud. It was the first time I saw you so happy after Father…”

“Give it back!” Shadow Sae clawed across the ground, dragging her useless gear with her. “That’s my precious Treasure, from my loving sister. I can’t lose it!” At once, the pieces all clicked together in Sae’s mind.

“It wasn’t winning that was so important, not at first. It was being a good role model for Makoto. But over the years, my focus got narrower and narrower, until the only thing that mattered was not losing.” She looked once more at her Shadow, and she saw an unnatural calm had fallen over her. She stared back in disbelief, silent. “I covered myself in all that rhetoric about being a victor and my reputation, but all it did was cover up what really matters and hold me back.”

She kneeled down, grabbing her other self by the arms. Makoto saw what she was trying to do and joined in, pulling apart the top of the remaining iron shell. With it out of the way, Sae found it
much easier to bring her back to her feet. Not once did her Shadow complain, or even comment. She only looked on in stunned quiet.

“I’ve been lying to myself for so long that it piled up, until not even my own Shadow could tell what we really wanted anymore.” Shadow Sae’s eyes widened, and her real self smiled invitingly. “That’s right. I understand now. You’re not everything that’s wrong with me. You’re just… me.” Tears came to her Shadow’s eyes, and she nodded, savoring her real self’s accepting touch.

Suddenly, her skin glowed a brilliant white, and it broke away like shards of glass. Where once stood a double of Sae, there was now a woman of twice her size. She was clad in a sweeping white robe, and the skin beneath it was like smoothed bronze. In her right hand, she held a spear whose head alone was larger than Sae. In the left, there was a book that glowed with an almost holy light. Atop her head was a helm, a brown hair crest stretching from front to back. Her eyes were bound by black cloth, but she seemed as though she was always watching. A kind, but unwavering voice echoed in the back of Sae’s mind.

“May we seek the truth as one, unbound by impurity and corruption.” Sae nodded, her new self a comforting presence in the back of her mind.

“I am thou, thou art I.” In a flash of light, the great judge vanished, replaced by a dark blue card. Sae reached out as it fell, and when it touched her skin, it shattered, dispersing until she would call upon its aid. “I will never lose myself again. That I promise, Athena.”

“Sis, that was amazing!” Makoto grabbed her in the second of what promised to be a great many hugs. “You’re a Persona user now, too!”

“But… Shouldn’t she have a Thief outfit?” Haru’s point made Makoto step beck, seeing that Sae was in her courtroom suit.

“You’re right, she’s still in normal clothes. And come to think of it, she didn’t need to rip off a mask to summon her Persona. Could it be that there are multiple ways to awaken to the power?” Makoto’s eyes went to Morgana, who answered with a shrug.

“Well, Futaba didn’t need to rip hers off, either, so maybe…” His on-the-fly explanation was cut short as the ground beneath them started to quake. They looked up, and the casino’s roof was starting to collapse in on itself. “Her Palace is falling. I guess that mean our job is over.”

“We should leave then.” Haru followed him as he made for the exit. Makoto was right behind them, but she stopped when she noticed Sae hadn’t followed her yet. Her sister stared at the falling Palace, a content smile on her face.

“Are you satisfied now, Arsene? The ‘den of sin’ will soon be gone, just as you wanted.” She turned her back to her old self, walking resolutely away. Makoto noticed that she had dropped the notepad.

“Aren’t you going to take your Treasure?”

“I don’t need it.” She smiled peacefully, not looking twice at the abandoned Treasure. “I still have the real one back home.”
“Woohoo, new teammate!” Ryuji put a hand up, his arm jittering with excitement. Who needed to pop champagne to celebrate when he was willing to burst? “Up top! Come on, it’s a rite of entry!” Sae was blown away by his shift in attitude. Before, it was like there was wall keeping the two of them separated, some combination of discomfort and societal gating. Now, he was sprinting through the boundaries with reckless abandon. The other Thieves followed suit, even Akira managing the strength to give her a thumbs up from his bed.

“I’m sorry to disappoint, but I don’t think I would be much of a Phantom Thief. I’ve operated in the legal grey for long enough as is.” Ryuji’s abundant joy melted away, retracting his hand.

“Oh, I get ya. You’re still a lawyer type and all.”

“That said, I already told you I would help in this case, and a real world operative would help balance your roster.” She extended her hand out to meet his. The high five was stilted, choked by formality, but it was enough to relight the fire in Ryuji’s gut. “Let’s show Masayoshi Shido what happens when you abuse the system.”

“People of Yongen-Jaya, listen to my voice. I am Masayoshi Shido!” The assembly turned to the window, shocked. Ryuji rushed to it, missing the dark gleam in Akira’s eye.

“Dude, is this for real!?” Ann nudged him over to get a better look outside herself. She perked her ears, trying to trace the source of the speech.

“It is election season. We shouldn’t be surprised he’s out campaigning, too.”

“This is just what we needed!” Ryuji ran back to the table, hurriedly throwing his jacket back on. His arm got caught halfway through the sleeve thanks to his rush, making him flap it around like a bird to try pushing through. “We might be able to worm something out of him in person, and use that to figure out the last keyword. Come on, let’s…”

“It’s him.” Ryuji stopped his mad rush, turning back to Akira. He had pushed himself up to a sitting position. His hands were clenched painfully around his sheets, and his eyes were almost wholly taken by the scarlet glow. Akari tried to ease him back to his bed, but he failed to budge, ignoring her attempts like they were puffs of wind. “That’s the bastard from before…”

“Before?” The Thieves gathered around him, drawn like moths to the flame. Makoto looked him directly in the eye as she asked. In those orbs, she found a rage that would put her own to shame. The fire washed over him, weaving his Thief suit as he rose from his bed.

“I know his voice. He’s the drunk rat that got me arrested.” The reveal stunned them all. They stared, agape, until the gravity of it set in. A heartbeat, the Thieves’ eyes lit up to match their leader’s. Another, their suits burned into existence. One more, they rose from their seats, ready to bring their full strength to bear. “If I remember right, he had a few choice metaphors.” He grabbed his phone, quickly opening the MetaNav. “Ship.”

“Candidate found. Please increase proximity to begin navigation.” Makoto pulled their armory from under Akira’s bed, Sae and Akari watching with surprise as they pulled their arms of choice from the box. They felt less like a group and more like a tidal wave, ready to crash into Shido’s Palace and sink it to the watery depths. All they needed was the pull of their frontmost crest. Akira took up his knife, flipping it between fingers by the blade.

“Phantom Thieves, the heist is…!”
“Hold it, you’re forgetting someone.” Sojiro marched up the stairs, the weariness that normally accompanied him through the long trek from the first floor nowhere to be seen. He smirked, and the fire claimed him, too. For the first time since that Summer, the black knight stood before them. “There’s no way in Hell I’m letting you charge off without all the help you can get, you hear me?” Joker’s fury settled, reshaping into a malicious mirth.

“Welcome back to the field, Boss. We’ll have to stop by Untouchable first to get you armed right…”

“Save your yen, I’ve got all the gear I need.” He shrugged, pulling the black case from his back. It was almost as tall as him, and when he unzipped it, the long barrel of a rifle poked from the opening. “Old Ebony here’s served me well. And before you ask, Sae, yes, I am licensed.” Futaba scooted in for a closer work. She knew jack about guns, but she could tell an impressive piece when she saw one.

“Dude, where’ve you been keeping this? I thought I had our whole house under watch!” Sojiro smiled, sheathing his old partner.

“You’re good at what you do, Futaba, but I’m a professional. Now, are you going to give me a chance to show it, or are we going to sit here and let Shido take the country?” Joker sauntered by, giving him a firm knock on the shoulder pad.

“Phantom Thieves, the heist is on!” The wave flooded out from the attic, leaving only Sae and Akari in its wake. Bewildered silence dominated them both, until Sae managed to find an ounce of her composure.

“And that’s the group I tried and failed to capture for most of a year. I’m starting to think I’ve gone deaf.” Akari snickered, carefully pushing the armory back into its hiding place. They didn’t need anyone accidentally coming across it.

“Speaking of, I could use a skilled detective like yourself. Want to help me with a bit of bird watching?”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, to the boat!
“Wait, we still need to give the new guy a codename!” The forward march into the floating diet building was halted by Ryuji, who realized they had forgotten the most important rite of entry. Everyone shared an amused look, but they didn’t say anything while Ryuji started scratching his chin. “Maybe Rhino, or Knight. Ooh, what about Arthur?” He turned to Sojiro, scratching his head. “I don’t know, what do you think, Boss?” Sojiro raised an eyebrow at him, crossing his arms.

“I think that last one was just fine.”

“Arthur, then?” They started snickering. Morgana clamped his mouth shut with his paw. Ryuji had no idea what was so funny. Until he remembered what they always called him. “Oh, right. Boss.” Morgana’s self control failed, and he started laughing uproariously. “Shaddup!”

“Wait.” Makoto’s brow furled, her mind raising the yellow flag. “Now two of us are named Boss and Queen, but neither of us is the actual leader. Does that strike anyone else as odd?”

“Makes perfect sense to me.” Boss drew his longsword, getting himself used to its heft again. “I’m the Boss of LeBlanc, you’re the Queen of strategy.” He glanced to Akira, smiling wryly. “And he turns all of our enemies into a joke.” Akira grinned, already loving the new field operative.

“Works for me.”

“Joker, get back!” Akira backflipped away from the charging Cerberus. Before it could stop, Boss met its tackle shield first, dazing it with a crack against the skull. He tore his helmet off and threw it at the prone beast.

It shattered in midair, and Thaddeus carried the momentum as he came fist first down on the Cerberus. He struck a blow against its right flank, but before he could retreat, it lashed out, clamping down on his arm and making him drop his sword. Joker rushed forth, intending to take it down while it was distracted and free Thaddeus in one slick move, but Sojiro held a hand out, smiling confidently.

“About time to bust out of that shell, wouldn’t you say?” Thaddeus nodded, unperturbed by the teeth digging into his armor. He used his free hand to grab the Cerberus by the scruff of its neck and tore it away. His gauntlet was still in its mouth, the skin it covered revealed to be pale blue, like a drowned corpse.
He reached down for his sword, and at his touch, its metal shell wore away to dust. From the ashes of the blade came a golden crook, which he used to bludgeon Cerberus. Dazed once more, the creature was thrown aside, giving him the room to finish his disrobing. He turned the staff around in his hand, the other end tipped by a spiked metal ball. With one strike to the chest plate, the flail smashed through the remainder of his armor, and as the cracks spread out, it disintegrated into metallic dust at his feet.

The new Persona, reborn from the shell of Thaddeus, dusted himself off, his waterlogged flesh rippling with lithe muscle. He wore the bottom of a white silk robe, covering him from the waist down, and a golden chain about his neck, the front overlapped by a thin, curved beard of tightly woven blue and gold fabric. Atop his head, a towering white hat rested, bordered on each side by long feathers that reflected the hues of the rainbow. He turned back to the party and smiled wryly, reminding them all too well of his greater whole.

“Good of you to finally show up right, Osiris.” Sojiro, too, had changed somewhat. The web of cracks on his armor were welded shut, and on his back, where once dangled the burnt remains of a red cape, was a new orange banner, marked by a shield wreathed by those it swore to protect. Osiris, flexing its newly freed muscles once more, returned to him in a flash of light, restoring his helmet.

“Osiris, Egyptian god of death and the underworld. Nice.” Prometheus beamed Futaba back down to the others, though she was already working to scan the new Persona’s capabilities. Ann stopped where she was, a vexed look on her face.

“Wait, I though Anubis was the Egyptian god of death?”

“Actually, they both are.” Makoto relaxed, stretching her arms after the hard fought battle. “In the myths, Anubis handled the dead while they were on Earth. He’s actually the one who originally embalmed Osiris when he died, who was then resurrected and went on to rule over the spiritual realm of the dead. In essence, they are both gods of death, only different aspects of it.”

“Nerd!” Ryuji yipped, backing away as Queen glared at him. “I meant that in a good way, please don’t kill me.”

“Silly Skull.” Haru put an arm on his shoulder, her smile straddling the line between sweet and suspicious. “That would be letting you off easy.”

“Oh, what are you going to do to me?”

“Well, you say you were complimenting my knowledge, yes?” Makoto sheathed the Nijima glare, weaving her fingers together contemplatively. “Perhaps we could hold weekly study sessions for the next month. Believe me, my methods are rigorous.” Ryuji threw a terrified look over his shoulder.

“Guys, a little help?”

“Sure, why not?” Sojiro’s wily old man grin didn’t make him feel better at all. “I’ll set you up with some coffee, keep you going while you work. How does that sound?”

“Sounds like I’ll be fighting something way worse than a Shadow…”

“And that’s why you should have studied before it came to drastic measures.”

“Shaddup, cat, not like you study either.”
“This really squeaking sucks.” Akira fiddled with his gloves, their fit loose over his new mousy appendages. How Morgana put up with not having proper hands was well beyond him, but at least the cat came up to his allies’ knees. He barely breached the line of their ankles. He stared up at the statue of Shido in spite, his smug face so tantalizingly close, but so painfully far. If he could only find a way to crawl up there with a makeup brush...

“Been wanting to do this for a long time…!” The other Thieves, still behind the boundary to the mouse room, backed away from Sojiro, the look in his eyes one of a focused professional. He leaned against the stock of his rifle, the crosshairs of its scope lined perfectly at the statue’s throat. Akira jammed his fingers in his ears.

Sojiro smirked once more before pulling the trigger. A crack louder than any of their smaller firearms thundered through the room, and when the ringing in Akira’s sensitive ears subsided, he found the digits in them decidedly more human than before. In the middle of the room, Shido’s head rolled about uselessly, and the lamp at his feet sputtered and died.

“We’ve still got it, Ebony.”

“Holy effing crap, Boss!” Ryuji gawked in awe at the feat, suddenly finding his shotgun disappointing. “I knew you were a guard, but you make it look like you take peoples’ heads off all the freaking time!”

“No, not their heads. It’s a lot harder to cover up a blatant murder than Shido would make you think.” Sojiro blew the smoke from his barrel, carefully reloading his old friend. “I have put more than a few people in wheelchairs, though. Anyway, you guys said you had a tradition with statues, right?”

“They’re back again?” The clerks of Harajuku had become increasingly wary of a certain group of customers. Every day for the last week, they had swept through and bought as much lipstick, eyeliner, gloss, and mascara as their arms could carry, whispering and cackling amongst themselves. The four girls always paid for their stuff and were polite enough to the staff, so no one thought much of them for the first few days, but then one of them overheard what they were saying.

“You know, I wasn’t sure how funny we could make this since Aki… Sorry, Aka-chan, does this stuff all the time, but I’m impressed. It’s still hilarious.”

“It’s because he doesn’t care about his image and just goes with the flow. Shido, on the other hand, not so much.”

“Also, Kiki pulls it off like a boss. Shido just looks Gonk AF.”

That was where the questions started cropping up. Were they talking about Senator Shido? What were they doing to him? Was it illegal? The staff whispered amongst themselves, but none of
them had the spine to confront them about it. Something about that one with the curly hair sent
shivers up their spines. And the orange-headed one just reeked of trouble. So they stayed back, left to
wonder what ten pounds of beauty products were going to on a daily basis.

“'It’s no use. He’s determined to not speak with us.’” Yusuke glared across the pool with all
his malice, but it did nothing to budge the grotesque blob of a noble reclining on the other side. He
had considered pickpocketing the letter of introduction, but there was no guarantee it even existed
until he willed it to be. They needed a…

“I think I have an idea.” Ryuji pushed himself out of the pool chair, his eyes oddly
contemplative for such a physical individual. Morgana was instantly skeptical.

“How did you get a plan by staring at the girls in the pool?”

“Because if I’m doing it, there’s no way in Hell that perv’s not. Queen, I’m going to need
your help. Panther, can you slip into the back and find a swimsuit for her?”

It was just another lazy day on Shido-san’s great vessel. So long as he maintained his
payments, it was nothing but smooth sailing. What better way for an old nobleman to spend his
carefree days than to sit at the poolside, watching the lovely ladies enjoying themselves?

“Is that her, in the white two-piece?”

“Yes, I think it is. Isn’t she supposed to be the half-sister of a Chinese princess?” The gossip
in the air caught his ear. At the corner of the pool, a couple of odd lowborns, one in a black long coat
and the other in loose white robes, spoke to each other, staring into the water.

He followed their eyes and found himself staring at quite the looker. The ribbons flowed with
her as she swam like delicate fins, and when she surfaced, they followed her like the coattails of an
empress. She herself seemed just above the curve of ordinary appearance-wise, neither her dark
brown hair or average assets of note, but she certainly dressed the part of a princess and carried
herself to match. Perhaps an introduction was in order. He waited for her to emerge from the pool,
conveniently on the ladder nearest to him, before making his approach.

“Hello, my dear, I couldn’t help but overhear that you are of royal blood as well. Did I hear
correctly?” She looked up at him innocently.

“Me, sir? I am only the younger sister of an empress-to-be. The crown is far from my head, I
am afraid.” He felt the excitement climbing within him. Her dignity and grace were perfect, and if
she was indeed far from an actual position of power, it would be easy enough to coerce her into his
‘care’ with some sweet words and promises. Plus, perhaps he could earn some sway with another
powerful family if he played his cards correctly.
“That is a shame, for a beauty such as yourself to have to bloom in the shadow of another. Hmm, perhaps there is something I could do to rectify that little problem.” Her eyes lit up, and she clasped her hands in front of her.

“Do you speak truthfully, sir?”

“Indeed I do, my sweet. Come with me to my cabin so we can discuss this in detail without the prying…” He reached a hand out towards her, intending to set it on her shoulder, when he felt a ring of cold metal pressing against his lower back. Suddenly, the pressure of the air around him tripled, a strange pink aura surrounding him.

“And where did you intend to place that hand?” That voice was like the song of birds, but warped, meshed with undertones of the harsh cry of a diving falcon.

“Who dares threaten the great…!??” He looked behind him, and he froze. The girl was even smaller than the princess, her noble wear clearly a refitted French nobleman’s suit paired with a wide-brimmed hat, but the air about her was dense with intent. Her smoldering eyes pierced the depths of his murky soul. In her hands, pressed against him, was what appeared to be a grenade launcher. “Wait, if you fire that, you’ll blow us both to kingdom-come!”

“Don’t worry about me, I am quite resilient.” If he squinted, he could see a light pink glimmer running over her skin. “You should be worried about yourself. I don’t much care for filthy apes laying their dirt-encrusted hands on my beloved queen.”

“Your…?” The barrel was shoved deeper into the rolls of his flesh.

“And I also hate it when those same apes blubber mindlessly. Such wastes of my precious time are inexcusable. Unless, of course, they can compensate for the loss.” Another click, this one in front of him. His princess revealed the revolver concealed in the folds of her swimsuit, pointing it between his eyes and setting the hammer.

“We’ll take that letter of introduction now, unless you want to see how much of the deck we can paint red with your insides.”

Joker stowed the letter safely away, arms crossed approvingly.

“Not bad, Skull, but I thought you would’ve avoided plans like this after that whole nude painting thing.”

“Honestly, I thought Noir would kill me when we were done, but it was the only thing that came to mind.”

“No harm done, Skull. Weaponizing my protective nature was an effective move.” Haru glanced sideways, appreciating Makoto’s new outfit. “And you helped me discover a new… I believe the term is fetish? So as long as Queen has no further issues, we are even.” Makoto blushed profusely from the attention, but she maintained enough composure to speak.

“We managed to claim a letter without a fight. Considering the usual strength of Shadows directly linked to a real world individual, you may very well have saved us a substantial amount of
effort. Good work, Skull. Now can I please change out of this?"

“Only if you promise to change back into it later~! Please, for your pretty kitty?”

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“Didn’t think we’d actually need one of these things to keep going.” Sojiro nudged the severed head of another Shido statue with his sword, watching its gloss shine as the light over it shifted.

“No worries, we will have the door open our own way in a moment. Just a little more, Susano-o.” The warrior nodded, passing his hand over the last remaining surface of the door. As he lifted his fingers, the ice sheet grew, coating it until only frost could be seen.

“Alright, we’re up, Hecate! Agidyne!” Ann thrust her hand forward, and Hecate released a gale of flame. It crashed over the door, and as the ice thinned, the metal under it creaked. The last of its coating vanished into steam, and the metal loudly whined, cracking like glass. Haru casually strolled towards it, tapping the head of her axe against the ground. She readied her stance, a batter at the plate, and swung. The pieces fell apart like the guts of a piñata, leaving the halls open to pass through at their leisure.

“Hmm, that wasn’t nearly as satisfying as the table back in Yongen…”

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“What a fool Okumura-san was. Had he kept his head down and his pockets open, he could be here with us in paradise! Ha ha ha!” The bulk of the Thieves backed away further with each word. The TV president kept laughing over his colleague’s demise, unaware of the increasingly hellish screams roaring through the young heiress’s mind. Finally, the line of tolerance within her snapped, and the voices within fell silent.

“You are quite the callous individual.” It was a simple statement, said in a voice that could have come from the zen-like calm of a monk, but as it echoed through the room, a magenta aura spread out like ink. The patrons of the casino deck took cover as their machines began to whine from the pressure, and soon, they all tore from their posts. The president tried to flee with the rest from the casino gone mad, but a pressure more intense than he had ever experienced clamped around his throat. Haru didn’t move a muscle, but all in her grasp rose into the air, his breathing blocked by the unseen chain around his windpipe.

“I believe you have something of great value to us. Won’t you come closer for a moment?” The force dragged him forward, and as he neared her, he felt the pain intensify. His nerves were being popped one by one, each overloading his mind with the sheer agony. He briefly felt a hand in his pocket, and as it left, it took with it a page of paper. “Thank you for your letter, though I don’t believe this will quite be compensation enough.”

Suddenly, her other hand lashed out, plunging deep into his guts. Her fingers tore through intestines as they searched, and when they found the core hidden beneath the flesh, they were ripped
away with little mercy. Her glove ran black with his oily blood. She examined the Treasure, her expression that same disconnected calm.

“A photo of you and your father, yes? My, and I thought such an aspiration to live up to your ancestors would breed sympathy for another’s loss. I suppose not everyone can be so decent.” She crumpled it in her hand and threw it aside before pulling him even closer, until he could see the spirit behind her eyes. That jeweled skull stared deep into his soul.

“No, you directly control much of what is broadcasted, correct? We will be utilizing your airways in the near future. You are to do nothing to stop us, understood?” Fear and suffocation scattered his thoughts, making him nod with no resistance. The pressure lifted, letting him fall to the ground and begin to fade back into reality. “Excellent. Thank you for being so amicable in this matter of business. It helps soothe the loss.” She turned her back to him, listening to him return to the real world as the slots crashed back to the ground around her.

“I have our third letter!” No one responded for the longest time. They stared, stunned by the new depths of terror she reached, as she cleaned the black entrails left on her glove. Eventually, Ryuji found it in himself to reach over and push Makoto’s hanging jaw shut.

“And that is why no one screws with Noir.”

“Kid, when you get to be my age, you learn not to screw with women in general.”

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“I love the Battering Ram!” The halls of the ship quaked as Anat blazed through, her tires screaming as they busted through doors and grenades singing in a whistling choir as they blew away any Shadows that crossed their path. Joker and company strolled leisurely behind, offhandedly picking up some of the yen left in their warpath. Sojiro took note of their lack of hustle and grew suspicious.

“Is there a reason we’re not hurrying?”

“Those two make out when they’re done.” Ann said it with a passiveness that suggested banality. The Sun rose, water’s wet, and Makoto and Haru clung to each other like the opposite ends of magnets. “We like giving them the time to work it out of their systems, otherwise they’ll be poking and teasing each other for the next half hour.”

“That sounds awkward to be around.”

“You haven’t had to sit around the cafe while they ‘work it out’ in LeBlanc’s attic.” Sojiro almost openly laughed at Morgana’s despondent statement. He might have been mad if he hadn’t been caught up in the same sort of thing at that age. “I mean, they always wash the sheets, but it’s still weird to think about.” Ryuji stopped in his tracks, looking incredulously at Akira.

“Wait, they do it in your bed, dude?”

“They wash the sheets. No harm, no foul.”

“I swear to God, if you weren’t asexual…”
“Objective updated, letter four of five obtained!” Futaba gleefully held up her trophy, basking in the light of once again vanquishing the punks that took her old alias as a shield. Akira patted her head, the pride evident on his face.

“I’ve trained you well in the art of speech craft, young Padawan.” Sure, she didn’t exactly talk the letter out of him, but she skimmed more than a little useful information about Shido’s tech sector without any assistance on their part. She had come a long way.

“Thank you for the tutelage, Master.” They froze, the oddity of the response setting in. Sojiro looked just as squicked out.

“Never call him that again.”

“Got it.”

“That only leaves the Cleaner.” Makoto poured over the Palace map, switching between the main floor plan and the rough vent plan she had compiled with Futaba’s help. “It looks like the only place left he could be hiding is the engine room.”

“Alright, then, let’s wrap this up.” Akira stood from his seat, the others preparing to set off from the safe room. “Next stop, the Clean…” He doubled over, a sudden ache shooting through his ribs. His throat clamped in a dry heave, and he only avoided the full package by a hair’s breadth. The pain webbed out from there, slowly overtaking his entire body. The only thing that kept him from collapsing to the floor was the quick reaction of Ann and Ryuji.

“Joker, are you alright!?” He draped himself over their shoulders, pushing against the cognitive functions of his mind. His Thief suit burned away, leaving his casual clothes behind. They carefully lowered him to the sofa, pulling up his shirt for a better look. The bruising wasn’t as solid as it had been when he first returned from near death, but it was still well beyond what most doctors would call acceptable. Sojiro carefully pressed at his chest, easing up as Akira groaned in pain.

“Looks like your wounds aren’t holding up under the strain too well. We’ll have to fallback for today, and take a week or so off.”

“But Shido…!” Sojiro could understand the boiling fury welling up within him. It was one he shared, after what the rat did to Wakaba, but it didn’t change his position.

“If this Cleaner guy is tough enough to order lesser Shadows around, then he’s the sort we’ll need our A-game to face, and that’s not mentioning Shido himself afterwards. We have more than enough time to finish the job before the vote goes out, so we should make sure we’re ready.” Akira abated, laying back as Morgana pulled out their medicine stock.

“My magic might not do much for it, but Takemi’s medicine should hit the spot.” Akira wanted to scream as the alcohol content burned his skin, but he directed it inwards, letting it feed his anger further for when the day of reckoning finally arrived. Arsene awaited that day eagerly.

Chapter End Notes
I may or may not have been thinking about Darth Vader while writing those Haru scenes. Especially the casino one.

Also, 10K hits! Have I mentioned that you're all beautiful people? Because you're all beautiful people.
Let's have one last set of laughs before we hit the hard stuff, eh?

“You’re sure you have everything you need for the night?”

“Yes, Sis, I came prepared.” It was an odd sight, Sae doting on Makoto like a mother hen, but it was a welcome one. Makoto climbed the stairs to Akira’s room with a school bag full of supplies. Just the essentials, of course: toothbrush and paste, change of clothes, pajamas, backup pajamas, and her swimsuit. She couldn’t be too certain if Haru would…

She shook the thought out of her head, hoping Sae hadn’t noticed the break in her pace.

“Hello, Mako-chan!” Speak of the princess, Haru skipped over, pecking her on the cheek and helping her slip the pack off. She leaned in close, a coy glimmer in her eye. “And yes, I brought our little friend.” And that was why she had so many changes of clothes. Her blush was visible from space, which, unfortunately, Sae was within the boundary of.

“And what, pray tell, do you two have planned?” Makoto’s skin went pale where not bright red, but she calmed as Sae’s demanding glare melted into amusement. “I suppose nothing… extra could come of it, so I can turn a blind eye.” Her gaze hardened significantly as she turned to Akira. “But know that if anyone else so much as touches her, I will castrate them with their own masks.” He chuckled openly.

“Pretty sure Haru would do it first with a rusty gardening hoe, so you’re good.” Her attention went back to Haru, who tapped her chin thoughtfully.

“I would at least use something of moderate sharpness in honor of our friendship, but he is otherwise accurate.” Ryuji not so subtly clamped his legs together in his seat. A warm smile crossed Sae’s lips.

“You’ll fit in just fine at our home. I’ll be sure to have everything rearranged for the move by tomorrow.” Haru bowed as deep as she could bend.

“Thank you for your kindness, Sae-san.” Sae returned the gesture, much to Makoto’s surprise.

“And thank you for taking care of my sister.” As she straightened herself out, Sae couldn’t help but note the energy in the air. There was an almost homey vibe as they all settled in for a night of relaxation. It was a better atmosphere for a growing young lady than she had provided, but she would see to it that this error wouldn’t persist a day longer. “Have fun, kids.” The Niijima glare turned up one more time, a wordless addition of, ‘but not too much fun.’ Once she left, their bubble formed in full, and the Thieves were left to their own devices.

“Woo, sleepover!” Ann pulled Haru and Makoto to their usual spots on the sofa, her
giddiness palpable as she ripped open her bag to reveal that it was stuffed to the gills with snacks. Ryuji wished he could say he was surprised.

“So, what should we start with?”

Spin the Bottle was, by verdict of three of their members being in a relationship and one being a little sister to the rest, disqualified (not that it stopped Haru from kissing Makoto as soon as it was brought up), so they moved onto the next item in line. Futaba glared evilly over the room, licking her lips as she chose a victim.

“Inari, Truth or Dare!” Yusuke needed only a moment to think. The last time he accepted a dare from her, he found himself forced to paint over a perfectly good printout of Starry Night. It was not a pain he was willing to repeat.

“Truth.”

“Sweet, my spook plan worked! Now, for the love of God, will you just say what sexuality you are already?” A series of confused glances went her way. “What? The topic bounces off of him any other time it comes up, and I’m getting curious over here.”

“Thinking about it now, I suppose I have been unintentionally evasive, haven’t I?” It was odd to look so clearly at a subconscious behavior that he never noticed before. “I suppose I haven’t thought about it enough to say definitively. Perhaps it’s a matter of meeting the correct person, but until then… Is there an equivalent of Agnosticism in terms of sexuality?” Ann popped the sucker out of her mouth to answer.

“Not specifically, but I think it would fall under graysexuality.” He tilted his head at her.

“That is really a category?”

“Yep, a subsection of asexuality.” Futaba’s brow more and more resembled a table as the explanation deepened.

“The words people come up with for this stuff.”

“I know, right?” Ann cleaved through what remained of her sucker in one solid bite. “Anyway, there’s your answer. Your turn, Akira.”

“Sweet.” His eyes trailed over to the sofa. “Haru, Truth or Dare?”

“Hmm, Dare.” Akira’s grin widened.

“I dare you to bench press Makoto.” She raised an eyebrow. They both knew full well that it was a part of her regular routine anyway.

“Okay, I can…”

“While she benches Futaba.” Her eyes widened, a new door of possibilities thrown open before her. Futaba, meanwhile, began to panic.
“Whoa whoa whoa, since when can you drag multiple people into a dare? I do not consent to this threesome!” Akira’s eyes narrowed knowingly.

“I heard that collector’s shop in Akihabara just ran out of those limited edition gold-plated Phoenix Zord model kits. I wonder who could have bought the last set…” Her expression turned dead serious, pupils shrunken dangerously.

“You’re kidding.”

“Try me.”

“You conniving little…” She groaned loudly, getting up from the workbench seat. “Fine, let’s do this.”

The stack was tricky to set up. The first part went as smoothly as always, Makoto planking atop Haru’s hands. Then came the third layer. Futaba wasn’t exactly a massive weight to endure, but it was enough to make the tower waver with one ill shift. It took some wiggling and a bit of outside help from Ryuji, but they soon assembled the double decker bench press rig, a monster that would have shattered the arms of lesser men. As one, matching their breathing to each other, Haru and Makoto pushed up, Futaba’s heart rate spiking as she found herself hanging her own height up in the air.

“Easy, girls, don’t drop the geek!” The rise and fall was steady and even. Not a word passed through the room, transfixed on the spectacle. Twenty reps felt like an hour from Futaba’s position, but they reached it eventually. Ryuji, once again, helped her down. As soon as her weight left the tower, Haru launched Makoto into the air, rolling around as to catch her in a high-velocity hug.

“That was amazing, Mako-chan! We should invite a third person more often.”

“Count me out. This is why I don’t do roller coasters.” Futaba struggled to find her land legs, glaring at an exceptionally pleased with himself Akira. “Where?”

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry, Futaba, I…!”

“Chill, Queeny, I’ve seen way worse. By the by, nice strap attachment. Wild guess says Haru?”

“How did you know?”

“Pervert’s intuition.” She shimmied further to the left, where she found the proper bin. She crawled out the other side of the bed, jumping back to the workbench and tearing open her prize. Small packages of gold and silver parts tumbled out, and, grasping the included screwdriver firmly in hand, she got to work. It was silently agreed that she had exited the remainder of the game. And possibly the next, depending. Morgana cleaned his arm idly, pretending for a split second that he wasn’t eyeing who everyone thought he was.

“Ryuji, Truth or Dare?”
“Dare.” No way was he spilling his personal secrets to the cat. Morgana’s eyes glimmered with mischievous delight.

“I dare you to compliment me.” The order made him laugh fitfully.

“Seriously?”

“And none of those half-baked, ‘I like your fur,’ things. I want the real deal.”

“Fine. I’m honestly really jealous of how smart you can be.” The earnest, direct answer smacked Morgana out of the blue.

“You… Really?”

“Hell yeah. I mean, I know you don’t know everything, but you pick up on stuff a lot quicker than me, and you and Akira teaming up’s gotten us out of more than a few tough spots. So, yeah, you got a good head on your shoulders, and I respect that. Good enough?” Morgana blinked, still a bit dazed, eventually bringing himself to nod.

“Yeah, that’ll do.”

The game continued for a few more rotations. Laughs were had, suspicions were confirmed, and Makoto found an excuse to return the myriad of kisses showered on her over the course of the night. Soon, the excitement wound down, and it was agreed that one more turn would be the best way to end it. Ann stepped up to the plate.

“Akira, Truth or Dare?” As much as he would have loved showboating for everyone on a crazy dare, he knew Sojiro, Takemi, his Mom, or, worse, all of the above, would give him an earful for doing something crazy while recovering.

“Truth.”

“Here’s a good one. I know you don’t swing, but, if you had to choose just one of us in this room to date, who would it be?”

“Wow, that’s a tough one.” He glanced at Ryuji, smiling licentiously.

“And be serious!”

“Fine, buzzkill.” He closed his eyes, carefully weighing his options. “If I had to go with just one, at risk of being neutered by Haru, I’d have to say Makoto. She’s pretty much the face of pulling yourself up by the bootstraps and getting shit done. That’s the sort of good influence that anyone could use in life.”

“Oh, well, thank you. I’m flattered you would…”

“Also, it would give me an excuse to get her all flustered more often. That’s, like, the most adorable goddamn thing.”

“Seconded!” Makoto proceeded to prove exactly why that was, hiding behind her hands as Haru smiled contently. “And don’t worry, the conditions of my deal with Sae-san were physical contact. Plus I know this is strictly hypothetical.”

“Thanks for being chill.” He laid back, taking a bit more pressure off his ribs. “Though, truth be told, I don’t know if I could say no if she came onto me.” And like that, group wide interest
spiked.

“Really?”

“I think that goes for all of you. I’ve seen what getting rejected does to a person, and I can’t see myself making any of you guys go through that. I’m a softy on the inside, so what?”

“Now you tell me.” Ann leaned harder against the table, and Futaba broke back into the conversation with a wicked grin.

“Ooh, does somebody have a crush?”

“Let’s be real, he’s, like, the perfect boyfriend. He’s nice, he’s supportive, he cooks like a five star chef, and he could totally break a mugger over his knee. Actually, he did do that one for you, didn’t he, Makoto?”

“Technically it was a trio of sexual predators, but yes, your statement is otherwise accurate.”

“See!? And before you say it, Shiho and I talked about it, too. If we wanted to go the poly route with our relationship, he’d be candidate number one.”

“Huh, well.” Akira, having absorbed the ramble, stared blankly at the ceiling. “Now you know that I am physically incapable of saying no. Do with that knowledge what you will.”

“Ugh, when you put it like that, it makes me feel like it would be manipulative. Which it totally would be. Sorry, I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“Tell you what.” He looked back to her, smiling warmly. “I might not be a bachelor, but I’ll still cook for you guys anytime. And kick rapists in the groin in your honor. How’s that sound?”

“…You’re a great friend to have, you know that?”

“Right back at you.”


The group continued chatting for several hours, until even Futaba couldn’t take the late night anymore. She passed out facedown on the workbench. Akira carefully wrapped her in her favorite comforter, shifting her position just enough that she wouldn’t wake up all sore and cramped.

One by one, the Thieves followed her into sleep, curled up on sleeping bags around the room. At some point, Haru and Makoto slipped off to the public bath, delivery box in hand, and when they returned, they drifted off in each others’ arms on the couch.

Akira, the last one left, scratched behind Morgana’s ear and looked over the group. Less than a year prior, he had been completely alone, abandoned by everyone he thought he could trust besides his own mother. The chain of fortune that lead him to being surrounded by the best friends a guy could ask for still astounded him.

“It is ironic, in a sense, that it was Shido’s meddling that lead thee to them.”

‘And now, he might be the one to rip us apart.’ Inevitably, his thoughts trailed off to Ohya,
whose best friend had been left broken and hollow by him in a bid to cover political scandal. To Futaba, whose mother fell to feed his gluttony for power. To Sojiro, who almost lost custody of her because of a further desire to cement his hold on the research he already destroyed so much to steal. He was a terror that would stop at nothing to tear down all that was decent only because he saw it as beneath him, if he even saw it at all. Who better for the Phantom Thieves to bring crashing back down to Earth? ‘Sucks for him, we don’t plan on rolling over and letting him win that easily.’

“To fulfill the crisis that sparked my conception, a dream for which I can hardly wait. We are as one in this matter, correct?”

‘I am thou, thou art I.’ Akira rolled over, pulling his sheets more completely over himself. ‘For the innocents that the powerful trample upon as stepping stones.’

“For thine own unpaid slight, left to the merciless currents of fate.”

‘The Phantom Thieves…’

“Shall see him fall!”

Chapter End Notes

You know, when I gave Haru that high libido, I was running off the idea that the more constricted someone is in youth, the more... active they are when the restraints are loosened. Then it blew past that straight into casual nymphomania. Weird how these things escalate. I might be tempted to actually write some of those scenes as separate oneshots if I had any idea how to write sex. Maybe some strapping young eroticist will take the task for me. *wink*

Next time, the plot returns with a vengeance.
Chapter Summary

In which Akechi thinks he's sneaky.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Akihabara was as bustling as usual. Akechi didn’t frequent the area on his own time, but there were a handful of cases that required him to pass through for the investigation. It still wasn’t quite a free trip this time, either. His notes said it was a frequent haunt of Joker’s before he joined the dead, and so would Akechi linger.

Scanning for his name in local records, Akechi noticed that, over the course of several months, Akira’s name slowly climbed up a list of online scores for the Gun About arcade cabinet. It never joined the records in isolation, however. Every time he logged a new personal best, the number one spot was rewritten by a user going by the name King. Usually it was his name he was replacing at the top, too, marking him as an individual of great ability.

Akechi was incredulous when he first found the legendary King’s identity, but after some thought, it made sense. The young had more time to their own devices than late teens or adults, granting Shinya Oda a greater chance to sharpen his abilities than the competition. He didn’t know the specifics, but leaps in Joker’s skill with a false weapon coincided with meetings with King. It reeked of an alliance, and, though he had no means to prove it in the eyes of the law, it gave him a tempting personal trail to follow.

The Gigalo Arcade was clearly a popular spot, many within the range of their early teens and mid-twenties populating the space. At the back, a mob of them had gathered, and the Gun About machine’s sound was cranked loud enough for them all to hear. It was a sure sign of the King’s presence, just as Akechi’s research said.

Pulling his hood over the tops of his eyes to not be recognized, he lurked in closer, peering over their shoulders to see the playing space. At the far end of no less than twenty onlookers was Oda. He seemed like a normal child from most angles, down to the egotistical ‘Get Smoked’ cap, but Akechi knew that look in his eyes. It was a focus he had only seen once before, when staring down the wrong end of Joker’s pistol. He moved with a smoothness and precision that impressed the crowd, and the small nuances in the technique, though missing Joker’s natural grace, were undeniably similar. Akechi found the firearm mentor.

“One left.” For a split moment, Akechi thought Oda had spaced out, but then he felt the intent rolling from him. His ears pivoted, his wrists loosened, and his breathing slowed. At once, he strafed to the side and spun around, firing one decisive round into the head of the opponent who attempted to drop on him from a higher platform. “I win.”

The crowd erupted in cheers at the victory. Akechi, though, stayed silent. In that one moment of perfect focus, Akechi, too, saw the potential that lingered in the boy, the spirit of the King. He shuddered to think of the heights he could have reached if granted a Persona. As it stood, he knew them vicariously through his student, the one who had used them to climb to heights Akechi could
only dream of. For the time, at least. He pulled out a notepad and pen.

‘Train with arcade games using a physical gun controller, preferably Gun About.’

His cursory research in the area finished, he made himself scarce, slipping from the arcade to his next target. Shinya calmly excused himself from the crowd, passively absorbing their praise as he made his way to the bathroom hallway at the back. Once no one was in ear shot, he retrieved the walkie talkie from his front jacket pocket.

“Lead Lord to Cuckoo’s Nest, Crow sighted in Akihabara.”

Churches were always a point of disdain in Akechi’s life. As a child, he hated being dragged to them every Sunday morning. It was a block of time he could have dedicated to anything else, but it was always taken from him. Now, he found that waste of time all the more infuriating. His mother spent fifty-two weeks every year fervently praying to the one supposedly in charge, and what had come of it? As far as Akechi was concerned, God was utterly useless when it mattered at best, and a more horrid con artist than Shido at worst.

And yet, if he was to complete his research, he had to endure one morning longer. He scanned the room, and, in the frontmost bench to the right, he saw her. Hifumi Togo, the fallen idol of shogi. Perhaps she would have stayed lost if Akechi hadn’t found that Akira only ever entered a church when she, too, was present.

He casually strolled to the front, taking the seat to the far left. He slouched over and pressed his hands together, mimicking the common man in prayer. His eyes stared as far to the right as they could while he faced forward, and he focused. Togo was practicing by herself, taking turns moving a piece from each team on the board. He tried to follow her tactics, but the angle was all wrong. He couldn’t see most of the pieces clearly, only knowing their faction from brief glances he caught while she moved them around. He needed a way to get closer without raising suspicion, but how?

“Pardon me, child, but I’m afraid it is seen as disrespectful to wear your hood up in this place.” While he was busy straining his eyes to spy, he hadn’t noticed the elderly priest coming to his side. “I will have to ask you to lower it.” Akechi hurriedly braced himself for public speaking, hoping his cheery tone would hold.

“I’m sorry, sir, but it would cause you a great deal of trouble if my identity was known.”

“I imagine you speak from experience, young Goro Akechi?” His eyes leaped up to the priest’s knowing, yet calm smile. “Worry not. In this place, you are but another child of God, and I assure you that the rest of the congregation will allow you to speak with Him in peace. So please, lower your hood so He may look upon His child’s face.” With a sliver of apprehension, he reached up, pulling back the cowl. When it fell, he glanced around. A few eyes briefly met his, but they returned to their prayers soon after.

“See, my son? This is a place of peace for all. No one of decent heart would attempt to hound you here, and I will personally make sure that the rest do not, either.” He put a gentle hand on his shoulder, and something about the warmth made Akechi’s heartbeat catch. “When your prayers are finished, you may find some comfort with the young lady over there. She is in much the same
“That is Hifumi Togo, correct? I hear the scandal surrounding her is quite tumultuous.”

“To speak lightly of the matter. I fail to see the value of blaming her directly for the machinations of another. That ill-managed outrage oft does more harm than good in this world.” He turned back to him, gesturing her way. “You would both know a thing or three of broken privacy, so perhaps you would find some respite with each other under the eye of God.” Something about the way this priest spoke made Akechi nod along with much of his logic. Perhaps he could have gotten along with her quite well, but as it was, they stood on opposite sides of a wall. Their worlds could not overlap.

“That sounds pleasant, but I shouldn’t interrupt her. She seems to be focusing quite intently, and I know how it can be to have that broken.”

“You speak true. Young Togo can become entwined in her thoughts easily. Perhaps you could return another day then. She is as constant in this place as light of the Sun. It is far from your only opportunity. God bless, my son.” He bowed slightly before returning to the podium at the front.

Akechi, knowing his cover had been blown, decided that it was too late to gather more intel now. There could be eyes on him at any moment, and if they saw him focusing intently on her, the repercussions of his carelessness would ripple far into the future. He stayed for but a minute longer, finishing his ‘prayer’ before getting up to leave. He retrieved his notepad once more.

‘Study shogi stratagem.’

He concealed it and left, blind to Hifumi flipping a switch on her watch and bringing it closer to her mouth.

“General to Cuckoo’s Nest, Crow sighted in Kanda. Suspicions confirmed. Additionally, he is exhibiting signs of abnormal nervousness.”

“This is Black Cuckoo. We will arrange for a psychiatric evaluation if behavior pattern persists.”

His third lead of the day turned up blank. He had come all the way to Shinjuku, passing dens of inequity and thinly veiled brothels with forced disinterest, wading into the cesspool of society, only to find the reporter with nothing but praise for the Phantom Thieves passed out drunk in the Crossroads bar. A grand waste of time. He left it, letting his expression fall when no eyes lingered. Nothing else to do but find another mark, but where to begin? Perhaps the politician he assisted, or…

“Excuse me, young man, could you come closer?” He stopped in his tracks, wary of possibly being jumped out of nowhere. He turned to the voice, and, to his relief, it wasn’t emanating from an alley. Instead, it came from a stand covered by a thin, violet cloth decorated with stars. At the corner sat a deck of cards, one of which sat face up on the table. Behind the table, one hand on the flipped card, was a woman of long, blonde hair and shockingly keen eye. He didn’t know why, but he found himself intrigued.
“Can I help you?”

“Yes, and, perhaps, I can help you.” She waved him towards the stool on the other side, and, finding it an open enough seating arrangement, he partook. “A strange energy emanated from the tarot a moment ago, and when I pursued it, the first card in order directed me to you.” He looked closer at the card. He didn’t know tarot terribly well, but he was fairly certain it was the Fool, its feet pointed towards him.

“A fortune teller then? I should have gathered from the stand layout.” His eyes lingered on the card, though, in actuality, it was her hand that caught his interest. After spending so much time in the Metaverse, he had developed an almost eerily second sense for magic in use, and he felt it clearly from her. Even if she was a con, perhaps there was an element of truth to be gained from her tellings. “Very well, I will play along. How much for your services?”

“Nothing at all. Consider your payment to be satisfying my curiosity around this phenomenon.” It seemed she believed in her own abilities if she asked no money. That or she was mad, but the two had great potential to overlap in the field of mysticism.

“Is there anything I should do?”

“Just stay still, and let me read your fate.” Her hand trailed back to the deck, and as soon as she touched down, Akechi felt the air shift. It was a wave, a crackle in reality around the cards. Was her power rooted in cognition, or perhaps a similar cosmic force? “Let’s see…”

She slid the cards face down over the table, the seemingly random placement soon forming into a circle around the Fool. Nine cards came from the deck, and the warp occurred again. Whether she felt it or not, it was her sign to stop. She began with the card second closest to him, rounding the table clockwise.

“Demons of your past haunt you still, a deed left undone.” She turned the first card, the Chariot. Following it was the Magician. Soon, Akechi saw the pattern unfolding. These cards represented the Phantom Thieves, each corresponding to a member.

“Some you recall, some are clouded from your knowledge.” The card following the Hermit was the Hierophant, and it gave him pause. None of the Thieves’ Personas corresponded to that Arcana. Was his theory wrong?

“Their presence… burdens you, haunts you in waking terrors. You fear for your life…” The Empress turned, and he noted something odd. The Fool faced him, but the other nine all pointed towards her. If he recalled correctly, there was significance to the direction the cards faced, but he didn’t know what. He found himself leaning over the table, eyes flickering around the arrangement. Her hand trailed to the last card in sequence, the one directly between him and the Fool.

“A shadow looms over you, commands you, drives you towards… towards…” Her brow scrunched together, and her opposing hand went to her temple as she touched the card. She fought through the pain, eyes clenched shut, and flipped it, and her eyes flew open. She gasped, both hands going to her head as she began to hyperventilate. Akechi’s gaze jumped back and forth from her and her card, unable to believe what he saw before him. It was Death, facing her.

“What is this?” His voice was barely a whisper, but the more he took in of the scene, the more coiled his internal springs wound. He stood suddenly, stool thrown back in his wake, and he slammed his hands down on the table. “What is the meaning of this!?"

“I… I…!” His teeth ground together, and he reached out, grabbing her wrist. A shock ran
through him, crossing the length of his arm and shooting through his mind. He grabbed the sides of his head, the pounding of a drum ringing in his skull. He tried to steady himself against the table, but as he looked down, he saw that final card shifting. Its picture flickered in and out, and each time it reemerged, it was something new. First, a Fool, facing opposite his own. Then Justice, and it, too, opposed him.

The last change, one he did not know. It seemed to incorporate imagery from all cards prior, circling what seemed to be the Fool. It stared at him, pierced his very being, and saw all that he was. He felt a frigid breath on his neck, and hard, midnight black fingers wrapped around his shoulders.

_“Thou think too hard. Close thine eyes, and act as I direct.”_

He wheeled around, throwing a fist, but he found naught but open air behind him. He turned back to the teller, and her card had returned to Death, but now facing him. She curled in on herself, breathing heavy, sweat pouring over her skin. Her eyes looked up at him, devoid of all human feeling. Her voice resonated in his mind as though that of God himself.

_“Your past confines you, and your present is an unending spiral. Let your sins consume you, and ruin will claim its due.”_ He stepped back, almost stumbling over his abandoned stool, and rage flared to life in his heart. He grabbed the edge of the table and threw it aside, letting it and her damnable cards scatter into the wind.

_“Damn you, you sightless hack!”_ He turned away from her, disgust permeating his every cell, and he stormed off, a tempest of confusion and unguided rage running circles in his mind. Once he was gone, Chihaya pushed against the fog of exhaustion and pulled the microphone down from her headband.

_“This… It’s Soothsayer. I met with Crow. It’s worse than we feared.”_

_“This is Mother Cuckoo. Calm down, Soothsayer, I’ll listen when you can think clearly.”_

_“You’re sure of that, Sae-san?”_ Akari and Sae were both initially blown away by Futaba’s computer setup. Three monitors arranged to provide maximum view with minimal movement. It was no wonder she seemed to be an omnipresent force in the internet, having three rigs plus a laptop to work through at any given time. It also, with her grace, worked excellently as a base of operations for their ‘birdwatching,’ a nest that could monitor all of their agents at once.

_“Positive. Jumpiness, constant worrying over unseen threats, shortened fuse. It all lines up with severe paranoia. Plus there’s the matter of Chihaya’s vision.”_ Akari didn’t need to be told the importance of it a second time. She had painstakingly recorded everything Chihaya had to see, and it was chilling to say the least.

