Persona 5: Trickster Vs. Champion.

by PRemington900

Summary

In this world, there are no heroes, just rebels and tyrants. Having been accused of a crime he didn't commit, Ren Amamiya has chosen to fight against the powers that be in order to create a truly free society. But how will he fare when another enters the playing field, one with a destiny similar to his. This is the story of Joker and Reaper. Of Friendship and Enmity.

Notes

Hey guys, thank you all for joining me today. I'm pretty new to the AO3 department but most of my fics are on FF. So, this is my attempt at a Persona 5 retelling featuring Ren and my OC as the two protagonists. I hope you guys will enjoy what I have so far. If you guys love it so much that you desire more, you can check it out on FF as it's most up to date on
that fic.

I would like to thank my fellow writers and friends for motivating me to create an AO3 account, they've also created some great stories that I recommend you check out. AristoMercu, ReallyLazerReader, Mayamelissa, HanaHimus, and many others.

Without further ado, enjoy the first chapter.
Welcome to my story everybody. This is a retelling of the entire story of Persona 5 with the inclusion of an OC. It is cross-posted on FF and that version is up to date. I'll do my best to upload all the chapters on here on a timely manner.

Let the madness commence. Enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This story is a work of fiction.

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

Only those who have agreed to the above have the privilege of partaking in this alternate game.

Do you accept?

...

I accept.

...

The contract has been sealed.

The world is not as it should be. It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" can no longer be avoided.

Those who oppose fate and desire change... From time to time, they were referred to as Tricksters.

You are the Trickster.

Now is the time to rise against the abyss of distortion.

He looked down at the crowd of people enjoying their time with friends and family, playing all sorts of games this casino had to offer. Now was the time. He took a deep breath and used his free hand to pull out his pistol.

"All right." He said with a smirk. "It's showtime!"

He pulled the trigger. As the bullet pierced through the wire connecting to the chandelier, it fell and hit the ground causing quite a commotion. Soon enough, the alarm went off just as planned.

"Look, up there!" One of the bystanders spotted him which caught the attention of the security guards down below. One of the guards ordered the rest to go after him. He grinned at their
foolishness. The idea that they could catch him was almost amusing.

"Now's our chance!" Crow said. "Good luck! We'll definitely meet again!"

"See ya." He told the others. With the treasure safely secured in the briefcase, he made his getaway as he leaped from his position to the next chandelier.

"Be safe, Joker," Queen told him. "We'll be waiting for you on the other side."

"Safe? Ha! Where's the fun in that?" He laughed.

Just then, he heard an unknown transmission interrupted the group.

...suspects... not... confirmed... hold... your... positions.

"Did you guys hear that?" Oracle asked.

"Loud and clear," Joker replied. "Are you guys all right?"

"Don't worry about us! Just concentrate on getting away!" Mona commanded.

"Roger." He said as he hopped to the next chandelier. Suddenly, he could hear a song being played. "Hey, who's playing music?"

"That's me," Oracle admitted. "Figured some tunes would go well with our great escape."

"Nice!" He nodded in approval. "Wait a minute, that's one of Reaper's songs, isn't it?"

"Which one?" Panther asked.

"I think it's Life Will Change," Joker said. "There's no mistaking that catchy tune."

"Y-Yeah," He heard Oracle's voice crack a little as she turned off the music. "I-I wish h-he was here, with us."

Everyone was silent at the moment as they all shared the same feelings. Another decided to step in, hoping to ease the mood and hopefully comfort Oracle and the others.

"We all do, Oracle," Queen said.

"I swear to you all, when this over, he will have justice," Crow promised.

"We'll hold you to that, Crow." Fox chimed in.

As he hopped to the next chandelier, he noticed that security was having a hard time catching up with him. Joker simply flashed them a smirk and a mocking salute as he jumped to the next chandelier.

"The enemy is focused on me, so the rest of you should be able to slip out." He informed the others.

Once he reached the higher gambling floor, two security guards appeared before him before they revealed their true forms as shadows. Another appeared behind him, hoping to catch him off guard.

Joker turned around and flashed his current enemy a smirk. With a wave of his hand, he motioned his foe to come at him.
"Shall we dance?" He mocked.

With that, he leaped onto his enemy's back and ripped off his mask to reveal his true form. As he hopped off, the shadow melted before transfiguring into a Sacrificial Pyrekeeper.

"Let's get started!" With a flap of his coat, his enemy charged at him. "Persona!

As he summoned his Persona, he grabbed his foe by his arms to stop it from charging. He then kicked the creature in the chest, sending his foe up in the air. He then flew up into the air and then slammed both hands into his enemy, sending it to the ground. As it laid on the ground helpless, Joker's Persona cast Eigaon into the Sacrificial Pyrekeeper's chest, destroying its existence.

"Good job, Joker. You defeated it with ease." Mona complimented.

"What'd you expect?" Joker smiled as he turned around and saw the other shadows coming at him.

"More of them? Be careful!" Oracle warned.

Joker took a simple step back as one of them slashed at him with an electric baton. He then hopped onto the pillar behind him and then leaped onto the upper floor.

"Joker, behind you! Go through that door!" Oracle commanded.

He ran through the door as instructed making his way into the next room.

"Dude, can you even hear us!?" Skull questioned causing their leader to roll his eyes.

"Obviously. There's no mistaking that loud tone for anyone other than you, my friend." He joked as he ran for the exit.

"Seriously, dude? What are you, Reaper?" He fired back.

"Skull..." Queen chided, causing him to regret what he said.

"R-Right. Sorry." He apologized.

As Joker walked through the next door, he crouched as he saw an agent walked past through the glass window. He looked around for him and his teammates, cursing for being unable to find them.

"I can't confirm the intruder's location." He said before moving on.

As Joker stood up, he saw that the exit was being barred off by another agent. He moved closer to the wall, able to hide his presence and eavesdrop on agent's conversation.

"Hey, are you sure he came in this way?" He asked. "Understood, I will continue the search!" The agent ran past him, not even noticing that the darkness disguised his presence.

"Now's your chance! Run for the stairs!" Oracle yelled.

He stood up, headed up the stairs and toward the exit. He looked around the next corner and once he saw it was clear, he ran for it. He walked past a command room of some sorts, hearing the man in charge commanding his colleagues to look for and kill him and his teammates.

He ran up the next flight of stairs before a group of security caught notice of him feeling and chased after him. As he made his way up, he ran for the door and found himself against a railing, looking down at the lobby.
"The exit should be up ahead," Oracle informed. "After that commotion, the bottom floor's completely closed off. Think you can make it?"

"You do know who you're talking to, right?" He smirked as he looked behind him to see that security had caught up.

Took them long enough.

"There's nowhere to run!" One of them said as they pointed their guns at the Phantom Thief.

"So you say." He grinned and climbed onto the railing. He ran around to make his way to the window. As he turned around, he saw the suits pointing their guns at him but at that point, they were too late. "By your leave, Gentlemen." He sarcastically saluted and then leaped through the glass window, covering his head as he burst through the glass. He made a point to do a variety of flips, showing off his moves.

"Really?" Oracle sighed.

"Very cool Joker!" Mona complimented with approval.


"I do my best," He said as he landed with grace. But before he could celebrate his escape. His vision was then obscured by various bright lights. He covered his eyes with his arm as the brightness was beginning to hurt.

"Huh?!!"

"No way! What's this reading?!!"

"An ambush!??"

"Joker!"

"Well..." Joker muttered as he realized he was standing before a large police force, ready to capture him. "Didn't see this coming."

"Capture him!" He commanded and the police rushed at him.

He immediately went for the fire escape, hoping to escape the police that way. He leaped for the ladder, climbing up as the police crowded around it. He smirked as none of them chose to follow but would soon regret that smirk as he looked up and saw more police at the end of the ladder.

"Oh, crap."

One of them raised their rifle and knocked him in the head with the butt of the gun, causing him to fall off. As he landed, the police were already on him. They had him pinned down, preventing him from escaping.

"Suspect secured." One of the police said as moved aside, letting another man walk by him.

"Didn't expect to find some kid." The man crouched down to face the Phantom Thief. "So, which one are you, The Phantom or The Grim Reaper?" Joker didn't respond, not wanting to give him the satisfaction. "You have your teammate to thank for this." He then grabbed his head and lifted him up. "You were sold out."
Joker's eyes widened as he heard from this man that one of his own teammates had betrayed him. The man got up and walked away to let the police do their job.

"Suspect confirmed. Cuff him."

And the last thing he remembered was having handcuffs slapped on him and his vision faded to darkness.

He slowly woke up to hear the soft echo of footsteps entering his ear. Everything was blurry but he was able to regain some of his vision. He looked around and found himself cuffed to a chair, unable to move. As he looked down he saw various syringes on the floor. It was clear to him that he had been drugged but whatever they gave him, it wasn't enough to stop the pain coursing through his body.

He felt a torrent of water splash onto him as it was unleashed from a bucket. Thankfully, it helped him regain some more of his vision but the pain still remained.

"Guess the drug was too strong" He heard. As he looked up, he saw a detective standing over him with his colleague and a guard standing behind him, keeping their distance. His vision was starting to fade again. "No dozing off!" He then kicked him in the stomach, knocking him off the chair and onto the ground.

"AH!" He hit the ground hard before the man walked over and placed his foot on his head.

"Who are your teammates? Who is the Grim Reaper?" As the detective gave out questions, his captive looked towards the camera which he noticed. "What about the camera? Are you thinking it can be used as video evidence?" He crouched onto a knee and grabbed him by the hair, looking him in the eye.

"I would imagine not." He said. "You'll likely delete it, that's what corrupt scum like you do after all. You can't win without your cheap tricks."

"Little brat!" He slammed the kid's his head into the ground which followed by a kick to the stomach

He let out a pained cough from the attack as if that was enough to shut him. "And your torturing tactics are a joke."

"Tch." He looked away annoyed as he walked over to his colleague who handed him a clipboard. "Let's see here. Obstruction of justice, blackmail, defamation, possession of weapons… Manslaughter too, yeah? It's a full course." He then turned to face the boy. "To think that all those crimes were led by a kid like this… The Phantom himself."

What's happening? He thought. Why can't I... why can't I remember anything. Everything's all hazy.

"If you don't cooperate, your friends will suffer instead." The man said before nodding to his colleague. It was a signal as the man went over to the boy and removed his handcuffs, freeing his hands. They both grabbed him and set him up for what's about to happen next "Here." The man handed him the clipboard. "It's a confession under your name."

"I..." He looked at the document before replying. "I understand."

The man pulled a pen out of one of his suits by as the boy grabbed it, he pulled him close so he can
look him in the eye.

"I'll tell you now, don't think that you'll get out so easily. We'll make you understand. One must take full responsibility for their actions." He finished before backing off and allowed him to sign the confession.

Ren Amamiya

She made her way down the hall and toward her destination. Once she heard the leader of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts was finally captured, she was determined to get her interrogation.

As she arrived at her destination, the detective blocked her path.

"Stop right there." He demanded, holding his hand out to halt her movement. "No one goes in there."

"I'm Niijima from the Public Prosecutors Office." She said, interrupting him.

"The Prosecutor's Office? What business do you have here?" He asked harshly, wondering what someone like her was doing here.

"It's urgent. There's something I need to confirm with the suspect." She fired back.

"Niijima-san, I believe this case is no longer in your jurisdiction." He told her.

Before she could object, she heard footsteps coming from behind her. An older detective who had a cell phone in his hand.

"Are you Prosecutor Sae Niijima? There's a call from your director." He informed her, holding out the phone for her to take.

"Tch." She clicked her tongue as she took the phone from him and placed it against her ear.

"I ordered you to stand by." She heard her boss sigh in annoyance.

"I'm responsible for this case, yet I'm not even being allowed an interrogation!" She said angrily.

"I'm calling because I knew you'd bring it up." He fired back. "Niijima, this case is already out of our hands."

"I will not be convinced unless I confirm it for myself." She interrupted, determined to get her interrogation.

"Well... Good luck to you then. I already went ahead and cleared it with them. I'm not expecting much though." He finished, ending the phone call.

"Well, you heard him." She told the detective as she placed her phone back into her pocket.

"Very well." He sighed annoyingly. "Just so we're clear, your time will be cut short. We can't permit you to talk with him for long."

Sae turned her head and sighed, knowing that these bastards were going to make her job harder on her.

"It's for your own sake. His methods are unknown. We can't guarantee it's safe, even just to talk to
He sat in his chair, his body ached from the beating he took from the corrupt detective. He massaged his wrists as bruises began to form due to the handcuffs. He heard the door open and a gasp followed. As he looked up, he saw a familiar face.

"Oh my god." She whispered. "Ren Amamiya?"

"Sae." He sat at the table, his hands entwined as he greeted the prosecutor with a smile. "It's good to see you again. Only I wish it was under better circumstances."

"I..." She shook her head, ignoring her shock for the moment as she sat down with her arms crossed. "I had my suspicions but, I didn't think it'd be you. Honestly, I was expecting..." She said before shaking her head, pushing her personal feelings aside as she took on a more professional tone. "From now on, you'll be answering my questions."

"That so?" He closed his eyes and let out a sigh. "Where are the others?" He asked about his teammates.

"Your teammates weren't caught. You're the only one who's been apprehended." She informed him. His lips formed a smile thanks to her answer before he clutched his head in pain. As Sae waited for him to recover, she looked toward the syringe on the floor, the mere sight of it made her angry. "Those bastards." She remarked before turning back to him. "Ren, can you hear me?. Almost anything can happen here, and I can't stop them." She said leaning back and crossing her arms. "We don't have much time. If you wish for safety, then answer me honestly."

"Alright then." He said, giving her his full attention.

"What was your objective? Why did you cause such a major incident? I didn't think it was a prank from the get-go, but I couldn't assemble a case for prosecution." She continued. "It's because I couldn't figure out the method behind it."

"Obviously not." He replied. "Otherwise, this meeting would've happened a lot sooner, don't you think?"

"True." She agreed. "There's no way I could be convinced of such a... "world" just by reading the reports." She said before noticing that the drugs haven't affected him that badly. "It seems you're coherent."

"I've had better days." He quipped.

"Now then, when and where did you find out about that 'world'? How is it even possible to steal another's heart?" She asked before giving him one last important question. "And, who is the identity of your partner, the so-called 'Grim Reaper'?"

"That..." He muttered weakly.

"Tell me your account of everything. Start from the very beginning." She finished. "Let me help you, Ren."
Before he could give a response, he clutched his head as the room darkened. Just then, a blue butterfly appeared before him, giving him a message.

**You are held captive. A prisoner of fate to a future that has been sealed in advance.**

**This is truly an unjust game... Your chances of winning are almost none.**

**But if my voice is reaching you, there may yet be a possibility open to you.**

**I beg you. Please overcome this game... and save the world.**

**The key to victory lies within the memories of your bonds. The truth that you and your friends grasped.**

**It all began that day... when the game was started half a year ago.**

**For the sake of your world's future... as well as your own... you must remember.**

As the butterfly gave its message, he looked toward the Prosecutor to give her his response.

"Very well, Sae. I shall tell you everything." He said. "However, whether you choose to believe me or not is your choice." He informed her. All she gave him was a simple nod, allowing him to begin his story. "It first began on that day..."

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His eyes opened suddenly, realizing he had just woken up from a dream thanks to the vibrations of the subway train. As he rubbed his eyes, he heard an announcement on the intercom.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for riding with us today. We will be arriving in Shibuya shortly. This is the last stop for this line. Please transfer there for all subway rides. The doors to your left will open."

As the announcement ended, he looked at his phone to check the time. Once he put his phone away, memories of that day flashed through his mind.

The day that changed everything.

**Please, help!**

He remembered that girl being forced into a car by a man clearly intoxicated. He couldn't just stand by and do nothing. He remembered walking over to the duo and placed his hand on the drunken man's shoulder to pry him off the woman.

**Get away from her, you drunk!**

He remembered the man swinging his arm in response before he tripped and hit his head on the pavement. The man got up, feeling blood form at his forehead, he placed his hand over the injury in an attempt to stop the bleeding.

**Damn brat... I'll sue!**

And that was it. At least, that's all he remembered before being forced into a police car.

And if that wasn't enough, he remembered when his parents visited him at the youth detention center. As if he could ever forget the different reactions from his Mother and Father.
Do you even realize what you've done, Ren! What the hell were you thinking?!

Mom, please. I'm innocent...

I don't want to hear your half-assed excuses! Do you know what will happen once word gets out?!
My career! My reputation! It will be ruined because of you!

He remembered how furious his Mother was and how his Father tried to calm her down.

Yoriko, that's enough! Do not yell at him like that! He's our son!

We raised our son better than this, Sonosuke! Or at least I thought we did!

Her words cut deep. To hear such things from his own mother really hurt.

Yoriko, go wait in the car. We'll talk about this later.

Hmph.

He remembered his mother leaving in a huff without saying goodbye.

I'm sorry, Dad.

It's okay, son. I know my boy would never mindlessly attack someone. I swear, I'll find you the best defense lawyer. Everything will be alright, Ren.

His Father tried, he really did.

But in the end, it wasn't enough.

Ren sighed as he tried to focus on other things. He overheard two girls gossiping about something.

"What? A mental shutdown?" One said.

"It's the truth!" Replied the other. "There are even cases where people go crazy and start attacking people!"

"To a person though? That's gotta be a joke. You really love all that occult stuff, don't you?"

"Cause it's cool!"

That's high school girls for you. No shame at all. Ren thought as he frowned at what they were talking about. As he tried to ignore their chatting, he noticed that he wasn't the only one annoyed by their gossip.

He looked across from where he was sitting to see a boy his age clenching his teeth to hold back irritation, all the while glaring at the two girls. He had brown hair and blue eyes. He wore a black T-shirt with the red colored words "I conquered the Inferno" written in the middle with small flame pattern designs on the top, bottom right, and bottom left, black jeans, and his usual black sneakers. He also had sunglasses hanging from his shirt.

The way he frowned and clenched his teeth, those girls clearly touched a nerve. Maybe this guy didn't like people freely discussing people mysteriously shutting down like it was some trend to laugh and giggle about. As he realized he had been staring for too long, he looked away, pulling out his phone to play one of his mobile crossword puzzle games.
Let's see here. What is a six-letter word meaning a vehement or loud cry? He thought for a minute before choosing his answer. Outcry, obviously. When he saw the check mark light up, he pumped his fist in victory for achieving the right answer.

After a few minutes, he placed his phone in his pocket as the train came to a stop. He quickly collected his belongings and exited the subway.

To say Shibuya was beautiful would be an understatement but that would also apply to it being a crowded place. He wasn't used to this many people in one setting as each and everyone here seemed to be accustomed to this area.

He stopped and pulled out his phone to check his directions when suddenly, a mysterious twisted looking icon appeared on his phone's map. It suddenly grew so Ren could get a better look at it. It was in the shape of an eyeball as it covered the entire map. He tapped on it, hoping to be rid of it so he could return to his map. Nothing happened so he tapped it a few more times before something finally happened.

He looked around to see that everyone suddenly stopped moving as if time itself had ceased to function.

What the hell? He thought as he looked around.

Suddenly, he looked across the street to see blue flames off in the distance. The fire began to form into a humanoid creature when suddenly, the fire cleared and Ren was met with an exact mirror of him with yellow eyes grinning madly.

And with that, time suddenly continued. He looked around to see that people had not noticed what he had noticed and simply chalked it up as a daydream.

I hate long train rides. He thought as he checked his phone to see that strange looking eyeball still on his map. He pressed his finger against the icon and tossed it into the trash bin to get a better look at the map.

Now that he had an idea where he was going, he headed to the next subway transfer to Yongen-Jaya.

After taking the next train, he finally arrived in Yongen-Jaya. It appeared to be a lively neighborhood but thankfully it wasn't as crowded as Shibuya. Still, he was unfamiliar with the area so he checked his phone once more for directions.

Starting today, Sojiro Sakura will be taking care of me. He thought as he checked his phone. His house should be in the backstreets of this residential area, so likely in an alley.

Ren walked around, admiring the various shops the neighborhood had to offer. The area had its local grocery store, a second-hand store, a closed movie theater, as well as a batting cage. As he walked down the street, he turned to his right to find a large house, likely Sojiro Sakura's. A delivery driver was there, probably delivering a package. He walked over to the house and checked the nameplate just to make sure.

It said Sakura, meaning that he had found his house. He pressed the doorbell and waited a while for the man to show up. After a few minutes, he didn't show so he rang the doorbell again.

Maybe he's gone out? He thought.
"Seems like no one's home." He heard. He turned around to see the owner of that delivery truck approaching the house with a package. "Sakura-san's usually at his cafe around this time. If you're looking for him, Leblanc's in the back alley near the Tobacco stand."

"Thank you, sir." Ren bowed politely before making his way back. He remembered passing by that alley as he looked for Sakura-san's house so this Leblanc was probably there. He walked back down to where he started and found the alley near the Tobacco stand. He walked down and found the cafe in question.

*Coffee&Curry. Cafe Leblanc.* He read the sign. *Interesting combination.*

He then opened the door and entered the cafe.

The place had an old school vibe to it, but Ren couldn't complain. As he walked in, he was met with a man with slicked-back dark hair with a receding hairline, gray eyes, a chinstrap beard with a goatee that flares out, and glasses. He was holding a newspaper, either reading the news or trying to solve crossword puzzles. He seemed engrossed in it as he hadn't realized that Ren had entered his cafe. But, they weren't alone as he spotted an elderly couple taking and enjoying their coffee.

"A public Transit bus was driven down an opposing lane with its customers still in it." He heard a tabloid show host give the latest news. "The citizens can't live in peace if this keeps up."

"How frightening." The elderly man said.

"Didn't something similar happen just the other day?" His wife questioned

"What's the world coming to these days?" Her husband wondered as he let out a sigh.

Ren knew what the discussion was about. It was about those mysterious mental shutdowns and psychotic breakdowns that have been plaguing Japan for the last two years. Apparently, there were cases where people would just mysteriously shut down or where people would randomly go crazy and attack anyone on sight only to not remember anything once they recover. So far it's been limited to Tokyo's citizens so it's not becoming an epidemic but whatever the causes were, people are becoming fearful and restless because of it.

"Hmm." Ren looked over at the man engrossed in the newspaper. Judging from the apron, he must be Sojiro Sakura. "Vertical is... the name of a shellfish used for farming pearls?"

"Oyster." He gave the man the answer he was looking for.

As soon as he heard the answer from the young man that entered his cafe, he looked over at him in surprise before looking back to the newspaper. He wrote down the answer and it fit perfectly.

"Hey, thanks, kid. Anyway, what can I..." He looked at the boy again before noticing the school uniform. As he looked back to the newspaper to check the date, he realized just who had walked into his cafe. "Oh, right. That was supposed to be today." He placed the newspaper on the bar counter, making a mental note of where to continue before standing up.

"We'll be going now." The elderly man said as he and his wife finished their drinks and stood up as well to leave the establishment. "The payment is on the table."

"Thanks for coming." The man gave the couple a customer service smile.

"This place is in the back alley, so a car's not likely to crash into the place." The elderly man made a comment.
"Crash?" He replied.

"There's been a string of those rampage accidents, you know. I just hope that none happen around here." The elderly man said with a look of worry.

"It's none of my concern." He waved, passing it off as a just a customer's comment.

"Haha, we'll see you next time." The elderly man said as he and his wife made for the exit.

"Have a good day." She said to both Ren and the cafe owner as she and her husband left the cafe.

Once they were gone, the cafe owner dropped his customer service smile and let out an annoyed groan as he went to collect his payment from the booth, scratching the back of his head.

*He probably doesn't get much business.* Ren deduced as he watched him sigh annoyingly.

"Four hours for just a single cup of coffee. Ugh." He let out one more sigh before turning to his visitor. "So... you're the one?"

"That's right." He replied, giving the man a formal bow. "I'm Ren Amamiya. It's nice to finally meet you face-to-face, Sakura-san."

He raised an eyebrow at the polite greeting he received from the kid.

"You too, kid." He replied, "I'm sure you already know but I'm Sojiro Sakura, you'll be in my custody over the next year." He gave his introduction before crossing his arms, looking the kid over as to evaluate him. "I was wondering what kind of delinquent would show up, but it's you, huh?"

"Pretty much." He shrugged, ignoring the man's offensive comment.

"Don't you know? A customer of mine is a good friend of your father's. He-" He was going to continue but stopped as he realized he was starting to make small talk like he does with his customers and this kid wasn't a customer. "Whatever. Follow me."

As Sojiro gestured for him to follow, Ren walked behind him as the two made their way up the stairs. When they arrived, they were both met with a dusty and cluttered attic. Full of boxes, unpackages books, a dusty sofa, household items, and garbage bags. Judging from the lack of smell, it's likely that the bags were filled with other items and not garbage. A box laid in the middle of the room, probably filled with Ren's belongings and additional clothes. He looked toward the far corner near the window and saw a bed covered in dust.

"This is your room," Sojiro said as he turned to his ward. "I'll give you bedsheets, at least."

That was good news. The last thing he wanted was to sleep in a dusty bed. He walked past the cafe owner and looked around the room.

"Hmm." Ren brought a hand up to his chin, deep in thought.

"You got something you want to say?" Sojiro's words broke him out of his trance, noticing that the boy was thinking hard about something. He crossed his arms as he believed the boy was about to complain.

He thought wrong.

"This..." He started. "...is just right."
While it was dusty and messy, that can be fixed with a little cleaning. In truth, Ren liked the room because it meant that once everything was all cleaned up, he would have a nice open space.

"Good to hear." The cafe owner commented, glad to know that he wasn't going to hear any complaints about his living quarters. "Though, it's on you to clean up everything else."

"No problem." He replied.

"Anyway, just so you know, I'll be leaving after I lock up each day. You'll be alone at night, so do me a favor and don't do anything stupid." He gave a warning. "If you cause any trouble or damage anything in my shop, I'll throw you out."

"I understand, sir." He nodded, letting his guardian know that he won't try to cause him or his business any trouble.

"Now then… I got the gist of your situation." He brought up. "Let me see if I understand this correctly. You protected some woman from a man forcing himself on her, he got injured, then sued you. Right?" He stated.

Ren didn't really want to hear about this anymore, but he knew it was unavoidable, after all, he was living in this man's cafe from now on so it was bound to be brought up. Then again, it was surprising to hear Sojiro recounting the true reason behind his situation rather than say he "mindlessly" assaulted someone.

"Inflicting bodily harm, huh?" He questioned before letting out a huff. "I guess you can't judge a book by its cover."

"You got it all wrong. I..." He gave up. Some part of Ren wanted to argue, to convince the man of his innocence. But he knew it wouldn't matter. The police didn't believe him. His own Mother didn't believe him. Why would he be any different?

"I don't want to hear it. I won't ask you about it either." Sojiro told the boy. "After getting a criminal record, you were expelled from your high school. The courts ordered you to transfer and move out here, which your parents approved of."

*Well, one of them did.* The boy kept that thought to himself.

"In other words, they got rid of you for being a nuisance." The cafe owner said. "Don't talk about any of this upfront with anyone, you understand? I am running a business here. Behave yourself for the year and keep out of trouble. If nothing happens, you'll be off probation."

"I'll do my best, sir." He promised

"Good." Sojiro nodded. "Just so you know, we'll be going to Shujin tomorrow."

"That's my new school, huh?" Ren questioned.

"That's right. Shujin Academy. We'll introduce ourselves properly to the staff there. There's rarely a place that'll accept someone like you, you know and they don't get many newcomers." He said before letting out another groan. "What a waste of my Sunday."

Ren adjusted his glasses to hide his expression from the cafe owner. He could tell this was a little stressful for the man, having to run a coffee shop along with taking care of someone with a criminal record. Despite the cafe owner's uncaring attitude, Ren didn't hate the man.
"Your luggage arrived earlier. I left it over there." He said as he made his way over to the stairs. "I have to get back to work." And with that, he was gone.

As soon as the cafe owner went back to work, Ren went over to his "luggage" and opened the box. Everything was in order as he checked the contents of the box. The first thing he did was change into more comfortable clothes, his favorite black blazer that he left unbuttoned over a black collared off-white long-sleeved shirt, blue jeans, and brown shoes. He carefully folded his school uniform and placed it on the table near the staircase as he will be wearing it when he visits Shujin tomorrow.

"Now let's get this room cleaned up. Amamiya style." He stated with determination.

He went over to the pile of household items to see if Sojiro owned any cleaning items. Fortunately, he found a feather duster, a mop, and a bucket. The first thing he did was go downstairs and fill the bucket up with water. After doing so, he set the bucket in the middle of the room. He opened the box filled with his belongings and placed them on the table next to the staircase where he placed his school uniform. Once he did, he put the box into the shelf near the sofa.

"Time to get to work". He began.

He started cleaning the windows using the feather duster, making sure to get every nook and cranny of the window. After that was done, he placed it back with the other household items and then took off the dusty bedsheets off of his mattress. He placed those dusty sheets into the shelf, next to the box and replaced them with the cleans sheets Sojiro provided for him. He then readied his mop to finish the job. Utilizing the bucket, he mopped the floor, making sure everything was spotless. After he finished, he looked around the room, proud of his work.

"That's more like it." He smirked and crossed his arms in satisfaction. The packaged books were placed on the shelves near his bed but he knew he had to do something about them eventually as well as those household items. But, overall, it was just the way he wanted it.

Clean.

He looked out the window and saw that nighttime had come. It appears he had been cleaning for a few hours.

"What the heck is going on up there?" He heard Sojiro's voice as the man came up to check on him. "Wow, I heard you make all sorts of noise but I didn't think you were cleaning." He made a point to look around the room and saw that it was completely dust-free. With that in mind, he smiled.

Judging from the state of the attic before I cleaned it, it's must've been dusty for a while, probably since he's bought the place. Ren believed, seeing as how it was used as a place for storage before his arrival.

"Not bad, kid. Not bad at all." He gave his approval. "Though it's only natural you'd want to keep your room clean. Why don't you go to bed for tonight? You don't have anything better to do, right?"

"I suppose not." He replied. Tell the truth, all that cleaning was really exhausting.

"I'm going to close up shop and get out of here." He informed him. "I won't be the one looking after you if you get sick from staying up too late, got it?"

"Of course." He nodded. "Have a good night, Sakura-san."
"Later, kid." He gave a wave goodbye.

After Sojiro left, Ren set the alarm on his phone and placed it on the mattress. He decided to eat something before bed as he hadn't eaten dinner yet. He went through his luggage and found the instant ramen in a cup he packed. After eating that, he put on his Pajamas and turned off the lights.

As he laid down on his bed, he thought over everything that had happened to him, and the events that led him to transfer schools and move to Tokyo.

"A criminal record, huh?" He muttered to himself. "Even so, what... what that man tried to do. I couldn't just... walk away."

The streets of Kamakura were nice and quiet, just like any other day. He stayed after school late to study before deciding to head home. He'd use any excuse in the book to get out of that house. Ever since his Mom's promotion, she's been nagging at his Father to try and advance or at the very least get a better job than accounting. But Sonosuke Amamiya was perfectly fine with his job, good hours, good colleagues, and good pay.

In the eyes of Ren Amamiya, they were both upstanding citizens of Japan, both with a nice house and a stable income.

As he took a shortcut home, he could hear someone yelling off in the distance.

"Just get in the car, you bitch!"

"Stop it!"

What the...? He thought.

As he heard those voice, he heard the last one calling out for help. He could just continue on his way home but if someone was in trouble, he couldn't just ignore it. He ran to the area where the yelling became clearer and saw a bald man forcing himself onto a woman.

"How dare you cross me!"

"Please, let me go!"

As Ren got closer, he saw the man physically grabbing the women, likely hurting her through the force of his grip. Judging from how he was acting and the smell from this distance, he deduced that the man was intoxicated.

But that wasn't important right now.

I have to do something. Ren thought as he moved closer to the couple.

"You think you're worth causing me trouble? Huh?!" The bald man angrily asked.

"Let me go! I'll call the police!" She threatened.

"Ha, go ahead. Call them all you want!" He mocked, laughing at her threat. "The police are my bitches! They're not going to take a dumb whore like you seriously!"

"N-No, Stop!" She pleaded.

Before Ren could intervene, he could hear the faint sound of sirens off in the distance.
"Tch, someone called the cops, huh? Fuck!" He clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Incompetent fools like you just need to shut up and follow where I steer this county. Now get in the goddamn car!"

"N-No." She continued to resist but after looking over the man's shoulder, she saw that they had a witness. Seeing that Ren was there, she called out. "Please, help!"

"Huh?" The bald man turned to see who she was calling out to. He gave Ren a vile glare the moment their eyes met. "What the hell are you looking at, punk?!"

"Get away from her, you drunk! You're hurting her!" The boy demanded which only seemed to piss the man off even more as he released the woman and turned to glare at him.

"This is none of your business! Get lost, kid!" The man gave his own demand before turning back to the woman. "See, this is all because you're so damn slow!" He grabbed her by the arm once again.

"Get in the fucking car!"

And because of that, he ended up here.

Ren closed his eyes, pushing the memory away, hoping to get some sleep. After all, he was going to register tomorrow so he wanted to wake up fresh.

Just as he shut his eyes, a ring and vibration suddenly startled him. It came from his phone. He reached into his pocket and pulled it out only to see that weird app from earlier.

"What the... this again?" He questioned as he recalled deleting it. Guess he forgot.

He dragged the app into the trash bin once again before placing it back in his pocket.

His eyelids started to get heavy and before he knew it, sleep overcame him.

After a few hours of sleep, he opened his eyes slowly but as his vision returned, he realized something troubling and as soon as that was apparent, he opened his eyes fully, now awake.

He looked around and saw that he was no longer in the safe confines of his bed in the attic of Cafe Leblanc. In fact, he wasn't even in the same bed. As he looked down, he found himself in a black and white prisoner uniform, similar to what prison inmates wear. Upon closer inspection, she realized that his hands and legs were bound by chains. He immediately got up to collect his thought and get his bearings. As he looked around, he found himself in some sort of cell.

Just then, his thoughts were interrupted by a mysterious chuckle, one that did not belong to him. He looked past the cell and saw two little kids staring at him. He got up from the bed and walked over to them, clutching the bars. The one on his left had a long braid, giving him a blank stare but the one on his right had hair buns and gave him a mocking smirk. What they both had in common was the same yellow color of their eyes.

Before Ren could ask them a question, the two moved out of the way and another figure entered the picture. He sat at the table with his hands folded, a menacing smirk painting his face, the most notable feature was his abnormally long nose.

"Trickster… Welcome to my Velvet Room." He greeted.
"T-Trickster?" He questioned, wondering why he called him that.

"So you've come to, Inmate." The kid on the right said.

"The you, in reality, is currently fast asleep." The one on the right explained. "You're only experiencing this as a dream."

"A dream?" He asked.

"You're in the presence of our master. Stand up straight!" The kid on the right demanded as Ren looked over at the long-nosed man, it appeared he had a few words for him.

"Welcome. I am delighted to make your acquaintance." He started. "This place exists between dream and reality, mind and matter. It is a room that only those who are bound by a "contract" may enter."

"A... contract?"

"I am Igor. The master of this place. Remember it well." He told the inmate. "I summoned you to speak of important matters. It involves your life as well."

"Important matters?" He asked curiously but it seemed Igor's thoughts were on something else.

"Still, this is a surprise." He said, looking around the room. "The state of this room reflects the state of your own heart. To think a prison would appear as such. You truly are a "prisoner" of fate. In the near future, there is no mistake that ruin awaits you."

"Ruin?" Ren wondered with fear. "What ruin?"

"I speak of the end to everything." He said before explaining his options in great detail. "However, there is a means to oppose such a fate. You must be "rehabilitated". Rehabilitated toward freedom. That is your only means to avoid ruin. Do you have the resolve to challenge the distortion of the world?"

"I..." The inmate thought of a suitable reply. "I'd rather avoid ruin if I can."

"Then allow me to observe the path of your rehabilitation." Just then, the little kids turned to face their prisoner. "Ah, pardon me for not introducing the others. To your right is Caroline; to your left, Justine. They serve as wardens here."

"Wardens?" He wondered.

"Hmph, try and struggle as hard as you like." Caroline mocked

"The duty of wardens is to protect inmates. We are also your collaborators." Justine explained. "That is if you remain obedient."

"I shall explain the roles of those two at another occasion," Igor said and the twin wardens turned to face their master. "Now then, it seems the night is waning. It is almost time. Take your time to slowly come to understand this place. We will surely meet again, eventually…"

Once he finished, the sound of an alarm entered his ears.

"Time's up. Now hurry up and go back to sleep." Caroline demanded.
"Wait!" Ren clutched the bars once last time. "I have questions! What do you... do you..."

But he couldn't ask them, as darkness had consumed his vision.

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4/10 - Sunday

The sudden ringing and vibration of his cell phone woke him up from a deep slumber. Suddenly, he found himself back into the attic that was now his room. He took out his cell phone and looked at the time.

*What a strange dream.* Ren thought. *Ruin... Rehabilitation. I don't understand?*

He thought about it more but then he remembered that he was going to register at Shujin today so he had to get ready. He got up from his bed and changed into his school uniform.

"Looks like you're up." He heard Sojiro walking up the stairs. Only this time, the cafe owner graced him with a different outfit then what he wore the other day. A white two-buttoned blazer and a white trilby with a red-white-and-blue striped hat band. "Well then, let's go introduce ourselves properly to the staff about your transfer. The school you're attending is in the Aoyama district. It'll cost you a bit to ride the train there without having your pass yet, and the route transfers are a pain. I'll drive you there, but just for today. Let's go."

"Alright." Ren stood up as he and Sojiro made their way down the stairs.

"Sheesh... I don't really allow men in my passenger seat." The cafe owner complained.

*Oh, seems we got ourselves a ladies man.* Ren snickered but didn't let it show.

Traffic wasn't too friendly for them, even though it was early in the morning. As soon as they arrived, Ren got a look at the school, his new school. Shujin Academy, supposedly one of the best prep schools in all of Tokyo but he knew it as the only school that would accept him, given his criminal record.

Before they decided to enter the school, Sojiro stopped him.

"Do me a favor and behave yourself, all right?" He asked him "It's just a quick meeting so don't say or do anything stupid."

"Understood," Ren answered. As soon as he gave his lecture, Sojiro made his way up the steps. Just as he was about to follow, unknown voices from afar stopped him in his tracks.

"Kazzy-kun! Let's go before we miss the train!"

"Oh, yeah."

Ren looked at where those voices were coming from and saw another individual wearing the same uniform as him. He was hurrying after a woman in a light green long sleeve T-shirt along with beige pants and white shoes.

Since his back was turned, he couldn't get a good look at his face but that brown hair looked awfully familiar.

"Isn't that...?"
"Cmon, kid. We haven't got all day." Sojiro called for him.

He turned his focus back to his guardian, realizing that he had kept him waiting. He followed after him as the two entered Shujin Academy.

They reached the principal's office where Sojiro was given some papers to sign. In the office was the principal who turned out to be a very fat man along with a woman with unkempt brown hair and dark eyes. She wore a yellow long-sleeved shirt striped with white and red horizontal lines, a blue denim skirt, and white kitten heel shoes. Due to her presence in the room, it was very likely that this woman will be Ren's homeroom teacher.

Once Sojiro was finished, the Principal turned to face the boy

"Just so we're clear young man, you will be expelled immediately if you cause any problems." He warned him. "To be honest, I hesitated on accepting someone like you, but there were some circumstances on our side. You might have done a variety of things in hiding in your previous residence, but you will behave yourself here at Shujin Academy. If you are thrown out from our school, there will be no place for you to go. Keep that in mind."

"Yes, sir." Ren gave a polite bow

"Good to hear." He smiled before turning to the woman next to him. "This is the teacher in charge of your class."

As Ren looked at her, she finally rose her head to meet his eyes.

"I'm Sadayo Kawakami." She introduced herself. "Here's your student ID." She placed it on the table for him. Ren grabbed it and placed it in his wallet. "Be sure to read the school rules. Any violations will send you straight to the guidance office. And, if by chance you cause any problems, I won't be able to protect you at all." She informed him before turning to her boss "That IS your promise, yes, Principal Kobayakawa?"

"That is correct." He nodded in agreement. "He is responsible for all his actions."

"But, why me?" She wondered, crossing her arms. "There should've been better candidates."

I'm standing right here, you know. The boy thought but kept it to himself. Getting a better look at his homeroom teacher, she appeared tired. The bags under her eyes were a clear indication and judging from the tone of her voice, she appeared both stressed and tired.

"It was a sudden transfer, and since Ms. Chouno's class was recently filled, your class was the only one that had an opening." He explained.

Recently filled? Ren questioned. What did the Principal mean by that?

"If you're done explaining things, mind if we get going?" Sojiro interjected. "I got a store to get back to."

"Ah, of course." Kobayakawa nodded. "Sakura-san, please keep a close eye on him. Don't let him cause any trouble outside."

"Well, I'll be sure to have a serious talk about the situation he's in." He assured them.

Kawakami gave a small sigh which Ren took notice off. She must be really stressed out by all of this.
Guess a teacher's life is never easy. Ren thought.

"Come to the faculty office when you arrive at school tomorrow. I'll show you to your classroom." She told him.

"Yes, Ma'am." He nodded.

"Come on, let get going," Sojiro said as he headed towards the exit.

"Have a good rest of your day Sir. Ms. Kawakami." Ren gave a bow to the two before following his guardian out the door.

As soon as they left the office, Sojiro groaned with annoyance as he turned to face his ward.

"Jesus. They just met you and they're already treating you like some kinda nuisance." He said, finding it a bit appalling that they would treat a student like that, even if the kid was on probation.

"It can't be helped." Ren shrugged, not really hurt by the principal and teacher's attitude towards him.

"I guess that's what it means to have a criminal record. Looks like your past follows you wherever you go." Sojiro said before giving him one last warning. "By the way, if you get expelled now, I won't hesitate to kick you out. Got it?"

"I'll do my best, Sakura-san." That was all he could do. Just do his best.

"School never changes, huh?" The cafe owner made one last comment. "Come on, we're going home." He said as the two made their way out of the school and back to Sojiro's car.

*Shujin Academy, huh?* Ren thought as the two left the premises.

Sadayo made her way through the courtyard as she thought over her meeting with her newest transfer student. To think, of all the teachers in the school, he had to be in her class. After all, wouldn't a male teacher be best suited to teach someone like Amamiya?

Then again, he appeared to be polite but even so, she didn't know what to think.

"What a troublesome situation, wouldn't you say Sadayo?" Just then her thoughts were broken by one of her fellow teachers.

"You could say that, Suguru." She greeted the coach of the school's volleyball team. She placed a hand on her hip and sighed. "I can't believe they pushed someone with a criminal record on me."

"It's not just him though." He brought up. "Get this, he isn't the only student transferring here."

"Really?" Sadayo was curious about this.

"Yep, turns out our school is being graced with not one but two transfer students, although this other one's no better." He sighed. "Supposedly, he was a truant at his old school and the only reason he's being allowed entry is that his parents were famous celebrities or something."

"I see." She replied. Two problem transfer students? Looks like the staff won't be catching a break anytime soon.

"Why in the world are people like them being admitted here?" He complained, wondering what
was going through the principal's head before accepting delinquents into this school.

"Who knows. Whatever it was, it was the principal's decision." She told him. "I was told that it's for the school's reputation, in Amamiya-kun's case anyway. As for the other one, your guess is as good as mine."

"Seriously? I would've thought that my volleyball team has contributed more than enough to cover that." He argued.

"That's certainly true." She agreed.

"Be careful, OK?" He said before stretching his arms. "Then again, if anything were to happen, I'd kick a student out like that right away."

"I'd keep wishing that he'd just end up not coming to school." She said before regretting her words a little. She just met him and was already expecting the worse of him. "Still, that isn't something I should be saying as a teacher."

"It's understandable. You have a criminal in your class after all." He said. "Anyway, practice is about to end so I should be heading back."

"Oh, right. The tournament's coming up, isn't it?" Sadayo changed the topic.

"Hehe, having such high expectations placed on you by others is quite a problem in itself." He grinned. "We'll have to work hard to make up for the track team too."

"Y-Yes... that's true." She said, looking away. The topic of the track team left a bad taste in her mouth, especially after what happened to their star player. As her co-worker left, she was left to contemplate her situation. "Why did it have to be my class? I can't do this again, not after..." She pushed those dark thoughts aside as she headed back to the teacher's lounge.

"Goddamn it! Traffic's not moving at all." Sojiro complained as he and Ren tried to head back home only to be caught in traffic. "You're taking the train starting tomorrow, I'll give you a commuter pass when we make it back." He informed his ward before changing the subject. "So how was it? The school, I mean. Think you can manage?"

"School's never been a problem for me, Sakura-san," Ren told him, letting him know his school life will be alright. "I'll be fine."

"Good to hear." Sojiro nodded. "Listen up. Don't get yourself involved in nonsense or do anything stupid, you understand? Still, you were expelled once already. To think you'd re-enroll at a different one. It's not like anyone will be sympathetic with you."

"I'm aware." He replied, not really expecting or wishing for pity or sympathy.

"If that's what it was like at school, people might say stuff about me in the future too." He sighed. "What a troublesome kid I've taken in."

Day two and Sojiro is as stressed out as he was the other day. Still, he was kind enough to take him in for his year at Shujin. Maybe some small talk might help.

"Can I ask you a question, Sakura-san?" Ren asked.

"What is it?" He replied.
"Why did you take me in?" He asked but the man refused to make eye contact as he gave his answer.

"Why? Because I was asked to and for some reason, I... agreed to do it." He told his ward. "I'm getting paid, for one thing.." He answered.

"I see." He said. He had a feeling that maybe there was some hidden reason as to why he took him in but he wasn't going to probe him for information. It's clear the man didn't hate him but at the very least, was wary of him. "Still, I'm very grateful, so thank you Sakura-san."

The cafe owner gave the boy a curious look, instead of complaining, he chose to be polite. Maybe he misjudged the boy.

"Hmph, whatever you say, kid." He shrugged off the kid's gratitude.

Ren focused on the road as he thought over his meeting with the principal. Truth be told, he didn't like him. The way he threatened to expel him if he caused any problems, the man clearly made it known that he didn't care for him. As for the teacher, she appeared stressed out, likely due to both having a new student in her class, one that has a criminal record, and other things that he didn't know about. Second job perhaps? What else would cause her to look so tired?

Pushing those thoughts aside, there was one thing that was still on his mind.

It was a sudden transfer, and since Ms. Chouno's class was recently filled, your class was the only one that had an opening. He remembered the principal's words

Was there another transfer student beside him?

"Again, due to the subway accident, the schedule for all trains has been affected-"

Suddenly, The radio spoke about a subway derailment at Shibuya Station.

"Another accident?" Sojiro stunned at the sudden news. "So that's why it's so crowded. There's been a lot of those lately."

If it was another accident, then it was likely another case of those mental shutdowns and psychotic breakdowns. Just what was causing them? Why were people suffering from them?

He asked but received no answers.

By the time they got back to the cafe, it was already evening. As the two entered Leblanc, he heard his guardian let out a groan of annoyance.

"Damn, to think there'd be that much traffic. What a waste of my time." He complained. "I wasn't able to open the cafe today."

He couldn't help but feel bad. This cafe was his business after all.

"I'm sorry, Sakura-san." He apologized, adjusting his glasses.

"Whatever. Just head upstairs. There's something I need to give to you." He told him and the boy complied.