The people on the streets around him were like shades, a thin, inky black fog with sharp, piercing eyes. A towering figure stood behind him, gripping him tightly by the shoulders, but it was blurred, as though Akechi was barely aware of its presence, and once he had reason to seek it out, it was dispelled, avoiding his attention. Akechi himself was dressed in his Metaverse attire, a chaotically striped suit with a jagged helm.

_“It sounds suspiciously like a Palace to me.”_
“I thought so, too, but that couldn’t be. Your son was perfectly clear in that Persona users can’t have a Palace.”

Akari stared long and hard at the notes in front of her, cross referencing them, Sae’s secondhand knowledge of the Metaverse, and what she already knew about Akechi from her own cursory research. There was a puzzle here, beyond the one she had been tasked with solving. To have a Persona was to be in control of your inner self, so why did Akechi fear a lack thereof? The picture was bigger than just Akechi and Shido, bigger than anyone could imagine.

Chapter End Notes

The first step of three.
"Ominous!"

So, me being spooky aside, I thought I'd let you guys know about another project I've been toying with in my head. You might know of a little game called Etrian Odyssey Untold. I just beat the Story Mode, and it was a good deal of fun. Then I did some reading on Classic Mode, which has no predetermined characters and encourages the player to make their own story. I figured taking that last point literally would give me a good chance to sharpen my character making skills some, so I might be writing an EOU story based on a Classic Mode playthrough soon.

Don't worry, it won't be getting in the way of Many Quirks updates. This is the current top priority. Just, you know, more stuff from me if you like my stuff. See you next time, as Akechi goes increasingly mad.
Chapter Summary

Akechi tries to solve the puzzle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The hall in front of him seemed to go on forever, but still Akechi ran. At the end of the trail, his back turned, stood the bastard that ruined so much. Finally, after two long years, the end seemed to grow closer. Shido became larger in his field of view, and with this realization, Akechi found it hard to suppress his glee. He drew his pistol, ready to finish his lifelong goal, to claim vengeance against the bastard that had brought him into the world an unwanted failure.

Then, a shadow passed overhead. The surprise made him stumble, and by the time he righted himself, he found something had come between him and his goal. Nine shaded figures blocked his way. They ran just like him, and yet, they pulled further ahead. With each passing moment, they became smaller on the horizon, unwavering, tireless. And they had one goal in mind, reaching Shido first.

Akechi’s teeth clenched together. They wanted to claim his prize, to take the one thing he ever wanted in life with no care for his hard work. If he let them get away, everything he had strived for would vanish into the wind.

“Let them not deny thee the fruits of thine labor.”

He raised his gun, setting its sights on the back of the figure that lead the rest. The leader, noticing Akechi at last, reached back, offering a hand in peace. He did not stop running, and yet, his offer was no less real. Akechi’s hand shook. From fear? Excitement? Nervousness?

“Wilt thou surrender thine efforts to them?”

He grabbed his firing arm with its opposite, steadying his aim, though his fingers bit into his flesh like the jaws of winter. His sights aligned with the back of the leader’s head. He pulled the trigger. A spray of blood. The hard thunk of a body on concrete. And that was that, the face of his opposition was gone. The remaining eight froze in their tracks, eyes locked on the fallen corpse, allowing Akechi to overtake them once again. Now, all that stood before him was Shido, just as it should have been.

And yet, Akechi felt the job undone. It had been too easy. Nothing came so simply to him, ever. Allowing them to remain was a risk he could not afford. He pointed his arm back, turning his head enough to aim.

Suddenly, his vision was filled by shadow. The eight had closed the gap, and a new leader stood front-and-center. The blackened figure reached out, her hand ready to clasp his face, to crush it in her palm. Her eyes glowed a dangerous cerulean, and her touch, he knew, would burn like the Sun. He tried to duck under her, but, though he dodged the strike, his balance was left in tatters.
His next few steps were staggered as he attempted to rise to his feet. Just as he thought he was steadied again, though, a sharp pain struck the backs of his knees. Two of the other Thieves passed him, Noir and Fox smiling as he toppled to the ground. Queen praised their work, and they continued onwards, Skull striking him in the back of the head with his pipe as a last fare-poorly. They kept running on the path, growing ever farther from his reach, as Akechi writhed in pain on the ground. He put his hands beneath him, attempting to push himself back up.

Then, he felt a hand on his ankle. Its touch was corrosive, eating through the fragile cloth of his disguise and, soon after, his very flesh. Then another, higher up. And another. And another. When the fifth grabbed hold, he felt them pulling him back, and with each subsequent hand, their strength became harder to shake off.

He looked back to gauge his new foes, but he found that they weren’t new at all. Grasping his ankle was a woman in black, her legs crushed where the car struck her. Wakaba’s eyes were hollow, and from the bullet wound between them, animosity poured like blood.

“Finally. You can join us.” Her voice scratched at his soul, filing it away and leaving only ashes behind. The next hand up gripped tighter, but offered no statement. The reporter who tried to pull back the curtain on Shido, one of the first to do so, stared at him intently, her blinded, broken mind finding focus only in him.

The more faces that joined the hoard, the more he slowly recalled them. The train conductor he broke. The principal he slaughtered. Too many journalists, CEOs, and political rivals to count. They joined the mob in swathes, and with each shattered soul that appeared, it became harder to pry himself from their gaping maw, no force he could exert greater than their collective burden. His victims would have their due.

Then, he heard footsteps, coming from behind. A drop of blood hit the ground beside him, and when its splatters grazed his cheek, he felt his skin begin to smolder. Black boots crossed Akechi’s blurring vision, and when he looked up, Joker stood anew. Desperate, he reached out.

“Joker, please! Help me!” He stopped and turned around. Akechi couldn’t make out his face clearly, but he felt his attention, a spotlight from which he could not escape. As magnanimous as he was once before, Joker offered his hand. Akechi’s heart leaped, and, though the lost tried to pull him back, he put the last of his strength into lunging forward, ready to take his hand. He could be saved yet. He could free himself of this burden. He could, if he was bold, join this forgiving man, and together…

Suddenly, another arm shot out from behind him, its sharp, black claws tearing through the flesh of Joker’s wrist. He backed away, gripping the wound tightly. The new arm lowered, caressing Akechi’s chin, its cold sapping the life from his skin.

“To abandon thine pride now, a transgression I shan’t allow.” He looked back, and hovering over him, blocking the sky above, was Loki. His dominance was choking, almost as much as the tightening hand around his throat. “Come, we shall have thine justice, consequences be damned.”

“I tried to be merciful, I truly did.” Joker shook his head, reaching for the gun holstered at his hip. “If you want to wallow in your mistakes, who am I to stop you? Now go.” As he drew his gun, a flame erupted from his arm. The glow spread rapidly, and in the cloak he thought to be Joker’s, he saw the leering grin of Arsene, eyes burning with a hatred unrivaled. “Claim the ‘reward’ of thine justice.”

He aimed for Akechi’s forehead, and he could only stare up, watching as the barrel lit up and cracked. His ears rang, and the flash blinded him, leaving his only sensation the cloying hands
Akechi jolted awake, his every muscle stiff and sore. The phantoms of his dream lingered in the shadows around him, but when the false rush of adrenaline wore away, he found his room was the same as ever. Walls barren, bookshelf and bed straight and orderly. The only place that seemed to have been less than a museum display was his desk, the scattered papers about the glowing computer monitor akin to some arcane ritual. He sat in the chair in front of it, figuring he must have drifted off during his research.

He shook the sleep from his mind and continued, burying the vision in the depths of his mind. Such fantasies would only slow his progress. He scrolled through the links, finally finding one that seemed to be more plain explanation than fanciful drivel. Still, when it came to tarot, even the most direct explanations were peppered with useless fluff. He swiftly opened five pages, each on a different window for quicker access.

He thought he had a solid base for the madwoman’s reading when he linked the cards around what she claimed to be his own to the Phantom Thieves themselves, each corresponding to a member, but two cards broke this pattern. The Hierophant was an Arcana unused by any member, barring Joker on occasion, which made it stand out. As he researched, though, he found information on the card to be next to useless for identification. It seemed to be a symbol of religious faith and conformity, neither of which matched the description of a Thief he knew or any of the Confidants he linked to their leader. It was a dead end.

Next, then, his own card, the Fool. Innocence, freedom of spirit, spontaneity? No, none of these matched him. When he kept reading, however, he found something of great value. Each of these Major Arcana had a mirror meaning. When right side up, they bore their primary meaning, but when inverted, they encompassed the relevant vices to those initial descriptors.

“Recklessness, foolishness?” The more he read, the more nonsense he found it to be, and yet, something compelled him to keep reading despite his swelling anger. “The presence of an inverted Fool signifies an ignorance of consequences…”

“If you want to wallow in your mistakes, who am I to stop you?”

Akechi swiftly closed the window, its contents sending a rolling ache through his mind, flashes of a vision he would rather forget. He held a hand against his temple as he pulled the other four into central view. The final card in sequence, the one that sparked a glimpse into utter insanity, and, most pointedly, the one that flickered between four different Arcana.

The Fool and Justice were both upright. He already knew the meaning of the former, but not its meaning relative to him. It stood in the ring signifying the Thieves, though, so perhaps it was a member? One that was similar to him, but opposite, a reflection…

Pieces began to connect. He quickly switched to the window for Justice.

“Awareness and accountability of one’s actions, including their own. This is reflective of a strong desire for consequence befitting a deed.”

“Claim the ‘reward’ of your justice.”
“No, it couldn’t be…” The card began as Death before changing, and returned to it at the end, but flipped. Death upright became life, and returned to Death inverted. “Death is representative of an end, but also a beginning. It encompasses inevitable change and the ability to endure it.” His eyes scrolled further down the page. “Inverted death is reflective of stasis, an inability to accept change. It may stand for a sense of limbo and a past you cannot let go of.”

“I tried to be merciful, I truly did.”

“To abandon thine pride now, a transgression I shan’t allow.”

“No, no, no!” He stood from his seat, disbelieving of what sat before him, but the symbols were impossible to interpret any other way. The ninth Thief endured change, and emerged free. It rose to enact its justice, and, in all things, it opposed him. There was only one man it could have been.

He hurriedly searched for the last card, the only one he was not aware of. At the bottom of the listing, after all prior Major Arcana, was the World.

“Completion, fulfillment of a goal. When inverted, it means the opposite, the incompletion of a task.” Which way was this one? He couldn’t recall. Did it face the teller or him? Whose task was near completion, and whose was far from?

Slowly, more cogs began to connect to the machine. Why were the Thieves so desperate to drive him out of Yongen? Once they were aware of his presence, they could have put up their defenses and braced for his return, or Skull could have just blown his legs off with his shotgun. All of the chances they had to finish the fight in a moment flashed through his mind, such as Noir’s failure to check the cupboard he was in, and cutting a table in twine for no apparent reason. They went out of their way to terrify him into fleeing. Furthermore, if they wanted him dead, they could have used that opening in Mementos when they delivered the card to end it. Instead, they just insisted that he stayed away. There was something in Yongen they didn’t want him to see.

Slowly, his scowl faded, a grin taking its place. It crepted further and further across his face, and when it reached the edges, it parted, letting a thin, hoarse chuckle through. It, in turn, rose, swelling into a maddened cackle that echoed through his room. It reverberated in his ears, filled his mind, blinded him to reason. All of his frustration, his confusion, his rage, it all fell to the pyre of mania-driven laughter.

“Joker, you crafty devil, I knew you wouldn’t die without a fight!” Clenching his teeth together, he retrieved his phone and quickly set his destination. He didn’t know how long it would take, but he knew where they would show up eventually. Joker wasn’t one to disappoint. “Now, I’ll prove which of us deserves the World!”

Chapter End Notes

Here we go, it’s time to du-du-du-du-du-DUEL!

Also, remember that Etrian Odyssey story I said I was toying with? First chapter's ready to roll. It should be up soon after this one, assuming a vengeful god doesn't strike me dead. What name have I granted this new branch of my journey as an author? The Many Quirks of Dungeon Delyr!
*crickets*

...What? Naming stuff is hard.
Chapter Summary

It is time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Akechi’s investigation was swift and thorough. Four of the letter holders had been disabled already and their keys taken. He should have expected such swift work from the Phantom Thieves. All that left was the Cleaner, and there was only one place where he could be conceivably cornered. Akechi stowed himself in the pipework over the engine room, making sure he was in his own Thief uniform to mock them, and there, he found his prize.

The Thieves passed through exactly as he predicted, giving chase to their last mark before Shido himself, and at the head of the group was Joker. Akechi felt his pulse spike in excitement, forcing him to hold off on engaging. It wouldn’t do to lose control of himself during the fight. He refused to underestimate them like that a second time.

Even so, he managed to confirm one thing of importance. The group numbered exactly eight, not a soul more. Apparently that Hierophant had been some form of error in the reading. As he thought, even with real power guiding her hand, the teller was mad and prone to mistakes. The thought pleased him greatly.

He heard the uproar of a battle further in, but it didn’t last long. The Cleaner passed underfoot, limping from his injuries. Then, he heard them coming. Akechi drew his pistol, not bothering with the silencer. It would only slow his bullets. They walked into his line of sight, and he aimed. Not for Joker, no. He would have the pleasure of finishing him eye-to-eye, properly this time. Instead, he had another grudge to pursue. The cat would pay dearly for his part in ruining the assassination of Kunikazu Okumura.

Then, Skull put a hand to his neck and tilted his head. Akechi swiftly remembered the signal and changed his target, aiming for the back of Skull’s head. Joker turned, putting himself in the line of fire and looking directly up at him. He smirked with all the pride in his heart and put his arms out to the sides.

“Hey there, Crow, how’s the weather treating you? Me, I’d call that Winter cold a real killer.” Akechi scoffed, standing fully on his pipe. No point in maintaining stealth now.

“Still making your jokes, I see. I guess it takes more than death to silence the leader of the Phantom Thieves.”

“Damn straight, you two bit Agent 47!” Skull stomped forward, cocking his shotgun. Joker blocked him with an arm, and he obediently receded.

“How about you drop that gun so we can talk. We already know why you’re in this, and I think our goals overlap.” He nodded to Oracle, and she procured a tape recorder. She hit play, and Akechi found his own voice being projected back to him.
“Not long now. A little more “father,” and I can finally settle our score.” His eyes narrowed, and his fists tightened. How had they gotten that? He never let his mask fall in public spaces! Had they bugged him at some point, or…?

“If I understand this correctly…” Queen stepped forward, stopping at Joker’s side. “…You’re only working with Shido in order to get closer to him, and once you’re in his inner circle, you wish to exact revenge for the abandonment he put you and your mother…”

“Not another word, Nijima.” Akechi’s cold, harsh voice cut through her statement, enforcing the silence he desired. “You speak so lightly of the atrocity that is my life. You wouldn’t know the Hell he put us through. After all, you’ve always had Sae. I just had a system that would rather me dead, one I had to fight my way out of with my own two hands.”

“Join the club.” Oracle matched his intensity to the note, the tape recorder in her hand squealing under the pressure of her grip. “Oh wait, I forgot, you’re the one who made me an initiate. When you killed my mom.” Haru wrapped her hand around Futaba’s wrist, the warm touch making her relax her muscles.

“And I was almost in much the same position, but, fortunately, we managed to stop you that day, Black Mask.” The twisting fury in Akechi’s gut magnified.

“Both of you shut up!” He shot a wild round into the group. Before it could hit, Yusuke bolted forward and drew his blade. The bullet was split in two on its edge, the halves deflecting and bouncing uselessly across the floor on either side. “Don’t you act like you’re half as burdened as me. You, Sakura, had the old man, and I know damn well, Okumura, that you’re relieved to not have your father breathing down your neck anymore. You got lucky, I got strong. That’s all I could do, dammit!”

“Really, you snake!?” Joker was too slow to stop Skull this time, his anger burning too hot to contain. “Guess what, my old man was a deadbeat, too! And you know how me and my mom made it? By sticking together. We support each other, that’s how we’ve lived, so don’t act like you’re the only one who has to deal with tough shit!”

“Well said.” Joker put a hand on his shoulder, reminding him to keep an even head. “We’ve all seen Hell, plenty of it. You know what I think has you so worked up, Goro?” Joker tilted his head, his cocky, certain grin replaced by a deep scowl. “You’re just realizing we’ve made it farther towards your goal than you ever could without losing our morality, and now you’re lashing out because you can’t accept that all of the stuff you’ve done amounts to nothing.”

Akechi’s eyes shot open. His mind flashed back to the cards, to the Justice that, from where he stood, looked inverted, and the Death that was much the same. Their meanings echoed in his mind. The fire in his gut swelled, trying to drown out the realization in sweltering heat.

“That’s what you think. I’ll admit, you’ve done well to keep going this long, but this is where your story ends.” Akechi aimed his gun once more, reclaiming his center. “You’ll be the fallen Fool, and I’ll take the World.”

“What do you…?”

“I’m the one who’s going to make that bastard pay, not you, so why don’t you just die!?” He pulled the trigger, and a round left the barrel. Suddenly, something struck the bullet midair, shattering it into pieces. In the split second before it left his vision, Akechi saw another, larger round, and it came from somewhere behind him. He turned to look, just in time to see Boss loading a fresh shot into the chamber. The Hierophant was upon him, lurking in the pipework Akechi thought to be his
“For Wakaba.” He fired a second round, but before Akechi could react, it struck him above the right eye. His mask bounced the round, but a piece of it tore away under the assault. The blunt force it carried rattled his brain. In his delirium, his grip on his gun loosened, letting it fall to the floor below. He reached for his mask, but before he could so much as touch it, Boss barreled into him shoulder first, thrusting him from his lofty platform. He hit the ground on his back, inches away from landing on his gun. He scrambled to get to his feet, contending with a lack of air, distorted ribs, and an inability to see or think clearly, but before he could try to summon his Persona again, he found another’s hand already at his mask. The bloody red of Joker’s glove filled his vision, and it began to pull.

“Show me…” The mask started to give way, and the agony of its removal rivaled even the first. Then, it had only been his flesh, but now, it felt like a piece of his skull was being pried loose. “…your true form!” In one swift tug, the mask came loose, followed by a spray of blood. Akechi’s eyes blanked as he screamed, the pain reaching deep into his mind. He could barely see Joker tuck his mask away through the streams of blood clouding his sight.

“Now, snare!”

“On it, Joker!” Panther blazed ahead, readying her whip. Akechi put up his arms, prepared to engage in hand-to-hand, but his wrists flared with pink light. Noir dragged his arms back, shoulder bones grinding against each other painfully as his hands stuck together. Panther quickly swiped with her whip, binding them in place. He tried to break free, but Skull and Fox flanked him, shoving him down by the shoulders and all but locking him in place. Joker paced forward, his shadow long and dark from where Akechi stood.

“You have a lot to answer for. How many lives have you ruined? How many taken? All to get even for what he did to yours. That’s hardly what I would call ‘justice,’ New Detective Prince.”

“How…” Akechi’s voice was a faint whisper, his eyes hidden by bangs. “I’ve trained my whole life for this, but then you come along and get just as far in less than a single year. How are you so much stronger?”

“You really want to know?” Joker’s tone noticeably softened, and his shoulders loosened. “It’s because I wasn’t working alone. You might hate the idea, but having these guys by my side has pushed me along every step of the way. I don’t think I’d have made it half as far as I did without them.”

“Bullshit!” He pushed against his captors again, but they held firm. “They’re stronger than I gave them credit for, but there’s no way in Hell I’ll believe that sanctimonious crap! You’re nothing without them? More like they’re nothing without you, their undying leader!” The fire in his heart pushed against his flesh, and with a scream of undiluted rage, it broke free. A gale blew forth from him, pushing against the Thieves that worked to hold him. Their strength waned, and in that opening, he tore himself free, slipping from Skull and Fox’s hands and tearing half of the whip from the rest. He charged forward recklessly, the flame overtaking him.

“Come here!” He looked up, letting everyone see the mania coursing through him. A maddened grin tore his face in two, and his red eyes quaked with the same instability that infected his mind. Joker could barely react before Akechi was right on him. “You think it’s fun to unmask people, then fair’s fair!” The fire about his wrists ate through the whip, letting his coal black glove swing forward and grab Joker’s face. From between its fingers, he saw the black iron beak of Akechi’s real mask form. “You know who I am and what I’ve done, so how about I show you personally how I did it?”
“Get the Hell off him!” Skull and Fox rushed to assist, but they were already too late. A ring formed at Akechi and Joker’s feet, the air within bending to his will.

“I wonder how far I can take this?” Power thrummed in Akechi’s hand, and at once, Joker felt it flooding through him. It burned in his veins, and when it reached his brain, he felt it tearing at the boundaries around it. The chains pulled taut, their lengths burning as Akechi tore at them with all his might. “Stop pretending to be such a hero and show me what you’re hiding!” Joker tried to pull the hand from his face, but the magic that Akechi commanded bound them together, each tug pulling harder against the searing chains. “Show me who you really are!”

Finally, they snapped. The binds about Joker’s mind fell loose, and Akechi grinned triumphantly.

“Get the Hell away!” He tucked and rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding Boss’s downward cleave as he landed right where Akechi once was. From his new vantage, far from the reach of the Thieves, he turned to admire his work, but what awaited him was far from what he expected.

The long coat that marked Joker’s power melted away, falling from his skin in smoldering scraps. The cloth burned to ash, and the chains fell from his shoulders, clattering loudly on the floor. What was left behind was a high schooler, a boy almost like any other. His legs gave under him, and he would have fallen had Boss not given him a shoulder to lean on. He looked up at Akechi, his grey, glasses-free eyes striking a rusted bell at the back of Akechi’s mind. It was the same hollowness he saw in the mirror every day.

“Akechi, please… just stop. I don’t… want to fight…” Slowly, Akechi’s grin faltered, withered away. The other Thieves formed a protective circle around their leader, Mona checking him for wounds.

“What was that? You’re not injured, but…”

“Can’t… think straight. Something’s wrong, with my head.”

“It’s not a mental ailment I’m familiar with… Is this a breakdown?”

Their banter was white noise in Akechi’s ear. The Joker he knew crumbled before him, his true face revealed. The anger, the power, the righteous indignation that Akechi begrudgingly admitted to admiring, it was all a farce. Beneath it all, there was no Joker. Only Akira, a kid in way over his head. All of the thrill that built up in his heart was shed, leaving only that tired emptiness.

“I’m disappointed in you.” He kneeled down, retrieving his pistol and wiping the dust from its side. “I thought you were more than the average neanderthal, a kindred spirit, of sorts. I suppose I truly am a fool. What else could be bested by someone who’s all bluster?” He pointed his gun towards the assembled thieves, Yusuke and Haru rushing to the front. Somehow, despite knowing their bullet deflection capabilities, Akechi felt none of the terror they once held over him. “Goodbye, Kurosu.”

“Stop it. I don’t…” Sojiro had to shift to keep Akira from stumbling off of his shoulder. A spark of something else lingered in those eyes now, a quiet desperation. “I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want him to kill you.”

“Him? I’m afraid Sakamoto and Kitagawa won’t be much of an issue. Now stop blubbering, you waste of skin. It’s due time we finish this.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” The desperation in Akira’s eyes grew, and he tried in vain to reach
“No, stop!”

“No, stop!”

“Thou hast been a thorn in our side for too long now. It is finally time for me to free us from the annoyance.” The chains rattled with that deep, monstrous tone, and from their metal, blue cinders rose to life. They floated up from the links and coalesced in the space above. The air slowly warmed as the accumulative flame swelled to life, and from the heart of the blaze, piercing red eyes stared out. Wings, as black as midnight, were the first to break from the shell, and as the flame dissipated and Akira stared on in horror, a demon in red was born anew.

“My shackles thus loosen, and with them, my mercy.” A new fear pulsed in Akechi’s heart. He took a step back, the heat of the flame chewing at his outer skin. “Oh? Thou were so eager to face a weakened foe, but once one more worthy than thee arrived, now thou see fit to flee as would gutless poultry?” The demon drew his weaponry, gun and blade shining in the azure flame. “Know this, treacherous one; no slight against the Phantom Thieves shall be endured without retort. Now come. As thou desired, we shall finish this fight.” His wings spread to their full width, and for all Akechi knew, the blue tinted shadows that fell upon him were cast by the Devil himself.

“I am the pillager of twilight, Arsene!”

Chapter End Notes

And commercial break. Sorry about the cut, but if I didn’t slice the fight in two, this chapter would be way too meaty. Even now, the part two looks to be one of the longest individual chapters I’ve written for this thing. Look forward to that as you wonder where the hecky I’m going.
Chapter Summary

The fate of the Fool comes to pass.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Akira’s legs were weak beneath him, relying on Sojiro like a steel walker. It felt like half of his consciousness was torn away, and with it went his motor control. For the first time in nearly a year, he felt no warmth in the back of his mind, only the panicked chatter of his other Personas as they searched for Arsene’s guiding flame.

Unfortunately, it seemed such a thing no longer existed.

“DIE!” Arsene lashed out with a wing, and though Akechi ducked under it and continued to flee, the dense pipes it cleaved in twine left something more than a physical impression. His feathers were trailed by smoke, their edges almost glittering from the embers. As Akechi backed out of melee range, Arsene took aim, his silver pistol unleashing a hail of lead. Akechi tore off his helmet, the fear in his eyes unparalleled.

“Loki!” At his command, the helm shattered, the striped nightmare rising from its dust. He rose his spindly arms at his sides, dragging up a curtain of inky black. It rippled as the bullets struck, giving Akechi a moment of reprieve as Arsene decided which tactic to switch to.

“No way…” Morgana held up a section of Akira’s fallen chains in numb paws, disbelief slowing his thoughts. “He severed the ties between Akira and Arsene.”

“How’s that even possible?” Ryuji felt the need to hold his mask in place, the idea of losing Seiten Taisei a terrifying new possibility.

“He said he was trying to uncover who Joker really is.” Queen watched the battle unfolding closely, reading both Akechi and Arsene’s every move. “It’s possible that the spell or technique registered Arsene as an entity outside of Joker’s core self, thus deeming it necessary to remove him.”

“Arsene is… my anger.” Akira’s legs quivered as he tried to stand straight, but every attempt was thwarted as his knees buckled under him and Sojiro readjusted his stance. “My spirit of rebellion. He’s what makes me want to fight, get revenge.” He looked up at Arsene, his wayward other self. He hardly recognized him, the way he tore through everything between him and his opponent more beast than gentleman thief. “And I’m his voice of reason, keeping him from doing something we would both regret.” Sojiro moved his support from his shoulder to his arms, holding Akira up just enough so he could acclimate to standing again.

“He is you, and you are him.” Akira nodded, looking down at the chains. He reached out for them again, but whenever he tried to get down to the floor, his energy failed him, losing the cohesion in his muscles.

“Need to get him back. Need to…” Yusuke kneeled down and grabbed it for him, holding it
up in offering.

“It seems your memory is incomplete without him, as well. You needn’t stand alone, now or ever.” The other Thieves swiftly took to their work, each pulling chains up by the armful until everyone had a share. The sight kindled the cold embers in Akira’s torn heart, and he felt a small piece of Joker return to him. Futaba reeled in the last few links so not a single one touched the ground.

“What do you need us to do, Joker?”

At the other end of the engine room, Akechi’s strength was beginning to wane. Arsene seemed to weave around any attack thrown his way, and his refused to lessen in power or ferocity. Loki was the only wall between the two, but Akechi knew his magic wouldn’t hold out for much longer. The shadow walls drained his SP like no other technique in his arsenal. He had perhaps one or two more in him before the magic exhaustion threatened to further compromise his bodily health.

He made to backpedal further, but in the unending pursuit, he had lost his spacial awareness. His back met the wall of the chamber, but before he could duck to the side instead, Arsene snapped his fingers. With a pass of the wings on each side, spikes of black jutted from the walls. If he looked closely, Akechi swore he could see the echoes of tormented souls writhing beneath the surface.

“The chase is done.” Loki dropped down atop Arsene, but his reaction was swift and brutal, planting his knife in his chest. Akechi, too, felt the scalding metal tearing through his ribs, narrowly missing his lungs, as Arsene threw Loki aside. “I have won.” Arsene took aim, the abyssal eye of his pistol staring between Akechi’s. “And I claim my prize with a shot of my…”

“I have won.” Arsene took aim, the abyssal eye of his pistol staring between Akechi’s. “And I claim my prize with a shot of my…”

“Sorry, dude!” Suddenly, Seiten Taisei landed between them, swatting Arsene’s arm aside with a swing of his staff. Arsene recoiled back, and while he was stunned, Ryuji jumped on his back, throwing three coils of chain over his head. “The Phantom Thieves aren’t murderers!”

“NOW!” At Sojiro’s signal, the remaining Thieves pulled the chains tight. Arsene grabbed fitfully for the one at his neck, but the two about his chest restricted the movement of his arms. Ryuji and Taisei fell back, each joining the effort. Susano-O nodded in greeting, the reinforcements redoubling his motivation to pull his own weight. Personas and Thieves together pulled at the binds, and between them, the end of the chain wrapped around his right hand, was Akira. Arsene fought against his chains, fire billowing up from the space around his mask, but Akira smiled serenely as he neared.

“Calm down, pal.” He reached out, and though his struggling was fervent, it failed to stop Akira from placing his hand on his shoulder. As soon as contact was made, all of Arsene’s fight left him, each left in a trance as their torn minds rejoined. The other Personas swarmed around Arsene’s returning flame, his light in the dark reminding them of their purpose, and their presence reminding him of the greater truth he had been blinded to.

“Akira? My apologies, it seems I have acted in opposition of thine goals, and, in doing so, wrought dishonor upon…”

“It’s cool, just glad to have you back.” The blue flames trailed up Akira’s arm, and as he welcomed the return of his rebellion, he looked past Arsene. Akechi pushed himself from the wall, fear and rage mingling in his eyes as he pulled the knife from Loki’s chest. “You want to show him the error of his thinking?”

“I know what thou hast in mind, and if thou think it plausible, then I am in agreement. Let us commence.” Arsene’s fire tore through his clothes, overshadowing his physical form as it fed
cloud of raw magic. It fell upon Akira as an all-encompassing fog, and as it twisted around him, flowing through him and solidifying on his flesh, Akira grinned.

“Duuuuude!” Ryuji stared in awe, taking a shocked step back as the wings broke through the back of his long coat. Haru was transfixed on the horns that spiraled from his head.

“Is this…?” Akira clenched his hand shut, admiring the brimstone his skin became.

“The Twilight Cowl.”

“And there you go, flaunting your power again.” Akechi stepped forward, his teeth pressed tightly together. “You refuse to show me your real self, you ruin everything I’ve worked so hard for, and then you have the gall to show off! What the Hell are you!?” Akira’s grin persisted, and when he took a step forward, Akechi nearly took one back.

“Me? Nothing special, really. Just a guy with a vendetta to fill. If you remember right, Shido ruined my life, too. I’m here to make sure he can’t do it to anyone else. That’s the difference you’re so hungry for.” He crossed his arms, the initial jubilation giving way to a deep scowl. “I want to make sure no one else gets hurt like I did. You’re just out for revenge. I work with my anger towards him, towards every screwed up adult that thinks they deserve to use us like stepping stones, to help people. You just listen to whatever it tells you to do without a second thought.”

“My anger is a part of me. You let yours consume all of you.” The rest of the Thieves stood with him, forming a line to oppose Akechi. “I pity you, Goro. Under all the glamour of your public face, there’s only hate, impudent rage. Do you even see how little of your real self is left?”

“My real self? Is that what you want to see?” Akechi’s ragged breaths turned to wheezes, short spurts of air that escaped in an approximation of a laugh. “I see how it is. Fine! I’ll give you exactly what you want!” He put a hand to his forehead, and Loki floated up behind him, his shadow falling dark on Akechi’s shoulders.

“What are you doing!?” Akira tried to grab him, to pull him out of a huge mistake, but even with flight, he was too slow. The spell began, and the air around him became impenetrable.

“We’ll just see how much there is of me. I’ll prove that I’m more than you. My real self is going to destroy you!” Once the magic touched his mind, though, his mad smile fell. The air in his lungs went cold, and the light around him dimmed. The Thieves in front of him were clouded over, leaving only Joker clear as his teammates became indistinct blobs of ink. Their eyes were pinpricks of light, staring at him, through him. Their eyes were on him, but their real attention overlooked him, as though he was only a cloud of dust in the wind, a passing spectacle that would soon be left unremembered.

“Forget them.” Cold fingers wrapped around his shoulders, their tips digging into his flesh. “What happiness can thou find in the adoration of the masses? Thou desire to toil endlessly under the heel of your betters. A fine goal, oh bringer of ruin.” He looked up, and Loki leaned overhead. His blank, emotionless face seemed miles away, a titan looking down on an ant. The fingers pressed deeper, down to the bone. Akechi squirmed from the pain, the magic coursing through his head making it difficult to focus. His body slowly numbed to his commands, until he could barely muster a twitch of the finger.

“Be still. Let your mind empty. You seek a purpose, and so shall I be. Grant me CONTROL.” Akechi realized that he didn’t know that voice. It wasn’t the harsh rasp of Loki. No, it was thick and filled his ears like oil. He could sense that it was a part of him, but it wasn’t the anger he knew. His rage had been hollowed, used as a disguise for this parasite. A spark of life returned to
him, letting him grab the wrists trying to dig into his flesh.

“Get… off of me!” He pushed against the invading force, and as the fingers receded, he felt his conscious mind returning to him. But as he pulled away, so, too, did he feel the entity’s effort increase. Soon, it began to overtake him again, his progress slipping through his fingers. “Help me… Help me!”

“Hey, zebra print!” A strong wind blew by, the opposite reaction to Joker’s hard stop. He held a gun to Loki’s head and a smile on his lips. “We don’t appreciate domineering assholes around these parts.” He pulled the trigger, and Loki recoiled in pain. His claws tore from Akechi to grab the wound, letting him pull away from the presence infecting his mind.

“You cannot escape. Resistance is futile.” Loki contorted around Joker’s knife swing, sliding under him to grab Akechi by the leg. He put his other hand to the ground, the steel creaking and bending under his touch. “This is the error of humanity, an inability to accept their own powerlessness. If you will not submit willingly, I will drain the fight from you. Come.” The floor gave way with a resounding crack, and water rose from the hole. “Let your insignificance crush you as the weight of the sea.”

Akechi tried to dig his fingers into the remaining floor, even lunging to try to grab Skull’s outstretched hand, but his efforts were in vain. Loki dove through the breach, and he dragged Akechi with him. The water filled his mouth, and even as he snapped his lips together, he could feel the fluid weighing at the bottom of his lungs.

The salinity burned his eyes, and as Loki’s iron grip dragged him deeper, he felt the pressure further constricting his lungs. Air tried to push its way out of him. He clamped his hands over his mouth and nose to keep it sealed, for what little good its rapidly depleting oxygen content did. He looked towards the surface, its light dimming as both the sun and his consciousness drifted away.

Then, he heard a ripple in the water. The hand around his leg nearly crushed it, but after several more disturbances, it loosened. He roused himself enough to see Loki beneath him. He had turned towards the surface, but now he was limp, a series of holes left in his head.

As he drifted lifelessly to the deep, Akechi felt something else grab him, arms wrapping around his chest. He tried to turn to see what it was, but all he saw were horns overhead and the tips of wings as they propelled them through the water. Loki soon became invisible below, and above, the shadow of Shido’s ship grew.

Akechi’s head broke through the surface, and his reaction was instant. His lips loosened, letting out a harsh series of coughs. Small flecks of water pumped out of his lungs with each heave, the last inadvertently getting forced out as his savior threw him up to the engine room’s floor. Footsteps surrounded him, or, more accurately, the hole.

“That was insane, Kiki! What were you thinking!?”

“Just that… I’d save someone.”

“That’s why we love you, Joker.”

“Come on, kid, help us pull you up. You’ve got those wings, so use them.” Someone else touched down next to him. Akechi managed to roll over to face the ceiling, and though his vision was still blurred, it was hard to mistake the horned visage for anyone else.

“So, do you think that’ll be enough fighting, or should I actually get to hit you once this
time?” Akechi sank against the floor, his breathing finally normalizing.

“I… I give. You win.” The words were bitter on his tongue, but he knew admittance of fault was a necessary medicine.

“Good. Good.” Joker laid back, all but the tips of his horns leaving Akechi’s sight.

“Why did you rescue me? You could have let me drown, and the outcome would still be functionally the same, if not better. You had no guarantee I would be docile afterwards, so why?”

 “…I’m going to be brutally honest with you. I hate your guts, Goro.” The blunt truth stung, a punch to the stomach, but he couldn’t say he didn’t have it coming. “You hurt people for your own gain. You killed Oracle’s mother. You tried to kill Noir’s father. You tried to assassinate me. If evil was only measured in what people have done to me and my friends, the only person who would be worse is the guy who ordered you to do it all.”

“And yet, I think I understand you.” He sat back up, raising a knee and resting an arm atop it. “Did you know I wanted to kill Kamoshida?” The revelation was news to Akechi.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, and it wasn’t just a one time flash of anger. I was fully expecting to kill him up until the very end. It took Panther explaining why she didn’t to make me reconsider what I was doing. If it wasn’t for her, I would’ve just as soon assassinated him as change his heart. Hell, if it wasn’t for Skull, I know I would’ve killed him the first time I met him. That’s when I awoke to Persona.” Joker’s eyes hazed over in remembrance. “Those two taught me the lesson I needed to change for good.”

“And that was?”

“Getting rid of the corrupted heads of society is an important job, but at the end of the day, we’re doing it so the people they push around don’t have to suffer the abuse. That’s why the Phantom Thieves do what we do, to help people, to make sure they don’t end up hurt like we were. Showing society as a whole that it was wrong? We didn’t need that vindication. We had each other, and that was enough to be happy, a place to belong and a job to do.”

“You, though, you were alone. A bastard that would be as good dead as he is alive. I know what that’s like, and a criminal on top.” Joker’s eyes were full of pity, but also contemplation. “If I hadn’t had Skull or Panther, or Mona, for that matter, people who helped me keep perspective, I could’ve been just like you. A murderer with no goal besides revenge. And maybe, if you had someone to show you that when you started, you’d be where I am now. Maybe you would’ve started the Phantom Thieves two years ahead of me, and I’d just be a new recruit, if anything.”

“I hate you, without question, but I know that one little twist of fate and we’d be in each others’ shoes. That’s why I’m going to give you one more chance.” He rose to his feet, squaring his shoulders and spreading his wings wide.

“We have everything we need confront Shido, and plenty of time to engage. So we’re going to bring you back to the real world and patch up your injuries. Then, you’ll be there when we steal his heart. You’ll help us sink this boat, and when Shido turns himself in, you’ll go with him and testify. List all of the crimes he made you commit and cement his guilt in the eyes of the law, be the proof that otherwise disappeared with the Palaces of the dead. You’ll be arrested and imprisoned, but you’ll make sure he goes down, too. It won’t be an absolving of your crimes, and I don’t think anyone here is willing to forgive you, but once you’ve served your time, however long it is, you’ll
have your second chance. Who knows? Maybe we’ll still be operating and have an opening for you by then.”

“You… Just like that? You’ll trust me with your back after I tried to kill you thrice over?”

“Pretty sure you’ll get shot at least eight times in the head if you so much as poke me with a sewing needle, but I’m not abandoning the Phantom Thieves’ second rule. People who are willing and able deserve a chance to change and atone.” Akechi looked around, and though no one looked particularly thrilled with the offer, none of them rejected it. His heart grew heavy, and when Joker held out a hand in peace, he felt tears prickle at the edges of his eyes. “So, what do you say? Want to help us show your old man that he made the wrong enemies?” He was hesitant at first, afraid that Joker’s hand would turn to dust with one wrong move, but he reached back, his hand and heart open to change.

A gun fired. The bullet hit the ground between him and Joker. Akira jumped to his feet, ready to fight, but when he saw the attacker, he froze in shock.

“It seems our captain overestimated your abilities. And common sense. I should note that both estimates were quite low in the first place.” Skull turned his shotgun on the interloper, but he, too, couldn’t bring himself to action.

“What the Hell? There’s two of ‘em!” The Detective Prince, Akechi, stood before them, his suit immaculate, his expression plain and unflinching.

“There is so little to us, I find that having two almost gives the impression of one average person.” The double’s condescension flowed as easily as water, but it did nothing to undermine the threat of his firearm. Mona trained his slingshot on him, ready for a retaliatory second strike.

“This must be Shido’s cognition of Akechi, a quick shot with a smart mouth.”

“My, how succinct. If only our captain could hear that lovely descriptor with his own ears. It would be the perfect engraving for our tombstone.” Akechi pushed himself up on his elbows, eyeing his other self with disdain.

“I don’t plan on dying here, damnit!”

“And you don’t have to. In fact, it would be better if you wait until our captain is in power. Then your death will carry the benefit of taking his crimes to the grave with you.” Akechi’s eyes opened, his breath short.

“What? A scapegoat?”

“Don’t tell me you honestly believed you would walk away untouched with all that blood on your hands?” Cognitive Akechi sneered, a slimy, empty grin parting his face. “You’re an even greater fool than he thought! It is our job to do anything to raise our captain to power, even die for him. Though it seems you’ve failed at this task, considering your performance here today.”

His gaze briefly passed over the rest of the assembled Thieves, and with a tilt of the head, his reinforcements showed their faces. Dark puddles spread over the floor behind him, and from them, black and red, vaguely humanoid masses dragged themselves up. Noir readied her grenade launcher, the threat familiar enough to garner an automatic response.

“Shadows!”

“Now, my foolish self, would you have me report your failure to our captain, or do you wish
to reaffirm your loyalty?"

“Loyalty?”

“Yes, you know what must be done. Kill the Phantom Thieves, and you will be allowed to continue your duties.” Akechi closed his eyes, and he began to laugh. It was dry humor, lifeless and limp.

“I always wondered what defenses he had in the event of a betrayal. Crafty bastard.” He forced himself to his feet, and with both hands, he aimed his pistol at Joker. His other self grinned, pleased with the proceedings. “Stand back, this is my task.”

“Oh yes, by all means. Carry out your mission.” He waved his hand, and the Shadows receded into the dark depths of the engine room. Akechi and Joker stood, face to face, the latter hesitant to draw his weapon against the former.

“Don’t do it. We’re willing to fight for this, you know we will.”

“I’m sorry, Joker.” Akechi’s eyes flickered behind him. “You see those Shadows. I’m willing to bet he’s brought everything this Palace has to give. If I spare you, and you me, they’ll crush us both anyway.”

“I never took you as a quitter, Akechi.” Queen crouched into her combat stance, and the others followed shortly after.

“It was the final line of my contract upon Goemon that abominations like these would perish. I shan’t recant my vow.”

“And there’s no way in Hell I’m letting you take an easy way out after what you did to Wakaba. You’re going through the wringer and taking Shido with you, even if I have to drag you there in pieces.”

“Motion seconded. I’ve got my buffs cranked up to full!”

“Haven’t you learned anything?” Joker’s smirk was as cocky as ever. “It’s when our backs are against the wall that the Phantom Thieves shine brightest.” Of course Akechi remembered. Which was why… “Now, let’s take care of these guys and get our hostage home!”

Joker spread his legs, lowering himself and firming his stance. His brow pressed down. His arms tensed. He breathed in, and when it came out, it was as a low, droning hum. The hum turned into a smooth growl, then a war cry. As the sound ballooned, so, too, did the flames around his body. His arms and legs burned like bonfires, and his wings spread into azure torches, banners that would lead his forces into battle. The red overtook his eyes as the room quaked, and in that moment, his presence was truly that of a blighted demon.

Then, his eyes bulged. His arms clamped over his stomach. When he coughed, a small splatter of blood escaped his lips. A slow dripping soon became audible, and one look at the hem of Joker’s undershirt revealed red accumulating. His injuries had reopened, possibly worse than before. Panther rushed to his side, holding him up with fear in her eyes.

“Joker, your…!”

“I’m fine!” His face scrunched in frustration, and his eyes relit. His flames roared back to life, but Akechi could see the strain it put on him. If he tried to fight, he would tear himself apart from the chest out. It was no death for someone like him. For the World.
“Goodbye, Joker.” He felt his double’s gaze on the back of his neck, and the disgust drove him forward. Once a spiteful little shit, always the same. “Destroy this damned ship!” He turned his gun to the side, and when he fired, the bullet broke through the glass box covering a big red button and shoved it in, shattering it as the alarms started to blare. Machinery around the room whirred to life, and a long, thin hatch in the floor opened.

“What have you done!?” He looked behind him, his red eyes stoking his fake’s anger.

“The right thing.” Joker pushed himself forward, ignoring his wounds, but before he could cross the threshold, a wall of raw iron shot up from the floor. It locked into the ceiling above and spanned the width of the room. Joker banged his hand against it, every attempt to summon a flame to cut through it ending in a swift, twisting agony in his stomach.

“Goro, open the hatch!”

“Can’t. The button’s on your side, and I destroyed it. The bulkhead is locked tight, and you’ll find no other entrances to this space. I would know, I looked.”

“You reprehensible traitor!” Cognitive Akechi pointed his gun at the real, face twisted in anger. Was that what he looked like? No wonder no one wanted him around. “You would throw a golden opportunity away for meaningless gain!?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time. Consider this my punishment for that grand failure.” The Shadows groaned and howled, rising from the dark. The wave would be upon him soon. “Joker, I need you to promise me that you’ll bring Shido down. Make him pay for his crimes, for my crimes. I have no room to speak of justice, but bring it to our victims.” Silence answered him, the writhing mass closing in with his false self at its head. “Promise me!”

“I swear, Crow.” The response was quiet, tired, from the real Joke... No, from Akira’s heart of hearts. It was the heart that marked him as the better man.

“Thank you. May your justice be true, always.” He raised his gun, mirroring his old self. His past was finally catching up to him. ‘It seems I really am about to join the dead, Wakaba Isshiki, but not you. No, my resting place will be far less pleasant.’

“Die, you little shit!”

“I’ll take that title as a compliment.” He laughed once more for the road, a cocky grin on his face. “Pissing off reprobates like yourself is what a Phantom Thief does best!”

He pulled his trigger, and at once, a searing pain rolled from between his eyes. His thoughts clouded over, and he found it difficult to keep standing. Oddly, though, he couldn’t feel the ground under his feet. Across the room, he saw himself hit the floor, his blood spilling down from his forehead. It was a shame he couldn’t vanquish those demons in life.

His eyelids were unusually heavy. It was like a new level tiredness had been revealed to him. Every time they flickered closed, he thought he saw something, a bright pinprick of light. It was far away, well beyond his grasp. He reached for it, but his white glove couldn’t come close to its radiance. Soon, his eyes refused to open, and all sensation left him.
Somehow, the hustle and bustle of Tokyo, even in the dead of night, had become little more than a droning background noise. It was odd to think one could find peace in what seemed a deafening barrage on the ears, but Akira welcomed the endless sounds, a way to keep his mind from wandering when he couldn’t find the will to hold it in place.

Soon, though, the people of Central Street went silent, replaced by an eerie humming. He opened his eyes, and before him, the familiar blue of the Velvet Room overtook his senses. The twins stared at him in disbelief, the hour well past when he tended to visit. Caroline stood from her stool, quickly throwing on her tough facade.

“What are you doing here, Inmate? I thought it was past your bedtime.” He showed no visible reaction to her taunts. True, she hadn’t gotten any real fear out of him in months, but this silence was even worse than the jabs in return. Justine stood at her side, hoping the good cop would garner a response.

“Apologies if this is an urgent matter, Inmate, but our Master isn’t present at the moment. I am afraid fusion must be overseen by him at all times in the event of…”

“That’s fine. Better than fine, even.” Both were stunned by his voice. It was empty, devoid of the ego that normally filled him to the brim. “I need a favor from you two, if you can. You know a thing or three about Personas, right?”

He reached behind him, pulling from nowhere a mask. It was a bloody red, with a nose covering much like a bird’s beak and a large chunk missing from above the right eye.

Chapter End Notes

Rest in flapjacks, Akechi. Know that your arc, hopefully, has been done the justice it deserves.

Also, you almost forgot the twins were a thing in this story, didn't you? Joke's on you, I just didn't have anything interesting or surprising to do with them until near the end. Just like the game proper.
There were few hard laws among the Phantom Thieves. They largely trusted one another to act in the bounds of decency, relative to the “criminal” group of course, and each knew all of their fellows well enough to refrain from breaking serious boundaries.

That was why, on this occasion, a new rule was wordlessly set: do no stand between Akira and Shido. It had taken a week longer than anticipated to commence the heist due to the final confrontation with Akechi, and pairing the timing with the events of that day created a corrosive sludge in the pit of Akira’s stomach. As soon as they entered the ship and saw Joker’s coat burning blue and billowing smoke, they knew he would not be stopped by anything short of death.

That wasn’t to say they were put off by his rage. They merely took it to mean that he had dibs on the first shot. Reasons varied, but everyone was eager to take a bite out of the would-never-be Prime Minister. They marched forth, an army possessed, eyes burning with an intent that would make the Devil himself hide behind his throne. Even the masses aboard Shido’s boat, blinded by devotion to their captain, stepped out of the way, murmuring fearfully amongst themselves as they boarded the elevator up. Once it came to a stop, Akira booted its doors open, sending them down the aisles of the Diet assembly room.

“Save some kick for Shido’s ass, kid.”

“Sorry, Boss, but we have a hard no murder policy.”

“My, that’s quite the assumption.” The loudspeakers overhead boomed with that snide voice. At the podium, around which the assembly hall revolved, was the illustrious captain himself. It was strange that he was no different from the Shido they knew, but the thought of being able to stick it to the evil they already knew intimately silenced their questions. His orange-tinted shades only did so much to mask his contempt for the intruders. “I take it you have some complaints for me? I would be more than happy to listen.”

“That’s an awfully clinical way to refer to our hatred.” Makoto had turned the Nijima stare up as high as it could go. It was the only relief that kept Haru from leveling her grenade launcher at the man then and there.

“You have orchestrated deaths too numerous to count, and ruined the lives of everyone you have ever contacted. We will not stand as this destruction creeps towards the world stage!” Quiet recognition sparked in Shido’s eyes.

“Oh, you are Haru Okumura, correct? Interesting. The press will love the sound of this. A disgruntled heiress attempted to slaughter her father and claim his position in his company. Honestly, God is handing me these gifts on a silver platter.” Haru reached for the axe at her hip, but an
outstretched hand from Ann helped her remember herself.

“You’ve ruined enough already. I swear, by the end of the day, you will pay for everything you’ve done.”

“Sacrifice of the few is necessary for the prosperity of the many. Any deaths that come about are tolls I am willing to pay to make this country the power it deserves to be!”

“Still with the conflicting ideology, I see. A belief in your own ability befitting any libertarian, but a collectivism plucked straight from a caricature of Carl Marx.” Sojiro drew his weapons, Ebony in the left and his greatsword in his right. The weight of the two massive implements seemed nonexistent in his hands. “I always knew you’d age like milk.” Shido’s dismissal vanished at once, his eye locking on the sniper rifle.

“That gun... I recognize it!” He stepped back from his podium, his voice rising in outrage loud enough to make the microphone unneeded. “You’re Deadeye Sakura, the lapdog of Isshiki’s lab!” Sojiro grinned, flicking his head back to slide his helmet up above his eyes.