Ren made his way back to his room and waited for Sojiro. As the man in questioned walked up the stairs, he was on his phone, reading off a news report.
"Talk about a gruesome accident… Eighty people were involved." He said, likely in regards to the recent accident. He then pulled out a journal and placed it on the table. "It's a diary. Make sure you write in it." He threw it onto the nearby table. "You may be under probation, but there are no special limitations on what you do in particular."

"Besides following the law?" The boy questioned.

"Exactly. However, I'm obligated to report on you, which is why I'm having you record your daily activities." He said but before he could say anything else, his phone rang. He pulled it out and answered it. "Hey, what's up?" He asked, conversing with the caller. "I'm about to leave right now. I'll see you soon." He hung up. "Well, I'm off. I'll lock the place up, so do whatever you want for the rest of the night. Oh, but don't mess up my store. If something goes missing, I'll hand you right over to the cops."

"Yes, sir." He nodded.

"You got school tomorrow, so you better head off to bed." With a wave, he was gone. He decided to make use of the journal and wrote down what he did today. After he was finished, he placed it on the table. He went over to change into his pajamas but before he could do that, he heard a ringing sound. It wasn't his cell phone and it sounded like it was coming from downstairs.

Deciding to check it out, he walked downstairs to see the yellow payphone on the counter ringing. While he was unsure if he should answer it, he remembered that Sojiro doesn't have his cell number and the caller could possibly be him. He picked up the phone and answered it.

"Yo, it's me."

"Sakura-san?" He figured. "Is something wrong?"

"Yeah uhh… I closed up the shop, but I forgot to flip the sign to CLOSED." He informed him. "It's too much of a hassle for me to go back, so you flip the sign for me."

"Sure, I can do that."

"Well, I'm sure no one's gonna come, even if it says OPEN. Thank goodness, I was able to reach you." He said, glad that he answered the phone. "Sorry. I make it a habit not to save guys' number on my cell phone."

_It's official, we got ourselves a ladies man._ He couldn't help but chuckle.

"Is something funny?" He heard Sojiro say.

"No, sir. Don't worry, I'll be sure to turn the sign." He assured his guardian.

"Okay then." He said. "Night, kid."

"Night." Ren hung up the phone.

Just as he was about to head out to flip the closed sign, the door opened.

He turned his head to the visitor who entered the cafe. As Ren got a better look at him, he noticed that he was wearing the Shujin academy uniform meaning he must go there, the only difference is that he left his blazer unbuttoned.

However, the moment his eyes met with the visitor, he was struck with familiarity.
Chapter End Notes

Pretty simple chapter, introducing Ren to the story. Next chapter, we'll introduce my OC. I hope you guys enjoyed it.

Till next time.
The Champion

Chapter Notes

Still getting used to AO3, it's much different than FF.

In this chapter, we introduce my OC. If you want to know more about him, his profile is on my FF profile.

A quick summary, my OC is a little more hard-headed, a little rough around the edges and a bit meaner and rude. But, I think you'll like him and how he grows over the course of the story.

Without further ado, here's the second chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The world's fate was sealed the moment humanity came to be.

Conflict and ruin were birthed, and the world has been lost many times over.

However, man's souls, riddled with flaws and contradictions, hold the potential to evolve into something... more.

...

You're an outsider. Never meant to be part of the events to come. But, it doesn't have to be this way.

Whether your choices bring about everlasting peace or total devastation, I wish to assist in helping you ascertain your role in this story.

Do you accept?

...

Yes.

...

Then, awaken... Champion!

He suddenly awoke thanks to the vibrations of the subway train. He rubbed his eyes as he realized he had been sleeping for a while.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for riding with us today." He heard a voice on the intercom. "We will be arriving in Shibuya shortly. This is the last stop for this line. Please transfer there for all subway rides. The doors to your left will open."
And here he thought he'd have at least a few more minutes of sleep until he arrived at his destination. Then again, the train ride from Kamakura to Tokyo was only an hour long. At the very least, it wasn't as long as his trip from Yasoinaba to Kamakura.

*Oh well.* He shrugged and let out a sigh as he looked around.

He didn't think much of anyone around him, just normal people going about their days, living their everyday lives as if all was right in their own little worlds.

But deep down, they're all the same.

**It's that kid. The one whose parents died because of those freak accidents.**

**I heard he skips class all the time and the teachers do nothing about it.**

**What makes him so special?**

**He's scary. We should probably stay away from him.**

"*Tch!*" He clicked his tongue in annoyance at the memories as he had better things to focus on.

"What? A mental shutdown?" He looked over and saw two high school girl chatting away, Likely talking about the mysterious mental shutdowns that have plagued Tokyo for the last two years.

"It's the truth!" Her friend replied. "There are even cases where people go crazy and start attacking people!"

"To a person though? That's gotta be a joke. You really love all that occult stuff, don't you?" She giggled.

"Cause it's cool!" The two friends shared a laugh which made Kazuma frown, rolling his eyes in severe annoyance.

*Typical high school idiots.* He scoffed in disgust. *Freely gossiping about subjects that don't personally involve them.*

However, it seems like he was not the only one disgusted by the high school girls. He looked across from where he was sitting and saw a boy around his age with glasses and wavy black hair. He wore the uniform of the school he was going to attend so he must go there as well.

He too was looking at the girls, sharing a similar annoyance at them for freely discussing people suffering from mental shutdowns.

*At least someone on this train is somewhat decent.* He thought before the train had stopped, arriving at its destination. He then made his way through the crowds of people and left the subway.

As he made his way through the streets of Shibuya he was suddenly hit with a bit of nostalgia. It had been almost two years since he's been here and barely anything had changed.

Still, it was home.

*Doesn't feel like home anymore, though.* He noted as he made his way to the next subway transfer, putting his earphones in so he could listen to music.

As he arrived in Yongen-Jaya, he stopped to admire the area.
He remembered the streets of Yongen-Jaya as a kid, not very crowded but not very quiet, all in all, a peaceful neighborhood. He looked around wanting to get a feel for the area seeing as how he would be living here from now on. He spotted a second-hand store, a supermarket, and an old movie theater.

However, he was not here to admire the sights.

*I'm supposed to meet Tori at Beauty Heights Apartments, the apartment building she owns.* He noted. Kazuma looked around to see if the building was anywhere in eyesight but couldn't find it. He then spotted a police officer on duty leaning against a pole with his arms crossed. He took his earphones out and walked over to him, hoping to get some directions.

"Excuse me, Officer?" He asked the policeman in question.

"What do you want, kid?" He replied curtly.

*Don't even try to act like you're busy, jackass. You're not even doing anything.* He thought.

"Do you know where Beauty Heights Apartments is?" Kazuma inquired.

"Down the street, past the old movie theater, and it's on your left, you can't miss it." He said, pointing down the street.

"I see. Thanks." He nodded before departing.

"Kids. Don't they have anything better to do than bother me." He heard the officer scoff under his breath.

He rolled his eyes and kept walking, ignoring the rude officer.

After walking past the old theater, he looked to his left and found his destination. Beauty Heights Apartments.

*Hard to believe you went from a simple nanny to landlady of an apartment building, Tori.* He thought.

After his previous caretakers could no longer afford to house him, he was informed that his former nanny, Tori Ichihara, had obtained legal custody of him thanks to her close association with his family and would be living with her from now on.

That meant he would have to transfer schools and move back to Tokyo, the one place he never wanted to come back to.

He opened the door and entered the lobby. He turned around and saw a few mailboxes by the front door. It was a small apartment building with only four floors but each floor had 4 apartments. The lobby itself was clean, well furnished with a few couches and chairs, a pay phone, a vending machine, and a small tv.

As he looked to his left, he was met with the front desk, occupied by someone he was quite familiar with, for he had known her since he was a mere 4 years of age.

A woman in her mid-20s with dark purple eyes and short black hair that extended to her shoulders. She wore a light green long sleeve T-shirt along with beige pants and white shoes. She had her vision perfectly obstructed with a book, so engrossed in it she had no idea that Kazuma was standing right there. Before he could say anything, he saw a man in a gray business suit walking
down the stairs with a briefcase.

"I'm off Ichihara-san." The man said, greeting the woman who looked up from her book to converse with the man.

"You're going to work this late in the afternoon, Okabe-kun?" She asked.

"Yeah, one of the other guys called in sick so I'm filling in for him." He replied.

"Aren't you already working on another case?" She wondered worryingly. "Maybe you should call in sick as well."

"I assure you Ichihara-san, I can handle the workload." He smiled.

"Well, If you say so." She said. "Don't work too hard."

"No promises." He quipped before walked towards the entrance. "Excuse me." He said as he walked passed Kazuma who eyed the man as he left.

He could tell that judging from their familiarity that he was likely a resident here from the words "another case" he was likely a detective or a lawyer. Although considering that he was filling in for another and has the option to "call in sick", a detective seems more likely.

"Seems more friendly than that jackhole down the street." Kazuma thought to himself.

With their conversation over, she watched as the man known as Okabe walked past her new visitor, now realizing that he was standing there.

"Hello, sir. How may I..." She stopped herself as she looked upon Kazuma, recognizing who he was and gasped in shock. "Oh my god! Kazzy-kun!!"

"Tori." He greeted her plainly even though a part of him wanted to call her out for using that ridiculous nickname. Again.

"But, I thought..." She pulled out her phone as if to look at the date and time before her eyes bulged out of her sockets. "Oh, dear! I had forgotten you were coming today!" She said before getting up and walking around the front desk. "You're finally here!" She exclaimed happily before embracing Kazuma in a comforting hug.

He simply stood still as she held him. After she let go, she graced him with a warm smile, the same smile she always gave when she saw him.

"Let me look at you for a minute." She said before bringing her hand to her chin, evaluating him with her eyes. "Yep. Still the same Kazzy-kun I remember." She giggled.

"It's been a while, Tori." He returned.

"And still refuses to use honorifics." She pouted but brushed it off. "We haven't seen each other in so long so I think a proper introduction is in order." She stated before placing both hands on her hips, giving him a wide smile. "I'm Tori Ichihara! From here on out, you'll be under my care!"

Still a Weirdo. He sighed at her introduction. She hadn't changed in the slightest, looks or personality. She was still the same bubbly, carefree, and cheerful woman that had looked after him since he was a kid.

"Anyway, you're probably tired from your train ride. Cmon, I'll show you to your room." She said,
motioning him to follow her.

"Am I not staying in your apartment?" He questioned.

"Nope. I'd rather you not sleep on a couch so I prepared a room just for you. Now, cmon." She said as she went upstairs with Kazuma following her.

They reached the first floor and walked down the hall. They stopped at the last door on the left at the end of the corridor, apartment 103. Ichihara pulled out her keys to open the door.

"Welcome to your new home." She said. "I hope you like it."

It wasn't like the house he lived in with his previous caretakers but it was clean and well furnished. The living room came with two comforting recliner chairs and a couch facing the opposite direction of a flat screen TV. The kitchen had all of its essentials, its own microwave, oven, fridge, etc.

Since he's never lived in an apartment before, he had no reason to complain. Ichihara must've gone to great lengths to let him have his own apartment so he felt very grateful to her.

"You didn't have to do this, Tori." He told her.

"Nonsense! I want you to feel right at home." She said. "Your stuff arrived yesterday, I put it all in your bedroom." She informed him but was met with silence as he continued to look around the room. "Anyway, let's sit down. We need to go over some rules first." She said as she sat down on the living room couch and invited him to join her.

"Alright." He said, sitting down next to her.

"While you may be under my care, there are certain rules that you will have to follow just like the other tenants." She told him before listing the rules. "It's simple, no drugs, no alcohol, no unnecessary noise, no loud music, and no parties unless I approve. Am I clear?"

"Yes Ma'am." He replied.

"Glad to hear it." She smiled. "Now that we got that out of the way, I should let you know that tomorrow we'll be going to Shujin Academy."

"Shujin?"

"Yep." She nodded. "You're so lucky, Kazzy-kun. Shujin is one of the best prep schools in Tokyo! My friend Sadayo works there too."

Yeah, I'm jumping for joy. He thought with a roll of his eyes though Tori didn't notice it.

"I really want this to be a fresh start for you." She said. "A new school means new experience. I'm sure you'll love it."

"Yeah, sure." He simply said.

"Anyway, I'm sure you'll be wanting to get settled in." She said before standing up and heading towards the door. "If you need me, I'll be at either the front desk or in my room. It's right down the hall, room 101."

"Got it." He nodded.
"Oh, before I forget." She pulled something out of her pocket and handed it to Kazuma. "Here's the key to the apartment. I'll be back later to check up on you and fix you some dinner, alright?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Alright then. Later, Kazzy-kun." She waved before closing the door, leaving Kazuma by his lonesome.

To think he would have an apartment all to himself? Still, he was aware that Tori would pop in from time to time to cook meals and check on him but he didn't mind the privacy of his own place. In fact, he preferred it.

After looking around a few more times, he got up from the couch and walked over to check out the bedroom. As he opened the door, he found the room to be well furnished. A king size bed, a dresser, a small desk with a computer on it, and its own bathroom. His bags were on the ground along with a box containing his school uniform and his guitar case. Seeing as it was all here, Kazuma decided to get to work. He unzipped his bags and placed all of his clothes into their respective drawers, separating shirts, pants, underwear, etc. He placed his case containing his guitar in the corner of the room, not desiring to play it at this moment.

He opened the box that contained his school uniform and hung it on hangers before placing it on the bathroom doorknob, reminding him of what to wear tomorrow when he and Tori leave to register at Shujin.

After finally unpacking, he laid down on the bed to sleep for a few minutes. He placed his earphones in his ears so he could listen to music in order to relax. As he put both hands behind his head, he leaned back and sighed.

*I never wanted to come back here.* He thought. The train rides he had to take were tiresome. He wasn't going to miss Yasoinaba but coming back to Tokyo wasn't something he was thrilled about. *I hate this city. It's filled with memories I wish I could bury.*

He felt drowsy as he closed his eyes, succumbing to slumber.

*Especially, that memory.*

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**2 years ago**

The Kazumas had just finished their vacation at Dome Town and were ready to head home. Kei walked alongside his Mother and Father, listening to his music the whole time. The three made their way to the subway station hoping to catch the next train.

"I can never get enough of DomeTown. Makes me feel young again." Atsuro said.

"This was a wonderful idea, honey," Yuko said, leaning her head on her beloved's shoulder. "Thanks for taking us here. I think Kei enjoyed himself too."

"Yeah, glad we were able to spend some quality time together. It's been a while since we had a family outing." Atsuro said with a hint of regret.

He looked over to his son, whose mind was focused on his music. Due to their careers as detectives, the Kazumas didn't have much free time to spend with their son, often relying on Tori to look after him while they were away at work. But even so, Kei never complained once and whenever they did have time together, he was always excited and thrilled for whatever was in store.
He was a good kid, one that both Atsuro and Yuko Kazuma were proud of.

"Hey guys, look over there."

The couple looked over to see a few civilians looking at them. They spoke quietly but could tell they were talking about them.

"Is that...?"

"Yeah, Atsuro and Yuko Kazuma."

"The Best Detectives in Tokyo?"

"The very same."

"Arent they the ones who took down that sex trafficking ring in Shinjuku?"

"Yep, practically handed to police on a platter."

"Thank god for people like them."

Atsuro scratched his head in embarrassment from their praise. He was never going to get used to all the attention they would receive from their hard work. Thankfully he didn't let the fame get to his head, as what mattered most was keeping his city and family safe. Still, he couldn't help but blush at the constant praise.

"Seems we're recognized everywhere we go." Atsuro laughed.

"Seems like i... i... i..." Yuko suddenly seemed to stutter which her husband caught notice of.

"Honey? Something wrong?" He asked, looking worriedly at his wife.

"At... At... su... ro... I... I..." She couldn't make out the words as she clutched her head, indescribable pain coursing through her.

Kei kept listening to his music not paying much attention to his surroundings as he awaited his train ride home. He looked over at his parents and caught notice that something was happening to his mother. He took his headphones out so he could figure out what's wrong.

"Mom?" He called out.

"Honey, what's wrong?! Answer me!" Atsuro demanded before turning his attention to the pedestrians. "Someone call an ambulance! My wife is..."

As Yuko stopped shaking, she looked up to her husband to meet her eyes with his. Only her pupils were no longer visible. Atsuro looked at his wife in shock. Her eyes practically rolled to the back of her head, mouth drooling, and teeth clenching.

"Oh my god." He muttered.

"AHHHHHHH!" She then lunged at him, grabbing at his neck, attempting to choke him to death.

"M-Mom?!" Kei exclaimed, both fearful and confused as to why his mother was attacking his father.

"Kei, run!" Atsuro managed to choke out as he struggled against his wife's grasp. "Run, Kei!
"Kazzy-kun!"

"AH!" Kazuma woke up, panting and sweating. He looked up to see Tori standing over him with a worried expression, her hands on his shoulders. He slowly began to recover from his nightmare, catching his breath and calming himself down. The last thing he wanted was to worry Tori.

"Are you okay?" She asked.

"I'm fine." He told her, half-lying.

"But, you're sweating bullets! And you were screaming!" She pointed out.

"Just a bad dream. I'm fine." He told her so she would drop the subject.

"Oh, Kazzy-kun." She then brought him into a comforting hug, resting his head on her stomach.

He mentally chided himself for falling asleep when he knew Tori was going to come back. He knew if he had fallen asleep, he would've ended up having that nightmare. Again.

*I'm sick of remembering them that way. He thought. It's never a happy dream of the times we went to Dometown or bad ones where they made me stay in a treehouse as punishment for doing something wrong. It's always the same nightmare.*

After a few minutes, she released from her embrace.

"Better?" She asked.

"Yeah." He replied.

"I'm glad." She gave him one of her trademark smiles, opting to change the subject so they wouldn't focus on the nightmare anymore. "Anyway, I have your dinner ready for you."

"Dinner?" He questioned before getting up and following her into the kitchen. As they made their way to the table, a plate of dinner awaited him.

"I made you a homemade teriyaki salmon cooked in soy sauce. It's one of my favorite recipes." She told him. "And to top it off. Ta-da!" She then placed another plate on the table which carried a treat that Kazuma was very familiar with. "A freshly baked anpan!"

Kazuma blushed and looked away. He knew that Tori was aware of his weakness for sweets and pastries and was clearly taking advantage of it. Still, he was hungry and he did miss her cooking. He sat down, grabbed a fork, and prepared to eat his dinner.

*Is she gonna watch me eat?* He wondered as he took a bite, noticing that his former nanny was staring at him, eyes filled with anticipation.

After finishing the salmon, he looked toward Tori to give her his thoughts.

"It was good." He told her.

"Yes! I knew I hit the jackpot on the Salmon!" She threw her fist in the air, excited that Kazuma liked it.
He rolled his eyes, believing she was getting excited over nothing. He then picked up the breaded pastry, giving it a look before he took a bite. He hadn't had Anpan in a long time but the taste of red bean paste brought back memories, good ones.

"It's... It's good." He tried to compose himself around Tori as he really wanted to devour the Anpan.

"I'm so glad you like it." She smiled. "Don't you worry, Kazzy-kun. I've got a mountain of recipes for you to try. You'll never get bored with my cooking."

Should I like the sound of that? He thought.

"Anyway, take some time to adjust yourself to the apartment. But, do not go out at night, you hear?" She warned. "You may have this place to yourself, but you do have a curfew. 10:00, no exceptions. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am." He simply said.

"Good to hear." She smiled. She said before pulling out an envelope. "Before I go, here's a month's allowance. I'll give you one each month. If you want more, you'll have to find yourself a job."

"Alright." He nodded as he took the envelope from her.

"Make sure you go to bed at a reasonable time Kazzy-kun. Remember, we're heading to Shujin tomorrow." She said before giving him a light kiss on the forehead. "Have a good night."

And with that, she left the apartment once again.

Finally having some privacy, Kazuma went over to the couch and turned on the TV to see if anything good was on. Nothing really piqued his interest so he kept flipping through channels until he landed on some game show. Game shows were always his favorite because it tested his knowledge so he found them to be great time killers.

After watching for a few hours, he checked the time and decided to go to bed early. He was going to his new school with Tori tomorrow so he should get a good night's rest. He got up from the couch and headed to his bedroom. He set his alarm clock and placed it on the night rest, right next to the picture of his parents. He gave the picture a look before letting out a sigh. Hopefully, he'll have decent dreams tonight.

As he settled into his bed, he gave the picture one last look before closing his eyes.

Fresh start, huh? Ugh, kill me now. He thought before sleep began to take him. As if anything special would actually happen.

He slowly opened his eyes and broke away from slumber. He could no longer feel the safe comfort of his bed. Instead, he felt the hardness of a cold floor. As his vision cleared, he realized he was no longer in his room, nor the apartment building. As he stood up, he looked around to get his barrings only to find himself in an unfamiliar place.

The atmosphere was indescribable as if no life existed except himself. He felt as if he was in space or something akin to that. He looked around and believed he was at the top of some kind of tower, six pillars surrounding him. He looked down and saw that the floor itself had a very checkered design to it.

"What..." He muttered. "Where am I? Am I dreaming?"
As he walked closer to the railing, he looked down to see that there really was nothing else in sight. It was as if this tower was all that existed in this world. As he took a few steps back, he had this strange feeling that he wasn't alone.

"Ah!"

As this feeling got stronger, he turned around and saw a man standing before him with his arms crossed.

He had long black hair that was tied up in a ponytail and an outfit that consisted of a white blazer worn over a black shirt and tie. The blazer went well with his white pants and black dress shoes. However, what was most outlandish about his appearance was that his face was hidden behind a mask with no eyeholes and a violet butterfly on the right side of his face.

To show respect, he gave a polite bow, greeting Kazuma in a formal manner.

"Welcome, Champion." The man spoke. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"W-What the..." He wasn't stunned by the man's outlandish appearance, but more stunned by the way he chose to greet him. More than that, he was more confused by the Champion title he chose to greet him with as if he knew who he was.

"Who are you?" Kazuma asked.

"It has been a long time so it's only natural that you would forget me. But, we have met before." He explained. "I am Philemon."

"Philemon?" He raised an eyebrow at the name. He said they had met before but the name was unfamiliar and Kazuma was sure that he had never seen this man before in his life.

"Yes. I am a dweller between consciousness and unconsciousness." He stated. "But now, a simple test, if you will. Can you state your name?"

"My name?" He questioned. If he already knew who he was why would he be asking for his name. Just as Kazuma was about to answer, even he was finding trouble making the words possible. Maybe the atmosphere of this place was getting to him. "It... it's... Kazuma." He answered. "My name is Kei Kazuma."

"Splendid. There aren't many who can remember their identity, when in this domain. I am pleased that you remember that much." Philemon said. "I have been waiting a long time for the day that we would meet again, my friend. Your journey is about to begin."

"My... journey?" The boy questioned.

"Yes. Conflict and ruin are approaching and the world will once again become lost. But you, my friend, have the potential to oppose such fate." He explained.

"Potential?" Kazuma questioned once again. This man, this masked stranger, was saying things that made no sense to him at all.

"Tell me, are you even aware of the many and varied selves that you harbor, within you?" The masked man asked, pointing his finger in his guest's direction.

"What?"
"The self-suffused with divine love." He held out one hand. "The self-capable of demonic cruelty." He held out the other before returning to his arms-crossed posture. "People live by wearing different masks. Your current self is only one of those innumerable masks."

"I-I don't..." He muttered in continued confusion.

"The time is soon where you must use your various masks to survive those who would threaten you. To that end, I grant you this power." Philemon pulled out what appeared to be a card from his sleeve and threw it at Kazuma. As he caught it, the card appeared blank.

"A blank card?" He turned it over to see that the back of the card was blank as well. What was he supposed to do with this?

"That card is special. With it, carries the power to summon the selves within you. The Gods and the Demons you harbor." He explained. "Now, you must return, to your proper time and place. Go forth Kei Kazuma, forge your own story."

"Wait! I..." Just then as Kazuma reached out to the masked man, his vision started to fade. He couldn't move his body, all he could do was watch as the mysterious man known as Philemon and his tower fade from his sight.

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**4/10 - Sunday**

He awoke from his slumber immediately, having been freed from his strange dream. He looked over at his alarm clock and saw that it was about 7 in the morning. He ran his fingers through his brown locks as he thought over the dream he just had.

*Journey. Selves. Masks. He wondered. What was that?*

He remembered the card that masked man threw at him so he checked to see if he had it on him only to find nothing. He let out an annoyed huff, chalkin...
"Rise and Shine, Kazzy-kun!" The door flew open and in came the devil. Tori entered the room with one of her trademark smiles before she noticed that Kazuma was already out of bed and dressed for the day. "Oh, you're awake." She said before she noticed his attire. "And you're wearing the uniform." She brought her hand up to her chin, deep in thought. "Hmm."

"What?" He asked, wondering if she was trying to judge how he looked in the uniform.

"I like it." She said before giving him a thumbs up. "You look really handsome in it."

"Thanks." He said.

"Anyway, now that you're up, I've got your breakfast on the table." She said as she left the room with Kazuma following after her. He sat down at the table as he awaited his meal. "Here you go! I made it just the way you like it!" She placed his breakfast on the table along with hers. Two sunny side eggs and a slice of toast.

Kazuma ate the breakfast that Tori had prepared for him. Like the salmon from yesterday, her cooking never fails to impress, even though it's a simple breakfast. He was glad that she remembered how he liked his eggs, especially since it's been a while since she's cooked for him.

"Thanks, Tori." He thanked her, finishing his breakfast.

"No problem." She smiled, picking up their plates and placing it in the sink. "Alright, let's get going. We'll be taking the train to your school, it's in the Aoyama district. The route transfers are kind of a nag and I'll have to pay for your tickets since you don't have a pass so I'd rather we get there as early as possible to avoid crowds."

"Alright," Kazuma said as he got up from the table and collected his phone and wallet from his room. Tori grabbed her purse as the two left the apartment, locking it before heading out.

"I can't wait for you to see your new school," Tori said as they left the building. "I think you'll love it."

"Doubt it." He thought as they headed towards the subway transfer to Shibuya.

The two took the subway transfer to Shibuya station and then headed towards the Teikyu Building to make next transfer to Aoyama-Itchome. Thankfully they didn't have to worry about large crowds as it was early in the morning so they were able to get to the next transfer to Aoyama safe and sound but they took their time considering they weren't expecting them until noon. As they arrived at the school, the two stopped at the gate to get a good look at it.

"Here we are, Shujin Academy." She said. She took in the sights before she turned to face her ward. "Well, what do you think?"

"It's... all right." He simply said.

"Looks more like a prison than a school." He thought as he looked at the place.

"Also, Kazzy-kun." She pointed out. "Please be on your best behavior when we meet the principal, okay? First impressions are always important after all."

"Yes Ma'am." He nodded.

"All right let's head on in." She said as she and Kazuma entered the school.
They were given a tour of the school before being directed to the Principal's office. Once the reached his office, they met two individuals: A large man who Kazuma believed to be the principal sitting down with a woman with black hair and a purple dress standing to his left. The principal greeted the two before giving Tori some documents to sign while Kazuma chose to remain silent. Once she finished, she placed the pen back on his desk and faced the two.

"All finished," Tori said.

"Excellent." The Principal said. "Allow me to be the first to welcome you to our school, Kazuma-san. Shujin is always welcome to promising students such as yourself."

"Thanks." Kazuma simply nodded.

"Now, onto the matter of your... attendance record." The Principal pointed out with a frown.

*Here we go.* He groaned, knowing that it was bound to be brought up eventually.

"I hope you understand that Shujin has a strict attendance policy, Kazuma-san. Exceed the number of absences, and you will immediately be expelled. Please keep that in mind." He warned the boy.

*Strict? Yeah, you and every other school I've been to, fatass.* He thought

"I understand," Kazuma replied. "It won't be a problem."

"Good to hear." He smiled before turning to the teacher next to him. "This is the teacher in charge of your class."

"I'm Iona Chouno. It's nice to meet you, Kazuma-san." She reached out for a handshake and Kazuma shook it politely before handing him an ID card. "Here's your student ID. I'm looking forward to working with you this year."

"Thank you, Ms." He took the card and placed it in his wallet.

"Come to the faculty office when you arrive at school tomorrow, I'll introduce you to your class." She told him and he simply nodded.

"Well then, if that's all we'll see ourselves out," Tori said.

"Have a good rest of your day, Ichihara-san." The Principal smiled. As the two were headed towards the door, he turned to Chouno. "Ms. Chouno, could you ask Ms. Kawakami to come to my office. Our other transfer student should be here soon."

"You mean?" She questioned.

"Yes, unfortunately." He sighed.

After the two made their way out of the school, Tori stopped in front of Kazuma to talk to him.

"They seem nice, don't you think?" She wondered.

"I guess." He thought.

Tell the truth, he didn't really think much of either of them. The way the Principal went from greeting him warmly to threatening to expel him made him believe that the man only cared about the school's reputation rather than a student's well-being. As for Ms. Chouno, she seemed decent at best and that's being nice.
"Hey, Kazzy-kun." Tori smiled. "I really want you to do good at this school so please, don't get into any trouble, ok?"

"I promise, Tori." He said, giving his word he won't get into trouble.

"Anyway, now that, that's done, how about we get something to eat? I know a cool diner in Shibuya we could go to. Think of it as a celebration of your return home." She suggested.

"Ok." He said as the two headed toward the subway transfer to Shibuya. As they were about to depart, Kazuma overheard someone talking behind him. As he looked over his shoulder, he caught sight of a middle-aged man apparently giving a kid a lecture of some kind. He wore the Shujin Academy which means he's a student there but his most notable traits were his glasses and wavy unkempt black hair.

*Hey, isn't he...* Kazuma thought as the boy seemed a little familiar.

"Kazzy-kun!" His thoughts broke as he heard Tori calling out to him. "Let's go before we miss the train!"

"Oh, yeah." He said before jogging over back to her as they made their way to the subway.

As the two made their way to the Aoyama subway transfer to Shibuya, they found themselves waiting for the next train as they had arrived a little early before the scheduled arrival.

Thirty minutes had passed, no train in sight.

Tori tapped her foot, waiting patiently for the train to arrive before she touched her face and noticed something off. She pulled out her compact before noticing a smudge on her eye.

"Oh, dear. I knew something was off." She said before turning to face Kazuma. "Hey, Kazzy-kun, could you wait here. I have to fix my makeup."

"Sure." He said. He never knew why Tori wore mascara, believing it to be a waste as she already had beautiful eyelashes.

"Okay. I'll be right back." She said leaving to find the nearest ladies room.

As he continued to wait, he thought over his visit to Shujin and how the principal brought up his attendance record. At his previous school, Kazuma maintained good grades throughout his first year but skipped a lot of classes over the course of the two semesters. Even when he did attend school, he would end up skipping lectures from time to time.

He didn't see the point. After all, why attend school when there's nothing to look forward to?

He sighed annoyingly, the train was probably late or something, it shouldn't take this long. As he waited, he noticed that someone had walked over to his side, waiting for the train as well. He glanced to his left to see a girl with brown eyes and dark black hair in a ponytail tied with a pink hairband. She wore the Shujin Academy uniform for girls, minus the blazer: a beige sweater rolled up to her elbows, the uniform skirt, and a black leg brace on her right leg.

Her eyes were glued to the ground as she carried this depressed expression on her face.

*Why does she look so upset?* He wondered before coming to the conclusion that maybe she wasn't very excited to start the new year. *I feel your pain, that feeling's not going away anytime soon.* He
thought as he looked away from her.

When she arrived at the station, she felt utterly exhausted. Mr. Kamoshida pushed the team extra hard today which didn't help due to her leg injury. She felt a bit despondent. At this rate, her leg won't heal properly and she wanted to be in tip-top shape for nationals. Maybe someone else would be better suited for the starting lineup?

Suddenly, her eyes rose as she had this distinct feeling that someone was looking at her. She turned to her right to see a boy with brown hair standing right next to her. She recognized the Shujin uniform but not the individual wearing it.

*Is he a new student?* She wondered as she had only seen one boy wear their blazer unbuttoned and it wasn't the boy next to her. Her thoughts would then turn to her cell phone as she felt it vibrate in her pocket. She pulled it out and saw that it was from her best friend.

**Ann:** Hey, Shiho. You on your way?

**Shiho:** Just got off practice. At the station, heading over to you right now.

**Ann:** Hey, Nationals is coming up, right? You excited?

**Shiho:** Not really, Ann.

**Ann:** It'll be alright. Don't worry, we'll make the most of this year.

**Shiho:** I hope so.

**Ann:** We will. I promise. Let's talk more when you get here, okay?

**Shiho:** See you soon.

"Make the most of this year, huh?" She said out loud.

"Hmm?" He looked at the girl next to him out of the corner of his eye when he heard her speak out loud to nobody in particular.

*Is she talking to herself?* He thought before he glanced at her cell phone and realized she had been texting someone. *No, she's probably just thinking out loud.*

"Is that even possible?" She continued to speak her thoughts. "It's not like anything special will happen."

She shared the same thoughts he had the other day. Normally, Kazuma wouldn't bat an eye to someone thinking out loud like this. He never had an interest in anyone's life before, never really cared. But seeing this girl, she looked so hurt, like she was afraid of something.

At that moment, it just came out.

"Then you'll just have to create special moments for yourself." He suddenly blurted out.

"Huh?" As she heard those words, she turned to face the boy who said them. He refused to look at her, keeping his eyes forward. He had no idea where those words came from, they just... came out
on their own. She kept her gaze focused on him as it appeared that he wasn't finished.

"If nothing fun or exciting ever happens, just create it using your own power." He said before he turned his head to meet her eyes who seemed filled with curiosity. "You can do it, can't you?"

"I-I." She stuttered as she heard this mysterious boy give her advice. But before she could say anything, she saw that the train had finally arrived.

When the train doors opened, everyone inside made their way out while everyone outside made their way in. Kazuma couldn't go as he was still waiting for Tori to come back from the restroom. Not wanting to miss the train, the girl simply decided to board the subway transfer. As she boarded, she turned around to face Kazuma, their eyes met once more. While she couldn't think of a suitable reply with words as she thought over what he had said, she gave him a small smile as the doors closed.

He was taken off guard by her smile which said more than words ever could. It was a smile of gratitude, thankful for the advice. As the train left, he thought over the words he had said to her and wondered what came over him to say something like that.

*If nothing fun or exciting ever happens, then create it using your own power?* He thought it over, not believing those words came from his mouth. It was the longest he had ever said since coming here. *Where did that come from?*

"NOOOOOOO!"

Just then, a yell broke his thoughts. He turned around and saw Tori sprinting over to where he was. As she arrived, she mentally cursed herself for taking too long to fix her makeup.

"Fuck! Son of a bitch!" She swore before turning to Kazuma, red-faced and embarrassed for the words that came out of her mouth. "S-Sorry, Kazzy-kun. I didn't mean to swear in front of you."

"It's fine." He said, not really as upset as she is.

"It'll be a while before the next train arrives." She sighed before deciding to leave. "Cmon, Kazzy-kun. Let's take a cab instead."

"Alright." He followed after her, that girl's smile still on his mind.

The cab ride was absolutely awful. Traffic had consumed the roads and it took hours before Kazuma and Tori could make it back to Yongen-Jaya. As the two entered the lobby, Tori went over to the front desk and sat down in her chair, slumping over her desk in exhaustion.

"Ugh! I hate taxis." She complained as Kazuma stood in front of her desk. She then grabbed the remote and turned on the lobby television to check on the news

"Again, due to the subway accident, the schedule for all trains has been affected-"

"Oh, dear. Another accident?" Tori said worryingly with Kazuma sharing her sentiments.

*Accident?* Kazuma's eyes widened at the news as they explained how the driver suddenly lost control. *Even after two years, it's still happening.*

"There's been a lot of those lately." She sighed, burying her head in her arms. "I wish I had a car."

As he heard Tori complain, he decided to stop watching the news and turn in for the day. As he
made his way to the stairs, Tori called out to him, halting his movements.

"I'm sorry we couldn't go to the diner like I wanted to, Kazzy-kun." She apologized. "I'll come up later and fix you something, okay?"

"Sure." He said before making his way up the stairs. He walked down the hall to his door before pulling out the key Tori gave him, using it to enter. He then closed the door and made his way to the couch. He sat down and placed his earphones in his ears to listen to music.

He allowed himself to doze off as he thought over recent events. His thoughts drifted to that girl at the train station and the strange advice he gave her when she appeared upset about starting the new year. It was so strange because he shared her exact same disbelief that anything special would happen this year. The advice definitely had some effect on her because he remembered the smile she graced him with as she left for Shibuya. He couldn't help but wonder if he made her day a little better with his words

*Even so, it doesn't matter.* He thought. It was unlikely he would ever see her again. Even though he'll be attending the same school as her, she'll probably have forgotten about him. *It's for the best anyway.*

As he slept for a little while longer, he felt someone shaking him to wake him up. He opened his eyes to see Tori standing over him. He took out his headphones and gave her his full attention.

"Hey Kazzy-kun, I'm gonna make you your dinner, okay?" She informed him.

He simply nodded before turning on the TV as Tori went to work. The news kept talking about the subway accident. Thankfully, no one was seriously hurt and the engineer couldn't explain why he suddenly lost control when he was taken in for questioning. He turned it off the moment they brought up recent accidents that had happened in the past. He knew listening to it more would bring up painful memories he'd rather forget.

"Kazzy-kun, dinner's ready," Tori said, motioning him to come over to the dinner table to eat. He sat down and looked upon the meal his former nanny placed in front of him. "What I have for you today is cheese topped miso marinated pork roast with a side of steamed vegetables. Dig in!"

*Your creativity never ceases to amaze, Tori.* He thought as he took a bite out of the roast. She went heavy on the cheese with this one. As he finished the meal, he gave Tori his thoughts.

"It was good." He said.

"Jackpot!" She threw her fist in the air from excitement. "Ah, who needs that silly diner anyway when you can enjoy Chef Tori's homecooked meals! Reserved only for you, Kazzy-kun!"

He just looked at her with a raised eyebrow as she got overly excited about her cooking. Kazuma was right, she hadn't changed in the slightest.

"Silliness aside, I'm glad you like it." She said as she pulled something out of her pocket and handed it to him. "Here you go. This is a commuter pass so you won't have to pay for train tickets. Tomorrow's your first day of school so don't leave without it."

"Thanks." He took the pass from her and placed it in his wallet.

"Be sure to go to bed at a reasonable time, okay? And remember, curfew is at 10:00 no exceptions." She said.
"I understand."

"Well then, I'll see you in the morning." She said as she headed out the door. "Have a good night."

He watched as she left the room. He looked at his phone and saw that it was about 9:20, meaning he had about 40 more minutes before curfew. Since he had time to kill, he decided to go out. He placed his plate in the sink and headed out his apartment door.

He walked down the stairs and into the lobby. It was as he thought, the front desk was empty meaning Tori was asleep in her own apartment. He then left the apartment complex to explore Yongen-Jaya.

He walked around, wanting to get a feel for the area as he was going to be living in this neighborhood from now on. He let out a sigh of relief as the rude cop from yesterday wasn't at his post, likely somewhere else or maybe reassigned though Kazuma didn't care. As he walked around, he took notice of a shop that really stood out. He walked over and read the sign.

Cafe Leblanc, Coffee, and Curry.

It appeared old-school if anything else. It didn't look like a popular spot but Kazuma found it impressive nonetheless. Wanting to see more, he decided to check out the inside, maybe get a nice decaf cup of joe.

As he entered, he saw that nobody was behind the counter. In fact, the shop was empty. But, as the door closed, his eyes met one occupant who appeared to have finished a phone call on a yellow pay phone. He wore the Shujin uniform same as him, but what he immediately recognized was the occupant's glasses and unkempt black hair.

He's...

Chapter End Notes

And now, our protagonists meet!

It took me a while to find a way to get these two to meet and so I figured it be best if they had met before their first day at school.

I hope you all enjoyed the new chapter, till next time.
Chapter Notes

All right guys, back again with another chapter. Here our protagonists meet and interact for the first time. As of right now, I'm currently working on the current chapter of Trickster Vs. Champion which is why I haven't uploaded on here for the past few days but It's almost done so I figured I'd take the time to upload chapter 3.

Enjoy!

Was it destiny, or a coincidence that this happened?

The moment Ren saw who had entered the cafe, a lot of thoughts came to mind. First off was that a possible customer had just entered the closed cafe and Sojiro wasn't here. Didn't the man lock the shop when he left or did he forget that too? The second was the identity of the visitor, he who looked to be around his age and wore an unbuttoned Shujin school uniform.

He's that guy from the train. Ren remembered

Even though he was wearing a different outfit, Ren could never forget that deadly scowl. He was on the train with him on his ride to Tokyo, remembering that look of disgust he had when those girls were freely discussing the mental shutdowns and psychotic breakdowns. And if he wasn't mistaken, he was also that same person he saw leaving the school when he and Sojiro went to visit Shujin earlier. And now, he was here. What a strange coincidence.

No words were spoken, they just stared at each other as they both shared the same disbelief that they were officially meeting.

It wasn't until Ren remembered that Leblanc was closed that he chose to break the silence.

"Sorry, the cafe's closed." He spoke first, breaking the silence the two had formed.

"Sign says open." The visitor pointed to the sign that Sojiro had forgotten to flip.

"Yeah, sorry. The owner forgot to flip the sign when he left." Ren explained.

"Then what are you doing here?" He asked curtly.

This guy's not very friendly. Ren noted as he tried to reason with him. While it was technically none of his business, Ren felt like he had nothing to hide so he may as well tell him.

"I... live here." He told the visitor.

"You live in a coffee shop?" The visitor raised an eyebrow at him, wondering if he was being serious.

"Y-Yeah." Ren adjusted his glasses as he explained the situation. "I just transferred here yesterday and my guardian won't let me stay at his house. So yeah, I live here."
"Transferred?" The visitor crossed his arms. He couldn't believe the irony of the situation. "You too, huh?

"Huh?" Ren raised an eyebrow at what he said.

"Forget it." He'd been here longer than he wanted to and he didn't come here to make conversation with some stranger. "I'll leave." The boy turned around and tried to leave the cafe before this guy caught on to what he had said.

"Wait." He called out, causing the new visitor to stop just as he placed his hand on the door handle. "Are you a transfer student too?"

"What's it to you?" The visitor fired back rudely.

"Just curious. It'd be nice to meet someone who's also new, you know?" Ren added.

"Well, not that it's any of your business, yeah I'm a transfer student," The visitor said, hoping that satisfied his curiosity so he could leave.

"Well, at least I know I won't be the only one." Ren laughed a little, finding comfort that there will be another new student just like him. He walked a little closer and held out his hand. "I'm Ren. Ren Amamiya, by the way."

"I didn't ask for your name." He replied.

"Well, one of us had to start out the introductions, wouldn't you say? That silence earlier was a little awkward." He joked, trying to lessen the tension in the air.

The visitor turned around to face Ren who still had his hand out. He looked at it then looked back at Ren. He let out an annoyed huff before he grabbed his hand and shook it. Since the guy was being polite, this was the least he could do.

"Kei Kazuma, take it or leave it." He gave his name.

"Kei... Kazuma, huh? So Kazuma-kun?" He replied, shaking his hand.

"Call me whatever you want, I don't care. Just leave the honorifics out of it." Kazuma said as he released his hand. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm leaving."

"Well, it was nice meeting you, Kazuma," Ren said as the boy prepared to leave. "Hopefully, I'll see you at school?"

"Hmph, whatever." And with that, he left the cafe.

Once the boy was out of sight, Ren's first impressions of him were far from good. From that conversation alone, he saw that Kazuma was unfriendly, rude, and socially challenged. Clearly not a people person but not exactly hateful. His curt words weren't personal so maybe he was just trying to find an excuse to leave and not engage in conversation. Regardless, he found comfort in the fact that he met someone who was in a somewhat similar position. Being the new kid was tough so maybe he'll see him around.

But for now, he needed to get some sleep. School was tomorrow so he went outside to flip the sign CLOSED before locking up. He could tell Sojiro that he forgot to lock up when he left but decided against it. The deed was done and all he wanted was to get some sleep. He walked back upstairs, changed into his pajamas and laid down on the bed.
So, I'll be taking the train to school from now on. He pulled out his phone and checked the subway transfers to get a feel for where he will need to go. Yongen-Jaya... Aoyama-Itchome... Transfer. Looks I need to go out to Shibuya, then transfer there. He sighed, dreading the idea of having to walk through those crowded streets again.

He then checked the news to find out more about the recent subway accident.

A lot of people got hurt. I bet this will affect the timetables for tomorrow. He said as he returned to the home screen only to find a familiar app once again gracing its presence on his phone. That strange app, again? Why does it keep showing up? Ren once again dragged the app to the trash bin, deleting it once more. I should probably reboot my phone, just in case, it's a virus.

And with that, he set the alarm on his phone and placed it in his pocket. As then pulled the covers over his body and allowed sleep to claim him. As he closed his eyes, his thoughts drifted to the other new kid, the one he met today and wondered if it was fate or coincidence that two transfer students would meet before the start of school.

Kei Kazuma, huh? I wonder what his deal is.

4/11 - Monday

"Kazzy-kun." His eyes slowly opened to a lovely sing-song voice that he was quite familiar with as he had heard it many times before as a child. Once his eyes fully opened, he saw Tori standing over him with a smile on her face. "Good morning, sunshine."

"Ugh." He groaned as his slumber was intruded. He got up and rubbed his eyes. He knew why she woke him up, it's his first day of hell after all. "Hey, Tori."

"Rise and shine, Kazzy-kun. It's time to get up." She said as he got out of bed. "I'll make your breakfast while you get ready."

"Alright." He said as he went to the bathroom to shower. Once he was finished, he put on his new uniform unbuttoned just how he liked it. Today was his first day of school, or as he would call it, his first day of a new hell. He groaned in annoyance and was not looking forward to this day at all.

He collected his school bag, left the bathroom and entered his living room.

"Here's what we have on the menu today." She quipped as she placed his breakfast on the table. The meal consisted of rice, miso soup, fermented soybeans, grilled fish, some pickled vegetables, and a glass of water. He sat down and ate his breakfast. Once again, Tori never failed to disappoint.

"Thanks, Tori." He said and he placed the empty glass on the finished plate.

"Only the best for you, Kazzy-kun." She said as she collected his dishes and placed them in the sink. "So, you ready for your first day?"

No, not really. He thought but he wasn't going to tell her that.

"Sure." He answered.

"I'm glad. I'm sure you'll have a wonderful first day. Here, I packed your lunch." She said as she handed him his lunch. "I packed you some croquette sandwiches. I hope you like them.
"Thanks." He collected his lunch and placed it in his bag.

"Hey, Kazzy-kun," Tori said before giving him a warm hug, easing any nerves he may have on attending a new school. "Have an awesome first day, okay?"

"Sure." He said. While he really didn't care about attending school anymore, he wasn't planning on skipping the first day. He wasn't going to do that to Tori. Plus, he wasn't going to give fatass a reason to expel him.

"I'll see you later then." She let go of him. Giving his former nanny a nod, he turned to leave and walked out of his new apartment. As he walked down the stairs, he decided to just suck it up and get it over with.

*And so, my new life begins. A life with no particular objective and nothing to be excited about.* He thought as he left the apartment building. *Just another unexceptional day.*

As the alarm went off, Ren shot out of bed. He didn't have the dream about the velvet room again, it was just a dreamless night. He wanted to get more answers about what that long-nosed man meant about "ruin" but it seemed like that'll come another day. More importantly, it was the first day of school, he had to get ready.