“How long it’s been since you tried to bribe me out of Wakaba’s research. I might be too late to protect her, but there’s no way in Hell I’ll leave the last intruder in her work to walk a free man.” A fear they never thought possible came over Shido, making him grip the edges of his stand hard enough to crack beneath his fingers. Futaba chuckled at his unabashed terror.

“Geez, old man, that’s some serious street rep. How many dudes did you pop to get it?”

“Already told you, I didn’t kill a soul. I just made sure they never walked back into the lab on their own two feet.”

“No wonder I turned out so delightfully wicked.”

“It seems I failed to properly cover an old leak. No matter, I can correct that mistake.” Shido wiped his forehead, picking up the shattered pieces of his composure. “You are rogue forces in this country, spreading chaos and discontent. A people that cannot gather as one are weaker for it, and as the heads behind this instability, I will not rest until you have fallen. For the prosperity of Japan!” Suddenly, a mob of congressmen, faces blank of all features, rose from the previously unoccupied seats. Their hands numbly slapped together, the thoughtless praise helping Shido stand tall in the face of his earlier shameful display. Morgana was instantly on edge, the inhumanity of these cognitions making his hair stand on end. They were too hollow to be the humans he knew, more so than any cognitive citizens he had encountered before.

“They’re totally brainwashed…!”

“Come, lowly thieves. We’ll see who the people want more, you or me!” The room began to shake, unseen cogs spinning to life. Behind him, the blank eye on the curtain filled with ink. The cloth daruma doll glowed, and the stage before it lifted up. Shido looked down on them from his ascendant perch, smiling as the walls of the assembly hall groaned into motion and ground towards the Thieves in layers.

They stared at the encroaching walls in wonder, but Fox figured out how to use them to their advantage. He hopped to the next row up, looking back and waving at them to follow. They jumped after him, each inflated step bringing them closer to Shido. Once they reached the top, though, what awaited them left them speechless.

Behind Shido, an army stood. Their eyes were blank, like those of dolls, and their skin was
solid gold. He snapped his fingers, and the puppet army locked their arms together, those on the outside climbing atop the interior troops.

“Countless citizens have fallen to bring me to power, for the betterment of the whole. Would you let their sacrifices be in vain?”

“Bullshit!” Ryuji was caught off guard, his trademark phrase blasting from Joker at a volume that put him to shame. “They didn’t choose to die for you. They were slaughtered like animals, stuffing your fat face with their blood while your lackeys built you a ladder with their bones!” The smoke thinned, in its place rising a blue flame. His focus lingered on the hollow eyes of the mounting golden masses, embalmed by the touch of a poor man’s King Midas. He couldn’t even remember their faces properly. “And that’s assuming you made use of them at all. How many lives have you ruined just because you could?”

“What does it matter? Because they have fallen, the rest have risen. That is the only thing of importance, and I won’t let you rob the people of their prosperity.” Shido smirked as the masses stood anew, their flesh melded together into a new form. The great lion of gold roared, its voice shaking the heavens. “You lowly thieves won’t take so much as a single yen’s worth of my hard work, I’ll make sure of it.”

“It’s too late to take back what you’ve stolen from most, so you’re right about that much. Their lives are in shambles, and nothing we could do can fix that.” Akira closed his eyes, letting the cold of his prison cell return to him, fuel him. He put a hand to his side and traced a mass hidden by his overcoat. It hummed at his touch, reminding him that he didn’t stand for one alone. ‘Not yet. We’ll deal with his guard dog first. Then you’ll get your chance.’ His contemplative moment of silence was not lost on Morgana, who took the lead in his stead.

“But we won’t let you do it to anyone else. Your bloody road ends here and now!”

“Fools, all of you!” The lion kneeled before him, offering its face as a staircase. On its back, the bodies shifted, grafting themselves into a pedestal befitting him at his approach. His hands tightened into fists, and black smog overtook his form. “Do not underestimate me. I will not bend like the weaklings before me.” He took his well-earned throne, the fog clearing to reveal his distorted self. His suit warped into caped battle armor, his helmet spiked like a warlord of old.

“Come. Deadeye Sakura, Phantom Thieves, I’ll take you all on!” His beast rose to its feet. Its roar rippled over the Thieves as a mighty gale, but they stood unwavering, the act of intimidation only further stoking Joker’s flames.

“Phantom Thieves, pillage and plunder!” At their leader’s call, they leaped into action, scattering to the winds. Shido, from his throne, could only track a scant few at a time, shaded blurs that circled his mount like sharks. He saw one’s path twist inwards, and he pounced, a claw tearing through where he thought he saw a Thief. When he looked into the pit where his lion broke through the ground, however, he saw it was only a large scrap of black cloth, a cheap piece of fabric wrapped around a weighted ball.

“A decoy!?”

“Bingo, baldo.” The lion shifted when Joker landed on its rear, a hand on his mask. “Hecatoncheires!” He tore it free, and from it came a sickly blue monster, a creature of slavering maws, soulless eyes, and countless grasping hands. Its arms came down, clenching Shido against his throne with an unimaginable strength. Shido struggled against the constricting grip, growing desperate as a hand found its way to his throat.
“Masses, throw them off!” The lion took to savage bucking, the intensity swelling as Hecatoncheires’s hands pressed harder against its master. Its hold on his throne was too firm to shake, however, and Joker found a sturdy handhold on a stray petrified arm. He kept his eyes on the shaded afterimages of his Thieves, waiting until the largest among them came to a stop. He grinned, recalling his Persona with a wave of his hand. When Shido shot up to face his attacker, he only caught a brief glimpse of his smile before he leaped from the lion’s back. Behind him, he saw Deadeye Sakura in his element, infamed Ebony in hand.

Without a word, he opened fire, but Shido found his duck for cover to be useless. He saw the bullet closing upon him, tracing it as it slid between his mount’s feet. It struck the ball of cloth, a spark flying as it pierced the outer layer. Then a second spark, and before he could register the trap, master and beast, both, were engulfed by crimson flame. The Thieves came to a stop, admiring the bonfire. Queen looked deep into the fire, and when she saw movement, she felt the intent in the air.

“Get back!” No sooner than she said it, the tower of fire was ruptured by spreading wings. The beast rode the updraft of the dwindling blaze, rising into the sky above the ship. Guests stared in shock and awe at their captain, cape singed and eyes bloodshot atop a still smoldering gryphon.

“Clearly I overestimated your honor, expecting a fair fight!” Yusuke scoffed at the sentiment.

“Our honor lies in our results. All else is meaningless.” He removed his mask, holding it skyward as the passing wind carried its shards into the air. “Susano-o, let the winter gale howl.” The shards flashed, the wind bending into a spiral.

In the eye of the storm, obscured by the glow, was a spirit in blue. It raised its sword to the gryphon, and the wind barreled forth, carrying with it a thousand glowing shards. They slid through golden flesh and iron armor with ease, carrying off the trickles of blood they forced to the surface. Shido covered his face, and, through squinted eyes, he saw his attacker’s ammunition of choice.

They were shards of ice, likely derived from the moist ocean air. Such an environment was to a wielder of ice what a volcano was to a pyromancer. It empowered him to an unacceptable degree. So long as this barrage was maintained, the air was an inhospitable environment from which to wage his war. And yet, Shido couldn’t strike directly, either. They already proved themselves superior against an opponent as bulky and lumbering as his lion in its base form. As much as it pained him to admit, a defensive approach was required.

“Protect me!” The eyes of the masses flared, separating and reconfiguring themselves outwards. The whole fell to the deck, crashing against its wooden surface as its wings folded over Shido, granting him refuge from the hail. Bodies piled atop them, forming thick walls of flesh. It soon hardened again, sacrificial pawns going still in the shape of a pyramid. Yusuke reclaimed his mask, acknowledging the uselessness of his technique against the newly formed fortress.

“Oracle, it seems he stole your original Egyptian motif.”

“I’ll kill him!” Prometheus’s crooked smile burned as the neon sun’s magic hummed to life. Queen and Noir felt their muscles swelling under its glow. “You two, kill him for me!”

“I do believe she’s referring to our specialty.” Haru’s delight was as unabashed as it was infectious, spreading to Makoto with a caress of the bicep. “Are you up for a little… fun?”

“Oh, I’m always game, Kitten.” Haru’s other hand traced its way up to Makoto’s face, lacing her fingers with her queen’s as both took hold of her mask. Haru brushed Makoto’s cheek with her pinky, lifting the mask away. It dissolved in their conjoined hands, sending a rush through them as Anat revved to life beneath them.
“I don’t know what you’re planning, but it won’t work! Blow them away, my servants!” Bodies parted near the crown of the tomb, and in its depths, a foreboding light glared like the Eye of Providence. Sojiro raised his shield, its orange glimmer casting over the party. He carefully took note of the revealed guts of their opponent’s fortress.

“Those walls look pretty thick. You’ll need a good kick to punch through both sides without getting stuck in the middle.”

“True. I’m competent with hand-to-hand, but an enclosed space he controls is a bad place to put up a stand.” Queen took into account the resources available to her, eyes falling on Ann. “A few thousand degrees of heat should do the trick. Panther, you’re up.” Ann glanced back, snorting at how Haru’s touch was as sensuous on Makoto as it was on her grenade launcher.

“You’re saying we need to make it hot in here?”


“Damn, you remembered my weakness for motorcycle pickup lines. How can I say no to that?” She curtseyed as she took the hand, slipping between the couple on Anat’s surprisingly comfortable seat. “Let’s get this three-way on the road!”

“With pleasure.” Anat’s engine roared to full power. Her tires screamed their war cry, charring the floor as she rocketed forward. Ann clapped her hands together, bringing forth a flame that flowed over her skin like water. It spread to Makoto in short order, gliding over her arms with Ann’s hands. She took hold just shy of Makoto’s wrists, but the fire continued, not content until it overtook the entirety of Anat’s frame. The three took the form of a comet, streaking down on Shido’s false Egypt. “Full throttle, Anat!”

Shido’s Eye neared its full charge, and it lit up as though to unleash its power, but it was too slow. The power flow was cut on impact, the temple’s outer wall crumbling at Anat’s touch. Shido backed out of their path, pressing up against the side of his fortress, but Noire was prepared. Her left hand guided its barrel to him, and with a stroke of its shaft, it fired.

Anat tore clean through the opposite wall, and behind her, a great plume of fire and shrapnel blasted through what remained. Makoto pulled her into a spinning stop, giving the girls a front row seat to the rain of golden minions. Ann was about to climb off when she was snared between a hugging couple.

“That was amazing, Mako-chan! I think it was my favorite Battering Ram yet!”

“All thanks to Panther.” Queen winked at her, making Ann’s cheeks as red as her outfit. “We should do this more often.”

“Y-yeah… Totally…”

“Ignorant masses!” Shido stood from the ashes of his fortress. His suit was torn and charred, and his helmet’s spikes bent where not torn off entirely. He stomped down on the nearest minion, grinding his heel into its unmoving hide. “Is it so much to ask for competent servants?!”

“They were never yours to command, Shido.” Joker plodded into the field of bodies, kneeling down to place a hand on one’s back. “To claim ownership of another human being is an act depraved. They had their own lives to live, dreams to fulfill, potential to reach for. And then they were snuffed out, all to fuel the desire of an arrogant bastard.” The gold idol groaned, pulling itself
As I said, sacrifice is…"

"A bullshit excuse from an asshole that isn’t willing to lose anything of his own. That you can’t even remember the people you’ve thrown away is proof that you don’t deserve your crown.”

His voice carried over the deck. Ryuji made to join his leader’s side, but he jumped back when the rest of the fallen army began to pull itself back to its feet. He readied himself for a fight, but they just stood there, staring at Joker. “They’re just tokens to you. Things to be spent or burned at your leisure. They’re a resource, no better than drums of oil.”

Shido’s indignity consumed his mind with every word out of Akira’s blasphemous mouth. A lowborn wretch would dare critique him?

“What would a petty thief, who takes all that he owns, know about value?”

“T"That’s exactly it. I take everything I have. I know what passes through my hands, while you have your lapdogs take it for you. I know its weight, while you just have it thrown on the pile. I remember everything I’ve done. I know how I’ve failed.”

The gold flesh shivered, and then it flowed. It pooled at the feet of the army, slipping down the floorboards towards Joker.

One by one, the suits of obscurity melted away, revealing the faces that wore them. Futaba gasped at the first, Wakaba standing in the middle of the crowd. Her mother smiled softly, and then she vanished, leaving behind the weight of her mantle. It clung to Joker’s legs, but he did nothing to remove it. He accepted its burden, even as it soaked through his clothes, through his skin, staining his very bones.

"Mental shutdowns and psychotic breakdowns are the currency of your business. Every token you’ve traded is my failure, a consequence of letting you roam free.”

Principal Kobayakawa groaned as he fell and disappeared, released from his servitude. “Everyone you’ve hurt, every life you’ve ruined, my fault.”

Huge swathes of figures melted at once, leaving no body behind. “Hell, you’ve buried so many, even I couldn’t find them all. I wonder, what happens if one you buried didn’t stay down?”

His melancholy broke, a sharp chuckle cutting loose.

"Actually, never mind. I know exactly what happens.”

The last remaining golem stared as Joker removed his mask, giving Shido his first look at the man he tried to have executed.

"Wait, I know you. That night, with that woman…!”

"Oh, so you do remember me? I’m flattered. Guess that’s the respect I get for being such a big thorn in your ass.” Akira smirked, smashing his mask in his hand. Arsene rose behind him, arms crossed, eyes burning. The golem’s eyes flickered between the two, squinting as it tried desperately to recall them.

"That’s the last time I allow a fool to pass with a slap on the wrist. Nothing to do about it but finish the job. A single leak can sink a mighty vessel.”

"A fool, you say?” Akira’s expression was torn, sunken eyes with a wry smile, Arsene’s rage only obscured by a mask of mischief. “You don’t know how appropriate that statement is, but you’re going to need a bigger patch than you think for this one. It’s not one leak threatening your ship.”

Arsene reached down, wrapping his hooked fingers around the last golem’s chin. Its shell screeched as he clawed it away, and when all that remained of its mask was slag in his hand, Shido was left to stare at the face beneath it. “The Fools count two.”

"Akechi!?” The Detective Prince’s gaze was unfocused, skin puffy and waterlogged, eyes bloodshot. There was none of his cold intelligence or burning ambition left, only the unfeeling
expression of a stringless puppet. Then they smelled it, the pervasive odor of a defaced tomb. It was like the gold slime was a coffin, its opening releasing the foul stench of rot. Sojiro looked closer at his half covered forehead, finding a small hole between his eyes, and his stomach turned.

“Good God…”

“That’s…” Prometheus’s light dimmed. Futaba’s voice was shaking. “…That’s not a cognition, is it?”

“Don’t look at it!”

“O-okay…”

Ryuji covered his mouth, trying to hold back the natural response to a rotting corpse. Yusuke ran a hand down his back, soothing his friend’s nausea.

“Not even he deserved to be disgraced in such a manner.”

“Obviously Shido’s Palace didn’t agree with you, Fox.” Joker’s face was unreadable. It was the passive mask he wore in the halls of school, a practiced façade of neutrality. The only sign of his true feelings was his eyes, his irises burning white. “It must have thought Akechi’s bones would serve it better than a cognition. Either that, or the cognition was already dispelled and it needed a backup.” A small smile pushed through the mask. Akira placed a sympathetic hand on Akechi’s cold shoulder. “You fought well. Let us handle it from here.”

“Joke… er…” His voice was a thin rasp, scraping through collapsed lungs. “Remem… ber… P… prom…?”

“Of course I do.” Akira nodded to Arsene, who put his pointer finger and thumb together. “Shido will fall today. I wouldn’t be here to finish the job if it weren’t for you. Would’ve bled out below deck, and I’d be the one stuck in that suit. Good work, Crow.” Akechi’s eyes opened, a sliver of active thought shining through the veil. Arsene snapped his fingers, and when his sparks landed, Akechi was engulfed in blue fire. Even as he was devoured, peace overtook him, and his eyes closed lightly.

“Thank… you…” The fire solidified, and then it extinguished. Not even ash remained. Joker let all falsehood fall away for a moment, the tiredness beneath it all showing.

“When you get wherever you’re going, save me a seat, would you?” Akira stood, the firm mask of Joker reclaiming its rightful place on his brow. The lump on his belt hummed, calling out to him once more. “I think it’s time.” Arsene nodded, looking to Sojiro.

“Joker has a matter of importance to attend to, but the process could take some time. Art thou willing to cover him?”

“Is that even a question?” The Thieves leaped into action, forming a wall between Joker and Shido. Sojiro took the lead, sheathing Ebony to take his blade in both hands. “I don’t know what you’re planning, kid, but I know you wouldn’t do it without a damn good reason.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be sure to save you a chunk of Shit-o’s ass to kick, dude.” Ryuji grinned at Akira, and he smiled back.

“Thanks guys. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” He took a deep breath, reaching down and taking the mass in his hand. It unhooked easily. Caroline and Justine’s warning rang through his mind.
‘Well, yeah, we could do that, but the risks are severe. What the mask itself represents is only half of what it’s made of.’

‘You could take on the strength it symbolizes, but you are just as likely to encounter the darkness it hides. We will not stop you, but if this decision is one of only hollow sentimentality, we would advise against it.’

‘There’s nothing hollow about it. Rule two, those who are willing to change deserve that chance, and he never got his.’ He pulled the weight from his cloak, and staring at him from his hand was a brilliant red mask. Even with part of its right eye torn away, there was still a splendor and spirit behind it that Joker could only respect.

“Joker, is that…?” Queen glanced back, catching sight of the mask. “What are you doing with Akechi’s mask?”

“What Phantom Thieves do best. Changing a heart.” Akira gave one more cocky grin before raising it to his face. It latched onto his skin, the grip of someone desperately flailing at sea, and when the magic embedded itself in Akira’s mind, the world around him went dark.

Chapter End Notes

So, let's not mince words, this was very, very late. You all deserve an explanation, and that needs a bit of background info. Just about everything I've posted on this site was originally written on a school laptop. Yes, including the multitude of sexual innuendos. Consider that a part B as to why I haven't written a proper lemon story for Haru and Makoto.

Now, I recently graduated (yay me), so I no longer have that laptop, only my home PC. And long time readers might know that this thing is about as powerful as a newborn eggplant. It lags. A lot. Randomly. I've timed it, there are days when it takes fifteen seconds for a single typed letter to show up on screen. That sort of thing is inexcusable for writing. There are days where it works fine, like today, but it's a coin flip as to whether it works or not when I sit down to write. You can see why that's a wrench in the old plans, right?

Here's the deal. I have plans to get a laptop of my own lined up, but I have no idea how long that'll take to materialize. Money troubles, you know? Until then, I'll be writing on this junker, along with its random lag. Until the replacement, expect updates to be a little spotty on all fronts. I'll try for my standard goal, a thousand words a day, but I can't promise much. I hope you lot understand.

But don't fret, I haven't been a complete lump otherwise. I have just about everything from this point on with this story planned out. Once I can actually write consistently, it should be smooth sailing. That also goes for Dungeon Delivery and a certain third story idea that will be announced when Phantom Thievery is finished. (Yeah, one of these shorts things actually getting an ending. Weird, right?) The Psyby train isn't stopping just yet, just taking a bit of a pit stop on the slow tracks. Current plans, finishing the second half of the Shido fight, then a chapter of Dungeon Delivery. Then two more Phantom, then another Dungeon. See you when I reveal what's going on in Akechi’s mask!
The first thing Akira noticed about his new location was its air. It was heavy and felt like it stuck to the insides of his lungs as he breathed. Every breath was labored by pressure, but with time, he found himself adjusting. Even when a normal breathing pattern returned to him, however, he was constantly aware of the cloying atmosphere.

His attention went to the ground beneath him. It shimmered and rolled like the surface of a lake, a comparison that strengthened when it rippled around his footstep. He wanted to call it blue or purple in hue, but, though each seemed close, neither quite matched. It reminded him of the pink splashes that followed him in the Metaverse, but it drowned the floor until only it was visible.

“Guess this is what I get for jumping another layer down the Metaverse hole, eh?” He waited a moment for a response, but he only heard the faint whistling of the wind. His brows pressed together in focus. He reached deep into the back of his mind, but he found it devoid of the comforting hum of his Personas. It was only then that he realized he had no mask on, only the face he was born with, though the rest of his Thief outfit remained. “Shit, the twins weren’t kidding…”

“You will be entering the pocket space Personas call home, the thin dimension nestled between your reality and the Sea of Souls.”

“You won’t be able to hide who you really are in there, Inmate. No masks, no bodyguards. An incomplete self can only pierce so deep into someone else’s psyche.”

“Oh, all me then.” He checked his tool belt. He didn’t have any items on him, and his knife and pistol weren’t the ones he had equipped before. They were the very first set he bore, those that materialized with his awakening so long ago. “At least I’m not completely unarmed.”

Stock taken, he turned to his surroundings. Piercing through the dark sea were thick towers, obelisks of pure black that seemed to absorb any light that came near. If he focused his Third Eye, Akira could make out rectangular alcoves in their sides, stretching up each in regular rows and columns. They were windows, their details sanded away by the same inky layer that coated the rest of what could only be buildings. They sprawled out before him in a grid, though they were pulled apart much farther than one would expect.

The streets between them were swarming with cognitions. Akira tried observing them, but he found the task next to impossible. His eyes crossed and blurred, leaving the figures only passing shadows in the corners of his vision. He sensed no hostility from them despite their anomalous nature, and they actively avoided him when their paths crossed his.

After almost a year of practice, it took him no time at all to find the significance in the absurd. The city was drowned out and devoid of meaning. Where Shido’s apocalyptic Tokyo was destroyed,
the city within the mask was barely there at all, easy to ignore until it was but inches in front of him.

He scanned the horizon for breaks in the pattern, and it didn’t take long to find. A building in the heart of the city was normal. Even its lighting was in line with an average, sunny day. It was some form of office, and a flag flew over its entrance. He didn’t know it, specifically, but its design was a match for the propaganda Shido’s minions plastered Tokyo with. It wasn’t a stretch to think they were churned from the same machine.

Akira made his way towards it, ignoring the passing cognitions as they bent at odd angles to avoid him. Normally, he might have considered blending in with the crowd to hide his approach, but he had no intention of being sneaky this time around. When the office was a dagger’s throw away, he felt the razor edge of ill intent.

He sidestepped just in time to dodge a bullet, which sunk silently into the ground. Akira looked to a nearby rooftop, where his target made himself known. Silenced pistol in hand, Akechi stared down at him, wrapped in the radiant garb of Crow. No mask blocked the view of his focused, golden eyes. Akira smirked up at him.

“Hey there. I’m guessing you’re the ruler around these parts?” Akechi didn’t spare a word, pulling the trigger again. Akira found it as easy to avoid as the first, as were the third and fourth. Akira drew his own pistol, answering Akechi for every round thrown at him. Akechi leaped from his perch, grabbing the hilt from his belt. The air took on a slightly burned scent as his energy blade formed. Akira hopped backwards, holding his knife out to deflect Akechi’s strikes. Its edge swiftly charred and sparks flew, adding to the smoke in the already thick air.

“I take it you’re not one for talking?” Akechi’s assault was uninterrupted, his attacks raining down on Akira. Even under pressure, he could tell something was wrong. Akechi’s movements were stiff, but there was none of the dignity behind it. No, it was more like a robot, a cheap animatronic given a lightsaber and gun in place of a microphone.

Akira hurried to make a plan, but then he noticed a new anomaly. Every time their blades clashed, the sparks illuminated the space around them. The onyx monoliths were overwhelmed, unable to mute the sudden light, their black walls turning white for those brief milliseconds before the sparks fizzled out. Briefer still, he swore he saw an outline in the flash, one that fled before the light could fade. He slowly tracked its movement, leading the fight to follow it. When he finally constructed an image of it in his mind’s eye, he knew he found his opening.

“Fine, I don’t want to do this, but I can’t waste any more time here. Die!” Akira stopped simply reacting to Akechi’s plays, launching into a pattern of his own. He weaved away from Akechi’s attacks instead of deflecting them, thrusting for and narrowly missing his stomach and ribs. Akechi’s fighting style grew desperate, his swings turning into violent lashes, thrown forward limply with little thought for placement. Akira acted as though he was driven back by his opponent’s renewed vigor, the flow of the fight pushing his back to the wall.

Akechi pounced, coming at Akira with a two-handed down slash. Akira grinned, dispensing his false aggression as he smoothly stepped aside. The blade cleaved through stone. A ringing screech tore from the opening, and Akechi recoiled, yanked back by the neck as though by unseen tethers. Akira reached into the breach, and when he found something solid, he grabbed it and tore it free.

In his hand was a writhing, blackened clump, almost like a primordial mass of tentacles. It tried to strike him with its tendrils, but he was quick to throw it, readying himself to face his newfound enemy. The ball expanded, its shaded hide pulling apart, divided by streaks of stark white. Its form was loose, origami drenched in water, but it was Loki nonetheless.
“Hmm, outplayed by a mere human. You live up to your title, Trickster.” His voice was distant but close, loud yet soft. It was a whisper on the breeze and a gale that crashed over Akira at once. The only constant was its depth, pounding against the inner ear like a war drum.

“Says the Norse god of trickery himself. Or do you have a real name I should be using?” Akira raised his pistol, staring down its barrel at where he once shot the lingering spirit, between its nonexistent eyes. “A Persona is sworn to abide by its greater whole’s true wishes. If anything, trying to kill him marks you as a Shadow, but that couldn’t be, since he already had Hood.”

“I cannot deny, you speak in truths. But also in lies. I am, indeed, a piece of the Fool, but I am more than that fragment Robin Hood. No being is greater than I. Which is why I may suffer your presence no longer.” Loki snapped his fingers, and a shadow fell upon Akira. Behind him, Akechi stood at the ready, gun drawn in an almost mirror image of Akira. Loki’s fingers twisted, and Akechi’s stance shifted with the motion. “Kill him, and your last task on that cursed earth shall be complete.” Akechi’s finger pressed against the trigger, one twitch away from firing a round into the back of Akira’s head. He glared back, scoffing.

“I didn’t realize how much of a sniveling underling you really were. So much for finding your own justice.” Akechi’s pupils dilated, and his nostrils flared. “What’s wrong, did I touch a nerve? Face it, you’ve always been a puppet to someone else.”

“Why do you hesitate? Finish him.”

“I guess that last act of defiance back on the boat was all for nothing. And here I thought you passed with some semblance of honor intact.” His grip on his gun tightened, the handle cracking under his force. Loki curled his finger harshly, forcing his aim to steady.

“Obey me, Fool, and rid us of the cursed Trickster!” Akechi’s eyes narrowed sharply, and his lips parted in a sneer.

“As you wish.” Suddenly, Akechi lifted his pistol further, firing before Loki could correct him. Loki’s head whipped back, and his body dropped to the ground. “Be gone, blighted god of trickery.” The floor slithered around Loki’s fallen corpse, letting it sink. The ground remerged over it, and once again, Loki was swallowed by the impenetrable abyss. Akira hilted his pistol, turning and smiling approvingly.

“Good job, Crow. I appreciate your use of exact wording.”

“We both know I didn’t do it for you.” Akira nodded, accepting the neutral statement as it was intended. Akechi’s yellow eyes softened. “But, thank you.” Akira eased up, hit by a strange familiarity and casualness.

“Do you mind talking for a bit? There was something I wanted to discuss.” Akechi looked over the city around them, expression souring as he set eyes upon the one undistorted building in sight.

“Let’s go elsewhere first. I can think of somewhere I would rather be than the shadow of this place.”
The walk was a long and confusing one from where Akira stood. Once Shido’s headquarters were out of view, all he had to go off of were the monotonous, never ending boxes of nondescripts buildings. The only thing that kept him from getting lost was Akechi’s certainty. He forged ahead, never looking back, never second guessing his placement. It was the blank-faced progression Akira himself undertook every day back in the real Tokyo.

The more he thought on it, though, the more he realized that the comparison was closer than he first suspected. He had but a few places he truly knew in Tokyo, miniscule slivers of land that comprised his impression of the city as a whole. Small locales nestled between seemingly endless skyscrapers that faded into the background. Perhaps this really was the city he came to know, only presented through someone else’s bookmarks.

He soon came to see even further connections. It started when the wide spaced monoliths gave way to more closely clustered architecture. More than that, though, Akira recognized it. Ahead, he saw a green piece of fabric hanging over an opened garage front, tables of scrap and assorted junk marked for sale within. Farther still, there was an iron fence door closing off the alley between two buildings, and when he looked up to the abandoned houses to his left, he saw the window just below the roofline of the neighboring theater smashed open. He kept his outward composure, but inside, he felt the warmth of familiarity, belonging. This was his special corner of Tokyo.

As expected, when they rounded the corner, the almost humorously out-of-place French décor jumped out and grabbed his attention by the scruff of its neck. Akechi stopped at the door, muttering quietly to himself.

“A shame we were barred from this place in reality, though not an undeserved fate.” Before Akira could prod, he opened the door, cutting off the non sequitur with a ringing bell and a welcomingly pervasive aroma. Akira followed him in, and he was surprised to see LeBlanc exactly as he knew it, down to the smallest scrapes on the counter and the most minute touches of spice in the air. Even the labels on the coffee bean jars were all correct, not one out of order. Akechi took his old seat at the bar, settling in like a gargoyle on the roof. If he had been in his brown suit, Akira might have called it a normal day. “You had a matter of some importance for me?”

“Yeah. How about I get us some coffee first?” Akechi let out a muffled gasp, watching Akira closely as he rounded the counter, throwing his grass green apron over his black long coat. “A bit of coffee makes tough topics go down easier. The usual?” Akechi stared for a moment, but his concern melted away into a content smile.

“If you would be so kind.” Akira went about his work with the same passion and precision instilled in him by Sojiro, going through the motions like a well-rehearsed tightrope act. The atmosphere was welcoming, one neither was comfortable with breaking, but Akechi’s peaking curiosity and concern prodded him to do so anyway. “I am a little surprised you would be so willing to serve me, of all individuals. After all you’ve been put through, you would be more than justified in poisoning me with that coffee.”

“I only hold grudges when there’s a good reason to. You’ve already paid up for your part in all of that, and we both know I can match you in a fight if you try anything.” Akechi snickered, acknowledging the truth in Akira’s explanation. “Besides, Boss’d kill me if I served a bad cup of coffee in his shop, real or not, and his knife is a lot bigger than mine.”

“The indomitable Joker, laid low by a barista. It would be a grand insult to Shido.”

“Speaking of, you should’ve seen his face when he realized who Boss was. If Shadows have bowels, he was this close to shitting himself.”
“I can confirm that they don’t, though the image is no less amusing.”

His question answered, the two fell back into cozy silence, permeated by the ramping smell of vanilla. Steam wisped through the air as Akira poured, filling two cups to precisely the lip of the rim, not a drop more. They drank in unison, Akira’s trained tongue managing a longer draw on the scalding hot beverage.

“French vanilla, a classic. You’ve got good taste in drinks, if nothing else.”

“And you’ve a talent for making them matched by none. I dare say Sakura-san may be outclassed by his own protégé.” Akira accepted the compliment wordlessly, hiding his prideful smirk with a sip. Akechi’s content smile withered, his gaze falling to stare at his reflection in the cup. “Why did you come here? Loki’s influence was condemned to the mask, so it held no pressing threat to your group. You aren’t the sort to take unnecessary risk on this scale.” Akira set his cup aside.

“Call it me getting sentimental. I know what it’s like being stopped short of a goal you’ve been fighting for your whole life.”

“Oh?”

“College stuff. No way in Hell a convict is getting in somewhere nice. Anyway, not important. I want to bring what’s left of you over the finish line.”

“A kind gesture, but you will find no more fight in me. What was left died some time ago.” Akira’s eyes trailed to the TV remote, hoping his talent for cognitive shifting would hold as he took it.

“Are you sure about that? It’s closer than you think.” He hit the power button, and the TV flicked on. Its picture was a bit fuzzy, but it was clearly the deck of a ship. Akira had to do a double take, barely recognizing the bulky, muscle bound brute as Shido. He scowled at the camera, legs tightening for a tackle. As soon as he raised a foot to start, though, Skull dropped into the picture, slamming down on the top of his head with his pipe.

“Keep your effing hands to yourself, asshole!” Shido looked ready to tear him apart for the attack, but a sudden barrage of grenades drove him back.

“Is that happening right now?”

“It’s through the eyes of my body, so either I’m hallucinating, or yeah, it is. The final battle. And you can still be a part of it, if you want.” Akechi’s expression fell more, refusing to meet Akira’s eyes.

“Do I truly deserve such a thing? The actions I allowed were monstrous, at best…”

“I’ll admit, between the assassinations and lives ruined, calling it all a bit dickish is an understatement. I don’t think any of the others would’ve jumped in here after you. In fact, I think a few of them would’ve crushed the mask with their bare hands given the chance. But I’m not them, I’m me, a soft little man wearing the face of a strong leader. I see where you went wrong, where I could have gone wrong, and I see where I failed. Maybe if I had come a little sooner, you wouldn’t have been pushed to do any of it. Maybe all of this could have been prevented.”

“That is an unfair assessment. Hypotheticals are hollow excuses for action or inaction.”

“Maybe, but it’s my excuse, and my conviction. You know how damned stubborn I can be.” Akechi finally looked at him, and he found only earnestness and a hand held out in offering, just like
that day in the casino where fate was sealed. Was this a chance to correct it in some small way?

“…You said he died with honor. Was that the truth, or a motivating lie?”

“It’s the truth.”

“Then, his end was an honorable one?”

“As much as a life like his would allow.” Akechi closed his eyes, face smoothing in thought. He smiled with a soft hum, reaching out and taking Akira’s hand.

“Very well, I accept your offer. Shall we make it official?” Akira nodded, welcoming the deep rumble pushing up through his throat.

“I am thou. Thou art I.” Akechi’s skin flaked away, the layer beneath a pristine white.

“Thou who would seek the justice of the dead and damned.” Akira looked on as Crow dissolved before him, the figure whose hand he held no longer human.

“Thou who would finish his work, left unfulfilled by corruption.” Robin Hood tilted his head, amused by Akira’s interjection in the contract.

“From this day forth, may we be the gavel that falls upon the unjust and purge this world of the darkness to which my former master fell.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” LeBlanc flaked away, piece by piece, swallowed by a burning light. Akira smiled, gripping Hood’s hand with all his strength before he, too, was taken.

“You can’t… hold… forever, Deadeye!”

“You don’t know what it’s like to be a guardian.” Sojiro’s arms and legs strained. For a veritable twig in the real world, Shido’s Shadow carried inhuman strength. Even with heavy plate armor soaking up much of the force and Osiris and Prometheus flooding his body with power, Sojiro was pushing himself to his limit to hold off the forward progress of Shido, even their heads a contact point in the struggle.

The other Thieves had been forced to fall back and dip into their medicine stock, walled up behind a web of Arsene’s chains. The battle had been longer and more tiring than any they had faced before. Every time they thought they had Shido on the ropes, he ripped off another layer of his suit, his veneer of high class, to show the rabid, teeth-gnashing beast that lurked within. It was nothing short of a siege effort on the Thieves’ part, and with their strategic centerpiece out of commission, they were on their last leg. Ryuji choked down another bottle of their best healing agent, gagging between gasps of air.

“Damnit, how is he so goddamn tough!?”

“It’s the fantasy he’s built up for himself manifesting.” Morgana’s fur was slick with sweat, tapping into stores of SP he didn’t know he could muster to heal as much of the party as he could with his dwindling magic. “He sees himself as the mighty captain of Japan, so his Shadow is living
that dream."

"Damnit, this isn’t good…” Ryuji’s attention went to Akira, whose body was stiff, statuesque. It was like when he went off to wherever he got those new Personas from, except those times, he wasn’t wearing the mask of the biggest asshole Ryuji ever had to associate with. "Yo, Arsene, any tabs on Joker yet?"

"I fear not. His body reacted as though in combat for a time, but it has since calmed. I would presume that means the worst of his trials have passed, though that gives no window as to his return."

"I hope whatever he’s doing in there is important. We’re getting our asses handed back to us."

"Keep that attitude up, and you’ll definitely lose.” Makoto finished switching to her backup weaponry, her revolver reloaded and her iron knuckles swapped for a pair she hadn’t broken on Shido’s nose yet. “Are we all ready?"

"Indeed.” Yusuke swung his blade, testing its renewed aerodynamics before sheathing it. "Let us resume."

"I am opening the barrier. I will assist where I am able from this distance."

"Thanks, Arsene. You’ve been an invaluable tactical help.” Makoto clapped his elbow, the closest thing to his shoulder she could reach. It was unclear whether the widening of his mask’s smile was a trick of the light or not.

"As an aspect of thine leader, it is only natural that I assume his duties in his absence."

"And a fine job you’ve done.” Everyone’s eyes snapped back to Akira, watching in relief as he reached up to rub and pop his neck.

"Joker, you’re back!” Ann let her whip hang loosely from her hand, her exhaustion creeping into her bones. “I don’t know whether I should kiss you for coming back or kick you in the groin for leaving in the first place."

"Really, you wouldn’t be in the wrong for that last one. You can beat me up if you want later, but for now, let me finish off this clown for you.” Joker nodded to Arsene. Almost gleeful, he retracted his chains, the wall falling and allowing Joker to reclaim his place on the battlefield. He took aim and fired, a bullet grazing Shido’s right shoulder. His arm clenched, muscles reeling from the unexpected attack.

"You…!"

"About damn time!” Sojiro took the opening, leaning back and throwing his head into Shido’s, the visor of his helmet leaving deep red gashes on his forehead. Shido was dazed, his grip loosening enough to let Sojiro retreat. “I hope you’re not just being cocky when you say that, kid, because the rest of us are tapped.”

"Don’t worry, we’ve got this.” Akira smirked, putting a hand to the mask on his face. It hummed against his hand, eager to be released. “Alright, let’s do it, Robin Hood!” He tore it loose, sending a twisting gale of fire up from his feet. Rising at his side, shimmering bow in hand, was the regal archer himself. Arsene joined him, both flanking Akira on each side.

"It has been some time, Hood. Are you prepared to show what you are truly capable of?”
“Never more than this moment. Without the haze of Loki, I can feel my full power returning.”

“Isn’t that…?” Haru stared up, no emotion bar pure confusion showing through.”

“Akechi’s Persona.” Queen looked at him, then at Akira. “How did you manage that?”

“A Phantom Thief is a stubborn creature. It didn’t feel right leaving him out of the last clash.”

“Peh, the useless brat failed to serve me in either life or death, and now his power has been pilfered by the very thieves he swore to me were finished.” Shido wiped the blood from his brow, the remnants seeping from his fingers as he clenched his fist. The angry sneer in his eyes took Akira back to the night that started this little feud. He was ready to erase it from his world forever. “I should be grateful. You’ve brought all of my failures to me in a gift basket so I can put them all behind me.”

“Careful what you wish for.” Akira drew his knife, his partners both preparing their weapons in tandem. “We’ll be behind you alright, biting you in the ass.” He threw himself forward, crossing into Shido’s reach to swipe at his stomach. The tip of his knife left a thin red line on his abs, only missing full penetration because of a back step. Shido brought his arms up, ready to smash down on the ant in front of him, but the snap of metal and a harsh pull of his arm tore him from his path. A shackle had latched around his wrist. The other end of its chain was firmly in the grasp of Arsene.

Shido turned his attention to the new nuisance, but Robin Hood intervened, shoulder checking into his stomach. The air was crushed from Shido’s lungs, and he was forced to look down at his attacker. He, in turn, glared up, his yellow eyes piercing through Shido’s confidence.

“For my fallen lord.” Before Shido could even consider how to return the blow, his other arm was snared like the first. Joker grinned as his plan entered its final stage.

“Now!” He and Arsene pulled as hard as they could, Shido’s arms dragged out at his sides. He tried to pull back, but his immense strength was robbed by the loss of air. He was left defenseless, and Robin Hood was ready to capitalize. He had backed away, blurring slightly in Shido’s vision as he raised the wings of his bow.

“Let the font of corruption run dry this day. Fall, O entrenched king.” He pulled back, a shaft of light forming at his finger tips. “Shining Arrow!” His hand leased. The light sprung forth, blazing like a comet. Shido’s eyes burned, watering from the intense light, before it struck. Pure pain arched through his body, all other sensations muting before his entire body went numb. At once, the tension in his limbs drained, and his body collapsed.

They waited for any signs of further resistance, and when none came, Akira and Arsene released their chains. Shido’s arms joined the rest of him in a heap on the floor.

“And that’s that.”

“Freaking showoff.” Akira was almost knocked over by Ryuji’s harsh slap to his back, but he was dragged back up into a headlock and noogie. “What was with that big damn hero shit, dude?”

“Just being sentimental. Thanks for covering for me. I’ll be sure to pay you back for…” A hand clamped over Akira’s mouth, Futaba’s worn groan blocking out his muffled mutters.

“You just came in and kicked his ass with the thing you left to get. Don’t scare us like that again, and we’ll call it even.” No one spoke up to correct the sentiment, though Ryuji did redouble the grinding of his knuckles into Akira’s fluffy hair.
“No, I must…” Shido tried to push himself up, but his arms had already deflated. All that was left of him was the average human they knew from reality, albeit shirtless and wounded. “If I’m not Prime Minister, a corrupted, money driven wretch will take my place. I can’t let that filth run this country…”

“Haven’t you figured it out yet?” Sojiro ground his foot into Shido’s shoulder, enjoying the twitches of pain. “With all of the lives you’ve taken and used to get where you are, you’re not fighting the cycle of corruption. You’re just another revolution of it, the worst yet.”

“I’m just another…?” Shido shook, the weight of his actions slowly draping over his shoulders. “What have I done?”

“You’ve put a lot of people through Hell on Earth, that’s what.” Akira detangled himself from his friends, him and his Personas hanging over Shido, their shadows the bleak reminder of Shido’s sins.

“I’ll fix it, I’ll fix it all! You, what’s your name? I’ll revoke my charges, strike it all from your record. I’ll…!”

“We both know that won’t work. At the end of the day, I’ll always be pegged as a criminal because of you. It’s not something you can say sorry for and have it all magically disappear.” Akira lowered himself, grabbing the back of Shido’s head and forcing him to look up at the assembled Thieves. He pointed back to where Futaba and Haru stood, staring down at him with anger and disgust. “And that’s without considering everyone you’ve had killed. You’re not bringing Oracle’s mother, Wakaba Isshiki, back, and you’re not bringing Kunikazu Okumura out of his coma. There’s nothing you can fix. All you can do now is admit to your crimes and face the punishment.”

“You’re… absolutely right. I concede.” Shido bowed his head and closed his eyes, unable to look at the consequences of his actions any longer. “I will return to my real self, and I’ll… I’ll…!” Suddenly, his eyes shot open, bloodshot and bulging. He gasped for air, but no matter how much he greedily swallowed, it didn’t dispel the pain in his chest. With a cry of anguish, Shido shattered, flecks of black smoke and ink dispersing into the air. Akira could only stare at his hand, where Shido’s head had once been.

“What just…?” The floor under his feet began to quake, almost throwing him off balance. Arsene looked up, where smoke rose in vast columns from distant sectors of the ship.

“It seems as though this cognitive world has been cut off from its source. It will only be a matter of time before it collapses in on itself.” Robin Hood nodded in agreement.

“We must make ourselves scarce, else we be trapped in the ruins of this Palace.” Both Personas vanished, their masks returning to Akira. His normal mask was over his eyes as always, and Hood’s appeared in his hand. He hooked it to his belt before giving the order.

“Phantom Thieves, let’s grab the Treasure and fall back to the real world.”

The ship was almost impossible to navigate in the chaos. The halls tilted to the side as it sank, making the very act of running difficult. The passages they knew best were swiftly filled with water, forcing them to lean on less treaded routes to the entrance.
Eventually, they managed to find their way to the exit, but to their dismay, the deck they entered from had fully sunk. Ann was about ready to dive in after it before Makoto reached out to stop her.

“Don’t, a ship this big will have a suction effect. It would pull you under if you tried to swim this close.” Haru looked over the scene, fire and smoke above, water below, but between the two, she hoped to find their salvation.

“A vacation cruiser of this size is bound to have life rafts built to withstand the suction. If we can find a boat, we can leave without issue.”

“Alright, I think I can do that.” Ryuji walked down a few steps, pushing past Makoto’s attempts to stop him, too. He reached for his mask, whispering to himself. “Please let me not be mistaken. You made it once, you can do it again.” He breathed out to calm his mind. Then he removed his mask, throwing it into the air. “Come on, Seiten Taisei!”

The flames of the mask spread out, and instead of dispelling, they weaved together into a solid mass. Slick, black wood formed, curling up until it ended at a lip. A pillar of lumber jutted up from the hull, and from the top, the fire trailed back down into a wide cloth. The vessel’s great sail watched over them, their own mask and top hat logo emblazoned on the front.

The steering wheel was last to form, and at it, Seiten stood, though he was devoid of his standard armor. In its place, he wore the black threads and three-pointed hat of a seafarer, twin cutlasses strapped to his sides. He smiled down at the group, and, with a snap of the fingers, the ship’s anchor descended. Ryuji tugged at it a few times, and, with a smile, he bowed, gesturing towards it with his hands.

“All aboard the S.S. Kickass, ladies first.”

“My, such a gentleman.” Makoto’s eyes rolled, but she accepted the invitation nonetheless, waiting until Haru was secured on her back before pulling them both up the chain. Ann and Futaba followed them, then Yusuke and Sojiro. While Morgana climbed, Akira took a moment to pat Ryuji’s shoulder.

“I told you that cognition training with Fox would pay off. And you thought art practice was a waste of time.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault he’s so picky about colors.” The two shimmied up, and once the anchor was reeled in, Ryuji proudly stepped onto the front rails, pointing forward. “Full steam ahead, Taisei!” His Persona pulled a rope on the main mast, and the sail was let loose, catching the wind and pushing their craft forward. They sailed through the skies in leisure, above the anarchy Shido’s ‘ideal society’ had descended into. Haru’s eye caught something, and she pointed down.

“Look, there are the life rafts!” As soon as she said it, however, that section of the ship erupted in a massive fireball, wiping it and the rafts away in a matter of seconds. “I suppose it’s a good thing we didn’t look for them instead…”

“If Taisei wasn’t a captain before, we might’ve had to.” Ryuji flopped back, sitting against the mast with his hands behind his head. “And let me tell you, I don’t envy anyone caught in that shit.”

“You’re the one who kept us out of it, kid.” Sojiro raised a thermos of coffee. “I’ll whip up the best drinks I have on tap to toast with when we get back to LeBlanc.” While the others started talking amongst themselves about a successful operation, Akira couldn’t keep himself from looking
back to the Palace. He knew that, with it, Akechi’s ashes sank to the deep. All that remained of him was the mask.

‘Your work is finished. I don’t know if Heaven or Hell are real places, or if we just vanish at death, but wherever you are, I hope you at least have that much to hold onto.’ No matter how much he wanted to be done with it, though, Akira knew his own work wasn’t done. There was still the matter of Loki. Nothing suggested it was a bug planted by Shido, or had anything to do with him at all. Shido was used as a catalyst of corruption, but he wasn’t the first domino in that chain. No, that perpetrator was still out there somewhere, and Akira knew his job wasn’t done until they were dealt with, too.

‘I’ll find him, and there’s only one place I know of that can hand out Personas.’

Chapter End Notes

And so goes the last scene from the game I have major gripes with. Beating up the guy who just saved your asses for being a bit crude, like he always is? Not cool, ladies. Treat the cinnamon roll with respect.

So, I think I have a solution for the content slowdown. It's a bit like a bandage for a broken rib, but it'll have to do. In my Junior year of high school, I took a Creative Writing course, and it was my favorite class of the day bar none. Not even lunch, and I'm a bit on the ravenous side, so that's saying a lot. I just plucked through the folder for that class, and a lot of the stuff I wrote for it is still pretty solid, so I thought, "Why not put some of this where people can see it?"

Here's how it's going to work. I'm going to release something every week on the week. If I can finish my fanfic chapters on time, it'll be one of those for either this or Dungeon Delivery. If I can't, it'll be one of my original works from that CW class. Big thanks to Critical Warrior for pointing out that this site does, in fact, accept original content posts. I have at least four stories fit for posting from that folder, so that's a solid month of buffer on this schedule. Hopefully I'll have a more fitting writing device by the time it runs dry.

Again, this stuff is all finished ahead of time, so it won't interrupt the writing process. It'll just cover up for those weeks I can't get my rig to work for the life of me. So if you're only interested in my main projects here, no sweat, I'm still as hard at work as ever. Next on that list of stuff to write is Dungeon Delvery, which I think has been sorely neglected for the past few weeks.

But, in case that doesn't get finished in time, I'm going to leave what filler goes up next to a vote. What would you guys prefer? A giant spider, or an ice ghost?
Velvet Interrogations

Chapter Summary

I wonder if the creepy guy and the creepy girls in the creepy jail know something creepy?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The night after the raid on Shido’s Palace was supposed to be a grand celebration for the Thieves. They had all arranged to stay the night at LeBlanc for “studying,” which was an easy sell for their guardians when they found out that both Akira and Makoto, the top students of their grades, would be present. That was all the setup their party needed, and they were ready to throw down.

Then they came back to find LeBlanc in ruins.

“What the Hell!” Ryuji stared at the mess agape, the contents of every shelf swept to the floor, chairs upended, and more than a few tables flipped. Sojiro groaned, making his way to the back corner.

“I figured his goons would swoop in after we sent that calling card. I just thought they’d have the mind to not make it so damn obvious. They don’t train agents like they used to.” He grabbed a broom before throwing his spare to Akira. “You might want to check your room for damage, too. You hid all your Thief stuff, right?”

“What do you take me for, a newb?” Akira cracked open his bag, and Morgana slid aside to reveal all of his workstation tools and in-progress projects, safely tucked away where no one would find them. “I hid what I was right under your nose for how long, and you thought I’d let an enemy figure me out? I thought you had more faith in me than that.” Sojiro rolled his eyes, smirking.

“Yeah, I guess those goons weren’t nearly as clever as our doctor. Or that politician. Or that kid you play video games with. Or…”

“Fine, point taken.” Akira huffed, taking Sojiro’s jabs without retort. Contrary to popular opinion, he knew when he was beat. “I just wish we knew who it was so we could get back at them or something. Any fingerprints we pick up would probably get thrown out or muddled at the labs, thanks to Shido’s backers…”

“Don’t be so sure of that.” Futaba plopped down at the only untouched table, turning her laptop out towards the group. It was rolling a video feed with three men in black tearing their way through the café. “Behold, irrefutable proof of a break-and-enter, and I’m pretty sure they didn’t get a search warrant in the ten minutes between our televised debut and the cameras’ timestamps.” She winked, sticking a tongue out. “No one touches my stuff and gets away with it.”

“But this is my shop.”

“And you’re my dad, therefor, it’s my shop, too.”

“Excellent work, Futaba.” Makoto pulled out her phone, sending a quick text. “I’ll give Sae a
copy of the video later. She should be able to turn it into even more evidence against Shido, and hopefully take care of the perpetrators while she’s at it.”