He picked up his uniform and went downstairs. While Sojiro was busy working, he directed his ward to the bathhouse where he could bathe and get ready for school. Thankfully, the bathhouse supplied him with what he needed. Once he finished, he put on his school uniform and returned to Leblanc to let the cafe owner know that he was about to head off to school.

*Hopefully, I won't get lost.* He thought. As long as he followed the map, he was sure he could find his way to Shujin.

Once he entered the cafe, he was greeted with a lovely smell. As he looked over at the counter he noticed a plate of curry was made, likely for him.

"Hey, Sakura-san." He greeted his guardian.

"Oh? You actually going to school, kid?" He replied before seeing that he was dressed in his school uniform.

"Might as well. Got nothing better to do." He joked which made his guardian's eyes roll.

"Cute." He groaned before pointing to the plate. "Here."

"Curry, huh?" He said as he eyed the meal in front of him.

"What's that reaction for?" He questioned, wondering if he was going to complain.

"It's nothing. Sorry, I didn't think you were actually gonna feed me." He confessed.

"What, you'd think I'd let you starve?" He joked before motioning him to sit down. "Go on, eat it before customers show up."

Ren sat down, picked up a fork, gathered up some curry and rice, and took a bite. The taste was indescribable but so delicious.

*I can really taste the complex flavors. How does he not get a lot of business, this is really good.* He thought and he finished the curry and gulped down a glass of water.
"That was delicious. Thank you for the meal." He said, giving Sojiro his gratitude who gave the boy a smile for once.

"Well, what do you know? You do have manners." He noted.

"I may be a 'delinquent' but I'm not that bad, you know." He quipped making his guardian chuckle a little.

See, we're getting there. He thought to himself.

"We'll see. Now, hurry on to school. You'll end up late if you get lost on the way." He said, before placing a card on the table. "Take this. It's a commuter pass so you won't have to keep buying tickets."

"Thanks," He said as he collected the pass before going upstairs to get his bag and wallet, preparing to leave.

"Oh, be sure flip the sign outside to OPEN for me." He told him. "Now, hurry on out, country boy."

"No problem, old timer." He gave one last quip as he left the cafe, leaving a grumbling Sojiro to look after the shop

"Smartass." He thought. So he's not just polite, he's also a smart mouth as well. He's really got his hands full with this one.

Ren flipped the sign to open and then pulled out his phone to check the subway transfers. The last thing he wants is to get on the wrong train and end up late on the first day. First, he had to take the train to Shibuya then another one to the Aoyama district. That transfer is located in the Teikyu Building, wherever that is.

As he walked over to the main streets of Yongen-Jaya, he ended up encountering a familiar individual crossing his path.

"O-Oh!" He said in slight surprise.

"Hmm?" The boy stopped as another crossed his path, coming from the direction of that coffee shop.

"Kazuma?" Ren said, a little shocked to see him again so soon.

"Oh great. You again?" Kazuma sighed annoyingly.

"I didn't know you lived around here." He continued. "Good morning."

"Yeah, morning." He gave a quick reply and walked away, heading to the subway station.

"Hey, hold on," Ren said catching up with him. "You're going to school, right?"

"No, I'm going snowboarding." He responded sardonically. "Where else would I be going?"

"Well, is it alright if I walk with you?" Ren asked, ignoring his rude comment. "I'm new to Tokyo so I don't know the subway transfers very well."

Normally, he would've just ignored him and kept on walking but their meeting the other day left a good impression on Kazuma. He figured if he's new, he may as well allow him to accompany him
on his way to school. If only this one time.

"Do what you want." He said as he started walking towards the train station with Ren following after.

The two made their way onto the subway, and for the both of them, it was not a pleasant ride. They were cramped with other people who were also taking the train to Shibuya. Turns out the rumors about the Tokyo subways are true. Kazuma stayed silent, not interacting with or looking at him though he didn't appear to be annoyed by wanting to walk to school together. Rather, he seemed apathetic if anything else.

The news was being shown on the LCD screen. It seems they're still talking about the accident from the other day. As he looked to where Kazuma was, he noticed a large frown on his face as he listened to the news. Was he upset about yesterday's accident?

"You all right?" He asked.

"Huh?" His concentration was cut off as he looked back over to Ren and seemed concerned as to what he was frowning about. "It's nothing."

Just as he was about to reply, he felt more people pressing into him, his personal space being invaded and it was starting to get harder to breathe. Kazuma took notice of this as he was suffering from the cramped space as well.

The two left the subway and made their way to the Teikyu Building to take the train to Aoyama-Itchome.

"Oh, man. Did it say it was going to rain today." Said a man who was sitting at the counter in the safe confines of Cafe Leblanc. Sojiro caught on as he tended to the shop, looking over at his TV, he changed the channel to check the weather report.

"Oh, crap." He said.

"I know, right. This is why I hate early spring." His customer replied.

"That reminds me, did he take an umbrella?" The cafe owner thought out loud as he wondered if his ward took one with him as he left.

"Huh? Who're you talking about." The man wondered?

"Oh, don't mind me." He shook his head. "So, what'll it be?"

"One house blend please." His customer ordered.

Sojiro changed the channel back to the news as he went to fix his customer his order.

"The effects of yesterday's subway accident continues on today as various lines suffer delays and-"

"There's been a lot of nasty accidents lately." The man said in reference to the accident yesterday. Seems the news is still talking about it. That, and previous unexplained accidents that happened in the past. "You know, I mean the subway accident that the news is talking about. My coworker got caught up in it and is in the hospital now. It's kinda creepy, considering the people who cause these accidents just go crazy for no reason. I even heard that some of them suffer from nervous breakdowns during interrogation."
"Huh," Sojiro said as he processed this bit of information. Before he could offer a reply, his door opened and in came one of his frequent customers.

"Goddamn rain." She muttered as she closed her umbrella.

"What did I say about using that language in my store, Ichihara-san?" Sojiro raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry, Boss. It just started raining all of a sudden." She said as she sat down at the counter. "How have you been?"

"Eh, as well as can be." He shrugged. "So, the usual?"

"Yes, please." She said as she sat at the counter, waiting on her drink. As Tori waited, she mentally cursed herself for not checking the weather as her ward left without an umbrella. "I hope he doesn't catch a cold."

What a wonderful first day. Ren joked to himself as both he and Kazuma arrived at Aoyama-Itchome only to be greeted with a torrent of rainfall.

"Crap, why didn't I bring an umbrella?" Kazuma cursed as both he and his fellow transfer student ran through the streets of Aoyama.

As they ran, they stopped at a store called Jeunesse et Beaute to catch their breath. Ren leaned against the wall while Kazuma crouched down, leaning against the glass window. Since they were early, they had some time to kill. Kazuma chose to put in his earphones and listen to music, closing his eyes and tuned out the world around him.

Ren looked down at his phone. They were close to Shujin and he probably would’ve gotten lost if not for his fellow transfer student's directions. Just then, he noticed that strange app from the other day once again tainting his phone. Before he could delete it again, it enlarged, covering the entire map.

What is this app? Why does it keep showing up? He questioned mentally but got no answer.

He was about to ask Kazuma if he had anything like this on his phone but before he could, he heard someone else walk over next to him, standing at his left. He turned to see a girl his age whose face was obscured by a hood. She wore the standard black blazer over a white varsity-like hoodie worn long to cover most of her short plaid skirt. Her hoodie has a red stripe between two blue stripes at the bottom, and S symbol near the front bottom on one side, and a green four-leaf-clover symbol on the back of the hood. Along with it were red tights and brown boots with yellow laces.

After she pulled her hood back, Ren was able to get a better look at her face. She had bright blue eyes and ash blonde wavy hair styled in bushy pigtails, with parted side bangs on the right side of her face.

She definitely stands out. He noted. If not her outfit, then her hair color will. He can't remember ever meeting anyone in Japan who had blonde hair. She may be of American descent but that's just a guess.

As she was finally freed from the rain, she noticed that someone was looking at her. She turned to her right to see a boy she was not familiar with. He may be wearing the uniform of her school but she was sure she'd never met him before.
"Is he a new student?" She wondered before giving him a smile, greeting him.

"Good morning." She said.

"Huh?" He muttered as she spoke first. "Oh, good morning."

"Are you new here?" She asked.

"Y-Yeah. I'm a transfer student." He explained. "2nd year."

"Oh!" She said, no wonder she didn't recognize him. "I'm a 2nd year as well."

"That so." He said as he held out his hand, wanting to properly greet her. "I'm Ren Amamiya, a pleasure to meet you."

"Ann Takamaki. Nice to meet you too, Amamiya-kun." She shook his hand. As she let go, she looked past him to see another student behind him, crouched on the ground, eyes closed, with earphones. She didn't recognize him either. Odds are, he was another transfer student. Before she could say anything, the two saw a car pull up. Upon seeing that car, the girl known as Takamaki cringed, likely because she knew who it belonged to. The driver rolled down his window and they were met with a man in a blue tracksuit and an unusually long chin. He gave them a smile before speaking.

"Good morning! You want me to give you a ride to school? You're gonna be late." He offered and Ren noticed that it was mainly addressed to Takamaki.

"Um, sure. Thank you." She said with a smile as she walked away from the two.

"How about you? Do you and your friend need a lift too?" He asked both boys.

"No thank you." Ren waved it off and from the look of it, that other boy that was with him didn't seem interested either.

With that, Takamaki put on her seatbelt and as the window rolled up, Ren caught her fake smile slowly turning into an expression that both combined sorrow and discomfort. The man gave Ann a smile as they drove off to Shujin.

"You should stay away from him." He warned her. "Kid's a criminal on probation, heard he assaulted someone. And that other guy that was with him is no better. It'd be best to avoid scum like them, kay babe?"

"You're one to talk, asshole." She thought as she glanced over her shoulder and saw Ren and that other kid still standing there. Amamiya-kun's on probation? Really? He doesn't seem like a bad guy. Her thoughts were then interrupted as he felt fingertips slowly caressing her thigh. Her face twisted in disgust as she inched away, hoping that he'll stop. Damn it.

Why did she go with him? He wondered. She seemed so uncomfortable and he could tell that she was feigning kindness when that man offered her a ride so why did she just willingly go with him? Just who was that guy?

Before he could get any answers, he looked to his right and saw Kazuma stand up, placing both earphones and his phone in his pocket as he saw what had transpired.

"Friend of yours?" He asked curiously.
"I just met her."

"That so." He commented as he watched them drive off.

Suddenly, Kazuma felt someone bump into from behind. Some kid with spiky blonde hair, who clearly wasn't looking where he was going, stopped in front of the duo, looking in the direction of where Takamaki and that man drove off.

"Dammit!" They heard him curse. "The hell's wrong with her?! Hanging out with that pervy teacher!"

So that guy was a teacher, all the more reason for Ren to be confused as to why she would go with him. However, that little comment about him being pervy caught him off guard.

"Pervy teacher?" He questioned

When he spoke, the blonde kid heard him and turned to face the two. They noticed that like Takamaki, his uniform was more modified. He wore the school's black blazer, unbuttoned, much like Kazuma's, to reveal a yellow t-shirt with a comic style star symbol and the word 'ZOMG!' He has plaid trousers rolled up to reveal his ankles. His pants have black suspenders that hang down instead of being worn on his shoulders, a white belt, and white sneakers that have a rising sun flag motif.

That comment Ren made caused the boy to give the two a harsh glare and approached them.

"What do you two want?" He said aggressively. "You plannin' on rattin' me out to Kamoshida?"

"Ever heard of personal space?" Kazuma returned with a glare of his own. "Back off."

"You tryin to start something?" The blonde asked rudely as he got closer.

"Hey, both of you knock it off," Ren said to the two of them as they turned their attention to him. "Who's Kamoshida?"

"Huh?" He gave him a questioned look. "In that car that just drove off, that was Kamoshida." His face contorted into an even bigger frown. "He does whatever the hell he wants. Who does he think he is, the king of a castle? Effin' Asshole."

"King of the castle?" Ren replied. "Which castle?"

"No, not an actual castle. I mean..." The blonde stopped as he looked at both of them. They wore the school uniforms but he was sure he's never met these two before. Strange, especially since they seem to be his age. "Wait. You don't know Kamoshida? Are you for real? You guys are from Shujin, right?"

"You go to Shujin as well?" He asked.

"Well, yeah. No other high school's got a uniform like this." The blonde replied.

"We're transfer students, idiot." Kazuma intervened. "Of course we don't know who you're talking about."

"Huh?" He heard the other guy speak. He heard the part of them being transfer students but not the insult to his character. With that in mind, he realized why they wouldn't know who Kamoshida was. "OH! You guys are transfer students! And second-years as well, so we're in the same grade.
No wonder you guys don't know him." He finished before scratching the back of his head, a little embarrassed as he understood that he was being aggressive for no reason. "Sorry for being an asshole."

"Whatever." He looked away, not really caring for nor wanting an apology.

"Anyway, I'm Ryuji Sakamoto. Nice to meet you guys." He greeted the two.

"I'm Ren and this is Kazuma. Nice to meet you, Ryuji-kun." The probationer introduced himself as he shook the spiky blonde's hand though when he held his hand out for Kazuma, he simply ignored it.

"R-Right. You can just call me Ryuji." He said as he withdrew his hand. Seeing that the rain was dying down, he made a comment. "This rain ain't too bad. We better hurry up or we'll be late." As he turned around, in a split second, the world around them appeared distorted and a wave of pain coursed through their heads.

"Ugh…!" The three grunted.

"Uuugh, my head hurts…" They heard Ryuji said. "Damn it, I wanna go home." With that, he started walking away.

With the headache over and done with, Ren and Kazuma looked at each other, realizing they all suffered from the same migraine.

"Weird." The probationer commented. "Guess, we should get going."

"Yeah," Kazuma said as they two walked after the spiky blonde.

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As he finished recounting his first few days in Tokyo, it appeared that Sae had something on her mind.

"There was a terrible subway accident that day. You remember it, don't you?"

"Obviously. It was all over the news." He replied.

"Then I assume you know of the uproar that the public calls the "psychotic breakdown incidents."?"

"Maybe I do maybe I don't." He answered and she gave an irritated sigh at his choice of answer.

"You say that like it's none of your business." She responded.

"Really, I wonder why." He replied earning another irritated sigh from her.

"It was all over the news, and one of the victims included a teacher at your high school. I've no doubt you heard about it." She said, responding with facts to back up her claim. "On that day…
were you still an "ordinary" student?"

"Depends on your definition of "ordinary". Sae." He said.

"Alright then, let me change the question. You transferred to Shujin Academy, correct?" The Prosecutor asked.

"That's right." He nodded.

"An ordinary prep school that could be found in any city. That's what it should've been." She added. "What happened around that time? Tell me everything. Truthfully."

"Fine." He continued his story.

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"Through here, new guys." Ryuji led the two through an alley. "We can take a shortcut through here. It'll lead us right to the school gate."

The two transfer students followed the spiky blonde through the alley to get to school. As they went through the supposed "shortcut", Ren started to feel a little weird. He couldn't put his finger on it but something was strange. He felt as if the atmosphere around him had changed but couldn't find the words to describe it. As he continued to follow Ryuji, he stepped on a puddle that felt like he had stepped on sticky goo or something akin to that.

"Hey." Kazuma said, making Ren turn around to face him."Something feels off."

"Yeah." He nodded, it appeared they both shared the same feeling.

"Wha...?!" Suddenly, they heard Ryuji let out a little screech. "What the hell?!"

The two followed after, wondering what was the problem but when they came to, it wasn't the school they were supposedly being led to by a shortcut. It wasn't Shujin Academy, one of the best prep schools in all of Tokyo, Japan. It wasn't the school that Ren and Kazuma were beginning their first days at.

No, far from it.

Instead, the three 2nd year boys gazed upon not their school, but a large castle in its place.

"What are you trying to pull here?" Kazuma turned to the spiky blonde accusingly. "What's going on?"

"Wha?! How the hell should I know?!" Ryuji exclaimed before turning around, looking at the alley they came from. "We didn't make a wrong turn, did we?"

"You tell me. You're the one who said it was a shortcut." He pointed out and continued to accuse the boy of misleading them.
"Kazuma, that's enough. He's just as confused as you are," Ren interjected before pointing at the sign. "Look, it says Shujin Academy so we didn't take a wrong turn."

"Are you stupid? That's clearly not the school, Amamiya." Kazuma replied.

"For real, what's going on here?" Ryuji wondered. "I guess we'll just have to go and ask."

Seeing no other option, the three walked along the drawbridge gate to enter the mysterious castle. Once inside, they found themselves in what appeared to be a grand hall of some sort.

"Th-That's weird…" Ryuji said as he looked around, looking for someone to tell them what was going on. "Where's the school?"

"Why don't you tell us?" Kazuma demanded.

"How the hell should I know, damn it!" The spiky blonde replied. "I've been using that shortcut since my 1st year, this has to be it! I mean, it… should be…" He pulled out his phone only to see that there were no bars. "Out of service? Where'd we end up?

"Guys, something's not right here," Ren said as a feeling a danger coursed through his body.

"Huh?" Before Ryuji could reply they saw something walking towards him. Fitting for the castle, in came a man dressed up as a knight, armed with a sword and shield approached them. His identity was concealed by a blue mask and judging from the way he was looking at them, Ren could tell it wasn't friendly. "Geez, you freaked me out… Who're you? This some kind of prank?"

He asked and approached the knight to get a better look. "Man, your cosplay is impressive. Is that armor real?" He asked but he got no answer. He crossed his arms, agitated by this guy's silent treatment. "Hey, don't ignore me. Explain dammit."

"Wait. I don't think he's..." Before Ren could interject, another knight, nearly identical, approached them, standing next to his partner.

"...H-Hey, what's goin' on?" Ryuji took a step back as he watcher another one enter the picture.

"Okay, this joke of yours has gone on long enough," Kazuma said to the blonde. "What is going on here?!"

"Dude! I'm telling you I don't know! I'm not doing this!" He retorted.

Suddenly, the knights started approaching them again, this time more aggressively.

"This shit's real." Ryuji believed. "C-Calm down! Timeout, man!" They wouldn't stop so he turned to the others. "We gotta run!"

"Let's get out of here!" The three made a run for the exit but before they could take another step, two additional knights showed up and before they knew it, they were surrounded.

"Ugh, what's with these guys!?" Ryuji exclaimed. Before he could do anything, one hit him in the back with his shield. "Gah!"

"Ryuji!" Ren cried out in worry.

"Oww… Y-You're gonna break my bones, damn it!" The blonde said as he tried to stand back up.

"That's enough!" Kazuma was getting tired of this, whatever this was. He walked in front of Ryuji, staring right at the knight that hit him. "Get out of my way you...!" But he was met with a shield to
the face. "AGH!" He grunted as he fell to the ground.

"Kazuma!" Ren went over to his fellow transfer student to see that he was knocked out cold.

"Shit!" The blonde responded in shock from what he had witnessed. He turned to face the group of strange knights with a glare. "The hell you think you're...!"

He couldn't finish his sentence as the knight closed in on them.

"Take them away!"

 Darkness.

That's all he could see right now. After that knight socked him in the face, darkness took him. In a way, he liked the darkness, only he liked it when he was in control of it. The darkness that came about when one falls asleep.

But this darkness that came about was not under his control.

"Hey, wake up!"

He could hear an unknown voice and small hands pushing against him. He didn't recognize it, it didn't belong to Amamiya or that blonde loudmouth he walked into the castle with. It was... someone else.

"Hey, wake up Brown Hair! Cmon, up and at em!" Suddenly, he felt something smack his face. He opened his eyes and found himself in a dungeon of some kind. He's played enough medieval RPGs before to know what stereotypical dungeons look like. As he to his right to see who was trying to wake him, he knew he must still be unconscious because there was no way this was real.

"Good, you're awake." Said the strange cat-like creature that stood before him. Whatever it was, it had a large head and eyes with a yellow bandana and a utility belt.

"That get-up." He whispered as he closed his eyes once more. "What a strange dream..."

"Hey!" It smacked him in the face once more, pain coursing through his cheek. "I said wake up!"

"Huh?!" Suddenly, his eyes shot open and the creature standing before him wasn't part of a dream, it was real. "W-What!"

"About time." It complained. "For a minute there I thought you'd never wake up."

"U-Uh..." He said as he stood up and got a better look at the creature. "What the...?"

"What? Is there something on my face?" It asked.

"Are you... what are you? Some kind of cat?" He inquired but that only seemed to anger it and it gave the boy an intense frown.

"I am NOT a cat!" He exclaimed. "Say that again and I'll make you regret it!"

"Excuse me?" Kazuma questioned the threat this 'thing' made toward him.

"Still, I'm surprised they put you in here with me." It said. "They took your friends a little further in, in case you were wondering."
"Friends?" He raised an eyebrow before realizing that it was talking about Amamiya and that other guy. "They're not my friends."

"Well, whatever they are, they were taken a little further in. Guess the King's got something planned for them." It believed.

"King? What..."

Before he could continue to question the creature, they heard Knights approaching. Kazuma was immediately on guard, knowing that one of those things knocked him out cold.

"My liege, this is one of the intruders we found at the entrance." He was speaking to someone but it wasn't directed at them.

"Is that so..."

Just then, the Knights opened the cell door and in came a man dressed in a red bathrobe covering his half-naked body wearing pink underwear. He wore a menacing smirk on his face and it didn't look like he was here to let him go.

"It's him." The creature whispered as it retreated to the corner of the cell.

"Y-You're..." Kazuma recognized the face of the so-called 'King'. It was the face of that man who offered that blonde girl a ride to school. "You're that guy from earlier."

"You will address me as your King you filthy piece of trash!" He yelled as he kicked the boy in the stomach, sending him the ground. "So, you're one of the intruders that dared to set foot in my castle. What were you thinking? Unlawful entry is a serious crime, you know?"

"Look, I'll happily leave this dump. Just let me go, creep." Kazuma retorted as he stood up.

"Oh, did you just insult me?" He raised an eyebrow at the boy. "You've got balls, kid. I'll give you that."

"Where are the others?" He asked. "What did you do to Amamiya and that other guy?"

"Worried about your accomplices, are you?" He crouched down, looking at the boy dead in the eye. "Don't worry, they'll be joining you soon."

"You...!" Kazuma looked at him coldly. "Let me out. Let us out, scumbag!"

"Tch!" He clicked his tongue in annoyance before turning to his guards. "The way he's looking at me pisses me off! His punishment will be... death by torture."

"What?!" His eyes widened as he heard his punishment

"Deal with him. The rest of you, on me." He commanded four of his knights to carry out Kazuma's punishment while the rest followed after their king, leaving the cell.

"Hey! I'm not done with..." He tried to hurry after him but one of the Knights that was left in the cell with him hit him in the face with his shield, knocking him the ground. "ARG!"

"You have been sentenced, prisoner! Do not resist!" He said as the other guards grabbed onto the boy's arms, preventing him from resisting any further.

"Hey, get off of him!" The cat-like creature from earlier rushed at them to help out his fellow
cellmate, but the fourth remaining knight grabbed onto the cat and pinned him to the wall.

"Stay out of this, prisoner. Your sentence will come when the King demands it." The guard sneered to the insolent creature.

"Let me go!" Kazuma struggled against the guards who were holding him down and watched as the guard in front of him pulled out his blade.

"As ordered by my liege, you're hereby sentenced to death... by torture." The knight said as he placed the blade near his shoulder and then dragging it along to his chest and then to his stomach, cutting through his uniform, causing him pain.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!"

"Hey. Hey! Dude, wake up!"

Ren opened his eyes. He thought if luck was on his side, everything that had happened was nothing more than a bad dream. That he would wake up in the attic of Leblanc, eat the curry Sojiro prepared for him, encounter Kazuma again on his way to the station, and be able to attend school, thinking of his time in the mysterious castle as nothing more than his wild imagination.

Unfortunately, it appeared that luck did not favor him whatsoever as he got up from the wooden bed and saw that he, along with Ryuji were trapped in some kind of dungeon.

"You all right? " He asked.

"I'll live." The probationer replied. "What about you?"

"Yeah, more or less." The blonde said as he looked around the cell. "Looks like this ain't no dream."

"Guess it's..." Ren stopped for a moment before he realized that it only he and Ryuji were in this cell. "Wait, where's Kazuma?!"

"I don't know, I didn't see him when I woke up. I guess they took him somewhere else." He groaned, kicking the ground in annoyance. "Ugh, what the effs goin' on!?" He ran towards the cell door and started banging on it, hoping to get someone's attention. "Hey, let us outta here you bastards! I know there's someone out there!"

"Hey." He called to the spiky blonde. "Let's not draw any unnecessary attention, okay?"

"Damn it!" Ryuji yelled. "Where the hell are we!? Is this some kinda TV set?"

Before Ren could answer, they heard a loud scream off in the distance. Whatever it was, it was agonizing, as if someone was being tortured. It was loud and whoever it was, it sounded like they were in pain.

"Th-The hell was that?!"

"I don't..." The screams kept happening and Ren suddenly realized who they belonged too. "That's Kazuma's voice!"

"Whoa... Whoa, whoa, whoa! Oh shit!" Ryuji trembled in fear as the screams got louder. There was no doubt that was Kazuma's voice they were hearing. "What the hell are they doing to
"We need to find a way out." The probationer reasoned. It's not too late, there must be a way out. If he doesn't, something bad could happen to Kazuma. All tried to calm himself down so he could come up with a plan. Ryuji started walking around, looking for anything that could be used as an escape.

*Think, Ren, think.* He looked around the cell, hoping for some kind of clue as to how to get out. *No windows, no cracks, no tools. What do I do?*

"Huh? You hear that?" Ryuji asked as he heard footstep approaching their cell. The two made their way over as they came face-to-face with those knights that brought them here.

"**Be glad that your punishment has been decided upon.**" One of them said. "**Your charge is 'unlawful entry'. Thus, you will be sentenced... to death.**"

The two took a few steps back in shock as they heard the knight say that they will be put to death.

"Say what!?" Ryuji said in shock from the punishment they chose to give them.

"No one's allowed to do as they please in my castle." They heard a new voice from behind the knights. As they moved out of the way, Ryuji could not believe he was seeing this. He had seen him before but not like this.

"Huh?" He did a double take on his getup before realizing who was wearing it. "Wait... Is that you, Kamoshida?"

Ren recognized that man. He watched him offer that girl, Ann Takamaki, a ride to school. The expression of discomfort that was etched on her face is something he never forgot. That same expression was now on his face as he was now seeing him in a bathrobe. That, and those yellows eyes made him appear very menacing.

"I thought the guards caught some petty thief, but to think it'd be you, Sakamoto. Are you trying to disobey me again? It looks like you haven't learned your lesson at all, huh?" He thought before he looked over at Ren and laughed. "And you brought friends this time? Guess I shouldn't be surprised. After all, you're so pathetic you can't do anything by yourself."

"Go to hell, you piece of shit! And what's with that crazy outfit?!" Sakamoto exclaimed as he struggled against the cell bars.

"How dare you speak to your King like that!" The man sneered at the imprisoned Ryuji. "You know, your other friend made the mistake of speaking to me that way and he's currently paying for it."

*No. Ren's eyes widened at what the king had said. He's talking about Kazuma, isn't he?*

"Seems you still don't know your place. Not only did you sneak into my castle, but you also committed the crime of insulting the king." He blared a nasty grin. "The punishment for that is death... by torture." He then ordered his guards to get ready for the punishment. "It's time for an execution. Open the cell!!"

When the cell doors opened, the knights entered and the two backed away. They seemed to be more focused on Sakamoto then Ren, but the knight currently standing guard by the door made sure that they wouldn't be leaving.
"S-Stop it," Ryuji said. "Goddammit!" He decided enough was enough and lunged into the nearby knight's shield with all of his strength, knocking it down. "I ain't down for this shit! C'mon, we're outta here!"

Ren was about to make a run for it before one of the knights approached the spiky blonde and slammed the hilt of his blade into the boy's stomach.

"Nnngh..." He fell to the ground in pain, the wind being knocked out of him.

"Stop it!" Amamiya yelled. "Leave him alone!"

"Just go, dammit! Get the hell outta here!" He told the probationer. "These guys are serious!"

"I'm not leaving you here!" He promised which seemed to make King Kamoshida laugh.

"Oh? Gonna run away, huh? What a heartless friend you are." He smugly said.

"He ain't a friend," Sakamoto stated before letting out a pained cough. "C'mon! Hurry up and go!"

"B-But..." Even if he wanted to, his body couldn't move. There is no way he could leave someone like this, to suffer at the hand of these monsters. That's not who he was.

"What's the matter? Too scared to run away?" Kamoshida huffed. "Hmph, pathetic scum isn't worth my time." He then walked over to Ryuji, ready to carry out the boy's punishment. "I'll focus on this one's execution." He snapped his fingers and his guards held him up, defenseless, unable to protect himself. "Take this!"

He punched him square in the face. Then another, then another.

"Lowly scum!" He threw out as he continued punching him, giggling at the pain he was causing the poor boy. " Worthless pest!" With one final strike, he knocked him to the ground. He then spat on him, as if he was nothing more than a piece of trash to get rid of. "What's the matter, Sakamoto? Where'd your energy from earlier go?" He asked before one of his knights grabbed the tortured boy and threw him across the room. "Pathetic. You're not even worth beating up."

Ryuji couldn't do anything, the beating had drained him of his will to fight back and if Ren didn't do anything, he would die.

"I'll have you killed right now."

He won't stand for this. This had gone on long enough

"Stop this?!" Ren exclaimed. "Have you lost your mind?!"

"Hm?" He turned around to face the other prisoner, giving him a vile glare. "What? Don't tell me you don't know who I am."

"I don't, but you know what?" he replied with a glare of his own. "I. Don't. Care."

"GRRRR!" The King growled at the boy's insolence. "It's the same look that brat from earlier gave me... it pisses the fuck off!" He kicked him in the stomach, falling against the wall. "Hold him there... After this piece of shit, it's his turn to die." He turned away to focus on Ryuji.

"Stop!" Ren tried to do something but two knights grabbed a hold of him and pinned him to the wall, preventing him from taking action. "No! Ryuji!"
"I-I don't wanna die." The spiky blonde whimpered as death approached him.

"HAHAHAHAHAI!" The King laughed at the boy's pathetic whimpers.

No. If I don't do something, then Ryuji... Kazuma... they'll... As those thoughts of panic entered his head, another voice, unfamiliar to him, entered his mind along with the appearance of a blue butterfly that not even the knights took notice of.

"What the..."

This is truly an unjust game… Your chances of winning are almost none

But if my voice is reaching you, there may yet be a possibility open to you.

Possibility? He questioned the words. Wha...?

What's the matter…? Are you simply going to watch?

What? Ren stood silently as he heard another voice rage within him.

Are you forsaking him to save yourself?

I...

Death awaits him if you do nothing.

I know. But, I can't...

Was your previous decision a mistake then?

At that moment, the memories of his arrest flashed through his mind. That drunken man, that girl, she was in trouble. He had to help her and because of that, he kissed his future goodbye.

But he didn't care.

It wasn’t. He stood by his decision. Even after everything, he still stood by his choice. Even if it meant the end of my life, my future, I didn't care, I still don't. I would've done it again. A thousand times over if it meant helping that woman. No matter what, nothing about that decision was a mistake! And I'll gladly risk everything again if it means I can save Ryuji and Kazuma!

As Ren debated with the voice within him, one of the knights grabbed Ryuji by the neck, hoisting him up, and placed his blade near his chest.

Very well! I have heeded your resolve!

"A-AARGH!" Pain suddenly coursed through him.

Vow to me.

He struggled against the Knights as the pain increased, becoming almost too much to bear.

I am thou, thou art I.

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

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

**Show the strength of thy will to ascertain all on thine own, though thou be chained to Hell itself!**

The pain had disappeared but the rage within him did not. He raised his head and glared at the so-called King.

"Execute him!" The King demanded.

"Hey, Pink Undies!" Ren taunted. "How can you call yourself a King when you're too weak to deal prisoners on your own? You're a joke!"

That really set something off within the bathrobe-wearing King as he turned to face the other prisoner with a look of burning hatred.

"What was that?" He looked at the boy with a vile glare. "What did you just call me?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Let me say it one more time, in case you didn't hear me before." Ren smirked venomously. "You, Pink Undies, are... A. Big. Fat. JOKE!"

"You little...!" The words that came out of this boy's mouth made him angrier than ever. The Knights took notice and the one who was holding Ryuji let him go to focus on the other prisoner. How dare he call him something like that?! He's the King of this Castle. "You really want to die that badly, you little shit?! Fine!" He motioned to the knight on his right that was holding Ren in place. The Knight then hit him square in the face with his shield, knocking his glasses off but even that couldn't wipe the smirk off his face.

"That all you got?" He taunted as he wiped the blood from his lips and a sudden burst of wind erupted from his body, catching the others off guard. But as he wiped the rest of the blood off, he felt something on his face that shouldn't be there. "Huh?"

He reached up and felt something attached to his face. It was a mask. A mask that was there before and should not be there. As he tried to take it off, he felt it stuck to his face. It wouldn't come off but it had to.

It had to come off!

"HRGGGHHH!" He grabbed at the mask with both hands and ripped the mask off with all of his strength. "A-A-AHHHHHHH!"

It felt as if his skin was being ripped off of him but it had to come off. He was successful but he was blinded by the blood now pouring from his eyes.

"Hehe..."

It was funny. How stunned everyone looked at him ripping off that mask. The fear that now entered Kamoshida's eyes as he felt something change within his prisoner.

Ren looked up, that same smirk still plastered on his face as his blood turned into a blue flame that engulfed his entire body

"HAHAHAHAHA!" He laughed as the power began to overwhelmed him. He could hear the crackling of chains but not the ones on the wall. No, it came from the new power given to him as the voice that raged within him took a physical form behind him. It wore a red jacket over a black business suit that came with a cravat. His wore a mask that seemed to act as his face, sharing the
same confident smirk Ren had, that came with horns and a top hat.

But it wasn't just him that seemed out of place, as Ren's outfit underwent a transformation as well. A black ankle-length tailcoat, a high-necked waistcoat with gold accents, black jogger-style pants, brown-black winkle-pickers, and a pair of red gloves.

"Heh."

He raised his arms and the being's wings came out of his back, pushing his enemies back with a torrent of wind. Each of them hit the wall with a thud, signifying the end of their lives. Kamoshida crouched in fear as he ran towards the exit of the cell while Ryuji remained in shock.

"Wha… What the…?" He muttered. "What are you…"

"Relax, Ryuji. I'm alright." Ren assured him. "In fact, I've never felt better!" He stated before turning around to face the entity hovering over him.

_I am the Pillager of Twilight. Arsene!_

"What the…?" Sakamoto said in amazement as he didn't expect that 'thing', whatever it was, to talk.

"Arsene..." His summoner spoke as their eyes met.

_I am the rebel's soul that resides within you. If you so desire, I shall consider granting you the power to break through this crisis._

"In that case." He grinned, ready to show the King and the rest of his goons who's really in control. "What are we waiting for?"

_Hmph, very well._

Ren and Arsene turned their attention to the cowardly king who ran outside the cell. Pathetic.

"Who the hell are you?" The King asked.

"Really, I am undeserving of such alarm. I am but a mere high school student." Ren continued to smirk as he saw two of the knights he knocked down earlier get back up. They were still alive. He was going to fix that. "Watch Pink Undies! Cower in fear as I rescue my companions with style from the hands of your poorly trained dogs!"

"Grrrr! Guards!" Having enough of his taunts, he ordered his guards to attack. "Start by killing that one!" And with that, he ran off, leaving his guards to deal with the prisoners. The knights then started shaking uncontrollably before they transfigured into floating pumpkins. Jack-o-Lanterns, each holding a lamp.

"All right then! It's showtime!" Ren, with a flap of his trenchcoat, pulled out what appeared to be a dagger from his belt, ready for a fight.

_Ryuji, Kazuma, I will save you both!_

"Persona!"

Chapter End Notes
Hope you guys liked it. I really loved writing that last part for Ren, really showcasing a back talking, snarky, rebellious trickster that is the leader of the Phantom Thieves. I hope I did it justice.

For those who are curious, my OC, Kei Kazuma's Japanese VA is Takahiro Sakurai and his English VA is David Matranga.

Till next time.
"ARGHHHHH!"

The Knights continued their torture of the transfer student. They took their time, making each cut count, as they were in no hurry to end his life. The Knights kept him held down even as he struggled while the knight carrying out his punishment kept dragging the tip of his blade across his skin slowly.

"S-STOP IT!" He screamed in agony. The pain was indescribable and they refused to heed his words.

"Get off him!" As for the cat-like creature that was his cellmate, he struggled against the knight pinning him to the wall. He wanted to help his fellow prisoner but couldn't. It didn't have his weapons and the knight's hands at its throat were preventing it from using its power.

The Knight pulled back, looking at his handiwork. His uniform was torn apart, blood starting to seep through. The cuts hadn't been that deep as the punishment was death by torture, thus, he didn't want the prisoner to die from blood loss.

"Guards!" Just then, their King entered the cell.

"My liege." Kazuma's torturer stepped to the side, allowing his King entry.

"So you're still alive, little shit? You're stubborn I'll give you that." He said smugly.

Kazuma looked up, breathing heavily from the pain that was inflicted upon him. That same cold gaze was still etched on the boy's face, not even daring to give this scumbag the satisfaction of seeing him in fear. To show that he wasn't afraid, he spat in his face, causing Kamoshida to backpedal a bit.

"Go... to hell... scumbag." He said, breathing heavily from the pain.

"Tch, piece of shit." The King exclaimed, wiping the spit off his face. "Guards, take him to the central hall. We'll wait for his friends there."

"Yes, my lord." His torturer nodded. "What about the cat?"

"Leave him, I'll deal with him later." The King said as he left the cell.

Abiding by their Kings orders, the guards that were holding Kazuma down begun to carry him, following after their king. The cat was then released by the knight holding him against the wall,
unable to chase after them as it gasped for air. The Knight closed the cell, leaving it trapped.

"Crap." The cat-like creature caught its breath. "Brown hair's done for if his friends don't make it."

"Persona!"

Ren thrust his hand forward towards his foes as one of them came charging at him. A fatal mistake on their part as Arsene roundhoused it, sending it flying into the cell door. It got back up, meaning that it was still alive but severely weakened.

"Stubborn, aren't they?" He noted.

*True, but they should be easy pickings for one such as you.*

His Persona stated, having faith in his master's abilities

_Detest the enemies before you! Change that animosity into power... and unleash it._

"No need to tell me twice," Ren said before deciding to take action. "Go forth, Arsene!"

Commanding his Persona to take charge, Arsene raised his hand, using Eiha to slay the weakened enemy. One down, one left to go. Despite his partner being slain, he came at the probationer. It spun around before attempting to attack him with its lantern. Gripping his dagger tightly, he blocked the attack, struggling against his enemy. Using his strength, he pushed the Jack-o-Lantern off of him.

_Swing your blade!_

"Hope you're ready for this." Ren grinned as he rushed forward, dagger in hand and sliced right through his remaining foe. The floating pumpkin began shaking uncontrollably before dissolving into nothing.

_This power of mine is yours! Kill them however you want. Run wild to your heart's content!_

"But, of course." He said before flapping his coat again and turning to Ryuji. "The show is over."

He gave a formal bow, signifying the end of the battle.

"D-Dude. W-What the..." Ryuji muttered as he tried to comprehend what he just witness, or rather, what his cellmate had done. "What was that just now? And... your clothes"

"It... it's hard to explain. I don't really know myself." He said. Now with the fighting over, he took a moment to check out his new outfit. But before he could, his new outfit transfigured back into his uniform.

"Whoa, it went back to normal!" The blonde exclaimed. "Seriously, this's effin' nuts!

"Yeah."

He checked himself to make sure that he was still wearing his school uniform. He touched his face to find his glasses once again, a bit stunned considering the broken pair in the corner.

How odd.

He shook it off as it wasn't important. After all, they were still one man short.
"It seems Mr. Pink Undies ran off." He noted. "We need to get out of here and find Kazuma. He's probably in one of these cells. Let's go."

"Y-Yeah." Ryuji got up. "You lead the way."

The two left their cell to look for their missing companion so they can get out of this godforsaken castle. He knew he was late for school but that's important right now. Kazuma's in trouble and he was going to save him.

*I'm coming Kazuma. Just hold on.*

Sadayo Kawakami sat at her office desk in the faculty office and already, she was not having a good day. Not only was Ren late for school but he didn't even show up to first period. She looked over at the clock to check the time. That didn't help her mood and she sighed in irritation.

"It's fourth period already." She said as she sighed again.

"You too, Sadayo." She heard her co-worker speak. She looked over to see Iona Chouno, sitting at her desk in the same foul mood as her.

"Oh, that's right. You have a transfer student in your class, right Iona?" She asked.

"Yeah. Looks like we're both in the same boat." She said as she leaned her cheek against her hand. "I knew he had a truancy problem but I didn't think he had the audacity to skip his first day."

Sadayo remembered Suguru telling her about the other transfer student, the one who was a frequent truant at his old school and had famous parents. Despite her knowledge of this student, she didn't know much about him and since his homeroom teacher was here, maybe she could find out more.

"Hey, Iona. Can I look through his file?" She asked.

"Knock yourself out." She handed her the file of her newest transfer student. She opened his file and began reading through the contents.

His name was Kei Kazuma and as Suguru said, he had a nasty record of absences. He was late to most of his classes throughout his first year and in some instances, police had to escort him back to school. However, despite his truancy, he turned in homework on time and his test scores were really good. In fact, his tendency to skip was the only negative thing about him. He didn't get into fights and he didn't cause any other problems. She then looked at who was currently taking care of him and her eyes widened.

"Oh wow, his guardian is Tori." She thought as she saw her friend's name in his file. She could only wonder how they knew each other. "What about his parents" As she looked for information about them, she quietly gasped before closing the file, chastising herself for looking through a student's private info like that. She handed the file back to Chouno before checking the clock again. "*Sigh* What did I do to deserve this?"

"Hey, we gotta hide!" Ryuji said as the two ducked behind crates.

They hid from more guards who were looking for them, likely on orders from King Kamoshida. So far, they had gotten nowhere in their search for Kazuma. As they traversed through the dungeon, they checked every cell and could not find him. Plus, they couldn't hear his screams anymore.
Even though he was glad that he wasn't going through any more pain, it will now be more difficult to pinpoint his location.

They had to jump over broken bridges, crawl through crawlspace to get where they are now. Luckily, they hadn't run into any foes. Ren didn't know if he could utilize his power again. Once the coast was clear, the two stood up.

"Damn, that was a close one," Ryuji commented. "I ain't playin' along with this anymore! We gotta find a way outta this goddamn place!"

"I know, but I'm not going anywhere until I find Kazuma," Ren informed him as he motioned him to follow him. The two went up a flight of stairs with Ryuji hoping there was a light at the end of this tunnel. Unfortunately, that light was nowhere to be found as they found themselves in another part of the dungeon and not an exit like the blonde had hoped.

"What the hell is this place!" He complained before looking around. "H-Hey, look." He pointed to another prisoner that was trapped in a cage. The cage was hanging from the ceiling so they had no way of getting to him but it clearly wasn't Kazuma. Not to mention the prisoner's face was obstructed by a helmet. "So we ain't the only ones who got captured. He ain't your friend, you think he's here?"

"Might be," Ren said as they continued on. There was no way to help that prisoner so they couldn't do anything for him at the moment.

They continued on, checking each cell only to find more prisoners that aren't Kazuma. How many people were imprisoned here?

They kept checking but to no avail as they arrived at the end of the cell block.

"Another dead end," Ryuji noted.

"He's got to be here somewhere," Ren said, wanting to keep holding onto the hope that his fellow transfer student is alright.

"Hey, you there!"

Suddenly, their thoughts were broken by a voice that didn't belong to either of them.

"Blondie! Frizzy Hair! Look over here!"

The two looked over to the nearest cell to see some kind of creature calling out to them. It looked like a large cat-like doll with large eyes and a yellow bandana. It struggled against the bars as it addressed them.

"What is this thing!?" Ryuji exclaimed, stunned by the sight of it.

"You guys are friends with Brown Hair, right? Get me out of here!" It pleaded. "Look, the key's right there!"

"Brown Hair?" The probationer questioned before he realized who it was talking about. "Kazuma! You know where he is?!"

"Yeah, he was my cellmate before the King and his goons dragged him out. I'll tell you where he is if you let me out!" It offered.
"Okay." He said but Ryuji stopped him.

"Dude, hold on!" He got in the way before turning to the creature. "Why should we let you out, you're obviously an enemy too." The blonde believed.

"I'm locked up here, so how can I be your enemy? Now, let me out!"

"Quiet down," Ren demanded as he heard footsteps.

"They're catching up," Ryuji noted before pulling out his phone. "Shit, there's still no service. Ain't there no way to contact someone outside?!"

"You want to know where the exit is?" The cat thing questioned. "Let me out and I'll take you there. You don't want to get caught and executed, right?"

"One thing at a time," Ren added. "You said you knew where Kazuma is, right? If we let you out, will you help us find him?"

"I never go back on my word!" It proudly admitted.

"This thing sounds like it's all talk," Ryuji said, a little skeptical about trusting this, well, whatever it is.

"If you guys think you can get out on your own, be my guest." It challenged them.

"Whadda we do?" The blonde asked before noticing the footsteps getting louder. "Are you seriously not messin' with us?!

"If you don't stop wasting time, your friend is as good as dead." It informed them.

Knowing that it has knowledge of where Kazuma might be and that it knows where the exit is, for now, they had to trust it, for Kazuma and for themselves.

"Fine," Ryuji said reluctantly as he grabbed the key and opened the cell, allowing the creature its freedom.

"Ahhh! Freedom tastes so great." It said, relieved to no longer be trapped in that cell.

"Now where's the exit and Amamiya's friend, you monster cat?!" The blonde demanded answers.

"Don't call me a cat! I am Morgana!" He introduced himself.

"Shaddup and hurry up! You wanna get locked up again?!" He threatened the cat-like being.

"A-All right, sheesh!" Morgana relented. "Follow me, and stay quiet!"

He led the others to the small statue of Kamoshida next to the closed up bridge.

"What're you doing?" Sakamoto wondered

"What does it look like. I'm lowering the bridge." He said before turning to Ren. "You, Frizzy Hair. It seems you pick up on things faster than our Blondie over here. Try checking around the mouth of this statue, OK?"

"Alright." He walked over to the statue to see if there was some kind of mechanism on it that could be used to lower the bridge. As he kept looking and found nothing, he grabbed onto it's lower lip
and saw that it was loose. "How about this?"

He pulled it down and watched as the bridge lowered, allowing them to cross it safely.

"How were we suppose to know to do that?!" Ryuji exclaimed.

"Hmph, amateur." Morgana taunted under his breath before motioning them to follow after him. "Come on, let's keep going."

The three continued on and just when they thought they were in the clear, a guard came from around the corner. With the escapees in sight, it readied itself to fight.

"A-Aah! Shit… Shit, it's them!" Ryuji yelled in a panic as he tripped and fell backward.

With danger imminent, Ren didn't notice that his clothes changed back into his coat. As if instinct took over him, he pulled out his dagger, which thankfully was still there, and readied to defend himself and his companions.

"Tch… You amateur!" Morgana insulted as he hopped over Ryuji and stood in front of him to protect him. "Stay still." He commanded before looking over to Ren. "Hey, you! You could fight, right? Let's go!"

"Ready when you are." He nodded.

"Come!" Morgana clenched his fists and looked upward "Zoro!"

A blue pillar of light erupted from him. It seems Morgana has a Persona of his own. A muscular figure with a rapier, it sliced a Z into the air with the speed of its blade.

"Y-You got one of those things too!?" Sakamoto asked in awe at seeing another of those things.

"Hmph," The cat-like creature crossed his arms confidently as another guard showed up, both transfiguring into their true forms. A Jack-o-Lantern and a flying bedside brute, otherwise known as an Incubus. "We will promptly shut them up!"

As the Jack-o-Lantern rushed at them, Ren made the first move.

"Arsene!" He reached up to touch his mask and summon his Persona. As he was summoned, it grabbed the floating pumpkin with his hand before kicking it like a soccer ball, sending it into the ceiling. Although he weakened it, it was still alive.

"Hmph, I knew you were an amateur." Morgana playfully mocked.

"Think you can do better?" He challenged.

"Of course! This is how you fight!" He motioned Zoro to attack. The Persona formed a Garu with his blade and sent it over to the Jack-o-Lantern. It had more effect than Arsene's attack as it was unable to move.

"Good job." Ren complemented.

"Naturally." The cat grinned.

While they conversed the Incubus made its move towards Morgana. As it went for an attack, the cat pulling out his own weapon, a short sword to deflect the blow. With his fighting companion struggling against the enemy, Ren had to do something.
"Arsene, now!" He commanded his Persona to attack. He kicked the shadow off of him with Morgana using this chance to cut through the demon with its blade, ending its life and the battle.

With the battle ended, Ren could feel himself and his Persona getting stronger with every fight.

*I can feel power coursing through me.* He thought before turning his attention to Morgana who put his weapon away.

"Not bad. Your Persona's pretty powerful." He stated.

"Persona?" Ryuji wondered as he got up. "Y'mean that thing that comes outta you guys all dramatic-like?"

"Yes." The cat nodded. "You saw how Frizzy Hair here ripped off his ripped his mask when he summoned it, right? Well, everybody wears a mask deep within their heart. By removing that…"

Before he could continue his explanation, his clothes returned to normal, back to his school uniform.

"Huh?" The spiky blonde noticed. "He turned back to normal."

"It looks like you don't have full control over your power yet." Morgana theorized. "The transformation shouldn't normally dissolve like that. After all-"

"That's enough!" Sakamoto grumbled loudly, realizing they were getting off track. Plus, this whole Persona business was confusing him. "This crap doesn't make any sense!"

Morgana frowned, face filled with annoyance and irritation.

"Can't you just sit still and listen for once, Blondie!?" He chastised.

"Don't call me Blondie! My name's Ryuji." He stated.

"Cmon guys, we're getting off track here," Ren interjected. "Look, you said you knew where Kazuma is right? Well, where is he?"

"If he's not in any of these cells, he's probably up ahead. Let's keep moving!" It stated before pulling something out of its pockets. "Here, take these. Use them carefully, OK?"

The cat gave him three bottles of painkillers, where he got them he had no idea but that wasn't important. He placed them in his coat pockets as they continued on.

They ventured forth in an attempt to find their lost companion and an exit. As they made some progress, Morgana interjected.

"The entrance hall's this way. That's likely where they have Brown Hair."

"Then let's hurry up," Ren said before noticing that Ryuji was focused on one particular prisoner. "Ryuji?"

"I feel like I've seen what this dude's wearin' before…" He said as he noticed the prisoner, on the ground in pain, wearing what appeared to be an athletic uniform. "Damn it! I'm too flustered! I can't remember a damn thing!"

"Come on, let's go!" Morgana commanded, outright ignoring the prisoner.
"Hold on, dammit!" The spiky blonde stopped the cat in his tracks. "Who are these guys? Why are they trapped here?

"If you have time to worry about others, then you have time to focus on your friend, now stop wasting time and let's go!" He harshly commanded, not giving the prisoner a passing thought.

"But, we can't just leave them here!" He continued to argue.

"You really don't get it, do you?" The cat sighed in irritation. "Fine, stay here and try to help them but if Brown Hair dies, then it's on you for wasting time. Can you live with that?"

"Y-You...!" He growled, getting tired of this thing's attitude.

"Ryuji, calm down." Ren interrupted. "I don't like this either but there's nothing we can do for them at the moment. Right now, we need to find Kazuma."

"B-But." He sighed before relenting. "Dammit. Fine, I'm coming."

The two crossed the bridge on the way to the entrance hall. Hopefully, their lost companion is still alive and well.

"Argh!" Kazuma struggled against the knights that were holding onto him. King Kamoshida had brought him to the entrance hall to wait for those thieves, using their companion as leverage.

"Even after all you went through, you still resist." The King sighed. "You're one stubborn piece of shit, I'll give you that."

"L-Let me go!" He continued to struggle, eyes glaring holes into the King.

"Annoying pest!" He then smacked him across his the face with his backhand.

"Ah!" He winced in pain. They've been at it for a while but Kazuma refused to give this scumbag the satisfaction of begging for his life. "W-Where are the others?!" He demanded.

"You're friends should be here soon." The King grinned evilly. "If you're a good boy, maybe I'll let you live long enough to watch my knights cut them down."

"Y-You...!" Before he could retort he heard footsteps coming from the opposite side of the room.

"Kazuma!" Everyone's attention was turned to the new arrivals. As he looked over at them, he saw Amamiya along with that vulgar blonde and that creature that was with him in his cell.

"A-Amamiya." He muttered.

"What the hell did you assholes do to him?!" Ryuji exclaimed as he noticed the cuts on his chest.

"Great, you finally arrived," Kamoshida sneered. "You damn thieves have annoyed me for the last time. You're going to die here and your friend's going to watch."

"Let him go!" Ren demanded.

"S-Stop." Kazuma continued to struggle.

"Tch, even now! Why can't you just shut up?!" Kamoshida kicked the boy in the chest as hard as he could, knocking him out of the knights grip and knocking the wind out of him.
"A-AH!" His back hit the ground hard as he clutch his stomach in pain.

"No!" Just then, Ren's clothes transfigured back into his coat, pulling out his dagger in an attempt to help him. Morgana pulled out his blade, joining him while Ryuji stood back.

"Piece of garbage," Kamoshida noted. "No matter. Stay where you are, pest. I'll deal with you later." He then turned his attention to the others before snapping his fingers. With that, more guards started showing up, almost too many for them to handle.

"Shit!" Ryuji panicked.

"Damn, There's too many of them." The cat noticed.

"As I said." The King crossed his arms and smirked. "No one is allowed to do as they please in my castle. You may have gotten this far, but now it's over."

This was bad. They were outnumbered. Even if they turned into their original forms, it would be almost too much to handle. Especially with Kazuma and Ryuji not being Persona-users. They would be vulnerable if one decides to go after them.

Before Ren could come up with a plan, He noticed that Kazuma was struggling to get up.

As the boy did his best to get up on his two feet, he backed away, getting some distance from the others. He knew what those knights were capable of, they would most surely kill Amamiya and the others if he didn't do something soon. He could just run and leave them to their fate but if he didn't do something then they were going to die.

...

Die.

As that thought repeated itself in his mind, he could feel himself watching it all over again. That day, when he watched the two most important people in his life die in front of him again and again. He clenched his fist as his fear faded, there was no way in hell he let something like that happen again.

Never again.

"N-No." He muttered as that thought entered his head. "S-Stop. Get away from them."

Ren noticed his knees wobbling, his body was probably in serious pain from whatever they put him through. But still, he stood tall and demanded that they leave them alone.

"What?" The King turned around and saw him standing. "Are you deaf, you little shit? I told you to stay down."

"I-I won't." He proclaimed. "I won't let you kill them."

"Kazuma, stop!" Ren yelled out. "They'll kill you!"

"S-Shut up, Amamiya." He fired back. "I don't n-need your help here."

"You're are a serious pain in the ass, you know that?" The king sighed. "Why do you even care, shithead? You were just telling me earlier that they weren't your friends."

"That..." True, they were not his friends. "I..."
"Then shut up and stay down. I'll deal with you later." He ordered before motioning his guards to re-focus on the others again. Hearing this piece of shit order him around like he was some underling at his beck and call was the last straw. Now that he's free from those knights, he wasn't going to let him win.

"S-Shut up! Shut your mouth!" Kazuma yelled at the King for his absurd order. "I don't know who you are, but I'm not someone you can push around! No one tells me what to do, no one! Now leave them alone! Get away from them!

"K-Kazuma?" Ren noticed the venom coming off his words. He knew he was mad but where did this touch of concern come from?

"What did you just say?" The King turned around once again, sneering at the boy's defiance. "You want to die that badly?"

Seeing their King now focused on him, the knights turned away from the others and focused solely on Kazuma. Amamiya and the others were safe and they weren't going to kill them. Even with the threat at hand, he wasn't going to let these freaks hurt anyone.

And with that, something inside him just snapped. With all eyes on him, he just lost it

"If you want to kill someone? KILL ME!"

...

...

So, you've finally come to, foolish child.

At that moment, a wave of indescribable pain coursed through Kazuma's head. The other watched his eyes turned bright yellow.

You accepted a life of loneliness, yet your very soul denied it. A clever trick indeed, yet a waste of your talents.

Tell me, if it was solitude you desired, why risk your life for mere peasants like them?

The pain got worse and it wouldn't let up. He let out a loud scream as he bunched up his hair with his hands and fell to his knees. Seeing him like this caused Kamoshida and his guards to take a step back, fearing what would happen if they got too close.

The longer you continue to live like this, the more you will suffer.

Since everyone's seen through you already, discard this pitiful loner facade and take up a new identity.

The real you yearns for it.

The pain only grew. He slammed his fist into the ground, cracking the floor as he continued to scream.

The contract is set.

I am thou, thou art I.
Thou with nothing to lose hast much more to gain.

Don your new mask, discard the laws of others and follow your own set of rules.

With your two hands, regain what was lost to you and take what is rightfully yours!

"Yes." Kazuma looked up at King Kamoshida and his guards, a dark green mask appeared on his face that hid his wicked glare.

He stood up, closed his eyes, and raised his hand.

"Per..." He then placed it on his mask. "so..." He clenched his free hand and looked at his enemies with a menacing scowl. "NAAAAAAAA!"

He ripped off his mask with all the strength he had as blue flame engulfed his body. Everyone in the room felt the incredible force emitting from the fire. After a while, as the blue flames started to fade, they were able to see that he was still alive. He stood silently with his eyes closed. Only this time, his clothes had changed much like Ren's. Instead of his ripped school uniform, he wore a sleeveless Dark Green suit with a hood that complimented his mask from earlier along with a pair of Dark Green compression armbands. The suit had two colored lines that ran down from the shoulders, two on the front, and two on the back, one red, and one white. He had two swords sheathed on his back and two empty holsters, one on each hip.

Along with his outfit came with what was indubitably, his Persona. It had its arms crossed and two sheathed blades on its hips. Its eyes were covered by black sunglasses but it came with a very sadistic smile. It's outfit consisted of a black dress shirt covered by a dark green suit jacket with a similar color scheme as Kazuma's with many red, white and black lines running through its dark green dress pants along with a pair of black boots and a Dark Green fedora.

"Kazuma." Ren's eyes widened as he watched his fellow transfer student unlock the power of Persona. "Y-You're."

"Oh, cmon?!" Ryuji groaned out loud. "He has one too!"

"What the!" The King yelled in fear from the newly awakened power.

I am the Lord of Deception, Ulysses!

He heard persona declared. Kazuma looked over his shoulder and their eyes met.

These pitiful pathetic cowards dare to order you around?! How audacious! Give the word, and we shall show them who's really in control.

"Hmph." He turned to face the King and his guards. After what these monsters put him through, enough was enough. He wanted blood. "Ready."

"Tch, enough words! Guards!" Kamoshida commanded and his guards slammed their blades down, turning into their true forms, Jack O'Lanterns all around, led by one Kelpie and an Incubus. "Kill him! Kill him now!" He yelled before running away.

"You want a fight, huh?" He popped his neck ready to fight, the guards' new forms didn't faze him in the slightest. "Let's go!"

The Kelpie came at him with the intent to kill. With a flick of his fingers, he commanded his Persona. Ulysses uncrossed his arms and kicked the shadow in the face, sending it flying into other
shadows. The Jack-O-Lanterns gathered around, preparing to surround him.

"Kazuma!" Ren was prepared to rush over and help him

But he didn't need it.

"Hmph." With the flick of his finger, Ulysses pulled down his sunglasses slightly and his eyes shined bright. Using Mahama, all the Jack-O-Lanterns around him died from the power of his Persona's light.

The others watched in awe as Kazuma dispatched the floating pumpkins but then noticed that the Incubus had gotten behind him.

Before they could warn him, He pulled out one of his blades and then spun around, slicing through it.

"That was payback," He said, remembering what the Incubus was before he revealed his true form as the knight that had tortured him.

He wasn't out of the woods yet, a few enemies remained. It was time to finish them off.

"Ulysses. Kill them all." He commanded.

The Persona pulled out his blades and rushed towards all of them, cutting through each one. He was too fast for all them, as each was cut down, Kazuma felt satisfied as their deaths brought closure to all the pain these monsters put him through.

"Die!" Just then as his Persona was busy cutting off enemies, he watched as a Kelpie rushed toward him. He could handle this, he thought. He pulled out his second blade as the shadow attacked him. He hopped over the horse, before landing behind it. He then turned around and went for an attack of his own. He plunged his blades into the back still alive Kelpie and it cried out in pain. He lifted the shadow into the air before cutting through it, pushing the blades in opposite directions.

With that done, the battle was over. He sheathed his blades and looked over to see the others still in their position. They hadn't moved a muscle after Kazuma unleashed his vengeance onto these monsters. The rest of the shadows were all dead, Ulysses had made sure of it. He looked up to see his Persona flying over him, returning to his arms-crossed posture.

"Per-so-na." He muttered.

Do not deny what you feel any longer, child. You know the truth behind the lies. Embrace it.

"Hmph, what do you know?" Kazuma scoffed, walking past it. With no threats imminent, Ulysses vanished and returned to its master as a mask.

"Kazuma!" Ren and the others rushed over to him. "Thank god, you're okay."

"Amamiya?" He questioned as he took note of the outfit he was wearing. "What's with the fancy duds?"

"Right back at you." He fired back.

"Hmm?" He said before noticing his change in attire. "What is this?

"It's the result of awakening to your power, your Persona," Morgana interjected.
"You again?" Kazuma noticed the cat creature was used to be his cellmate before pulling out his blade and pointing it at him. "Are you one of them?"

"Whoa, I'm on your side, Brown Hair!" He stated.

"It's okay, Kazuma. He's been helping us. In fact, he's the reason we found you." The probationer stepped in front of him, protecting his new companion.

"Hmph, if you say so." He sheathed his blade once more before looking around. "Looks like the King ran off. Too bad, I wasn't done yet."

"Let's not stick around to wait for him to come back with more guards." His fellow transfer student said.

"Noted." He nodded. "So, do any of you know how to get out of here?"

"This cat says he knows where the exit is." Ryuji brought up.

"I am not a cat!" Morgana argued. "Cmon, this way."

The cat went over to the opposite side of the room with Ryuji following after him. Before he could take another step, Kazuma stopped him in his tracks.

"You trust that thing?" He asked.

"I do. He's been helpful so far and he lead us to you after all." Ren informed him.

"I didn't need your help." He replied before heading over to the others.

"Sure you didn't." He rolled his eyes and he went after the others.

As Morgana led the three into the end of the hallway, he turned to face them.

"Alright, we're here." He said.

"Finally! We're saved!" Ryuji said with a sigh of relief before rushing to the door on the right and tried to open it. He wasn't having any luck as it was locked. "It's not opening!" He then turned to face the cat. "D'you trick us you jerk?!"

"Don't jump to conclusions!" Morgana smirked. "Over here."

He opened the door and motioned the three to enter. Once they did they still found no way out.

"Where are we supposed to get out from here!? There aren't even any windows!" The blonde exclaimed.

"Ugh, do you ever shut up and just think, amateur." The cat sighed in annoyance. "This is the most basic of basics."

"You're talking about the ventilation shaft, right?" Ren pointed towards what he was referring to and the creature smiled at him approvingly.

"That's right! As I thought, you're a natural at this." He complimented.

"Then what are we waiting for? Shut up and let's get going," Kazuma spoke impatiently as he
climbed up the bookcase and removed the metallic grate.

"Is he always such an asshole?" Ryuji whispered.

"He's not that bad." Ren defended.

Once the gate was off, it hit the ground, making a loud noise.

"Oh crap, the enemy didn't hear us, did they?" Sakamoto questioned, not wanting to stay to find out. "Seriously, we're finally gettin out of here!"

"You should probably wait on celebrating until you actually get out. Now get going!" He rushed them.

"But... what about you?" The blonde questioned.

"There's something that I still have to do." He told them. "We're going our separate ways."

"I see, in that case." Ren held out his hand to the cat-like creature. "Thank you so much for your help, Morgana. If we ever meet again, I promise to repay you for saving us."

The cat didn't expect such kindness or gratitude but he couldn't help but smile as the boy gave his thanks.

"I'll hold you to that one day." He then shook the boy's hand firmly. "See ya."

"If you guys are done wasting time, I'm getting out of here," Kazuma said as he left went on without them. Ryuji and Ren followed after and as they left, Morgana remained, thinking on his former companions.

"Those three seem useful. Especially the frizzy-haired one, if my judgment's right." He thought fondly of the boy's natural talent with the Persona and his ability to fight. "Brown-Hair has some talent too. But, there's something... off about him."

Chapter End Notes

It was really difficult trying to figure out what type of Persona I should give my OC as you know the Phantom Thieves Personas are Trickster oriented. So for my OC, I went with the Latin variant of Odysseus, Ulysses.

Hope you guys liked it, expect more soon.
All right, we're at five chapters! Soon, we'll be up to date. Hope you guys like it. I was definitely excited to write this part, especially for my OC. Why, you'll fine out soon enough. ;)

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The three made their way out of the castle, they backtracked their way back to where they first met, at Jeunesse et Beaute when the world around them began to change.

Soon enough, the distortions cleared up and they found themselves back in the real world.

They gasped for air, breathing heavily from sprinting all the way to their location.

"Did we make it?" Ryuji questioned before looking around and see people walk past them.

"We're definitely back in the real world, that's for sure," Ren said before turning to his fellow transfer student, noticing something different. "Kazuma, your uniform."

"Huh?" He looked down and saw his uniform back to its original state as if it was never torn from the torture they endured. "How... strange." He said as he clutched his chest, the pain still there. Faint, but still there.

"Here." He reached into his pocket and as it turns out, he still had the painkillers Morgana gave him. He pulled out some medicine and gave it to him. "This will numb the pain."

Kazuma looked at the medicine Amamiya offered him and took it without question, putting it in his mouth and swallowing it. Anything to get rid of this feeling.

You have returned to the real world.

Ren heard a voice coming from his pocket. The other two heard it and looked on as he pulled out his cellphone to check the source of the voice.

Welcome back.

"Huh? Returned…?" Ryuji scratched his head in confusion. "Does that mean we got away?"

"I would say so." The probationer looked around and saw citizens going about their everyday lives. They were definitely back.

"I dunno what to think anymore." Sakamoto sighed in irritation. "What was all that anyway? That castle, and Kamoshida, and that weird cat! The hell's going on!?"

"What's with the yelling? Are you students of Shujin?" Just then, two police officers approached the three, one of them on a bicycle. "Cutting classes, are we?"
"Huh? No!" The blonde panicked, trying to explain the situation. "We were tryin' to get to school, and we ended up at this weird castle!"

"Don't tell them that, idiot," Kazuma whispered harshly.

"What?" One of the officers said before sighing. "Alright, hand over your bag. You better have not been doing any drugs."

"Why would you think that!?" Ryuji exclaimed defensively.

"Apologies, Officers. This is a simple misunderstanding." Ren interjected. It was time to defuse the situation and his companions weren't helping. "I encountered this student on our way to school and he was clutching his stomach in pain. Me and my friend here escorted him to a doctor to get him checked out. They gave him some medicine and he's been saying strange things since he left, something about a castle and a talking cat."

Kazuma watched as his fellow transfer student quickly defused the situation professionally and convincingly. How impressive. The only thing that could ruin it is if Sakamoto opens his mouth again, but the blonde looked a bit stunned at the story he told the cops, even though it was half-true.

"What he said," Kazuma said in agreement.

"Anyway, we apologize for taking your time." He bowed to the two before motioning the others to follow. "Cmon guys, let's hurry."

"Y-Yeah." The blonde hurried after him along with Kazuma.

They two transfer students both knew they were likely going to contact the school about this and while it would be easier taking the shortcut again, they didn't want to risk ending up in that castle again.

One thing is for sure though.

*Sakura-san is not going to be happy.*

The three arrived at the school in utter confusion. Yes, the gate did read Shujin Academy but it was the actual school itself and not the castle they had just escaped from. While they were glad they didn't end up in that place again, it was still confusing nonetheless.

"Is this for real?" Sakamoto himself couldn't believe it. "What's going on here?"

"That's exactly what I wanted to ask you." Just then, the guidance counselor came out of the school with his arms crossed, looking at the blonde with a disapproving expression."We received a call from the police."

"That damn cop snitched on us after all!" Ryuji kicked the ground in annoyance.

"It was unavoidable," Ren whispered.

"Hmm." He noticed the other two with him. "It's rare not to see you alone. Where were you roaming around until this time?"

"Uhh... a c-castle?" He said.
“What did I just say earlier?” Kazuma groaned at his stupidity.

“So you have no intention of giving me an honest answer?” The counselor questioned.

“What's this about a castle?” They heard another speak up and as he walked over to the teacher's side, the three recognized him.

“K-Kamoshida?!” Ryuji backpedaled seeing him again, especially after what happened in the castle. Ren kept his calm, knowing the person he was seeing wasn't the same person they saw in the castle. On the other hand, Kazuma glared holes into him as the mere sight of him reminded him of the King that caused him pain.

“You seem so carefree, Sakamoto.” The man took note of. "Quite a difference from when you did morning practice for the track team.”

That must've triggered a reaction as Ryuji's face darkened, one full of absolute hate. Ren took notice of it and wondered just what was his deal with this guy.

"Shaddup! It's your fault that-"

"How dare you speak that way to Mr. Kamoshida!” The counselor interrupted. "There's not much leeway left for you, you know?"

"He's the one that provoked me!” He argued.

_Sounds like he's got a grudge._ Kazuma took note of the venom spilling from his mouth.

"Do you really want to be expelled?!" He threatened. "In any case, you'll have to explain yourself. Follow me."

"What?! This is bullshit!” Ryuji wouldn't let up as he continued to be defensive.

"Come now. I should've been more considerate too.” Kamoshida chuckled as he attempted to defuse the situation. "Let's just say that we were both to blame."

"Well, if you say so.” The counselor relented. "Still you're coming with me. It's undeniable that you're extremely late."

"Tch, fine.” With everyone calmed down, Ryui relented as well.

Kamoshida then took notice of the other two students with him, recognizing who they are.

"By the way.” He spoke to the individuals in question. "You two. You're are the new transfer students, correct? Ren Amamiya and... Kei Kazuma, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes, sir.” Ren nodded while Kazuma chose to remain silent.

Ryuji walked up the steps, following after the counselor but not before giving Kamoshida a wicked glare as he walked right past him. The teacher gave a scoffing sound as the boy walked by him. He turned his attention back to the two new students.

"Say, have we met somewhere before?” He wondered.

"This morning, you offered that girl a ride.” Ren pointed out.

"Hmm?” He scratched his head before his eyes widened. "Oh, that's right. This morning.” He said
in remembrance. "Well, I'll overlook this just for today." He said before giving him a serious look. "Just to be clear, Amamiya-san. I'm sure you've heard from the principal, but cause any trouble and you'll be expelled. Understand?"

"Yes, sir." He nodded. While he could've offered a witty retort, he chose to keep it simple, for now. After all, this guy's a teacher.

"And as for you, Kazuma-san." He turned to the other student. "The faculty has already been informed about your truancy streak from your last school. Do the staff and yourself a favor and come to class on time from now on. Got it?"

"Sure." He replied, wanting this man to get out of his sight.

"At any rate, hurry up and go to the faculty office. I'm sure Ms. Kawakami and Ms. Chouno are tired of waiting." He said before turning around, looking over his shoulder and giving the two a smug look. "Good luck trying to enjoy your new school lives." And with that, he went back into the building.

*Sarcasm? What's this man's game?* Ren wondered, that last remark was sort of a challenge. What was that about?

"Well..." He turned to his companion. "Shall we?"

"Whatever." The two entered the school, ready for the scolding that awaited them.

...  
...

He continued his story, from when he entered his first palace to when he arrived at school. Judging from the look on her face, Sae was in disbelief, wondering if the drugs those bastards gave him were getting to him.

"The school turned into an old castle?" She remarked. "A talking cat?"

"Surprised?" He found the look on her face to be amusing.

"..Are you hallucinating from an overdose? I won't put up with you if you're simply joking around." She warned him.

"You want my story, I'm giving it to you." He told her. "I told you at the start 'whether you choose to believe or not is your choice'. Not my fault if you weren't paying attention."

"Tch." She clicked her tongue in irritation at his smart mouth before checking her watch. "I'm going to have you continue the story."

"What else do you want to know?" He asked.

"The one who received a "calling card" from the Phantom Thieves was an Olympic medalist." She removed showed him a picture of the man she was talking about. "An alumnus from Shujin Academy, the PE teacher Suguru Kamoshida." She said before choosing her next words carefully
as the details of his case were utterly revolting. "It's true that what he did were deplorable crimes from… indulging his desire. He confessed to it all. But there should've been no connection between the two of you since you had just transferred."

"That's what you think." He remarked.

"Then why did you target him?" She asked.

"You asked me to relay my story. That's what I'm doing. One step at a time, Sae." He said but that didn't convince her as she slammed her hands on the table and stood up.

"That's unacceptable! Try and recall it once again!" She demanded.

"Calm down and I'll tell you," He said and she relented, sinking back into the chair. "Me and Reaper went to the faculty office, ready to begin our new student lives."

"Yes, about that." She interrupted once more. "This "Reaper" you keep referring to. Would this be the Grim Reaper? Your partner?"

"We're not talking about that right now." He told her. "Anyway, we arrived and our respective homeroom teachers scolded us..."

"... and that's why we're late." Ren had explained the situation the two. When he and Kazuma arrived, Kawakami sighed and Ms. Chouno gave the two a glare of disapproval. When asked, Ren made up the same story he gave to the cops, hoping it relieves him and his fellow transfer student of any trouble.

"While I applaud you both for helping a fellow student, it's almost lunchtime." Ms. Chouno scolded.

"Sorry." Kazuma gave a half-hearted apology, looking away from their gazes.

"And to think you're both late." She remarked.

"I apologize." Ren bowed to the two. "I was the one who asked Kazuma to help, the fault is mine."

"Amamiya." He looked over and watched as his fellow transfer student helped him by taking the blame. Not that he needed it.

"Calm down, Amamiya-kun. Since it was to help a fellow student, we'll overlook this." Ms. Kawakami stated. "But pull yourself together, you were given a fair warning yesterday."

"You as well, Kazuma-san. Principal Kobayakawa warned you about our attendance policy." Ms. Chouno continued to scold him.

"More importantly." Kawakami continued. "I heard that you two were caught along with that Sakamoto-kun."

"That Sakamoto-kun?" Ren questioned at the way she spoke his name as if it was sort of taboo.

"Don't get involved with him, OK? He's nothing but trouble." She warned them about Ryuji.
What kind of teacher says that about a student? Ren noted, his respect for Ms. Kawakami was slowly starting to diminish.

"Don't be so hard on him, Sadayo." Ms. Chouno intervened. "That's my student you're talking about."

"Sorry." She apologized. "He wasn't like that when he was devoting his time to track and field though."

_He's an athlete. No wonder he was good at running._ Ren thought

"Anyway, break time's almost over." Chouno stood up. "Let's go, Kazuma-san."

"Right." He followed her.

"Later, Kazuma," Ren said his goodbye but he didn't reply as he followed Ms. Chouno out of the classroom.

"Are you two friends?" His homeroom teacher asked.

"Something like that." He simply said. To be honest, he didn't know where he stood with Kazuma. That guy appears standoffish and mean but after what happened in the castle, he didn't know what to think of him or their relationship.

"I see." She said. "Anyway, classes will end after fifth period because of the subway accident. I'll have you introduce yourself when class resumes." She stood up. "Follow me."

She led him out of the faculty office as they made their way to her classroom.

"By the way, when you introduce yourself." She stopped in the hallway and turned to face him. "Be serious about it even if you're lying to class, OK? Do NOT say anything unnecessary."

"I'll do my best, Ms." He adjusted his glasses as he reassured her, as they continued, he heard some students who passed him make remarks about him.

_It's showtime._

Shiho Suzui sat in class as she waited for Ms. Chouno to show up. She wondered what the hold up was as she was always prepared for class on time. She saw the classroom door open only to see Ryuji enter the class, slumping down on his desk and he sighed in exhaustion. She hadn't seen him all day and he was really late.

"Did you see that? Sakamoto is late." One of the students said.

" Seriously? You think any college is ever going to accept him with the way he acts."

"Forget about him. We don't need to waste a moment of our lives worrying about that loser."

As she overheard her classmates talk, she watched her class' representative approach Ryuji.

"Sakamoto-kun?"

"Yeah?" He lifted his head to meet her eyes.

"Care to explain your tardiness?" She crossed her arms.
"Ugh, long story Matsumoto." He grumbled, hoping she'll just leave.

"Well don't do it again. When a student is late, the class rep is the one the teacher scolds. Keep that in mind next time." She finished her scolding and returned to her seat.

Shiho couldn't help but admire Emi Matsumoto's dedication to her duties as Class 2-E representative. Even so, she wished she wasn't too hard on Sakamoto.

"Ouch, looks like our favorite Newspaper Girl grilled Sakamoto a new one."

"Serves him right."

"Hey guys, I hear we're getting a new transfer student in this class."

"The one in the rumors?"

"No, it's someone else."

"Two transfer students? This is gonna be confusing."

A transfer student? She had heard about two new transfer students coming to Shujin early this morning. One of which was supposedly a criminal who assaulted someone. Although now people are saying that he's a yakuza underling or that he smokes on a daily basis so she didn't know what to believe.

But the one in this class was going to be someone else entirely. She wondered who it could be.

Just then, her thoughts were interrupted as Ms. Chouno entered the classroom, the students were struck silent as she took her place at her desk.

"Hello class, I apologize for being late." She said. "I would like to take this time to introduce our newest transfer student. You can come in now!"

At her order, the transfer student walked in. He stood at the front of the class and the moment Shiho saw him, she gasped lightly but kept it hidden from everyone else.

Oh my god. She said in complete shock. To think of the irony of having him of all people in her class. It's him. The boy from the train station.

As Kazuma stood at the front, looking at his class, he could hear some of them making comments about him. He frowned in annoyance at the thought of being the newest thing to gossip about which didn't go unnoticed by his classmates.

"This guy's the transfer student?"

"He doesn't look very friendly."

As he scanned the classroom, he caught sight of the spiky blonde from earlier, Sakamoto, who was staring at him in shock upon finding out that they would be classmates.

Great, the moron's in this class too? He groaned annoyingly. I do not need this right now

His frown grew as he heard them talk about him. As he looked around the room he noticed Ryuji was here but ignored him as he was already informed that they were going to be in the same class. But as he looked to his left, his eyes met someone he believed he wasn't going to meet ever again.
He almost couldn’t believe the coincidence. That same girl from the station the other day was in this class and was staring at him in disbelief.

*Oh, crap. It's that girl again.* He remembered her, that black ponytail being a dead giveaway. He had thought they would never see each other again but if that look in her eye was any indication, she probably remembered him too.

"Anyway." Ms. Chouno cleared her throat, silencing her students. "Please introduce yourself to the class."

His eyes refocused on the entire class. Looking at them, he knew just who he was dealing with, rumormongers, gossip hounds, and idiots, all the same. Just being in the same room as them and having to look at them was absolutely repulsive. He closed his eyes and forced out an introduction.

"Kei Kazuma."

He gave a simple introduction which caused more whispers about him.

"What kind of introduction is that?"

"I don't like him. He's kind of... scary."

"Is there anything you'd like to tell us about yourself, Kazuma-san?" Ms. Chouno continued.

"No."

"Well, alright then." She said, ready to continue class. "Please take your seat. It's right over there."

As she pointed to her seat, it was a window seat which he was thankful for as he could focus on other things besides a teacher's boring lectures. The only offside is that he's seated right next to none other than his former spiky blonde companion.

Oh, well.

He ignored the gossip and looks people were giving him as he walked over to his seat.

"Yo." He heard Ryuji greet him.

He didn't reply, he just sat down in his desk and kept his focus on the outside, resting his cheek against the palm of his hand, wanting to drown out this horrible day and escape to his daydreams.

"Hey, dude." And yet, he continued. Kazuma simply turned to face him, hoping if he gave him just an ounce of his attention, he'll leave him alone. "Meet me on the roof after class. I want to talk about... you know."

He knew what he was referring to and while he could've just ignored his request, he did want answers, especially considering he was almost tortured to death by a bunch of Knight looking monsters.

He noticed a few students were giving him looks and talking about him.

"Geez, what a grump. What's his problem?"

"Don't know, he's kind of a jerk, isn't he?"

"Well, better him than that criminal."
Criminal?

Those words confused him, were they referring to Amamiya? Why would they say about him?

"A transfer student with a criminal record and now this guy? Our school's not catching a break anytime soon."

"Got that right. I heard he smokes and carries a knife around. This guy's done it all."

"Really, cause I've heard..."

A criminal record? Now that caught him off guard. They were definitely talking about Amamiya. Looking past all the nonsense they were saying about him, what he gathered from their chatter was how Amamiya assaulted someone, that he almost killed a guy.

_Amamiya's got a criminal record, huh? That sounded so stupid, it almost made him laugh. What a joke. No way that goody-two-shoes is a criminal._

Ren entered the class and stood at the front. As he faced his classmates, many started to chat amongst themselves. They weren't exactly being quiet about their gossip as he was able to pick out what they were saying.

"Being super late on his first day? He really is insane..."

"He looks normal though..."

"But he might slug us if we look him in the eye..."

The comments caught him off guard, from what he gathered it would appear that his classmates are aware of who he is, or rather, what he is.

_So, seems like someone spilled the beans about my situation._ He adjusted his glasses, not really fazed about this turn of events. It was unsettling sure, but there was nothing he could about it.

As he looked around, there were a few students that caught his eye. One, in particular, was the only one in the classroom not wearing the blazer, but rather Shujin Academy's standard winter uniform. His blue-tinted hair made him stand out from the rest but what was noticeable was the bruise on his face and the fact he was looking away as if to ignore Ren's presence in the classroom.

He looked around some more only to find another student that not only stood out by appearance but also by familiarity.

_Oh, Takamaki-san's here too._ He noticed the blonde from earlier sitting by the window who seemed surprised that he was here.

"Settle down." Ms. Kawakami demanded, signaling her students to quiet down and breaking Ren from his observations. "Well, I'd like to introduce a transfer student. Today we had him... attend from the afternoon on since he had to help a fellow student who got sick. Now then, please say something to the class."

Giving Amamiya control of the class, he stepped forward and swallowed his nerves away, first impressions were always important after all. He gave a polite smile to the class before giving his introduction.

"Hello everyone, my name is Ren Amamiya." He gave a formal bow to the class. "Let's have a
great year together."

His introduction seemed to have produced even more gossip as people wondered if this guy really is as the rumors say he is.

"He seems nice… but I bet when he loses it."

"I mean, he was arrested for assault, right?"

"...Uhh, so…" The continued gossip appeared to throw Kawakami off guard. "Your seat will be… Hmm… Over there. The one that's open." She pointed to the open seat near the window, right behind Takamaki. "Sorry, but can the people nearby please share your textbooks with him for today?"

"This sucks…"

He had a feeling no one was going their textbooks with him today.

*Oh well, let's get to it.*

It was time for class to get started. He placed his hands in his pockets and made his way to his seat. The moment he passed by Takamaki's breath, he heard her say something under her breath.

"Lies."

"Hmm?" He raised an eyebrow, stopping at the desk in front of his. She probably didn't expect him to hear her say that as their eyes met.

"U-Um!" Takamaki muttered, chiding herself for not being quieter. "H-Hi again." She said, greeting him. Despite what her classmates were saying about him, she had her doubts.

He didn't say anything, simply a smile and a nod before seating himself down behind her.

It appears their familiarity with each other didn't go unnoticed by the rest of the classmates as they started talking some more. He could overhear the conversation going on between the students seated next to him.

"Did you catch that? Do those two know each other?"

"Oooh, are those two a thing?"

"That means she's cheating on Mr. Kamoshida? Then again, this is Takamaki-san we're talking about."

"For real, that slut has no shame at all. Glad I'm not on that side of the classroom."

*What did she just say?* Did he hear them just right? What was that about? Why were they saying such horrible things about Takamaki? As he looked in front of him, he saw Takamki looking away, clearly able to hear everyone talking about her and Ren. She sighed sadly, almost as if this was routine. He couldn't help but feel responsible as it was because he stopped at her desk that they began talking about them. He leaned forward so that only she could hear him.

"Sorry." He whispered.

She heard him apologize and knew what he was referring to. She simply glanced over her shoulder before whispering back.
"Don't worry about it."

And with that, the two turned their focus back to Kawakami who silenced her class once again.

"Oh, right! The volleyball rally's in two days. Everyone's just changed classes, so make sure you use that time to get to know each other." She announced before beginning the lecture. "Well, then let's get class started. Who's on duty today?"

The boy with blue-tinted hair stood up.

"Everyone, please rise."

When class finally ended, many students hurried out of the classroom. Ren didn't even bother asking the students next to him to share their textbooks, he knew they wouldn't despite Kawakami asking them too. Thankfully, Takamaki was kind enough to lend her textbook to him, although when he gave it back to her, she rushed out of the classroom along with the others, not having any time to talk. Oh well, he could try another day, something about her says she's not like the others.

Ren exited the classroom, about to head back to Leblanc and explain himself to Sojiro. If the police informed the school about his tardiness, he just knew the school informed him as well, despite Ms. Kawakami and Ms. Chouno giving him and Kazuma a pass.

"ARG!" He clutched his head as the school began to change its scenery, flashes of the castle from earlier appearing in its place before changing back to normal.

Kawakami exited the classroom and saw that he was in pain.

"Hm? What's wrong?" He turned to the classroom door to see Kawakami standing there.

"Oh, nothing Ms. Just a minor Migraine." He smiled.

"I see." She replied. "If it gets worse, see the nurse before you leave." She explained before continuing. "Also, it seems like people are already talking about you. But, I'm not the one who told them."

"It's whatever." He shrugged it off, not really bothered. "People were bound to find out eventually."

Kawakami gave off a loud sigh, as if consumed by the stress she was feeling. "I can't even catch a break. Why do I have to deal with this?"

*Once again, I'm standing right here.* Its one thing to be stressed out about a probationer in your class, but to express frustration right in front of them is downright rude. Then again, he believed that she was saying these things simply out of stress, even today she looked more stressed out than the other day. Could that have been caused by his tardiness? Who knows?

"Might I offer the same advice to you, Ms." He said, changing the subject.

"Huh?" She seemed surprised, wondering what he was referring to.

"Well, you kept clutching your head during class, Ms. You should take some medicine and rest. Sleep deprivation can affect one's physical and mental performance." He explained, greatly shocking her as she didn't know her apparent tiredness was that easy to figure out.

"How did you..." She stopped herself, she wasn't going to let him derail her like this. "Nevermind. Anyway, You should head straight home without stopping by anywhere. Mr. Sakura sounded
pretty angry."

_No surprise there._ He thought to himself.

"Oh, and about Sakamoto-kun. Don't get involved..." As if on cue, the man in question entered the scene. Ryuji approached them, intruding in on their conversation. Kawakami turned to face him. "Speak of the devil. What do you want? I heard the police caught you cutting classes today."

"Ugh... it was nothin'. This guy and his friend had to help me out, that's all." He replied, scoffing at her tone and looking away.

"And you haven't dyed your hair back to black either." She brought up, placing her hand on her hip.

"Sorry 'bout that'..." He gave a false apology, ignoring Kawakami's rambling and approached Ren, moving close so only he could hear. "I'll be waitin' on the rooftop. Your friend will be there too."

He finished before taking his leave.

_The rooftop, huh? And Kazuma's gonna be there too? He thought. It must be about the castle._

"See? That's why I don't want you getting involved. Understood?" His Homeroom teacher continued to point out.

"Noted." He said, giving a bow to her. "Enjoy the rest of your day, Ms. Kawakami."

Even though that lecture, he still remained the polite boy she met the other day. It was strange how passive he was being with everyone talking about him. Was he really a problem student?

"You too, Amamiya-kun." She gave a simple nod and left. Once he was out of earshot, she thought as to how he understood how tired she was and how she was currently suffering from a severe headache. As if his polite behavior didn't make it any stranger.

He checked his phone to look at the time, he still had time to check in with Ryuji and make the next train back to Shibuya. But before he could take action, he spotted the devil himself, Mr. Kamoshida and Principal Kobayakawa walking up the stairs, barring his path. He was close so he could overhear what they were talking about but made sure he wasn't close so they could notice him.

"Why would you allow students like them to transfer here? They're already starting to associate with Sakamoto." Kamoshida complained, referring to Ren and Kazuma's presence at the school. "A student with a criminal record and a student with a nasty record of absences. At this rate, it'd be pointless how much I contribute to the school."

"Now, don't be like that. The school counts on you, Kamoshida-kun. You're are our star." The principal retorted. "Still, a steady build-up is necessary behind such brilliance as well."

_Wow, the guy's got a man crush._ Ren chuckled at how much the Principal admired the P.E. teacher.

"Your troubles never seem to end, do they, Principal Kobayakawa?" Kamoshida questioned before giving a confident smile. "All right, I understand. I'll continue to do my best to answer your expectations of me."

"And I applaud you for your effort." The Principal said. "Besides, I wouldn't be too quick to judge Kazuma-san. His parents were some of Tokyo's most influential and widely acclaimed individuals, after all."
"That so?" He questioned, smiling as if an idea popped into his head.

"Anyway, have a good day, Kamoshida-kun." And with that, the Principal left. Kamoshida left too and the path to the roof was available.

Ren made his way to the rooftop, ignoring the looks many were giving him. So it's true, people really do know about his record. If that wasn't worse, people are also making false allegations about him, that he smokes and carries a knife being the most frequent. He had to admit, they were kind of amusing, listening to these tall tales.

*High school students have wild imaginations.* He believed.

Once he made it to the rooftop door, he pushed those thoughts out of his head and focused on his meeting with Ryuji. He opened the door to find the blond leaning against a chair, waiting for him. However, it was only him, Kazuma wasn't here yet.

He looked past Sakamoto to find a small garden, probably from the school's gardening club, he deduced. At his old school, students weren't allowed on the rooftop but he often used it as a place to eat lunch in peace and to be alone. He believed that same rule also applied to Shujin but that never stopped him before.

"There you are." The spiky blonde greeted, breaking him from his thoughts. "Sorry for callin' you up here like this."

"It's no problem." He assured him. "Is Kazuma not coming?"

"He went to the bathroom, last I saw him. He'll be here." He told him. "So, I bet Kawakami already told you stuff like "don't get involved with that Sakamoto," huh?"

"Something along those lines, kind of a terrible thing for a teacher to say about a student though," Ren stated.

"Figured as much." He sighed annoyingly. "Then again, we're in the same boat."

"Oh?" He questioned.

"Yep, I heard you got a criminal record. Everyone's talkin' about it." He pointed out.

"So I've heard, although you can ignore the ones about me carrying cigarettes and a knife, I checked on my way up here and I can't find them anywhere." He made a joke about the situation which got a laugh out of Ryuji.

"Hahaha! Yeah, welcome to Shujin Academy, land of rumors and bullshit." He laughed at the joke. "I'm just sayin', it's no wonder you were so gutsy."

Just then, before they could continue the conversation, the door to the roof opened and in came their late arrival. Kazuma entered the picture, approaching the two with an annoyed expression.

"Hey, Kazuma." Ren greeted. "Was class okay for you?"

"Not important." Kazuma retorted. After everything that had happened, he wanted answers. "So, considering the fact that the three of us were nearly murdered, maybe one of you would like to explain what's going on. Because between being thrown in a prison cell, tortured by monsters, and seeing that asshat in a bathrobe, I would've been better off actually skipping today."
"Well, It wasn't a dream… right?" Ryuji questioned, looking at Ren for answers. "You remember it too, yeah?"

"I remember everything. Being imprisoned, fighting those weird monsters, saving Morgana, everything." He answered.

"Well, just 'cause we all remember it doesn't mean much though." The three didn't really have much to go on from that, after all, it sounds impossible for three individuals to share the exact same dream and share the exact same experience of said dream. Too many questions and no answers. "I mean, even if it was a dream, you saved me from Kamoshida. So yeah… Thanks, Ren."

"Anytime." He gave him thumbs up.

"Oh, and you." Ryuji turned toward his classmate. "You were badass, man. The way you killed all those floating pumpkins effin' rocked."

"Whatever." He turned away, crossing his arms, not really use to compliments nor desiring to be complimented.

"But man, that Kamoshida we saw there…" He brought up the person they met in the castle, the one that looked like the P.E. teacher that works here. "You guys prolly don't know about it, but there are some rumors about him."

*Rumors, huh. I wonder if it has anything to do with Takamaki-san.* He thought as the gossip in class about the beautiful blonde seated in front of him still fresh on his mind.

"The King?" Kazuma questioned

"I think he means Mr. Pink Undies." Ren gave his nickname, not desiring to give that scumbag the honor of actually saying his name.

"Yeah. That asshole who was all full of himself at the castle." Ryuji hid his snicker at Ren's nickname before sitting up in his chair. "No one says anything against him 'cause he's some medalist who took the volleyball team to nationals. The way Kamoshida was king of that castle felt crazy real 'cause of that."

"You did say he acted like he was 'the king of the castle' when we first met you." The probationer pointed out.

"...I wonder if we can go back to that castle again…" Sakamoto questioned the idea before standing up, pushing aside the idea as ridiculous. "Ugh, forget it. Must've been a dream! It has to be!"

"Well whatever it was, all that matters is that we're alive," Ren told him.

"Yeah, you're right." He rubbed the back of his head, agreeing with what he said. "Sorry for dragging you guys out here like this. That's all I had to say."

"Hey, it's no problem at all. I'm glad we had this chance to talk." He smiled, appreciating Ryuji's kindness.

"You know, we might be pretty similar." He smiled at the two. "I feel like the three of us are gonna get along just fine as 'troublemakers'."

"Yeah, lovely. I'm leaving." Kazuma said impatiently as he made his way to the door.
"Hey, hold on a sec." The spiky blonde called out. "Sorry dude, I completely fazed out during class, what was your name again?"

"There's no point in you knowing my name." He replied, even after Ren had introduced him, he forgot his name? Seriously?

"But we're classmates. And we sit next to each other, you know?" He argued.

"So what? Being classmates doesn't mean anything." He said as he made his way to the door.