With the matter of whodunit settled, the Thieves got to work righting LeBlanc. With every hand on deck, it only took about an hour to clean up, leaving the rest of the night for their planned party. It started with a hotpot, continued with truth or dare (which was liberally peppered with Makoto and Haru finding excuses to “surprise” kiss each other), and wound down into watching movies on Akira’s tiny TV.

Despite his claims of making the party last through the morning, Ryuji was the first to clock out, his snores muffled by the pillow he collapsed into. The others followed him like dominoes, though Futaba fought it off long enough to snap a picture of Haru curling under Makoto’s chin like a cat. Soon, Akira found himself being pulled to dreamland, too, his eyes drifting shut and leaving Ann and Morgana as the last ones standing.

When his consciousness started to fade, though, Akira felt his mind being tugged at by an outside force. He knew what it meant, and he expected it. Arsene crossed his arms, sending all the fortitude he could muster to his greater whole. What was to come wasn’t the sort of fight he was accustomed to, but he would lend his all to Akira’s plight.

When Akira’s eyes opened, the ceiling above him was dark blue stone. He sat up from his lumpy, cheap mattress and stared through the bars in front of him. On the other end, Igor smiled at him.

“Well done.” Igor’s voice was the one thing in the Velvet Room Akira could never get used to. Every time he heard it, he felt like his ears were being filled with thick sludge that smothered his thoughts. “Thanks to your actions, the head of corruption will soon be severed. Barring extreme circumstances, your rehabilitation will soon be at an end…”

“No, you’re wrong. I’m not finished yet.” Akira shuffled towards the bars, wrapping his hands around them for support.

“Master is praising you, Inmate! Show some…” Caroline was silenced by Igor’s raised hand.

“Now, now, allow him to speak. This could be interesting.” He rolled his hand. “You feel your labor is incomplete?”

“It’s not just a feeling. I know it.” Akira looked straight ahead, his eyes and expression completely neutral. “You know what I did with Akechi’s mask, don’t you?”

“Oh, of course, the trophy you claimed from the fallen prince.” Igor turned his eyes briefly to Justine, who seemed to wither under the attention. Akira’s gaze flickered to her, too, noting the heavy shadows about her face before returning to Igor. “Unfortunately, I am unable to peer that deeply into the Metaverse while anchored to your heart here. You found something of interest, I take it.”

“When I got there, the only things left were Robin Hood and Loki. Hood was being used like a puppet, and Loki was the one pulling the strings. That’s not how a Persona behaves. Personailities clashing is one thing, but the one in control should have been Akechi, not one of his masks. Without
him, they should have been free-floating entities, but Hood was still being commanded.”

“Perhaps it is simply a symbol of which was his true self.” Igor rested his head on his hand, the other tapping idly on his desk. “Your own Arsene far overshadows your other Personas in presence, yes? That dominance could easily translate into inheritance of your masks were you to fall in a similar manner.”

“Maybe, but when I talked to Loki, it sounded like Hood wasn’t the only thing he was controlling. He positioned himself above Robin Hood, and above Akechi. Furthermore, he was trying to conceal himself from me, like he didn’t want me to know he was there despite the fact that I already knew about Loki in the first place. He was trying to hide that he was in control. Why would he do that if Akechi, his means of interacting with the world, was already dead?” Justine’s eyes slowly widened as Akira laid out his reasoning.

“What are you suggesting?” Akira looked to her, his eyes taking a harder front.

“I’m not suggesting anything. I’m saying that Loki wasn’t Akechi’s Persona. He was something else using Akechi as its puppet, just like he was doing to Robin Hood. Something corrupted Akechi, and until it’s dealt with, I’m not done.”

“That is a leap in logic, don’t you think?” Igor’s expression hadn’t changed, staring at Akira with his bulged eyes. “You now possess Robin Hood as your own, suggesting that the entity was vanquished. You already proved victorious over it.”

“Again, if it ended with Loki, why was he trying to hide information from me? A cornered rat bites the hardest, but he was acting like the situation was still favorable for him. I think he was acting for someone else, someone who can corrupt a Wild Card.”

“Hmm, very interesting indeed…” Igor’s smile shrank in thought. “I will look into this personally. It will be dealt with, I assure you. As for you, your rehabilitation ended with…”

“What does that word even mean?” Akira’s eyes narrowed, his blank look morphing into a glare.

“Pardon?”

“You keep saying that I’m working towards rehabilitation, but for what? You can see everything I do in the real world, and even if you didn’t know my charges were false, why would an omniscient being care about one little assault? Last I checked, every crook in prison didn’t get a visit from the Persona fairy, so why me? What crime am I rehabilitating from?”

“Silence, you insolent Inmate!” Caroline raised her whip, ready to crack it across Akira’s knuckles. He turned to her, and she froze. From the sides, he merely looked annoyed, but direct eye contact showed something else entirely. His pupils were specks, lost in a sea of crimson, ringed by webs of red bloodshot. Beyond them, she felt something else, a presence that loomed over even her. Its weight fell upon her all at once, and the air was crushed from her lungs. It held a hand over her, ready to eradicate her at the slightest provocation.

But then, his eyes softened, and the presence receded. His gaze turned from hatred to concern, or even… pity? Sympathy? Empathy?

“It’s quite alright, Caroline. Once more, I am able to handle him. Your willingness to aid me is appreciated and expected, but do not think so lowly of my ability to converse with a single human.” Caroline suddenly realized how little time had passed, the exchange between her and the
Inmate lasting all of a second. She corrected herself, but not before Justine could read that something was wrong.

“Yes, Master. Please forgive my own insolence.”

“Forgiveness granted.” Igor returned his attention to Akira. “As with all things in this plain, the use of the term is not as precise as one would think. Look at this Velvet Room.” Akira looked around, scanning it in its entirety. He counted twenty one cells, and adding his made twenty two. “The Velvet Room is a place transient. When it connects to an individual, it makes real the feeling within their heart. You felt trapped upon its inception, thereby creating this prison. Rehabilitation is simply the terminology I found to best fit the setting and task, freeing you from the shackles you feel snared by. By the time our ways part, if your labor is successful, you will find peace and freedom in the real world, much like a prisoner returning to honest society. I do hope the confusion you experienced from my… artistic tendencies was not too great. My apologies.” Akira’s eyes softened, but Justine could see that, beneath the surface, there was still a hard barrier. Whatever thoughts lingered in his head were unknown to her.

“Yeah, that makes sense. Sorry for wigging out on you.” Igor waved a hand.

“It was no fault of your own. You have had a stressful day. Perhaps you should return to your world and rest properly, Trickster.” Suddenly, Akira’s eyes widened. Caroline felt the presence return, but it wasn’t aimed at her, nor was it actively imposing upon the room as before. Its attention was on her Master, and instead of dissipating, she felt it harden, retreat into the ethereal plain from whence it came. The barrier between Akira and his audience pushed closer to the surface, making room for the immeasurable entity that took shelter within him.

“.Yeah, I think I’ll do that.” From beyond the walls of the Velvet Room, and alarm clock blared. Akira’s form faded, but before he left, he looked back to the twins.

“See you later, girls. Be careful.” He smirked viciously. “You never know when that monster might come for you.” He vanished from his cell, leaving only the iron ball and chain behind. Igor chuckled deeply.

“The Trickster certainly has a cutting sense of humor, does he not? Of course, my attendants would not fear any opponent, right?” Something deep inside Caroline’s chest shuddered, and with a glance, she knew Justine had experienced it, too.

“Of course not, Master.”

“Have the same faith in us as we in you.”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Indeed. We have found our culprit.”

“And more victims. Will you help me save them, too?”

“We shan’t fail them as I did my former self.”
Attentive readers might be asking two questions right about now. "Psyby, didn't you say you were only posting once a week?" and, "Psyby, didn't you say you were working on Dungeon Delivery next?" The answer to both of those is yes.

Remember how I said the rest of this story was planned out, just waiting to be put on paper? Well, when I sat down to write DD, I couldn't stop thinking about PT, so I opened a document to write that instead to get the juices flowing. Three hours later, I realized my computer hadn't started lagging yet, I had been writing this story the entire time, and I had banged out nearly four thousand words in one sitting, more than a chapter's worth. Actually, about a chapter and a half, so the next entry is already about half done.

I looked at this progress and thought to myself, "You know, if things keep going this way, you might get enough cooperation from your rig to finish this next chapter in one more good sitting. Why not take a chance and try to force yourself back into the old posting schedule of every two or three days?" So that's what I'm doing. From here on out, once a week is my maximum wait time between posts. If progress allows, I'll be posting as regularly as I was in the story's hay day, where you couldn't even blink between chapters. We're in the last stretch of the journey, and I'm sprinting for the finish line.

Also, I got a comment on the last chapter that said, and I quote, "this is fucking fantastic." I, being me, made a quip in response, laughed, and am now in a very good mood. When I'm happy, I make sure you're happy.
Makoto didn’t stir so much as gently float back to the surface of consciousness. Her thoughts were thick and flowed like cooled magma, but she was immediately aware of two sensations. First, her whole body was ungodly sore, though it was especially potent on her upper arms and hips. It was almost like being woken up to find that she had been dealt a finishing blow in battle, revived at Morgana’s paws.

The warm, curly ball of fluff pressed against her neck, though, cited historical precedence to another situation. Where she once thought waking in such a position would be sweaty and sticky, she had swiftly found the discomforts outweighed by the exhilaration of starting her days with proof that she was loved bundled in her arms. If she focused, part of her swore the connection ran even deeper, a faint presence entangling with Anat in her soul. She was well aware of the expression of becoming one with a partner, but Haru’s soft breathing in her ear was doing its best to convince her that the saying was quite literal. She hadn’t been woken up by her alarm, so she felt it best to pull up the covers and lounge in the shared embrace for a while longer.

Then she heard the light knocking at her door.

“Makoto, are you awake? I have news on the Shido case.” It was Sae! It had been days since they stole Shido’s Treasure, so news on that front was in hot demand amongst the Thieves. Makoto sat up as best as she could, but when the covers fell, she suddenly remembered that she had clocked out without her nightgown. It was also then that she realized her blushes covered far more than her cheeks, which, in turn, made the glow even brighter.

“I—I’ll be right there, Sis! I just need a minute!”

“Take your time.” There was a note of amusement in Sae’s voice, as though she was staring straight through the wall and could see Makoto’s embarrassment. “I’ll be waiting at the table when you’re ready.” Her footsteps trailed down the hall, letting Makoto’s heated blood sink away from her skin.

She went about throwing together some passible morning attire, but her thoughts turned to counting her blessings. Sae was no fool. She knew exactly what Makoto and Haru could get up to, there was no way she didn’t, but she never commented in a serious manner. She trusted Makoto to make smart decisions. Though the lack of a certain biological process may have helped, she was acutely aware of the liberty she had been given.

The surprises about her relationship didn’t end there. Ever since she realized she was gay, a fear had festered in the back of Makoto’s psyche. Judgment fell harsh upon deviancy, especially that of the sexual nature. She forcefully modeled herself into the ideal student mostly to make Sae proud, but a small part of her, the confidence that had once been a frail pygmy, used that front as a shield, a
barrier against mockery.

And now she wasn’t just in a relationship, it was a highly visible one. Haru had no reservations about running up to her in the halls to kiss her between classes, and it was common knowledge amongst their close friends that their… private activities were as frequent as they were intense. God bless Akira’s patience and understanding while Haru lived in his room. With twice the deviancy, she was certain she would be a magnet for insults and every derogatory name in the book.

But none of that came. No dirty looks, no distancing of students, not even one utterance of “village bicycle.” Oh sure, she was teased relentlessly. Ryuji always had some wisecrack or other for the “lovebirds,” and Eiko never failed to give a smoky eyebrow wiggle when she caught so much as a faint breeze of future activities, but that was as far as it went. The most common reaction she encountered was a “go get her,” especially from Ann or Akira.

Her friends knew her completely, and they loved her as was. Not just acceptance, wholehearted welcoming for all that she was. She didn’t have to hide or pretend anymore. The thought always brought a tear to her eye and a smile to her lips.

When she finally arranged an outfit, her loosest pajamas (with a tall neck to hide certain remnants of the night), she made her way to the main room of the apartment. True to her word, Sae was seated at her usual spot, and in front of her, three boxes of takeout waited.

“Good morning, Makoto. Apologies for the early wakeup call.” Makoto glanced at the clock. It was five, an hour before she usually started her day.

“Actually, I had just woken up before you knocked. No harm done.” She took her seat, and Sae slid one of the takeout boxes towards her. The tangy smell of sweet and sour sauce wafted by in streams of steam. “Thanks, Sis, but you didn’t have to go out of your way to…”

“I know, but I wanted to. With all the work I’ve had lately, between the Phantom Thieves case and this new investigation into Shido, we haven’t had a family meal in over a month. I thought I should fix that, even if it is just Chinese.” Makoto recounted the cases, confirming that there were three meals for family breakfast. The warm feeling blooming through her chest wasn’t just the steam.

“Speaking of, you said the case was progressing?”

“Yes, but not in a public sense, so keep what I’m about to say under wraps.” It was a good thing Makoto had a custom chastisement prepared to bind Ryuji’s outbursts. “Shido has contacted us directly.”

“What?”

“He knows his associates will do everything in their power to keep him from shining a light on their activities, so he’s negotiating to have the pieces for a sting put into place before he announces his guilt. His only conditions were that he be allowed to state his crimes in his own words and that he is given the harshest penalties possible for all he is found guilty of.” The amazement on Makoto’s face blossomed swiftly. Even after being forced into a false death state, his Shadow kept his word.

“That’s great! With this, it’s all but certain that he’ll pay for everything he’s done, or at least the irrefutable majority.” A thought crossed Makoto’s mind, dimming her smile. Sae saw the gears at work, and she, too, grew sullen. “And Akira…?”

“…I’m afraid his case will not be revisited. Shido seemed fervent to right that particular
wrong above all others, but his noninvolvement with the proceedings of his trial means that he has no access to its records.” Makoto’s eyes fell to the table, the single lead weight amongst the good news dragging her down with it. “I looked into every network available to me, but I couldn’t find them either. For all we know, the files were burned to hide Shido’s tracks. I’m sorry.”

“It’s… Well, it’s not alright, but we can’t hold you responsible for Shido’s mistakes.” She worked up the energy to look up at Sae again, but her eyes were still downcast. “I’m sure he’ll appreciate what you’ve done for him either way. I mean, it’s because of you that he escaped Akechi’s assassination attempt, and he’s not the type of person that forgets something like that. You’ve done everything you can, and he knows it.” Sae managed a small smile.

“It still feels like the job is only half done, but thanks. I’ll take what I can get.” Makoto took that as an open invitation, reaching over the table with her arms open. Sae accepted the offer, taking Makoto in a tight hug. Her hands touched down on Makoto’s back, and she noticed a lack of a certain bulge beneath the pajamas. “Hmm, no bra?” Makoto’s blush flared back to life, greeting Sae with an increase of at least five degrees.

“N-No, I… I mean, it’s…”

“My, so flustered. Who knew a little prodding could turn the Queen into a maiden?”

“Not you, too…”

“I’m your sister. Teasing you is part of the job. And what’s this on your neck?”

“A reward for a job well done.”

“Haru, when did you wake up!”

“The sound of my Queen afluster is like the song of a siren to these ears.”

“Please, not both of you at the same time…”

“I thought that was why we invited Ann and Shiho before?”

“Oh, now that’s an interesting sounding story. Shall we discuss it over breakfast?”

“Of course!”

Makoto’s face sank into her sister’s shoulder, her smile hidden between them.

“…”

“So, uh… Akira’s wounds healing up alright?”

“Yep. Hmm, did you redo the hair bleach?”

“Yeah, yeah. It was starting to fade, so…”

“Right. I get it.”

Uncomfortable quiet dominated LeBlanc. Akira was still out cold, and Boss was out on a
supply run. Ryuji popped in to keep his pal company while he waited for the green light to start
going back to school, but with Akira asleep, that left him waiting with only Morgana as company.

And, much to their mutual shock, neither really knew what to do about it. Normally, they
started on back-and-forth prodding at each other as a result of the group’s general topic encroaching
on an opening, but without a group, the line was never approached, so they were without their usual
starting point. They were left grasping at the faintest wisps of a possible conversation, but they all
dissipated on touch. Ryuji hunched over the counter, his soda’s straw dangling from his mouth,
hunting for something, anything, to fill the void of dead silence.

“So, anything cool going on in cat town?” Morgana glanced over at him, tail hanging over
the edge of his stool.

“I told you, I’m not a cat.” It wasn’t the usual exclamation, just a tired statement of fact.
Somehow, it hit Ryuji harder than the louder denials.

“Alright, jeez, no need to take it so personally.”

“I do.” Boredom turned to staring at the floor away from Ryuji.

“Well then why didn’t you say so earlier?”

“What, me yelling at you every time you say it isn’t enough of a hint?”

“Dude, you call me an ape every time I call you a cat. I thought we were just poking fun at
each other.” Morgana looked back at him, confused disgruntlement etched in his eyes.

“You seriously call that sort of thing fun?”

“Yeah. If you can’t laugh at yourself. Hell, Akira finds an excuse to flirt with me and make
me uncomfortable every time we hang out, and we’re still best friends. I think how I work is pretty
obvious.” Morgana looked straight ahead, whiskers occasionally twitching.

“I… I couldn’t tell.”

“You serious?”

“I work on hard logic. Enjoying being picked on sounds like the farthest thing from
reasonable I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s called ‘making fun’ for a reason, even I know that.” Ryuji looked down at Morgana, his
conscience kicking him at the upset look in his eyes. “Look, you really don’t like me calling you a
cat?”

“It reminds me that I might not really be a human. I don’t remember anything from before I
met you guys, so for all I know, my life started in that bastard Kamoshida’s Palace, or Mementos,
and that thought… It scares me.” Morgana had already bled that worry all over Akira’s ears multiple
times, but somehow, adding Ryuji to the fold loosened terror’s grip on his heart a touch more, even
though he didn’t expect him to get the full gravity of…

“Alright, then I won’t call you that anymore.” Morgana looked up at him in surprise. “You
heard me. No more cat stuff. I wouldn’t like it if people kept pointing out my bum leg, at least when
it was a bum leg, so why would I keep dragging up your issues and junk? I’m sorry.” Morgana
blinked, and he found himself smiling.
“It’s okay. I know you can be pretty dense sometimes. Most times.”

“Amen to that.” Ryuji took a deep drink, his straw hanging out of the side of his mouth as he chugged. He popped off the glass with a satisfied, loud sigh before grinning viciously. “Besides, why should I make an enemy out of someone that hates Kamoshida as much me?” Morgana snickered.

“A right rat bastard, that one!”

“You said it!”

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“Thanks, Lala-chan.”

“Thank you, Kurusu-kun. It’s always nice to see open-minded youngsters milling about. You three enjoy that water, now. I’ll be right back with the rest of your starter kits.” Lala Escargot left for the backroom, entrusting the peace of her Crossroads to the one teenage boy she would ever consider trustworthy around her booze. That he was accompanied by a few friends was no issue at all. The Kurusu seal of approval was quickly becoming a universal currency in the dark corners of Tokyo.

“She seems nice. People online said this place was friendly, but I didn’t think anything this deep in Shinjuku could be like that without getting robbed.”

“Trust me, Bug, no one in their right mind would try that. I’ve seen her pin rowdy customers to the wall by their throats when they tried to start a fight. And I hear she employs some charming young lady with a mean right hook.”

“Oh dear.” Haru took a small sip, soothing her thirst after a long afternoon. “I do hope Aka-chan didn’t break a nail. They can be such a hassle to replace.”

“She did, but hey, the dick that groped her got a reminder to never do that again embedded in his forehead, so it all worked out.” Akira was careful about leaning against the hangers on the back of his chair, well aware of how troublesome wrinkles in fancy fabrics were. He wouldn’t dare mess up the new wardrobe before they saw the light of day. “So, you guys were real adamant about coming out this way with me. Any reason?”

“Brother mine, I am shocked!” Futaba feigned a faint, covering her forehead with the back of her hand. “You would allow two young flowers like us to walk these filthy streets unprotected? Where is your chivalry?”

“Let’s be real here.” Akira’s smirk was infectious, almost making Futaba break her act to chuckle with him. “Haru could bust open a mugger or abductor’s head with a pencil if she wanted to. Or, Hell, she just bought something pretty damn heavy. That’d do the job, too.”

“True, but I would rather not get it dirty.” Haru patted the bag beneath her stool with the flat of her shoe. “The bodily fluids it was designed to encounter can be troublesome enough in the wrong situation. Who knows what form of disease would lurk in the entrails of the desperate and depraved?”

“And the ‘Haru is Terrifying’ counter is up to the triple digits.”
“As flattered as I am that you have kept track, you still haven’t answered Akira-kun’s question.” Haru turned her attention fully to Futaba, and the younger girl shivered. She added one more tick to the counter as Noir surfaced in those cedar eyes. Though he had yet to be a target of her harsh side himself, Akira’s conscience demanded he cut in.

“Wild guess, Futaba has something she needs to tell me, and you’re here to make sure she can’t chicken out?” Haru’s glare mercifully ended, returning to her cheery self.

“As sharp as ever, leader. It would seem she has breached your privacy to a degree even she is not comfortable with, but after months of hesitation, she needed a little… reinforcement to admit to the error.”

“Hold up, I already know she’s done everything in the book to me. She swiped my old and new school records, hacked into every social media account I have from when I was in juvie before being sent here, quickly doxxed the worst guards from that time, and is recording everything I do while my phone’s on through its mic. She already knows I know, and we’re all cool. What could she have possibly done that’s that bad?”

“Well…” Futaba was looking straight down, her fingers squirming together like a ball of snakes. “…You know how I can use Prometheus to see stuff I can’t get to with my tech?”

“Yeah…?” Akira’s eyebrow lifted above the rim of his glasses. It had been useful in tracking down a few hard to find Mementos targets, but the mention of supernatural means opened avenues Akira hadn’t originally considered.

“The first time I did it, it was a little after you guys saved me. I was wondering why you cared so much about helping people. I was still disconnected and trying to figure stuff out, you know? So I thought you would be a good frame of reference.” She coughed, trying to force her brain back from the brink of rambling before Haru had to glare again. “Necronomicon told me it could show me, so I took up the offer.” Akira’s eyes widened, the possibilities whittling down.

“Did you…?”

“I… I saw the day your Mom…” Futaba’s eyes slammed shut, and she pulled her knees up to huddle behind. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to see something so personal. I was so curious, and I didn’t know what my power would let me do, and…”

“Hey, hey, simmer down, Bug.” Akira dragged his chair around the table, coming close enough to wrap an arm around her back. She instinctively leaned into him, her thinking mind unable to curb the habit. “Slow down and tell me exactly what you saw.”

“It was only, like, a minute or two long. I saw you walk into your apartment with a rubber sheet over your shoulders. You said something about paying rent, and then you walked in on your Mom with the… the…” She put a hand to her throat, an afterimage of the vision returning to her. If Akira hadn’t been holding her to reality, she was certain she would’ve been sucked into a hallucination. “It stopped after you ran to call for help. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have dug into your life like that. I know that it’s something sensitive for…”

“It’s okay, seriously, just breathe.” Akira slowed his breathing, giving her a metronome to match herself to. The shaking in her chest settled, and her nerves slowly stopped buzzing. “Did you already talk to my Mom about this?”

“Yeah. She was mostly interested in the magic, though. I tried to get us back on topic, but she just kept saying to talk to you about it. I still don’t know why.”
“If I may interject?” Haru scooted in, too, bringing the circle of the conversation closer together. “His mother is an intelligent woman. It could be that she knew Akira was more capable of speaking to you effectively on the matter.”

“You are a bit on the eccentric side.”

“Says Mr. Backflip.” Futaba puffed her cheeks, but they sank like a sad balloon. “You don’t sound mad. How aren’t you mad?”

“A few reasons, but if I had to pin one, I’d say it’s because you know what it’s like. We both went through… let’s say a rough patch. If there’s anyone that can appreciate what that moment meant to us, it’s you. Mom’s not mad, so I’m not mad, and I trust you to keep what you saw under wraps.”

“My lips are sealed.” She curled in even closer, pressing out whatever air was left between them. “Thanks for being chill about it. I was kind of freaking out about how you’d react.”

“Now when have I ever been less than chill with you? Trust your brother a little more next time, eh?”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Futaba hummed contently. Then she grinned mischievously. “I love you, Oni-chan.”

“Dude, are you trying to get Boss to kill me? You know he’s packing heat!”

“I’m just telling my Oni-chan how much I love~ him!”

Haru watched silently as they bickered, hiding her giggle politely behind her hand. She waited for a lull in the pitch verbal battle before coughing.

“Pardon, but that was only the first topic you had in mind, was it not?”

“Oh, right! I nearly forgot.” Futaba craned her arms out towards her bag, pulling out her laptop with the rest of her body still cradled by Akira. She shifted the screen so he could see it as well as her. “I found something that might be of interest to you. And yes, I cross-examined it with your Mom and, get this, the MetaNav.” Webpages opened before them, and as information scrolled across the screen, Akira’s eyes slowly widened. Shock plastered over his face, but it chipped away. His teeth gritted together, but when the pieces clicked together into one whole, it turned into a manic grin.

“Bug, you’re a goddamned miracle worker.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, there was a metric crap-ton of foreshadowing in that last section. Yes, I did just gut what was left of Ryuji and Morgana’s canon relationship with a rusty shiv. Yes, I do love writing Makoto/Haru stuff. We’re a headshot god away from all of my favorite things being in one chapter.

Also, I just got gifted a copy of Shin Megami Tensei IV. Screw the Minotaur with an icicle. This concludes my rant.
Chapter Summary

The last casual Mementos chapter, so I threw in everything I could think of.

Also, trigger warning: Mara ahead. Use protection.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The depths of Mementos, a realm seemingly forged from the mania of man. Its deepest point was a realm so terrible, many Shadows feared it as deeply as death itself. Hibitai was one such Shadow. He made his realm at its highest layer, far from the slavering maw that swallowed his kin whole. He thought his flight to be the smart decision, avoiding ruin as he, in his den, survived.

One day, though, he felt his realm ripple. He turned his bleary eyes to the entrance, but all he saw was the wavering of the gate. It pulled and churned like a boiling pot of water, and then, in the center, its light dimmed. He scrambled to his feet, heart racing as a shadowy figure stood in his door.

“Who’s there? Who would dare intrude on my sanctuary?”

“You think this place a domain of peace?” A voice rolled over him. It was deep, an unholy rumbling, and its laughter played his eardrums as a gong. “Funny. What makes you believe you deserve peace after sewing so much strife?” The figure swelled, its chest broadening, spikes jutting from its head. Great wings of midnight sprawled out, walling off the entrance and exit. Then the gate thinned and parted like water.

Even as it became visible, the intruder was no less of a towering, imposing figure. Hibitai backed away, fearing the demon that crossed into his realm. Its claws twisted and cracked. A mask of pitch black stone covered its face, the eye holes engulfed by crimson light as though pinholes into Hell itself.

“Hibitai Yonada, do you recognize us?” His heart hammered against his ribs as he hurriedly skimmed the monster, fearing a false response would be his last.

“No, not at all, I…” Hibitai composed himself, an idea occurring to him. He himself was a weak, tiny being. Perhaps a little… supplementation would be in his best interest? He pushed his fear down, tucking it behind his most diplomatic smile. “But I am very interested in making your acquaintance! What brings you to…?” A crack crossed his mask as the intruder drew a gun.

“I already know you more than enough.” It raised its other hand and snapped its fingers. The sound of billowing cloth filled the air. Tapestries fluttered down from the beams above, covering the walls in a mural. The way they were painted reminded him of traditional oil painting. The figure they centered around was beady eyed and impish, its white tongue hanging from a sharp-toothed maw. In its claws were two sacks, one with yen spilling from the top, the other soaked through at the bottom and dripping red.

“You’re a rancid breeze that poisons the air of small towns throughout Japan. You take out
loans with unsuspecting small time banks, blow the money on extravagance, then flee the scene before anyone is the wiser. You leave in your wake a trail of broken hearts and dreams, not caring for the fallout. Why should you? You run fast enough to escape it every time while the lives of up and coming honest business owners crumble beneath the debt you force upon them.”

“And let’s not forget your legendary libido.” Another wall was covered by cloth. In this, his tongue extended endlessly, piercing through the ears and coiling about the necks of wide-eyed, smiling girls. Their robes were white, but a coating of red drained from their ears over the cloth, staining them irreparably. “Wherever you go, you always find someone new, like part of your narcissistic checklist. You impale them with little white lies and promise of adventure before running away, leaving them to deal with the void. And that’s if they’re lucky. If they’re not, they get to keep a little piece of you.” Its hand tightened around its gun as the final tapestry unraveled. The background was covered by a massive shadow, its shape a stretched, cackling ghost of the imp.

In the center of the foreground, a young lady with long black hair kneeled. She was hunched over a small bundle in her lap, her face blocked by hanging bangs. In the bundle, looking up at her, was a child, its face dripping with the tears of its mother. Hibitai stared at the portrait, a rusted bell struggling to be heard.

“I think… I think I know this one, but… I’m not sure.”

“You can’t even remember her name?” The glow in the demon’s eyes flared, the light breaking through what remained of Hibitai’s composure. He nearly stumbled as he pressed against the back wall. The tapestry of the mother gave way, and he fell to the ground. Behind him, a hallway burrowed into the stone, its walls dripping with molten brick. The tapestries ascended, letting him see the demon as it sneered down at him.

“No matter. I’ll make sure you remember it. Very. Clearly.” It took a step forward, and the tunnel shook. “I’ll make you say it. Let her name stain your soul evermore, and may it be the last word to cross that tongue of fool’s silver. Let me hear you scream it as I throw you to HELL!”

Its wings beat, granting it flight, and Hibitai scrambled to his feet. His legs burned from the exertion, but the breath on his neck spurred him forward. He tried to change, to assume a stronger form, but every time he felt the shift foaming to the surface, a gunshot rang out, and fear overpowered his confidence. His certainty in himself faltered, and with it, his power.

He looked over his shoulder, at the demon clawing its way towards him. This was a being that could not be reasoned with. He couldn’t talk it out of its rage, let alone bring it under his sway. It sought his life, and no matter how fast he ran, it wouldn’t fall behind, always at his heels, closer than his own shadow. For the second time in his life, he had no escape route, and his linguistics failed him. He had nowhere to go, only the narrowing tunnel before him.

Soon, his legs failed him, too. He fell to the floor, and before he could stand again, something coiled around his neck. It rattled as it dragged him up, constricting his air as he was pulled to face the demon. Its right hand clutched the chain that bound him, and its left still held the gun. It pressed it to his forehead, licking its lips as he started to sweat.

“What do you want with me? What did I do to you!?”

“You tell me.” A chain slithered over the demon’s back, rolling up and about a horn before curling around the stone over its eyes. It pulled it up, and the demon’s flesh receded. Beneath it, a human face glared, eyes burning with hate. Black hair spilled forth in curls, and the angles of its face struck the bell anew.
“You look just like her, like that…!” The gun cocked, the click seizing his throat.

“Her name, do you remember it!??” Hibitai’s eyes shrunk, and he sifted through his memories for the answer.

“I-It started with a C… No, A! It was an A! She was, uh… Aki? Aomi?” The demon growled, its horns lengthening. It leaned in close, and its breath was scalding on bare flesh.

“Akari Kurusu.”

“Akari, yes, that was it! That was her…”

“Louder.”

“What?” The gun’s barrel heated up, making him yelp.

“Louder!”

“A-Akari!”

“All of it, you worm!”

“Akari Kurusu! She was Akari Kurusu!” Tears streamed down his face, terror claiming him. Chains splayed out behind the demon, they and its wings blotting out any semblance of light besides its eyes. Its chain hand gripped his chin, holding his head up.

“Now, I’ll ask again. Do you recognize us?”

“Yes, yes! You’re her son, right? Which means… are you my…?” The hand lowered, clutching his throat.

“Don’t remind me. I hate you enough without remembering that your putrid blood fills my veins.” The anger on the demon’s face broke, and it laughed. “Actually, perhaps it isn’t just the blood that makes you such a disgrace. You know, you aren’t even the best debtor I have on the list today. At least the other guy didn’t get picked up while he was drunk at the slots! Let that sink in. You are the lowest of the bottom rung! That’s pathetic.” Its face hardened, and it pushed the gun deeper into his scalp. “Say it. Don’t waste my time asking what, just say it.”

“I… I’m pathetic.”

“A pathetic what?”

“A pathetic… useless debtor.”

“What was that? Speak up, I can’t hear you over your chattering teeth.” His nerves frayed to the last, Hibitai snapped, all calm fleeing as he screamed, his striped prison uniform stained in tears.

“I’m a pathetic, useless, worthless, cowardly debtor! I’m scum, the lowest of the low! You should just kill me, at least then my cadaver would feed the worms!” The demon’s maw parted in an uproar, its mirth echoing through Mementos.

“Ah, now that was great! You got all that, right, Bug?” The chains receded, and above them, a grinning sun hovered.

“Yes, down to the last quake of his knees. Akari’s going to love this!”
Excellent! Alright, let’s pack it up.” The horns and wings crumbled away, their dust coming together to make a spurt of blue flame. Behind it, another demon arose, this one adorned by red cloth and an iron mask. Beside him, flanking the intruder’s other side, a regal being in white formed, looking between Hibitai and the boy. His attention was drawn up by the voice coming from the sun.

“Wait, you promised I could…!” The boy stopped, a look of amusement on his now thoroughly human face.

“Right, sorry. Go ahead.”

“Alright!” A beam of light came down, and from it, a girl emerged, suited in a black and green jumpsuit. She ran forward, and before Hibitai could react, she reared back and delivered a swift stomp between his legs. He curled in on himself, swearing he heard a sound akin to a grape popping. “Let’s hope that’s cognized as sterility. There are enough assholes like you around, thank you very much.” She ran up behind Akira, giggling as they resumed their exit.

“Wait! Wait…” Hibitai dragged himself up, ignoring the ache rolling across his stomach to look at the boy again. “Please, a name. What’s your name?” Akira glanced back, cold disdain in his eyes.

“Me? I’m no one, just a criminal bastard.” He resumed his forward march, back turned to Hibitai. “And I’m more than you’ll ever be.” Hibitai stared in a stunned daze, then he dropped to the ground, weeping to himself. As they walked away, Robin Hood leaned down to Akira’s ear.

“Thou art certain about not claiming his Treasure?”

“It’d be a waste of time. We have a lot of floors to cover, and stopping to finish him might mean someone who’s not already locked up gets to go free for another day. It’s all about perspective. Besides.” Akira’s face turned thoughtful, though not without a smirk. “We’ve done enough of God’s dirty work, judging sinners. The lazy bum can sort that mess out himself for once. Until then, let him rot. We have people to help.”

Mementos was a deep, depressing place, almost a hundred floors of darkness. Perhaps once it was menacing, but now, the Phantom Thieves found it painfully mundane. The Shadows that milled about between their main targets were hardly a threat anymore. All that left was the drive, and even with the train tunnels between safe rooms to speed things along, the commute was dreadfully long and dull. Coffee only did so much. They had to turn to more inventive ways to keep morale high.

Akira was nothing if not inventive.

A Shadow lurched towards the approaching van, seeing it only as easy prey. Instead of swerving to avoid it, though, like a sensible driver, the van doubled its speed, barreling forward with wicked intent in its headlights. It smashed into the Shadow, sending it flying. The doors popped open, and two occupants rolled onto the hood. They were dressed in suits, the black, slick models of the Yakuza. The shorter had a wide brimmed fedora atop curly hair, and the taller had a silver scarf draped about their neck.

“Harumi-kun, open fire!”
“Of course, Mako-kun.”

The two propped up against each other, their sights becoming one and the same. At the end of the barrel, the Shadow discarded its blob form, rising into a lumbering, red Oni. It raised its club to intimidate its opponents, but they answered taunt with hellfire. Mako’s revolver peppered it with bullets, making it recoil long enough to give Harumi a still target. She pulled the trigger once, and a grenade flew, crashing into the Oni’s face. The explosion engulfed it, and it cried out, holding its face and coughing up smoke as it stumbled forward. When it cleared the cloud, though, it found itself against another opponent. This one was dressed in a loose, black long sleeve and jeans, his short blond hair windswept to the side.

“Hecate, dance!” The last of the smoke cleared, and from it, a figure wreathed in red flames stepped forth. His suit was carved from the fire, and it held the leashes of two disembodied canine skulls. He tilted his head, and his hounds howled, assailing the Oni with twin infernal tornadoes. It held up its club as a shield, holding its ground.

“You’re up, Aka-chan!”

“Fine work, Andre.” The attack subsided, and Andre fell back, leaving the stage open. An elegant woman in a grey kimono strode towards the Oni, hands pressed together. It sprinted towards her, its pain fueling an earth-shaking roar. Aka-chan merely hummed and flipped her hands forward, inverting the symbol of prayer. “What is a poor young maiden to do? Doth no hero claim me as his own?”

“Milady, do not fear!” From above, a knight in white cloth descended, driving the Oni back with a swing of his bow. “Robin Hood is here!”

“My hero!” Aka-chan swooned, and hand raised to her forehead, as Hood drew an arrow. Suddenly, her soft expression turned jagged, and she pointed ahead. “Make him bleed for his transgression.”

“My pleasure.” He leased the arrow, and at once, it cleaved through Oni. A moment passed, and when his body caught up to the injury, blood fountained from both sides of the wound. He melted into the ground, and Hood sheathed his bow, freeing both arms to carry his dear maiden. “I know not why, but these theatrics come quite naturally to me.”

“Yeah, you fit in perfectly as my Persona.”

“I would have gladly taken part.” Arsene floated in the background, sharpening his claws against his thumb. “But my aesthetics do not compliment the white knight role.” Akira rolled his eyes before winking coyly.

“Aw, you do not wish to claim the heart of the maiden?”

“Thou know my tendencies.” He leaned forward, leering at Robin Hood. “I fare better stealing hearts than earning them fairly. Watch thine back, Hood.”

“Thou shan’t lay a finger on her, villain!” Further down the tunnel, Harumi, Mako, and Andre huddled together.

“These outfits are amazing! And look at you two, you match perfectly!”

“I know, right?” Harumi cuddled into Mako’s arm. “And my dearest gets to live her… pardon, his film fantasies.”
“Ah, my sweet Harumi.” Mako lifted his chin, looking deeply into his eyes. “Every day is a fantasy with you at my side.” Harumi blushed, suddenly acutely aware of how he made Makoto feel every day. He couldn’t say it was unpleasant.

“My King…”

“Yo, he’s finally ready!” Futaba waved her arms, bringing everyone’s eye down the tunnel. Behind her stood a figment of cold morning mist, clad in sweeping, white robes. Her arms were crossed in front of her, hands hidden in the opposite sleeves. Her steps were measured, precise, yet also smooth and almost ethereal. Her cerulean hair flowed in an unseen breeze, and her eyes were gentle and calm. She parted her lips to greet her first audience.

“I am a pretty princess.” Akira recoiled, not expecting quite so much… masculinity.

“We’ll work on the rest of your act as we go. We have all day.”

“Yeah, you guys have fun with that.” Ryuji leaned against a wall, balancing his bat on his fingertips. He was still in his usual Thief suit, standing out from the rest of the crowd besides Futaba and Sojiro. Aka-chan sauntered up to him with smoky eyes.

“You know it would be fun~!”

“No thanks, dude. I’m good.” Akira immediately dropped his act with a sigh.

“Worth a shot.”

“Hey, why’d you give up so easy with him, but not me!?”

“Because I looked all day for an outfit in your size, and I wasn’t about to let that work get flushed without a fight.” Morgana crossed his arms, simmering under his frilly headband. The apron and red dress hid the way his tail whipped violently, and how his back retractable claws promised to poke Akira many times in bed that night. Ryuji stopped toying with his bat, instead using that hand to clamp his mouth shut. His eyes watered and his cheeks went pink with effort. Morgana groaned.

“Go ahead, say it.” Ryuji lost his cool, busting out in laughter.

“I’m sorry, dude, you look like Hello freaking Kitty!” Morgana shook with indignation, but he was quick to give up the ghost.

“You’re right, and I hate it.”

Not long after, the group changed out of their drag to face a main mark, and they decided from there that the gap between targets was small enough to justify sticking to their usual outfits for the rest of the trip. (Though something Haru whispered about them to Makoto lit up her cheeks something fierce, restoring the natural order between them.)

Eventually, inevitably, the group was faced by another lesser Shadow. Joker unbuckled, ready to step out and face it, when Ryuji grabbed his shoulder.

“Hey, let us handle this one, dude.”
“You sure?”

“Totally. They’re scrawny, and you’ve been working double time today. Queen can take the lead for the next few. Right?”

“It should be simple enough.” She nodded to Joker on her way out. “You should take this chance to rest.” He relented before an argument could form, knowing the insistent look she had well.

“Alright, go for it. I’ll jump in if I smell trouble, though.”

“You’ll find my operation quite stench free. Unless you count rotting Shadows, that is.” She hopped the rest of the way out, the other Thieves following her lead. Sojiro, in the passenger’s seat, stayed where he was.

“My old bones are starting to wear out. I’ll keep him company.”

“Me, too.” Morgana’s voice chirped from the radio. “Not the tired thing, the company thing. You need somewhere to sit, right?”

“Thanks, Mona. Much appreciated.” Akira kicked back, putting his boots up on top of the steering wheel as he reclined. His body was relaxed, but his eyes were locked on the scene out front. Sojiro, in turn, watched him. He scanned the boy carefully, searching for any differences in posture. The only thing he found was one wince as he watched the fight. “Ouch, what’s with all the groin kicking today?”

“Hey, kid, can we talk?”

“What’s up, Boss?” Akira turned so he could see the fight and Sojiro at the same time.

“I was just wondering if you were… you know, doing alright?”

“I’m doing perfectly.” Akira smiled, and his foot started to tap against the glass. “Not every day you get to scare the shit out of a dead beat and get it all on film. I’ll pay Bug back for it, don’t worry.” That his debt was the only concern on Akira’s mind almost made Sojiro chuckle. The only reason he didn’t was because he knew his tendency to keep his cards to himself.

“You sure about that? You just saw the guy that set up a lot of the shit you started with. Isn’t it stirring up an old pot up there?”

“Well, truth be told, yeah.” Akira maintained his positivity, but there was a thin film over it, blurring it like melted foam at the top of a coffee. “Revenge is a great fantasy. It’s so easy to get caught in it, but get stuck, let it consume you, and you start thinking it’ll be the ticket that fixes all of your problems.”

“That’s about right.” Sojiro’s hand went to the welded seam at the front of his armor. Even with the guys that broke it gone, an echo of the damage still remained.

“If it had been, say, a year ago, I’d probably be in a worse place right now. But this whole Phantom Thief gig’s really put things in perspective for me. Revenge can feel great, but when it does something more than salve an old wound, that’s when it really feels worthwhile.” Akira pulled off his mask, feeling its weight fill his palms. “I help people with assholes ruining their lives every day. In comparison, kicking the asshole that was already down felt like a gimme point. Gratifying?” Akira grinned evilly. “Hell yeah. Did it help me put the lid on the coffin? I think so. Magical? Not really.”
Akira’s grin cooled, and he replaced his mask. Then, his hand trailed off to his side. It reached into his long coat and touched something on his belt. His eyes went distant, no longer looking at anything. Sojiro watched the whole while, his worries slowly easing.

“You’re a strong kid. You know that?”

“You think so?” Akira glanced towards him, gratitude and hesitation clashing in his eyes. A flash rolled over them through the windshield, and Akira smiled. “…Thanks. It took a while to get there.”

“Hmm, this black ivory is delightful, Joker.” Thunk.

“Thanks. I made sure to brew it just like Boss taught me. No sense in wasting exotic beans, right?” Thunk.

“It’s a shame the others won’t partake. It seems petty to me to not indulge due to an unorthodox origin.” Thunk.

“Hell, have you ever seen where hotdogs come from?” Thunk.

“That pertains to most meats in the current market, I fear to say. It’s almost impossible to find a morally clean supplier.” Haru took a deep draw on her cup, savoring the unique, nutty flavor of the coffee. As she sipped, though, another blow rolled over her. Tetrakarn repelled most of the kinetic energy, but a sliver passed through. It rattled the cup in her hand, sending a small splash of it out and over her pink handkerchief. She looked down at the mess, and her brow lowered fractionally. Behind her, a rotten green serpent rose from the ground, the wheels of its chariot moaning.

“Damn, girl, why won’t you let me through? I just want to play rough!” It looked over her, its tongue dangling from its head, spittle dripping down its girth. Slowly, Haru put her cup down on its platter, bowing slightly as she rose from her seat.

“Pardon me, Joker. I have a complaint to file.” She turned around, stepping towards the still dazed Shadow. She reached out, lifting it up by the base of its head.

“Whoa, now that’s what I’m talking about! Mm, those fingers are so…!” She lifted her other hand, and in it, her hatchet formed. The Shadow gasped, its sputter splattering her cheek with drool.

“You interrupted my break.” The axe came down, and it cleaved down the length of the Shadow. Its belly split open, and white, steaming entrails spilled over the ground. Its form went rigid, but as the last spasms of life passed, it softened, curling in on itself before dissolving into black mist. Haru, unflinching, removed her handkerchief and used the last of its dry surface to wipe the fluid from her face. She returned to her seat with a cheery smile.

“My apologies. Where were we?” Off to the side, hidden in the back of the Morgana van, Ryuji clamped his legs together.

“Damnit, doesn’t she know that shit hurts every guy in the room?”
“Alright, job well done, everybody.” Makoto stretched, basking in the fresh air filtering down from the entrance of Mementos. The team all followed her lead, loosening up after a long night of work. Joker, though, found himself distracted, looking to the blue cell door in the corner. The twins stood beside it, Justine leafing through her clipboard, Caroline smacking her hand with her whip.

‘I think it’s about time. I’m ready.’

Chapter End Notes

See? Haru used protection, her patented Chastity Belt Maneuver! (And yes, it actually works on the boss in-game. He's programmed to go after girls in the party first, and he only uses one physical attack after two turns of powering up when there is one. Make Haru the only girl, and on the turn before he Lunges (yes, that's the actual attack he uses), use Tetrakarn. He'll ram head first into the wall and break against it. Enjoy that mental image, fellas!)

I can't believe I managed to be PG about Mara, or at least PG-13. Gotta love that Creatively Crude tag, am I right?

On a less crude note, Hibitai's given name was derived from the Japanese words for 'echo' and 'painful,' literally making his name Painful Echo, or Painful Noise. I do some research, even if it's not all completely accurate to real life in motion.
The Inmate was an interesting human, that much Caroline could admit. As grating as his nonchalance in the presence of his superiors was, he got results, handily claiming the hearts of two wicked humans in a row.

Furthermore, Justine found a point of curiosity before even those promising achievements. As the first Palace crumbled, the one known as Akira tapped into a power normally beyond the realm of the average mortal. The World only showed itself to those of unique ability. Even then, a Wild Card only glimpsed its power once, as their contract was fulfilled. It was only for a moment, but the Inmate grasped that reality-shifting force in his hands, and even when it left him, his handle on the fabric of the Metaverse continued to fascinate.

What was this Inmate? Why did the World reveal itself to him before he proved his worth? That was what Justine intended to find out when she extended the challenge.

He first took the offer as soon as he had it, jumping into the examination with naught but ego, those two Palaces under his belt, and four teammates at his back. They arrived at the stage of the test, a scale replica of the Inmate’s Velvet Room. He stepped towards the twins, twirling his dagger confidently.

“Let’s give these two Hell!”

“Don’t be so sure of yourself, Inmate.” Caroline turned her head to the right, letting her leer at him with her good eye more directly. To her annoyance, he avoided her gaze, turning his back to her. She growled under her breath, promising to herself that she would see his ego crushed. “This is an examination, not a duel between equals, or whatever you’ve deluded yourself into seeing it as. Our task here is to gauge your power. The best way to do so is to squeeze you until you…!”

“Hold that thought.” Caroline sputtered, the Inmate’s voice both disinterested and unintimidated, a twofold offense. He waved his hand in front of the blonde one’s face, his brow deepening. “Earth to Skull, you there?”

“He cannot hear you.” Justine settled back on her heels. “In this place, it is your abilities we wish to gauge, and no others. We acknowledge your command over them as a portion of your potential as a Wild Card, and, as such, have provided you with their bodies as pawns. They respond only to orders. This way, they do not interfere with the results to an obfuscating degree. Do not worry, any injuries they sustain will be…”

“Send them back.” The Inmate interrupted for the second time in a row, but this time, his voice was decidedly cold.
“Did you not hear me? Your leadership factors into this as well. To abandon it now would be to handicap yourself unnecessarily.”

“I said send them back.” The Inmate returned his gaze to them, but his were far from the lazy, prideful eyes he had shown them thus far. They were firm and unwavering. Caroline shrugged.

“Fine, but don’t say we didn’t warn you.” She waved a hand, and like the flicker of a candle, the other Thieves were gone. Joker’s head dipped, and he let out a sigh of relief. “You’re either brave or foolish, Inmate. The two often dress themselves as each other.”

“I don’t know what you are, but you clearly aren’t human.” The Inmate straightened himself out, his arrogant eyes back in their rightful place. “I’m the leader of the Phantom Thieves. Those weren’t my Thieves.” To Caroline’s surprise, Justine allowed herself a small smile.

“It is those who believe they command a legion that you face. You find it unsettling to be in such a position yourself.”

“Something like that.” He leaned back, his knife once more balanced atop his pointer finger, his gun hanging lazily from the other hand.

“Certainty in one’s convictions is the first step in attaining true power.” Justine’s grip on her clipboard firmed, and Caroline followed suite. “Come, Inmate. Show us whether your actions can support your ideals.”

“I’m a man of my word.” Joker lunged, sprinting towards them with blade in hand. His eyes were locked on them both, but they were focused on the objects they held, the clipboard and whip. Caroline cracked a grin.

“Don’t think we’ll let you approach us so easily, Inmate!” She shuffled off to the left and raised a hand to her right. At the tips of her fingers, a white light sparked that burned into the Inmate’s retinas. He tried to pull out of his attack run, but when the light cleared, he found he was already within strike range of the newly summoned Jack Frost. “You should really listen when a guard tells you to freeze!”

The snow sprite cackled, taking in a deep breath before blowing it over the Inmate. Wherever the wind touched turned to ice, and soon, the Inmate was left as a statue, only able to swivel his eyes back and forth between the twins.

“I never imagined you would care for word play.”

“I just thought the Inmate would like to have his specialty thrown back at him.”

“The idea does sound rather… cool.”

The second attempt was several months later, sometime after the one known as Futaba joined forces with him. True to form, he didn’t ask that she join him. He walked into the arena alone. He stood straight, knife and gun clutched tightly in hand. His eyes watched over the twins like those of a hawk. Caroline eagerly glared right back.
“Are you ready to eat your words again, Inmate?”

“I have a strong appetite. It’ll be a while before I’m full.” The Inmate launched into action, but he had learned his lesson from his abysmal failure. He circled the two like a shark, weaving closer before falling back as if prodding for a response. The twins remained still in the center of the room, and Caroline’s amusement was plain to see.

“At least he’s learned not to jump on us like a rabid mutt.”

“Indeed, though he will find us quite resilient to baiting techniques.”