When he opened the door, he glanced over his shoulder to see Ren looking at him. It appeared that he was still concerned about him, especially after hearing that those monsters tortured him. It annoyed him greatly, his concern, his friendliness, and his altruism.

He sighed irritatingly as he looked away, not wanting to look at him anymore.

"Kei Kazuma." He gave his name one final time before heading back downstairs. Once the door closed and he was out of earshot, the spiky blonde let out an annoyed groan.

"Okay seriously, what an asshole," Ryuji called out.

"He's unfriendly, yes, but I think that's a bit far-fetched." Ren believed. "You remember what he said, right? Back at the castle?"

"Y-Yeah, as if I could forget," Sakamoto said, the words his classmate said before awakening his Persona on his mind, his demand that the King and his guardsman turn their attention to him instead of the others. "Anyway, I'll come talk if I see you around. Don't ignore me, all right?"

"You got it." He nodded as the two parted ways and left the rooftop.

Ann and Shiho talked near the entrance as they killed time before the latter had to attend volleyball practice. It was the best way for the two to waste their after-school afternoons when the latter didn't have practice, otherwise, they would be hanging out at the Shibuya Underground Mall. Nothing exciting was really happening so they just talked about their days, rather, the new students that have entered their school lives.

"So, I heard you got the rumored transfer student in your class." Shiho brought up.

"Yeah, people are already spreading rumors about him," Ann informed, crossing her arms and frowning a little at the comments spread by her classmates. Her first opinion of Ren Amamiya is that he was polite and really nice. When they first met this morning, he greeted her with such kindness then he apologized to her in class when students started talking about them. He was so nice, not at all like how the rumors make him out to be.

"I hope he's okay." The volleyball team member expressed concern.

"Oh Shiho, that's so you. Always worrying about others." She giggled at her friend's selflessness. "What about you, I heard you have a transfer student in your class as well."

"Y-Yeah. I do." She said, remember just who it was that was the new transfer student in her class. It was clear that he recognized her but she didn't know if he wanted to talk to her. After all, he rushed out of class the moment it ended.

"So, what do you think about him?" The blonde wondered.
"Well, he's..."

"Yo, Takamaki-san!"

Just then the two friends were interrupted by a fellow student, Daisuke Takanashi, followed by three of his friends. He was an asshole in Ann's eyes, always trying to cause trouble with other students. Knowing him, she could tell this wasn't going to be pleasant.

"Daisuke-kun." She greeted simply, not really wanting to talk to the likes of him.

"So, what're you up to?" He asked.

"I'm about to go home. Alone." He lightly snapped, letting him know her intentions.

"Oh, really? Me and the guys were about to head out to Shinjuku for a little fun. We wanted to know if you wanted to come with. After all, you like to have 'fun' now and then don't ya?" He quipped as he and his friends laughed at his insinuation.

It was times like these that Shiho wished she could stand up to these assholes for treating Ann like this. The rumors about her greatly bothered her and it clearly bothered her friend as well. None of it was true, it was a slander and tall tales.

"So, what do you say, Takamaki-san? Wanna come have some-AGH!" He continued until someone bumped into him rather roughly, causing Daisuke to fall to the ground. His friends looked towards the perpetrator who was making his way toward the exit, not even noticing what he had done.

"Hey! What the hell was that for?!" He called out but got no answer, probably unable to hear him as this mysterious student was listening to music, earphone in each ear.

"Hey, hold up asshole!"

His three friends ran around him to block his path, preventing him from leaving. Once they saw who it was, they gasped because the look he was giving them gave him a menacing appearance. They took a few steps back, not knowing what he was gonna do.

"Hey, you think you can just bump into me like that and get away with it?!" Daisuke questioned angrily as he grabbed onto the perpetrator's shoulder rather roughly. "You better give me an apology right now. On your knees punk!"

"D-Daisuke. Dude, I-I don't think we should mess with this guy."

"Huh?" He said wondering why his friend appeared frightened. The perpetrator removed one earphone from his ear and turned around to face him, gracing him with the same glare he was giving his friends a few seconds ago.

With his face now visible, Shiho could see who it was.

*I-It's him.* She recognized the perp as Kei Kazuma, new transfer student, and her newest classmate. The look he was giving Daisuke was rather menacing, one full of annoyance, hate, and disgust combined into one glare.

"W-Whoa, man." Daisuke back away, holding his hand up in front of him. "L-Look, I'm sorry. I-I don't want any trouble, okay?"

The new transfer student kept glaring at him until backed off. To be fair, he did bump into him but he was in the way, students shouldn't be hanging near the front door after all. He looked over to see
who these assholes were talking too. His glare faded and his eyes widened as soon as his eye's met Shiho's.

Shiho didn't know what to do at the moment, the way his menacing frown dropped the moment he looked at her did not go unnoticed by her. That was all the confirmation she needed to know that he remembered her from that day. But what should she say? Should she introduce herself? Say hi? She didn't know what to do. All she could do is stay silent as their eyes met continued to stare at one another.

"Hmph." He looked away from her before putting the hanging earphone back in his ear, turning around and walking away.

Once he was out of sight, Daisuke and his friends began talking about him.

"Who the hell was that?"

"Don't you know? That's one of the transfer students."

"Which class?"

"2-E."

"Oh. So he's not the one in the rumors?"

"Still, can you believe that guy?" Daisuke scoffed at him. "What a piece of shit."

"Heh, you talk big but you look like you're about to piss yourself, Daisuke."

"I do not!" He complained.

As they argued amongst themselves, Shiho and Ann moved away from them, as if to escape in the event they were to turn their attention back to them. While Ann was glad that everything ended without anyone throwing punches, she was still reeling from the information she had learned. The blonde had recognized that boy before as he was with Amamiya this morning but didn't know he was the transfer student in her friend's class.

"So, he's in your class, Shiho?" She asked.

"Y-Yeah. That was him." Shiho answered.

"Y-Yeah. That was him." Shiho answered.

"Geez, he doesn't seem friendly to me. Even if Daisuke was an asshole." Ann continued.

Even so, Shiho couldn't help but feel thankful towards him for defusing the situation, even if it was inadvertently. This, and their initial encounter the other day at the train station, him giving her hopeful advice, made this Kei Kazuma more mysterious and more intriguing. But it's as Ann said, he doesn't seem like a friendly guy, it was apparent in the way he introduced himself in class.

*His eyes looked so full of hate. It wasn't like yesterday. She thought. Maybe he just needs a friend.*

Having left the school, Kazuma waited for the train to arrive. While he wasn't as early as he wished since he met up with Ren and Ryuji earlier, it should be here any second.

His thoughts turned to that girl, that same girl that he met in this very station, is in his class. His belief that she would forget him turned out to be false. If anything the looks she gave him in class and when he just left a while ago say the exact opposite.
Who is she? He wondered.

"Kazuma!" He heard someone call out to him. He took out his earphones and turned to face the one calling his name.

"Amamiya." He said as it was his fellow transfer student that ran after him.

"Hey, glad I caught up with you." He smiled as he caught his breath. "We walked to school together, might as well walk back together, right?"

"Do what you want, I really don't care." He placed his earphones back into his ear, listening to his music.

They didn't talk on their way back to Shibuya, even though Ren wanted to use this chance to get to know him better. Once they took the train back to Yongen-Jaya, he didn't say goodbye, he just kept walking in the direction of his residence.

However, seeing as how they were alone, now might be a good time to ask.

"Hey, Kazuma." Ren stopped him before he could head back to the apartment building.

"What?" He stopped in his tracks and pulled out his earphones once again as his fellow transfer student called out to him.

"I was wondering." He pulled out his phone. "Do you want to exchange numbers and chat ID?"

"You already know I live around here. You don't need it." He said, trying to derail the conversation so he could leave and not exchange numbers.

"Yeah but, it'd be nice to keep in contact. We're both new and after what happened, we should stick together." He reasoned.

"Kazuma sighed, this guy was too stubborn and clearly wasn't going to take no for an answer. He would be lying if he said he didn't respect Ren. He did which was a first for him. Plus, considering that he has a criminal record, the only thing he can do is convince the rumored criminal that he's going down the wrong path. "Look, Amamiya. Don't misunderstand, I don't dislike you or anything and you seem like a decent guy so I'm gonna give you some advice and save you the trouble."

"O-Okay?" He nodded, wondering what Kazuma was going to say. It wasn't like him to be this straightforward.

"If you're trying to befriend me or anyone at that dump of a school, do yourself a favor and give it up cause you're just wasting your time." He said bluntly.

"What?" Ren was taken aback by what he had said but it didn't appear that he was trying to be rude.

"You've probably noticed it already, haven't you? The rumors, the gossip, it's already starting. Thanks to that criminal record of yours, people won't shut up about you." Kazuma explained.

"Yeah, I've noticed." He admitted. No one was supposed to know about it and Ms. Kawakami had already explained that she didn't tell anyone. "Rumors are already spreading about me like wildfire, most of it has nothing to do with my record."

"Unlucky you." He commented curtly before continuing. "Look, I don't know what you did or
didn't do. I don't care and guess what, no one else is going to care either."

"What do you mean by that?" Ren asked. While he found it comforting that Kazuma didn't care about his record, he wondered what he meant by no one else would care. Although he had an inkling of what he meant.

"Whether you're innocent of whatever it is that you did, it doesn't matter. People won't care, they never do. They'll label you and spread rumors about you regardless of the truth, it's easier for them to live that way." He explained. Ren couldn't help but notice his frown grew as he talked which made him believe that Kazuma not only knew what he was talking about but meant every word of it. "Now, if you're smart, you'll keep your head down, shut your mouth, don't talk to anyone, and maybe, just maybe, if you're lucky, the rumors will die down and everyone will just simply ignore you. So you see, making friends at that school is pointless. After all, Friendships are like plates, one little misstep, and it'll shatter before your very eyes. In the end, everyone's only out for themselves."

"What about you?" He questioned.

"I'm someone you don't want to get to know, nor do I wish to get to know you." He told him up front. "I have no intention of befriending you or that Sakamoto guy. You both just need to back off and leave me alone."

"No intention huh?" Ren couldn't help but question just how true those words were. He believed that Kazuma wasn't being entirely honest, especially after what happened in that other world. "So, that whole 'If you wanna kill someone, kill me' was what? A spur of the moment proclamation?"

"That…" He crossed his arms and glared at his fellow transfer student as he chose his next words carefully. "…was nothing more than me dealing with a few annoyances."

"Really?" He scratched the back of his head, finding what he just said to be amusing. "Heh, I guess I never saw myself as an annoyance."

"Welcome to the real world, Amamiya." He finished.

"You know, you speak as if you know all this from experience." He pointed out.

"I wouldn't be wasting my time with you if I didn't know what I was talking about," Kazuma stated, trying his best not to recall his own experience in dealing with gossip hounds.

"Well, you make a good point, I can't argue that." He admitted bittersweetly but he wasn't done yet. "I'll take your advice to heart, Kazuma. But before I go, can I just ask you one last question?"

Even after all that, he still had more to say? He really is a stubborn fool, not one to give up easily. However, Ren's been respectful to him so far so the least he could do is indulge him one last time before they finally go their separate ways.

"Fine. What is it?" He asked.

And those words that he said next, destroyed his argument entirely.

"Are you happy?"

At that moment, Kazuma's eyes widened at the question. He tried to think of something to say, to counter the question or give him a yes or no answer. But the words got caught in his mouth and for some reason, he couldn't give him any kind of answer.
"W-What?"

"I said, are you happy? Are you perfectly happy not having any friends?" He elaborated but it only made the situation worse, for Kazuma anyways.

"I…” He looked away, not wanting Ren to see his conflicted expression. Was he happy? Tell the truth, it was an interesting question. Why? Because he never really thought about it, the happiness of it all. Until now that is. Ren had forced him to consider whether being a loner is what truly made him happy. If solitude is what he desired. Ulysses said his loner lifestyle was nothing more than pure deception, but as he along with Ren and Ryuji believed, it was a dream and Ulysses wasn't real.

"It… I...

"The offer's still there." He held out his phone, reminding him of his previous offer to exchange numbers and chat ID.

He really should just walk away right now, just ignore the question, ignore Kurusu, and forget this conversation ever happened. But, whatever it was, his question had him completely at a loss for words. He only had two choices, just walk away or…

What is wrong with me?

Knowing how stubborn Ren is, there's a high chance he wouldn't take his 'ignore him' request to heart so against his better judgment, he took his phone from him and put in both his number and chat ID. After putting in his information, he gave his phone back to the probationer who gave him a smile.

"Thanks, Kazuma." He said gratefully.

"Yeah, whatever." He looked away, not meeting his eyes.

Against his better judgment, he relented and exchanged contact info with his fellow transfer student.

... 

I am thou, thou art I.

Thou hast established a new bond.

...

From the self-suffused with divine love to the self-capable of demonic cruelty

A new self has been born.

...

Thou hast given birth to the Arcana of Fool that shall grant thee new power.

...

What the… Kazuma stood in silence as he heard those strange words. It appeared that only he could hear it as Ren seem as puzzled as he was.
"You okay?" He asked with concern, wondering why he was giving him strange looks.

"Y-Yeah. I'm fine." He said, shrugging off what he had heard. It had been a long day indeed and he just wanted to get some rest.

"I'll text you later. Enjoy the rest of your day." He said, giving the boy a polite bow as he left, making his way to Leblanc.

As Kazuma stood there, he couldn't believe how this talk turned out. He didn't expect to be struck silence by a simple question. But Ren did just that, even though he told him he had no intention of befriending him, he still continued to argue and wasn't at all fazed by his own words. However, despite their talk still gnawing at him, he remembered that he had to get back to Beauty Heights. Odds are the school called Tori about him being late and if he knows her like he thinks he does, she will not be her bubbly cheery self when he sees her. Accepting whatever fate he had in store for him, he began making his way to Beauty Heights with the question Ren asked still fresh on his mind.

Are you happy?

"Who are you, Ren Amamiya?"

Chapter End Notes

YEP! TAKE THAT! Kazuma has confidants just like Ren does.

When talking about Kazuma's confidants, other than the other Phantom Thieves and two others, Kazuma has his own confidants which are characters you've seen in game or OC's. I've written out the whole roster and I think you'll like who he befriends.

Til next time.
Ren stood at the door of Cafe Leblanc, knowing full well the moment he walks into the coffee shop, that Sojiro would scold him for apparently "cutting" class. He figured he could use the same story he told Ms. Kawakami and Ms. Chouno to get off the hook, that he and Kazuma helped came across a sick Ryuji Sakamoto and helped to the doctor, staying with him until he felt better. Then again, knowing Sakura-san he'll probably argue that he was getting involved in business that wasn't his.

Well, here goes nothing. Ren thought to himself, seeing no way out of this. He opened the door to the cafe and entered.

Sojiro was fixated on whatever TV show he was watching before Ren walked through the door. But, now that he was here, the cafe owner gave him a very disappointed expression.

"Hey. I got an interesting call from your school today." He crossed his arms. "It's only your first day, and you're already showing up hours late?"

"Yeah, about that..." Ren scratched his head in nervousness, not wanting to imagine the expression that painted his guardian's face when he received that phone call. "It was my fault. I came across a fellow student who got sick so I helped him to a doctor."

"Yeah, Ms. Kawakami told me as much." He sighed a little, wanting to get to the point. "Look, just behave yourself. Your life's forfeit if anything happens. You understand the meaning of probation, right?"

"I'm aware, Sakura-san." He told him. "I promise, it won't happen again."

"OK, then." The cafe owner finished, ending the conversation as he believed he got his point across. Just then, his phone started ringing. He pulled it out and answered it. "Hey, what's up?" He asked, engaging in conversation with the caller. "Yeah, I just closed up shop. I'll be there in half an hour." Before he could continue, he realized his ward was still standing there. He put his hand on the phone before turning to him. "Hey, what're standing around for? Go hurry on up to bed."

Well, since you asked so nicely. He quipped in his thoughts as he placed his hands in his pockets before walking over to the attic that was his living quarters.

"No, I just hired a part-timer." Sojiro continued the conversation before stopping Ren as he took the first step up the stairs. "Don't forget to lock the door and turn all the lights off, OK?"

"Yes, sir." He nodded as he made his way up the stairs. The first thing he did was write down his
activities for the day in his journal, although he left his castle escape out of it, not wanting Sojiro to snoop through it and question him about such rubbish.

"Ugh, what a day." He dropped his bag on his desk and fell onto the bed, tired as hell. "I feel exhausted, maybe it's because of that place." He said, remembering his trip to the castle, fighting those monsters, and awakening to his power. "Persona, huh?" He muttered before sitting up a bit and grabbing his phone. He remembered telling Kazuma he was going to text him later and now was a good time.

Ren: Hey Kazuma?

After sending that message, he didn't get a response. He wasn't ignoring him, was he? After all, he did put in his number and chat ID for him so that couldn't be the case.

Ren: Are you there?

He sent another text, and yet, no reply. Was he doing something? It's possible that he was currently talking to whoever's taking care of him about him "cutting" class. Maybe that's why he was taking so long.

He figured one more text couldn't hurt. If he doesn't reply then, he'll just go to bed.

Ren: Is everything okay? You're not in trouble, are you?

Kazuma: Will you cut it out with the constant messages, I'm fine.

He let out a sigh of relief as his fellow transfer student sent him a text.

Ren: Oh, there you are. Glad you replied, I was beginning to feel ignored.

Kazuma: I had to talk with my guardian.

So that was the case? He thought as he read the text. So, Kazuma has a guardian of his own? That was interesting, wondering if he/she was anything like Sojiro. Although this confused him, he heard from the Principal that Kazuma's parents were "highly acclaimed individuals" so were they not taking care of him? And if not, who is?

Ren: I can't imagine that was pleasant.

Kazuma: Don't remind me.

Earlier.

Kazuma entered Beauty Heights, ready to face the music that is the wrath of his former nanny turned guardian, Tori Ichihara. She wasn't at the front desk, so odds are, she was either in his apartment or hers. He decided to take the former approach and made his way to his apartment. Using the key, he entered the apartment. Turns out he was right, as he entered the apartment, Tori was in the kitchen cooking up dinner for herself and for Kazuma. Seeing that he had arrived him, she turned to face him with a smile.

"Oh, Kazzy-kun! You're finally home." She greeted.

"Tori." He replied. He set his bag down as he closed the door, walking closer to her.
"You're a little late, aren't you?" She questioned.

"Yeah." He simply said.

"So, how was your first day? Did you have a blast?" She wondered.

"It was... something." He said, a little nervous as to why she was still being her usual self. Did the school not call her about his tardiness?

"That so?" Once she finished cooking, she placed both of their meals onto the dinner table before turning to face him fully. "What did you learn in class today? Maybe about how your pants are on fire, you LIAR!"

Scratch that, they definitely called her. Her usual smile had contorted in an angry frown in mere seconds.

"Um, no." Maybe he shouldn't have said that. It didn't help his case.

"I got a call from your school earlier today. They told me you were caught skipping." She crossed her arms. "You promised me you wouldn't get into any trouble. What's going on here, Kazzy-kun?"

"It's..." While trying to think of an excuse, he remembered the story Ren gave to the cops and to their homeroom teachers and believed that same story would work on his guardian. "I had to help out a student who got sick."

"Huh?" Her frown disappeared, now replaced with a confused and stunned expression.

"Yeah, I encountered a student on my way to school who was apparently sick so I helped him to a doctor. That's why I was late," He said, hoping that story would work on her.

"You were trying to help out a student?" She questioned. "Are you telling me the truth?"

"Yes, Ma'am." He lied, but it was the best story he could come up.

She seemed to be in deep thought before her frown returned, only it was directed at him.

"So you were accused of skipping only because you were trying to help out one of your fellow students? That's... That's...!" She grew angrier by the second before letting it out. "THAT'S OUTRAGEOUS!"

Oh, dear lord. He could feel himself hypothetically facepalming at Tori's antics once again. This wasn't true anger, this was just Tori being Tori.

"I have never, in the 30 years of my life, heard of something so audacious! You were helping out a student, they should be praising you, Kazzy-kun, not calling me to accuse you of skipping!" She argued.

"Tori, you're 26." He corrected.

"Huh?" She realized in the moment of her outrage, she embarrassingly for a moment, forgot her age. She laughed it off though. "Hehehe, silly me. Anyway, lets put this behind us, there's always tomorrow, right?"

"Sure." He sat down and ate his dinner with Tori. Once he was finished, Tori excused herself, wanting to get back to work, leaving him to his devices. He put all of his dishes in the sink and went to lay down on the bed.
What did I get myself into? He wondered, first walking to school with Amamiya, meeting that loudmouth Sakamoto, nearly being tortured to death by monsters, and then this strange power.

"Persona." He whispered before lifting up his shirt. Scars that would've permanently tainted his chest and stomach were not there, his awakening to his power must've healed him completely, wounds and the tears on his school uniform. "What is going on here?"

Deciding to push away the events of today and just forget it ever happened, he pulled out his phone to play some music and relax. After unlocking his phone, he noticed something on his phone that was awfully peculiar as it wasn't there before.

"What's this? An app?" He noticed a menacing looking app in the shape of an eye, installed onto his phone.

Before he could do anything, his phone vibrated and a message popped up.

**Ren: Is everything okay? You're not in trouble, are you?**

He groaned a little, seeing that it was Amamiya. He looked to see two additional missed messages that came before it as he was unable to respond due to talking with Tori.

"This guy just doesn't give up, does he?" He sighed irritationally before deciding the answer the messages.

---

**Kazuma: What about you?**

**Ren: He wasn't as mad as I thought he was gonna be, just a small lecture and I was in the clear.**

**Kazuma: Lucky you.**

**Ren: Anyway, I wanted to ask you something. What are your thoughts on Mr. Kamoshida?**

Ren wanted to know his fellow transfer's opinions of the man, both having confronted him at the school gates and how he sarcastically wished them luck in their new student lives. That, coupled together with his disapproval of Ren and Kazuma being at the school along with Ryuji's comments about there being nasty rumors about him and what he heard in class about him and Ann Takamaki, he had his suspicions about this Olympic medalist.

**Kazuma: Why are you asking? Is this because of what Sakamoto said?**

**Ren: Yeah, so what do you think?**

**Kazuma: I don't like him, or trust him. And no, it has nothing to do with that lookalike we saw in the castle. Something about him really rubs me the wrong way.**

**Ren: I feel the same. You saw how sarcastic he was when he wished us luck on our "new student lives". If I didn't know any better, I wouldn't be surprised if it was he who leaked my record to the school.**

**Kazuma: It's clear Sakamoto hates his guts. The guy clearly has a grudge, couldn't even look at him or say his name without getting pissed off.**
Ren: Yeah, I noticed.

Ren then thought of why Ryuji hated Kamoshida so much, maybe it was the rumors? No, it couldn't be. The venomous hatred spilling from his mouth had to be something of a personal nature. As he thought about it some more, he did notice something about Ryuji that was rather odd. He wondered if Kazuma picked up on it.

Ren: You think it has anything to do with the way he walks?

Kazuma: Huh?

Ren: You haven't noticed? There's something off about his leg, and the way he stands looks almost like he's squatting. It's barely noticeable if you're not looking hard enough.

Kazuma: I don't see how his leg problems have anything to do with him hating Kamoshida.

Ren: Yeah, maybe I'm just overthinking it. We should probably get some sleep so I'm gonna let you go.

Kazuma: Yeah, whatever.

Ren: Have a good night, Kazuma.

He didn't get a reply, likely already asleep. He made sure to turn out the lights and lock the door before heading off to sleep. He turned on the alarm on his phone, placing it into his pocket before falling asleep.

Kamoshida. The man in question still haunting his thoughts. What's his connection to Ryuji? And to Ann Takamaki?

He got no answers, just darkness as sleep overcame him.

The soft sounds of a piano slowly woke him from slumber. As he opened his eyes, he saw that he was once again changed and donned an inmate's attire. Ren realized that he was once again back in that "Velvet Room"

He got out of his bed and rubbed his eyes, he looked over to see Caroline and Justine standing on either side with the long-nosed man known as Igor sitting comfortably in his chair.

"About time you've come to." She blurted out as she hit the cell with her baton to get his attention. "On your feet, Inmate!"

Not wanting to further irritate her, he got up from the bed and walked over to the cell, gripping the bars.

"Our master wishes to speak with. It's for your own sake that you take his words to heart." Justine spoke quietly.

"Right." He nodded, looking over at the long-nosed man

"First off, let us celebrate our reunion." He spoke before realizing something. "Oh…? You've awakened to your powers. And special ones at that."

Special?
"Your rehabilitation can finally begin."

"My powers," Ren said before bringing up a question. "What is it exactly? There are so many things I don't understand."

"There is no need to understand it all at the moment." He explained. "You will be training in that power of Persona, which you have awakened to.

"But what is a Persona?" Ren asked once more.

"Personas are, in other words, a "mask". An armor of the heart when confronting worldly matters."

So in other words, it's strength of my heart." The inmate wondered wondered

"Precisely." He nodded, glad that his guest was able to understand. "I have high expectations for you."

"Master." Justine interrupted. "Forgive my interruption but, I believe there is another matter we must address."

"Huh?" Caroline questioned. "Wait, you mean... the other one?"

"Ah, yes." Igor chuckled lightly which confused not only Ren but the twin wardens as well as to how he was taking the new topic so lightly. "It appears an anomaly has entered the playing field. An outsider, of sorts."

"An outsider?" Ren questioned. What outsider could he possibly be talking about? Ryuji? No, he doesn't have a Persona. Morgana? It's possible. Who else could it... As he continued to think, he had an assumption of who he was referring to. "Are you talking about Kazuma?"

"Yes, him." He nodded. "Whether he is ally or enemy, finding out will play a part in furthering your rehabilitation. So be wary."

Kazuma? An enemy? What was that supposed to mean?

"By the by." Igor changed the subject. "Have you come to appreciate the Metaverse Navigator?"

"Metaverse Navigator?" Ren questioned.

"Using it will allow you to come and go between reality and Palaces." He continued to explain.

"Palaces? Does he mean that weird castle? And this "Metaverse Navigator? What is... He thought before coming to a conclusion. He must mean that eye-shaped app."

"I bestowed it to you as a means to train you as a thief." He said.

"I see." So, he gave him the app. No wonder it wouldn't be permanently deleted. He must've kept installing it on his phone every time he tried. That must've been a pain.

"The Metaverse Navigator is a gift from our master! You better take care in using it, Inmate!"

Caroline exclaimed.

"Devote yourself to your training so that you may become a fine thief," Justine remarked.

He nodded, somewhat understanding them.
"It must be disheartening to make use of the Metaverse Navigator alone. Should there be others who would prove beneficial to you, I will grant it to them as well, just as I have granted it to the Outsider." He explained. "This is all for you to grow as a most excellent thief…"

Wait, Kazuma has the app?! His eyes widened.

Before he could ask, he heard an alarm go off, signaling the end of his visit to the Velvet Room.

"Hmph, it's time. Go back and enjoy whatever rest you might have." Caroline ordered.

Once again, he had questions but got no answers as his vision went black and only darkness remained.

4/12 - Tuesday

After a night of sleep, Kazuma was able to put the other day's events behind him and focus on the now. He got up, ate breakfast and left and Tori wished him another good day of school as if time at that school could be considered "good".

He wasn't visited by that strange masked man again, although Kazuma chalked it off to just a strange dream. As he left Beauty Heights, he thought of the mysterious app he received the other day but more importantly, his text conversation with Amamiya. Granted, he brushed it off, but there was definitely something up with Sakamoto's leg, the way he walked was a bit odd.

Why does he despise Kamoshida so much? You don't hold that much venom in your words unless someone negatively affected you in a personal way. He of all people knew that only his venom was shown more through his actions, not words. His disgust for rumormongers and idiots, which happens to be the entire student body of almost every school.

As he walked towards the train station, he once again crossed paths with someone he knew would be inevitable to avoid from now on.

"Kazuma." Ren greeted. "Good morning."

"Amamiya." He said but not saying anymore as he walked towards the train station with his fellow transfer student following after him.

"Hey, Kazuma. I wanted to ask you something." He stopped him for a moment.

"Now what?" He questioned.

"Do you happen to have a weird, eye-shaped app installed on your phone?" He asked which got Kazuma's attention.

"You mean this?" He pulled out his phone and showed him the app in question.

"That's it." Ren pulled out his phone and showed him the same app. "I don't know how, but listen. I think this app is connected to that castle."

"Then why do we have it?" He wondered.

"I don't know, it just appeared on my phone when I first transferred here. As for you, maybe the reason you have it is because you awakened to that strange power in the castle." Ren theorized.

"Well, short of going back there again, which is not happening, I don't care." Kazuma placed the
app in his trash bin, deleting the app. "Now, if you're done wasting time, I'd rather not be late again." He turned around and walked away, heading towards the train station.

*Should I tell him the app will just be reinstalled?* Ren chuckled as he tries to imagine Kazuma's reaction, running after him. *Nah, I think he'll figure it out soon.*

The two transfer students then made their way to Shujin Academy, both thinking over the information they had learned.

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Ren and Kazuma made it school safely, not having to go through another trip to the mysterious castle. The train ride wasn't so bad, although many were talking about the recent train accident. Ren couldn't help but notice how Kazuma grew more irritated than usual whenever someone brought it up. It happened yesterday as well. Whatever it was, he didn't like people freely discussing it.

Once they arrived at school, they went their separate ways and head to their respective classrooms. Just like yesterday, people were whispering about Ren, coming up with all sorts of false rumors. The one that really cracked him up was that he would tattoo names of the people he's killed on his chest.

He checked just to make sure, once again, rumor proved false.

As for Kazuma, he kept up his annoyed frown on his face which made people steer clear of him and move out of his way. Although Ren had no idea if that was a frown or just his regular expression.

He sat in class, his head in the palm of his hand as he starred off into space, looking at the window as class began.

"I'm the social studies teacher, Mr. Ushimaru. I'll be teaching you the rules of society this year." He introduced himself before giving the class a disapproving expression. "Hmph. You all look like you've been spoiled growing up."

*Assumption is the mother of all failures, you know?* Ren thought.

"Before we learn society's rules, maybe I should start with the rules of being a decent human being." He looked over to a particular student, one who didn't appear to be paying attention. Ushimaru's frown grew and irritation rose. "Hey, new kid!" Before he could react the teacher threw his chalk in the direction of the Ren, hitting him on the side of the head.

"Oof!" He clutched the side of his head in minor pain.

"Are you even paying attention?!" He exclaimed.

With an attitude like that, this definitely called for a witty remark of the great Ren Amamiya. He adjusted his glasses, hiding his award-winning smirk from his teacher and classmates.

"In my own way." He said.

Many of his classmates chuckled to themselves at his witty remark. What was more noticeable was when he looked forward to the blonde sitting in front of him, Ann Takamaki, trying her best to hide her laughter, covering her mouth with her hand.

"All right then, smart-aleck. Answer this." The social studies teacher got back on track. "The Greek
philosopher Plato divided the human soul into three parts. A soul is comprised of appetite, spirit, and...

"Logic." He interrupted answering the question.

"What?" He was surprised by the sudden interruption.

"Plato's tripartite theory of the human soul, written around 380 BCE, describes the human soul to be comprised of appetite, spirit, and logic." He explained, once again hiding his expressing by adjusting his glasses. "Correct?"

As he finished, he heard many students talking about him.

"Wow, he got it right. Is he really a delinquent?"

"He seems like a punk, but maybe he's actually serious about studying?"

They continued to gossip before Ushimaru clapped his hands to quiet everyone down.

"So you knew that, huh." He grumbled before continuing the lecture. "Plato's teacher, Socrates, said that evil is born from ignorance. People who've been babied, taught that evil is due to individuality, can only become society's scum. Bizarre incidents have been occurring frequently. Those are but the actions of such scum. We don't need crude people like that in this school. Understand?"

Somehow, Ren felt as if he was referring to himself, but brushed it off, people were entitled to believe what they want. He didn't care then, doesn't care now.

The rest of the classes passed by smoothly. Ren got his things and head for the door. As he left the classroom, he caught notice of Takamaki heading for the stairs before the real-world version of Mr. Pink Undies approached her.

"Hey, Takamaki." Kamoshida went up to her. Just the mere sight of him caused her to be on edge. "You looking for a ride home? Things have been pretty dangerous lately with all those accidents."

Don't do it. Ren thought as he awaited the girl's response.

"Sorry, I have a photoshoot today, it's for the special summer issue, so I can't afford to me it." She said, not looking him in the eyes.

She's a model? Ren questioned.

Kamoshida, on the other hand, didn't like the excuse she gave. His smile dropped and he placed his hands on his hips.

"Hey, now. Being a model's all fine and dandy, but don't work your pretty little self to the bone. You mentioned you weren't feeling well, right? Something about appendicitis?" He questioned.

Appendicitis? Cmon, Takamaki, you can do better than that. Ren thought. The situation seemed bad. Should he step in?

"Y-Yes, I've been planning to go the hospital but I've been too busy." She continued with the excuses. "Sorry to worry you."

"You must feel lonely too. I feel bad for keeping your best friend at practice so often. That's why I
asked you out in the first place. " He said before changing the subject. "Oh, and be careful around those transfer students. The one in your class has a criminal record after all and that other one is in Suzui-san's class. Best to stay away from them, for your own safety."

"Thank you." She simply said as she took her leave. "Please excuse me."

Once she was gone, Ren saw that Kamoshida's demeanor had changed, one with annoyance and anger. He clicked his tongue as the blonde left the scene before he left too.

Nice one, Takamaki. He chuckled lightly as he made his way out of the building. No one was leaving the 2-E classroom so Ryuji and Kazuma probably left. As he left the school, he walked past the school gates only to have his path barred by his former blonde companion.

"Yo." He greeted.

"Oh, hey Ryuji." He returned the greeting before noticing that Kazuma was behind the spiky blonde, arms crossed, clearly irritated. "Hey, Kazuma."

"Amamiya." He looked away, still in a foul mood.

"What's going on?" Ren asked.

"You tell me. This jackhole won't let me leave." He brought up, remembering how Ryuji had dragged him from the classroom and refused to let him head home until Ren showed up. He still needed to switch out his school shoes.

"Cause this involves the three of us, dude," Ryuji argued. "Look, I want to talk about that castle from yesterday. I tried telling myself it was just a dream, but I couldn't do it."

"Well, it doesn't seem right for three guys like us to share the exact same dream," Ren said.

"Yeah, and I can't act like nothing happened." He stated. "It's all connected to that bastard Kamoshida, after all."

"What are you suggesting?" Kazuma asked, a bit curious as to what he was thinking.

"I wanna find out what's up with that place, no matter what." He explained. "And, y'know, you two are the only people I can rely on. So, you guys in?"

Ren thought about it. What Ryuji was suggesting, it would mean returning to that castle, the same one that nearly got them killed, the same one where he and his fellow transfer student awakened to their powers. If this castle was at all related to the real Kamoshida, it might give him some answers to questions. Why did Ryuji hate him so much? Why are people saying nasty rumors about him and Takamaki being together?

This was the chance.

"I'm in." He said. "So, what's next?"

"Ooooh." Ryuji smiled at his answer. "Looks like I managed to talk some sense into you." He said before turning to his classmate. "What about you, Kaz..."

He turned to see that his classmate was not leaning against the wall anymore but was leaving the scene.

"Hey! What the hell man?!" Ryuji rushed after him, getting in his way.
"Get out of my way." He warned.

"Cmon man, I need your help." He pleaded but it wasn't working.

"You have Amamiya, you don't need me." He argued. "Now move."

"Dude, what is your problem?" He questioned, growing a little more annoyed by Kazuma's attitude.

"If you want to get yourself killed then go ahead. I, on the other hand, don't have a death wish. Now leave me alone." He said, moving past the annoying blonde.

"Hey! I'm not done...!"

"Kazuma, wait," Ren interjected, knowing that Sakamoto's persistence would do anything to sway Kazuma into joining them. So he decided a better approach which seemed to have worked as the boy in question halted his movements. "You've heard it, haven't you? You must have. I've only been here a day and I've heard all I need to know."

"What are you talking about?" He turned around, looking at his fellow transfer student.

"The rumors. That Kamoshida is... involved with a particular student." He explained, leaving Takamaki's name out of the record. "You know it, don't you?"

He wouldn't deny the truthiness of his words, after all, he witnessed it first hand when he bumped into that douchebag the other day. He was talking about that blonde, Ann Takamaki, he believed her name to be. He heard the whispers, the gossip among the student body, most of it was about Amamiya but somehow she ends up being a topic of discussion. Plus, the insinuations that Daisuke was making when he was bothering Takamaki and her friend, proved that the student body believed it, that she was easy, a total slut, and that she was sleeping with Kamoshida.

As he thought of the rumors circulating her, his thoughts turned to that friend of hers, the one with the black ponytail that was in his class. While those idiots were more focused on Takamaki rather than her, she was still caught in the crossfire.

"If there's even a small chance of proving those rumors false, we have to take it." Ren believed as he approached him. "Also, if Kamoshida really is as bad as the rumors say, if he is anything like his counterpart in that castle, could you go on living your school life with someone like him walking around this school doing whatever he wants?"

That was a good question? Could he continue his education, knowing that someone like that roams through the school?

His father once told him, in situations like these, you have a choice, either do nothing or do something. And with Amamiya bringing up such a good argument, he knew he couldn't just do nothing.

At the end of the day, he is a Kazuma, through and through, the son of the Best Detectives in Tokyo, the Last Resorts, so he had to do something.

"Fine." He turned around. "I'll do it."

"Phew, thanks, man. It means a lot to me." Ryuji thanked him, glad that Ren was able to talk some sense into him. He and Kazuma walked back over to Ren to come up with a plan. "Alright, guys here's the plan. I think we should retrace our steps from yesterday."
"Good plan." Ren agreed. "It all started when we took that shortcut through the alleyway."

"But the starting point itself was that clothing store, Jeunesse et Beaute," Kazuma added.

"All right, let's start from there." Ryuji clapped his hands together and smiled as the three of them formed their plan together. "In the meantime, you guys were walkin' to the station, right? Let's go together."

The two nodded and followed the spiky blonde. Ren wasn't worried, he had complete faith in Ryuji's plan and if he was right about this "Metaverse Navigator" app on his phone, the castle should show up if they just go through the alleyway again. Kazuma, for the most part, wanted to find this place, get in, get answers, and go home. Maybe give the King some payback if he still had his power from last time.

Once the three made it to the clothing store in question, Ryuji turned to face his companions.

"All right guys, we're here." He stated. "Now, if a huge castle like that really exists, I'm sure we'll find it in no time. When they'd build something like that though?"

"And why does it replace the school?" Amamiya questioned.

"You guys are asking pointless questions, it doesn't matter how it came about, all that matters is how to get there," Kazuma interjected, a little annoyed at them for getting off topic. "Let's try the shortcut again and see if it works."

"Sounds good. But stick together you two. I'd rather not drag an innocent bystander into this." The probationer said.

"All right, this way." Ryuji took the lead. "Lemme know if you notice something."

The three used the alleyway to see if it would take them back to the castle. When they came to, they weren't met with the mysterious castle, but Shujin Academy.

"Huh?" The spiky blonde appeared dumbfounded as it didn't work the way they wanted it too. "We're at school." He turned to the others. "There wasn't anything out of place along the way, right?"

"I didn't see anything." Ren thought.

"Same," Kazuma spoke.

"Damn it, we must've made a wrong turn somewhere. Let's try again." Sakamoto suggested. The three went back to the clothing shop and entered the alleyway once more. When they came too, it was the same result. No castle, just Shujin Academy. "For real?"

Why is the app not working? Ren thought, wondering why it wasn't sending them back to the castle.

"Is it smaller than we think it is?" Ryuji questioned as he leaned back against the nearby wall. "What do you guys think?"

"I might have an idea." The probationer thought. "You guys remember how after we escaped the castle, we heard my phone say "you have returned to the real world"?"

"You're talking about that app, aren't you?" Kazuma asked, referring the app he showed him this
morning.

"App?" The spiky blonde wondered, completely in the dark about what they were talking about before his eyes widened in sudden realization. "Oh! You mean that navigation thingy."

"That's right. And I learned this morning that Kazuma has it too." He informed him.

"You too?" Ryuji turned to his classmate.

"Yeah, but I..." He checked his phone and saw that the app was back on his phone as if he hadn't deleted it in the first place. "Wait, what?"

Join the club. Ren thought, remembering how many times he's deleted this app only for it to reappear again.

"But I deleted it this morning." He stated.

"Seriously? Can I see?" Ryuji asked. Seeing as how it was Ren's phone that sent them to the castle the first time, they might have a better chance if they use his phone first. He handed the blonde his cell phone and checked it out. "What a creepy design." He thought as he saw the weird eyeball-looking app. "I knew it! It is a navigation app!" He showed it to the two. "There's even your search history! Oh man, I'm such a genius!"

"Good job, Ryuji." Ren smiled, glad they were able to make progress.

"If you two are done, can we get on with it?" Kazuma crossed his arms.

"Alright, let's try usin' it," Sakamoto suggested before already making the decision, pushing onto the app as the eyeball surrounded the screen.

Kamoshida... Shujin Academy... Pervert... Castle...

The app spoke, catching the three off guard.

"What the..." Kazuma said.

So the app responds to certain keywords. Interesting. Ren thought.

"There we go!" Ryuji exclaimed. "Then, we went in a certain direction, and-" Before he could finish, the two transfer students noticed that scenery around them was becoming distorted. The blonde looked up at them, confused by their expressions. "Hey, what're you... Huh?!" It was then that he started to notice too. "What the hell?!!"

Soon enough, the people around them started to vanish into thin air, the school itself was starting to change. As waves of distortions began to change the scenery around them, Ren and Kazuma noticed their attires beginning to change.

Soon enough, they had accomplished the first part of their mission.

They had returned to the castle.

"Look, it's the castle from yesterday!" Ryuji said, realizing that the events of yesterday were not fiction, but reality. He charged through with the other two following him, across the drawbridge, they found that the door to the entrance hall was closed. "We made it back... That means what happened yesterday was for real too." He said before noticing something about his companions. "T-Those clothes!"
The two transfer students looked at each other, both back into their strange costumes from they acquired from their last trip to the palace, Ren in his trenchcoat with red gloves, and Kazuma in his dark green sleeveless suit with a hood and dark green compression armbands. Both checked to see if they still had their weapons, Ren his dagger, Kazuma his dual blades.

And just like last time, the two still retained their masks.

"That happened last time too, huh?!" Sakamoto exclaimed. "Whats with those outfits?!"

"I really don't know," Ren said. It's possible these clothes were a side effect of awakening to their powers but that was just a guess. "Why, you jelly?" He could help but joke at his companion's flabbergasted expression.

"I-I ain't jealous! And that's not important right now!" He exclaimed. "What's goin' on here?! This makes no effin' sense at all!"

"Hey."

Kazuma immediately pulled out his sword and pointed it in the direction of the voice that interrupted Sakamoto's ranting. The other two looked over and saw that same cat creature that assisted in their escape the last time they were here.

"Morgana?" Ren called out.

"This thing again?" Kazuma sheathed his blade as the cat walked up to them with an annoyed expression.

"Stop making a commotion." He warned them.

"Ah... You!?” Ryuji exclaimed, remembering the creature.

"The Shadows started acting up, so I came here wondering what it could be." He crossed his arms, clearly disappointed. "To think you guys would come back to the entrance when you barely managed to escape last time."

"What is this place? Is it the school?" Ryuji asked.

"That's right." Morgana nodded.

"But it's a castle!" He fired back, not believing him in the slightest.

"This castle IS the school. But only to this castle's ruler." The cat continued.

"The castle's ruler?" The blonde rubbed the back of his head, still confused.

"I think you called him... Kamoshida?" He brought up. "It's how his distorted heart views the school."

"Kamoshida... Distorted...?" He didn't understand what the cat was saying. "Explain in a way that makes sense!"

"I shouldn't have expected a moron like you to get it." Morgana rolled his eyes, annoyed by this boy's inability to understand the situation.

"What'd you say!?" He growled at his insult before Ren decided to step in and clarify the situation.
"In other words, this castle is a manifestation of the real world Kamoshida's perception of Shujin Academy," Amamiya stated.

"He sees the school as his castle, so in this world, that belief becomes reality." Kazuma believed.

"Exactly! At least you two get it." Morgana smiled, at least blonde's companions have brains on them.

Suddenly, a scream broke them from their talk, putting all of them on edge.

"What was that!?" Ryuji yelled out, a little scared.

"It must be the slaves captive here," Morgana believed.

"For real?" He asked and more screaming answered his question.

"Jesus Christ." Kazuma cringed, knowing that he was in a similar position the other day.

"Oh, shit, It's for real!" The spiky blonde exclaimed. "We saw other guys held captive here yesterday. I'm pretty sure they're from our school."

"Most likely on Kamoshida's orders. It's nothing out of the ordinary; it's like that every day here."

The cat explained. "What's more, you three escaped yesterday. He must have lost his temper quite a bit."

"That son of a bitch!" Ryuji blurted out angrily.

"Ryuji?" Morgana questioned, wondering why the boy got so angry so fast.

"This is bullshit!" He sprinted towards the huge doors and slammed himself into them in an attempt to open them. "You hear me, Kamoshida!?"

"Ryuji stop!" Ren stopped him, pulling him back from the doors "He's probably got some more of those guards with him, calm down a bit."

"It seems he's got a grudge." The cat whispered to his former cellmate.

"And I think I know why." Kazuma thought as he remembered his text conversation with Amamiya the other day.

Once Ryuji had calmed down a bit, he and Ren walked back over to the two.

"Hey, Monamona!" Sakamoto called out, getting his name wrong.

"It's Morgana!" The cat exclaimed.

"Do you know where those voices are comin' from?" He asked.

"You want me to take you to them?" He questioned. "Well, I guess I could guide you there. But only if they come with us." He gestured over to the two transfer students.

"I'm in," Ren stated.

"Yeah, whatever," Kazuma said, basically meaning the same thing as Amamiya.

"It's settled then!" Morgana jumped excitedly.
"Thanks, guys." Ryuji gave his gratitude to the two.

"All right, let's do this. Follow me!"

Morgana led the three back to the ventilation shaft they used to make their escape the last time they were here.

"This is our infiltration point."

"Ain't this the place we escaped outta last time?" Ryuji asked.

"That's right. Not barging in through the entrance is one of the basics of phantom thievery."

"How're we supposed to know about this stuff?" The blonde asked again.

"I'll make sure to teach you as we go." He said as he hopped into the ventilation shaft. "Come on, follow me!" He didn't even wait as he went further in.

Before they could continue on, Ryuji stopped the two as he had something he wanted to say to them.

"Hey uh… sorry about draggin' you two into all of this. But I just can't forgive that bastard Kamoshida doin' whatever the hell he wants!" Ryuji exclaimed, still angry at this situation.

"It's fine, Ryuji. I share your sentiments as well. If he's really as bad as you say he is, we'll find proof." Ren said before turning to his fellow transfer student. "Right, Kazuma?"

"Sure, whatever." He crossed his arms, looking away.

"Really though, thanks for comin' along. I owe you guys big time." The spiky blonde gave his gratitude one last time.

"If we're are done here, let's not keep the cat waiting." Kazuma interrupted, ready to get the show on the road. "You take the lead, Amamiya. I don't know this place very well."

"Got it." He said, flapping his coat as he approached the ventilation shaft.

"All right guys, it's showtime!"

Chapter End Notes

And so begins the first official infiltration.

As you can see Kazuma was in no hurry to go back but he knows Ren has a point, this is something he can't just ignore.