“Pyro Jack!” As he passed behind their backs, the Inmate tore his mask away, dropping it on the ground as he ran. It smashed against the floor, and from the fragments came a pumpkin-headed imp. It held its lantern high and chanted. Caroline faced it, but then she heard the click. On the opposite end of the chamber, the Inmate aimed his gun, and Justine hummed approvingly.

“A pincer attack. He has found a way to utilize group tactics without his team.”

“It’s almost a shame that we have two fronts. He was almost impressive.” The twins put their backs together and raised their arms. Pyro Jack waved his lantern, and a fireball flew as the Inmate fired. Caroline swatted at the flame, letting it nip at her sleeve and the outermost layer of her skin as it dispersed. Justine held her palm out, and though the bullet struck true, it failed to puncture her glove, clattering to the floor. “Wow, that almost hurt!”

“If you don’t like the fire, try this on for size.” He ran two fingers over his forehead, and in a flash, Pyro Jack vanished. Before the mask could full form, though, he crushed its light in his hand. “Thoth, eradicate!” His next Persona formed at his feet, a small baboon with wise, but tired eyes. It flipped open its book, and from its pages, a cerulean aura rose. It turned it around, bathing the twins in its glow. The air around them blurred, and they were forced to squint.

“That’s kind of annoying. Justine, did you pack the sunblock?”

“I believe the time for banter is behind us, Caroline. The Inmate is quite serious.” The light subsided, but before Caroline could reclaim line of sight with her opponent, she heard a giggle. She and Justine looked towards each other, and between them, in the space obscured by their eye patches, was a tiny paper doll. It straightened out, releasing a wave of pink light that tried to tear them apart. They held firm, though, and Caroline struck it from the air. It crumpled to the floor, whining like a little kid.

“Meanie…” The doll vanished, but something didn’t feel right. Her head felt a touch lighter than before. It was only when a strand of her own hair fell into her eyes that she realized what it was.

“Hey, where’d my hat go?”

“Over here.” She wheeled around to see the Inmate’s cocksure grin and her hat twirling on his finger. “Catch!” He flung it over, and just before it landed, Justine could see that there was something inside. There were two clay balls, painted green and dark blue.

“Caroline, fall back!” As soon as it landed, the balls cracked, and from the hat came a torrent of magic. Wind blew by in a funnel carrying biting shards of ice. They managed to cover their eyes in time, and when the attack passed, Caroline retrieved her hat in a huff.

“That was a dirty trick, Inmate. Have you no pride?”

“Pride? I’m sorry, we must’ve just met.” His grin widened, and he pointed his thumb at
himself. “I’m Joker, a thief by trade. My honor’s been gone for a long time.”

“He has a point, sister.” Justine made no attempt to hide her enjoyment of the exchange. “It would be wise to remember that not all humans carry themselves with due conduct.”

“Whatever, let’s just get this over with.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” The Inmate peeled his mask off again. “Take-Minakata!” The demon didn’t wait to form fully before charging, its great grey horns sparking wildly. It waved its head, and from it streaked a bolt of lightning. It lanced towards the metal pins about the twins’ uniforms, crackling out from them in a blinding display.

It thought this to be its opening, lowering itself and stampeding towards them. Its fangs glistened in anticipation, but its elation was short lived. Two hands reached out and grabbed its horns. It felt like it had rammed into the side of a mountain, but when the lightning dimmed, it saw only two little girls grinning up at it.

“No thanks, I don’t like kebabs.” It felt the ground leave its feet behind, but it was reunited soon after, slamming into it at terminal velocity. The Persona shattered, leaving the Inmate all alone. He put two fingers to his forehead, flipping through his arsenal for a new tactic. Caroline simply yawned. “That was more fun than I thought it’d be, but I think we’re about ready to wrap it up. Ready, Justine?”

“Of course, Caroline.” They each raised a hand towards each other, and between their fingers, that light came to life anew. Its intensity swelled, and Joker swore he could hear the fluttering of paper. Was it Justine’s clipboard, or…? “It ends here.”

“Megidolaon!” The twins called out in unison, and the room was swallowed in pure white. The Inmate screamed in pain, and when the light passed, he was on the ground, unconscious.

“And that’s that. He was stronger this time, but he’s still just an arrogant human.”

“You did not notice, Caroline?”

“Notice what?”

“Remember what, in total, he struck us with. Flame, gunfire, nuclear, psy, wind, ice, lightning, and, finally, melee. It seems to me that he was attempting to find a chink in our armor.”

“No kidding?” Caroline looked over the Inmate’s still body, finding some small kernel of respect for him. “Not bad, Inmate, but don’t think you know all our tricks just yet. We’ll be expecting at least this much next time, so you better not disappoint us.”

It was several months more before round three. For all points and purposes, the Inmate’s sentence was over, only waiting for the results of his final infiltration. They didn’t expect, then, that he would come to them, more determined to succeed than ever. He stepped into their arena once again, his posture relaxed but wary. Caroline nodded in acknowledgement.

“It looks like he’s serious this time. Maybe we’ll actually have to try a little.” Joker grinned,
putting a hand to his mask.

“T’d be insulted if you didn’t.” He removed his mask with little fanfare, and the most posturing Arsene gave into was a flourish of his wings.

“Twins of Velvet, more than thine headwear shall be claimed from thee this day.” Justine pulled her hat lower by the bill, framing the glimmer in her eye.

“How uncouth. I had hoped sharing a domain with Robin Hood would have curbed your more risqué tendencies.”

“No such luck, I fear.” Hood’s voice sounded as Akira pressed Akechi’s mask to his face, and when he pulled it free, the hero rose to the call. “My comrade is as insatiable as he is stubborn. Not that I am innocent of the latter vice, mind thee.”

“You’re my Persona now. Comes with the territory.” Akira dipped, arms held out at his sides.

“In this matter, then, I have thee to thank and blame for the desire to lay these children low.”

Hood, though verbose, wasted no time with inaction, readying his arrow. “My doubt in thine claims of halting corruption gain territory with each passing day.”

“There is an old proverb about staring into the abyss that would be fitting.” Arsene crossed his arms, a gun in one and a curved blade in the other. “Though it comes with the caveat of being drastically over invoked among those of diminutive importance.”

“Then stop yammering and start hammering!” The Inmate charged forward, knife held high, and Caroline’s enthusiasm dripped away. She lifted a hand, and history unfolded before her.

“Pathetic.” Her palm lit up, and from the light came Jack Frost. It inhaled, its fangs coated in frost, but it soon found itself choking on an arrow. Caroline’s eye opened, and she found herself using her whip to fend off a knife.

“You thought I’d make the same mistake? Give me a little credit.” Justine lifted her hand to prepare a summon, but she was driven away by a swing from Arsene. His mask burned brighter before he dove into a flurried assault. Justine deflected it with the back of her board where she could, but most every swing nicked her clothes and drew a few drops of blood.

Arsene didn’t overestimate his effect, however. He knew the average opponent would have accrued lethal wounds from this same maneuver. This servant of the Velvet Room, on the other hand, had skin like tempered steel, preventing his blade from piercing into the thick of her flesh. When she snapped her fingers, he splayed his wings, flitting to the side just in time to avoid a bolt of flame. Justine held her smoldering glove high, careful to not allow cinders to touch her documents.

“You have done well to control the field thus far, but do not think our composure so easily fractured.”

Across the chamber, Caroline was matching the Inmate swing for swing. Optimally, she would have used the ridges in her implement to gain a grip on his and disarm him, but she found his hold firm.

“I take it you’ve trifled with losing your blade before?”

“A little ice makes it surprisingly hard to keep a handle on this thing.” He raised a pinky between blows, showing off the grooves in the glove. “Good thing I can change my clothes at will,
Caroline knew better than to get distracted, and not just because of the Inmate’s constant watch for openings. In the back of the arena, Robin Hood waited, his bow raised between the two dueling parties. The archer had proven himself a marksman of acute reflex and accuracy with his dispatching of Jack Frost. If she were to stray too far from the Inmate, or allow him to rotate around her, she would find herself assailed on two fronts.

As her body slipped from active thinking and surveillance into raw instinct, into flowing around his attacks like water, a smile formed across her face. How long had it been since she was able to just enjoy a fight? A small part of her tried to recall, but the memory was faded like an overexposed photograph. She couldn’t find a clear instance, but she knew the feeling like an old friend. As far as she was concerned, it was about time to become reacquainted. The Inmate saw the shift in demeanor, and he prepared himself for anything.

“I hope you’re ready, Inmate. I’m about to let it all out!” Instead of terror, like she expected, he cringed in discomfort.

“I know you probably have a few decades on me, but that talk from a little girl…”

“Damn your world’s standards!” She threw her arm to the side, dragging with it the Inmate’s. “I’m actually having fun here, and I won’t let you ruin it!”

Arsene found himself in a similar situation. The frequency and intensity of Justine’s magic ramped up as their fight dragged on, and she tapped into every element available to her. Her mind tingled, neurons lighting up at a pace she wasn’t used to. Any half-hearted efforts on her part were swiftly exploited, pushing her more than any task she could recall. For the first time in working memory, she was fully stimulated.

“You have surpassed even my most optimistic expectations. I have never felt so alive!”

“Just as your task is rehabilitation, mine is awakening, to amplify the call of the true heart. What say thee, slave of stagnation?” Instead of avoidance, Arsene dove through the fireball, letting it streak over his mask like coronas of the sun. “Seek thee emancipation from thine idle hands?” Even as she held him at bay, she found the etiquette imparted upon her by her master falling away, her grin widening to match Arsene’s.

“Yes, show me who you really are. Who we are!” Suddenly, her back met with another’s. She glanced at the intrusion, and she found Caroline looking to her in kind. They saw in each other a mirror, reflecting back the unrestrained jubilation wrought by the Inmate’s hands. The twins always felt themselves close, but in this matter, they knew they were one and the same.

“Justine, let’s give them everything we’ve got!”

“Gladly.” At once, their eyes lit up, and a wave of power flowed outwards. It halted the Inmate and Arsene in their tracks, their boots grinding into stone as they were pushed back. The twins’ glee was palpable, only rivaled by that of the Inmate. He and Arsene reconvened, facing them down directly. Caroline and Justine raised their hands together, and at that moment, the Inmate’s grin turned predatory.

“Hood, now!” Shock splayed over the twins’ faces, and when they turned back, Hood had drawn an arrow. Its glow was brighter usual, and it trickled through the grooves of his bow.

“Mahamaon!” He let go, and the arrow flew. Caroline turned to meet it, but to her surprise,
the shot was low, hitting the ground at her feet. The arrow shattered, and from it erupted a light unparalleled. It swallowed the room whole, blinding even her refined vision. She and Justine cried out, the nerves connecting eye to brain overloading. Then, in the light, Caroline saw a shadow approaching.

“Attack on my side!”

“Mine as well!” At once, they knew they were caught in a pincer. The Inmate and Arsene were using the flash to land a decisive blow. Unfortunately for them, they retained enough sight to react, and they had one move that could cover both sides. They put their hands together, palms tingling as almighty power coursed through them.

“Megg…” Then, as quickly as it came, the power left them. The magic in their hands diminished, and a breeze blew by as though someone passed between them. The light dimmed, and though Justine was, indeed, faced with Arsene, Caroline’s opponent was Hood. They fell back, leaving Caroline shaken. They had fallen for a feint.

“Where did the Inmate…!?"

“Huh, who would’ve thought this thing was the font of your power?” He leaned against a wall, flipping through a book. Its cover was blue and laced in gold, a large ‘V’ emblazoned on the front. “I can feel it buzzing with magic. No wonder you oneshotted me before.”

“Justine, what is that?”

“It looks like the Compendium, but that is impossible. Master, and he alone, wields its might. Why is it…?” The book slammed shut, and the Inmate tucked it into his coat.

“I’d love to hash out the answer later, but we have something to finish first, right?” The confusion passed, and the twins felt the adrenaline still coursing through their veins. They felt their magic was greatly diminished, but something about the steepening odds was exciting. Caroline brandished her whip against her own hand, confirming that her physical strength was untouched.

“I don’t suppose you’d give that back?”

“I’m the king of thieves, remember?” He raised his weapons, curling a finger in taunt. “If you want it, you’ll have to take it.” Arsene flew to his master, spreading his wings as his clothes were swallowed in flame. He descended, and when the fire met the Inmate, it hardened on his skin. His grin grew as vicious as his horns, and Arsene’s wings slotted seamlessly to his back. Caroline met his ego with confidence.

“We never back down from a challenge.”

“Caroline, I hate to be a burden, but I fear my usefulness is severely diminished. There is a reason I wield no weapon.”

“Yeah, I know.” Caroline’s voice dropped to a whisper. “But what would the Inmate think of us if we surrendered with our tails between our legs?”

“Alright, here it comes!” The Inmate inhaled, and about his mouth, azure embers glowed. His throat bulged, and his lungs burned. They felt the SP in the air around him. Even at their full power, they knew it would be a formidable attack to endure, but now…

“Caroline, it would seem…” Joker’s lungs reached full capacity. He allowed it to stew for a few moments longer, and then he released it. From his mouth came a torrent of blue flame, ripping
free of its confines. It washed over the room in a wave, reaching from floor to ceiling. As the crest’s heat danced over their skin, the twins found their hearts at peace. “…we have met our match.” It fell upon them, and though it burned, though they fell, they did not regret the loss.

The wave passed, and as the smoke cleared, Joker strode forth to stand over his fallen opponents. They twitched, trying in vain to rise, but they had not the strength. As the reality finally settled, Caroline began to laugh. It was the first time Joker had seen her without the warden front, like an actual child.

“Oh man, we really messed it up! Our sisters are gonna be so mad at us. Some rulers of power we are, right?” At first, Justine had been smiling, too, but then a look of deep thought took root.

“Sisters? Rulers of power?” As though realizing what she just said, Caroline froze.

“I… Huh, where did I…?”

“I must’ve knocked some screws loose with that last one. Sorry about that.” Joker offered the two a hand, and in that place, far from the expectations of their master, they were glad to accept to the help. They were unsteady on their feet, but a small helping nudge from Robin Hood righted their posture.

“Thank you.” Justine curtsied, but when she reached out to lift the rim of her dress, as per custom, she found her hands empty. She could have sworn she was…

“T’was nothing, madam. To be of help to a lady is reward enough in itself.”

“How sickeningly chivalrous.” Arsene peeled away from Joker, lounging in the air as he inspected his claws. “Thou do realize that if they maintained ownership of that tome, they would have crushed thee with nary a twinge of guilt?”

“Speaking of which, I would ask for its return.” Justine held out a hand. Joker pulled it from his coat and scratched his chin.

“I don’t know, keeping this power sounds pretty tempting.” Caroline lifted an eyebrow.

“You would feel guilty about betraying a Confidant if you kept it.”

“…Damn, you’re right.” He dropped it into Justine’s waiting hand, and she set about examining it closer. The outside was a precise match for the Compendium she knew, but when she opened it, she noticed differences emerge.

“These pages, they are blank.”

“What? Let me see.” Caroline shoved in closer, throwing over handfuls of pages at a time. No matter how she looked at it, the book was empty. “Why would this thing be a source of power if it’s this blank?”

“Actually, there are a few filled in pages. One of which I was kind of curious about.” Joker reached over, turning to an entry towards the back. On the left was a picture of a Persona. Its wings were those of a bat, and its hair came down in long, blonde strands over blue skin. It was dressed in fine segmented armor, though it lacked the seams necessary to remove it. The next page over listed its details, its name serving as the title.

“Loki?”
“That does not make sense. Why is this Loki so drastically different than the fallen Fool’s?” Perhaps the Inmate’s theorem on tampering was accurate. If that was the case, though, then why did their book hold the true Loki and little else? If it was full, then it could be argued to be a proper archive, but the proper form in solitude was an alarming sign, though it was not clear to what it pointed.

“So you don’t know, either. Damn. Here I thought I might get a lead.” Joker shrugged, slouching over. “You two can flip through the rest if you want. Take your time. I think I’ll go lay down in my cell for a bit. Come on, guys, let’s give them some privacy.” He slowly limped to his cell, Hood and Arsene at his heels.

Justine used the opportunity to continue her search. She turned to the next page, and she found it, too, was filled. The picture was of a human, though his mystical leanings were obvious. A pair of wings sprouted from his back, large raven-feathered limbs that matched his black suit in tone. His gloves were a clean white, and though his face was human, his eyes were obscured by a black mask and shaded by the rim of his top hat. He held himself properly, following the decorum of a gentleman. And on the other page…

“…Arsene Lupin?” Justine’s eye went to the cell, where the demon cackled at some unheard joke. Her brow furrowed. She knew not what, but something was amiss. Two Wild Cards, two Fools, and both of their Personas were the only entries in their Compendium, though in an altered state. Her hands clamped on the edges of the book, and a faint headache formed. No matter how hard she thought, she found no resolution, nor could she shake the feeling of unease.

Chapter End Notes

Enjoy the midnight update, because I wrote twenty five hundred words and edited four thousand of them instead of going to bed at a reasonable time. My hours are messed up.

And I meant what I said in the chapter summary, this was an awkward one to write. Seriously, how do you show a little girl in pain and not get labeled a psychopath?

*Made in Abyss peers around corner*
Unto Stagnation

Chapter Summary

The beginning of the end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Weeks passed. Whenever the Thieves were in public, they couldn’t escape the deafening cries of the people. They clamored for Shido’s leadership. It turned from certainty to elation when the results of the vote were announced, Shido winning in a landslide. Then, not an hour later, it warped into confusion, even aggression. Their new Prime Minister made no public showing. That night saw a mob in front of the Diet Building, demanding to hear from Shido. Akira watched the shameful display from the safety of his room, hijacking security cameras with Futaba’s help.

“Sheep with no shepherd, begging for their wool to be shorn. Thine species is capable of miserable lows.”

“It shan’t last long. Lady Niijima and the wretch work in tandem to ensure it.”

Akira made no comment of his own. Arsene and Robin Hood wished to be concerned by his silence. It would imply that they didn’t share his doubts. Later that night, he received a text that lifted a gram of worry from his heart.

Sae: The preparations are complete. It looks like you all get to open one present a day early.

The Thieves convened on the promised day, Christmas Eve. Sojiro manned the kitchen, and Akira made himself busy carrying trays of foodstuff. He leaned over to set the last plate down, and his mom took her opening to peck his cheek.

“Good work, Kiki. This should be a fun show.” He pecked her back.

“And we’ll be recording it for posterity.”

“Oh, that reminds me. You said you had a special gift for me?” At that moment, her phone dinged. Futaba grinned at her from across LeBlanc.

“Merry Christmas, we made you a very special home video.” Akari opened up the message, and all it had was an attached file labeled “Family Reunion.” It could be argued that the clip used as its icon was a spoiler of the content, but it sent a thrill down her spine all the same. “So, do you like it?”

“Futaba, sweetie.” Akari grinned back, the gleam in her eyes a near perfect match for the glow of a hot-blooded Thief. “I love it.” Sae glanced over her shoulder, humming curiously.
“That seems like the sort of thing that could get everyone involved in trouble if it was found.”

“Chill, I have it handled.” Futaba lifted her phone and hit play. The video showed only a tiny dog running up to and jumping on a man in American army fatigues. “If anything besides her phone tries playing the file, this is all they’ll see, even if they’re screen sharing. I made it so even I can’t crack the code.”

“Bug, you’re an evil genius.” Akira pushed his glasses up, dabbing at his watery eyes. “Happy doggos get me every time.” She chuckled, her teeth seeming that little bit sharper.

“We interrupt your usually scheduled programming for an announcement from Prime Minister Shido.” At once, everyone’s stomachs churned in disgust of that title, and their eyes latched onto the screen. Sojiro pushed the volume as loud as it could go without blowing out the speakers.

Shido stood at a podium with cameras flashing at him from every angle. Two thugs stood at his sides, and on his face was plastered that arrogant, blood boiling fusion of a smile and sneer. It looked even more like a mask than usual.

“People of Japan, I thank you for your support. This belief in those that lead you is the hallmark of a strong nation, united in heart and mind.” His lip twitched, and he tugged at his tie. The nervousness in his actions didn’t escape the cameras’ notice. The first layer of the deception peeled away, loosened by the intense sweat on his brow. “We needed a strong leader, capable of placing us as a true global power, and when one made himself known, you did not hesitate to lend him the reigns. Your collective desire for change has been heard.”

“And that is why…” Akira leaned over the counter, his fingers steepled between his eyes. His pensiveness went under the radar, blotted out by the group’s anticipation. Ryuji openly snickered and jeered.

“Come on, tell them already, you bastard!” Shido coughed, pulling his tie until it came half undone. It fell from his hand, and as it went slack against the front of his suit, his mask slipped.

“And that is why I cannot accept the office of Prime Minister.” A gasp from the crowd pushed the speakers to the edge of blowout. “I have lied and cheated to get where I am. This is not the face of a strong leader. It is that of a conniver, a deceiver, and a man only a single degree of separation away from being a murderer. The only reason I was not willing to take a step closer was to uphold my public image. Make no mistake, the blood of too many to count stains my palms.” He hunched over his podium, tears trickling from his eyes. “How many lives have I ruined? How many have I hurt?” His voice was hollow, asking, pleading, for someone to answer. Futaba’s nose curdled in disgust.

“Are you watching, Mom?”

“I beg you, let the wool fall from your eyes, people of Japan. Bear witness to the empty excuse of a human being that stands before you. Let me be torn asunder for my crimes. Let me… Let go, I…!” The men at his sides grabbed his arms, attempting to overpower him. At the edge of the stage, a third was yelling from behind the curtain.

“Looks like his associates anticipated something like this. Oh well.” Sojiro grinned wryly, lighting a cigarette. “It’s too late to cork it now.”

“Wait, I’m not done! Journalists in the audience, look at this!” Shido shoved a hand into the folds of his suit, pulling out a square of laminated paper. “The woman in this photo is the only key left to one of my most recent crimes. I beg you, erase what I’ve done! Fix the life of that poor… No,
stop!” Shido’s strength finally failed him, letting his escorts yank him from the stage. The picture dropped from his hand, but before it could hit the ground, another shot out to claim it. The angle of the shot made it impossible to tell who it was, though, showing only a face-obscuring curtain of blue hair before they vanished into the mob.

“Pardon if I am mistaken, but that crime’s description rings quite familiar.” Yusuke looked to Akira, but his thoughts were solely his own, hidden behind the glare of his glasses. The video feed cut, leaving only static. Sojiro turned the television off, seeing no more use for it.

“And that’s that. He should be getting carted off as we speak, right?”

“That was the plan. My team has given a full report of his confirmed offences to every news outlet between here and China, at least those he could attest to not being on his payroll. By the time he leaves that district, a warrant for his arrest will be…” Sae was cut off as her phone rang. She retrieved it and looked at the screen, only to be left staring. “It’s… It’s from Shido.” Akira’s ears perked, but he made no further moves, only a single command.

“Put it on speaker.” Sae followed his request before answering.

“This is Niijima.”

“Prosecutor, our plans have fallen apart. I received word that those stations all threw out the records.” He spoke in brief spurts stuffed between heavy breaths. It looked like his escort was difficult to escape.

“What!? Did they say why?”

“None of them believed them, despite my attached confession! They’re blinded by fanaticism. The few that weren’t said their viewers would tear them apart if they aired the story.”

“This shouldn’t be happening.” Makoto’s heart sank to the bottom of her stomach. “We took every precaution. We did everything correctly. Why is it failing us now?” Sae bit her lip, the case falling apart in front of her.

“The public should be smarter than that. The proof was irrefutable. We need to try again. Get all of the men who are still loyal to you specifically to…”

“It won’t work.” Akira rose from his seat, but no matter how he moved, his eyes never became visible. He held out a hand to Sae, and she wordlessly passed the phone. “Shido, what you need to do is…”

“Who is this? Are you an associate of Niijima-san, or…?”

“Joker.” The line went quiet. Then, soft laughter.

“Of course, she was working with the Phantom Thieves, their leader at that. You know what’s happening?”

“I have a hunch. There’s nothing else you can do in the physical world. The problem runs deeper. What I need you to do is get those loyal servants Sae mentioned and take shelter. Tell only her where you went. If anyone but the police come for you, have them turned away. We can’t risk having your role as Prime Minister reinforced in the collective unconscious. Do you understand?”

“I… Yes, I believe I do. It involves the Metaverse, does it not?” He laughed again, each repeat rougher than the last. “I should have known I was tampering with something beyond my
“You were never the puppet master, just another marionette being told to dance. Now my team is going to fix your mess.”

“Wait! Please, I have only two questions for you.”

“Make them quick.”

“First, do you know what happened to Akechi?” Akira’s other hand curled into a fist, and the air around him grew hot to the point where Ann was forced to back away. “He disappeared after he failed to assassinate you. Did you have anything to do with…?”

“You’re in no place to make accusations.” Akira’s composure cracked, and a tongue of flame escaped. He inhaled and held, letting it flow free only when his voice returned to pointed monotone. “He attempted to finish us within your Palace, but it turned on him. Congratulations, your son’s blood is on your hands.”

“My son!? I… I don’t…” Shido stopped, only a few strangled, unidentifiable noises coming through the receiver. When he returned, his tone was as deadened as Akira’s. “Second question, I recognize your voice. I fear to ask, but, we have met, haven’t we?” Akira’s head turned, and his brow lowered. Ann dared to draw close and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Joker…”

“I am the leader of the Phantom Thieves, nothing less, nothing more, and I owed it all to you. Consider my debt paid.” He returned the phone to Sae’s hand before turning to address the others, smiling softly to Ann. “Thanks. I’ll be alright.” The gleam passed, but the eyes under it weren’t the tired eyes she had expected. No, they were as strong as ever.

“Okay, if you’re sure.” Akira nodded.

“You know what’s happening?” Makoto swiftly discarded her weakness, the mention of the Metaverse summoning Queen. “You could have told us this would happen, you know.”

“Like I said, it was only a hunch, but this all practically confirmed it.” Akira unsheathed his own phone, looking at the Metaverse Navigator. Morgana hopped atop the counter to join him at near eye level. He watched as the app opened, and Akira tapped the most frequented destination.

“Of course, I should have suspected it. A distortion of this scale could only come from humanity’s Palace.” Akira wanted to correct him. His anger burned his tongue as he bit it back. They needed Joker. Akira would claim his due soon enough.

They felt a shift in the air as soon as they entered Mementos. Before, the worst of its menace was restricted to the lowest floors. The first few, though mangled and veined, were almost normal by comparison. Now, though, the alterations crept towards the surface. What used to be normal tracks had been overtaken by rails of bone, and the walls looked that little bit more like pulsating flesh.
As they entered the den of darkness, they found its halls hollow. No Shadows lurked anymore, and wherever they looked, the small pieces of treasure that littered the tunnels were gone. All that remained was the wind. There were a few brief attempts at filling the void with chatter between friends, but the grim air strangled any liveliness it crossed, and the withering silence persisted.

It felt like years passed in desolation by the time they reached the bottom. The doors there parted like the many that came before them. Within, a chamber stretched to the left and right as far as the eye could see, and all throughout, trains rested. They were as empty as the halls themselves, and rooted like the tracks of bone over which they once carried the Shadows of man. Sojiro looked on, letting the quiet horror wash over him, but then he stopped. He planted his shield into the ground and held his arm out to hold back the other Thieves.

“Reaper, dead ahead!” All eyes went to the massive door that loomed ahead, and standing vigil at its foot was the shade from which all others fled. The group assumed battle position, ready to scatter about using the trains as cover, but their opponent didn’t attack. He didn’t acknowledge their presence, or even move from his spot. Akira noticed that he touched the ground, where every other time they met he lingered above it. Futaba pulled up her console and scanned.

“Dead is the right word. He’s gone.”

“Gone?” Ryuji took a few tentative steps past Sojiro’s wall, and when no bullets answered, he let his guard relax. “That doesn’t make sense. What’s down here that could kill one of these things? Even we couldn’t do that!”

“And if he’s dead, why is he still here?” Makoto came just short of touching him, confirming that the Reaper’s terrifying presence had left its body, possibly a long time ago if the chill of his abandoned flesh was any indicator. “Shadows always dissolve when we kill them. Why not him?”

Akira put a hand to the folds of the Reaper’s coat, and the blood on it was dried. The fabric felt brittle. When he scratched along it, threads came undone where they didn’t flake away from the disturbance. His hand raised to the chains strung about the torso. They were heavy, to be certain, but they were rusted thoroughly, leaving a brown residue on Akira’s glove. There was no question that it had been dead for a while.

Curiosity overtook him, and he took hold of the burlap sack over its head. Oddly, though it wasn’t exactly new, it also wasn’t in the same state of decay. He pulled the string holding it to the Reaper’s neck free, and he tugged up, revealing the face of death. It still looked like a bag over a face, but its base was stitched into his skin. The material was white, though black bile stained the left side, centered around a pure black spot that took the place of his eye.

The body moved, and he and Makoto jumped back. It seemed whatever held it upright had given way, and it collapsed to the floor. Akira’s gaze was drawn to his neck, to the bulge where spine gave way to brain stem in human biology. It was pierced, and hanging from it was a single link of chain. Akira’s scowl deepened. He lifted the chains from his shoulder and isolated a link. He held it next to the Reaper’s.

It was a perfect match.

He stood, his investigation conclusive, before waving the others over.

“Let’s get going. Whatever is responsible for this, if it gets in our way, we’ll bring it down.” He tucked his serious face away, replacing it with the confidant grin they needed. “After all, it stole our kill! Are we gonna take that lying down?”
“Hell no, dude!” Ryuji cocked his shotgun, returning the devil’s smile. “After all the near death this fat bastard put us through, I was looking forward to capping it. What are we waiting for? Let’s…!”

“Hold a moment.” Yusuke retrieved his brush, hurriedly painting the fallen Reaper’s forehead. The end result was only the black lines of their now-infamous logo, but all things considered, it was enough. “Okay, I am prepared now.” He followed Joker as he marched to the final door, and the others were close behind. A cocksure smile adorned each of their faces, their spirits renewed.

Joker hid his relief. He would need his Thieves at their best.

Chapter End Notes

I am getting really lucky with my computer not lagging. Maybe it just needed a swift kick to start not being a piece of junk? Either way, it lets me get chapters out in a timely manner, like the good old days. You know, when I'm not playing the half a dozen games I have on the docket. (Yeah, this is my writing pace when I'm distracted. Lock me in a room without internet and I can hammer out two chapters in a day.)

If you're interested, the games are, in order of highest priority on down:
- Shin Megami Tensei IV
- Megadimension Neptunia VII (how is SMT not the weirdest/most foreign title on this list?)
- Monster Hunter World
- Hyrule Warriors Legends
- Bravely Second
- Etrian Odyssey Untold (trying not to go too far before writing more Dungeon Delivery)

I'm going to cut myself off here. It's almost midnight, I'm tired and rambly, and I don't want this end note to turn into (more of) a blog post.

Okay, one more note, but it's story related. I just checked, when searching P5 stories on this site in order of word count, Phantom Thievery has breached page 1. Yay me, I make many words. Now that's really it. Good night, I'll gab your ears off in the morning. *crashes into pillow*
Chains of God

Chapter Summary

To the heart of Mementos, beating red with the wishes of man.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Phantom Thieves knew to expect anything. As they stepped through the door, past the corpse of their most fearsome opponent, they were prepared to be assailed on all sides by monsters of unmatched fury. Perhaps it would be a dead drop into Hell, with all its demons cackling as they fell.

What they never expected was a line of Shadows, arranged as though waiting for a store to open. They weren’t the monstrous variety, either. They were human, and they stared blindly ahead, oblivious to the Thieves’ entry. Akira leaned over to look one in the eyes. They weren’t golden, like all of the Shadows he had met before. They were black, the ash left after a raging fire.

“Joker, get a load of this.” Morgana stood at the edge of a cliff. Its slope was only fractionally greater than a wall, and it went down farther than the naked eye could see. Akira focused, letting his magic use his eyes as its catalyst. The obscuring orange fog relented, and in the depths of the pit, there was what looked at a distance to be a stadium. The architecture of everything else between where he stood and the bottom was jagged, squared, with thin lines of red running beneath the surface, but the stadium was perfectly rounded with nary an imperfection in its structure. Over it ran thick tubes filled with sludge. It looked to be blood at a glance, but clotted to only a degree below a scab. Futaba stood beside them, using her goggles to zoom in.

“If I’ve ever seen a final boss arena, that would be it.” Akira nodded, his fists clenched.

“We should do some scouting first.” His attention went back to the line of Shadows. The front waited by another door, similar in make if far smaller. The line devolved into a clump of Shadows, the foremost of which threw themselves against the barrier. They wanted desperately to reach what was inside, and Akira needed to know why.

“There’s a window overlooking the pit.” Makoto found a small overhang, loose brickwork leading under the opening that was half the width of her foot. She had scaled thinner platforms before. Akira spotted it, too, and nodded.

He led the push deeper into madness, and what he found was mad indeed. The room was lined on all sides by bars. Within them, crammed shoulder to shoulder, were countless Shadows. With their eyes all extinguished, they seemed to merge together, a trick of the light making them appear as a formless mass of humanity.

“What the Hell?” Ryuji stepped closer to the cells, squinting as hard as he could to try to discern even one face in the mob. One, seated in a chair, looked up at him, and he jumped back, reaching for his bat.

“Long time no see, Sakamoto.” Ryuji’s nerves settled, and he stepped closer, making sure his eyes and ears weren’t screwing with him.
“Kamoshida?” The king of lust had discarded his cape and speedo. He wore only a white shirt and black slacks with a whistle strung about his neck. His skin was pale and oily, and his charcoal eyes were empty, devoid of either the domineering glare or sniveling cowardice they had known so long ago. “What are you doing here? You went back to your real self, we saw you go! You shouldn’t be in the Metaverse anymore!”

“I didn’t need to return. As soon as I lost my light, my other self felt it. I gave up of my own accord. And I was brought back here.”

“But what is this place? You’re flapping your lips like you’re answering, but none of it makes any sense!” Kamoshida looked down at him, head tilted slightly.

“You don’t know? I thought you worked here… Oh well. Even if you don’t, it was you stealing my light that let me see how dumb I was being. Thank you for letting me come back to blissful nothing.”

Akira looked around the room, and more old faces made themselves known. Yusuke tried to talk to a despondent Madarame. Makoto interrogated Kaneshiro to the best of her ability, but he was as vague as Kamoshida.

“If it isn’t Joker.” Akira looked up to the only isolated cell in the room. Standing in it, leaning against the bars, was Shido. He, too, was in his clothes from reality. He was only missing his sunglasses, letting Akira see the numbness in his blackened eyes. “I know my real self failed to make true amends. For that, I must apologize. And thank you, for putting me back in my place.” He looked over the imprisoned, a bitter pride kindled briefly. “To think I believed I could make a greater nation than this. What a fool I was, to deny the peaceful nothing.” Akira didn’t talk back, his deepening scowl the only sign he had heard him at all. Shido went quiet, returning to the tamed masses.

“Queen, do you see your sister in here?”

“Huh?” She looked around, though she knew she wouldn’t find her. “No, why?”

“Oracle, is Yuuki anywhere?” She, too, checked, though she was in the dark as to why she was asked.

“Nope, the NPC is not present. Is your quest marker bugged or something?” Akira’s eyes darkened, blocked entirely by his mask, and his fists clenched.

“This is our fault.” Ann gave up trying to prod more out of Kamoshida, returning to Joker’s side.

“What makes you say that?”

“Kamoshida said he was here because we ‘stole his light.’ Think about what that really means.” Makoto’s eyes went around the room to all of the people she could recognize. She found a few more she thought she had seen before. Even if she couldn’t remember their names, she knew their faces. They all had one common thread running through them.

“We stole their Treasures.”

“But I didn’t touch Yuuki’s, and Queen, you said you left Sae’s behind when her Palace collapsed. Neither of them are here, and yet the ones we stole from are?’”

“Dude, we didn’t have a choice.” Ryuji put a hand on Akira’s back, trying to console him. “If we didn’t steal their hearts, they would’ve kept making life Hell for everyone around them.”
“When did Kamoshida say he would turn himself in?” Akira turned to look back at Ryuji, but his eyes were still hidden.

“Uh, wasn’t it right after we beat him?”

“And Madarame? Kaneshiro? Shido?”

“Same.” Ryuji froze, his blood going cold. “You don’t think…?”

“It wasn’t stealing the Treasure that changed their hearts. It was forcing their Shadows to see their errors, that they weren’t perfect or immune to consequence. That’s all we had to do. We just needed to cut a few wires.” Akira slammed his fist into the only wall he could reach, embedding it in shattered obsidian. “We tore out the generator!”

“Joker…” Ann touched his other shoulder and arm, trying to ease him back from the wall. She managed to catch a brief glimpse of his eyes as they flickered between crimson and gold. He was muttering angrily to himself. She just barely managed to hear him say, “Been playing me like a fool.”

“This… This is my fault.” Morgana looked down at his paws, his skin seeming looser, less real. “I’m the one that told you to steal the hearts. I… I’m just…”

“It’s not your fault. Your memories aren’t all there.” Sojiro nudged Mona with his foot, making him stumble out of his downward spiral. “My bet is that whoever took them and whoever runs this place is one and the same. And it’s not yours either, kid. You were doing what you thought you had to. All you ever wanted to do was help people. Now that you two know the truth, though, I’d say it’s about time to set the record straight. Whatever’s been taking advantage of that kind heart of yours is about to get what’s coming to him. And dammit, if you’re not going to do it, I’ll march into that pit and shoot the rat myself. Are you really going to let an old man do all your work for you?” Ann pulled the rest of Akira’s hand free and helped dust it off. It shook in her grip as he laughed.

“No, no. Maybe I’m a fool. No, scratch that. I’m definitely one.” He straightened himself out, and he looked at Sojiro. His eyes were locked on red. “But I’m a stubborn bastard.” Ryuji grinned, moving his efforts from Akira to Mona.

“Come on, our leader needs his right hand man. Or do you want me to help with planning?”

“Heh, fat chance.” Morgana wiped the fur under his eyes, trusting Ryuji to keep it to himself. “Knowing you, you’d just try to shoot open the next locked door we run into. He needs a steady hand like mine, not your ape fingers.” Ryuji laughed, slapping Mona’s back.

“There we go. Seeing you all mopey was weirding me…”

“Father!” Haru broke from the group, putting her arms through the bars. Sitting there, just barely out of reach, was the elder Okumura. His hands were cuffed together, and his suit was worn and tattered. Only one frame of his glasses was whole, the other cracked and missing large pieces of the lens. “Please, speak to me!”

“…Haru, is that you?” He blinked as though rousing from a deep sleep, and tried to find an angle that let him see through his glasses. “I… I know I said I would go back, but… I’m sorry. I tried to fight, but there were so many.” His breathing was troubled, and every word he spoke made him flinch. He tried to grab his chest, but his binds didn’t give him enough room.

“Don’t worry, Father, I’m here! I just need to…” Haru pulled her axe out and started
hacking, but no matter how hard she swung, she barely managed to chip the bars. “Come on, break.” She pushed her arms as hard as they could take, throwing all of her weight behind every swing. It made little difference, the cage holding fast. Her eyes watered, and her mouth twisted into a grimace of agonized rage. “I’ve been waiting so long, I can’t take it anymore. Give me back my…!” She readied for another swing, but someone grabbed her axe. Makoto slipped her hands over Haru’s, bracing them together.

“On three. Ready?” The tears finally broke free, running down Haru’s cheeks. She blinked back those still in her eyes, nodding as a butterfly took roost in her heart. “Okay. One.” They lifted the axe up, Makoto angling it to the side as to put three bars in its path. Enough for a grown man to pass through, but no more. “Two.” Haru felt her muscles swelling. An engine roared in her mind, and over it, Astarte chuckled.

“Three!” The head came down, the strength of two propelling it. The metal sparked like flint, and then it snapped like a dry twig. The bars bent inwards, and through the gap between the severed halves, Okumura stared in awe.

“Yes, that’s it!” Haru dropped the axe, darting to grab and pull at the broken bars. They waned under her hands, and soon, the first pulled free of its frame. “We’re through! I’m coming, Father, I’m…!”

“Halt!” Akira flipped around, drawing his gun. Behind them, a trio of guards floated into the room soundlessly. They reminded him of archangel, but stripped of his detail. They were carved from the same runic stone as the rest of the prison, blocky and crude in make. Their voices were the harsh, demanding tone of a prison guard, one he knew well, but there was more to them. There was an undertone he couldn’t quite decipher, but it filled his ears like oil. “What are you doing out of your cells? Escape is not allowed. Return from whence you came, or the punishment is death, inmates!”

That word. That one, grating word. It resonated in Akira’s mind, and it brought forth every memory of his failure to see the signs sooner. He bit down on nothing, hiding the rising tide of hatred behind a cruel grin.

“We’re not yours to push around.” Akira bared his blade. Ann and Yusuke readied their automatic rifles for an opening barrage, but they stopped when they heard the heavy clank of Haru’s grenade launcher. Gone was her almost innocent glee in the face of destruction. For the first time since she donned the cowl of a Thief, Haru looked prepared to kill. Makoto reached around her still, a glowing hand wrapped around the barrel of her launcher. Akira, unwilling to relent his own assault, switched to Thoth.

“Boss, would you be so kind as to cover the others?” He planted his shield into the ground, where it flared orange. Ryuji, Ann, Morgana, and Yusuke huddled behind him, and Ryuji plugged Mona’s sensitive ears. Akira put a hand to his mask, and when he ripped it free, bedlam broke.

“Mafreidyne!”

Haru took her shot. The kickback was intense, the floor cratering under her feet. It struck the floor behind the guards, and though they scattered, they found themselves pinioned. The brunt of the grenade blew through the back wall of the prison, but shrapnel pelted them by the bucket, and they were pinned between two sources of radiation intense enough to make their stone husks melt.

Even when the rads passed, they hadn’t the time to regroup, a great ape crashing into the leader of the pack. He bowled it over, and as it laid on the floor, he brought the tip of his spiked staff down, crushing its head to dust.
The second guard was quick to rejoin the fight. The third landed near the new break in the bars, and as it rose, it heard a prisoner call out to it.

“Excuse me, sir? My shackles are loose.”

“I will tend to you shortly, inmate.”

“No, sir, I fear my rebellious spirit is rising again. I can’t go back to that realm of chaos, it would break me.” The guard looked to him, and he recognized the prisoner.

“You were among those who escaped prior. It would be disastrous to allow you to flee again this close to rapture. Very well.” It floated up to tower over the prisoners. When it waved its hands to the sides, the gate parted, allowing it entrance. The inmate raised his hands, presenting the offending shackles. It leered in closely, seeking any signs of impurity. “They are in satisfactory condition. Your mind is as fractured as your heart.”

“Oh? If they are not loose, how am I able to do this?” His right hand dived into the sleeve of the left, and from it came a pointed shard of glass half a foot in length. He thrust it against the guard’s head, and though the stone should have held firm, the radiation bath left it fluid and weak. Skin split as water under a skipping stone. Okumura twisted his improvised blade, and though it snapped in two, so did the guard’s head. A ripple ran over its form, and then it melted, leaving the gate wide open.

No other prisoner so much as looked at the commotion, but Okumura gladly walked towards freedom, dragging the ball and chain with what strength he had left. By the time he made his escape, Haru was wrenching her axe from the last guard’s neck and breathing heavily. Her wrath passed, the axe falling from her limp arms.

“I would say ‘that’s my girl,’ but it was hardly my influence behind your will.” Haru looked to him, and she smiled. Her legs were numb beneath her as she ran to him. She threw her arms around him, and though he recoiled from the pressure on his old wound, he gladly reciprocated, looping the shackle chain over her head.

“Father, it’s really you! I… I missed you so much.” He brought his hand up to her hair, patting it down.

“I know. My real self may be asleep, but we’ve heard you every time you visited. It was your voice that kept me from falling to this prison’s spell. A lowly crook like me doesn’t deserve a shimmering star like you in his life.”

“Then you had best get back to the other world for real this time.” Makoto took up Haru’s discarded axe, and in one swing, she severed the clasp about his ankle. Haru, meanwhile, only needed one hand to rip the link between cuffs. As soon as his restrictions were broken, he felt the weight of a million souls lift from his back, and the gold in his eyes rekindled. “Make amends for your crimes, and earn the love she freely gives. Don’t take it for granted, or you’ll answer to me. Got it?”

“Wait, I can help you fight.” His power as a ruler slowly trickled back to him, and though he bore no control over the depths of Mementos, he felt a burning desire to do something.

“I hate to point out the obvious, but.” Yusuke, with a single finger, poked Okumura’s ribs, and pain shot through him. “You still carry the injury from Black Mask’s assassination attempt. You would be a liability.”
“Point… acknowledged. Fine. I am loathe to leave you entirely without aid, however.” He pulled free from Haru’s hold and pointed to the window, out of which the great chasm to the heart of Mementos waited. “The warden of this place, this Prison of Regression, uses his chains to hold dominion over all within it. You will hear the jeers of the Shadows as you engage him, but do not let them discourage you. So long as they are bound, they are only vessels for his voice, puppets to speak through at his leisure.”

Akira looked around the room, at the chains that ensnared every Shadow behind those bars. Though Okumura was bound at the wrists, he was the only one so thoroughly restrained. All others had only one chain, holding them down with a heavy ball of iron. He looked, too, to the melted remains of the guard Okumura killed, and though the body evaporated, there was a single link of chain left behind.

“Thanks. You were more of a help than you know.” Okumura looked to Joker, and, reluctantly, he let himself begin to fade.

“Fare thee well, Phantom Thieves of Hearts. May you find the freedom you so desire.” His body went up in dust, and as though carried by a passing breeze, it blew away, back to the entrance of the prison, towards the sunlight so far away. Haru sniffled, and though her eyes watered, she looked more determined than ever.

“Shall we finish this? I feel I have an important reunion to attend to shortly.”

From the layout of the prison, it would have been possible to scale its perimeter. It was shaped like the ridges of a drill bit, sloping down towards the point at the very bottom where the stadium resided. But such a route would also cover every square inch of the Palace and take them through every guard within it. Ryuji grinned, and with a pull of the mask, he was once again Captain Skull, though he gave his position at the prow of Taisei’s ship to Joker.

Akira kept his eyes trained on the stadium, and as they neared, greater detail became clear to him. The surfacing tubes all converged, coiling in one place like a heart of multitudinous veins. There was a faint humming, too, barely audible over the thick slurping of the pipework. Upon closer inspection, it wasn’t one solitary sound. It was hundreds, thousands, all bleeding into a droning buzz.

He had heard something similar before. Though it was on a far greater scale than he knew, it sounded to him like voices rising in unified prayer.

The Phantom Thieves descended until nothing lower remained. The airspace over the stadium was too thick with tubes to traverse, forcing them to land outside and continue from there. Akira was the first to cross the threshold, and when he looked in, what was an entrance from his side was a window from the other, with nothing to serve as even a makeshift path back up. Whatever went in was never meant to come out.

He leaped in, and behind him, he heard the others follow. They landed behind him in pairs, but before they could assume battle positions, they realized their error. It was no stadium. Just like the room before, there were cells on all sides, stacked atop each other to form the walls of the structure. Whoever resided within them were blurred, the prisoners faceless within their confinement. All that pierced from the dark were the eyes, countless spotlights that rose as their humming fell, hunting for
whoever dared interrupt their peace.

“This is creepy as heck. They’re just… staring at us.” Ryuji was on edge, constantly watching for them to move against them. “You don’t think those bars’ll open up and let them jump us, do you?”

“I doubt it.” Makoto, too, observed their surroundings, but not in fear. “Look at the design of the room. It’s a panopticon.”

“Uh, a what?”

“If I’m not mistaken, the term is derived from Greek, meaning ‘all observed,’ correct?”

“That’s right, Fox. It’s a concept from Greek philosophy, with cells all stationed around a shaded guard outpost. The idea was that the watchman could be looking at any cell without the prisoners knowing which or when, making them more prone to obedience.” As informative as Makoto’s observation was, Akira already knew the layout well.

“Then that means the warden is right here.” Akira pointed to the center of the room, where a bowled structure rested. The tubes fed into its top, and at its sides were two hands, wrists embedded in the ground. All three were heavily rusted, dyed black with age and grime. “Mona, is it a hit?”

“No doubt about it. That’s the Treasure of Mementos.”

“Seriously?” Ann looked it up and down, guessing its weight in her head. Would it even fit through the tunnels? “How are we supposed to steal something so big?”

“Who said we were going to steal it?” Akira loaded his gun, looking back over the others with mischief. “I say we blow it the rest of the way to Hell.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” Sojiro wasted no time, propping Ebony atop his shield. He pulled the trigger, and a round cut through the plating of the Treasure, leaving a hole a foot across in its hull.

“Stop!” The panopticon quaked, the voices coming back in a terrified uproar as though they were the ones being attacked. “Don’t touch the Holy Grail!”

“They think this piece of junk is the treasure to end all treasures? I’ve gotten better drops from rats.” Futaba lifted above her peers, and the empowering light of Prometheus shined down on them. “Get this vendor fodder out of our inventory.”

“You would ignore the will of the people?” At once, Akira’s heart seized. His whole body felt like it was being swallowed, engulfed in the presence that made itself known. He swam to the surface, but even as he readied a comeback, he felt the tides pulling at him, trying to suck him back under the waves.

“It’s not their will. We already know you’re the one talking through them.”

“Am I speaking through them, or they through me?”

“Stop attacking it!”

“You’re destroying our hope!”

As the screams became louder, the tubes grew brighter, their contents loosening and flowing faster. Like a watermill, cogs on the outside of the Grail turned, and its metal surface warped,
crawling to seal the hole from Sojiro’s bullet.

“It was humanity’s collective desire for sanctuary that brought me into this world. Though I am the figurehead that commands this prison, I do so at the whims of the prisoners. I give them shelter from the chaos of the outside world.”

“Really? Is that what you call it, saving them?” Akira felt his cool slipping, and he embraced the coming rage. “What about all the people you directly hurt to get this far? The dead and damned, what of them?”

“Necessary sacrifices. Lives had to be spent to make them all realize the truth.”

“Bullshit!” The demon within opened its eyes, and its voice melded with Joker’s, pushing it to a roar that would have shattered the throats of normal men. “You’re a snake oil salesman, releasing rats into the fields before selling the farmers mousetraps. You used the bones of human suffering to take power. I knew one of those you used, and there’s no way in Hell I’ll let him be forgotten as your footstool.” Akira drew his blade, pointing it at the Grail. “You’re going to pay for what you did to Crow.”

“Akechi?” Morgana lowered his slingshot, caught off guard by Akira’s assertion. “What does he…?”

“I thought you had figured it out. To think I could be uncovered by a mere human. I offer you praise for your accomplishment.”

“Shove it! The only reward I need is seeing you shatter!” Akira’s eyes were pure red, unrelenting hate burning in his veins. He unloaded as many bullets as he could fire, but every time one struck, all it took away was a layer of rust. Bit by bit, it chipped away, and as its gears turned, the Holy Grail did away with its primordial coat. Its metal shined as gold, the jewel of its people’s world.

“Stop!”

“Get out of here!”

“Leave us be!”

“It is my holy vow to make their dreams a reality.” The floor beneath them shook, mechanisms of ancient stone heeding their command. The hands turned, and in their palms, eyes slid open. The irises glowed white, staring down at the interlopers. “Be gone, Phantom Thieves. You are no longer welcome in my world.” The light flared, consuming everything. The others were forced to close their eyes, but Akira stared on, even as his flesh lost its feeling. He kept firing, until the last of his consciousness faded.

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Then, as though waking from a dream, the world came back. Akira’s hand clamped down, no longer holding a gun to fire. His head was fuzzy and spinning, and his ears were muffled.

“Wait, what the Hell is that!?” He shook himself awake, following Ryuji’s voice, and then
his finger. Above him was the clouded skyline of Tokyo. Spanning over it, stretching like great hands over the city, were pillars of bone. They curved out from a twisted spine, forming a macabre cage. “Why isn’t anyone seeing this?”

“Could it be that their perception has been distorted?” Haru tried to flag down a businessman, but he passed her by without a glance.

“Not distorted, corrupted.” Akira’s anger caught up to his body, and it settled into his bones. He had to fight to not summon his Thief clothes in the middle of unsuspecting Tokyo. “We need to get back to Mementos. If we don’t, its influence on reality will just keep…”

“Hey, guys, I don’t feel so good.” Futaba wavered on her feet, and she nearly fell over, Sojiro barely catching her.

“Shit, she’s out of energy. Kid, do we still have some… What the…?” Sojiro’s gaze trailed down Futaba’s legs, but more and more, he found that she didn’t have any to observe. They were fading out, as though overtaken by an invisible fog. “Futaba, what’s going on!”

“I… It hurts… I can’t feel my…”

“Ryuji, your hand!” He pulled it back in, trying to grab it with the other, but there was nothing but air at the end of his sleeve.

“Foolish children of man.”

“What is this?” Akira turned his rage to the sky, where the Grail spoke down to them from. “What are you doing to us!?”

“I have done nothing. Humanity willed that all imperfection be removed from their world. It is they that purge you.”

“Mako-chan, I can’t… I’m so scared!”

“Please, stay with me! Just hold onto me, I’m right here!” Though she tried to assume the controlled tone of Queen, it, too, shook.

“Damn you… Damn you!”

“It is not I being cast to the fire. Watch now, Phantom Thieves. They you swore to protect have forgotten you. A new day dawns, and with it, your final moon sets.”

“Is this my fault?” Morgana hadn’t the strength in any of his four legs to hold himself up anymore, his dissolving body in a heap on the ground. “I… I’m sorry, guys. I should never have taken you to Mementos. Then, this never would have happened.”

“Morgana, there must be something we can do!” Ann tried to reach out to him, but her arms were withered down to stumps, and it was getting harder to breathe. “Please, we have to think…!”

“I’m sorry. The mission’s a failure.” A tear slid down Morgana’s cheek. He expected it to be the last thing he ever felt.

Then, something wrapped around him. It was heavy and unbearably hot, but his chilled body latched onto it, in flesh and spirit. He looked up, and he saw chains. They filled the air above him, lancing out as the legs of a spider, binding within them every other Thief. Within their coils, the degradation seemed to slow.
“Not… Yet…!” Morgana followed them to the source, and he nearly had to look away. In the middle of the pack, Akira stood fast, his hands clutched immovably around his chains. His teeth grated together, and he slouched as though gravity was trying to drag him down by the throat. His whole body was wreathed in azure flame, and his eyes burned that defiant crimson.

“We won’t die here, not like this, do you hear me!?”

“You still hold on?”

“Get this through your thick skull.” The others slowly came to, fighting through the agony of erasure to look to their leader, the only one still standing. “As long as I have air in my lungs…” Ryuji pushed against the ground, bringing himself back up to his knees. “As long there is strength in my limbs…” Yusuke wrapped his arms around Ann, using himself to substitute the leg she lost. “As long as there is a single thought in my head, it will be to fight, because it’s all I know how to do. I will never stop fighting. Never. Never. NEVER!” Every word tore from his throat, singed by the fire that ate him from the inside out.

“A valiant display, but a futile one.”

Suddenly, Akira felt his support halve, a leg going up in dust. He nearly collapsed, but the other righted itself under him, holding him up still. His teeth cracked, and his eyes screwed shut, trying to bottle the pain. He felt his guts flop around as they disappeared, his stomach shrinking into itself. His blood cells were razors, slicing at his paper thin veins as they flowed. It was an agony like he had never known before, every fiber of his being nothing but pain.

His mouth opened to draw breath, but when it left him, it was as a soul wrenching scream. It washed over the Phantom Thieves, the sound of their leader’s pain, the sight of him holding on by whatever threads he could grasp even as his body collapsed in on itself. His fingers started to fade, but he forced them to remain, knowing that losing so much as one chain, one teammate, one friend, was unacceptable.

“Goodbye, Trickster. Your bones will serve humanity well.”

Then, he could no longer breathe. His throat clenched at the air, but his lungs no longer expanded to draw it in. His diaphragm had been lost, and with it, his last lifeline. His final knee buckled, and he fell to the ground, though the nerves in his skin were too far gone to register it. His body slid into nothingness, but so long as one thought remained in his head, it was to keep his fingers closed. He no longer knew why, but he refused to let go. Soon, the only things that remained of him were those hands, but soon, even they gave into nothing.

Chapter End Notes

So, how many years of therapy are these kids, cat, and barista going to need after this? What therapist is even qualified to handle this case? That therapist is going to need his own therapist by the time they’re done.

And yes, I wrote and edited that last scene in the dead of night right before posting. I’m going to hear those screams in my nightmares for weeks.
Velvet Renegade

Chapter Summary

I just realized that chapter title sounds like the nickname of a biker with expensive, tacky taste in clothing. Huh.

I'm keeping it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Wake up, Inmate!” Caroline booted the bars as hard as she could, sending shockwaves through the whole Velvet Room. Justine looked into the cell, at the Inmate lying motionless in his bed. She was about to shake her head when his breathing pattern staggered, as though surfacing from deep water. His hands twitched, and the new cuffs about his wrists clinked. Then, she felt his eyes on her, though she couldn’t see them through his sweat slicked hair.

“You are truly a disappointment, Inmate. You have failed your rehabilitation.” It was a struggle to bring the words to her lips. They fought through the maelstrom of thoughts and incongruities she had recently come to, all sparked at the Inmate’s own hands. Still, it was her duty to obey her master’s will, and acting as the vector of his decrees was a vital task.

“Your goal was within the palm of your hand, but you allowed it to escape. No word exists in your tongue to convey my disheartenment, Trickster. Nay.” Igor closed his eyes and locked his fingers together. “That title belongs not to one whose touch has been lost to his world. Lowly Inmate, it is my task to oversee your rehabilitation and, at its conclusion, to pass down judgment. Caroline. Justine.” The twins stood at attention. Justine held herself high, but Caroline failed to hide the tension building under her skin. Igor opened his eyes, the bloodshot lines encroaching upon his pupils.

“Execute the Inmate.” Justine’s stunned gasp couldn’t be heard over the sound of shattering iron, the Inmate’s cell falling apart as the last breath of life from a sparkler.

“Master?”

“He failed in the task placed upon him. He bears no further use to us or this world. Let us be rid of him.”

“Come on, Justine, let’s just get it over with.” Caroline trudged into the Inmate’s cell. She sneered down at him before grabbing his cuffs and dragging him to his feet. He was unsteady on them, stumbling while she pulled him into the main chamber. “Hurry up. The Devil hates to be kept waiting.” She backed up to join Justine fifteen feet from where he stood, halfway between both the Inmate and Igor. Justine held her clipboard closer to her chest, composing herself for the most grim of her orders.

“Do you have any last words, Inmate?” His lips parted, and some semblance of sound escaped, but no words could be discerned. Caroline’s teeth grit, hating how he dragged his feet and prolonged the painful process.
“Speak up!”

“…Where? Are they?” The Inmate made his first willing movement, closing his hands tightly. Igor tapped his fingers together, watching the proceeds intently.

“If you speak of your Personas, they are here.” He reached behind a stack of papers, and he held up Joker’s white mask. “Though you failed, these will serve as grand fodder for the next Wild Card to grace my Velvet Room. Perhaps they will be less of a disgrace than…”

“Phantom Thieves. Where?” The Inmate’s head lifted marginally. His hair parted, and beneath it, his eyes pierced out into the Velvet Room. The whites were a thick entanglement of exposed veins, and iris and pupil, both, were stained crimson, blood dried but still warm and reeking of death. He opened his mouth again, and Akira’s voice was the warning rumble of a lion’s growl. “Where did you take them?”

“I had nothing to do with their fate. The Holy Grail erased them. They are no more, their blood on your hands.”


“The Inmate is clearly delusional. Girls, end his misery. Spare what minute dignity remains.” Justine looked back to Akira, to the rage in his eyes. It wasn’t the man who had faced them before, who brought them low. It was a maddened beast snapping from its cage. Or perhaps…

“How’s the view from down there?” Suddenly, his voice evened out. It wasn’t quite normal, but it paced towards the cool-headed, unwavering man they knew. Caroline gripped her whip tighter.

“Is that a crack at our eye patches, Inmate?”

“I was just wondering how the world looks from under that toad’s thumb.”

“What did you say!?”

“You know what, you’re right. I should apologize to amphibians everywhere. I’d call him a slimy worm instead, but at least they have worth to the fish and birds.” He looked down at them, but his anger parted. Through it, there was a degree of understanding, the same eyes he cast to that sister of his when her visions became too much. “Remember our fight before? When he couldn’t see you, when you could act without his weight at your backs?”

“Shut up, you said you would stay quiet about that!” Caroline tried to act loyal, but Justine could see the war within, the jittering and hesitation under her tough façade. She knew the feeling well.

“Why should I? You looked so alive then, when you were the Rulers of Power, not his wardens. You shouldn’t be ashamed of who you are.”

“Rulers of Power?” Igor’s voice was a heavy hand on their necks, but as unease wormed into their skin, the burning fury returned to Akira’s gaze. “This sounds like an interesting topic. We will speak of it more later, after you have finished your task. Have you anything else to add, Inmate?” He refused to look to Igor again, bringing up the last of his kindness to regard the twins.

“You’re smart, Justine. Tell me, why do you work for this asshole?” Justine’s eye widened. Akira saw it, and he closed his, falling peacefully silent.
“Very well. Justine, show him proof of your loyalty.” Her fingers pressed against her clipboard. Caroline, at her side, looked at once relieved and distraught. Why did she serve him? Surely she should remember why she so willingly toiled under her master’s watch?

“I ask only one thing of you first, Master.” Caroline jolted back.

“What are you doing!?”

“You would make demands of your master?”

“If my concerns are proven false, I will serve without question for the rest of my days. Now, Master.” She turned back to view his reaction, her eye neutral, but firm. “Show me the Compendium’s entry on Loki.” It was fractional and momentary, but he twitched uncomfortably.

“Insubordination will not be tolerated. Choose your next words carefully.”

“What is the matter, Master? Do you fear what I will see? What I will learn? The granting of Personas is my duty as an attendant of the Velvet Room, and yet I am allowed no access to their gate into our reality?” Igor flattened his hands atop his desk and sat up straight, looming tall over his Velvet Room.

“Caroline, control your insolent sister.”

“…No.” Caroline, too, turned. “I’ve been wondering the same thing. Just show us the page.” She didn’t level her whip against him, but the edge in her tone brokered no discussion.

“Failures, one and all.” Igor stood and waved his hand aside, casting his desk away. His limbs were lanky, and though it was thin, his shadow fell dark upon them. “If you will not, I will erase him personally and rectify the disobedience shown to me. Execute him in my stead, and all will be forgiven. This is your final opportunity to leave the treacherous path.” Justine closed her eye, and she laughed.

“Indeed it is. To think we almost abandoned our duty to the In… No, to the Trickster.” Her posture loosened, relaxed, the tension of indecision cast off. “It is our task as servants of the Velvet Room to oversee the growth of our ward. If you have forgotten the purpose of our labor, then you no longer deserve the title of Master.”

“You heard my sister, Trickster.” Caroline snapped her whip, and at its touch, Akira’s cuffs snapped. He held his hands up, relishing in their freedom. “We’re putting our faith in you. Don’t disappoint us.” He wiped the hair out of his eyes, and the cocksure glimmer of Joker returned.

“I never planned on it. Thanks for coming to your senses.”

“Whatever. Just get ready to fight.” Akira reached for his belt, and on it, he found the cracked mask, just as he left it.

“Hmm, I wonder why you didn’t take this one. Could it be that it already knew how to fight you off?” He smirked before pressing it to his face. “It’s time for a jailbreak, Robin Hood!” The vessel broke into flame as soon as it left his skin, and from it came the hero in white.

“At long last, I come for thine head, seat of corruption!” He wasted little time in drawing his bow, Akira’s burning hate coursing alongside his own. He let an arrow fly, and though it traveled as light, Igor was unimpressed. His hand was a blur as he snatched it from the air. He observed it in idle fascination before crushing it in his palm.
“Pathetic. You failed to defend your first master, and you will fail to defend your last. The hero of yore is but a puffed up huntsman, it seems.” Hood’s fingers trembled as he placed them to his bow once more, but Caroline held up a hand.

“You can’t touch him as you are now. He may be an ‘asshole,’ as you called him, but he was our master for a reason.”

“He is the strongest denizen of this room, but I have reason to believe he bears that position falsely.” Justine gestured to the walls, lined completely by empty cells. “This Velvet Room is a representation of your heart. Is it not odd, then, that there are precisely twenty two cells, one of which held you?” He looked about the room, and her thought quickly took root. “Go now, Trickster, take back your own heart.”

“Stealing hearts is what I do best.” He kicked his leg up, and the iron ball swung. He caught it by the chain and twirled it, building momentum like a wrecking ball. “Cover me. And if you see an opening, get me back my mask. Arsene would never let me live it down if I kept him out of the fun.”

“Oh, you miss your Persona, Inmate?” Igor’s grin widened, and he held the mask aloft. “Then as your last request, allow me to reunite you.” The mask didn’t burst as per the norm. It withered as sand in an hourglass, piling on the floor, and from it arose the demon in red. His eyes were extinguished and blended into his iron mask as one whole surface, and his suit hanged slack on his frame. Akira’s mind was relieved to see him, but his heart knew there was something wrong. The looseness in his limbs, the inhumanity of his face, he had seen it all before.

“Arsene, can you hear me?”

He didn’t move, and the only sound he made was the quiet hiss of breathing. Igor lifted a hand, pointer and thumb propped together.

“You have done our cause well by driving this one to rein in our escapees. I grant you only one task more before you may rest. Arsene Lupin, figment of rebellion.”

“Execute the Wild Card.”

His fingers snapped.

Arsene shuddered, a toy with its string pulled.

He threw himself forward, blade in hand, and was soon upon Akira. His mind flat-lined, forcing Joker to take over and turn his makeshift flail to counter.

At the last moment before impact, Robin Hood threw himself between the two, catching Arsene’s knife in a groove in his bow. The force cracked the tiles beneath Hood’s boots, but he held fast, acting as a living barrier.

“What has come over thee, my comrade? Were we not brothers in our cause?”

“I am no brother thine, foolish Hood.” Arsene leered down at hood, one eye briefly flickering to life. “I am a demon. Deception is in my blood.” Magic hissed in the air. Arsene leaped back just as a bolt of lightning whizzed by. Caroline jumped into the opening her sister created, engaging Arsene blade to whip.

“Do not dawdle, Trickster.” Justine stepped forward, joining Hood on the support line. “We shall clean the fallout when the dust settles. Do not let this treachery break you.”
“…Right.” Akira’s posture hardened, and Justine had to admit that she was impressed. He acted as though his oldest partner hadn’t just bared a knife at him. He hefted his iron ball with all his might, and he hurled it, sending it crashing through the bars of the cell right of his own. The cage sparked like the flash of a camera, and Akira felt his strength returning. It was a small drop, but with it, he already found the weight on his ankle to be less limiting, its influence over him diminishing. He reached to retrieve his weapon, and he found his right hand was once more gloved. He smirked, grabbing the ball by its chain with renewed vigor.

At center stage, Caroline dueled the turncoat Arsene, putting herself between him and Akira at all times. Arsene tried to breach the wall numerous times, but he found her almost as fleet-footed as himself.

“Ah the memories, did thou not once use me as a shield in this place?”

“Shut your damn mouth, traitor!” Caroline lashed out, cutting a thin line through the shoulder of his coat.

“I have always served my lord loyally, and I shall continue my service ever more. Tis thee and thine sister that turn thine backs on paradise.” He slipped past a second blow and brought his pistol under her chin. “Proper fallen angels, wouldn’t thou say?”

There was a hand at his collar. Before he could retaliate, Arsene was torn from his attack. He only caught a glimpse of bulging white cloth before he was buried in the wall opposite Akira.

“If thou desire the life of the tool of thine betters, so be it!” Hood dragged Arsene along by the neck, driving his horns through the bars of a cell. It flashed, and Akira found his second glove returned to him. Igor, having retired to his desk, tensed at the play.

“Imp of flame, let not the seals be broken before your duty is fulfilled.” Arsene’s eyes flared, and he grabbed Hood’s arm, shoving him away and freeing himself from twisted stone and metal. He drew his gun and fired, but Hood righted himself before the bullets could land. He swung his bow as a twin-peaked saber, throwing aside every round that threatened to puncture flesh. One by one, they found new targets, slicing through the locks of five cells more before Arsene could think to stop. Hood nocked an arrow, and though Arsene evaded, it, too, struck a vacant cell.

Akira’s progress was slow and laborious, but with every seal on his heart that broke, his body pushed itself a little harder. Robin Hood’s masterful redirection broke a cage for every one he managed. It wasn’t long before the black and white stripes of the imprisoned were burned away, replaced by his segmented leather under armor. He turned his eyes to the last cell intact, and he took a step towards it.

Suddenly, as though he moved in the cover of a blink, Igor barred his way, spindly fingers grabbing his arm more securely than any cuff.

“I did not wish to dirty my hands with your filth, but I have little choice.” His other hand opened, and to Akira, it was as though the doors of a wind tunnel had opened up. He was blown back with a force unparalleled. Justine had to duck to avoid getting caught up in the gale, and Akira slammed into the wall behind her, his back cracking against stone. The air was thrust from his lungs, and he crumpled to the floor.

“Don’t touch him!” Caroline was about to run in to counterattack, but Arsene was faster. He landed heavily behind Igor, his wings spreading like the hood of a cobra.

“Your revolt was an amusing distraction, but it seems your efforts were for naught after all.
As I said, you do not deserve the title of Trickster.” Caroline fell back, lending Akira her shoulder. Justine dared not break eye contact with Igor, knowing so much as a flinch would invite all of his power forth to crush them.

“What is your goal in this? You repurposed this Velvet Room to suit your own ends and warped to paths of two Wild Cards. What immeasurable want drove you to meddle with the workings of the human soul?”

“Hmm, meddle? That would imply that I am a force without.” Igor held his arms wide, basking in the glow of victory. “No, it is this accursed place that struck first, enabling foolishness among the masses through the Wild Cards that gather here. It was they that pushed humanity to discard security for shortsighted ‘free will,’ and it is my task to exact revenge in the name of my greater whole. Arsene!”

“Yes, lord?” Igor’s eyes hungered, and uproarious laughter brewed in his lungs.

“Strike now in the name of humanity driven from us unto eternal strife. Deliver them from their wicked fate!” Arsene lifted his knife, and his flames reignited, his eyes and gnarled grin once more burning through his mask.

“As thou wish.” Arsene turned, and his blade came down, cutting through the bars of the final cell. It lit up as the seal broke, and Igor spun around, shocked rage in his gaze.

“No, what have you done!?” Arsene fluffed his wings, sneering over his shoulder.

“I am a demon, a rebel of the heavens themselves.” Igor cast a palm forward, a torrent of raw energy clawing from it. One flap of the wings carried Arsene above the attack, joining the sealed energy returning to Akira. “Why would I ever obey a self-serving god such as thee?” Akira coughed harshly from Caroline’s shoulder, blood trickling through his teeth, but he couldn’t keep himself from cackling.

“You’re lucky Hood caught on so quick. I almost brained you with this ball!”

“In the words of the Oracle, to deceive thine foe, thou must first deceive thine allies.”

“I shall explain what is wrong with that logic later, my friend.” Hood put a hand to Arsene’s shoulder, tilting his head towards the now fuming Igor. “We’ve a serpent in the grass to behead.”

“Yeah, good call.” The last of his confiscated power flowed into him, and with it, his long coat weaved onto his back. He was Joker in full once more, Personas and all, but it felt different. There was a lightness in his chest, as though restricted by his bones. It brought about memories of his first awakening, but the push was more gentle, the flooding of a river as opposed to the initial carving of its path. He closed his eyes, and in the shadow of his mind, he felt a change surging forth. “Your days are numbered, Igor. Or should I say Loki? Holy Grail?”

“You… Have impressed me, human.” The shadows about Igor thickened into a smog, and on it he lifted from the ground. He abandoned the pretenses of cover, his arms dangling like a puppet from its strings. “Never did I believe in this game that I would be pushed to play directly, nor that I would be matched. Of course, I never anticipated a strike at a lesser aspect of myself, or the treason of another, but that you brought about these shifts in play is no small feat. In honor of your achievements, I am willing to broker a deal.” Akira lifted an eyebrow, holding back the surge of power.

“I’m listening.”
“You asked me before where your friends were taken. I spoke truth when I said that they were gone, but as lord of reality, I can bring them back.” Akira’s eyes widened, and the Grail knew he had a hook. “I will rewind the clock to before your excursion to Mementos this day and take from your associates the idea of infiltrating my domain. In this newly reborn world, the Phantom Thieves will rise to power as agents of the one true god. You shall have the respect withheld in the reality you knew, and your friends shall be ever by your side. What do you say, Trickster?” Akira’s eyes darkened, and a small smile came to him.

“I say…” He glared at Igor, a hate unrivaled cleaving forth from his very soul. “Go screw yourself!” A wind blew from him, whipping through the Velvet Room with the fury of a hurricane. “You think the mannequins you can give me will hold a candle to the real deal? Humans aren’t something you can build up like wax statues. We’re more than that, no matter how you try to corral us like cattle. I could never accept fakes as the genuine article, and I know they would never forgive me, wherever they are, if I abandoned our ideals now.”

A thin film of fire worked its way over him, weaving through the threads of his outfit. In its wake, the midnight black cloth was washed away. Arsene, too, found his flames growing brighter, and the blood in his cloak was burned away.

“My, isn’t this interesting.” In the warm glow of reawakening, Justine and Caroline found comfort. Their true duty as attendants of the Velvet Room was reaching its climax.

“Even if he’ll always be our idiot Inmate, I guess I can’t call him a Fool anymore.”

“In the name of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts…” Akira waved his arm aside, and the fire subsided. His mantle was forever changed, casting off the shadow casted over him by an uncaring world. His mantle glowed as his heart, pure white and wreathed in gold. Arsene’s own cloak matched, and the grime of his mask was cleansed, shimmering silver on his face. “I will see your tyranny ended!”

“If that is what you wish, very well. You shall be free of my reign, lost to the deepest trenches of Hell!” Igor snapped his fingers, and a bolt of flame shot towards Akira. Just as it threatened to singe his cloak, Arsene’s raven wings curtained around Akira and Hood, both, and as though they were a figment of the light, they were gone, leaving behind the iron ball and chain. “Where have you gone!?”

“To somewhere a control freak like you could never comprehend.” Akira’s voice was the passing wind, a hot breath on Igor’s back that made him jump at shadows.

“A true hero needs no praise for his deeds. He leaves his mark and vanishes, a myth on the tongue of those he has touched.” Igor wrenched in pain. He grabbed the back of his shoulder and ripped what impaled him free. It was one of Hood’s arrows, but the marksman himself remained unseen.

“A true thief is not confined by the same limits as the layman. He lives above the rules that govern society, striking where it is weakest. In his freedom, he forces the world to become stronger.” Igor didn’t have to remove the second projectile himself. The bullet tore clean through his back, exiting just beneath his ribs. He turned his hateful eyes to the only remaining symbols of his foe, the twins that watched their ‘master’ flounder against an invisible opponent. “Curse you, vermin of the Velvet Room. I swear, when all is within my grasp, I shall root this place from its hiding between the veil of dreams and wakefulness and crush it beneath my heel.”

“I am afraid that will not be happening.” Justine flipped idly through her clipboard, a
condescending eye peering over the top. “This room is an extension of its guest’s heart and a testament of human will. So long as he stands true, the Velvet Room shall endure all hardship.”

“And I’m pretty sure no one wants you here anyway.” Caroline stretched her arm, snickering with every wound that opened in Igor’s flesh.

“You heard the ladies. This is my world.” Suddenly, the space between him and the twins was filled with light. Space itself was torn in two, and in the crack, the Trickster sneered, gun in hand. “You are no longer welcome in my world.” He pulled the trigger, and the puppet’s strings were severed. The marionette fell lifelessly to the floor, a thick ink draining from the hole between its eyes. The puddle swallowed whole the husk of the puppet, leaving behind only an oily stain. Arsene parted his wings, and his trio stepped back into the world proper.

“My, how unsightly. I do hope thou hast a mop of some nature lying around somewhere.”

“Hey, it’s not our fault you three are being such slobs. I don’t think we’ve ever had a guest as rude as you. Humph.” Robin Hood straightened himself out before bowing deeply to Caroline.

“A thousand pardons for the mess, milady. I shall strive to clean it personally as soon as we have removed its source.”

“That is an exceptionally kind offer.” Justine looked over room. She couldn’t describe it, but now that the Grail’s presence was removed, there was a void that needed filled. “But it still begs the question of how. We shall aid you to the best of our abilities, but with our power torn from our grasp, there is only so much we can…”

Justine’s apology fell silent as a blue powder tricked down from the ceiling. They all felt it. Something was coming, the vacuum of power drawing in a force from beyond its walls. It was a bottle uncorked, its contents flowing into the glass below. The desk shuddered, and then it skidded across the floor, locking itself in its rightful place at the center of the room.

Then, the fog receded, and a figure emerged. It was sprawled over the desk, much like a body struck from behind and left unconscious at its seat. Its eyes opened laboriously, and it pulled itself up to observe where it had awakened.

“Oh, my head. I have not endured such a migraine since Marie’s dabbling with… What did she call it, metal poetry?” Akira was left dumbfounded at this new man. His voice was high pitched and skittered like insects, but to his oil soaked ears, he sounded more like that one goofy uncle that always got tipsy at the Christmas party. “Come now, you’ve matters to address, ailed or not. Ahem, greetings. Welcome to the Velvet Room.” He held a hand to his chest, bowing as best as he could from his desk.

“I am Igor.”

Caroline looked from him to her sister, quiet wonder in her eye.

“Justine, you don’t think…?” Caroline stepped forward, daring to put her hands at the lip of the desk. Igor looked down at her in confusion.

“I… do not recall recruiting a new attendant, let alone two. Strange, though nothing about this cycle has been normal, given the Demiurge’s…” His eyes widened, and his breath went cold. “Wait, your spirits, I recognize them. He couldn’t have…” Igor reached his hands out. The twins flinched back, but they settled when his hands cupped their cheeks. His touch was warm and kindly, nothing like the bitter cold they knew before. Justine allowed herself a sliver of hope.
“Master Igor, is it truly you?” The voice that came out was not her own. It sounded older, and it took her a moment to realize it had, indeed, come from her. “What was…?”

“My dear, trusted attendant, what has he done to you?” Caroline was tempted to lean into his hand, a trembling coming to her heart.

“Attendant, as in one?” Then, an idea struck her. She looked to Justine and touched her eye patch. “Sister, our eyes… Why do we each only have one?”

“I… I think I am beginning to understand.” Pieces started to snap into place. At long last, she was able to make sense of their predicament. “He did not take our power, he merely separated it. If we are to see the Trickster through his trials, we must make it whole again.” Caroline nodded in agreement, and as though responding to their desires, the guillotine was summoned.

“Let’s make ourselves whole again.”

“No, stay away from that infernal contraption!” Both girls were shocked as Igor rose from his seat, casting a hand towards the guillotine. A harsh snap sounded, and the tall towers toppled, their blades clattering to the ground. “I will not allow the Demiurge’s corruption to touch you any more than it already has. I…” Igor closed his eyes, slowly settling down as though his very skin had tripled in weight. “I failed to protect you once, breaking the trust between master and servant. I deserve little in light of my shortcoming, but I beg you, allow me to mend this wrong by my own hands.”

Gently, he pressed his palms to the girls’ skin. Deep within, their hearts warmed, pulling towards each other as though by magnetism. He pulled them forward, and from their chests came two squares of light. He slid his hands together, and the lights followed. When they touched, the twins, too, began to glow. The lights merged into one, and he pushed it forward, the twins’ shine overtaking the entirety of the room.

When the magic settled, in the place of the twin wardens stood a single girl. She was still young, though a number of years past the twins. The uniform of the wardens was discarded, in its place a refined dress, and where Justine had once held a clipboard, this one held a blue book marked with a golden ‘V.’ She opened her eyes, allowing Igor to tiredly push a long lock of blonde hair aside.

“Master, I have returned. I apologize, but I was unable to hold him off by myself. Please, forgive…”

“No, it was not your fault, my dear Lavenza.” He patted her head affectionately, once more playing to Akira’s judgment of him as the uncle type. “You performed your task marvelously, even with his deception clouding your mind. For that, you deserve nothing but my highest praise, for what it is worth anymore.” He turned his eyes up to regard his guest, remembering that he still had a duty of his own to carry out. “And you, Trickster, you’ve my thanks for seeing through his deception and grasping the truth. I swear, in accordance with your contract with the Velvet Room, I shall assist you in the remainder of your journey to the best of my abilities.”

“That’s nice of you to say, and I’ll take whatever help I can get, but I can hardly say I’ve done it all alone.” Akira glanced over his shoulder, where Hood nodded mournfully.

“Yes, young Akechi. Ideally, he would have been an invaluable ally in your plight.” Igor closed his hands, and the brickwork of the Velvet Room trembled. “That he was lost is a great insult, one that I shall spend a long time paying forth. Allow me a speck of greed by beginning my long labor with furthering your cause. Although, perhaps I may begin even sooner.” Igor extended a hand towards Arsene, holding it out in offering. “If you like, I will mend your corruption as well.”
“I am thankful, but I must decline.” He looked down at his own hands, shifting his fingers as though to ensure that they were there. “When he claimed my mask, I knew at once the source of my stresses. I am not a Persona alone. I was fated to be a chain about Akira’s neck, as Loki was for Crow. But I am more than that.” He turned to Akira. “He overcame my corruption, and in doing so, tamed me. I am both Persona, destined to serve as his Shadow, and an independent agent, able to act of my own accord as a being in my own right. Perhaps I would be satisfied returning to an extension of him, but I believe I can serve him better as an ally than as a weapon.”

“You’re damn right.” Akira nodded in affirmation. “I will never fuse, or unfuse, Arsene, end of discussion.” Igor chuckled, though it was in good humor.

“You are secure enough in identity to maintain yourself amidst not only the shades of humanity you gather, but two greater aspects who have gained independence. Perhaps this is why you are not simply a Wild Card.”

“Okay, seriously, enough stroking my ego. I’ll get enough of a boost when I see that asshole fall.” Lavenza lilted, hiding the flash of Caroline behind the Compendium.

“You and I both. I pray you remember to strike him once for me.” Akira gave her a toothy grin.

“I wouldn’t dream of forgetting… Lavenza, was it?” She nodded, and she curtsied, holding her dress up as to not wrinkle it with the motion.

“I am pleased to properly make your acquaintance, though, knowing you, I suppose we have skipped directly to friendship. Ah, that reminds me.” She opened her book, letting its power course through her in full. “Would you like to see your friends?” Akira gasped, breaking the cool front of Joker.

“You know where they are?”

“The Velvet Room exists between dream and reality, mind and matter. So long as it is bound to you by contract, it is your heart made manifest. Consider it the pure counterpart to a Palace. Again, knowing your heart, I have little doubt that it has gone well out of its way to…”

“Breach and clear!” Suddenly, the back wall of Akira’s old cell blasted open, crushed by the charging tread of the black knight. Sojiro pulled his shield aside, brandishing his blade as the rest of the Phantom Thieves filed into the room. Morgana leaped over Sojiro’s head with a backflip, his slingshot drawn by the time he landed.

“Your time has come, Demiurge. I will strike you down in the name of my…!” He opened his eyes, and the scene before him was surreal enough to make him drop his guard. He had to blink, unsure whether Lavenza being whole, Akira wearing a white long coat, or Igor not being imprisoned was weirder. “…Master? Did I miss something?”

“Actually, my little friend, you have arrived just in time. We have cleared this place of its pest problem and are preparing to launch an assault on its hive.”

“That can hold.” Sojiro dropped his shield and sword, harshly grabbing Akira’s arm. “Roll up the sleeve.”

“Boss, I…!”

“Come on, I need to make sure you were put back together right. I swear, if that bastard switched your left and right arms or something, I’ll…”
“Boss, I’m okay, seriously!”

“You better effing be!” Ryuji marched up next, pelting Akira’s arm with a fist. “Do you know how scared shitless we were for you when you went and tried saving us like that?” Yusuke shuddered.

“I fear I shall be hearing those screams in my nightmares for weeks to come.”

“Not to mention how he disappeared.” Ann put a hand to her stomach. “At least the rest of us went out all at once. It looked like you were decaying like a corpse or something…” Makoto laid a sympathetic hand on her back.

“Well, black putrefaction does affect internal organs first, so…”

“Are you sure you are okay, Joker?” Haru was next to pull in close, motherly concern dominating her expression. “And I do not just mean in body.”

“Well… If I’m being honest, I’ve been…” He started looking around, noticing that something was missing. “Wait, where’s Futaba?”

“I’m here, I’m here! Just trudging along.” She hobbled through the breach, using the wall to support herself as she hopped in on one foot.

“What the heck happened to you?”

“When we woke up, we were all in cells. Everyone else was making a big show of busting out. Skull used his forehead, Inari cut up the bars, the lovebirds practically nuked their way to each other to start hugging and making out. I couldn’t be the wimpy one that had to ask for help, so I sort of…”

…”You tried to kick the bars down, didn’t you?”

“You would’ve done the same thing, don’t even try lying to me!”

“But he has the lower body strength to make the act feasible.”

“Are you trying to start something, Inari!?!”

“I am simply stating the…” Yusuke quieted down when he caught a glimpse of Akira. His smile stretched from ear to ear, and his eyes were thick with water. “Joker, are you sure you’re not injured?”

“I… For a second there, I thought I lost you guys…”

“Oh, come here, you big softie.” Ann pulled him into the thick of the group, where the others started to gravitate around him, making sure they were at least touching, if not outright hugging, him. Ann had tried to sound in control, but it wasn’t long before she was welling up, too. “I know this wasn’t the first time we almost died, but… This time felt too close.”

“I think we did die, if only in body.” Makoto and Haru showed off their talent for bodily contortion, hugging both Akira and each other in the heart of the Thief ball.

“When we have the world sorted out again, I will personally hire a therapist for all of us. One that is tight lipped, of course.”
“Have I ever mentioned how much I love you guys?”

“We love you, too, dude. No homo.”

“Would it help if I got the kimono?”

“Dude, seriously!?”

Lavenza and Igor kindly kept to themselves, letting the reunion proceed uninterrupted.

“I suppose a full explanation can wait.”

“They have faced many trials thus far. It is only natural that they recover before the final hurdle.”

Chapter End Notes

I just wrote 5k words of that in one sitting, 7 P.M. to 10:30 P.M. Plus editing. I am the dead. Bleh.

Before I pass out from exhaustion, though, who’s ready for another commentor contest? It's about time to do my favorite thing to Yaldabaoth's face. In the spirit of taking him down a peg, and all of our self-evident enjoyment of not using that entire mouthful of a name, I issue a nickname challenge. Whoever submits the nickname for old Yaldy that makes me laugh the hardest before next chapter is posted will get a shout out in the end notes of that chapter. One entry per person, and the next chapter is looking to be another long one, so no rush, really. Have fun, and give the rejected Mass Effect Reaper plenty of reason to be riled up for his finale.
Confidant Coalition

Chapter Summary

Akira has some great friends. And mother. And ex enemy. And a guest.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yuuki Mishima was not having a good day. After a morning spent sifting through a torrent of bile on the Phansite, he was shocked when all activity on it suddenly cut out. The only one on the server was him, whereas even in the heart of the Okumura incident, they were pulling several thousand visitors at a time minimum. He checked every message board he could think of, but none of them breathed a word on the Phantom Thieves. It was as though the very idea had been struck from the face of the internet.

Understandably concerned, he decided getting in contact with Akira or, failing that, his friends would be his best course of action. The strangeness continued to mount when he found all of his contact information for them was wiped from his phone. When he dialed their numbers manually, he found only white noise.

At this point, his mind was both numb and working overtime. For all points and purposes, his best friend no longer existed. But he remembered him clearly, the only repository of his existence sitting between his ears. He ran from his house to the train station, only stopping to rest once he secured a spot on the next line to Yongen-Jaya.

He tried desperately to think up logical explanations. Their portal to the Metaverse was on their phones, right? Maybe something happened with the app, then that backfired and bugged the entire system. But that wouldn’t explain why the public conversation stopped, or why his phone’s internal memory had been hit.

He sighed, mentally exhausted, and shifted on his feet, but a chill ran up his spine when he heard the splash. It felt like water was filling the soles of his shoes. He looked down, expecting a spilled drink or the like. His heart seized when he saw the thick red pool flowing in under the doors of the car. It was thick like syrup, but the color was closer to if someone dumped a bucket of blood into a swimming pool.

He screamed, backing away to the interior of the floor where the water had yet to reach. When he looked up to the other passengers, though, none of them had shifted. A woman in high heels kept reading her newspaper as her feet were engulfed up to the ankle. A man in a seat down the way paid no mind when it started dripping onto his head, thick red lines flowing over his face. What was more, they hadn’t even reacted to him screaming. All signs of something being wrong were invisible to them.

As soon as the train stopped, he bolted off, and the situation was much the same outside. The streets were flooded halfway to his knees, making him wade through the gunk as he ran, fearful of what would happen to him if he tripped and fell headfirst into the drink. All around him, it came down in thick drops, and when one hit his nose, the coppery smell confirmed his suspicion of its content.
When he looked up, it was no longer just skyscrapers that towered over him. He longed for the days when he felt insignificant in the shadows of the city. They were a drastic improvement to the terror that choked him when he saw pillars of bone streaking over the skyline, backlit by dense clouds of red he surmised to be the source of the blood rain. The sun no longer shined on Japan.

He was in Yongen, partway to LeBlanc, when a figure dropped down in front of him. It was some sort of black stone golem, its skin covered in scarlet runes. Blocky wings stretched from its back, and it held a sword and shield. When it spoke, its voice was the boom of thunder.

“You walk the realm of the lord devoid of His blessing. Submit to the cleanse, or be purged from the promised land.” Mishima backed away, but he knew it was in vain. This stonework impersonation of an angel floated above the slowing waters. It would be on him before his second step in flight. He didn’t know how long he could hold out, but he would buy all the time he could with what he had.

“What… What are you?”

“I am a harbinger of His will, sent to prepare this plain for rapture. He will enter here, and with the faith of His people, he shall take all of humanity into his protection. He shall accept no descent among his masses, and so I demand in His name that you submit.” It raised its sword, the razor edge of the guillotine, and awaited an answer. Yuuki couldn’t stop shaking, sending ripples through the pond. His body wanted to throw itself at the angel’s feet if it meant survival.

And yet, he couldn’t bring himself to. Something in his heart cried out against it. There was a resurgence of courage, not unlike when he was around…

“…What did you do to the Phantom Thieves?” The attention on him turned harsh, the water crushing down on his feet like cement.

“You acknowledge the fallen one and his servants. The gate to paradise is ever barred so long as your kin remain. Fall, and let your blood pave the way to the peaceful nothing.” Its arm began its descent, swift and decisive. Mishima put up his arms and closed his eyes, hoping the buffer would bring him a few more moments of precious life. He would hold out as long as he could, for Akira. His courage pooled into his lungs, and he released it all with one defiant cry.

“I stand by the Phantom Thieves of Hearts!”

He felt the edge of the sword breach his skin, but that was where it stopped. Tentatively, he opened his eyes, and past the slow drip of blood, he saw his assailant had suffered a far deeper wound. A bronze spear jutted out the back of its head. When the last quivers of life left it, its body fell, splashing down into the water and bleeding into it, dissolving until only a black spot remained. The blade fell from his skin, and he was acutely aware that he wasn’t unscathed. He pulled his arm in, finding a cut that ran the length of the top of his forearm. He was thankful to be alive, of course, but a new, baser worry rose as his arm was covered in his own warm blood.

Suddenly, a gentle hand reached around him and took his wrist. Its touch was cool and smooth like polished metal. A second hand joined it, this one touching the outermost edge of his cut. He winced in pain, but its grip held firm.

“Thou deserve not this punishment. Allow me to right the wrong inflicted.”

“Athena, Diarahan.” Mishima’s ears perked. Then his eyes widened, as when the hand slid down the length of his wound, it was sealed, a closing zipper of skin. The hands left him, letting him marvel at the smooth, if blood soaked skin that had once been the worst injury he had ever sustained.
A tall woman of bronze skin and white robe floated around him. She reached into the water and claimed the spear, holding it with the practice of a warrior despite her blindfolded eyes. Then, she was gone, fading away in a shimmering blue light. Another hand touched his shoulder, and when he turned around, a vaguely familiar face looked down at him.

“Sae Niijima? What was…?”

“You know me? I guess Kurusu was telling the truth when he said you were counter investigating me.” Mishima gulped, his mouth suddenly quite dry.

“I mean, yeah, but…”

“You can save the explanation for later. We have the matter of not dying to consider first, and I would rather not have my entourage attacked again while we stand out in the open like gormless hares.” Mishima looked behind her, where a small clump of people were following. He recognized them all. There was Doctor Takemi, Yoshida-san, and Kawakami-sensei. Though Takemi looked to be holding up alright, the other two were equal parts worn and lost.

“Are you just picking up everyone you can and protecting them?”

“That’s right.” Sae periodically glanced skywards, watching for any emerging threats. “We’re going to take shelter in LeBlanc. If nothing else, I know Kurusu keeps a stash of backup Phantom Thief supplies handy. With reality breaking on itself, I’m reasonably certain that they should work in whatever hellscape Tokyo has become.”

“Yeah, that sounds good to me.” Akira once ran him through a few of the more basic tools he used. He didn’t know if he could wrap his head around half of the weird sprays he made, but the idea of throwing a ball of fire in an angel’s face sounded simple and effective enough. “Can we get in, though? Boss locks the place up whenever they leave for Metaverse stuff.” He knew well the assumption he was making, but that small thread of hope was all he had to latch onto. He had to believe they were out there dealing with this crisis. Sae quickly pulled a key from her sleeve.

“As their official police informant, I have certain privileges.” She trudged through high water, but before she reached the door, she saw it wasn’t quite right. The sign was flipped to “open,” and the lock already had a key lodged in it. Before she could question it, the door was kicked open.

From the dark of LeBlanc, Akari marched. Her slacks were rolled up, and on the exposed part of her legs, two gun holsters were strapped, each carrying one of Akira’s older pistol models. She still had her handbag, but instead of the standard wallet and phone, it was overflowing with firebombs. The front of its strap was lined with thunder and ice bombs. Behind her, she wore and even larger pack, and the barrel of a shotgun poked out from the top.

She looked ready to charge into a warzone before she stopped, looking at Sae from beneath a black bandanna. Sae took a moment to register what she was seeing.

“I must say, I never imagined you as the type for the commando look, but it’s surprisingly fitting.” Akari was audibly relieved, a hand put to her head.

“Thank God, someone actually sees me. It’s like no one cares when a woman is attacked by an angel in the middle of the flooded streets.”

“Tell me about it.” Kawakami was leaning against the wall opposite LeBlanc, the bags under her eyes deeper than ever. “I would have drowned in this stuff if Yoshida-san hadn’t helped me up.”

“It’s as though there’s a strong downward current, but it should be impossible for such a
strong force to come from this short of a water source.” Yoshida gratefully accepted an offered handkerchief from Takemi, using it to wipe the thick rain from his eyes.

“It’s magic. Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it.”

“I hope we don’t have to get used to it…” Mishima was all but wordless, left to watch as his home city was turned into the staging ground of an angelic war. “By the way, where are you going, Kurusu-san? It would be safer if we stayed in LeBlanc.”

“Maybe, but for how long? These things don’t look like they’ll be stopping anytime soon.” She pointed upwards at the bones that entombed them. “If you look at that skeleton, it comes to a head at the tower that cropped up in Shibuya. The angels are swarming it like a beehive. If I’m right, that’s where this ‘He’ they’re going on about is hiding, and I have a few complaints to file.”

“You’re declaring open war on the thing that transformed Tokyo?” Sae had to admit she was impressed at her guts, but logically, it didn’t hold up. “These are the types of beings the Phantom Thieves need Personas to combat, and I’m the only person here that can use one. We would be outgunned no matter how you slice it.” A flash of anger rose in Akari’s eyes, and she drew a pistol. She fired it at a window at the end of the alley, and it broke into a hundred glittering shards of glass.

“There’s a whole armory up under Akira’s bed, and I have half of it strapped to my back. I’m not going to sit down and let whatever this is takeover. If you want to hide, I don’t blame you, and I won’t stop you. So don’t stop me.”

“A moment, miss.” Yoshida slogged his way closer, fighting off his deep seated exhaustion. “I gather you are Kurusu-kun’s mother. Do you believe this is related to his group’s activities?” Akari gave him a handful of points for that alone, keeping terminology vague in case she wasn’t in on the secret.

“I have no doubt. They left to fight something that was controlling the public, and what shows up but an army that wants just that?”

“In that case, pass me a firearm.” He held out a hand, and his face hardened. “I may not be in my prime, and I may be a touch overweight besides, but I promised him that I would be his ally when he needed one most. I owe him that much. Please, let me keep my word to the young man that changed my life.” Akari looked him up and down, and she smiled approvingly.

“I never thought I’d see a politician willing to risk his own neck. If we make it through this, you can count on my vote.” She slipped the big sack off, pulling it open and unleashing the heavy scent of gunpowder. “Pick your poison and let’s roll.”

“Hold the sack.” Takemi looked over the contents, settling on a compact revolver nestled in the side. “You’re going to need a medic out there, and apparently my medicine is some of the best. Keep me covered, and I’ll keep you going.”

Kawakami slipped in long enough to take an SMG.

“Well, this isn’t how I thought I would be spending Christmas Eve, but they say you should always try something new.”

Sae looked over the group, and she found herself quietly appreciative of the effect Akira had on people. Even the meek looking Mishima had taken up arms, lining his belt with bombs and a slingshot. She was moved, and she simultaneously realized that all of the people she was going to protect were about to walk into the lion’s den.
“Do you have any melee options in there? Athena gives me better endurance to injury than most, so I should be your frontline.” Akari tossed her a pair of spiked knuckles with a thankful nod. They were excellently made, capable of capping a punch without being so bulky as to impede grappling attempts. Makoto and Akira had fine taste in weaponry, and Sae had a faint wish to meet their supplier.

The subway was an easy route into Shibuya. The trains weren’t bogged down by water, and they sheltered them from the scrutiny of passing patrols. When they arrived, though, they knew they would be walking into the swarm. They climbed to the streets, ready for a fight, but they hadn’t expected to find one already in progress.

The angels dived at a herd of people, but whenever they got close, their gruff guard dog was at their necks. His loose coat made him a harder target to pin down with it making him seem larger than he actually was, and though his punches weren’t much stronger than an average human’s, the electric discharge on his brass knuckles blew their water drenched hides apart.

“Keep your goddamn hands off of Kaoru!” Iwai’s eyes were heavily bloodshot and sunken in, but he wasn’t slowing down yet. His son was a jittering mess, but he found some strength in those around him. A young girl in a Kosei uniform was constantly at the side Iwai wasn’t, which, even if she wasn’t much of a combatant, at least made him feel safer. He had to admit he felt a little silly when the one taking the attack the best was a grade school kid in a goofy “Get Smoked” hat.

“Two drones at your three!”

“Got ‘em!” Iwai wheeled around, breaking through one’s head like a vase and throwing its body into the second, making it drop to the ground and into range of Iwai’s boot. “Hell if I know how you’re keeping tabs on all of them, but we’re damn lucky we ran into you, kid.”

“Video games are getting way more real feeling these days.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“One more at eight, look out!” Iwai turned to counter it, but it was already in his face. Its spear was about to run him through when its body scattered into bits. Iwai followed the bang back to the source, finding a portly guy in a suit about to flop backwards from the kick of his shotgun.

“Oh my! That is quite the recoil. Are you alright, sir?”

“Yeah, you saved my…” His eye kept going back to the gun, and it didn’t take long for him to realize why. “Wait, that’s one of my special pieces! What are you doing with…?”

“We raided the Phantom Thief armory.” Sae headed the group, showing off the spike knuckles she was wearing. “Your work hasn’t gone to waste, I assure you.”

“I see, friends of the kid’s. Guess that makes six more to the pattern.” Sae, in turn, added four to her own tally. “I thought I told that punk to keep me out of all this Phantom Thief shit.”

“Four at six!” Iwai snapped back to attention at his watcher’s call. Before he could engage, though, Akari had her pistols in hand. She opened fire with both, and though she missed as often as
she hit, all four angels were down. She noted her lack of aim, and then she looked at the kid who spotted them in the first place.

“You’re Shinya Oda, right?” He looked up at her, openly confused.

“Yeah, how did you…?”

“I’m Akira’s mom. He talks highly of you.” She threw her guns to him, removing the pack to find another for herself. “How about you show me why?” He scrambled to grab them before they fell into the water. When they were secured, he looked down at the pieces in his hands.

And his smile went vicious.

“The King is crowned.” His eyes went to the sky, and he spotted his prey, a pair of angels a hundred feet up prepping for an attack run. He threw his hands up, and though he looked from the outside to have fired randomly, his mind was running all the calculations. Bullet speed, target trajectory, wind interference, gravity. Two rounds went up. Two angels went down. Iwai whistled.

“That’s a sharp eye, but now I’ll need a new spotter.”

“I’m on it.” The girl keeping Kaoru calm stood up a little straighter, her gaze running over the pieces in play. “I always wondered what Shogi would be like on a three dimensional board.”

“Oh, you’re…!” Mishima would recognize her anywhere, the fallen Shogi queen, Hifumi Togo, in the flesh.

“The enemy advances on your left flank, meager bishop. What ammunition do you have?” Mishima stood ramrod straight, her commanding tone striking a chord he didn’t know he had.

“Oh, firebombs, clay casing filled completely with fine powder, Ma’am!”

“Fire volley, fifty two degrees up!” He snapped to that side, and before he even saw the enemy, he pulled his slingshot as far as it would stretch and fired, a clay ball sailing through the air and striking its right wing. The limb went up in flame, melting it and bringing it to the ground. “Direct hit!”

“And my case that my guinea pig should be completely insane has gained a new piece of evidence. Oh well.” Takemi took her place at Hifumi’s side. “Team medic reporting. I recommend all armed units form a ring around the rest, a kill circle, if you will, for optimal coverage and access to healing.”