Look forward to the next chapter coming soon.

Till next time.
A Pirate's Life For Me

Chapter Notes

So, since I haven't been very active on AO3 as of late, I decided to upload chapter 7 on top of chapter 6. After this, It'll be another week until I upload another one as I need to work on the current chapter over on FF.

Without Further ado, here's the 7th chapter.

Warning: Abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three climbed through the ventilation shaft and found themselves in the room they used to escape from last time. Once they each made it into the room, they found Morgana checking the corridor for any enemy sightings. Once he was done, he walked back over to the three to begin their mission.

"Man, this place is as creepy as always," Ryuji stated as he looked around.

"Now, make sure you guys do exactly as I say, all right? I'd rather not get thrown into a dungeon again." Morgana said as he left the room, gesturing the others to follow. "Follow me."

"We're right behind you, Morgana," Ren assured as the three followed after the cat.

He led the three into the central hall, where Kazuma had awakened to his power. Immediately, the three started to get the chills, each being reminded of what had transpired here. Before it was the place where Kazuma had received his power, it's also where they first came in when they came upon this castle for the first time. Encountering those knight cosplaying monsters, being thrown into a dungeon, and then coming across King Kamoshida trying to use Kazuma as leverage, a lot happened in this very room.

"Hey... We went by here when we came in the front, didn't we?" Ryuji pointed out. "And it's where you went to town on those floating pumpkins, dude." He said to his classmate.

"Hmph." He huffed, not really wanting to remember that day.

Just then, before they could do anything else, the scenery became distorted, and in a split second, the central hall changed into that of the school.

"Woah!" Ryuji said in shock. "I was seein' double or something just now! Was that Shujin?"

"I've told you before. This place is your school." Morgana reminded the blonde.

"It looked as if we were in the first-floor hallway," Ren stated as the change of scenery did not go unnoticed by him.

"Regardless, we don't have the time to stand around. Who knows when a shadow might show up." The cat warned.
"What are we waiting for then," Kazuma added, wanting to move on.

"Come on, this way!" He beckoned the others to follow him. Not wanting to stick around for guards to show up, they did as instructed and followed after the cat, leaving the central hall behind.

They found themselves back in the underground prison. As they went down the stairs, they found a guard on patrol near a closed drawbridge that they needed to cross to continue their mission. They hid behind the cell door that would lead them to the guard as thought out their strategy.

"Darn, I had a feeling there would be guards here." Morgana groaned at the situation.

"Pink Undies must've stationed more guards here after our escape. We'll probably face more opposition from now on." Ren deduced.

"F-For real?" Ryuji stuttered, not liking the idea of having to fight those things, especially since he can't fight.

"So what? It's just one guard, let's kill it and be on our way." Kazuma said impatiently. "Look, it doesn't even know we're here. Let's ambush it."

"I like the way you think, Brown Hair." Morgana complimented. "If you want to break the control the palace ruler has over them, you'll need to rip off their masks. It'll weaken them in the process."

"Alright. Let's go with Kazuma's plan and use this element of surprise to our advantage." Ren said.

"Sounds good to me." The cat said before turning to Ryuji. "You may want to stay back, after all, you don't have a Persona."

"R-Right." He rubbed the back of his head, feeling a bit down at his inability to help.

"You take point, Frizzy Hair," Morgana commanded.

"Got it." Ren nodded as he left his hiding spot and moved closer to the guard.

The shadow still had it's back turned to the group, giving Amamiya the opportunity to get in close and take it by surprise. He hopped onto the guard, grabbing at its mask.

"What the...!" The guard exclaimed.

"Your mine!" The probationer mocked. "Now, show me your true form!"

With that, he used all of his strength to rip off the mask before backing away to gain some distance. The guard shook uncontrollably from his mask being ripped off and transfigured into a familiar floating pumpkin. A Jack O' Lantern to be exact.

"Ah, this should be a cakewalk." Ren believed, looking over to Kazuma. "You ready?"

"Hmph. Just say when." He glared at the pumpkin, ready to end its life.

"Here I go." Amamiya started as he brought his left-hand closer to his mask. "Persona!" He touched his mask as it broke away and summoned forth his Persona, Arsene. From the look of him, he was just as excited to get the party started.

"Come." Now, it was Kazuma's turn. "Persona!" Using his right hand, he ripped off his mask, summoning forth his own Persona, Ulysses, who flew in the air in his arms-crossed posture, ready to unleash hell on his master's enemies.
"Go Arsene! Ravage him!" Ren commanded. Arsene flew forward, charging at the shadow, ready to cleave it with his claws. Unfortunately, this Jack O' Lantern wasn't like the rest. It managed to dodge his attack before ramming it's lantern into the Persona, causing it some damage.

"Rip it apart, Ulysses." Kazuma thrust his hand forward, causing his Person to unsheathe its blades and charge over to the pumpkin, slicing and slashing at it, to no avail. "It's fast."

"Looks like they've upgraded since our last visit." Ren believed. "Then we'll just have to step up our game. Morgana, if you would do the honors?"

"Hmph. I'll show you amateurs how it's done." The cat said before clenching its fists. "Zorro! Show your might!" He summoned forth his Persona, using its blade to entrap the pumpkin in wind magic. Luckily, it's speed couldn't save it as the power of Garu easily surrounded it, causing it numerous damage to the point it could barely move. "Now, go you two!"

"Arsene!" Ren commanded.

"Ulysses!" Kazuma did the same.

At their commands, the Personas charged in opposite directions, cutting through the shadow and destroying it completely. As it fell to the ground, dissolving into nothing, it left behind something in the remains.

"Looks like you've both mastered your Personas rather easily. Nice work you two." The cat complimented.

"That's the power of teamwork, for you," Amamiya claimed before turning to his partner. "Good job, Kazuma."

"Yeah, whatever." He looked away, crossing his arms. "You did alright, I guess."

"I'll take that as a compliment." He chuckled before walking over to where the shadow had died and picked up what remained. "Hey guys, this guy had ¥149 on him."

"So these things crap out money?" Ryuji questioned. "Man, this shit doesn't make sense."

"No use thinking about it. Let's move on." Kazuma said, not wanting to continue this pointless banter any longer.

"This way, guys!" Morgana commanded and the three followed after him.

The three crossed the drawbridge and found themselves near the prison cells. The only problem is, when Ren and Ryuji passed through here the last time, they were sure they had prisoners in these cells. Now, they were empty, as if they were never there.

"Why ain't anyone here?" Ryuji rushed over to see if he wasn't hallucinating or if the prisoners weren't just hiding. They weren't, the cells were dead empty. He then angrily turned to the cat demanding answers. "Dammit, they were here before! Where'd they go?!"

"Quiet down!" The cat shushed him. "Are you trying to get us all caught?!"

"Oh yeah, there were more of 'em further in too...!" He realized before rushing ahead to find the lost prisoners.

"Don't go on without us, you idiot," Kazuma warned before going after him.
"They might have been transferred already." The cat informed Ren.

"Transferred?" He questioned. "Where exactly?"

Before he could answer that, he noticed Kazuma and Ryuji sprinting over in their direction.

"They're coming this way, lots of 'em!" The blonde warned them.

"Thanks to you, moron." His classmate insulted.

This could be a problem. It appears the two didn't have the slightest clue of how many were on
their way and if they were having trouble taking down one enemy like the Jack O' Lantern earlier,
than dealing with a whole group could be problematic.

"It would be a problem if they discovered us now," Morgana said before noticing something about
the room nearby. He walked closer to it and gestured the others to follow him. "Let's head into this
room. We should be able to hide in there until they leave."

That was all they needed to hear and they rushed through the door, slamming it shut once they
were inside with Kazuma and Ryuji pressing their weight against it in the attempt that they were
found out.

"Don't worry, the shadows probably won't come in here." The cat informed them. Deciding to trust
it, the two released themselves from the door.

"How can you tell?" Ryuji asked, still catching his breath.

"There's a lack of distortion here, meaning the ruler's control over this area is weak." The cat
explained.

Before Ryuji could complain, the scenery around them started to change, the distortions of the
room becoming apparent to the group. Sakamoto's eyes widened as the distortions of the room
gave off its real-world appearance.

"Is this a classroom!?" The spiky blonde questioned

"Now do you understand?" Morgana asked. "This place is another reality that the ruler's heart
projects."

"This is Kamoshida's reality?" Sakamoto as he had a hard time grasping the reality of the situation.
"Shit makes no sense at all!"

"One could say it's a world in which one's distorted desires have materialized." The cat continued to
explain. "I call such a place a "Palace."

_Palace._ Ren recognized that term, the same one Igor told him about.

"This is happening because he thinks the school is his own castle," Morgana stated.

"So, it became like this 'cause he just thought of it like that?!" Ryuji exclaimed, chuckling a bit at
how ridiculous everything was before realizing this was real. He stomped on the ground, growling
in utter rage. "That son of a bitch!"

The three looked on as he once again expressed his hatred and utter disgust for Suguru Kamoshida.
This had nothing to do with the rumors, this was personal hatred.
"You must really hate this Kamoshida guy." The cat pointed out.

"Hate doesn't even cover how I feel about that piece of shit." The venomous frown that contorted Sakamoto's features was something that did not go unnoticed by his two companions. This wasn't hatred, it was something far worse. "Everything is that asshole's fault!"

"Everything?" Kazuma questioned what he meant by that.

"N-Nothing." The spiky blonde looked away. "J-Just forget it. It's nothing."

"Well, I don't know what happened between two, but don't let your emotions get the better of you," Morgana warned him, a little put off himself about Ryuji's attitude towards Kamoshida.

"We'll be careful," Ren interjected. "Before we go on, I have to ask. Do you know anything about these outfits, Morgana?"

"Ah, I knew this was coming." The cat shot up.

"Yeah, I'm curious as hell about it too." Sakamoto interrupted. "Like, why does he have a trench coat but Kazuma has something totally different."

"That's also because of this world." Morgana continued which made Ryuji groan in annoyance.

"More stuff that makes no sense." He said but the cat chose to ignore him.

"Anything distorts according to how a ruler pleases within his Palace. A school can turn into a castle like this, after all. In order to prevent such distortions, one must hold a powerful will of rebellion." The cat explained thoroughly.

"So, these clothes are a representation of my will?" Ren questioned.

"Exactly." He nodded. "It's the image of the rebellion that you hold within."

"Wish mine had sleeves," Kazuma grumbled. He didn't mind sleeveless clothing but that was better suited for exercise. The hood was a nice touch though.

"Ugh! I'm so fed up with all this!" Ryuji exclaimed, turning his attention toward the cat. "I'm more curious about you than their clothes! What the hell are you anyway?!"

"I'm a human. An honest-to-god human!" He argued although that was met with skepticism.

"No, you're obviously more like a cat!" The blonde fired back.

"This is well... It's because I lost my true form." He said but he didn't appear to be sure. "I think."

"You think?" Kazuma questioned. "Meaning, you don't remember who you were or something?"

"Y-Yeah, something like that," he stated before regaining his confidence. "But, I do know how to regain my true form. The reason why I snuck in here was for a preliminary investigation of those means." He stated before looking away. "Well, I ended up getting caught though. But that's beside the point, I've been tortured by Kamoshida too! I'm gonna make him pay for sure!"

He seemed sure and while he was happy that he was on their side, Ryuji still couldn't believe that this cat-like whatever it was was actually once a living breathing human being.

"What is this, a comic book? This is seriously crazy." He commented before turning to the others.
"What do you guys think? Should we trust him?"

"Without a doubt," Ren answered instantly which made the cat perk up at his trust. "He saved our lives, Ryuji. We'd be dead without him."

"So far it delivers. Though, if it tries anything I'll kill it." Kazuma threatened.

"T-That's good. Glad to see we're on the same page." Morgana stuttered a little, somewhat affected by his former cellmate's death threat, wondering if he was serious. "If we're gonna keep going, we should hurry along." He changed the subject before looking at his fellow Persona-Users. "I'll be counting on you, you rookies better not hold back."

"We'll do our best." Ren nodded, determined to see this through.

"Don't worry, I'm not gonna force it all on you guys. I thought it might help so..." Ryuji pulled out his bag, showing that he brought firearms with him. Three pistols and a shotgun. "I brought these just in case! They're only model guns though so it only makes sounds!"

"That's a toy!" Morgana called him out.

"But it looks totally real, so it'll at least fake 'em out." He explained. "I brought some medicine too. You know what they say: Providin' is pre... something."

"Good job, Ryuji. You really came prepared." Ren gave a thumbs up at his companion's preparation.

"So you were planning this from the start?" Kazuma muttered, giving his classmate a nasty glare.

"Well, fine. If you're ready to go, we'll resume our infiltration." The cat rolled his eyes at the blonde for bringing toy guns.

"Here." Ryuji gave Ren his gun and medicine. He then handed one to Morgana.

"I don't need that worthless thing. I've got my own." He then pulled out what appeared to be a slingshot.

"What's that gonna do?" Sakamoto questioned but ignored it. If the cat was sure, the cat was sure. "Eh, whatever. Here dude. You have two weapons, might as well have two guns." He gave the extra gun to his classmate.

"Whatever." Kazuma took the two pistols from Ryuji and placed them in the empty holsters that he had with Amamiya placing his pistol in his coat pocket. "Let's get on with it. I'm tired of all this pointless chit-chat."

"Couldn't agree more, Brown hair," Morgana said as he moved towards the door. "There are probably still soldiers making their rounds outside. Let's take it slow."

"Right." Ren nodded as he opened the door slightly. As he pecked out the door, it appeared that most of the soldiers that came had gone, with only three still remaining and talking amongst themselves.

"I thought I just heard something move over there. Guess it was my imagination."

"And what of the slaves?"
"They're all in the training all. I'd assume they're screaming in pain by now."

"Very well. By the way, I heard we may have intruders around. Stay on your guard."

And with that finished, they dispersed. Once they were gone, the group stepped out of the safe room to contemplate what they had learned from the guards.

"Did you hear that?" Morgana asked.

"I'm starting to wish I didn't." Ren said. Hearing those guards talking about slaves and screaming in pain was a little off-putting.

"They said trainin' hall, right?" Ryuji questioned.

"I think that's just a little further ahead. Let's go!" The cat finished as he took the lead and charged ahead. The group followed after Morgana down the stairs only to see him stop at the sight of a guard on duty. "Shoot. There's a guard on duty here. The way to the training hall should be through those bars."

"So, what're we gonna do? Do we gotta fight it?" Ryuji asked.

"Seems like it," Ren stated, turning to his fellow transfer student with a smirk. "I'll let you take this one."

"Hmph." Kazuma nodded as he waited for an opening. He then rushed forward, jumping onto the knight grabbing at its mask. "This is where you'll die!" He ripped off the mask, stepping back as it shook violently, transfiguring into not one but two flower type creatures, otherwise known as Mandrakes.

"Arsene!" Touching his mask, he summoned for his Persona who used Eiha on the mandrake to the right, hurting it but not killing it. Its partner decided to use the advantage to attack Ren. Using his dagger, he was able to block it just in time.

"Amamiya!" Kazuma rushed to his aid but the other Mandrake Ren had attacked earlier lunged forward and attacked him. He immediately pulled out his blades to deflect the blow but the force of the attack sent him flying into the nearby wall. "Ulysses, kill it!" He summoned his Persona, standing tall in front of his master to defend him. He pulled down his sunglasses and showed off his glowing eyes, casting Kouha and killing the damaged mandrake once and for all.

Ren was able to push off the Mandrake attacking him using all of his strength, freeing himself.

"Zorro!" Morgana rushed in, summoning his Persona and rushing to Ren's aid. The Persona's blade formed into a spring which then took the form of a large boxing glove, performing a Lucky Punch onto the shadow, knocking it backward.

"Now for the finale!" Amamiya thrust his hand forward, commanding Arsene to attack. The Gentleman Persona rushed forward, using its claws to cleave through the shadow, ending its life. Once they were clear, Ren collected the cash from its remains and rushed over to help Kazuma.

"Alright?"

"I'll live." He grabbed Ren's hand and got up.

"I have to say, you're pretty tough, Kazuma." He complimented. "That was quite a nasty hit you took, but you still managed to keep fighting."
"You're not half bad either." He did his best to compliment him, although he looked away, not wanting to meet eye contact when he did.

"Actually, you both have some learning to do," Morgana interjected. "Though, for a couple of amateurs, you're not bad."

"Heh, thanks, Morgana." Ren thanked. "Alright gang, let's continue on."

He walked over to the cell doors that led to the training hall and pulled down the lever to gain entry. The door opened and the group continued on forward.

The way lead to some sort of underground passage, the atmosphere itself felt rather sinister. Who knows what went on down here. If it was anything like the dungeon, it can only get worse. As they went down the hall, they tried to take the nearby door only to find it locked, their only way would have to be the staircase that led downward. As they went down the stairs, they stopped and crouched down behind the barrels as they heard voices up ahead. Ren looked around the corner to see two more shadows conversing with one another. He leaned in closer to hear what they were saying.

"Hey, have you see anyone who looks like an intruder?"

"No, nobody yet."

"More enemies up ahead." Morgana noticed. "It'd be impossible to dodge all of them."

"Then, what do we do? Should we try and take 'em down like before?" Ryuji suggested.

"It's not that simple. We still have a long way to go, so we should be conserving energy." The cat explained.

"We have been using our Personas way too much. If we keep using them in every fight, we'll be too tired to even escape." Ren stated.

"I-I see. Sorry." Sakamoto apologized before cursing his apparent uselessness. "Dammit, I wish I could fight. I'd at least be able to help out a bit. But all I got is this toy from earlier. I'm such a loser." He thought, holding his model shotgun and thinking himself stupid for thinking that simple model guns could have any effect on the shadows.

"Hey, don't sell yourself short. We wouldn't have got this far without your help." Ren comforted.

"Yeah, but..." Still, he felt down. His two companions had special powers that could be used to fight against these monsters and he couldn't do anything. He was such an idiot for thinking that simple model guns could have any effect on the shadows.

Or at least, that's what he believed.

When they brought up the model guns, Kazuma had an idea that maybe they weren't as useless as his classmate believes them to be. Normal rules don't apply in this world, after all, it was born from Kamoshida's beliefs that he is the ruler of Shujin Academy. What if he and his guards didn't believe this simple model gun to be a toy? What if they thought it was real?

"Hey, Cat," Kazuma called out.

"It's Morgana, Brown Hair." The cat fired back angrily.
"Whatever. You said this world came to be because of Kamoshida's belief that he rules Shujin Academy, making his counterpart here the King of the castle, right?" He asked.

"Uh, yeah." He replied, confused as to where he was going with this.

"Then what would happen if the Kamoshida here or his guards believed this toy gun to be real? Would it work like a real gun?" He brought up.

"Well, it's... possible." Morgana stuttered over his words as he himself didn't even know.

"What are you saying, dude?" Ryuji interjected. Even Ren himself was curious as to what his fellow transfer student was thinking of. If he had a plan to conserve energy, he was eager to hear it.

"Let's see if this works." He said, standing up from his hiding spot. He then walked over to the hallway, exposing himself to the guards. "Hey, asshats!" He exclaimed loudly, getting the guards attention. "You want an intruder? I'm right here!"

"Dude, what the hell are you doing?!" Sakamoto blurted out at his classmate for giving away their location.

"Intruder! Stop!" The two guards turned into Jack O' Lanterns and charged at him. He did as they ordered, he didn't move a muscle.

He didn't need to after all.

He pulled out his pistols, aimed it at the guards, and hoped his theory was correct.

As he pulled the trigger of one of his pistols, it let out a loud bang. It was a model gun and like Ryuji said, it made some noise. When the others looked toward the shadows, they noticed one of them had a hole in it's head, a bullet had managed to pierce through it.

"Holy shit!" Sakamoto said in awe.

"Ah, I see what you did there Brown Hair." Morgana complimented.

When Ren noticed that one of Kazuma's guns, supposedly a model gun, shot a real bullet through one of the guards, he understood Kazuma's theory.

_The guards believe it's real. So that makes these toy guns..._ He smirked a little, fully understanding why these toys were working like real firearms. _Good job, Kazuma._

He got up from the hiding spot and walked over to Kazuma, pulling out his own gun.

"I got the left." Ren told him.

"I'll finish off the right." Kazuma replied.

They both nodded and got to work. They both pointed their firearms at their respective targets and unleashed hell. Once they were finally dead, they both let down their weapons.

"When did you figure it out?" Ren asked curiously.

"It was a guess, really." Kazuma said. "I figured since we weren't in the real world..."

"That normal rules wouldn't apply here." He finished his sentence. "Nice work."
"Whoa!" Ryuji exclaimed as he and Morgana stepped out. "Did that toy gun just shoot real freakin' bullets?!"

"Well, this is a cognitive world. As long as your opponent sees it as real, it becomes such. It's a good thing it's realistic-looking." The cat pointed out.

"Wait for it." Kazuma believed.

"I don't get it." The spiky blonde said.

"Knew it." He sighed annoyingly.

"I wasn't expecting someone with your brains to understand." The cat playfully mocked before turning to Kazuma. "Good on you for figuring it out, Brown Hair."

"Whatever." He brushed off his compliment.

"Basically, they believe the gun is real so it becomes real," Ren stated in more simple terms to Ryuji. "See, not such loser anymore, are you?"

"Well, I guess." He said, glad that Ren was helping him out and making him feel better for bringing the guns, everything about this was starting to hurt his brain. "Wait, if it's better havin' something realistic, why do you have that slingshot?!"

W-Well, um." Morgana couldn't think of an explanation or a witty retort as to why he chose to use a slingshot in battle. "Fine, you can choose to understand it however you want."

"My guess is, it'll work in the same way as our guns, right Morgana?" Ren chose to lift up the cat's spirits now, seeing that he was a little down for having his weapon called out like that.

"Exactly. See, you get it." The cat perked up. He had to admit, he was beginning to like Frizzy Hair. He was smart, kind, and knew how to show respect. "Oh, by the way, we should decide how divvy up our roles in battle from here on out. As you can see, there are quite a lot of enemies. It'll be important to coordinate our moves as well. I can keep providing intel for us but you should be the one giving out orders, Frizzy Hair."

"I think I can handle that," Ren said taking on the responsibility but he wasn't finished. "Then, I ask that Kazuma act as my partner and support."

"What?" He replied, a little caught off guard by Amamiya's offer.

"Sounds good to me. You two do work well together, after all." The cat nodded, agreeing with the arrangement.

"Is it alright with you?" Ren asked

"I don't care." He simply shrugged.

"Then, it's settled." He took that as a yes. "Let's move on."

The group continued on through the underground passage. Ryuji took it upon himself to keep an eye out for any more enemies, wanting to make himself useful to the group. Thankfully, it appeared to be smooth sailing from here on out as they ventured forth through the underground passage with ease.

Unfortunately, as they rounded the corner, they found another guard was blocking their path.
"I'm pretty sure that's where we need to go." Morgana stated, "This might be a good time."

"For what?" Kazuma questioned, wondering what the cat was planning.

"Ok, I've decided. I'm going to teach you two a special way to fight enemies!" The cat said.

"Sounds good. Let's get started!" Ren exclaimed as he rushed over to the guard, slashing at it with his dagger.

It fell backward from the attack, shaking violently before transfiguring into what appeared to be a tiny fairy, almost like a Pixie. As harmless as it's appearance, they knew better.

"Listen, there's a distinct flow to battles. Let me show you. After all, seeing is... something?" Morgana did his best to explain. "First, knock down all enemies! Everything starts at that crucial step!"

"I'll leave it to you, Amamiya," Kazuma stated,

"No problem. Persona!" He summoned forth his Persona, who then proceeded to cat Eiha onto the lone Pixie, greatly injuring it as it fell to the ground, unable to offer a counterattack.

"All right! Now rush on in for an All-out Attack!" The cat commanded.

"All right!" Ren flapped his coat excitedly, performing a backflip for dramatic effect and to gain some distance. "Kazuma, let's do it!"

"Right!" He did the same.

Once they had their distance, They leaped into the air and rushed forward, attacking the Pixie from every direction. Their bodies felt as if they were on fire, never in their lives did they feel this fast, it was almost as if their bodies were moving on its own. It felt.

It was so exhilarating!

When they were done, Ren took the moment to adjust his gloves, smirking in victory as the Pixie dissolved away.

"The Show's Over!" He taunted at the dying shadow.

Once it was over, they took a moment to catch their breath as both Ren and Kazuma tried their best to comprehend the act in which they performed. Ren was in the heat of the moment so after calming down, he couldn't believe he was capable of such speed and finesse.

"That went really well!" Morgana complimented. "You're both definitely fit for this."

"What the hell was that?!" Ryuji questioned. "It all happened so fast!"

"I told you, it's called an All-out Attack." The cat said. "If you manage to knock all the enemies down, you might be able to use it to beat them all at once."

"Yeah, that was over quick." The blonde added.

"It's a concentrated attack on defenseless enemies, after all." Morgana continued.

"It's definitely something we should take advantage of in future battles," Ren stated.
"We've wasted enough time, let's get going," Kazuma interjected, wanting to move on.

Now that everyone knew they were in the clear, they approached the door slowly. Ren gripped the door handle with one hand while keeping his pistol ready with the other. Kazuma had his pistols ready as well, with the number of enemies they've had to face, they were not about to take any chances. The two looked at one another to confirm they were ready.

Once the door was open, they rushed in, firearms armed and ready.

"We're clear," Kazuma stated as he placed his pistols back into the holsters.

With no enemies in the room, they relaxed a bit. As he looked around, the group found themselves in some sort of barracks, likely a place where the guards would come to unwind and relax.

"All right, this is it!" Morgana announced.

They were definitely near the training hall but the banner hanging above the door in front of them said something else.

"Kamoshida's... Training Hall of... Love?" Ryuji read it out. "What kinda bullshit is this?!

"I don't like this," Ren said, the banner was very strange and the insinuations it gave off made him very uncomfortable. "Let's keep going."

They moved but through the door, thankfully no enemies. They continued on as they hear more screams of agony in the distance. Something was definitely happening in this "Training Hall".

As they crossed the drawbridge, the screaming became more clear.

"Oh! Is it coming from over there?!" Ryuji rushed over to the wooden gate where he heard screaming. As he looked down, he couldn't believe his eyes. "Guys."

The others joined him soon after and when they looked down, they were abhorred by what they saw.

The prisoners from earlier were dressed in athletic uniforms and were being held against a volleyball net as more of those shadow creatures repeatedly began hitting them in the back. They screamed in pain, begging for mercy but wouldn't let up.

"My god." It took every strong bone in Ren's body to keep his disgust in check. The sight was repulsive and horrifying as he watched the guards continuously beat the prisoners.

"Jesus Christ." Kazuma cringed at the sight. They were treating the prisoners like they weren't even human. Their begging and pleading fell on deaf ears, no mercy was shown.

"Dammit! This is bullshit!" Ryuji cursed out loud, the sight making him so angry he couldn't stop shaking.

"How many times do I have to tell you to keep your voice down?!" The cat warned.

"But this is beyond messed up!" The blonde argued before grabbing onto the gate. "How do I open this?"

"Stop it!"
They were interrupted by one of the prisoners approaching the gate who looked to be in severe pain.

"Leave us alone. It's useless."

"Huh?!!" Ryuji said in shock.

"If we stay obedient, we won't be executed like you guys." Another one approached them, informing them why they can't do anything about their situation.

"You're tellin' me you wanna stay in a place like this?!" He continued to argue but they just ignored him and walked away.

"Wait a minute." The cat stopped for a moment. "Were you planning on taking these guys out of here?"

"We can't just leave 'em here!" The blonde argued.

"How stupid can you be?" The cat taunted once more, mentally face-palming at the blonde's stupidity.

"What?!" He fired back angrily, getting sick and tired of this cat insulting him.

"These are only humans in Kamoshida's cognition. They aren't real humans that have entered from reality. They're different from you three." Morgana explained.

"Cognition?" Ryuji rose an eyebrow at the word. The cat has said it several times before, but still had no clue as to what it meant.

"It means there's no point in saving them! They're different from the real ones in the real world." The cat continued to press his point.

"In other words, they aren't real." Kazuma brought up.

"Exactly." Morgana nodded.

"The hell?! Why's it gotta be so complicated?!!" Sakamoto complained before looking back toward the tortured prisoners. As he looked at them, in severe pain, he clenched his fist, anger rising. He was starting to piece it all together. "So the school's a castle, the students are slaves, and he's the King? It's so on point that it makes me laugh. This really is the inside of that asshole's head!"

As Kazuma watched his classmate get angry about this, he decided enough was enough. If he was going to continue, it was time for Ryuji to be honest.

"I think it's about time you start telling us the truth." He stated, talking to Ryuji.

"What?" He replied, confused by his confrontation.

"Kazuma, now's not..."

"Shut up, Amamiya. He owes us." He warned before facing the blonde. "I've had to listen to you whine and complain about Kamoshida from the moment we came back here and you haven't been honest with us. What is your problem with him?"

"That..." He looked away, clenching his fist. His classmate brought up memories that he didn't wish to relive at the moment. "That's none of your business, dude."
"You want me to keep helping you, you better give me a reason to trust you." Kazuma glared, warning him he won't take that as an answer. "This is beyond just mere dislike. You hate him, you hate his guts, and no one holds that kind of animosity for someone unless they really hurt you in some way. So what did he do to you?"

"Stop it. I don't want to talk about." He continued to deflect it.

"Is it because of your leg?" He brought up which seemed to have triggered some kind of reaction from Ryuji as he looked at his classmate with the angriest expression Ren had ever seen. "Is that why? Did he..."

He couldn't finish his sentence as Ryuji grabbed him by the shirt and pushed him up against the wall rather roughly. He kept calm, but the blonde was clenching his teeth in pure rage from being called out like this and bringing up memories he never wanted to remember again.

"I'm warning you, dude! Back off!" He screamed in his face, demanding that he step off.

"You're such a coward." Kazuma insulted.

"I don't wanna hear that shit from you! You didn't even want to come back here so shut up!" He fired back.

"Stop it! Now!" Ren got in between the two and pushed them apart. Once the two were apart, he prepared to scold them. "Kazuma, you need to leave Ryuji alone. Whatever his personal issue is with Kamoshida, it's no one's business but his own." He then turned to the spiky blonde. "And you need to keep your cool, I'd rather not attract every guard in the castle to our location. Take a minute to chill out, both of you."

"Tch." Ryuji clicked his tongue, still keeping his glare on Kazuma. "You're a real asshole, you know that?"

"Whatever." Kazuma shrugged his insult off as nothing.

As he waited for them to calm down, Ren turned to Morgana who wanted to stay out of this heated discussion.

"They gonna be alright?" He asked.

"Yeah, just give them a minute," Ren said. Morgana opted for a change of subject in order to put this tension behind them as he approached the wooden gate to look at the tortured prisoners.

"This is horrible." The cat winced a little. Even they weren't real people, this was inhuman. "It must mean he treats them as slaves in the real world too."

"In the real world too?" Ryuji repeated that last part as he decided to put his little scuffle with his classmate behind and looked back at the prisoners. As he got a better look at them, he realized just who they were. "Wait, I know these guys. They're members of the volleyball team. The one Kamoshida coaches for!"

"Really?" Ren commented as he looked upon the tortured prisoners.

"They must be physically abused every day. There's no way they'd be so beaten up normally." Morgana added.

"Don't tell me..." Ryuji's eyes widened as he came to a realization. If these fake versions of them
were being tortured, then the ones in the real world are...

"This must mean Kamoshida is abusing them in the real world too. Probably passing it off as 'training', I bet." Kazuma believed.

"Yeah! Yeah, that's gotta be it!" Ryuji agreed with his classmate, having completely forgotten about their earlier scuffle. "Like, just yesterday, I saw Suzui-san with this leg brace that she supposedly got from practice! God dammit, why didn't I effin' see it!"

"Suzui-san?" Kazuma questioned.

"She's in our class, dude. She doesn't wear the blazer, black hair in a ponytail?" Sakamoto brought up.

*That girl? So, Suzui's her name?* Kazuma recognized the description. That girl in his class, the same girl from the train station. *She's on the volleyball team?*

"I heard Kamoshida's usin' physical punishment. They're just rumors, but... If they're true, wouldn't this be somethin' to report to the police?" The spiky blonde questioned.

"Maybe they're too afraid to speak up." Ren thought.

"Then I'll use these guys as evidence. If it all goes well, we can take down that asshole Kamoshida." Ryuji believed but he saw that his phone's camera application wouldn't respond to his touch. "Huh?"

"What's wrong?" Ren questioned.

"It's not workin'?!" He complained as he kept trying to unlock the camera to no avail. "We can use the navigation app, but the camera's a no go?!"

"Navigation app?" Morgana questioned, wondering what he was referring too.

"That's what we used to come here," Ryuji explained. "What about you guys?"

Ren and Kazuma checked their phones and checked to see if they could use their cameras.

"Nope," Amamiya stated.

"None here." Kazuma did the same.

"Whatever you do is fine, but we're gonna get caught if we stand around like this," Morgana warned, reminding them that they've been here for too long. There's no telling when more guards would show up, or if the ones currently torturing those prisoners would stop and take notice. "We need to head back!"

"Hang on a sec." Ryuji stopped before taking a good look at the prisoners. "There's no other way. I'll just memorize their faces before goin' home!"

"Hurry it up!" The cat rushed,

"Alright got it," Sakamoto said. One they opened the exit, they found more prison cells likely holding more prisoners. Ryuji wasn't going to leave one prisoner unchecked. "Let's check the cells 'round there."

As they continued on, they came across more prisoners being tortured, only the method was
different. As they came upon more prisoners, they found three of them running on a treadmill-looking device, chasing after what appeared to be a jug of water hanging a few feet away from them. They chased after it as best they could, slipping and falling being certain death as they would be crush by the spikes behind them, threatening to take their lives.

"Not givin' athletes water even for tough trainin' is a common thing in the real world too." Ryuji pointed out, disgusted by the sight.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Ren stated, the sight was horrible.

"Then don't look," Kazuma told him. "Let's keep going."

They kept walking until they came across another prisoner, huddled up in the corner of his cell. When he looked over to the group, he appeared even more frightened, not by them, but by what would happen if he conversed with them.

"I don't know why you guys are here... but just leave us alone." He begged.

"What're you talking about!? You're seriously OK with this?!" Sakamoto argued.

"There's no point in talking to them." Kazuma brought up, wanting to get a move on. "They're not real, so don't waste your time."

Ryuji silently agreed and moved along. The next sight was even worse than the previous ones. They watched as a prisoner was hanging upside down from a rope tied around his legs as a cannon shot out volleyballs, hitting him in the face several times.

"Agh! Gah!" The prisoner gasped as he was pummeled by volleyballs over and over. "It hurts! It hurts!

"The hell? This ain't trainin' at all. It's just violence!" He stated, not sure if he could take more of this.

"Wait, I know that guy." Ren pointed out, that blue-tinted hair was easily recognizable. "He's in my class!"

"Huh?" Ryuji questioned before getting a good look at him. "Wait, That's Mishima!"

"Mishima?" Kazuma questioned.

"He's 2-D's representative who's on the volleyball team. I swore I saw him the other day with bruises all over his face." The spiky blonde realized. "This means he's doin' something similar in reality too, right? Damn that bastard!"

"Will you hurry it up." The cat rushed him once more, not wanting to stick around here any longer.

"I know, I know, just give me a sec!" He replied. He then stepped away from the gate. "Alright, I got all of 'em."

"Then let's stop wasting time! We need to scram!" Morgana exclaimed.

"Then let's go," Ren ordered as the group followed after him.

They backtracked their way back to where the safe room was. Thankfully, since there were no guards so there was no need to fight. Once they finally made back to where the safe room was, they took a short breather.
"All right, we're back," Sakamoto said. "We gotta get outta here, quick!"

"The watch post near the training hall has ceased reporting!"

They heard the voice of a guard nearby, likely reinforcements.

"Chances of intruder activity are extremely high! All personnel, increase security measures!"

"Get down! Get down!" Ren commanded as the group hid behind the nearby crates. As he looked over he saw a guard quickly making his rounds over by the drawbridge. Since they were well hidden, the guard left, believing there were no intruders.

"Tch, we've stayed here too long," Morgana complained as they left their hiding spots. "Come on, let's get out of here!"

Once they were in the clear, they left the area and made their way back to the entrance hall. There were no enemies ahead, they were in the clear. The exit was so close.

But as they made their way to the middle of the entrance hall, guards came out of nowhere, approaching the group. One of them stood out from the others, a guard whose army was plated in gold, likely the captain in charge. And at the head...

"You knaves again?" King Kamoshida, once again donning his bathrobe, gazed at the intruders with a sneer at the sight of them. "To think you'd make the same mistake again. You're hopeless!"

"Mr. Pink Undies, what a pleasant surprise." Ren mocked, the nickname causing his eye to twitch.

"You!" Kazuma growled at the sight of him, immediately placing his hands on his pistols.

"The school ain't your castle!" Ryuji exclaimed angrily. "I've memorized their faces real good. You're goin' down!"

"It seems it's true when they say 'barking dogs seldom bite'." He mocked at his efforts. "How far the star runner of the track team has fallen."

"The hell are you gettin' at?" Sakamoto angrily asked.

"I speak of the 'Track Traitor' who acted in violence, ending his teammates' dreams." The King continued. "Oh, I can imagine the pain of the others who were dragged under with your... selfish act."

"Ngh." He really must've hit a nerve as Ryuji couldn't think of any kind of retort.

"Track Traitor?" Ren questioned, wondering what he meant.

"What a surprise? It's the problem transfer students." Kamoshida recognized the two from the other day. "So you two are accompanying him without knowing anything at all?"

"Speak, jackass. What are you talking about?" Kazuma demanded.

"He betrayed his teammates and crushed their hopes, yet he still carries on as carefree as ever." He shook his head in disappointment.

"That's not true!" Ryuji winced at his words, each one attacking him at his core.

"You've come along with this fool and are now going to end up dead. How unlucky of you." He
turned away from them. "Go. Kill them all. Don't sully my castle with garbage."

The guard captain raised his blade, ordering his subordinates to do as their King instructed. They shook violently, transfiguring into their real forms. Turning into dirty two-horned beast, three Bicorns readied themselves to face their King's enemies.

"Goddammit." Ryuji cursed as these shadows were unlike the previous ones they've fought. One of them charged toward the blonde, attempting to kill him.

"Look out!" Kazuma rushed forward, tackling Ryuji away from the Bicorn that lunged at him. Once he was safe, it was time to fight. "Persona!"

Summoning Ulysses, the Persona managed to kick the Bicorn away from the blonde, securing Ryuji's safety. However, it recovered in mere seconds and quickly surrounded the Persona-Users.

"We're surrounded," Morgana noted.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you 'cause King Kamoshida told us! I'll kill 'cause that's what he wants!"

"Come on then, you disgusting beasts! Let's see what you've got! Arsene!" Ren summoned forth his Persona, cleaving at the Bicorn in his way only for it to shrug off the damage and lunge forward, attacking the Persona. As it struggled against the beast, Arsene had trouble trying to gain an advantage before another Bicorn lunged into it, sending it to the ground. "No!" Ren watched as his Persona returned to him as his mask.

He then pulled out his pistol and fired shots at the bicorns. While it caused some amount of damage, he ran out of bullets before he could kill it. The two then lunged forward, using their combined strength to attack Ren, knocking him backward onto the ground.

"Amamiya!" Kazuma rushed over to aid him only to have the two Bicorns charged to him. He pulled out his pistols only to find that he too, had run out of ammo. He then pulled out his blades and blocked their blow, struggling against it. "Monsters! I won't let you..." His sentence was interrupted when the third Bicorn Ulysses had kicked away rammed into him at full speed. "GAH!"

"Frizzy Hair! Brown Hair!" Morgana rushed to their aid. "Zorro!" He summoned his persona, attempting to perform a Lucky Punch, only for them to dodge it and lunge toward the cat, knocking him down, causing Zorro to return to his master.

Ren and Kazuma couldn't do anything as they had been defeated. They watched as King Kamoshida made his presence known once again, stepping onto Morgana as if he was a carpet rug.

"Oof!" He gasped for air. "You piece of..."

"Morgana!" Ren tried to get up, only for the guard captain to hold him down with his foot.

"No...!" Kazuma tried to help his companions but one of the guards pressed it's foot against his back, preventing him from getting up.

"I bet you simply came here on a whim and ended up like this. Isn't that right?" He mocked, looking over to where Ryuji was. He fell to his knees as each of the Bicorns returned to their original forms. He felt so helpless. All he had was a shotgun and even with that, he was outnumbered.

"No." He replied, wanting to convince himself rather than him.
"What a worthless piece of trash, getting emotional so quickly. How dare you raise your hand against me." The King pressed his foot even harder into Morgana's back, causing him pain. "Though it was only temporary, have you forgotten my kindness in supervising track practice?"

"Wasn't no practice! It was physical abuse!" Ryuji exclaimed, slamming his fists into the ground. "You just didn't like our team!"

"It was nothing but an eyesore!" He growled, pretty much confirming what The blonde had said. "The only one who needs to achieve results is me! That coach who got fired was hopeless too. Had he not opposed me with a sound argument, I would've settled it with only breaking his star's leg."

"What?!" Ren looked up as he heard what Kamoshida had said.

"So, it's true," Kazuma whispered as he heard what the King had said.

"D-Damn it." Ryuji looked down as his secret was revealed. Why he hated Kamoshida so much. Why he wanted to come back here.

"Do you need me to deal with your other leg too?" He threatened. "The school will call it self-defense anyway!"

"Dammit. Am I gonna lose again?" Ryuji never felt so defeated. It was bad enough that he couldn't fight, but now he dragged Ren and Kazuma into this, and because of him, they were as good as dead. "Not only can I not run anymore. The track team is gone too 'cause of this asshole!"

"Ryuji..." Morgana whimpered at what he had learned. To have something important taken away from you, he couldn't help but sympathize. He then felt the King push his foot harder into his back. "AGH!"

"Once these three are dealt with, you're next," Kamoshida stated before breaking into laughter at his uselessness.

"Ryuji!" Ren called out. "Don't let him win! You..."

"Get up, Sakamoto!" Kazuma screamed out. Ryuji looked up as he heard his classmate call him out. "Look at you, whining and crying like a child, feeling sorry for yourself! What is wrong with you?! This man ruined your life! You just going to sit there and let him get away with it?!

"N-No, but..." Ryuji stuttered as he heard his classmate yell at him with such passion.

"Then prove it. Or you'll just be confirming everything he's saying." He finished, wondering if that knocked some sense into this idiot.

"Y-You." It was almost ironic, to think Kazuma of all people would be pushing him to stand up to these assholes. Just a few minutes ago, he was calling him out for keeping secrets, now he was helping him. Even so, he had a point. If he doesn't do anything, then everything Kamoshida said would be true. "You're right." He stated as he tried to stand up. "Everything that was important to me was taken by him. I'll never get 'em back!"

"Stay there and watch." Kamoshida continued to mock him. "Look on as these hopeless scum die for nothing because they sided with trash like you."

"No, that's what you are!" Ryuji fired as he stood tall, no longer afraid. "All you think about is using people! You're the real trash Kamoshida! Now leave my friends alone!"
He approached the King slowly, fearing nothing as his classmate's words pushed him to prove that everything Kamoshida had said about him was wrong. That he was the villain, not him.

"What are you doing? Silence..."

"Shut up!" He screamed, interrupting him before pointing angrily at him. "Stop lookin' down on me with that stupid smile on your face!"

... ... 

*You made me wait quite a while.*

Ryuji's eyes shot open as his iris' turned golden yellow. A wave of indescribable pain coursed through his head, the worst pain imaginable.

"A-Aaagh!" He clutched his head in agony.

*You seek power, correct? Then let us form a pact.*

He fell to his knees as the voice that raged within him did nothing to ease his pain.

*Since your name has been disgraced already, why not hoist the flag and wreak havoc? The "other you" who exists within desires it thus.*

He clutched the ground as the pain wouldn't stop. No matter how much he tried, he could not stop this agony.

*I am thou, thou art I.*

*There is no turning back.*

*The skull of rebellion is your flag henceforth!*

At the end of that final declaration, Ryuji raised his head as a mask formed on his face.

"Ryuji," Ren said softly as he realized what his friend had accomplished.

"Hmph. What can you do?" The guard captain mocked as he raised his blade, prepared to end Ren's life. "Cower in fear and watch!"

The spiky blonde got up on his own two feet, the pain finally gone. He gripped the mask with both of his hands.

"Aah." He ripped it off using all of his strength, unleashing his hidden potential. "HRAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!"

Soon, his body was engulfed in blue fire which surrounded the entire room. The force of these flames was so strong, it pushed the enemies off of the others, freeing them at last.

When the flames finally cleared, the others looked as Ryuji stood tall with his newly awakened Persona. a pirate, standing tall aboard his flying ship, spotting a hand cannon on its right arm and a wicked glare for his foes.

Ryuji looked up with a smirk of victory as he felt the power in his hands.
"Ugh... This one as well?!" Kamoshida mentioned as now Sakamoto had one of those... things.

"Right on! Wassup, Persona." He clenched his fists, excitement coursing through him. "This effin' rocks!"

The others stood up, now free from the enemies. They walked over, weapons in hand, ready to aid newly awakened Persona-User.

"Now that I got his power, it's time for payback." He stated, cracking his knuckles, itching for a fight. "Yo, I'm ready." He pulled out what appeared to be a pipe, eager to let loose and drop some heads. "Bring it!"

"Ngh!" The guard captain wasn't going to let this stand. He wouldn't fail his King! "Don't mock me, you brat!" He slammed his sword down, changing into his true form, that of the horseman, Eligor who came charging at him

"Blast him away! Captain Kidd!" Ryuji ordered, pointing at his foe. The pirate Persona pointed his hand cannon and shot out a Zio, greatly injuring him.

"GAH!" Eligor grunted from the damage. "What troublemakers that bother King Kamoshida with trifles matters!"

"Kamoshida's cognition ain't changin', right? Then I'll act like the troublemaker I am!" Sakamoto exclaimed, looking toward his companions.

"You got this Ryuji!" Ren gave him a thumbs up. "End this party with a bang!"

"You have an advantage, the others turned tail and ran." Kazuma pointed out. "So stop wasting time and kill it already."

"Let's see what you can do." The cat gave him the go-ahead.

"Thanks, guys," Ryuji said, turning back to the guard captain, ready to kick some ass. "Let's do this, Captain Kidd!"

As he prepared, Eligor summoned reinforcements to aid him.

"Nice try, dumbass!" The spiky blonde mocked as he commanded Kidd to destroy his reinforcements, killing each Bicorn with a Zio. He then had his Persona refocus on Eligor, shooting Zios to end the shadow. It kept dodging his attacks and Ren believed it wouldn't stay still unless they make him.

"Kazuma!" Ren called out.

"Yeah, I know!" He caught on.

"Persona!" The two summoned forth their Personas to aid their companion. They each came at the shadow in opposite directions, even with their speed, they were having a hard time catching it.

"I got this! Zorro!" Morgana summoned forth his Persona, hurting it was a Garu. Now that it was stunned, Arsene and Ulysses grabbed onto it, allowing the Kidd the final blow.

"Let's go, Captain!" Ryuji ordered one final time, Kidd aimed for the heart and fired! Shooting Zio through its chest, destroying it but not killing it. It reverted back to its original form and it fell down next to King Kamoshida. It took him a moment to catch his breath but once he did, he shot a
confident look toward the king. "How 'bout that?!"

"So Ryuji had the potential too." Morgana pointed out.

"I knew he had it in him," Ren commented.

"Guess he's not as useless as he thought he was," Kazuma stated.

They all turned their attention back to the King, wondering what the bastard was going to pull next.

"Even if you apologize now, I ain't forgivin' you!" Ryuji proclaimed.

"Hmph." He shrugged off his insult, his face returning to that shit-eating grin he had on a few moments ago. "I told you that this is my castle. It seems you don't understand." He then held out his hand, as he signaled someone to approach him.

They watch as a girl in a skimpy bikini walked down the stairs and rushed over to the King's side. Only, the identity of this girl left them all stunned.

"What the...?" Ren recognized as the girl turned out to be his classmate.

"Takamaki?" Ryuji shared the same stunned look.

"What is she doing here?" Kazuma wondered and why was she wearing such a skimpy outfit.

"Wha.." Morgana was left stunned at the sight, the beauty next to the foul king was utterly gorgeous. "What a meow-velous and beautiful girl!"

She wrapped her arms around the King, cuddling her head against him.

"What's going on?!" Sakamoto exclaimed. "What the hell are you doing?! Get away from him!"

"Wait, Ryuji." Ren stopped him for a moment. "That may not be the real one. She's probably like those prisoners, just a fake duplicate."

"How many times must I tell you until you understand?" Kamoshida replied, cupping her face in his hand. "This is MY castle. A place which I can do whatever I want. Everyone wishes to be loved by me. Ain't that right, babe?" He gave her a firm smack on her rear.

"Oooh, you're so naughty!" She cooed which sickened the others.

"I'm going to throw up," Ren said. This was definitely not the Ann Takamaki from class.

"Are you jealous?" Kamoshida mocked. "Well, I'm not surprised. Women aren't drawn to problematic punks like you."

"Dammit!" Ryuji exclaimed.

"Clean them up this instant!" The King ordered. More guards appeared in front of the group, ready to fight.

"We're outnumbered," Morgana noted. "Let's scram before we get surrounded again!"

"We're not gonna do anything and just run?!" The spiky blonde complained, not wanting it to end here.
"You have a better idea?" Kazuma inquired, knowing he didn't.

"We can't die here, Ryuji. Let's get out and come up with a plan for later." Ren suggested.

"Thank god you guys have level heads." The cat said.

"Ugh, fine," Ryuji said annoyingly before making one final declaration to the King. "We'll expose what you really are, no matter what! You better be ready for us!"

"Hahaha! I was beginning to get bored of torturing the ones here!" Kamoshida laughed, not taking his threat seriously. "Come at me whenever you want, if you don't care about your life!"

"Oh don't worry, when we're back, it'll be your last surprise, Pink Undies." Ren taunted before giving a formal bow the everyone in a very taunting matter. "Until then, I bid you adieu, gentlemen."

With that, they turned and ran towards the exit. Once they made it to the room, they quickly went through the ventilation shaft and made it safely back to the entrance.

Once they knew they were safe, they stopped to catch their breath. This wasn't like their first trip at all, they were more concerned with getting out than performing an investigation. They were not prepared for this but that would change. Next time they met with the King, it will be his last surprise.

He'll never see it coming.

"Anyways," Ryuji said after finally catching his breath before bringing up something he just noticed. "I don't remember changin' into this?"

"Huh?" Ren looked to see that just like him and Kazuma, his appearance had completely changed. It now consisted of a matching black jacket and pants with knee pads, a red ascot, combat boots, a pair of yellow gloves, and a skull mask. "It's like ours."

"Yeah." He looked over. With clothes came his melee weapon, a steel pipe strapped to his belt.

"You look like a thug if anything else," Kazuma stated which Ryuji didn't appreciate.

"What the hell?! Eff you, dude! At least mine has sleeves!" He fired back.

"Is now really the time to be fighting over who's outfit is better?" Ren interjected.

"Did you find them?!"

They heard a voice from within the castle, likely one of the guards still looking for them.

"Quiet!" Morgana demanded.

"No. Search that way!"

Once the voices died down, they were in the clear.

"So, what's goin' on? I'm completely lost, man!" Ryuji asked.

"I told you before." Morgana brought up. "When a Persona-User opposes a Palace's ruler and becomes a threat to them, this happens. It's to prevent you from being affected by distortions."
"Is this... a skull?" The blonde reached up and touched his mask.

"Your appearance reflects your inner self. It's the rebel that slumbers within." The cat explained before giving the blonde a sly look. "Not that you'll get it, right?"

"Nope." Ryuji slumped his head.

"Then stop asking questions and accept what you see for what it is." The cat argued.

"Easy for you to say." He crossed his arms in annoyance.

"In other words, it's a side effect of gaining your Persona," Ren stated in more simple terms. "It wouldn't be right for all of us to have the same outfit. So, this outfit represents what you are deep down."

"Like I said, a thug." Kazuma made one last remark.

"Shaddup!" The blonde fired back. "You think just because you have a hood, that yours is cooler than mine?!!"

"I didn't say anything like that, moron." He fired back, glaring at his classmate for his stupid insinuation.

"Up yours!" Ryuji threw out one last insult before realizing something. "Wait, we're in deep shit!"

"I said to be quiet!" Morgana exclaimed again for the loud blonde.

"We might've gotten away here, but we're still screwed with Kamoshida at the real school." He brought up.

"That's quite sharp of you... For being an idiot." The cat teased. "Relax. The Kamoshida in reality can't possibly know about what happens here."

"How so?" Ren asked.

"Because 'King' Kamoshida is the shadow-self of the real one." He explained. "A shadow is the true self that is suppressed, a side of one's personality they don't want to see."

"So Pink Undies is a shadow? Like those guards?" The probationer questioned.

"Exactly, only he's not just any shadow, he's a shadow-self, powerful beings who rule over Palaces." Morgana continued.

"So, we're OK?" Ryuji asked nervously.

"Did the Kamoshida in reality remember your first escape?" The cat brought up and the others look stunned as they remember that the real Kamoshida did nothing of the sort. "There you have it."

"All right!" The blonde exclaimed, getting fired up at the prospect of getting rid of Kamoshida. "Now that we know that, all we gotta do is..."

"Wait." The cat interrupted just when he was in the moment. "I guided you as promised. It's your turn to cooperate with me."

"Say what?" The blonde questioned.
"That's why I was super nice about teaching you idiots everything." The cat crossed his arms.

"Cooperate?" He replied, wondering what he meant.

"Don't you remember? I originally came here for an investigation." Morgana brought up. "I need to erase the distortion from my body and regain my real form! That's why we must delve into Mementos and..."

"Shut up." Kazuma interrupted harshly, stopping the cat from talking. "We don't owe you anything, cat. As I recall, none of us made any promises to help you."

"Huh?" The cat replied, stunned by his former cellmate's cold words and the possibility that none of them were going to help him. "Don't tell me... Are you not going to repay the hospitality I showed you?"

"Like I said, I don't owe you anything." Kazuma finished as he walked away.

"Is it because I'm not human? Because I'm like a cat?" He was starting to ask questions. "Is that why you're making a fool of me?!"

"We're busy!" Sakamoto told him off, before kneeling down. "Thanks for everything, cat. You've got guts, bein' a cat and all." He then stood back up. "See you around."

Ryuji followed after his classmate, leaving Morgana behind. Ren simply gave a wave as he followed after his companions.

"I bid thee farewell, Sir Morgana!" He said, chuckling as he ran off after the others.

"Hey, what the hell?!" The cat cried out, running after the others. "Ugh, seriously! Why're you wrapping this up like everything's all hunky-dory?! Oh, hell no! Get back here!"

You have returned to the real world. Welcome back

The confirmation from the navigation app was all they needed to know that they had left the castle and have returned to reality. If not that, the nearby students leaving the school were enough proof.

Whatever it was about that place, it really wore the three out. It wasn't like last time, there was more fighting than last time and once again, they were this close to dancing with death. However, Ren wasn't content with leaving this alone. He made a vow to Pink Undies and he will take him down as well as expose the real Kamoshida for his crimes against the school.

"Thank god. We're back." Ryuji said, having finally calmed down. "I dragged you guys around a lot, huh? I'm sorry."

"No apologies necessary. We knew the risks." Ren replied.

"Ugh," He groaned a little, utterly exhausted. "I'm dead tired. How you holdin' up?"

"I'll live." He replied before turning to his partner. "What about you, Kazuma? You okay?"

"Just peachy," Kazuma replied curtly, trying to catch his breath.

"Man, that place wore me out. I'm gonna sleep like a rock when I get home." The spiky blonde stated before changing the subject. "But damn, if what we saw was for real, this is gonna get good!"
"Couldn't agree more." The probationer said. "We finally a lead to go on."

"Yep, and I totally remember the faces of the guys Kamoshida was treatin' like slaves." Ryuji brought up. "Once we make 'em fess up to any physical abuse, Kamoshida will be done."

"You're joking right?" Kazuma asked rudely. "You saw how they were in the castle, you really think any of them will actually testify?"

"We won't know unless we try," Ren argued. "One of them has to be sick of how they're being treated. If we can get just one testimony, it'll be one step closer to bringing Pink Undies to justice."

"You're preaching to the choir, Amamiya." His fellow transfer student remained pessimistic.

"Cmon, man. Have some faith, will ya? You're totally killing the vibe." The blonde complained. "So... wanna help me look for those guys or any witnesses?"

"You don't even have to ask. I'm in." Ren gave his loyalty to the cause and to Ryuji.

"What about you, man?" Ryuji asked his classmate. "I could really use your help."

Kazuma sighed, how many times was he going to be goddamn Santa Claus this week?

Then again, it's like Ren said before they went to the castle, there was no way he could continue on with someone like Kamoshida prancing around doing whatever the hell he wants. And after what he saw in the castle there is no way he could let this go.

"Fine." He gave his answer.

"Now that's what I'm takin' about!" The blonde exclaimed happily. "Oh, and I'm sorry for snapping at you earlier. You were right, I wasn't being honest and you didn't deserve that."

"It's whatever." He brushed off his apology as he didn't really take offense to his outburst against him.

"But seriously though, you really saved my ass back there. Gave me one hell of a wake-up call." He held out his hand for a handshake. "What do you say, dude? Wanna start over?"

Kazuma looked at his hand and the first instinct was to ignore it, just like he did when they first met. Then again, while he didn't care for his apologies for their earlier spats, he had to admit that he gained some respect for the spiky-haired delinquent. He was loud, annoying, and not very smart. But, he wasn't like everyone else. He didn't care for labels or rumors, he was friendly just like Ren was when they first met. He looked towards the boy in question who was giving him a look that just said go for it.

Make no mistake, they were not his friends, but he had nothing to lose associating with them for the time being. He grabbed his hand and shook it.

Despite their differences, it appears that Ryuji and Kazuma were slowly beginning to understand each other, as classmates and as companions.

...  

_I am thou, thou art I._

_Thou hast established a new bond._
...  

From the self-suffused with divine love to the self-capable of demonic cruelty.  

A new self has been born.  

...  

Thou hast given birth to the Arcana of Chariot that shall grant thee new power.  

...  

There it is again?! Kazuma thought in his head as that same voice rang through his head. It was the same voice that he heard when he gave Amamiya his contact information. What was the meaning behind it?

"About time you guys decided to get along." Ren teased. "I was beginning to think I would have to baby you both forever."

"S-Shaddup, it's not like we were fighting or anything." Ryuji fired back before changing the subject about their reputations. "So listen, guys. If you're thinkin' of layin' low, I don't think that'll help."

"You think so?" Ren asked. It wasn't really his intention to "lay low" as Sakamoto put it, but he wasn't planning to draw too much attention to himself.

"It's just, everyone already knows. They totally got you pegged as a criminal." He explained.

"Trust me, I've heard." The probationer replied, already aware his reputation is in the gutters.

"And you dude," Ryuji turned to his classmate. "No offense, but I think people are scared of you."

"I don't care." He replied. Truth be told, he was fine with people being scared of him, it means they'll leave him alone and he has no wish to interact with any rumormongering idiot.

"I bet Kamoshida had something to do with all this bullshit. I heard he's been telling students to steer clear of the new 'problem transfer students'. Piece of shit." Ryuji cursed.

"It has to be true," Ren added right after, not a single ounce of doubt in his voice. "Only a teacher could've been capable of leaking something like my record that fast and with no repercussions."

"Damn right, it doesn't matter if it's a student, teacher, or a club; that asshole just wrecks things he doesn't agree with. Just like he did with me." He cursed out. "No one'll take anything I say seriously. Still, those rumors about him gettin' physical might be real. And after seein' Kamoshida's distorted-heart thing in person, there's no way I can just sit back!"

"With what we've learned in the castle, there has to be evidence somewhere. We'll find it and we will take him down." He promised.

"Hell yeah!" Ryuji yelled, getting fired up. "I'm countin' on you guys! Don't worry; I'm hyped about this too!"

Ren nodded. Know that Ryuji has his trust and vice versa, he truly believed that they will bring Pink Undies and Kamoshida to justice. He was one step closer to finding the truth about the nasty rumors surrounding that pervert and Ann Takamaki, and he wasn't about to stop now.
As he continued to relay the story to Sae, she stopped him for just a second as she wanted to bring up something that concerned her.

"Acting as a Phantom Thief would've been more efficient alone. You could've gone about it that way. However, you did not. There are merits to having associates. That's what you decided." She stated before leaning forward. "Am I wrong?"

"What can I say." He replied sarcastically. "I'm a people person."

---

*I am thou, thou art I.*

*Thou hast acquired a new vow.*

...  

*It shall become the wings of rebellion*  

*that breaketh thy chains of captivity.*

...  

*With the birth of the Chariot Persona,*

*I have obtained the blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power.*

---

*What was that?* Ren heard the mysterious voice of what appeared to be a woman's voice but didn't have much to go on other than that.

"You cool, dude?" Ryuji questioned wondering why he was spacing out.

"Y-Yeah. I'm fine." Ren nodded. Whatever that was, there was no point in getting hung over it. Just then, the three heard what appeared to be someone's stomach rumbling, indicating hunger. They realized it was coming from Ryuji.

"Oh..." He blushed, embarrassed a little. "Right, I haven't eaten anything since lunch."
"Tell the truth, I'm a bit famished as well," Ren stated, feeling a bit hungry himself.

"It'd be weird splittin' off now, so why don't we grab a bite somewhere? That's put that money we earned to use." Ryuji offered.

"Sure, I could eat." He replied before turning to his fellow transfer student. "What do you say Kazuma?"

"Pass. I'm leaving." He stated, walking away from them and heading back inside the school.

"Hey, hold on!" Ryuji called out. "Cmon man, you can't pass up a free meal. We earned it."

"Look, I'm tired and pissed off." He replied irritatingly to his classmate. "You guys can do whatever you want, but I'm going home." And with that, he left them to their devices, heading back inside the school to collect his book and go home.

"I'll text you later, Kazuma," Ren told him, watching his partner and transfer student just give a small wave as he entered the school.

_Well, he waved this time. That's something._ He thought.

"Dick," Ryuji muttered before turning to Amamiya. "More for us then. Follow me. It's in Shibuya so let's take the train together. I totally gotta hear about your past."

"Well get comfortable, it's a long one." He replied as he and his new friend departed Shujin Academy grounds and headed wherever Sakamoto believed would be good for sating their appetites.

Kazuma went back to his locker on the 2nd-floor building to switch out his school shoes for his original ones. He would've gotten them earlier if his loudmouth classmate hadn't dragged him to the front of the school, hoping to convince him to traverse the mysterious castle again.

Once he reached his locker, he put in the correct combination, opened the locker and switched out his shoes. He was about to close it when he overheard two girls whispering behind him. And he uses the term "whispering" loosely because they weren't exactly being secretive about their gossip.

"Look, it's that transfer student in 2-E."

"I heard he's been hanging out with Sakamoto-kun and that criminal."

"What's he thinking, hanging out with those scumbags. Is he like them too?"

"What's happened to our school?"

It was all too familiar, the rumors, the gossip, and the annoyance that comes with it. He slammed his locker shut, causing the girls behind him to jump a little as he looked over his shoulder, glaring harshly at the two who were talking about it. His stare sent shivers down their spines as a wave of fear began to course through their bodies.

"L-Let's go."

"Y-Yeah."

They left and immediately hurried away from him. He gave a sigh, now finally free of those idiots. It's as Ryuji said, people really were scared of him.
"Excuse me, Kazuma-kun?"

Before he could leave, someone had called out to him. He turned around and was met with green eyes, long black hair along with glasses, much like Amamiya's. She wore the uniform for girls, the school blazer and white turtleneck shirt, the school uniform skirt, and black shoes.

Although Kazuma didn't recognize her, she appeared to know him.

"I'm glad I was able to catch you before you left." She said before giving a polite bow. "My name is Emi Matsumoto, I'm your class representative." She greeted but he didn't say anything. Instead, he chose to greet her with a look of disinterest, wanting to leave as soon as possible. "I sit in front of you, in class?" She continued, a little uncomfortable with the silence.

"Hmph." He huffed, walking past her as he headed for the stairs.

"Hey, hold on a sec!" She rushed after him, getting in the way. "Don't ignore me like that. It's rude."

_That's the point._ He thought.

"I have nothing to say to you. Get lost." He said moving past her again only for her to hold out her arms, preventing him from leaving.

"I'm sorry?" She replied, a little confused by his attitude. "Did I do something to piss you off?"

"Yeah, you're bothering me. Now leave me alone." He demanded.

"Not the friendly type, huh? I can work with that." She stated, not letting his unfriendly and curt attitude affect her. "I wanted to inform you that Ms. Chouno put you on cleaning duty today."

"What?" Great, more annoyances to deal with. Will he ever catch a break?

"Yep. Maybe this will teach you not to skip class anymore." She said, patting him on the shoulder before leaving. "Everything you need is already in 2-E. See you tomorrow."

_If there is a God, he hates my existence._ He thought dramatically.

Well, he did promise Tori he wouldn't get into any more trouble so there's no way he could ignore this. He decided to tough it out, and head to 2-E for cleaning duty.

_Now I'm starting to wish I had gone with Amamiya and Sakamoto._ He thought as he entered his classroom to get started.

"WHAT?!"

"Keep it down, Ryuji." Ren calmly asked, reminding him that they were in a public setting.

Ryuji had led him to Orenobeko, the most popular beef bowl shop in all of Shibuya, probably because it's the only beef bowl shop in Shibuya. But you know what they say, nothing wrong with a free beef bowl, the money they earned in the castle came in handy.

Ren had just finished telling Ryuji about the events that led up to his arrest, the drunk man who sued him, the woman he tried to save, and how his parents reacted.

He was not happy.
"Sorry, just... the eff', man. How much shittier can that asshole get?!" He fired, couldn't believe the crap he just heard.

"I can't even imagine," Ren replied, not really wanting to think about that night anymore.

"So, you left your hometown, and you're livin' here now, huh?" He brought, still stuffing his face with beef.

"That's pretty much the gist of it." The probation said, getting back to his meal.

"We might be more alike than I originally thought." The spiky blonde added.

"I think so too," Ren stated. "Even though Kawakami told me you were bad news, I had a feeling you were a good guy."

"Yeah, just ignore her man. She's annoying but harmless." He smiled, thankful his new friend doesn't believe him to be some mindless delinquent. "You know, you're the first guy that made me think that."

"And you're the first to not believe in the rumors about me. You and me, we're cool." He told him, letting him know he was okay in his book.

"Thanks, man." Ryuji nodded. "I guess it's how we're treated like a pain in the ass by the people around us, like we don't belong."

"Yeah, I feel you." He replied. Ever since his first day of school, the rumors and gossip already informed him that his classmates and fellow students want nothing to do with him. In a way, it was upsetting but he quickly got over it.

"Thing is... I did something stupid at school before, too." He told him before chugging down the last bit of beef he had left, slamming his bowl down to signify that he was finished. "Now, I wanted to ask. Your friend, Kazuma. What's his deal?"

"Him?" Ren raised an eyebrow at the change of subject, especially the subject of his fellow transfer student. "Why do you ask?"

"Don't you think he's a bit weird?" He brought up. "What do you know about him?"

"Not much, really." He began. "I met him two days ago, purely by coincidence. As you know, he's a transfer student like me. He lives close to where I'm staying and he's living with a guardian. I don't know much about his parents but from what I've heard, they're pretty famous."

"Damn. I had no idea." Ryuji replied, a bit stunned at how little he knew about him.

"And as you may have guessed, he's not exactly a people person." Ren brought up his attitude.

"Yeah, no shit." the spiky blonde spat a little. While he had gained a new respect for his classmate, he hasn't forgotten how just how much of a jerk he is. "Guy really pisses me off sometimes."

"He is a bit of a jerk, but he's the honest type. I respect him for that." He stated. While not knowing much about him, he could tell that Kazuma isn't the type of person to tell white lies or treat people with fake kindness or false sympathy. "Even so, he could stand to be a bit nicer."

"Yeah." Ryuji thought for a moment. Even with little knowledge about him, other than his unfriendly attitude, he did agree to help them and has risked his life for them in the castle. "Why do
"You think he's helping us?"

"Why?" He thought of it for a moment. He had nothing to gain from helping them, even though he's made it clear he doesn't like Kamoshida, why was he helping them? Ren had an idea. "Probably the same reason as me. He saw something unjust and just can't ignore it."

"You think so, huh?" Sakamoto questioned. If that was truly the reason, it makes sense. Ryuji hasn't forgotten that first visit to the castle, the one where his classmate stood up to Kamoshida's shadow and told them if they wanted to kill someone, they should kill him. Maybe Ren's got a point. "Anyway, the place you're livin' now is... Yongen, right? It's rush hour on the subways. I suggest you kill time before heading home."

"Sounds good to me," Ren said, thinking it would be a good time to explore Shibuya and get a feel for the place.

"What the hell, man. You barely touched your food." The spiky blonde stated before adding ginger to his bowl

"I can do that myself, thank you very much." The probationer glared.

"Just lemme do it, I gotta thank you for helpin' me." The spiky blonde grinned. "Anyways, I got your back like you got mine from tomorrow on. As long as we do something about Kamoshida, I'm sure we'll both feel better about bein' at school."

"I quite agree." Ren nodded, both determined to bring Kamoshida to justice.

"Oh, yeah!" Ryuji exclaimed, changing the subject. "Tell me your number. Chat ID too."

"Oh, right. We'll need to reach each other." He pulled out his phone to exchange numbers and Chat ID. "I'll give you Kazuma's as well. We'll all open a group chat together for the investigation."

"Think he'll mind?" He asked.

"I'm sure he'll come around." The probation chuckled before giving Ryuji, Kazuma's number and ID.

"Just you wait, Kamoshida." The spiky blonde muttered under his breath, ready to get started. "We're gonna start right away tomorrow. First, let's hit up those guys that were kept as slaves."

"You have a plan?" Ren asked.

"Damn straight. The volleyball rally's tomorrow. Shit's recommended by Kamoshida. Makes me wanna gag." He explained. "But thanks to that, we got no classes in the afternoon, and we can walk around unnoticed."

"Alright, we have our strategy." The probationer stated.

"We'll work out the details tomorrow," Ryuji said before noticing that Ren has barely put a dent in his meal. "C'mon, you gotta eat more. There's tons of ginger here."

"I think I'm good." Ren chuckled, feeling that he's eaten enough. "Oh, I want to get Kazuma something too."

He decided to order a large barbecue bowl for his fellow transfer student, wondering if he's made it home yet. He decided to shoot him a text just in case.
The people here are sick. Who leaves that much gum under a desk. Kazuma cursed the group of students who would dare put gum under the desks of his classroom. Thankfully, not much needed to be done so he was able to complete his cleaning very quickly.

Now that he was finished, he could finally leave this wretched school and head home. He could feel his stomach rumbling, he was hungry, tired, and irritated that he had to do something like cleaning duty on the 2nd day of school.

He collected his back, put away the cleaning materials, and left the 2-E classroom. As he headed down the stairs, someone familiar crossed his path.

He appeared worn out and depressed, not even acknowledging Kazuma's existence as he walked by him. His blue-tinted hair, however, was what made him recognizable.

That's Amamiya's class rep. He noted. He remembered coming across his duplicate in the castle, he was the one hanging from a rope while a cannon shot volleyballs in his face. Judging from the bruises on his face, maybe he's dealing with something similar. Where's he going?

He saw that he was headed towards the courtyard. Why wasn't he heading home?

He didn't know what it was, but something told him that following after him may give him some answers about Kamoshida.

Deciding to go with his gut, he followed the boy in secret.

Shiho and Ann sat on the school bench in the courtyard. With practice finally over, they could finally get a chance to hang out for a little while. While they normally would've gone for crepes, the volleyball player wanted some time to cool down.

Ann noticed something off about her best friend, she seemed down and really tired. Just how rough was practice?

"Shiho? You okay?" She asked with concern.

"Y-Yeah." She replied though it wasn't very convincing. "I-I haven't been sleeping well lately.

"Why not?" Ann wondered.

"W-Well, whenever I close my eyes, I keep thinking about too many things." She explained. It hasn't been a good couple of days for Shiho Suzui. She had way too much on her mind. Volleyball practice was one, Kamoshida has been pushing everyone lately, wanting to prepare for the upcoming tournament. Her leg hasn't fully healed from the injury she received during practice and it was affecting her performance.

But besides volleyball, her mind often wandered to a certain someone. More precisely, the new transfer student in her class.

It's only been his 2nd day and people were already steering clear of him, scared of him for some reason. He seemed to have that frown plastered on his face whenever she looked at him. It was completely different from when she encountered him at the train station and the advice he gave her.

*If nothing fun or exciting ever happens, then create it using your own power.* She remembered his words. It was when she openly expressed reluctance to anything special happening this year. *You*
"can do it, can't you?"

"I've tried. I've really tried." She thought.

"Shiho..." Ann whispered, upset at the depressed state her best friend was in.

"Nationals are coming up soon, so I keep thinking. Should someone like me really be on the starting lineup." She confessed.

"Hey, don't think like that. Just be confident in yourself!" Ann exclaimed, trying to raise her spirits.

"Your skills have been recognized! It's all because you work harder than anyone else!"

While she appreciated Ann's attempts to cheer her up, she still couldn't help but feel down.

"Yeah." She simply agreed, not wanting to worry her friend.


"N-No. it's nothing. It's normal, especially since a meet's coming up." Shiho explained.

Ann didn't seem convinced. She knew Kamoshida's practices were tough and harsh, but even if Shiho is on the starting lineup, was it safe for her to play with that injury?

Before she could say anything, a familiar face approached them.

"Sorry to interrupt, Suzui. Takamaki-san." Mishima said. "Um... Mr. Kamoshida told me to get you."

"Huh?" Suddenly, confusion and fear coursed through her body. Mr. Kamoshida was calling for her? Why? "What does he want?"

"He didn't say." He finished, looking away from them.

"Ann, I..." She muttered.

"I-It'll be fine!" Takamaki stated. "I bet it's a meeting about the starting lineup or something."

That didn't exactly calm Shiho's nerves but she decided to see the bright side of things and agree with her.

"Yeah." She gave a small smile which dropped as she stood up from her seat and clenched her fist, trying to hold back her fear. "Well, I better go."

"Yep, good luck!" Ann stood up, saying her goodbyes for now.

With that, Shiho left, heading to Mr. Kamoshida's office. Mishima left soon after, carrying his depressed energy and expression with him.

"Hang in there, Shiho," Takamaki whispered as she watched her friend leave.

Unbeknownst to them, Kazuma was nearby, having followed Mishima to his destination. He wasn't expecting to see that girl again, nor did he expect the blue-tinted haired boy to deliver her a message, from Kamoshida of all people.
What does he want with her? Kazuma wondered. He had this wretched feeling in his gut that whatever he wants with that girl, it couldn't be good. Seeing that Mishima went elsewhere, having finished what he was told to do, he changed his directive and followed after Suzui.

Like he told Amamiya over text, he doesn't trust Kamoshida, not in the slightest. Whatever he needed her for, he had no idea. Whatever it was, he was going to find out.

He followed her to the P.E. faculty office, likely where Kamoshida's office was. It was fairly empty, no one appeared to be around, student or faculty. He hid behind a wall as he watched her go round the corner. Once he knew it was clear, he walked over, peeking around the corner to see her knocking on what appeared to be his office. Soon after she opened the door and entered.

Looking around to make sure that no one knew he was there or that he was hiding, he moved from his hiding spot and approached the volleyball coach's office slowly.

He pressed his ear against the door to hear their conversation. He guessed correctly, as he heard what appeared to be yelling coming from inside the office, he knew something was not right here.

"Mr. Kamoshida, I..."

"I don't want to hear your goddamn excuses!" He heard Kamoshida yell, followed by a clattering noise and a gasp from Suzui. He must've kicked a chair in pure anger. "I gave you a pass yesterday but today was unacceptable! You've been slacking off during practice! Are you trying to jeopardize your teammates!"

"N-No, sir." Kazuma heard Shiho say. It was clear she was afraid, he could feel it in her voice. "It's just, m-my leg hasn't healed yet and if I put more strain on it, then..."

"More goddamn excuses! Suzui-san, I've had it up to here with your selfishness!" He angrily replied.

"Sir, I just..."

She was cut off, whatever apology she could offer, was taken from her as a loud, sickening noise intruded Kazuma's ears.

"GAH!" The sickening sound of a fist colliding with one's face was heard from beyond the door, as well as the thud of a body hitting the floor.

What the hell?! Kazuma placed his hand over his mouth to keep himself from making any noise.

"You listen to me, you little bitch." He heard Kamoshida continue. "Don't you ever speak to me like that again. Your teammates are busting their asses, breaking bones to get to Nationals, while you're here complaining about your leg. Pathetic."

"A-ah." He heard her whimper.

"If I ever hear such shit come out of your mouth again, I'll happily remind you that your position can easily be replaced with another." He finished. "Now get the fuck out of my sight."

While Kazuma wanted answers, this wasn't what he was expecting. This proved that everything they learned in the castle was true. He really was like the King. No, he was worse!

He couldn't even believe his ears, hearing that asshole punch her nearly made him gasp. He couldn't ignore this, not after what he heard.
I have to get out of here. Kazuma thought as he slowly walked away from Kamoshida's office before taking off, running in the direction of the school building. *I have to do something!* 

Chapter End Notes

It hurt to write that last part but it had to be done. Armed with this knowledge, what will Kazuma do now?

Find out in the next chapter.

Till next time.
Kazuma finally made it back to the school building, avoiding detection from both Suzui and Kamoshida. That was too close, there was no telling what would've happened if he was caught listening in on their 'meeting'. And now that he did, he had no idea what to do with the information.

For christ sake, a student was just assaulted on school grounds! If Kamoshida has been doing this to his team on a consistent basis, why the hell isn't anyone saying anything?!

His first instinct was to tell a teacher, but he believed that to be a worthless decision. Any teacher he would tell would probably ask for evidence that such an event occurred or at the very least, they would take this accusation to the Principal, and he didn't trust fatass in the slightest.

Should he tell Amamiya and Sakamoto? That would be the thing to do and there's no doubt that they would believe him. But, all they have is his word. He didn't have any evidence and if Suzui refused to testify, they would have no case. Same with the police, he has no proof, therefore, his word is invalid.

What do I do? He thought, not having the slightest idea on how to proceed. He thought following after Mishima and Suzui could provide some clues, and it did. Only now, he didn't know what to do with it. He should've done more! Record their meeting, take pictures, just something! Anything!

A vibration from his phone broke his thoughts. It was a text message, probably from Amamiya. He pulled it out to see what he wanted.

Ren: Hey Kazuma, have you made it home yet?

This was his chance, should he tell him?

As he thought it over, he realized that even if he did, it wouldn't have any effect. He had no proof other than his word and even if he did tell him, he would likely tell Sakamoto, and knowing his hatred for Kamoshida, there's no telling what he would do.

And so, he decided against it.

Kazuma: I haven't even left the school. My class rep caught me and put me on cleaning duty.

Ren: Oh, crap. It's not much to do, is it?

Kazuma: Just finished a few minutes ago.
Ren: Alright, glad to hear it. I wanted to let you know I ordered you some food at the place me and Ryuji went to.

*Such a goody-goody.* He rolled his eyes, not even surprised he would do something like this.

Ren: You do like beef bowls, right?

Kazuma: I have no complaints.

Ren: Awesome. Meet me at the train station to Yongen-Jaya, I'll give you your food. Also, I hope you don't mind but I gave Ryuji your contact information. We all need to communicate with each other for the investigation.

Normally, he would've been annoyed, but his mind was focused on more important things.

Kazuma: Alright, whatever.

Ren: See you soon.

Once the text conversation was over, he heard footsteps coming from behind him. He turned around, and it was her.

Suzui.

She was covering up her eye with her left eye with her hand, must've been where Kamoshida had hit her. She walked right by him, not even realizing that he was there. She kept her head down as she headed towards the exit.

With the information that he had learned, there was only one possible scenario that he could take that would benefit him and the others. He'll just have to go up to Suzui and confront her with this knowledge. When Kazuma voiced his doubts that anyone would come forward, he had the advantage. After all, he heard every word that was said during that 'meeting', so she'll have to confess.

Deciding to go with that approach, he walked after her.

"GAH!"

He clutched his head as mysterious pain coursed through his head.

He stopped his course of action, the pain being too great for him to move. This was the same pain he felt before he awakened to Ulysses, but this time, it was in the real world. As he looked around, he noticed the scenery around him was becoming distorted. What was happening? He didn't use the navigation app. Was he going back to the castle?

Suddenly a flash of light blinded Kazuma, causing him to clutch his eyes with his free hand.

When he removed his hand, his vision had returned only he wasn't in the school any longer.

He was back in the castle.

W-What? Why am I here again?! He looked around and saw that he was in the entrance hall. He noticed that he wasn't in his sleeveless battle attire nor did he have his mask. He was powerless. What's going on?
He noticed that there were guards all over the place, but for some reason were not paying any attention to him. As he turned around, he saw a guard coming towards him. He raised his fists up in defense but the guard didn’t seem to notice his defensive stance. Or rather, he didn’t notice him at all. In fact, what was most shocking is, the guard walked right through him.

_Huh?_ He turned back around to see the guard that had passed right through him to continue on, walking away from him as if he wasn’t even there. _What was that? What’s happening to me?_

He pulled out his phone and saw that he had bars, unlike his last trip into the castle, when Ryuji asked him and Amamiya to check their camera apps, he noticed he didn’t have cell reception. But this time, he did.

But what was most shocking about all of this was that, when his screen saver died down, Kazuma saw his reflection on his phone. He looked at his eyes were of a different color, his dark blue iris’ were replaced with that of a bloody red color.

"Guards! Increase security immediately!" A voice he knew broke through. He turned around and saw him. King Kamoshida, giving out orders to his minions. "If those damn thieves return, I want them dead! You hear me! You will bring me their heads!"

Just like the guards, he didn't seem to notice that Kazuma was there. Which means.

_I'm not really in the castle._ He believed. I'm just seeing what's happening in the castle from the real world. _That means I'm..._

"You will execute them on sight! You will-"

"Kazuma-san!"

_Huh?_ Just then, a flash blinded Kazuma's eyesight once more.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself back in Shujin Academy. The pain he felt before was gone and everything appeared to be back to normal.

Well, somewhat normal.

As he looked up, he saw that King Kamoshida was no longer in front of him, but instead, the real one, who had called out to him

"Mr. Kamoshida?" It was definitely the real one standing in front of him. Why was he here?

"You okay, kid? You looked like you were spacing out." The volleyball coach explained.

"Oh, uh..." Kazuma didn't know what to say, he didn't expect this man to actually come up and talk with him. He believed that, after his scuffle with his shadow-self, that this man disliked him, Amamiya, and Sakamoto. Plus, he was still reeling from what had happened.

"Wait, let me guess. Ms. Chouno put you on cleaning duty?" He chuckled a little. "Ah, that woman. I think it was her way of punishing you for being late the first day."

"R-Right." He muttered. He could feel himself fighting the urge to glare at this man. It was as if he had completely forgotten what he did! The bastard! "Well, I should-"

"Mind if we talk for a minute? I feel like we got off on the wrong foot when we first met." Kamoshida offered.
What is he planning? Kazuma frowned a little. This had to be a trick, what does he want with him? Wait, does he know I was listening in on his "meeting"?!

"It won't take long. Come, walk with me." The coach offered. While he could just walk away and ignore him, he didn't want the man to catch on what he's found out about him. He walked alongside Mr. Kamoshida, taking a small walk through the hallway. "Have you been enjoying your time here?"

"Y-Yes sir." He replied, it was a lie, he hated this school, but he chose to play along. "It's a great school."

"I'm glad to hear it." Kamoshida smiled. "Tell me, Kazuma-san. Do you play sports?"

"Well, I've..." He stuttered a bit, wondering where he was going with this questioning. Yes, he's played sports before but what does he want to know? "I've played before, yes."

"Ah! That's good to hear." He then gave of this grin that made Kazuma very uncomfortable. More uncomfortable when he placed his hand on his shoulder. "You know, I'm always open to new members for the volleyball team. Interested?"

He's asking me to join the team? Kazuma thought, skeptical as to what his game was.

"You would allow me to join?" He asked.

"Well, you'd have to try out, but if you're capable, you would most certainly be welcomed." Mr. Kamoshida explained. "We're actually holding a rally tomorrow. You're more than happy to participate. And if you make it, I'll even do you a favor?"

A favor? He didn't like the sound of that.

"That terrible attendance record of yours from your last school. I'll make it a clean slate as if it never existed. I can do that, you know." The coach offered. "What do you say?"

Was this man for real? Was he actually offering him a spot on his volleyball team? But more than that, was he actually offering to erase his bad attendance record and start from scratch.

No, that can't be it. This had to be some sort of trick. There is no way he would let him on the team with friendly and open arms, this had to be some sort of plan. What was he planning?

"I'll..." He wanted to flat out reject him, tell him off for even asking him to join his stupid team. However, he had to play along. "I'll consider it, sir."

"I'm certain you'll come around." Kamoshida removed his hand from the boy's shoulder and gave him a smile. "Well, the school's closing so, you'd best head on home. Hope to see you at the rally tomorrow. Have a good rest of your day." And with that, he left the boy to his devices.

He watched a Kamoshida left and once he was out of earshot, Kazuma didn't have to play along any longer. He glared at the direction where the coach took his exit, clenched his fist from the rage he felt, and cursed him as if he was still there.

"Go to hell, you narcissistic, egotistical, piece of crap. Join your team? Don't make me laugh. As if I would ever join your stupid volleyball team, you filthy jackhole!" He spewed out insults, letting out how he truly felt. Feeling truly and utterly disgusted for having to spare an ounce of his attention for that scumbag, he decided to leave this dump of a school, making his way towards the exit. "I will bury you, Kamoshida."
He made his promise as he left the school. While what happened earlier was still on his mind, he put it off for now. It was probably a side effect of being a Persona-User, he believed. Nothing to be concerned about right now.

He wasn't sure if Kamoshida's offer was a trick, but it's clear that he's got his eye on him. And if that is true, it's only a matter of time before he locks onto Amamiya.

*I know what I have to do.* Kazuma thought as he walked down the steps of the school, heading to the train station. *I have to talk to that girl.*

To Suzui.

For the first time, since their encounter at the train station, while he believed avoiding her would be the best course of action for both of them, he had no choice.

To take down King Kamoshida, he would finally have to talk to her face-to-face.

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After Ryuji went on home, Ren took it upon himself to venture around Shibuya in order to get a feel for the area. After all, it'd be embarrassing to always get lost, he can't rely on Kazuma to be his guide forever. As he walked around Central Street, he took note of all the hottest spots and establishments Shibuya had to offer. The most notable places to eat at were Big Bang Burger, Orenobeko, and a diner that offers a variety of interesting meals. For entertainment, there's a Gigolo arcade center, Toyo Cinemas movie theater, and Sing Sing Karaoke where people can sing their hearts out. There's also a video rental shop, a hotel called the Wilton Hotel, and even a gym called Protein Lovers that doesn't offer membership, but rather a ¥2,000 fee per visit.

Once he felt comfortable with the area, he made his way to Station Square. He had not so fond memories of this place, it being extremely crowded when he first arrived in Tokyo, as well as receiving the navigation app and having time around him stop momentarily. He walked to the Underground Walkway which had its own fruit stand that sold smoothies as well as magazine racks that offered part-time jobs. It's definitely something to take note of in the future, after all, Sojiro may feed him but asking for an allowance has to be out of the question.

He then went to check out the Underground Mall which offered a variety of stores and shops for people to spend their hard-earned cash, clothing stores, jewelry stores, florists, you name it.

*I think I know where everything is now. Time to head to the station.* Ren thought as he ended his adventure through Shibuya and left for the train station.

When he arrived he noticed that Kazuma hadn't arrived yet. As he waited, he thought over his talk with Ryuji and their opinions on the boy. It really goes to show just how little they knew about him or just what kind of person he really is. On one hand, he's rude, curt, unfriendly, glares at people that annoy him, and just overall hates everything at Shujin Academy, the school, and its students. To be frank, he couldn't really blame him with the number of rumormongers and gossip hounds that litter the place, it's no wonder he holds such disdain for the school.

Then there's the other part that confuses him, with how he acts he's nearly risked his life for them, first when he awakened to his Persona, then earlier today when he protected Ryuji from those Bicorns, even motivating him to stand up to Kamoshida, despite his harsh words.

Then there's the matter of his family, sure he's a transfer student, but he's living with a guardian instead of his parents. Who were they? From what he heard, they were "highly acclaimed individuals" according to the Principal. Meaning that, whoever they were, they must be pretty
important, maybe even famous.

Just who is Kei Kazuma?

*Living the way he does, I wonder if he's lonely.* Ren wondered. He felt that way sometimes. Even though back at his old school, he often stayed after late so he could get out of the house, he missed his Mother and Father. They haven't contacted him since he left and wondered if they were okay. His neighborhood wasn't that big so when he was arrested, it was a huge deal. Maybe they were just waiting for the drama to die down? That's a possibility.

Either way, it doesn't matter right now. He had more important things to worry about.

"What are you brooding about?"

"Huh?" His thoughts were cut off as Kazuma entered the picture, having approached him only to find him in deep thought. "Oh, hey Kazuma. Sorry, I was just thinking."

"Whatever." He looked away, waiting for the train.

"Oh, here's your food." Ren offered him the bag containing his meal. "It's a large barbecue bowl. I hope that's alright."

He looked at the bag, the aroma of beef and barbecue emitting from it was enticing. He took the bag from the probationer and refocused his attention elsewhere. "Thanks."

"Anytime." He replied.

Once the train arrived, the two boarded the train bound for Yongen-Jaya. When they arrived, the two walked until they stopped at the street that led to Cafe Leblanc. Once they arrived, Ren stopped to part way with his partner.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Kazuma. Let's do our best." He bowed before taking his leave.

"Amamiya." He called out, stopping the probationer in his tracks. He turned around, wondering why Kazuma called out to him. "Kamoshida spoke to me before I left school."

That immediately got his attention. "What?"

"He came up to me when I tried to leave." He continued.

This immediately caused Ren to worry. Was Morgana wrong? Did their encounter with Kamoshida's shadow affect the real one? And more importantly, what did he want with Kazuma? He walked back over to his fellow transfer student to get answers, not only find out what the man wanted but also to protect his new partner-in-crime.

"What did he want?" Ren asked.

"He..." Kazuma wanted to tell him the whole truth, but he knew he couldn't. He had his plan and he couldn't involve Amamiya in it and especially not Sakamoto. All he could do was tell him half of the story. "He asked me to try out for the Volleyball team."

Okay, that DEFINITELY set off some red alarms. After all the times he eavesdropped on Kamoshida talking bad about Shujin's new 'problem transfer students' there's no way in hell that he would want Kazuma on his team. This was definitely a trick and if what he heard from the principal regarding his Kazuma's parents was correct, then he had a gut feeling as to why
Kamoshida would offer him a spot on his volleyball team.

"I don't know what his game is, but it has to be a trick." Kazuma believed.

"It is," Ren added. His certainty caused his partner to cross his arms and raise an eyebrow.

"You seem certain?" He pointed out.

"Because I am." The probation explained. "It was after classes had ended on our first day. I overheard Kamoshida and the Principal talking about us."

"Did he now?" Kazuma questioned with an annoyed roll of his eyes. "Let me guess, he complained about us being at the school."

"Pretty much, but it's more than that." Ren continued. "They were talking about your parents."

"What?" The mention of his family caused him to unfold his arms and look at his fellow transfer student with a large frown, one that abandoned his initial annoyance and now embodied anger. "What did they say?" He demanded.

"The Principal said that they were, and I quote 'Tokyo's most influential and widely acclaimed individuals' or something like that." He quoted Kobayakawa's words. "Kamoshida's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree when he heard that. Almost like an idea popped into his head."

"So that's why? The bastard wants to mooch off my family's rep." He angrily deduced, having finally uncovered his plan. "Sakamoto was right about him, he really has no shame in anything he does."

"Yeah, no kidding." Ren put his hands in his pockets before continuing. "Who knows how many people will suffer if we don't stop him. We have to do something."

For Takamaki's sake too. He thought of his blonde classmate and wondered what her tie is to Kamoshida.

"Hmph, whatever you say, Amamiya," Kazuma said as he took his leave. "Thanks for the food."

"Wait." Ren reached out and grabbed his wrist, preventing him from leaving. "I'm not finished talking to you yet."

"Now what?" He replied annoyingly to Amamiya's persistence.

"It's about your family, Kazuma. You told me you're living with a guardian but, what about your parents?" He brought up. His fellow transfer student kept his eyes away so he couldn't tell what Kazuma was thinking or feeling at the moment. "You know so much about me and Ryuji, but we know next to nothing about you. Just who are you Kei Kazuma?"

He didn't answer, he just kept silent and still for a few seconds. The moment Ren brought up his parents, memories of the worst day of his life flashed through his head. It was instant but the pain lingered.

Watching his world being crushed in front of him, remembering the disgusting taste of copper that stained his face that day.

In that moment Kazuma roughly pulled his arm away, escaping Amamiya's grasp.

"Kazuma?" He questioned worriedly.
"You listen to me and listen well, Ren Amamiya." He spoke in a low, harsh, and cold tone. "I'm a man of my word, so I will help you and Sakamoto take down Kamoshida. But..." He looked over his shoulder, glaring at his fellow transfer student. "...don't you dare pry into my life."

With that, he left, heading back to his residence. As he walked away, Ren contemplated his warning and thought that Kazuma was being a bit of a hypocrite. He called out Ryuji for not being totally honest with him and yet he himself refuses to shed any info about himself. Even so, he didn't want to give up. After all, that's not who he is. He wanted to know more about his fellow transfer student, his likes, and dislikes, what makes him tick his hobbies. But more than that, he truly does want to be his friend, because even though Kazuma was a jerk sometimes, there was one thing they both had in common.

*He's like me before I met him and Ryuji. He's... lonely.* He believed, promising to redouble his efforts at befriending him as he walked away, heading to Leblanc.

Kazuma entered Beauty Heights, ready to eat his dinner and just relax. Today had been a stressful day, from having to enter the castle again, to eavesdropping on Kamoshida assaulting Suzui, and now Amamiya wanting to know more about him.

*Who does that guy think he is?* This wasn't a give and take relationship. In fact, there was no relationship or friendship whatsoever. It was a simple partnership nothing more. Why does he care so much? Why does he want to get to know him so badly?