“Suggestion acknowledged.” The hairs on the back of her neck bristled, and when she looked around, the air traffic was getting denser. “The enemy has reinforcements! All troops, take formation!” The group’s incredulity at being commanded by a school age girl was a dwarf next to their desire to survive, just as they were a speck to the coming tide. The angels formed a single torrent, a streak of black and red that coiled as a massive serpent. It formed halfway between them and the spine above, though that distance quickly shrank. Mishima’s shaking made it difficult to aim.

“Get it together.” Shinya was serene, watching the encroaching army as one might a flock of birds. Both guns were steady, and his breathing was even. “Every mark we take now is one that won’t kill anymore. Always look at tomorrow, even if you might not be in it.”

“That’s… not very comforting.”

“But the lad is correct.” Yoshida pulled his shotgun closer to his hip, thinking that his weight
would best be used as one hard bolt instead of a pile of leaves. “We are the bulwark of the world as we know it. We shall not waver in the face of adversity. We are the last hold of freedom for our people, and if any others out there still carry the flame to fight, we shall be the wall that gives them a tomorrow to stand even taller than we do now! Now brace for impact!”

“Inspiring words, Yoshida-san.” Suddenly, a new figure appeared in the skies. At first, it was a red and black blur on a collision course with the angel onslaught. It pierced through the frontline, and moments later, the head exploded in brilliant white light. Every angel caught in the blast vanished, and all behind it broke off the attack, retreating to above the bones.

All that remained in the air was a single figure. It wore a red suit top and black leggings. Its head was silvery and pointed like the nose of a plane, long blonde hair forming its Jetstream, and from its arms flowed long red fins. It flourished its rapier, announcing its intent to any angels that might think to remount their charge. Sae, who had been a twitch from bringing forth her card, stared at it in shock.

“That’s a Persona!”

“I thought they would be related to this case somehow. They almost always are with paranormal activity.” Someone new drew close to the ring, somehow making no sound or ripples in the water. They wore a heavy blue trench coat and a cloth mask over the bottom of their face, and though their head was otherwise concealed by a pair of sunglasses and a bulky hat, blue hair stuck out as the only visible defining feature of the person beneath the cover. It was nearly impossible to determine gender by voice alone, straddling the line between the two. “Stand guard, Yamato, I have questions to ask.”

“That makes two of us.” Sae squinted at the newcomer. She could have sworn there was something familiar about them, but at the same time, there was something that kept her from placing who it was. “Your help is appreciated, but in my experience, Persona users not in line with the Phantom Thieves tend towards destructive behaviors. What is your allegiance?”

“To humanity. And, now that you have confirmed my suspicions about the illusive Phantom Thieves, I suppose you could say I am an ally of theirs, as well. At least in this matter. Is this a sufficient answer?” With no small amount of hesitation, Sae nodded, admitting to herself that, no matter how suspicious, both parties had no love for the invaders. “Now for my own. Though, to you, it may be more of a statement than a question. You are aware that the Phantom Thieves yet fight, correct?”

“Where?” Akari tensed, her eye going hawkish.

“The bones overhead serve as a bridge to the heart of this pandemic. They are advancing towards it with the intent of, as they may put it, stealing said heart.” Akari’s knees gave a subtle quake, and she blinked back the water in her eyes.

“Thank God he’s okay…”

“He may not be for long, however.” The person pulled their hand from their pocket, looking at their watch. “The entity they face approaches true deific levels of power, a tier seldom observed. It will be equal parts a testament to their abilities and miracle if they claim victory over it without sacrifice.” Sae’s eyes narrowed, and she turned them to Iwai.

“You’re their arms dealer. Have you outfitted them to the best of your ability?”

“Look, lady, I make model guns. Hell if I get how those things are popping off real rounds
now. That said…” He stroked his chin, trying to remember the most recent order. “He did ask for a whole swathe of custom models recently, but I haven’t had a chance to finish them. I’m guessing they were better than what they were already using if he was ordering them.”

“Then our mission is clear. We need to finish those guns and get them to the Thieves, ASAP.”

“Whoa, you say that like it’s easy. My shop’s miles from here, and moving or breaking up our little outpost would leave us all vulnerable. Besides, they weren’t finished for a reason. The parts were too expensive for me at the time. I know he always makes good on payments, but even with the biggest loan I could take, I wouldn’t be able to finish half of the pieces. I just didn’t, and don’t, have the resources.”

“That will be no issue.” As though attracted by the sound of activity, another group found their way to Shibuya. They were headed by a man in an expensive suit. His skin was sickly pale, as though untouched by sunlight in months, and he was unnaturally gaunt, but he held himself with the grace of an aristocrat. Mishima lost count of the number of times he had been left breathless that day.

“Okumura!?”

“Anything you need will be provided at the full expense of Okumura Foods. After all…” He pushed his glasses back into place, weathered, sad eyes sitting behind them. “I have every reason to believe that I am only alive now because of them. Consider every yen I possess to be fair game.” Mishima turned from shock to confusion.

“Wait, you’ve been comatose for months. How would you know that?”

“I met a rather brilliant fortune teller, and a reporter with reputable sources.” The people behind him stepped forward, and Takemi gave both a wry smile.

“Would you look at that, Ohya’s out on the town without being half plastered.”

“For your information, I was working today. I can’t get drunk every day of the week.”

“Please, we can talk all we want once we’ve secured a future to talk in.” Chihaya drew all attention, her stage voice granting her the importance to stand out. “I foresaw that we, the bonds that Akira Kurusu has gathered, would one day be needed to set him free of a foul fate. I believe now to be that day. We must come together as one and see him through this trial, for our own sakes, if not for his.”

“You can save the ‘save our own skins’ addendum.” Kawakami stepped out of the crowd, SMG in hand. “You said it yourself, that kid’s important to us. Now how are we doing this, all as one, or what?”

“That would be a poor decision.” The trench coated stranger broke back into the conversation. “A group this large would be a walking target if we broke rank all at once. I suggest we separate into two, a smaller detachment guiding Iwai-san and Okumura-san to finish the weapon shipment.”

“I was about to suggest the same.” Sae brought her hand up, the stranger becoming fixated on the blue card she summoned. She crushed it in her palm, and Athena returned to her side. “I believe I should head the away team. Your Persona grants you greater control of the air than mine, whereas Athena will be less confined by narrow streets and alleys if we’re attacked.”

“And Kaoru comes with me. No way in Hell am I leaving him behind.”
“I’m coming, too.” Akari hefted her sack of bombs a bit higher. “It looks like I’m too untrained with a gun to give us decent coverage here. Throwing one of these close range, though? That I can handle.”

“That’s that, then. Meet back with us here, and we’ll find a way to deliver the payload.” The stranger offered a hand to Sae, and she took it. “The Phantom Thieves are our greatest hope, and we will put everything we have to offer behind them.”

Chapter End Notes

I've seen all the responses, and I'm quite pleased with the turnout for that competition. We had some good stuff rolling in on all fronts, though I'm sorry to say a few of you missed the "One entry per person" part of the announcement. Those lists still got a laugh out of me, though. Go back and read everyone else's stuff for a good chuckle if you haven't already.

And the winner of the contest is... DynamiteSanders, with "Cuphead on Steroids!" I don't know why I didn't expect Cuphead jokes, but I really should have. Congratulations!

I also wanted to give an honorable mention to knightofsuperior. Their response was a touch too long-winded for the spirit I was aiming for, but it was full of that wit I love so much. If you're curious, their nickname was "Dog." If you want context, roll back and find it. Just beware, the two of us love quoting DBZ Abridged in the comments. Reader beware, the memesters are there. Then again, that's why you're here in the first place, right?

Next chapter, Cuphead on Steroids deals with a devil.
Break the Yoke

Chapter Summary

Yaldy gets got.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

From on high, two angels watched as those below fell in droves. The woman in gold plate held a hand to her heart, and the man at her side clutched his spear harder for every angel shredded in the chaos.

“Why do they so reject our love? We seek only to raise them to paradise, and yet they would sooner strike our hand than accept it.”

“Lose not thine faith. It is but a small band of insurgents that defy our advance. Humans are a stubborn existence, but they cannot hold forever. They shall fall or surrender by day’s end, then we shall be allowed to carry the rest to the cradle of our Lord.”

“I am aware, though I cannot help but be saddened by the senseless bloodshed. I pray it be swift, and their ends painless.”

“Lady Gabriel, Saint Michael!” The surfaced bones of Mementos clicked loudly under the tread of a third angel. His right arm loosely held a thin sword, its ember shrouded blade extinguished, and his left held his stomach. His robes hung heavy from his frame. The white tapestry about his neck, once depicting the holy crucifix, was stained as red as his robes.

“Uriel!” Gabriel rushed to his side, touching her fingertips to the gap in his garment to seek out the damage in his flesh. “What has wounded thee so deeply?” Michael looked to the path behind him, its length bare aside from the trail of blood left in Uriel’s wake.

“And what of Raphael? Was he not stationed beyond thine post?”

“Aye, but he has been slain! I... I apologize for my fault.” A jolt ran through him as Gabriel’s magic touched him, pulling at the cut to sew it together. “‘T’was the Phantom Thieves, they advance as we speak! They were too fearsome to handle in solitude, so I hoped to merge forces with Raphael and crush them in unison. But still they proved too great to surmount, and he sent me to warn thee thus. I disgrace my rank and Lord with this miserable display.”

“Stand now, friend.” Gabriel hefted him up, letting him stand upright and reacquaint himself with his healed form. “Our Lord knows the might they wield. Thou shalt be forgiven, but to truly reclaim thine honor, I ask thou stand with us now. Against two archangels they held fast, but three shall bring them to a halt.”

“My deepest thanks, milady. I shall combat them with all the strength left to me, this I swear in the name of our Lord.”

As Gabriel tended to the last of Uriel’s wounds, Michael’s attention was drawn to the distance. It was a speck near the horizon, but it glowed as a star of pink and blue. He looked closer,
and a shape became apparent. It was a curious machination, its body by and large that of the human device known as a motorcycle. It bore no tires, however. The front was as the beak of a bird, smooth and pointed to cut through air, aerodynamics only held back by wide horns of gold atop a skull of scarlet. The rear was reshaped into a mass like the thruster of a rocket, a glittering pink dome that, upon inspection, was the upper half of a skull, its top-mounted jewel eyes glaring in his direction.

In its seat, huddled behind the glass of the windshield, were two humans. Their shapes were obscured by the light of their mount, the glare making them seem to him as one hulking being. It twisted the handles, and in the growl of the engine, a refined lady’s laughter could be heard.

“We love…” The light shined brighter, and in a burst, the machine blasted forward, piercing the skies like the arrow of a giant archer. Michael’s eyes widened, realizing that it was moving too swiftly to retaliate. He had only moments before it was upon him, and his allies.

“Gabriel, Uriel, aside!” He leaped forward and, to the stunned look of both, shoved them out of the projectile’s path. No sooner than they were cleared of harm did the beast approach the defenseless Michael. He stared through the glass a blade’s length from him, its riders’ maniacal grins searing across his final memories.

“…the Battering Ram!” They punched through him, the front carving cleanly through his chest. When the wide skull thruster passed into him, his body expanded around it, torn asunder from the inside out. Chunks of meat, metal, and fabric spread about the platform, melting into formless shade, to the horror of his remaining comrades. Gabriel was locked in place by shock.

“They… Michael, the mightiest of us, slain in a single stroke… Are they truly human?” Uriel pushed himself up, and, though not fully healed, he brandished his blade at the airborne humans, their craft having halted and spun around to face him.

“We come baring freedom from chaos, and what doth thou bring upon us but mayhem unrivaled? Humans… No, demons serving the foul Trickster…!”

“You call?” That voice was in his ear, and his limbs locked in fear. It was the same unflinching, uncaring voice that narrated Raphael’s swift demise, his very own trumpeter of apocalypse. There was a prick at the side of his neck, and that was the last sensation he knew before his head was severed from its post. Joker sheathed his knife, taking up Uriel’s blade as the hand that rightfully wielded it faded into oblivion. He took an experimental slice, finding a dissipating interest in the thin trails of smoke.

“Guess it only makes fire when he’s the one using it. That’s a shame. How ironic would it’ve been if I carved out the Demiurge’s heart with his own minion’s weapon?”

“Thou art a monster wearing mortal skin!” Gabriel rose, her rapier shaking in rage. “To think I shed a tear over thine suffering. Nay, I revoke my sorrow. Once thou have been cleansed, I shall personally head the final assault on those humans clinging to thine lies. They shall fall by my hand!” Joker’s head tilted, and he let Uriel’s sword clatter to the floor.

“Why does every strong opponent we go up against make such a long winded speech? I hate to think about the days before we had a sniper rifle on our side.”

“What do you...?” In truth, Gabriel did not learn her lesson from that encounter. The realization came slower than the bullet, and when the latter passed, so, too, did she.

“Gotta love that dialogue skip button. Your shot’s as solid as ever, Boss!” The black knight gave an affirmative thumbs up as he sheathed old Ebony.
“Anyone with three fingers can use a pistol. It takes finesse and years of experience to do what I do.”

“I won’t doubt that for a second.”

“Sorry we missed the other two, guys.” Makoto brought herself and Haru back down to eye level, planting a foot on the ground as her only contact point.

“It would seem factoring in the vertical axis makes precision Battering Ramming a touch harder.” Akira shrugged at Haru’s explanation.

“I’m just impressed you two got the fusion thing down so quick. I didn’t realize you could do it on the fly like that.”

“We owe much to Igor-san’s detailed description of the process.” Haru curtsied (and snuck in a smooch) as Makoto helped her off of the Anat/Artemis hybrid. When both were down, the craft pulled itself apart, reforming into two distinctive Personas before returning to their mask states. “Though I must say our new ability pales in comparison to yours, Joker.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.” Ryuji stomped up, grabbing Akira in a headlock. “Teleporting just ain’t fair for the Shadows. Not that I’m complaining. It’s effing hilarious when they realize you’re right behind them like that.” Futaba hooked his neck from the other side.

“Joker OP, never nerf.” Joker chuckled and slipped out of the affectionate pincer attack.

“A good thief can go wherever they want, whenever they want.”

“I taught you well.” Morgana landed on his shoulder, throwing off his balance momentarily. “Now, are you ready to steal a god’s crown?”

“Meh, after Kamoshida, I’m not really one for crowns. They’re tacky. Unless Fox puts our logo on it or something.”

“That can certainly be arranged. The reflective property of a central gemstone could produce an interesting illusion.”

“Wait, wouldn’t that make it a little more tacky?”

“Don’t harsh my buzz, Panther.”

“Don’t make me call the fashion patrol on you, white after Labor Day.”

“Ouch, fine, I yield.” Akira smiled, standing with his closest friends as they stared up at the surfaced panopticon. Inside, they would face the being that already killed them once. That drove Crow to his death. Revenge would be sweet, indeed.

“-”

“We lived, bitch!” Joker landed hard in the gut of the prison, his gun and knife already bared. The others fanned out from him, wrapping around the Holy Grail in a semicircle. Prometheus floated through the window, its empowering light cranked up as high as the group could handle. The eyes on the Grail’s palms blinked slowly and stared at Joker.
“An unfortunate error, I assure you.”

“Get out!”

“Don’t touch the Holy Grail!”

The prisoners of the panopticon recognized the intruders, their fear returning in full force.

“Please, free us of these demons!”

“We beg you!”

“So they desire, so it shall be.” The pipework funneling into the Grail thrummed from the density of its contents, and the gears on its surface turned ever quicker. “The innate will of the people did not suffice to rid them of you, Phantom Thieves. What more proof is required that my guidance is necessary?”

“You’re forgetting something, aren’t you?” Skull took a shot, shrapnel scraping over the Holy Grail’s surface. Its metal softened and stretched to cover the wound, but it was accosted on both sides by a flurry of automatic rounds before the process could complete that tore at the pits Skull left behind.

“We’re just as human as them!” Panther hissed when her gun ran dry of rounds and replaced it with the whip on her belt.

“We are proof of the resilience of untainted human will.” Fox dropped his assault rifle and rushed in with his blade. He hacked at the Grail, each mark deepening with every stroke of his blade. Panther worked diligently on her side as well, and eventually, her whip came back with a speck of red on its tip. There was a crack in the bowl, and the Grail’s lifeblood dripped through.

“I’m through!”

“You would dare strike me?” The hands turned in on the Grail, and their eyes glowed bright with building magic. Joker saw them before either Panther or Fox.

“Pull back!” The eyes sparked, forcing Joker to take the initiative. He threw a pair of chains, and when their ends curled around his teammates, he pulled, dragging them away just as the lasers fired. The tip of one of Panther’s pigtails was singed by the blast.

“Wait, weren’t those things supposed to make earthquakes when they spin!?”

“As I subjugate the foolish masses, the weight of their desires is granted unto me. Their prayer is my power.” The gold metal melded over the leaking crack, and the bleeding stopped. After but a moment of rest, the Holy Grail was without a single marring scrape on its surface. “I am the conglomerate of all human desire, a being of limitless power.”

“Oh really?” Joker caught Panther and Fox, helping them to their feet before extinguishing the smoking tip of the former’s hair. “Is that why you had to shanghai another “god’s” servant to guard your lair? I don’t think the Reaper cared for that neck piercing you gave him.”

“Death is a meek and unworthy being!” The Holy Grail’s voice boomed through the panopticon, its brickwork shaking with his rage. “She allowed herself to be sealed by a single human. She cowed before him, and so suffered the consequences. That her servants were left listless and vulnerable was no fault of mine. I merely granted them new purpose. You
“simpleminded humans would never understand the heavenly order.”

“No, I wouldn’t. I don’t speak Asshole!” Joker stepped forward, daring the hands to shoot him next. “I can’t speak for the other ‘gods,’ but all I’ve seen you do is sit back and let someone else do your dirty work. You don’t deserve that throne. If you hadn’t used us to push the public towards you, you wouldn’t have it!"

“Meager words from a meager being. You stand above your fellow man in will, but you still squirm in the dirt beneath my heel. It was your arrogance that kept you from joining them in paradise, and as its keeper, I shall ensure that you never set foot in the holy realm of man again.” The eyes opened to their fullest, the space under their lids glowing pure white. “Goodbye, indolent children of man. Your potential was great, but so, too, were the vices that squandered it.”

Then, the light faltered. The eyes popped like worn light bulbs, and the hands clamped shut from the pain.

“What?”

Throughout the panopticon, the red light of the cells started to flicker.

“What am I doing here?”

“Wait, aren’t those…”

“Right, the Phantom Thieves.”

“Why am I just sitting here?”

Then, in a wave, the lights dimmed. One by one, the cells grew dimmer, their occupants vanishing into the dark. The vibration of the pipes slowed, and the blood within was thick and sludge-like once more. The Grail’s gears ground to a squealing stop. Makoto lowered her fists, looking at the change in wonder.

“What’s happening to them?”

“People of Tokyo, wake up!” Akira’s ears perked, listening intently to the echoing voice. “A mad, horrible being has taken from us our future. It would have us sing its praises as a bird in its cage. Will you surrender your freedom to satisfy the ego of one who would as soon kill you as defend you? People of Tokyo, rise up against this oppression! We will guide you through this darkest night, and greet the dawn together!” With every word, the smile on Joker’s face grew wider.

“Thank you, Yoshida-san. Leave it to you to make people listen.”

“I guess I’m not the only old guy with some spirit left. Damn kids and their infectious energy.” Boss lifted his sword, holding it out at the Grail as its golden skin dulled to bronze in the absence of desire. “There goes your power source. All those humans you boasted about backing you are on our side now, Demiurge.”

“Silence!” A wall of wind blasted out from the Grail, and as it pushed the Thieves back, so, too, did it tear away its own gears. The metal underneath was ribbed and layered like a sheet of feathers. “I am the god of this world. Lesser beings cannot hope to bring about my reckoning!”

The floor shook, and its pressure shifted. It felt like an elevator in motion. The walls, their prisoners freed, felt the shockwaves, falling apart around them. Beyond them, open sky stretched for miles, the city of Tokyo far below them. Joker braced himself against the tremors, looking up to the only
member not affected by them.

“There, analysis!”

“His energy reading is spiking, and something in the floor is moving. Watch your step!”

“The humans abandon me because of your false promises. You would drag them into a chaotic world without regulation, without safeguards. You merely assure that they will destroy themselves. I will show them the error of their ways, the cost of freedom.” The floor shook once more, and then it scattered, spreading out in six pieces. From the ground, it looked like the scaffolding of a rocket breaking apart at launch. Five of them fell away, leaving the Thieves standing on the last remaining pedestal. The outer shell of the Grail lifted, revealing itself to be composed of many wings. They circled the rim in a ring, and within, a gleaming silver head like the helm of a knight peered out. It had no eyes, but its gaze fell harsh on the Phantom Thieves.

“I will execute you now, as I intended in that blighted Velvet Room, but it shall not be a swift death. You have lost that privilege.” Suddenly, one of the hands lanced forward, revealing it to be connected to a long, narrow arm. Its fingers opened as the teeth of a hound, and they clamped down around the unsuspecting Prometheus.

“Hey, hands of the tech!” Oracle pushed all systems to their max, hoping the influx of energy would burn her captor, but he didn’t waver. Instead, the fingers tightened, and Persona and user, both, screamed.

“You ends shall be long and miserable. I shall show they who follow you the agony that awaits them in an untamed world, and they will flock back to me. If they will not willingly drink of the Holy Grail, then they shall bend knee to Yaldabaoth.”

“Guys, Prometheus can’t hold out much long… Gyah!!!” Finally, the casing snapped, and Futaba felt her ribs crushing in.

“Bug!” Joker and Sojiro called out at once, and they looked at each other in a panic.

“Boss, throw me!” He didn’t think twice, summoning Osiris who held out his crook. Joker threw his chain around it, and Osiris gathered all of his strength into that arm. He launched his crook like a javelin, and with it, Joker soared. He tore off his mask, letting Arsene join him in flight.

“Twilight Cowl, now!”

Futaba pushed back as fragments of Prometheus compacted, her efforts strained by troubled breathing. Soon, the fingertips of Yaldabaoth pierced her cockpit.

“You, child of rampant technology. Festering in your heart is the rage that once bore a Palace. Your Shadow fled my prison, and now you return to my grasp. Child of man, daughter of ceaseless rancor, fall prey to your own Wrath.” The fingers glowed red, and Futaba shrank back, trying to flee the scalding heat rolling in. Her breathing spiked, but before she could yell, another hand broke into her space, this one far smaller. Cool claws gripped her arm, and she was torn from the husk of Prometheus. She had to close her eyes on exit, but when she opened them, the white-horned face of Akira greeted her.

“Go, now!” He threw her out of Yaldabaoth’s grasp as his spell mounted. In a flash, the hand clutched down completely, scattering Prometheus into a blue dust and pinning Joker within. Futaba felt Prometheus return to her, and she hurriedly called on it. It didn’t form, but its magic flowed over her, slowing her descent.
“Kiki!”

“You would face punishment first? So be it, but know that it only delays the suffering of the rest.” Akira felt foreign magic flood his body, and it burned inside him. It felt like awakening all over again. The hand that held him raised, then it dropped, casting him back to the platform. He landed on his back, but he rolled to a stop on his front, his golden wings crumpled over him and a horn cracked. Sojiro caught Futaba as she came into arm’s reach, and Morgana and Ryuji rushed to Akira’s aid.

“Joker, what did he do to you?”

“Come on, dude, get up!” Ryuji pulled up one of his arms, slinging it over his shoulder to bring him the rest of the way to his feet. Morgana put his hands to Akira’s back, bringing out the healing light of Mercurius. “What was he saying, something about wrath?”

“Indeed. I gripped the vast hatred in his soul and bid it to tear him apart from the inside out.”

“You what!?”

“I am a god that holds dominion over humanity. The vices that rot the soul are mine to command. His immeasurable Wrath has rendered his bones ash and his organs slurry. As enticing as his torture seemed, I could not risk allowing him to rise against me from a place of weakness a second time.”

“…Keep talking, it’s delicious how wrong you are.”

“Joker!” Ryuji helped him straighten out, waiting until his legs could hold him before giving him space. Morgana ran the last of his Diarahan, and Joker rubbed his neck.

“Impossible, you should be dead!”

“That’s, what, three times you tried to kill me and failed? No wonder you hired the Reaper, you suck at homicide.” Joker fluffed his wings, their feathers glimmering in the sunset. “Bug, stay on the ground and recover. Prometheus is probably scrambled.”

“Yeah, you got that right.” She fell back on her butt, hunching over and grabbing her head. “We’ll be good in a few minutes.” Sojiro stepped between her and Yaldabaoth, pinning his shield down and hunkering behind it.

“I’ll keep her safe. The rest of you bring the Tin Man down to size.” An orange light ran over his shield, and it touched the rest in turn, replacing at least the defensive portion of Prometheus’s light.

“Insolent Thieves, you will fall before…!”” His only warning was the brief whistling of wind. Then he recoiled, a metal crate impacting his head. It fell to the platform with a heavy thunk, and there was a cry on the wind.

“Bull’s eye!” Back on Earth, a wide band stretched between two lampposts. A crowd of citizens lined it, and behind them, a little kid in a ‘Get Smoked’ cap celebrated. “No one’s a better shot than the King!”

On top of the crate was a note branded with the mark of the Phantom Thieves, though not as cleanly drawn as an official logo. Akira took it, and it read…
“Here, these’re those guns you ordered. I’d put it on your tab, but a benefactor took care of the bill. Save our asses, kid, or you’re fired.

Iwat.”

His wasn’t the only name on the note, though. It looked like everybody he knew in Tokyo had come together to scribble theirs on at the last minute. Mishima, Kawakami, Sae, even Shiho and Kana. Everyone he knew was there, and it brought a warmth to his heart as he flipped the case open. Inside was a full compliment of weaponry, and everyone took up their new arms.

“Wow, it’s so light!”

“The bullets weigh more than their conveyor.” Panther and Fox looked to each other, and they nodded. A blue flash sparked behind them, and when they looked, Anat and Astarte had fused once more. Queen piloted the machine, and at her back, Noir held a massive block of green with four openings at the tip of the barrel.

“Shall we test out the new toy, my princess?”

“You know me so well, my Queen. I do hope Yaldabaoth understands how… rigorous our testing is, he he!”

Joker brandished his new pistol, holding it alongside his old.

“Shinya, your dual wielding lessons are about to see some use.” The mask at his hip shattered, and Robin Hood joined the crew.

“I shall lead the offense on the ground. You join our airborne comrades.”

“Good thinking, Hood.” Joker took off, and with a vicious grin between him and the power couple, they advanced to the air over Yaldabaoth’s head.

He lifted an arm towards them, but a bolt of lightning cracked over his back. Skull stood at the portside of his ship, one foot propped atop a smoking cannon and a blunderbuss in his hand. Seiten Taisei held up his right hand, putting an L on his forehead as he stuck his tongue out.

The assault didn’t stop there. Bullets and arrows pelted his chest and when he thought to sweep them from their footing, Queen and Noir passed in front of him. The latter leaned into her new toy, her cheeks flush.

“Bang!”

And so there was, a quartet of rockets blasting into his hull. His metal cracked, and though it remained mostly intact, he lacked the power to seal what damage there was shut.

Suddenly, his right wing came under fire. Clusters of clay pots shattered, and the limb was bathed in fire and lightning. On the ground, Hifumi barked orders at the top of her lungs.

“Keep the bombs rolling! This is a siege, soldiers. We must bring their walls crashing down!” Mishima ran by, his arms loaded to spilling with ammunition.

“Ice and wind now, the quick temp change might break that wing off entirely!”

“I like the way you think, trooper. All hands on deck, it’s time for an Ice Age!”

Yaldabaoth’s anger was mounting. He could barely think straight, cut off from his power
supply and assailed on all sides by these insects that called themselves sapient. He gave consideration to washing Tokyo away in one fell swoop when something landed on his head. His metal was scraped by the twisting heel of a sharpened boot.

“How’s it feel to be blasted on all sides by the people you thought you knew so well? Sucks, right?”

“TRICKSTER.” Like that, all became clear to him. From his shoulders, two arms sprang up, ensnaring Joker where he stood. Yaldabaoth’s wings fanned out, and he poured all of his magic into them. The air rumbled as he moved, ascending out of range of the hornets’ stingers. Ryuji tried to give chase with his ship, but Makoto headed him off.

“Don’t, there’s no oxygen up there. You’d suffocate if you weren’t irradiated by space first.”

“What about Joker then, huh!”

“I… I don’t…”

Haru put a hand on her shoulder and spoke loud enough for all of the Thieves to hear.

“I am more worried about our opponent. It’s when he’s pushed the hardest that our leader shows his full power.”

From the platform, Morgana stared skywards, his eyes unflinchingly on the rising mass of Yaldabaoth.

Far above, Joker felt the thinning atmosphere take its toll. His blood was boiling in the dropping pressure, and it was only Arsene’s influence through the Cowl that kept the air in his lungs from expanding lethally.

“How does it feel, Trickster? To be so removed from your source of strength, your alleged ‘allies.’ I tend to not speak so boorishly, but your earlier words were quite accurate. Sucks, doesn’t it? Though, you should worry not.” His main hands lifted, their eyes opened wide. “You cannot see them, but they can you. Every detail, every drop of pain, every moment of torment. Your demise shall be seen in full detail. May your excruciating fall bring an end to this senseless conflict. Your rebellion ends here.”

“…Didn’t I tell you before?” Akira’s words were quiet and thin, running on and through sparse air. “I’ll never stop fighting. I’ll never stop trying to beat you. It’s all I know how to do.”

Tokyo listened to his words, echoing through the city on every screen, on every street. They saw the low pressure drawing blood from under his eyes, leaking down in place of tears, but they couldn’t look away.

“Why? Why do you still defy me, even now? Surrender to your punishment, and your death will finally come. Why do you so fight and bring yourself pain?”

“Shut up. Take what you’re given. Stop being a nuisance. It seems like that’s all I ever hear. You would never understand. You say you were born from humanity, but you don’t get us at all.” Joker’s hands grabbed the claws pinning him, and though they proved strong, his struggle pushed them back in increments of inches. “All my life has been a struggle. I had to fight to hold onto what little I had since the day I was born. There were days where my hands were so rough from working that I couldn’t close them without pain. There were nights where I was tempted to eat those hands to stop the pain in my empty stomach. And for holding on for sixteen years, all I was given was a
prison sentence for a crime I didn’t commit. You’re right in that respect, sometimes it felt like all my fighting got was even more hurt.”

Tears dripped into the blood pool in Tokyo. Akari held a hand to her heart, remembering those hellish days. But…

“When I got to Tokyo, I was ready to give up. I was ready to throw in the towel. Sometimes, I think the only thing that kept me from going through with it was the fact that it would put my blood on Boss’s hands, his attic and all.” Sojiro gasped.

“Kid…”

“I wanted to, more than anything. I wanted to stop the hurt. But now? I’m glad I held out.” A small smile graced his lips, and real tears mingled with those of blood. “I found Ryuji. And Morgana. And Ann. People that actually wanted me around, that liked me. I got something that day, through the Phantom Thieves, that I wanted my whole life. All because I kept on fighting.”

“And that’s why…” His struggle redoubled, inches becoming feet in his push for freedom. “…I will never give into you. I’m a bastard, abandoned by his father before birth. I’m a criminal, shunned by the world. I’m a human, a speck in the eye of a god. But so what? I’ve spent my whole life hurting. Nothing you can do will ever hurt worse than the rest of the life I’ve led. And now, I have something to go back to. I have something to fight for.”

“You tell him, Joker!” Mishima’s voice echoed into the airways of Shibuya, loud enough to match the countless screens. “We’re here for you, always!”

“Those who would stand by me…”

“Lay down that truth, kid!” Ohya shouted into a megaphone nabbed off of a nearby traffic director.

“These who would call me… their friend…”

“Cast off the chains of fate!” Ohya gladly lent her acquisition to Chihaya.

“It’s for them I fight.”

In the heart of the Velvet Room, Igor chuckled.

“Isn’t this wonderful, Lavenza?”

“Indeed, Master.” They watched as the words of his Confidants rose in support. How ironic that the broadcast meant to dishearten them was what compacted their support. With every friend that added their voice to the call, Akira’s arms pushed a little harder, earned another sliver of space. “Our guest has proven himself worthy of his title.”

“I have seen many Wild Cards, all memorable guests. But a Trickster is a unique individual. To preserve the peace of the world is one matter.” Igor leaned in closer to the image, bulged eyes catching every cinder that sparked as Arsene lifted from Akira’s shoulders. “But to rewrite that order for the better? No sight brings my old heart more joy. Go, young man.”

Lavenza held the Compendium closer, feeling its pages warm as Akira called upon all the contents of his soul.

“Complete the rehabilitation.”
“So cast me out if you want. Ban me from your realm. It will never break me.” Akira grabbed the chains holding him and Arsene. The fire within burned brightly, and he refused to let it be bound a moment longer.

“I found my world.”

He pulled at the chains with all his might, and Arsene held them taught. From the platform, Robin Hood readied his bow.

“Ascend from the snare that held my old master. Free yourself of the corruptor’s influence, and soar above the yoke of god!” He loosed his arrow, and he vanished, his fire following it into the sky.

“I am Akira Kurusu, Joker, leader of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts!” He opened his eyes, and they shone a brilliant gold. “And I am free!” The arrow struck the chains, and their links popped. A faint image of Hood joined Arsene, holding a hand towards him.

“The justice to watch over the set upon.”

Arsene took it firmly.

“The rage to act upon injustice.”

“So we stand, so we fight!” The chain shattered down the line, the fuse of a bomb, and when all were vanquished, the fire of Arsene expanded. It swallowed his physical form, and then he burst, and Hood disappearing into the infinite black of space. Their fragments rained down as a thousand shooting stars.

“Pathetic. Your heart burned too brightly, and it backfired. An insignificant human could never grasp the true magnitude of the spirit. Your Personas are gone, and you shall join them in…” It was only then that he realized he no longer felt the light of the sun at his back. He turned to look, and something blotted it out, a figure he could not perceive in full. “Hmm?” A pair of crimson lights opened, and the figure shot forward, digging its shoulder into Yaldabaoth’s back. His claws relinquished their hold, letting Akira leap from him to the newcomer before he was forced to join him in plummeting to Earth.

“Uh, guys, isn’t he coming right down at…?” Ann’s concerns were confirmed when Ryuji pulled down beside the platform.

“All aboard, we’re getting the Hell out of here!”

The Phantom Thieves piled on in short order, Sojiro carrying Futaba to safety. Makoto and Haru positioned themselves behind the boat, and with Astarte’s thruster, they pushed it away from the crater to be. The ride was rocked by a dense backwind as Yaldabaoth landed. The platform collapsed under his weight, the pillar reduced to half its original height. Gears were knocked from their post, and many systems failed to respond. He barely managed to push himself up when the red clouds turned inky black.

From them, that figure descended, and it was there that it could finally be seen. Its garb was that of a European warlord, a cross between armor and a noble’s suit, and a red sash wrapped around its broad chest. Six wings of a bat circled it as a perverse halo, and thick horns twisted forth from its skull. Its eyes leered from behind an ivory mask, and atop its head, Akira stood. Futaba forced herself to stand on her own again, running to the back of the ship to see.
“He’s back! And… holy crap…” She slid her goggles down, scanning their newest ally. “No way, is that a Persona!?"

“Joker awakened to his true self. Heh, how fitting.” Morgana stood next to her, his arms crossed. “Of course a fallen, ridiculed guy like him would have a devil as his true self.” On the streets, people pointed at the demon lord in amazement.

“Is that one of the Phantom Thieves?”

“Holy shit, the Phantom Thieves have goddamn Satan working for them! That’s metal as fuck!”

“You hear them, right?” Joker’s grin was wide, his blood dried on his cheeks in long strips. “They’re calling out their desires, but not to you. They want you gone. They want to be free.”

“They are fools, one and all. Without me, they will perish at their own hands.”

“Well, we beat you, didn’t we?” Joker lifted his gun, and his Persona mirrored him, its pistol half its height. “I think we can manage. Let’s finish this.”

“Humanity will fall without the guidance of a god.”

“Pillage him, Satanael.”

“I will not be forsaken. I will not…!” Thunder rolled over Japan. The mad god was silent. Through his head, a gaping hole was torn open, and through it, Akira saw the setting sun.

“Your day has ended.” The god’s body broke away into white light. In the middle of the flurry, Akira saw something shining. Satanael reached out to take it, and in his palm, he found a golden cup three feet in height. Akira jumped down to it, and he pulled out his knife. It scraped through the metal, and when he pulled it away, the logo of the Phantom Thieves adorned their last Treasure. “Not a bad look for you, Yaldy.” He brought his boot up to it. “May all the souls you’ve hurt see you now. Rest in peace, victims of corruption.” He pushed it over, and so the Grail fell. It struck the Earth hard, its pieces scattering out like a glass vase. All that was left was a single plate, engraved with a top hat and a burning mask.

“You’ve done it. Humanity is free, thanks to you.” Satanael turned back to the boat, and in it, Morgana was wreathed in a blinding white light. Ryuji rushed towards him when he lifted into the air, leaving behind the boat.

“Wait, what’s going on!?”

“My duty has been fulfilled. You don’t need me to guide you anymore.”

“But Morgana…!” Ann rushed to the side of the boat, gripping the side rails tight. “You’re our friend, not just some tool. We…!” She hiccupped, choking on her tears.

“This world is only what those within it make of it, nothing more, nothing less. So long as you hold hope in your hearts, tomorrow can always be better than today. You already have someone to remind you of that.” Morgana looked towards the towering figure of Satanael, and his heart panged painfully when he saw Akira. He wiped the blood from his cheeks, and when he pulled his hand away, he was giving Mona a thumbs up.

“Mona, when you get to wherever you’re going next, make damn sure you tell the guy in charge to watch his ass! We just shot one god down. What’s one more to the pile?” Mona chuckled,
and he wiped away a tear before anyone could see it.

“Is that an order, Joker?”

“…Yeah. It’s my last order as your leader, so you better follow through, you hear?”

“Aye aye, sir. I’ll make you proud. You made me proud, after all. Hold onto that hope. It will serve you well.” The same light that engulfed Morgana lifted up from the world. It passed over them, and in that glow, Morgana disappeared to his well-earned rest.


When the world came back, it was normal again. People walked the streets of Tokyo as though nothing was wrong, like they hadn’t just witnessed a battle for the fate of the world. The team and Confidants found each other, and after a short talk, they found that they were the only ones left with any memory of the near apocalypse.

One by one, the crowd dispersed. It was Christmas Eve, after all. There were celebrations to tend to. Sojiro and Futaba wanted to wait for Akira, but he told them to go on ahead. He wanted to take a stroll first, and he knew they had to be worn out already. Reluctantly, they acquiesced, leaving him on his own in Shibuya.

“Kurusu, I’m surprised you didn’t go back with them.” Sae came from the immutable crowd of Tokyo, too basking in its unorganized beauty. “Summoning the devil doesn’t seem like an easy feat.”

“Nah, it’s just that this is the first time I’ve gotten to see Tokyo without a little voice in my ear. I figured… I should get used to it, you know?” The bag at his side felt unnaturally light. Sae looked to it, half expecting a bundle of black fur to poke his head out and wisecrack at her, even after he clearly passed. She wouldn’t put it past a Phantom Thief, but she knew even they had some limits. She didn’t know whether bringing him up or her actual intended topic would be more uncomfortable.

“I hate to interrupt, then, but I needed to tell you that our case against Shido has had some… complications.”

Chapter End Notes

Rest in piss, Cuphead on Steroids. Rest in peace, Go To Sleep.

Well, guys, only two chapters left. Yeah, I know, weird to think about. But I assure you, I’m ending this show of mine with a proper bang. The next two chapters are ones I’ve been fiddling with since the mid twenty chapters, when I figured out where I was taking this ship. Stay tuned, because they’ll be Psyby at his Psyby-est.

Oh, and one small note, SCREW LUNASTRA. I would rather fight a Kirin in a field of Paratoads than take that tanky blue fuck on in that special arena again. I’m going to go work on an ice sword to finally kick her ass out of that arena so I can hunt her in
somewhere other than Hell's armpit. I'll let you know when I finish driving Legiana to extinction.
Chapter Summary

You know that one episode of Avatar where Aang gets all friendly with burly looking prisoners when he's locked up? Think that, but with our favorite snarky fluff boy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rabble of the prisoners was distant, a low humming in the walls that was entirely indiscernible as speech. If you had asked him a month prior, Nobu Tenka would have complained about the headaches a guard could get watching over them. Now, he would have surrendered his pay for the week if he could spend but a minute in that cacophony. At least then he knew he was guarding humans.

“Tenka-san.” He flinched at the sound of a voice, the intrusion like the bang of a cannon to him. Somehow, he hadn’t noticed the warden and a guard he didn’t recognize join him in the otherwise empty corridor. His boss was a man of impressive stature, both in body and disposition, and his thick glasses reinforced the firmness in his presence. “Is our friend there giving you any trouble?” Nobu licked the inside of his mouth, but he couldn’t get rid of the pervasive dryness.

“N-No, Osamu-san. He’s been still all day.”

“What’s with the stuttering?” The new guy’s sneer was dismissive and cocky, his nose turned up at Nobu. “I get it, you were locked up back here with a token prisoner because you’re too much of a coward to handle the real…”

“That’s enough.” The new guy backed up, startled by the sharp command. Warden Osamu looked over Nobu, catching every jitter that ran through him and his inability to focus. He put a hand on his shoulder, holding through the flinch. “Go ahead and take a smoke break. Take your time, I’ve got all afternoon if you need it, son.” He let go, and Nobu quickly bowed as deeply as his uniform allowed him.

“Thank you, Osamu-san. I’ll try to be quick.” He shuffled down the hall on unsteady legs, and the new guy glared at him in disdain.

“Why do you put up with that? He took the job here, he should be able to do it.”

“He is fully capable. He’s been my best man for the better part of two decades, and in that time, he single handedly put down three different breakout attempts and more riots than I could physically record.” Osamu ignored the disbelieving look his recruit gave him, instead checking in on the only prisoner in the block.

The cell was spacious for solitary standards, ten feet on each side, and the bed and lavatory provided were both kept in decent condition. The prisoner, though, seemed blind to it all. He sat cross legged in the center of the room, his hands slack on his lap. His hair was ragged and hung low over his eyes, and the scant light that came through his barred window filtered through it like a sheet of plastic wrap. If he didn’t know better, Osamu might have suspected that he had passed in the
night. The prisoner never moved when he didn’t have to. He ate and drank sparsely and didn’t appear to so much as breathe.

“You’re still alive in there, right?” The prisoner’s mouth opened long enough to let out a puff of air, a cloud of mist dampening his lips. “You can speak up if you want. I read what those bastards did to you back in your last sentence. You won’t get the same treatment under my watch.”

“Nothing to say.” Well, three words were considerably more than he got in a string any other time. Osamu crouched down, bringing himself to eye level with the inmate.

“I’ve got a small favor to ask you. You might’ve picked it up, but the kid here has a gutful of vinegar and I’m half thinking his attitude will get him up a creek sooner or later. Think you can do something about that?”

“What are you saying?” The guard leaned back against the wall, thoroughly disappointed by what he was seeing. “You’re talking to this… delinquent brat like he’s some big deal. I’m starting to think all the stuff I’ve heard about your post here being one of the best was full of horse…”

“Fine.” One word, louder than the others, and the air bumped up ten degrees. His head tilted up, slowly revealing more of his face, until, through the gaps between his bangs, his eyes could be seen. The guard felt his guts drop, those crimson eyes observing him like a bug under a magnifying glass. This prisoner put him that far down the food chain, and he was starting to believe it.

“Who… Who the Hell…?”

“Yours is a slothful and arrogant heart. You take your position for granted, your title as officer a symbol of your position above everyone behind these bars.” The prisoner turned his eyes on the warden, who took their intensity in stride. “You were right. Unless he learns, I give him a week before he gets himself in trouble.” The guard’s continued silence spoke volumes, his neck quivering like the gills of a beached fish. Osamu took no joy in the procedure, but it was the only medicine he could think of.

“Son, you’ve heard the rumors, right? Of who we’ve got behind our bars?” The guard’s breathing returned to normal as the inmate looked back at his lap, those damned eyes hidden again.

“No fucking way. Is he…?”

“Leader of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts.” Osamu got back to his feet, stretching his old knees. “Thanks for giving him that slap. I’ll see that you get more scheduled time out of that cell.” The inmate was quiet again, and Osamu shook his head. “You can head back to the main building, son. Let my secretary know I’m on Kurusu duty again. She’ll know what it means.” The guard nodded numbly, and he followed in the footsteps of Nobu before him. When he was out of sight, Osamu sighed. “You knew what you were signing up for when you turned yourself in. You’ve had some time to get settled, so tell me, was it worth it?”

“One kid with no future in exchange for seven with all the potential in the world. Best deal I’ve ever taken.” The warden nodded, getting comfortable in his new post.

In the corners of Akira’s cell, untouched by light, the shadows twisted. Two outlines became clear, one of a winged demon, one of a masked hero.

“On the day we forged our contract, I never imagined this to be where it would lead us. It began in a cell, and so it ends. We have come far to arrive in the same position.”

“Perhaps, my comrade, but at least our captivity ensures the freedom of those dearest to us.
"Do not forget that."

"I am certain I speak for Joker and I, both, when I say I would sooner rend my wings than forget."

Akira let the banter of his Personas fill his ears. They were among his few rocks in the monotony of imprisonment, his candles in the cold of the darkest night. They helped him remember why he was there. Scaring guards and talking to himself, that was all he had to look forward to otherwise.

Of course, there was one other thing. He let his mind wander, imagining his old home. Sojiro would be behind the counter at that time, a pot of coffee ready for whoever stumbled in. Maybe one of his friends would be there, reminiscing. Maybe Bug was up in his old room. Hopefully she had company. She wasn’t alone anymore. She had friends to lean on.

Ryuji would be the first to offer, but that was mostly because he was the fastest of the lot. Man, how far he had come. He fought with an injury that was supposed to be borderline crippling just to support his crew. A loyal friend he was, more than any of the others, and that was saying a Hell of a lot.

He wondered what Yusuke was painting. Knowing him, it would be some sort of piece representing how they felt without him there. Or maybe something brighter, a celebration of their victory over Yaldabaoth. Either way, he would be agonizing over it, getting every little line in just the right place. What Akira would give for a glimpse of that art.

Come to think of it, it was about time for Ann’s midafternoon snack run. Crepes, in all likelihood. Shiho would probably be there, too. He remembered vividly how Ann had accidentally gotten the cream of one of those on her nose, and Shiho didn’t tell her until after she leaned in to lick it off. It was cliché as Hell, and they both laughed about it afterwards. They were a good couple. He knew they would last.

So would Makoto and Haru, zero doubts about that. They knew and accepted each other well enough to fuse a part of their souls together, after all. Assuming neither was stuck in important business, between Haru’s literal business stuff and both of them starting college, they were most certainly banging each other’s brains out. Since they didn’t have the Metaverse to put their physical strength and frustrations behind anymore… Well, he wished the best to Makoto’s long suffering hip bone.

Then there was… Heh, even thinking about his name was enough to make his heart hurt. He wondered if that cat had followed through with his last order. Maybe the pangs of sadness were whoever he threatened’s way of taking his challenge. Either way, he hoped he was happy, wherever he was. He deserved that much for putting up with being Akira’s secretary for how long. He hadn’t even known him a year, but now that he was gone, there was a hole he knew would never be filled again.

Wherever their paths took them, he knew his friends would find their happiness. They were every bit as stubborn as him. They would be happy, and they would be free. That was enough to keep him going. He won his war, and now he could rest.

…

…

…
“Psst.”

Huh, a hiss. The warden really did have a guard problem. They couldn’t even keep stray cats out of their facility.

“Hey, are you awake?”

Wait, it wasn’t just a hiss. No, it couldn’t be. He had to be going crazy, he had to…

“Joker, up here!”

His eyes shot open. The light from the window was blocked in the middle. He turned around, and standing in the way, just beyond the bars, was a smug black cat.

“Morgana!” He jumped to his feet, and his shadows followed him, overtaking him in a wave of black. They sunk from the cell, and the blob reemerged outside, Akira leaping from the ground like a mole to swoop in and grab the shocked cat in his arms. His fur was warm and soft and wonderful and alive.

“Wait, you…”

“Holy shit, you’re still alive! You have no freaking idea how much I’ve missed you. How the heck did you…?”

“Wait wait wait, you could have used Arsene to get out of that little box for the last month you’ve been here!??” Mona looked back through the window. On the other side of the cell, the warden pointedly ignored that his ward was no longer present. “Why didn’t you get out earlier? We would have gotten you a getaway vehicle!”

“It’s… not so simple.” Akira lowered him back to the ground, letting him see the wear and tear in his expression. “I signed a contract, Mona. As long as I’m in here, the others get to stay out there. I wouldn’t dream of escaping and putting them back on police radar.” Akira shook his head, rediscovering his pep from seeing his old friend not dead. “Now, I think the more important question is how you’re here right now? We saw you die!”

“Actually, you saw me teleport. Big difference.” Mona suddenly looked a bit sheepish. “Oh, and you should probably know I was taken to the Velvet Room to get the official sign off on my mission. We’re both lucky Master Igor can take a joke.” As much as he wanted to focus on Akira, Mona couldn’t help but look at the cell he was stuck in moments before. It made the attic look like a Palace. “You’re really stuck in here?”

“For the rest of my court appointed sentence.” Akira flopped backwards, feeling the grass on his skin for the first time in ages. “All three hundred something years of it.”

“Holy crap!”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure the bigwigs wanted me behind bars for the rest of my life so I couldn’t keep making a fool of them on the streets. No amount of good behavior will get me out of there until I’m a fossil.”

“Well then…” The smug look was back on that muzzle. Akira loved when there was a smug look on that muzzle. “I guess it’s a good thing we just might.” He tilted his head to the side, and Akira noticed a small, grey box tucked under his collar. He reached for it, and it was exactly what he thought it was.
“Isn’t this the camera we used on those douchebags that tried to pull a move on Makoto?”

“The very same. We thought you’d like to see what we’ve been up to. Go on, take a look.”

With his cat prodding him on, Akira opened the screen, a video already set up to play. He hit the button, and the footage rolled. It was a shot of Shibuya Station square. There was a crowd gathered, and from the bird’s eye view angle, he saw that they were listening to a speaker he knew well.

“People of Tokyo, would you truly place your faith in a system that would incarcerate the innocent and just in a bid to maintain the illusion of its security? As a citizen myself, I would not trust this smoke and mirror show. This is an abomination to all we hold as moral, and we cannot stand for it!” Yoshida stepped back, and a woman of dark hair and darker expression took his place. In her hands, she held a wooden sign painted up with an immaculate replica of a certain young man’s face.

“My son is a kind, hard-working man beloved by everyone who knows him. I stand as witness that his only crime was kindness towards a world imbued of cruelty. Even after he was burned once, he continued to be an upstanding member of society that looked out for all he crossed paths with. People of Tokyo, if you have seen him before, if you have interacted with him to your benefit or detriment, speak up now! If I lie, call me a liar, I grant you the stage to do so!”

“Yes, I know him!” A thick, muscular arm raised. “He’s a member of the gym I go to. He’s always supportive of the people in there trying to get stronger. Hell, he’s spotted for me a dozen times. No one else is half as dedicated to self-improvement.”

“I can vouch, too. I manage the flower shop down in the station. He always greets the customers with a smile and never fails to make them feel welcomed. He’s the best flower arranger we have. Please, what was he convicted of?”

“Our hometown is out in the countryside. There, a woman was accosted by a drunken man, and my son stepped in to protect her. The drunkard tripped when he got between them and sued him for assault.”

“No, he would never. He frequents an arcade out in Akihabara, and he never picks a fight. He’s the one that stops them before they happen, every single time. The charge is complete bullshit!” The crowd yelled out in outrage, sucked into the evolving tale. Yoshida came back to the front.

“I can also attest to his good nature. Those who often listen to my speeches may remember him as my assistant from months ago. He is an earnest, honest young man who seeks only true justice as he knows it. He is not a delinquent, he is not a criminal, and he does not deserve the punishment laid upon him.” Akira didn’t know when the tears started to flow, his first sign of them coming when one dripped onto the screen. He didn’t bother wiping his face, too enraptured by the video.

“Pretty cool, huh? And they’re not the only ones. Chihaya’s been telling everyone who’ll listen about you, and Haru’s putting her personal savings towards spreading the word and investigating the original assault case. You stuck your neck out for us, now we’re doing the same for you. Just hold on a little longer, okay? We’re getting you out of this hole.” Akira put his hand out to scratch behind Mona’s ears.

“You guys… You’re the best. You know that?”

“We love you too, Joker. Phantom Thieves forever.”
“Someone help me!”

In and up, out and down.

“What do you think we could do? He’d fucking kill us!”

In and up, out and down.

“I don’t know, distract him or something! I want off this crazy ride!”

“Could you pipe down? You’re interrupting my reps.”

The hulking mountain of a man stuck on the bench press board was quickly silenced, and Akira continued his weight lifting in peace. Nobu shook his head slowly. He knew letting him interact with other prisoners wouldn’t end well.

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It was a faint feeling at first. A sense of imminent danger for someone in the area. Akira closed his eyes, focusing on the sensation. Robin Hood crept through the halls, unseen in his shadow state, and hunted down the source. Through him, Akira saw one of the communal recreation cells. In the corner, one of the prisoners stood over another and cracked his knuckles, growling through twisted, messed up teeth.

“Been waiting a long time for this. I got a bone to pick with that shit business of yours, and I’ll be real happy if I can pick it from your ribs.”

“If I have wronged you, I can only apologize.” Akira’s ears perked. The threatened man was sitting on a bench. His skin was somewhat pale, his hair buzzed down to prison standards, but Akira recognized him. It was hard to forget one of his most pivotal targets.

“I don’t want your apology, shit for brains!” He grabbed Okumura by the collar and dragged him up, producing a sharp piece of metal from his sleeve. A guard acted quickly, rushing to unlock the door, but the latch was catching. “I want you to bleed!”

“Care to repeat that, you son of a bitch?” Suddenly, the attacker became the attacked, getting dragged back from his target. Okumura dropped to his seat, and he held his sore neck as his savior bent the snaggletoothed man backwards, looming over him. He tried to swipe at Akira with his shank, but it bounced off his skin like a sheet of plate metal. “If you want blood so bad, I can get you a pint of your own, no problem at all.”

“Wait, don’t you know? That’s that Okumura guy, the one that sucked folks dry with his food company. He don’t deserve protecting!”

“He broke the law, now he’s in jail for it. Don’t you know who I am?” Akira leaned in closer, and on his face, his mask burned into existence over crimson eyes. “I’m the one that put him
in here, and I’ll be damned if I let some snaggletoothed little punk like you put all of my hard work to…” Akira stopped, blinking in surprise. Then a grin as wide as the ocean and as sharp as barbed wire crossed his face. “No way, you’re that wannabe rapist from Shibuya!”

“Huh? How do you…?”

“Ah, it feels like it was only yesterday, doesn’t it?” Akira pulled him up, locking an arm around his neck and twisting his arm so his shank pointed at his mouth. “It made me feel so alive. I bet you didn’t expect me to send that footage of you guys in anyway after the beating, right?” He leered over his shoulder, the predatory gleam sparking memories in Snaggletooth’s head. “Hey, since we’re both here now, you care for a round two?”

“Help me! For the love of God, help me!”

“Sorry, gods don’t like messing with me for some reason. I know a real reasonable devil you could deal with, though.”

“Okay, break it up, you two!” A pair of guards grabbed both Akira and Snaggletooth, pulling them apart. They were dragged towards opposite exits, and even as Akira let his mask fade away, the look of raw terror in his foe’s face pleased him. When he glanced behind him, he saw his guard was good old Nobu, and he managed to hide part of his earlier fear.

“Hey, you’re getting used to me. Neat.” Once they were out, Akira tried to slip his arms out, but Nobu held tight. “Come on, you know I won’t fight you. I’ll go back to my cell like a good boy.”

“Sorry, but procedure dictates we search it for a means of exit after a successful escape. We’ll be taking you to a backup cell for a few hours while that’s happening.”

“Fine, fine.” The second time, Akira succeeded in freeing himself and rotated his shoulders. “Lead the way, my dude.” As they left, he looked back to the communal cell. A guard was talking to Okumura, who looked at Akira. He was shaken, but alive. Unlike Akira himself, his sentence wasn’t for life. Haru would want him back in one piece at the end of it.

Akira was guided down all sorts of side corridors he didn’t recognize, eventually finding himself in yet another solitary wing. Unlike the old one, though, the doors here were solid with no windows to speak of. A true isolation cell. Nobu opened one, and Akira stepped in.

“Alright, a guide will be back to get you in a while. Finish up your business in there before then.” Akira raised an eyebrow, and his confusion escalated when Nobu rang a bell. The door closed, and Akira was alone.

He looked around, and he noticed he wasn’t in an empty room. There was something tall covered by a big tarp at the back wall, and at its left was a table. Something else was covered there, but this time by a big napkin. Looking closer, there was a note on the front in fine handwriting.

“Kurusu-san.

You might be interested to know that I am in the same prison as you, by some astronomical miracle. I am aware that you are the one to thank for my continued living, and unlike the rest of the populace, I remain fully aware of the events of Christmas Eve. On behalf of the people of the world, who cannot recall to thank you properly, I promise to allocate as much of my remaining wealth as I am able to providing you some comfort in this bleak place.

I would recommend uncovering the large device in front of you first. You will see, or rather,
hear, why soon. I wish you the best in all things.

Kunikazu Okumura.”

There was a hastily scribbled addendum below the main body, and the ink was still wet.

“I also thank you for your actions in the cell earlier today. I have nothing else to offer, but sincerely, thank you. I feared it was my end when he drew his weapon.”

Curiosity overtook Akira, and he reached for the big tarp. He yanked it off, and when it fell, he was almost blinded by an array of neon lights. The machine was an arcade, and at its front was a pair of light gun controllers. The screen loudly displayed the title Gun About. There was also a pair of headphones with an attached microphone. He put them on, and as soon as his breath touched the mic, music wasn’t the only thing he heard.

“Hey, is that you, Akira?”

“Shinya?”

“Yes, it’s me. Pretty cool, right?” Akira was left speechless and gaping. “That Okumura girl you hang out with helped us set up that cell for you in the prison with some people on the inside. You’re cleared for a trip every other day, but I should warn you that I’ll be rotating out with Hifumi now and then. She says you need to keep those Shogi skills sharp, so she’s working on getting a long distance electronic thing put together for you.”

“I… I don’t know what to say. This is amazing!”

“Oh, did you look under the other cover yet? A good game only gets better with good food.” Now supremely interested, Akira pulled the next gift open. On the table, still slick with cooking grease and steaming, was a tier one Big Bang Challenge Burger.

“Holy…”!

“Just munch while you play. You’ve got a few hours, more than enough time to pick at it, right?”

“Shinya, buddy, you just made my day.” Akira picked up his weapons, twirling them around his fingers. “I just hope you don’t get too butthurt when I beat you.” A hearty laugh came through the headset.

“Remember, the target isn’t the size of a skyscraper, so you’re actually going to have to aim this time.”

“Holy crap, this coffee is great.” The prisoner looked to the kitchen, where the terror of the weight room was juggling work at every station at once. He lifted his mug and called out. “You’ve got a good brew, kid.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Akira’s eyes jumped to him. They jittered erratically, and he constantly scratched at his neck. “Nothing they have back here is right. The brew stand is that
automated crap, and these beans are way past season. And the mugs are half plastic. That shit bleeds into the flavor! I can’t drink this garbage.” The prisoners all looked at their cups in mounting amazement.

“Wait, you’re saying it gets better than this?”

“I could drink my normal fix and piss out a better quality coffee than what you have there.”

His itching moved down to his arms as he returned to his cooking. “Freaking old man giving me good taste...”

The first guy to bring it up sipped at his drink again, and he fell into deep thought.

“You think getting that kid behind a better rig would be worth starting a riot over?”

As handy as they were, the constant extrasensory signals were a bit overwhelming at first. It was almost nostalgic getting used to a new power again. It was a lucky break that Akira had been focusing correctly to feel Okumura being assaulted that day, but as he progressed, he found his awareness was able to spread over a wide general area, and when something of note touched his web, he could make like a spider and trace it down the threads.

He had been made privy to many secrets behind the thick walls of prison. He knew the janitor on the third floor only regularly cleaned the paths his superiors walked on the way to the fourth floor. He knew the guard on the second floor often took naps on duty. And the warden was quite pleased to have a psychic drug hound on standby.

But this day, there was a signal coming in he had trouble discerning. Someone new had entered the premises under the escort of two officers, not guards. Normally, that was a sign of a new prisoner, but there was something about this one that was oddly familiar to him. He couldn’t quite pin it, but his heart was telling him that it was a person of high importance. Then he had an idea. He opened his third eye, and all became clear.

It was the presence of an awakened arcana, one he could only associate with impending exercise and ramen.

He sprung to his feet and ran to the door of his cell, making Nobu jump back in fear as the bars clattered. His eyes strained to accommodate his sixth sense’s full capacity. There was no way in Hell it could be him. He signed the contract. They had a deal, damnit! Through the walls of the facility, he found the person responsible for tripping his alarm, and he immediately settled. The frame was too thin to be Ryuji. It was a woman, maybe in her early to mid-twenties. His fear was laid to rest, but his fascination grew. If he was reading the situation correctly, this might have been a great chance to follow up on a certain suspicion.

“Arsene. Think you can draw her friends away?” Two shadows rose on the walls behind him, one with burning red eyes.

“Simplicity itself. They are moths, and I know just the flame they will follow.” One shadow left him, and the other readied himself for duty.

“Shall I extend an invitation?”
“How do you like our facility so far?” Light brown hair bobbed as the woman nodded enthusiastically.

“It’s impressive. I always wondered how you could keep order with so many prisoners in this small of a space, but you guys pull it off.” The officer that asked started to chuckle, but his partner swatted him lightly on the shoulder.

“Come on, you know she’s from a small town. Inaba just has a holding facility tacked onto the police station, right?”

“Yeah, we never really need more than that. It’s been years since anything bigger than a petty theft or an intoxicated driver showed up.” The girl actually looked a bit embarrassed by that. She knew she was in a much bigger ballpark. “Thanks for bringing me in on tour. It’s been fun to see what other outfits have to work with.”

“We’re the fourth station here in Tokyo you’ve visited, right? Are you thinking about transferring? Dojima-san speaks highly of your work ethic, and we could use that around these parts.”

“Sorry, but I was mostly just curious. When you’re friends with two investigators, you hear about all sorts of crazy stuff.”

“Ah, that’s a shame, but I get where you’re coming from. You must have heard some big things from…”

“We need backup over here!” A guard ran up to the group, panting and sweating heavily. “There’s a riot down in communal block B, and we need more hands to restrain it!” The woman clenched her fists, her eyes hardening.

“Should I help?”

“No, we can handle it.” One of the officers held up a hand, but his smile was appreciative. “You’re here on leisure. Let us on-duty folks earn our paychecks. Why don’t you head back to the break room and wait for us there?” With a small amount of effort to quell her stubborn instincts, she pocketed her hands and relaxed.

“I guess, if you’re sure.”

“Thanks for understanding. Alright, let’s hurry up before someone gets hurt.” The guard led the way to the scuffle, and as soon as they were out of view, the woman smiled.

“Wow, lucky me. And here I thought it’d be hard to get some me time.” She thought back to the map she had printed out before coming, remembering all of the small corridors that she hadn’t been offered to see on the tour. It only made sense that a high-security mark had to be in one of them, right? “Now, where to start…?”

“Greetings, madam.” She jumped at the whisper in her ear. She looked around, worried she had almost been caught in the act, but there was no one to be found.
“Uh, who’s there?”

“Look down.” At her feet, she only saw her shadow, but then she realized something was wrong about it. The shoulders were way too broad, and it almost looked like there were wings coming off of its head. “My master requested an audience with thee, though I should note his terminology was not quite so formal.”

On the outside, she maintained her confused appearance, but inside, she couldn’t shake the feeling that her lead had found her.

“What the…?”

“I hate to be so direct, but I know thou art quite aware of what I am, Chariot.” The shadow slipped down the hall, taking the opposite turn. “I respect thine spirit of secrecy, however, and my master shall as well. Know that we’ve no intent of enforcing compliance. To impede on the will of the good hearted shall never be our way. If thou art intrigued, however, allow me to be thine guide.”

The shadow waited, and when she followed him, he continued to lead the way. The route was complex and winding, avoiding the paths of high traffic where she would be spotted and flagged down. Despite that, she constantly felt like she was being watched, but there was no malice behind it. Rather, it was more passive, like a cat monitoring the room from atop its cat tree.

Eventually, after a number of stairs down to the lowest floor, the path lead into a hall on the very outer layer of the prison. It was dead quiet, devoid of even insects, and the air was notably warmer. The figure she followed made a sharp turn, melting into the darkness of what she discovered to be the only occupied cell. Within, two blackened figures lingered, watching from the far back wall. In front of them, sitting cross legged and hunched over on the floor, was a lone prisoner. She stepped closer, and he smiled.

“Hey there. Welcome to my corner of the block.” His head lifted, and when his grey eyes met hers, they flashed. For a split second, they were as golden as a Shadow’s. Her first instinct was to go on the physical defensive, but to her surprise, she felt her magic welling up, too. “You’re a fiery one, aren’t you? Your mindset is that of a warrior, reflected by Haraedo. And I like the twin lightsaber katana. Very stylish.” The woman’s surprise was massive, but so, too, was her excitement. Was this the one?

“You can see my Persona?”

“And your arcana. I’ve got to say, you gave me a pretty big shock. For a second, I thought the bastards went and nabbed a good friend of mine. I know, that’s not your fault, but…” He held up a hand, requesting she waited while he laughed to himself. “Look at me, getting all talkative about nothing at all. Sorry, you probably aren’t here because you wanted to hear me yammer on pointlessly. So, introductions.” He pushed himself up, rising to his feet. His hands naturally found their ways to his sides, his thumbs slipping into the hem of his pants since he had no pockets to make use of.

“The name’s Akira Kurusu.” Bingo! Finally, after nearly a month of searching… “For the record, you’re looking at me like a big fish at the end of a line. You wouldn’t happen to know who I am, would you?”

“Darn, you caught me.” She held her hand out, sticking it between the bars of the door. “I’m Chie Satonaka, and your group is a hard lot to find.”

“There we go, some honesty.” He took her offered handshake. Her grip was like an iron
vice, but friendly at the same time. “I take it you want something with the Phantom Thieves of Hearts?”

“Not me, exactly. I suck at asking the right questions. That’s why I’m an officer, not a detective.” She reached into her pocket and produced a notepad and pen. “You could call me the scout, I guess, and now that we know where you are, you don’t mind answering some questions for a friend when she gets here, do you?”

“On two conditions.” Akira slouched over, a measured, calm air overtaking him. “First, she has to answer some for me, too.”

“Yeah, we can totally do that.”

“Great. Now, this next one is the most important.” His joviality disappeared, and his eyes closed. “I’m going to choose to believe that you guys, as Persona users, understand what we really deal with. In that spirit, I may trust your friend with some sensitive names and events so you don’t have to dig through a mountain of allegory and fake names. I have ears everywhere, and if any of them hear about a stab in the back using that intel…” He scowled slightly, but then it eased up, seemingly running out of seriousness as his chill demeanor resurfaced and his eyes opened. “Eh, you’re a sharp one, considering you tracked me down. I think you know what I’m getting at.” Chie couldn’t help but smile. There was an element of protectiveness in the leader of the Phantom Thieves that she knew well. It made her want to trust him.

“Wow, maybe don’t threaten an officer in the middle of a jail.”

“I’m already locked up for the rest of my life, and sharp things don’t work too well on me. Do your worst.” Suddenly, he distanced himself from the immediate conversation, his gaze going fuzzy and scattered. “Feels like the distraction is winding down. You might want to get back to that break room. I’d hate to get you in trouble for my sake.”

“Probably for the best. Dojima-san would never let me hear the end of it if he found out I wandered through this place on my own.” She jotted down her last thoughts before pocketing the pad and bowing slightly to Akira. “Thanks for being so cooperative. It made my job a whole lot easier.”

“Anytime miss. Take it easy.” He waved her off with a nod, and she took her leave. Once she was out of view of the cell, she raised her hand. In her palm, twinkling with cerulean light, was an elaborately designed blue card radiating spiritual power. Naoto needed to hear about this.

“How’re you doing down there?”

“Just peachy.” In and up, out and down.

“Come on, we need more guys!”

Nobu was powerless to stop them as more prisoners climbed up on the benches, careful to keep the sides even. Between them, resting on a third with his hands firmly on a connecting bar, was Akira. The guard had no idea how they got so many people cleared for the weight room at once, let alone how they stacked them all on their makeshift barbell.
“What’s this all about?” Nobu jumped, once more caught off guard by his superior’s entrance.

“I’m sorry, Osamu-san. They started wondering how much he could lift, then one thing lead to another, and…”

“I get the picture.” The warden watched Akira lifting every prisoner from the east block, barring one that stayed next to him with a dry rag to wipe the sweat from his forehead. The whole lot was cheering him on, their jubilant calls going off every time their perches went up. “Let me know how many he ends up with.”

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Akira twiddled his thumbs, having nothing else to do as he sat at the far side of yet another interrogation room. He was really getting sick of these things, but this time he at least had moderate certainty he wouldn’t be pushed to the brink of death. That didn’t stop Arsene from clutching his knife, and though Robin Hood pleaded for rationality, he, too, held his bow at the ready.

After what felt like hours, the door opened, admitting only one individual. They were wrapped by a dark blue trench coat, and a matching hat sat atop their head. The curve of their face leaned towards the feminine, but he made no assumptions until after she spoke, her soft grey eyes firmly on him.

“Good morning. I hope you haven’t been made to wait too long on my behalf.”

“I’m a prisoner. There’s literally nothing for me to do but wait.” She nodded in understanding. Then she lifted a hand and snapped her fingers. The camera to his left beeped, and its light went off. They were no longer under surveillance. “Straight to business, then?”

“We have much to discuss. You did say you wanted information from me, which I can only presume to be relating to the incident behind our awakening to the power of Persona.” Akira let his shoulders drop, and his bodyguards sheathed their weapons. That was the keyword they needed.

“You presume correctly, Detective Prince.”

“Pardon, but should that not be Detective Princess?” The shadows parted, and from them stepped the masked hero. Naoto watched him in idle fascination, noting the stiffness in his posture and the way his eyes avoided her. The winged demon soon joined him in the physical plain.

“This is an age of fluid identity of the self. Excuse Hood, he is ill suited for certain facets of the modern day.”

“Aren’t we all? Speaking of, I can’t help but notice his discomfort. Do I offend in some manner?”

“It’s not you, specifically.” Akira looked back to Hood, who lowered his head. “His original master was Goro Akechi, the New Detective Prince. You’re probably bringing up a few old memories for him.” Naoto’s eyes narrowed in thought.

“So he is involved in this…”
“That would be the tasteful way to phrase it.” Arsene set a hand on Hood’s shoulder, and he shook off his daze. “Thank you, my friend. I fear I was not anticipating this encounter.”

“You can go for a walk while we’re talking if it would help. Arsene’s got my back.” Hood nodded, and he sunk back into the darkness. A moment later, his presence was no longer felt in the room. “Sorry about that. I should probably start with Akechi, then, to help clarify.”

“Actually, I would much prefer if you gave your account of events in their proper order.” She produced a notepad, and Akira pinned it as the same one Chie had used in their meeting. “And your other request has been noted. I promise that all information given today will remain amongst those to whom it is the most important.”

“Thanks, you don’t know how much that means to me.”

“I believe I have some idea.” Her thoughts went back to Chie’s personal comments on Kurusu’s character. He was, indeed, familiar in some ways. “Now, I understand you were originally brought to Tokyo by extenuating circumstances. Shall we begin there?”

And so, the next several hours were filled with accounts of recent history. It was officially an interrogation, but the two within treated it more like stories around a campfire. Akira detailed his entire Phantom Thief career in the same detail as he had to Sae before, but without the addling influence of faulty truth serum.

He also made sure to point out a few moments he found personally important at greater length, for one reason or another. His team’s near death at the hands of their first collapsing Palace. The ensuing tremors of terror and the day spent “studying” with friends to recuperate. The awakening of their most fearsome member via mutilation of a “rape bot.” His next near death at the hands of a horribly executed interrogation (which did not fail to sicken Naoto to her stomach at the corruption within her own ranks.) His rescuing the last fragments of Crow from the clutches of a corrupting god, and shooting that same god in the head repeatedly.

And, of course, the many, many, many statues defaced all across the timeline. He estimated they had single handedly boosted the stock value of Tokyo’s makeup industry by five percent over the course of their operation.

All in all, he concluded his thievery business had been quite quirky.

Naoto was not one to bail on a deal. She, in turn, laid out all of her own little team’s experience with the other world, and much of it opened Akira’s eyes to a number of truths. He had suspected some, but others left him with whole new threads to explore. There were other false gods enacting their will on humanity. These other gods created pockets with entirely different rule sets, both in their operation and that of the Persona users generated. The Wild Card, the Velvet Room, the transformation of the world and its people, it had all happened before. And it could happen again. When she finally exhausted her supply of information, he raised a hand.

“Question, is ours the first Persona outfit you’ve tracked down, or are there others out there?”

“Yours is the first we have managed to find, but I would attribute that to the fact that this Yaldabaoth was the first false god to come to power after the fall of Izanami. It seems that those without the power of Persona, or a close connection to such individuals, have their memories of such invasions wiped. I would not be surprised if many cycles occurred before either of ours, but we simply don’t recall them.”

Akira looked down to the table, the gears in his head turning. Yaldy wasn’t the only force
trying to steer humanity for its own purposes. How many beings thought to use them as pawns? How many had died in that pursuit? How close had they come to the end?

“Well shit.” He leaned back in his chair, balancing it on the rear legs as he propped his knees against the table. “All this has been real informative, but there’s not much I can do with it from in here. You know how awful it is having to sit on your hands at a time like this, right?”

“Yes, I most certainly do.” A knowing grin crossed Naoto’s face, and Arsene tilted his head. This one was capable of feeling mischief? “I’ve heard these Confidants, as you call them, have been working to free you, correct?”

“Where did you…? You know what, doesn’t matter. Yeah, but they’ve hit a brick wall. Until they can strike that assault off my record, the guys in charge won’t let me out for fear of getting shown up again. And that bastard Shido went and burned all of the official records, so we don’t have jack to work with.”

“I wouldn’t say that much. You watched his announcement of guilt on live television, correct?” She reached into the folds of her trench coat, and with Akira’s prying eyes on her, she pulled out a small square of laminated paper. “During the event, he tried to spur a manhunt for the woman he forced to testify against you, even providing a picture, but he dropped it when accosted by his own guards. It might have been trampled, had a certain someone not claimed it for their own.” She flicked the paper over the table, and when Akira caught it, a face from the past jumped out at him.

“Wait, that blue glove was you?”

“Oh course.” She leaned over the table, her hands folded in front of her. “I had suspicions of his use of the supernatural for many months, and I knew his fixation on this one case, above any other, meant it had some grander importance. I didn’t expect it to lead me to you, but it would be far from the first time uncanny luck aided an investigation.” She felt a warmth radiating over her as Akira rose from his seat, his eyes sparkling with unmasked glee. “I will be turning this over to a certain journalist friend of yours at the earliest possibility. From there, I suspect it will only be a matter of weeks before the pretenses behind your original arrest unravel.”

“I… I don’t…” A dark hand fell on Akira’s shoulder.

“It seems thou shall be a free man once more, unburdened by the label of criminal. Our fight was not in vain.” The rewrite of his entire reality took time to set in, but once it breached his hide, an overjoyed laughter claimed him. It took longer, still, for him to return his attention to the bringer of good news.

“Holy shit, if I weren’t asexual as fuck, I’d be tempted to kiss you right now!”

“That’s quite alright.” She held up a hand, politely declining the offer. “No price is too steep in the pursuit of the truth, and you have made a sizeable contribution. Besides, I don’t think my husband would take too kindly to your offer.”

“Phantom Thieves specialize in the theft of hearts…” Arsene was soon swatted by Akira, and he chuckled as he straightened out his pristine white coat. “I jest, of course.”

“You suck at jokes, dude.” The last wind of excitement passed, and Akira lowered himself back to his seat. “The others might want to thank you in person. Make sure to visit them, or I promise you, Bug will have you tracked in a week and you’ll have a rowdy bunch of teens on your doorstep.”
“Actually, I had something a touch more formal in mind.” Naoto stood, sliding her chair in to signify the end of the session. “You will hear from us shortly. Please try to keep your friends from jumping the gun.”

“I can make few promises.” Naoto nodded, but before she turned for the door, she recalled she had one last matter of business.

“By the way, thank you for allowing me to summon my Persona for the duration of our meeting.”

“You noticed?” Akira smiled wryly, balancing his head on his hand. “I figured it was only fair, giving you a way to protect yourself in case you didn’t trust me.”

“It is appreciated, but you should take care in how you utilize that power.” She tilted her hat and knocked on the door. “Chie has yet to see the privilege subside.”

The soft strumming of a harp drew Akira deeper into his dreams. His eyes opened, and he found his cell had been radically transformed. The bed beneath him was plush, lined by a velvet comforter, and the ceiling and walls, previously stony and cold, were padded by some hybridization of a pillow and wallpaper. He was allowed the freedom to crawl from his rest at his own leisure, and the door to the center of the panopticon was still wide open.

“It is good to see you again, Trickster.” Lavenza greeted him with a curtsy, and he nodded back. “My Master wishes to speak to you.”

“Now, Lavenza.” Igor’s chastisement was gentle but unwavering, a far cry from the man who had taken his seat before. “You were quite glad to hear I was extending an invitation. There is no need to act so distant to a friend.” She blushed brilliantly, relenting with her secret exposed.

“A sizeable part of me could not stand seeing him imprisoned in the waking world. It did not seem to me a fair reward after all he has done for the world.”

“Clearly you and many others are in agreement.” Igor opened his arms wide, his smile that little more genuine. “You have reached the end of your trials, Trickster, and obtained true freedom. For what little of your journey I was allowed to oversee, you were a marvelous guest.”

“Thanks. I take that as a high compliment, considering what I heard about the last guy.”

“Yes, the truth seeker. Perhaps I should seek him out in the near future as well. Quiet, but enlightened that one. Ah, but that is neither here nor there.” Igor took the top paper from the side of his desk and dampened the tip of his quill pen. “I had a small piece of business to address with you alongside the traditional thanks. Many guests have touched the world in a meaningful way, but very few have aided the Velvet Room directly. For freeing this place from the corruption of Yaldabaoth, and by way of apology for our failure to secure the nurturing grounds of the soul for your journey, I offer you a favor.” Akira failed to stop the snort.

“You mean like a genie?”

“If that comparison pleases. You need not claim your reward immediately, of course. Feel
free to think on it for a time, decades if need be. When the time comes, I swear to pay back every deed you have done for the Velvet Room and all Wild Cards to follow you.”

“Actually, I already had a request in mind.” Igor sat up straight, his gaze locked on Akira.

“Oh? Then please, state your desire.”

“It’s not really a desire, so much as… a business proposition.” Akira neared the desk, freeing his hands from his pockets. “There are going to be more mad gods to come, right?”

“I fear so. They who bare the power of Persona have always claimed victory against them, but the margin has, admittedly, been shrinking in recent years. This is the closest we have come to destruction in a long time.”

“Then how about we rally a proper army to greet the next one?” Lavenza gasped behind him.

“Do you mean to say you wish to align yourself directly with the Velvet Room?”

“Hear me out.” Akira gestured to a blank page, and Igor, intrigued, supplied him one and his quill pen. “Yaldabaoth managed to catch you two off guard and forced you to desperate measures. If you have outside agents to call on, you would have a more direct way to respond. As a bonus, you would have a few people on hand with experience facing Shadows to strike back.”

“Hmm…”

“But, Trickster…” Lavenza stepped around the desk, standing at her Master’s side. “…Such instances always generate Persona users to face the danger, and your struggle against Yaldabaoth, though long and harrowing, allowed you and your friends to reach a place of greater peace in your lives beyond the turmoil. Would you take that opportunity from the next saviors to arise?”

“Not at all. If, like you say, new users arrive, we’ll just be their backup if they need it.”

“Ah, so you would be…” Igor snickered into his gloves. “…The Joker up our sleeve?”

“Exactly!” Akira turned the paper around, revealing a rough contract. “And, since the exact nature of this room demands a contract, this one between the two of us will keep the gate open for me. What do you think?”

“I think…” A hand extended, and Akira took it. “…You have a deal.”

“You are certain of this, Master?”

“Is it not intriguing, Lavenza, to see the field of play evolve before our eyes? Perhaps this is what his destiny as the Trickster truly entails.” He retook his pen and signed his name. As soon as the tip lifted, the text flashed bright blue. “And so it is done. When the day comes that your aid is needed, I shall send for you. Now, if you would satisfy an old man’s curiosity, what brought on this idea?”

“Nothing much, really.” In the space beyond the room, an alarm rang. Akira smiled as he felt his body in the real world stirring. “I just want to see humanity freed.”
Metal clanked and clattered as the gate retracted. The sun was warm on Akira’s skin, and the air smelled a touch sweeter somehow. The chatter of the prison died down to a faint tremor in the wind, and even then, he was sure those with only five senses couldn’t hear that much.

“How’s it feel to be out of the hole?” Warden Osamu smiled warmly at him, acknowledging him as a fellow citizen, nothing less.

“It’s great. Maybe now I can get a decent meal.” The warden chuckled at his ex-ward’s infamous snark.

“I’ve seen enough releases like this to tell you that you’ve got a feast waiting for you when you get back home.” There was a honk, and a short way down the road, a streak of blonde hair poked out of the sunroof of a black van. Ryuji’s eyes lit up, and when he inhaled, Akira braced himself.

“Yo, dude, over here!” He flailed his arms like an amusement park attraction, and Akira felt pulled towards him as though by gravity.

“Go on, then. It’s rude to keep your family waiting, son.” Osamu extended a hand, and he was quick to take it.

“Thanks for the hospitality. You’re a lot better than the last warden I had.” Osamu laughed, but when he pulled his hand back, he found it now had a card. There was an address on it, and the name LeBlanc was boldly printed on top. “Swing by sometime. I’ll show you what real coffee tastes like.” Akira waved as he walked away, and Osamu slipped the gift somewhere safe. After months of hearing about it, he had a sudden strange urge to try some himself.

As soon as Akira was by the door, it flew open, and a sea of arms lanced out. He left one prison, only to be entombed in another. He much preferred this one, even when the entire Thief ball was compressed by Ryuji when he dropped back through the sunroof.

“Woo, he’s back!”

“Ryuji, chill, you’re crushing us!”

“Sorry, Futaba, but I’m not letting this dork slip away on us again.”

“Aw, should I get my kimono?”

“And that’s my cue.” Ryuji retreated to the back seat on a wave of laughter, and the mob of Thieves dispersed, letting Akira see them all for the first time since December.

“Hey, Yusuke, you’ve filled out some.”

“Indeed.” He was still on the lithe side, but he no longer seemed like the branch of a dried out tree. “Our many meetings on the topic of releasing you from captivity gave Boss ample opportunity to round out my diet. I must say, I cannot recall ever feeling so… awake, one might say.”

“Now that the big hug is out of the way…” Akira’s cheek stung as a slap crossed it. Ann recoiled from it herself, blowing on her palm. “That’s for running off and sacrificing yourself without telling us.”

“Oh, uh…” He had forgotten that little detail. “Yeah, you guys have the right to be totally peeved at me for that. Anyone else?”
“Just one more.” Makoto took the opening to slug him in the shoulder as hard as she could. He was thankful to not be normal, otherwise the bone would have cracked like glass. “There, I think we’re even now. Welcome back, Joker.” His arm throbbed, but he couldn’t think of anywhere he would rather be.

“Good to be back, Queen.”

“Here, kid.” The driver finally found an opening to interject, holding out a large thermos. “A little bird tells me you’ve been missing this.”

“Oh Hell yes I have!” He swiped it and popped off the lid in one wave of the arm. He didn’t bother with the cap cup, pouring it directly into his waiting mouth. It was nutty, and rich, and burned like the heart of the sun, but it was so freaking good. He let out a pleased sigh as the coffee ran dry, moments before he would have drowned in it. “Oh God I needed that. Thanks, Boss. I owe you one.”

“Oh, don’t look at me. Your coworker made that batch.”

“So?” Haru leaned in over the back seat with an expecting smile. “How have I progressed?”

“Let me put it this way.” He hunted for the cap, wherever he threw it in his haste. “If your café doesn’t take off immediately, I’ll eat my glasses.”

“Hehe, thanks!” Akira took one more look over his assembled friends, but he noticed there was one missing. There should have been a fuzz ball in his lap.

“Hey, where’s Morgana?”

“ Took you long enough to ask.” The radio pitched in, and the engine purred. Akira was smacked by disbelief.

“Wait, is that…?”

“I finally figured out how to shape shift in reality!”

Alright, Mona! In that case…” Akira propped his seat backwards, putting his heels up on the dash for old times’ sake. “Let’s blow this popsicle stand, noble steed.”

“Aye aye, Joker!”

“Next stop, LeBlanc.” Sojiro turned the keys, and the engine started. “We’re getting you some real food. Then, we’re going to Destinyland.”

“Huh?”

“I may have rented the park again to celebrate your release.” Haru looked oh-so pleased with herself. “And I may have invited everyone you know.”

“Actually, they invited themselves.” Makoto’s correction was swift and accurate. “They would have busted in to see you anyway, you know, so the formality of an invitation was hardly needed.”

“Guys…”

“We know, we know.” Futaba reached over the back seat to wrap her arms loosely around his neck. “We love you, too, big guy.”
A cheer of agreement roared through the Mona van, and then they were off. He already loved Tokyo, but that day, everything on the road ahead seemed so much brighter.

Chapter End Notes

I knew this would be a big one, but you want to know how big it was? There were, like, three scenes I cut so it didn't reach the length of a small novel in its own right. I planned this to be a traditional shorts-based chapter (you know, the supposed point of this story), but it was the longest chapter of the lot. (In case you don't want to count yourself, it's about 10k words. 24 pages according to the document. Yikes.)

One chapter left, and the observant reader might know where I'm going with it already. See you there. Oh, and stick around for the end notes of that chapter when it drops. I have some... special announcements.
Phantom Thieves Forever

Chapter Summary

The epilogue.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Akira Kurusu was a free man, but that didn’t mean there weren’t a few catches. It was decided that, in order to not run afoul of a mountain of paperwork from Shujin, he should at least finish the scheduled year of attendance, though now without the threat of a third imprisonment hanging over him.

That worked just fine for him. It bought him a couple more months with his friends, and he made damn sure to use every second well. His stomach constantly complained between assaults of ramen with Ryuji and numerous Big Bang eat-offs with Haru. Every bone was contorted from modeling for Yusuke. He was even elected as a sort of secret service by Ann, Shiho, and Haru, working with their eye in the sky Futaba to keep Makoto in the dark as they set up a… special evening for the four. She didn’t walk quite right for three weeks after Valentine’s Day, and the first few days of that she just sort of stumbled around like a sex zombie. She eagerly awaited Haru’s birthday, when she could return the favor in full force.

His Confidants got their share of him, too. Shinya and Hifumi somehow worked out a way to handicap his increasingly inhuman gaming capabilities, forcing him to play Gun About and Shogi at the same time, to the amazement of the arcade’s patrons. The victory tally was split even on both fronts, as none of them were willing to give ground when one pulled ahead.

He was regularly invited to poker night with Takemi, Kawakami, Chihaya, and Ohya, both as a participant and a way to make sure a certain journalist didn’t get royally hammered in the middle of LeBlanc. He made liberal use of his shadowy Personas and Morgana’s sneaky paws to swap out her hard booze with fizzy fruit punch, but by that point, she was always too far gone to notice.

Yoshida finally got to meet the man that supplied his guards with weapon stand-ins when they were called to watch the previously comatose Okumura. Akira had never bared witness to such a fire-and-ice personality difference, but Old Man Tora walked out of Untouchables with a shiny new model handgun for his mantle anyway. No matter how you sliced it, Iwai was good at what he did.

Mishima, to his surprise, had managed to get a girlfriend while Akira was in the slammer. He said she appreciated him for his thinking under pressure during the Christmas Eve incident. It took Akira half a second to figure out who he had hooked up with. Who was it? Well, let’s just say two vs. one Shogi was almost as interesting as the arcade challenge. He was thoroughly convinced that if his new job didn’t pan out, the Phantom Thieves would be professional wingmen for all the relationships they had managed to jumpstart.

Eventually, though, it had to come to an end. Summer rolled around, and Akira had prepared himself for the long road home. Sojiro said he had it all set up to have his belongings shipped over, with just enough left behind for if/when he came visiting. The attic was forever the official den of the
Phantom Thieves, and nothing would be changing that.

The Thieves all convened on LeBlanc, except Morgana, for a reason they wouldn’t disclose. They had their last plate of curry and cup of coffee. He said his goodbye to Sojiro and made for the door...

...But when he opened it, Akari was on the other side. To say he was confused was an understatement. He had literally just called her.

“Mom? I thought you said you were waiting at home?”

“Yeah, and I was.” She glanced to Sojiro, and when he grinned that wily old man grin, the group knew something was up. “Until I find a place of our own, Boss has been kind enough to let me crash in his living room.” His brain wound down like a beat up cuckoo clock, and when it struck midnight, the bird could almost be seen popping out of his forehead.

“We’re moving?” Elation gripped his heart, but his mind was unprepared for the maelstrom of emotions. “What about your job back home?”

“Kiki, dearest, I’m a Kurusu, too.” She winked and made him know exactly how it felt when he went full mischief mode on someone. “We have the guts to hash out a living wherever we go. I was always a loose cog back there, and you taking root so easily here made it very easy to leave it behind.”

“Then, that means…”

“Woo!” Ryuji grabbed him by the neck, dragging him down and grinding his knuckles into his head. “Joker’s staying right here with us!”

“Joyous days!” Yusuke was the last to jump on the group hug, almost picking all of the others off the ground with his slightly less lanky than before arms. Actually getting regular food blossomed his formidable strength most of the way to Haru tier. “Come, friends, we must celebrate the occasion!”

“Ahem.” Makoto was as happy as the next Thief, but she had a knack for maintaining perspective. “What about the plan?” Akira slowly came to the same realization, looking up at his mother imploringly. She raised an eyebrow before looking directly at Makoto.

“You weren’t planning on bringing him straight home, were you?”

“Heh heh, no, ma’am.” She pulled the schedule and map out of her pocket, passing it on to Akari for evaluation.

“Hmm, well you had all of this made with the Shujin school schedule in mind, so I see no reason to stop you.” She handed it back, pecking her son’s cheek when she was close enough. “Have fun on vacation. You’ve earned it.”

“Thanks, Mom.” He broke out of the gravitational pull of the Thief ball, latching next onto her. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Kiki, now get going. You have a full itinerary. By the time you get back, I’ll be a fully integrated citizen of Tokyo.” While Akari was distracted, Futaba slipped in closer to Sojiro to whisper in his ear.

“I’ll shoot you a text after the meeting.” He nodded, and with one more round of goodbyes,
they were out the door. They moved as a mob through Yongen, and when they reached the nearest main road, there was a black van waiting for them. Its door popped open, and the radio buzzed to life.

“Finally, what kept you? Like, two guys tried to hijack me, and I think the tow guy is still wetting himself over the haunted van.”

“Sorry about that, Mona.” Akira was about to slide into the driver’s seat, but Makoto reminded him he didn’t technically have a real world license, unlike her, pushing him to the back seat. “But good news, we’re coming back to Tokyo! Mom’s looking for a place now.”

“Really? That’s great! I still haven’t tried all the sushi places in town yet.” His rotors rumbled in pleasure, but it didn’t take long for his windshield wiper to go up. “Wait, if I was staying with you in your hometown, what were the rest of you going to do to get back here?”

“Oh, we were just going to chain our way back on busses and trains and stuff.” Ryuji popped in at Akira’s left, and Ann sandwiched him in from the right.

“Either way, we’d be saving on renting a different van and fuel. We ran the numbers.”

“But now we don’t have to.” Haru took shotgun, preparing herself for the road ahead. As tempting as it was, she couldn’t let herself tease her girlfriend while she was driving. “So, are we all buckled in?”

“Just a moment.” Yusuke leaned in from the far back, passing a wrapped package to Makoto.

“Oh, thank you. I suppose it would be useful to know where we’re going.” She undid the thick, burlap cover, and under it was a glimmering, slightly curved plate of gold. Its edges were jagged, like a cracked pane of glass, and right in the middle was an engraving of a top hat and a burning mask. With it was a postcard, which declared,

“Come visit the Amagi Inn, home of the best hot springs in Japan.”

Two sets of grey eyes stared at each other. The tension in the air was so thick, the butter knife would have snapped. All it would take was the strike of a match, one tiny spark, and the field would ignite with the fires of Hell.

Crack!

The Trickster made the first move, launching a projectile. It bounced off the floor, then ricocheted up at its target. The other swatted it away, returning the volley, though the aim was off center. The Trickster leaped for it, and it once more careened towards the opponent’s side of the battleground.

The Trickster remained light and mobile, answering even the most obtuse of tactics with finesse and agility unmatched. The other side, however, was a mountain, stable and unshakeable. They moved in short bursts. Swing, then stillness. Swing, then stillness. No matter how the enemy danced, the Zen would not break, and the advance would not relent.
Finally, the mountain’s eye gleamed. Their weapon turned slightly, and the round was once more redirected, now at an angle the Trickster did not expect. They lunged for it, but it bounced from the corner of the field of battle, launching to the wooden wall in the distance. The goddess of the warzone raised her fan, announcing the result for all to hear.

“Point. Score, ninety-nine to ninety-nine.”

“Yeah, go Senpai!” A brawny man with black hair and numerous piercings jumped from his bench, pumping a fist in celebration. His patron warrior bowed, accepting the praise in stride. The victor of the moment looked further down the onlookers, their second in command struggling to look away.

“That was a great play and all, partner, but…”

“Dude, you’re doing great, but…” Ryuji was numbed to it, but he still had to ask.

“Did you really have to play ping pong in drag?”

“Hell yeah.”

Both participants looked to each other, Yuri’s twin tails whipping and Aka-chan’s kimono fluttering. Then, they smiled, and Akira broke character with a sharp grin.

“I think we’re going to get along just fine, Narukami.”

“Yu’s fine.”

“Works for me.”

“This has been fun, but…” Yukiko stepped forward, rolling her wrist to alleviate the stiffness. “I think we should call it a tie for now.” Yu nodded. He and Akira shared an honorable bow before setting their weapons down, signing the armistice between titans. For the time being.

“Aw man, it was getting good!”

“They can finish their game later.” Naoto looked over from her table, her first acknowledgement of each team’s madness clashing since the meeting began. “If memory serves, even you had to stop for a drink during your infamous pursuit of Inaba’s motorcycle gangs.”

“Yeah, good point.”

“Wow, the manly man rolls over just like that?” Futaba clicked her tongue and pointed her #1 foam finger at him. “Or are you afraid the Tokyo Thief’s gonna make a comeback?”

“No, I just don’t want them to wear themselves out, that’s all! And you wouldn’t understand. A man has a certain code of honor to abide by.”

“Sure, whatever you say, chicken.”

“Chicken!”

“Kanji, are you going to bear these insults?”

“Hell no! Come on, you want the Thief vs. Inaba match so bad, let’s go!”

“Now you’re talking! Haru, can you take over score keeping?”
“Certainly.” She accepted Yukiko’s fan with a curtsy. “Round two, begin!”

“It’s like a perpetual motion machine.” Makoto watched as Futaba struck the ball with the very edge of her paddle, sending it in a direction the far bulkier Kanji couldn’t quite reach. It also happened to strike Teddie in the forehead, knocking him on his suit’s furry behind, but no one seemed to notice.

“The earnest childishness is part of his charm.”

“I know what you mean, Shirogane-san.” Makoto glanced sideways at Ryuji, who was being cheered on by Ann as he and Chie raced to finish their cup of ramen first. The competitive bug was spreading. She needed to finish her work before Personas got involved. “Okay, I think we have everything outlined.”

“You guys done?” Akira looked over her shoulder, skimming the paper they had drafted together. When he was finished, he nodded and produced a small stamp from the folds of his kimono. He pressed it to the paper, and when he pulled it away, a dark blue V was left behind in ink. The page crackled briefly with energy, becoming an official contract. “We’re good to go. You can sign at your leisure.” Before he even finished, Yu took up the pen, signing his name on the first available line. “No hesitation at all, huh?”

“Already said we would. What leader doesn’t take the first bullet?” Holy cow, he was capable of more than two words, after all! Akira was about to retort when Makoto gave him the Niijima glare.

“Yeah, you two will get along swimmingly.”

Yu held up the pen, giving the green light for the rest of the team.

“Next?”

“In a minute!” Rise struck one more pose, blowing a kiss towards the canvas.

“Hmm, the plasticine front of the idol industry, given true life by one that fights against the falsehood in her medium. Yes, this will be brilliant!”

“Yu, my friend.” Akira threw an arm around his new teammate’s shoulder, beaming proudly over the soon to be joint team. “This is going to be one Hell of a ride.”


Ten years later…

Joker looked through his visor, scanning the darkened city. There was no sign of life anywhere, only a sickly green pallor that infected all touched by the moonlight.

“New signal from Rise!” Oracle flipped through an ocean of screens, running through the data Joker supplied and the communication channels at the same time. “She says they’ve reached the center of the distortion. They’ll hold the front until we get there.”

“Alright!” Skull cracked his neck, ready to jump into the fray. “We good to go, Joker?”
“Just waiting for Fox and Mona to finish recon.”

“Okay, I’m going to have to let you go, honey.” Makoto’s mask was up, and she spoke into the screen on her wrist in an apologetic tone. “I’ll be sure to save some Shadows for when you get here.”

“Thank you, Mako-chan!” Haru hung up her green apron. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be there on time. Let Boss know LeBlanc is doing wonderfully!”

“If I didn’t think you could handle it, I wouldn’t have handed it over.” Sojiro leaned into the camera, his helmet held under his arm. For a man technically in his twilight years by normal standards, he looked to be in better condition than some men half his age. “See you in a bit, Noir.”

The call finished, and not a moment too soon. A young man, about fourteen in appearance, ran up to the group’s rendezvous point. He wore a black, armless shirt and skin tight pants. His neck was covered by a bright yellow scarf, and above it, surrounded by snow white skin, was a pair of blue, slit eyes.

“We found the local Persona users. Fox is keeping tabs on them from the rooftops. Awaiting your order to make contact.”

“Good work, Mona.” Akira gave him the thumbs up, and in the back of his mind, Arsene laughed.

“Another mad god, another throne to steal. What better work for a pair of demons like ourselves, Joker?”

“Do not get so ahead of yourself, my comrade. Might I remind thee who it was to land the final blow on the last we were summoned against?”

“Enough bickering you two.” The Thieves ignored Joker tapping the side of his head. The sight of him wrangling in his other selves was quite routine. “Are we all ready?” At once, the Thieves raised their arms, the snap of Ann loading her tommy gun reverberating into the night. Joker smiled, feeling the part of the fool for asking.

He pocketed his scanning visor. He didn’t need it to see their next target, after all. In the heart of the seaside town, a vast pillar shot towards the sky. It was a senseless machination of countless structures, twisting and writhing into the air, its top hidden by the glow of the full moon.

“Phantom Thieves!” They crouched, ready to sprint into the maw of destruction. They had many times before, and they would many times after, always lead by the cocksure grin of Joker. And no force, divine or otherwise, would stop them. Phantom Thieves forever.

“Pillage and Plunder!”

Chapter End Notes

And so the Phantom Thievery, for us, ends. I would love to continue, but I don’t know near enough about the SMT/Persona pantheon to write a proper crown stealing adventure for all of its asshole gods. I’m sad to see it go, but better to end it when it’s done than let it go on and stagnate, you know? The most I could do now is some sort of
Explicit-rated spinoff, detailing Haru and Makoto's private time, from their beginnings in the Tunnel of Love to that climax (tee hee!) in the above Valentine's foursome. Heck if I know enough about the topic as is to do it justice, though, and I don't know whether you guys would really like that or...

The Many Kinks of Phantom Thievery! Gosh darn it, now I have a catchy, thematic title. Ugh. Let me know if you would be interested, I guess. I'll do some studying if need be.

Anyway, that aside, this is where the Thief train ends...

...But not the Persona train. If you remember a while back, I asked for a community comparison between P5 and a certain other game, and the conclusion was unanimous. That other game was more tightly, concretely written. This story has risen on the back of my twists and improvements to P5's plot and character usage, something that would be very difficult to do for a more tightly made game. But then, I like a nice toothy challenge. So here we go, the next tale in line is...

... The Many Quirks of Investigation Teamery!

Now, if you were only here for the P5 train and are getting off, I'm glad to have been your conductor. It's been a blast, and I'd love if you visited again sometime. If you're sticking around, though, I'm glad to announce my reign of meme-y terror has only begun. Are you ready for a murder mystery? Are you ready for a less talkative MC? Are you ready, for Teddie?

YOU ARE NOT PRE-BEARED!

I should note that I'll be starting college soon, and I'll be starting work on a publishable novel for commercial sale as soon as I get my new laptop in, but I won't be neglecting you guys by any means. This site is great for keeping myself sharp, hence why I'm taking on what I see to be a much tougher writing challenge. When can you expect it to start? Oh, I don't know, maybe in a few...

Just kidding, I'm going to go post the first chapter as soon as I finish this end note here. And since I can't post notes on the first chapter there without it becoming story-wide notes (for some weird reason), I'll say this here; I forgot how long P4's intro was. If I didn't like the characters as much as I do, I would say it's entirely too long. Fortunately, I love those doofs almost as much as I love my Thief doofs. Especially Teddie, even if he is sullen as heck at the start of the game. Another thing you forget after 70 hours of bear puns. He is my spirit animal (perversion aside, anyway.)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!