He was annoying, that much is true. But... But now that he thinks about, he can say for sure that out of all the idiots at that school, Amamiya was nothing like any of them. Even though the guy has a criminal record, he doesn't let that or the rumors about him stop him from being himself.

He was annoying, but Kazuma respected him greatly. After all, if he didn't respect him, he wouldn't be dealing with him.

Sakamoto, on the other hand, was another story. The guy was ten times as annoying as Amamiya, a complete loudmouth who really doesn't know how to shut up, and the kind of guy who wears his emotions on his sleeves. But, just like Amamiya, he was different, so he did have some respect for him.

*I suppose affiliating with those two isn't the worst thing ever.* He admitted as he entered his apartment building.

Tori sat at her desk, reading one of her books. She looked up and saw that he had returned home, greeting him with a smile.

"You're awfully late, Kazzy-kun." She remarked.

"My class rep put me on cleaning duty at the last second." He told her.

"Ah, that's why. Anyway, did you have a great day at school?" She asked.

"Something like that." Kazuma lied. Today was anything but great.

"Well, I'm glad that..." She stopped as she noticed the bag he was carrying. "Did you go to Orenobeko for dinner?"

"Huh?" He replied before realizing that she was talking about the bag carrying his beef bowl. "A... classmate bought it for me. He thought I might be hungry after cleaning duty."
"A classmate huh?" She simply questioned before returning to her book. "Wait, a classmate!" As she repeated the word, she shot out of her desk, shutting her book close.

*Oh no.* Kazuma braced for impact.

Tori instantly jumped over her desk, sprinting up to Kazuma, her hands clasped together as she had stars in her eyes and a large smile on her face.

"A classmate bought you dinner! Who is he?! Or is it a she?! Have you made some friends?! OhmygodmylittleKazzy-kunismakingfriends! I'M SO HAPPY!" She cheered.

*What happened to your unnecessary noise rule, Tori?* Kazuma complained as his guardian made a huge deal out of this.

"This is so exciting! I have to meet them! I must!" She demanded.

"Sure. One day, Tori." He said just so she would calm down.

"Aww." She then wrapped her arms around him, giving him a hug. "I'm proud of you."

Kazuma felt touched by those words. As weird as she was, Tori always had a heart of gold. While he respected Amamiya and Sakamoto, the word respect wouldn't even begin to describe what he felt for his former nanny turned guardian.

Which is why he couldn't let her get too close. Especially now.

"Thanks." He said as she released him. "I'm heading up."

"Alright. Be sure to lock up, Okay?" She reminded him. He gave her a simple nod as he left.

As he walked up the stairs, he someone exit the apartment across from him. He recognized him as the Detective that left to go to work three days ago, he and Tori appeared to be on friendly terms. As it turned out, they were neighbors.

Kazuma simply chose to ignore him, he wasn't important at the moment. He walked up to his apartment and fished out his key.

"Oh, hello." The man chose to greet him. "You must be my new neighbor."

He turned around and saw the man trying to greet him. He appeared friendly as he held out his hand.

"I'm Masu Okabe. It's nice to meet you." He introduced, holding his hand out for a handshake.

Normally, he would've just brushed him off, but since this man was his neighbor and a resident in Tori's apartment building, she would never let him hear the end of it if he was rude to one of her residents. He simply decided to greet him, hoping an introduction would send him away.

"Kei Kazuma." He shook the man's hand.

"Kazuma?" He questioned as the name sounded familiar. "Wait. Would you happen to be related to Atsuro and Yuko Kazuma? The Best Detectives in Tokyo?"

*Not now.* He looked away, not wanting to deal with this, especially with a complete stranger.

"Not anymore." He finished.
"Oh, right. My apologies." Okabe bowed apologetically, remembering that they were deceased. "Your parents were heroes to me. Me and my wife often watched them on interview talk shows. They were truly an inspiration."

"Thank you," Kazuma said. It was nice to know that some people haven't forgotten his family. "You're a Detective too?"

"Huh? Oh, right!" Okabe pulled out what appeared to be his badge and showed it to him. "Detective Masu Okabe, Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department."

A Detective is living next door to him? Well, he seems reliable enough.

"Anyway, I was on my way out. I hope to see you around, Kazuma-san. It was nice meeting you."

He bowed before taking his leave.

Detective Masu Okabe, huh? Never heard of him. Kazuma thought. He doesn't seem to be a rookie so he's probably worked as a Detective for quite some time and since he knew his parents, it's possible he's been a Detective around the time they were alive.

If Tori's friends with him, then he must be trustworthy.

Pushing aside his meeting with the Detective. He entered the apartment and sat at the dinner table to eat the beef bowl Amamiya bought for him.

Barbecue, huh? Well, I'm not complaining. He had no reason too. He liked barbecue beef.

Once he finished, he placed everything in the trash before heading to his room to rest and relax, putting in his earphones, listening to music.

But, no matter how hard he tried to put the day behind him, he couldn't. The thoughts on what happened earlier still weighed heavily on his mind.

You listen to me, you little bitch. He winced a little as remembered the words he used to verbally assault Suzui, adding insult to injury after he physically attacked her. If I ever hear such shit come out of your mouth again, I'll happily remind you that your position can easily be replaced with another.

"She didn't deserve that." Kazuma argued. It's one thing to chastise someone for their performance during Volleyball practice but to hit someone because of it is another thing. He knew what he had to do. He had to confront Suzui with what he learned. If he was to stop Kamoshida and protect her, he would have to talk to her.

Wait? Protect her?

Is that the reason he was going through with this plan? To protect some girl he doesn't know? Some girl he came across at the train station who ironically is his classmate? This girl was nothing more than a stranger to him.

Why? He thought it over as conflicted with the reason he wanted to talk to her. She has nothing to do with me. If anything she's better off not talking to me. So... why am I worried about her?

Before he could think about it some more, he felt his phone vibrate, likely another text from Amamiya. He pulled it out and groaned. It wasn't Amamiya.
It was much worse.

Ryuji: Hey man, hope you don't mind, Ren gave me your number and chat ID.

Ryuji: Are you getting this?

Ryuji: Dude?

Ryuji: Hello?!

Ryuji: Earth to Kazuma!

"My life sucks."

He opened the door and entered only to find Sojiro sitting near the door reading a newspaper. The moment he heard the doorbell, he looked up to see his ward had arrived.

"Oh, you're back." The cafe owner greeted. "I take it you actually went to school today?"

"Yep. Pretty standard day, really." Ren replied.

"Well, as long as you're not getting into any trouble, it's fine by me." He added. "Look, I don't know what you've been up to, but trust me, you'll be gone if you start causing problems."

Ah, here it is ladies and gentlemen. My Sojiro Sakura threat of the day. He quipped in his head.

"In case you forget, your life is not a free one right now." He continued.

Before he could reply, he felt his phone ring, notifying him that a message has been received. He pulled it out and saw that Ryuji had texted him.

Ryuji: Hey I decided to go ahead and message you. Can you see this?

Ren: Nope. I can't see a thing.

Ryuji: Don't lie! You SO can.

Ren chuckled a bit, unable to help himself.

Ryuji: I tried messaging Kazuma earlier but he didn't reply. You sure you gave me the right number?

Ren: I did. I think he's just ignoring you.

Ryuji: Seriously? What a dick. Oh well, it doesn't matter. I'm gonna be counting on you tomorrow, OK?

Ren: Oh? What about?

Ryuji: Cmon, dude. Don't play dumb.

Ren: Sorry, couldn't help it XD.

Ryuji: Uh huh. Look, we've come this far, so you gotta stick with me to the end.
Ren: Don't worry, buddy. I'm with you til death do us part.

Ryuji: Uh, I'm not sure that's how you use that phrase, bro. Anyway, let's just save those guys who've been getting abused.

Ren: Got it. See you tomorrow.

Once he put his phone away, he returned his attention back to Sojiro who appeared annoyed as he felt like his ward was ignoring his warnings.

"Sheesh, are you even listening to me?" He complained.

"Don't cause trouble or my ass is out. Loud and clear, sir!" Ren gave a mock salute to his guardian. Sojiro simply rolled his eyes and let out a sigh. "Just stay away from bad influences, OK?"

Ren returned to normal, giving a short nod as he decided to turn in for the day, walking past the cafe owner to head up to his room.

"Hey, I'm gonna head home for the night." The older man said as he placed his newspaper on the bar. "I'll lock the store up. Don't go wandering out."

With one final nod, he walked up the stairs and into his room. He wrote down what happened today in his journal, minus the trip to the castle, and went to change into his Pijamas.

As he sat down on the bed, he heard his phone ring again. It appears that Ryuji wasn't done with him yet. He pulled out his phone and saw that it wasn't just Ryuji, but rather a group chat set up by Ryuji.

Ryuji: Alright guys, I got the group chat set up. Can you guys see this?

Ren: Loud and clear, Cap'n.

Ryuji: Pirate jokes, dude? Really?

Ren: I just had to get one in.

Ryuji: What about you, Kazuma? You gettin' this?

No reply came from the other transfer student. At this point, Ren couldn't tell if he was busy or outright ignoring them.

Ryuji: Dude, stop ignoring me! Answer the damn the message!

Kazuma: Why did you give this moron my number, Amamiya? He's been spamming me with texts non-stop.

Ryuji: So you were getting my messages, you asshole!

Ren: Well, seems like the group chat is all set up. Good work, Ryuji.

Ren went and changed the subject, wanting to get back on track.

Ryuji: No problem. Listen, you guys had that red eyeball thingy on your phones, right?
Kazuma: The navigation app?

Ryuji: Yeah, that's the one. I found it on my phone too.

Igor must've installed it on his phone, now that Ryuji's a Persona-User. Ren thought it over as he learned of his friend acquiring the navigation app.

Ryuji: I don't even remember installing it!

Ren: Join the club.

Ryuji: For real. What is this thing? You think it's being downloaded on its own somehow?

Kazuma: Amamiya thinks it has something to do with our Personas.

Ryuji: Oh! That makes sense. I think.

Kazuma: You think?

Ryuji: Shaddup!

Ryuji: With this app, we can go back to the castle, right?

Ren: Seems like it.

Ryuji: Basically, it's gonna depend on how we use it. But first, we gotta find evidence for the beatings. I'm counting on you guys, all right? Don't go ditching school on me.

Ren: He's talking to you Kazuma.

Kazuma: Shut up Amamiya.

Ren: Sorry, couldn't help it. Goodnight you two.

Once the conversation was over, he put in the alarm and went to sleep. As he slept, he wondered if he would end up in that velvet room again. He wouldn't right? He's already been there two times in a row.

And it appears three times the charm.

Ren woke up to find himself back in his prison cell. He looked over at his cell door to find the twin wardens standing on either side as Igor sat patiently at his desk. He decided the best thing to do is to get this over with. He got up and walked over to the cell, clutching the bars.

"Welcome to the velvet room." Igor greeted. "I thought about resuming our previous conversation tonight. That is why I have summoned you."

"That's fine. I have questions for you." Ren replied only to have Caroline slam the cell bars with her baton.

"Our Master is speaking! Be silent, inmate!" She hissed.

"Tell me, what are your thoughts. Are you becoming accustomed to this place?" He asked.
"You could say that. Coming here three times in a row, it's almost like second nature by now." Ren said.

"Ah, glad to hear it. It seems you have nerves of steel." Igor commented before continuing. "Your rehabilitation determines if ruin can be stopped. Yet, such a feat cannot be done by you alone. But today, you and the Outsider have entered a partnership with someone who awoke to the same power, haven't you?"

"You're referring to Ryuji?" He asked.

"Involving yourself with others is an important foundation for your recovery. You've done well." He complimented. "That said, I am not advising the formation of superficial relationships. It must not be of frivolity, but a ring of those who would, by morals or faith lend you their strength."

"So, strong friendships?" The inmate questioned.

"In other words, they are bonds with those who have been robbed of their places to belong." The long-nosed man continued. "The expansion of said ring will, in return, help you mature as well."

"I see," Ren said as he thought it over. He was likely referring to that strange voice he heard when he agreed to help Ryuji take down Kamoshida. It must've symbolized their partnership, or bond, as Igor put it.

"Personas are the strength of heart," Justine explained. "The stronger the bonds that surround you, the more powerful your Personas will become."

"There are countless people in the city who have talents that a weakling like you doesn't." Caroline brought up. "You better rack that noggin of yours and get them on your side. We'll change that into power."

"Indeed." Igor nodded in agreement with the wardens. "You should be prepared to use even myself, or your ambitions will not come to fruition."

"Well..." All of this was making his brain hurt. Becoming stronger by forming powerful bonds? Sounds like something out of a crappy anime. Then again, if it helps strengthen Arsene and himself, he'll take it. "I'll do my best."

Igor simply chuckled. "We have a deal then."

...  

_ I am thou, thou art I. _

_ Thou hast acquired a new vow. _

...  

_ It shall become the wings of rebellion _

_ that breaketh thy chains of captivity. _

...  

_ With the birth of the Fool Persona, _
I have obtained the blessing that shall lead to freedom and new power.

... There it is again. Ren heard the voice again, detailing his partnership with Igor. He was beginning to understand it a little. From here on out, he'll just have to do his best with the people he meets. All right.

"You will understand it all in due time. Continue devoting yourself to your rehabilitation." Igor finished.

"Now, this conversation's over! Get lost, inmate!" Caroline shooed away.

"Until next time, ladies." He gave a mocking bow, returning to his slumber in hopes that he will awaken in the real world.

4/13 - Wednesday

Ren and Kazuma walked to school together as they normally did. They didn't exchange any words, Ren didn't think he'd want to talk after what happened between them the other day. Even though there was silence, he didn't object to walking to school together, a sign that he wasn't mad at him.

On their way, they overheard two dissatisfied first-years talking amongst themselves, discussing the volleyball rally that would take place today.

"How annoying. We've barely started high school, and already they're making us play at a volleyball rally? And why are they pitting us against the teacher team? Kamoshida's gonna crush us."

"But we get to see his technique live and in person, though. We should totally get spiked on!" His friend replied.

"Yeah, OK. You're gonna get your face smashed in. Just look at how banged up the volleyball team is. What the hell goes on during their practices?"

If only you idiots knew just how much "practice" is actually involved. Kazuma sneered in disgust at their ignorance.

"You alright?" He heard Ren ask.

"I'm fine." He looked away.

"Hey, listen. About the other day..." He brought up. "I wasn't trying to be nosy, or anything. I'm sorry if I offended you."

"Keep your apologies, Amamiya." Kazuma fired back. "I'm not mad at you, so just forget about it."

"Well, if you say so." Ren simply said. "Let's do our best today. If there's dirt on Kamoshida, we'll find it."

"Yeah." He said as they arrived at the school.

Once they went their separate ways, Kazuma head to 2-E, entered the classroom and sat in his seat. He looked out the window as he thought over his own plan to get dirt on Kamoshida.
First things first, he'll need to confront that girl, Suzui, with his knowledge of her little "meeting" with Kamoshida. He'll have to get her alone, maybe after school?

No wait, she's a member of the volleyball team, she'll have practice after school.

It's not like he can stay after for no reason. Students and teachers may get suspicious. If only he had a reason to stay after.

As he thought over his plan, he felt someone touching his arms.

"Huh?" He shot up as the physical contact he was feeling earlier disappeared only to feel it again in his pockets. He looked to the side to see his class representative not only invading his privacy but also his pockets. "What are you doing to me?"

"Huh?" Emi looked up and saw that she got caught. She immediately stood up, holding her hands up with an innocent smile on her face. "Ah, you caught me! Sorry Kazuma-kun, I was just checking out a lead."

"Lead?" He questioned.

"Yep. Rumor has Amamiya-kun carries a knife. Since I've seen you and Sakamoto-kun hanging around him, I was checking to see if you were carrying it for him." She then pulled out her notebook and checked something off. "Rumor: False."

What an idiot. He rolled his eyes, looking away from his class rep. He had more important things to do than deal with her.

"So..." She then sat in her seat and just like she said the other day, it happened to be the seat in front of him. "Hope cleaning duty wasn't too bad. Ms. Chouno often uses it as punishment whenever a student acts out. You should've seen her last year. Utterly ruthless."

He didn't reply, he just continued to ignore her. He closed his eyes, hoping to get a small snooze before class starts. Unfortunately, it was cut short as he felt a hand smack his desk, causing him to shoot up instantly.

"Hey! Why are you ignoring me again?!" She pouted a little before realizing why he's giving her the cold shoulder. "Did I come off as bitchy the other day? I wasn't trying to be."

"Do you always talk this much?" He decided to give her a reply.

"What can I say, I'm a talker, especially to the new kids." She teased a little.

He growled a little, knowing this girl was probably going to talk his ear off until class starts. He figured if he ignored her, she'd get the message, but that didn't appear to be working.

...Then again, maybe he shouldn't ignore her. Not yet anyway.

She was the one who gave him cleaning duty the other day, and thanks to the time spent cleaning up this godforsaken classroom, he was able to catch Amamiya's class rep deliver a message to Shiho, who had probably just gotten off practice.

This was his chance. If he was going to confront her, this may be the only way.

"It's, Matsumoto, right?" He questioned.

"Yep, but you can call me Emi if you want." She replied.
"I was wondering. Could you have Chouno put me on cleaning duty again?" Kazuma asked which greatly confused her as to why he would want to do cleaning duty a second time.

"What?" She raised an eyebrow. "May I ask why?"

"Well, I..." He muttered as he fished for an excuse. "I'm in no hurry to go home today."

"Hmm." She thought it over, thinking as to whether his excuse was genuine before replying. "Well, if you're offering, who am I to stop you? I'll tell Chouno after class."

"Cool." He said as he heard someone else enter the classroom.

"Oh! Thank god I made it on time." Ryuji rushed into the class as he walked over to his desk. "Hey, dude." He greeted before noticing him talking with his class rep. "Matsumoto-san?"

"Ah, Sakamoto-kun. Glad you decided to show up, and on time." She said, crossing her arms.

"Y-Yeah." He scratched his head a little. Once he sat down, he whispered over to Kazuma. "You ready, dude? Let's do our best today."

"Whatever." He replied, turning back to gazing out the window.

More students entered the classroom, each taking their seats as they waited for Ms. Chouno to arrive and start class. Breaking his gaze from the window, he looked past Ryuji to see if she was here. He looked and there she was.

Suzui.

He tried to hold back his gasp as he looked at her face etched in sorrow and pain that came with what appeared to be a fully-formed bruise on her left eye.

_Goddamn it!_ He cursed. He didn't know a bruise would form so soon, and now, everyone's going to be asking about it, should they notice.

Soon after, Ms. Chouno entered the classroom, ready to begin the lecture for the day.

"Good morning class. Please, listen up." She got everyone's attention. "As you all know, today is the volleyball rally. Once class is over, head to the gymnasium once you've changed. Got it?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw as Suzui suppressed a small whine, clearly not wanting to attend the rally.

Alright. Kazuma clenched his fist. _Let's do this._

The three watched as the volleyball team held their so-called "rally". If anything, it was more like an ego trip because every now and then, Kamoshida would use that spike of his to completely dominate the other side. The one who seems to be getting it worse is Mishima, Ren's class rep, who strangely enough seems to be on the receiving on of Kamoshida's volleyball spike.

_So that's why his duplicate was being pummeled by volleyballs._ Ren deduced after watching the last few rounds of Mishima get hit in the face. The boy didn't even seem to be trying.

"Man, you've still got it, Coach!" One of the teacher's on Kamoshida's team cheered for their win.

"Thanks. Let's go for one more!" The coach said, ready for another round.
Ren sat next to Ryuji, donned in the P.E. uniform meant for boys, wearing the red tracksuit over it. He looked over to see Ryuji not wearing his tracksuit and his shirt's sleeves folded up. Kazuma refused to wear the suit as well, only he wore the shirt normally.

He noticed that Ryuji wasn't focused on the game, but rather, on someone. He looked over and saw Takamaki, fiddling with her pigtails, clearly not interested in the game. She was seated next to a girl with dark black hair in a ponytail tied with a pink hairband. She looked down, upset about something, but noticed the bruise on her left eye. Judging from the leg-brace on her leg, this must be "Suzui" that Ryuji spoke of during their last trip to the castle.

"Those two, thick as thieves. Hasn't changed a bit." Ryuji commented.

"Huh?" Ren wondered what he meant by that.

The spiky blonde didn't answer but let out a loud yawn, uninterested in the game. "Pretty boring. Right?"

Ren simply chuckled while Kazuma kept his focus on the game.

He just knew that soon, Kamoshida would call him out, challenge him in an attempt to introduce him to the volleyball team. Even if he did horrible, he was sure the man would find some loophole to put him on the team, if only to mooch off his parent's reputation. As if he would ever allow that.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Suzui seated next to that blonde girl, Takamaki. She kept her head down the entire time, not really focused on the match. Just then, she looked over to his direction, causing him to look back towards the game so she wouldn't notice.

Shiho looked over to the left to see her newest classmate, Kazuma seated next to Ryuji. On the other side of the spiky blonde, was likely the rumored transfer student who was in 2-D, just like Ann.

"They seem close." She noted.

"Huh?" Ann questioned before looking over to where she was staring to find her classmate, seated with Sakamoto and the transfer student in Shiho's class.

_I wonder if Amamiya-kun is getting along with Sakamoto._ They've been hanging out a lot lately. She thought, looking over to Shiho's new classmate sitting next to the spiky blonde. _Not sure about him, though._

The students cheering grew louder as they watched Kamoshida swoop in and claim victory once again, performing his signature spike which aimed directly for, you guessed it...

...Poor Mishima's face.

The three winced a little as the boy took the full force of the volleyball, knocking him unconscious and hitting the ground hard.

_That was on purpose!_ Ren thought as he watched Kamoshida rush to the boy's aid.

"Oh, crap! Sorry!" The coach rushed over to Mishima. "Hey, are you all right?!" He asked but got no response. "Someone! Take him to the nurse's office!"
One of his teammates went over to the fallen boy, lifted him up, bringing his arm around his shoulders, and helped him to the nurse.

His apology was worth nothing in the eyes of the three delinquents who saw that for what it really was. Ryuji gripped the volleyball next to his leg and threw it.

"He'll pay soon enough." The spiky blonde proclaimed.

"All right, let's resume the match!" Kamoshida exclaimed, wanting to move on. "Would anyone like to participate?!"

*There he goes.* Kazuma thought. This was it. The coach was enacting his plan.

Ren had noticed too. He would likely target Kazuma soon if no one speaks up. But, he wasn't going to let that happen. It was time to give Kamoshida a taste of his own medicine and put that narcissist's ego to shame.

"Let's have some fun," Ren said as he stood up.

"Huh?" Ryuji looked as his friend left their spot and walked onto the court. Kazuma noticed too, watching as Amamiya raised his hand high before walking any further.

"Mind if I tag in?!" Ren called out, getting everybody's attention.

Ann and Shiho looked over to see him, declaring his desire to join in on the game. Was he serious?

"Amamiya-kun." The blonde girl whispered as she watched the boy hold his hand high, asking for permission.

"So, you want to play, huh Amamiya-san?" Kamoshida smirked a little. While this wasn't his original plan, this could actually be interesting. "Alright. One of you sit out." He ordered one of the students on the other team to tag out.

One he was allowed, he dropped his hand and walked onto the court. Soon enough, he heard people boo him, his presence onto the court creating a negative reaction.

"Get off the court, criminal!"

"Show that thug who's boss, Mr. Kamoshida!"

"Put that piece of shit in his place!"

*Wow, I must be that popular.* He adjusted his glasses, the taunts and insults were almost humorous.

"Assholes. They don't even know him." Ryuji spat angrily, the insults among the students were enough to set him off.

"Always trying to play hero, the idiot." Kazuma thought aloud, knowing the real reason why Ren was challenging Kamoshida. He heard the cries and boos of everyone in the gym, utterly disgusted by their behaviors. He looked around and saw that Suzui and Takamaki, did not share their sentiments. The latter looked pissed off due to the hate Ren was receiving while former actually appeared to be quite worried and concerned, fearing that he was going to get hurt. It was from looking at that sad look in her eyes that he knew he couldn't stand by and do nothing. Just like his father said, you can either do nothing or do something. "Damn it."

Against his character and better judgment, Kazuma stood up and walked over to the court. He
didn't even bother asking for permission, he approached one of the volleyball team members from behind an tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention.

"I'm tagging in. Beat it." He warned.

"R-Right." He meekly said, walking away. Now everyone's focus was on Kazuma as he took his place onto the court. Ren simply smirked with gratitude for having his back.

"I'm joining in." He declared. "That a problem?"

Shiho watched as her worried expression for the transfer student evaporated and replaced with that of surprise as her classmate took to the court to challenge Kamoshida.

It was... really cool actually.

"So, the transfer students want to play, eh?" The Coach smiled as his opponents stood together to challenge him. "Alright, I'm game! You both ready?"

"Oh, I'm ready," Ren smirked as he reached up and removed his glasses, finally showing the entire school what he looked like without them, his eyes giving off an intense gaze. He put them in his pockets before reaching up to his tracksuit. "The question is..." He then took off his tracksuit, throwing it over his shoulder into Ryuji's direction. "...are you?"

His voice just oozed with confidence which did not go unnoticed by the people around him. Ryuji let out a little whistle, excited to see him take on Kamoshida. Ann could only watch in astonishment as she saw one of the bravest acts ever performed during her time at Shujin Academy. Kazuma just rolled his eyes.

"Show off". He scoffed before turning his attention back to the volleyball coach. "Word is you have a national-winning spike, Mr. Kamoshida," Kazuma spoke up, popping his neck a little, readying himself. "Can you prove that? Or are you just all talk.?"

"Kazuma-kun." Shiho watched as her classmate bravely spoke to Mr. Kamoshida in an insulting manner. She only hoped he would not get hurt in the long run.

Kamoshida kept his anger hidden at these boys for their insolent taunts. "Alright, let's begin the game."

As one of Kamoshida's teammates prepared to serve the ball, Ren and Kazuma briefly looked at one another. It felt like they were back in the castle, that understanding they both shared when they fought against a shadow, that partnership they both had when they shot down Jack O' Lanterns with model guns, and their teamwork in helping Ryuji take down Eligor. They both gave a short nod as they prepared for the match to begin.

It felt as if time has slowed down as they both prepared their plan of attack.

Kamoshida thinks he's smart, but I've uncovered his tricks. Ren began as the ball was served. He tries to scare us psychologically by making his teammates do most of the work...

...He stays in the background, attempting to psych us out into thinking the next serve over to his side could be a spike. Think again! Kazuma hit the ball, sending it over the net. No, not just any serve would do. He wants the ball as high as it can be, that way...

...He can aim for one of us, just like he did with Mishima. Ren kept thinking as one of his teammates hit the ball. Too bad for him, I've picked up on some of his bad habits. Whenever he's
planning to spike he...

...Clenches his left hand to crack his knuckles, as if to ready himself. Kazuma caught on as he watched the Coach smirk lightly and clenched his left hand into a fist. When he does that, it means...

...The spike is coming! Ren watched as one of his teammates hit the ball. Once it reached the net, he watched the Coach go for the move. He had to stop him! Your spike may be strong, Kamoshida. But you forgot that I'm younger and... The coach leaped to perform his spike, but unfortunately for him, he wasn't quick enough.

FASTER!

Using all the strength he had, Ren slammed his hand into the volleyball, performing a spike of his own. The ball landed into one of the teacher's faces, causing him to clutch his face in pain.

The entire gym gasped and went silent as they watched the infamous transfer student, Ren Amamiya, block Kamoshida's signature victory spike and win the round, alongside Kei Kazuma.

"Yes!" Ryuji threw his hands up in the air in excitement as he saw his friends put that pervert in his place.

"Holy..." Ann watched in awe as the look on Kamoshida's face, a face of utter defeat, nearly made her cheer.

"W-Wow." Shiho felt the same as her classmate stood alongside the infamous criminal and together, they blocked the P.E. teacher's spike.

Kamoshida was speechless, unable to move a muscle after being humiliated in front of the entire student body. "H-How could I lose, to these two?!!"

"Well, that was fun. But, I think one round is enough for me." Ren quipped as he put his glasses back on. "Good game, Mr. Kamoshida." He gave a formal bow as he turned around and tagged out.

"Hmph." Kazuma, on the other hand, sent a harsh glare toward the volleyball coach. "That's my answer." And with that, he turned around. As he walked back over to his two companions, he briefly looked over to where Shiho was sitting and their eyes met.

Happy now, Suzui? Kazuma thought as her sorrowful expression turned into one that was awestruck by what she had witnessed.

"That was effin' awesome!" Ryuji exclaimed as he gave Ren a high five and Kazuma a pat on the back. "Holy shit!"

"It was something," Ren replied, turning to his partner-in-crime. "You did good Kazuma."

"That... was satisfying." He admitted, putting that scumbag in his place felt so good.

"You can say that again." Ren said. "Alright guys, fun time is over. You ready?"

"Hell yeah! After watching that, I'm all fired up!" Sakamoto said, pumped up and ready to get to work.

"Hmph." Kazuma gave a simple nod.

"Alright then, it's showtime!" He exclaimed as he put on his tracksuit, heading out of the gym with
Little did they know that while the game resumed, one individual kept her gaze on the boys and saw that they were leaving the gym with determined expressions.

As Ann watched them leave the gym, she wondered what they could be doing.

*What are they up to?*

Chapter End Notes

That last part was the most satisfying scene I've ever written. Being able to put Kamoshitbag in his place felt good. Bastard deserves it as we all know the volleyball rally was nothing more than an ego trip, I guess you could say we took a spike to his ego MWAHAHAHAHAHA! Not funny? :(  

Til next time.
This is, without a doubt, my favorite chapter to write, at least for now it is.

You'll see why in a minute.

Without further ado, enjoy the 9th chapter.

The three made their way to the part of the courtyard where it was quiet and empty. With benches and vending machines, this would serve as their base. Now that they were alone and away from prying eyes and ears, it was time to begin the investigation.

"Man, that asshole was actin' like a king the whole time," Ryuji complained.

"Seriously. This "Volleyball rally" was nothing more than an ego trip, plain and simple." Ren concluded.

"Damn right, and how he acted like he was worried about Mishima. What an abusive d-bag!" He continued before giving the two a thumbs up. "But you guys effin' rocked! Definitely, put that bastard in his place."

"I'm sorry, are we going to talk about the volleyball rally all day, or are we going to get started?" Kazuma said impatiently.

"R-Right." Ryuji dropped his complaints before getting back to the task at hand. "Now's our chance to go look for the guys we saw were slaves yesterday. All of the members of the Volleyball team should be here today." He clenched his fist, rubbing the side of his leg with his free hand as he thought that this was the time to get serious. "I'll be sure to find someone to spill about Kamoshida's physical abuse. Just you wait, asshole."

"So, where should we start?" Ren started.

"Well, the first one that popped out was a guy from Class D, so let's start from there." the spiky blonde offered.

"Isn't that your class, Amamiya?" Kazuma questioned.

"That's right." He nodded before offering a suggestion. "How about you lead the questioning for this one Kazuma. I don't think he'll talk to me."

"And people have been avoidin' me lately, so..." Ryuji said.

"Fine." He groaned. He knew this was a waste of time. He doubted any of the volleyball members will willingly testify. But, for the time being, until he can enact his own plan, he'll humor the two. Who knows? Maybe one of them will confess.

"And Kazuma, try to play nice, please." The probationer added.
"Hmph." He turned away, not promising anything.

"Alright, guys. Let's do this."

The two followed Kazuma's lead as they made their way to the 2nd-floor hallway. Once they entered the 2-D, it was easy to spot the volleyball team member they were looking for.

"There he is." Ryuji pointed him out.

He had the number 5 on his jersey and his face was covered in bruises. He stood over by the chalkboard and appeared to be minding his own business.

The three walked over to him to try and get a testimony out of him.

"Yo," Ryuji called out to get his attention.

"Huh?" He turned around and faced the three. Once he saw Ren among them, he let out a scoffing sound. "Are you skipping out on the volleyball rally? I guess I should've expected it from you, transfer."

"It got a little dull after a while," Ren commented, adjusting his glasses.

"Sakamoto too?" He pointed out before noticing the member of their party. "And 2-E's transfer student? What do you guys want?"

"We're the ones asking the questions here so shut up and listen," Kazuma warned, scaring the volleyball team member a little which earned a groan from Ren.

So much for playing nice.

"What's with the bandages? How did you get those injuries?" He questioned.

"They're from practice." He tried to argue. "What does that have to do anything."

"Kamoshida did it to you, right?" Ryuji asked. "Look, I ain't gonna tell anyone you squealed. Just tell us about how Kamoshida's abusin' you."

"I-I don't know what you're talking about!" He continued to fight back, the questioning was beginning to frighten him.

"Why are you so afraid?" Ren genuinely asked.

"I'm not! You guys are talking complete nonsense!" He exclaimed.

"Don't try n' hide it! We already know!" Ryuji yelled out.

"You... You know?" His eyes widened but remained skeptical. "You have proof?"

"Proof?" The spiky blonde was put on the spot as he had no idea what to do. "Well, I... uh."

"Physical proof, no," Ren interjected. "But your reaction just proved that we're not talking nonsense."

"S-Shut up! You guys tricked me!" He fired back. "Please, leave me alone. You're really bothering me!"
"We're wasting our time with this idiot." Kazuma brought up.

"Y-Yeah. Cmon, let's go." Ryuji relented as he and the others left the classroom, their confrontation with the team member was attracting some stares. Once they were out of the classroom, the spiky blonde hit the wall out of frustration. "That injury ain't normal! And he still won't fess up."

"I told you this was a stupid idea." His classmate argued. "Trying to get a testimony from an assault victim is like trying to pull out your own wisdom teeth. Near impossible."

"Maybe if someone didn't go all 'bad cop' on him, we would've gotten somethin'," The spiky blonde argued. "Ren told you to play nice, damn it!"

"You don't tell me what to do, Sakamoto. And neither does he." Kazuma fired back.

"Guys, stop it. If we keep arguing, the rally will end and we'll be out of time." Ren interjected with a solution. "Let's try splitting up, we'll cover more ground that way."

"Yeah, you're right." Ryuji agreed. "I'll check the Practice Building for people before clubs start. You two handle the Classroom Building."

"Then we have a plan." The probation added. "Any leads?"

"There's a third-year on the volleyball team that I remember. I think he's in...3-C?" The spiky blonde thought.

"I'll check the 3rd floor for him," Ren said.

"He was beaten pretty badly at the castle. He might have some injuries here too." Ryuji brought up before turning to his classmate. "And there's a first year who's a new member. He just joined so he might not be all wrapped up in Kamoshida's web of bullshit yet. Can you check that out, dude?"

"Sure." Kazuma simply said.

"All right, let's get going." Sakamoto ended the meeting. "I'll hit you guys up if I find anything. Seeya." He parted ways with his two companions as he left for the Practice Building.

"Good luck, Kazuma," Ren said. "And try to play nice this time."

"Hmph." The boy said nothing as he took his leave, heading upstairs to the 1st year floor.

Ren made his way downstairs to the 3rd year hallway. He looked around and saw Takamaki and her friend, Suzui, talking amongst themselves on his left. While this would be an opportune moment to question his blonde classmate about Kamoshida, he opted to stay focused on the task at hand. He looked over to his right and found two 3rd-years standing outside of 3-C. The bandages on one of them was a dead giveaway. He approached them, overhearing their conversation a bit.

"Man, cleaning up after the volleyball rally is gonna be such a goddamn pain." The bandaged student remarked.

"Tell me about it." His friend said.

Now was the time.

"Excuse me. Could I talk to you for a moment?" Ren interrupted their conversation.
"Huh?" The bandaged student turned around and saw a 2nd-year trying to talk to him. "You got something to say?"

"You're on the volleyball team, right?" Amamiya questioned.

"Yeah, so what if I am?" He fired back, wondering what was the point of this questioning.

"Hey, I know who this guy is." His friend pointed out. "He's that transfer student in 2-D. The one who's been hanging out with Sakamoto."

"Oh, I get it." The bandaged student figured out Ren's intentions. "You're trying to snoop on Mr. Kamoshida, right?"

"Just concerned for my senpai, that's all." Ren tried to play it cool but it didn't convince either of them.

"Look, our volleyball team performs at a national level. Of course, our practices are gonna be tough." The bandaged student argued. "Mr. Kamoshida's just dedicated to training us. You and that other transfer shouldn't believe every lie Sakamoto says."

"You sure it's not physical abuse?" The probationer questioned which made them wince a little. "Normal injuries like yours shouldn't come from standard volleyball practice."

"W-What do you know?!" He fired back.

"Hey, we should stop talking to him. What if he loses it and starts attacking us?" His friend brought up, wanting to get away from Ren. "I heard he even carries a knife around. Who knows what he's capable of."

"Y-Yeah. We're outta here!" He and his friend walked away, leaving Ren with no answers.

Crap. Maybe Kazuma had a point. He groaned before he heard a ring from his phone. He pulled it out and saw that he had received a text from Ryuji.

**Ryuji: How's it going?**

**Ren: He wouldn't tell me anything.**

**Ryuji: Him too? Man, everyone's too freaked out about Kamoshida.**

**Ren: What about you Kazuma?**

**Kazuma: Take a wild guess.**

**Ryuji: So you didn't have any luck either? Damn it. All right, screw it, let's regroup for now. See you guys in the courtyard.**

Before he could put his phone away, he heard it ring again to notify him that he received another text. This time, it was Kazuma who was texting him outside the group chat.

**Kazuma: Amamiya. The first year told me that your class rep often gets "special coaching" from Kamoshida. I think we both know what that means.**

**Ren: Class rep? You mean Mishima?**
Kazuma: If that's his name, then yes. Also, I overheard some members of the volleyball team on the 2nd floor talking about us. I think people are catching on to what we're doing.

Ren: That so? So much for acting under the radar.

Kazuma: I'm going to see if I can get some dirt from them. Head to the courtyard without me.

Ren: Alright. Oh, and Kazuma?

Kazuma: What?

Ren: Thanks for sticking with us, or more specifically, me.

He didn't get a text back until a few minutes later.

Kazuma: Later.

And with that, the texting between them ended. He only hoped that Kazuma could get something from the volleyball team members. They need something at this point.

He put his phone away and headed for the courtyard.

Having finally arrived at their meeting place, Ren took a seat on the bench as he waited for Ryuji to arrive. So far, they haven't been able to make any progress in the investigation. Kazuma was right, none of the volleyball team members are willing to testify against Kamoshida. That man must be very powerful to keep them all silent about his abuse.

*What do we do?* He thought over his options. The only other option he could think of would be to do something about Kamoshida's shadow-self in the castle. If the two Kamoshidas are connected, maybe if they defeated the shadow, the real one would be affected too.

"Amamiya-kun?"

His thoughts were interrupted when he heard someone call his name. He looked up and saw that it was his blonde classmate, Ann Takamaki.

"Takamaki-san?" It wasn't who he was expecting but that didn't mean he wasn't happy to see her again. He got up and gave a bow. "Good to see you again."

She smiled, he was just as formal and nice as he was when they first met. "Likewise. Can I talk to you for a second?"

"Of course." He sat down on the bench and made some room for her. She took a seat next to him before they started. "I never got to thank you for lending me your textbook. Can I get you something to drink?" He pointed to the vending machine but she shook her head.

"It's alright. I just wanted to talk to you." She continued.

"What about?" Ren questioned.

"Well, it's about those rumors about you." Ann brought up.

"Which one are you talking about? There's so many I've lost track." He quipped as he listed off the rumors. "Is it the one where I carry a knife? The one where I use the bones of my enemies as
toothpicks? Or my favorite one, that I kill squirrels and use their fur to make my clothes?"

She couldn't help but laugh a bit at that last one. "Okay, that one was pretty bad!" She laughed some more before calming down. "Seriously though. You're handling it pretty well."

"People are entitled to believe what they want," Ren stated. "I know who I am and I'm not going to let their comments stop me from being myself."

"Being yourself, huh?" She thought about his words. Ren definitely wasn't like the rumors portray him as. She knew that from the start. He was so nice to her when they first met that there was no way he was some violent criminal. He didn't let the rumors affect him and he treated them like they were jokes. "Are you and Sakamoto getting along. I've been seeing you and him together a lot lately." She changed the subject.

"Well, he's the only person, besides Kazuma, that will talk to me. But, so far he's not a bad guy." He told her.

"Kazuma? Is that the transfer student in his class?" She asked.

"That's the one," Ren told her. "He's not exactly a people person, but he's not a bad guy either."

"I see." She thought over his friendship with Sakamoto and the other transfer student. It kind of reminded her of her friendship with Shiho, the only friend she had in this school. It was good to hear that her classmate has found similar friendship, after all in this shithole known as Shujin Academy, true friends were hard to come by. "You guys were late on the first day, right? What as that all about? Because I totally didn't buy that excuse Kawakami gave."

"That?" Now, this was going to be a problem. It appears that she caught him, not believing the fabricated story that he and Kazuma helped a sick Ryuji to the doctor on the first day. It's not like he could tell her what actually happened. "It's a long story."

"Oh? Do tell." She crossed her arms, not letting him off the hook.

"Well, it's..."

"Whaddya want with him?"

Whatever Ren was about to say was cut off when Ryuji entered the picture, wondering just what Ann was doing with him. She apparently didn't appreciate their talk being interrupted as she got up from the bench and spoke to Ryuji in a tone that wasn't considered friendly.

"Right back at you. You're not even in our class," She fired back.

"We just happened to get to know each other." He responded.

"Uh huh." She replied before crossing her arms. "What are you planning to do to Mr. Kamoshida?"

"Huh?!" Ryuji replied a little shocked that their investigation had reached the ears of others. But hearing this from Ann must've triggered something from him because he started to get mad. "Ah, I see. I getcha. You really are all buddy-buddy with Kamoshida after all."

"This has nothing to do with you, Sakamoto!" Ann didn't take that likely as she fired back in a harsh tone.

"If you found out what he was doin' behind your back, you'd dump him right away." He told her.
Ann's eyes widened a bit at that comment.

"Behind my back?" She questioned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's nothing." He shook his head, not wanting to get her involved. "You wouldn't get it,"

"That's enough, Ryuji," Ren interjected. Not wanting to hear any more of this. After defusing the situation, Ann decided to get to the point.

"Anyway, people are already talking about you guys." She explained. "I don't know what you're trying to pull but no one is gonna help you," She informed them before looking away regretfully. "I'm warning you, stop this now before you get in serious trouble."

"But, can't you help us?" He asked her. "It's clear you don't like him either."

"I..." She shook her head and looked away in shame, not wanting to meet eye contact with him as she refused his offer. "I can't. I'm sorry."

"Takamaki-san..." He tried to come up with another way to convince her but that was ruined when Ryuji interrupted.

"Alright, we got your warning. Now beat it." The spiky blonde demanded.

Ann simply gave him a glare and a scoffing sound as she stormed away, leaving the boys to themselves.

"Why's she gotta be so aggressive all the time." The spiky blonde complained.

"Looks who's talking." Ren fired back. "What was that all about? You didn't have to treat her like that."

"She'll only get in our way, dude," Ryuji replied. "And, she was basically telling us to stop."

"Yeah, and you want to know why? It's because you made her think that we believe in those sick rumors that people are making about her. You know, those disgusting rumors that people have made up about her for no reason other than to create gossip, chit-chat, and to attack her simply because they don't like her." He argued. "With all the rumors people have been making about you and me, I thought you were better than that, Ryuji."

"That..." Ren really hit him this time with his words of truth. He always hated how people made him out to be a thug which is why he didn't believe the rumors surrounding Ren. But, he had a point. Maybe it was Takamaki getting in their business that he had said things simply just to get her to leave, but she didn't deserve that. After all, he knew the same girl he got along with in middle school wasn't what the rumors were making her out to be. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I think I may have overreacted." The spiky blonde chuckled a bit, scratching the back of his head. "How do you know her?"

"We went to the same middle school." He told her. "Anyway, moving on. I had no luck on my end. What about you? Did anything like, someone's name turn up?"

"No, but Kazuma found something," Ren informed him. "My class rep, Mishima, often receives 'special coaching' from Kamoshida."

"Special Coaching', huh?" Ryuji repeated as he knew there was nothing special about it. "True, I
always see the guy covered in bruises. Let's go talk to him before he leaves then."

"Alright. Let me text Kazuma and let him know what we're doing." He said as he pulled out his phone.

**Ren: Hey Kazuma we're going to go talk to Mishima. Meet us at the school's exit when you're done.**

With that done, they left to find Mishima, this investigation far from over.

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Kazuma laid against the wall of the 2nd-year floor, out of eyesight from the two volleyball team members who were talking amongst themselves. He knew better, he knew Ren and Ryuji weren't going to get anywhere talking to them upfront. If their fear of the new "criminal" transfer student was enough to keep them quiet, then it was their obvious cowardly nature.

They were clearly afraid of what Kamoshida may do to them if they were to speak of any dirty laundry he may have. Kazuma opted for a different approach, another way to obtain information.

Eavesdropping.

While this action could be seen as cowardly, desperate times call for desperate measures. Him and Ren beating that douchebag at his own game during the rally was bound to come with consequences, especially since Kamoshida tried to induct him into the volleyball team. As if he would ever join a team lead by him.

*Especially after what he did to her.* He thought angrily.

He pushed those thoughts aside, focusing on the task at hand as he overheard the two members talking amongst themselves.

"Sakamoto and that criminal are going around asking about Mr. Kamoshida." One started.

"I know, it's like they want to be expelled. The other scoffed.

"They seem like trouble, especially Amamiya." The first one admitted. "But, what if they..."

"Dude, shut up." The other shushed his teammate. "Whatever you're about to say, don't say it. You know what Mr. Kamoshida will do to us if we... you know..."

"Yeah, sorry." He apologized, understanding his teammates fear.

"Just stay away from them. That other transfer student in 2-E has been hanging around them as well so he's likely in on whatever they're planning. Avoid him too."

"Sure dude." He nodded as the two went downstairs.

*Cowards.* Kazuma scoffed in disgust.

Everyone must've heard that Ren and Ryuji were investigating Kamoshida, likely due to their questioning. These students were so stupid. They continuously endure abuse and do nothing in defense. They just... allow it. They allow themselves and their friends to suffer for nothing more than personal gain. It made him sick to his stomach, especially to be attending the same school as them.

He heard the vibration of his phone from his pocket. He pulled it out and read it.
Ren: Hey Kazuma we're going to go talk to Mishima. Meet us at the school's exit when you're done.

Since it was clear that he wasn't going to get anything out of the students, he got off the wall and decided to head to the exit. But before he could, he was stopped in his tracks.

"Hey, its Kazuma-kun, right?" Asked the girl who stood in front of him.

He knew who she was, after all, people won't shut up about her. Ann Takamaki, the girl who everyone believes to be fooling around with Kamoshida. He also knew her as Suzui's friend. She was present on his first day when Kazuma bumped into that guy that was flirting with her and her blonde pigtails made her stand out from the rest of the student body. What did she want with him?

Ann had just given her warning to Ren and Ryuji so she figured she could give one to this guy as well. Her initial impression of him was that he was unfriendly, considering he bumped into Daisuke on the first day and didn't even apologize, he just glared and scared him. Then again, Daisuke was an asshole so maybe he wasn't so bad.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" She asked again as he gave no response to her previous question.

"I have nothing to say to you. Get lost." He told her, wanting her to leave. He had things to do and didn't want to waste time talking to her.

"There's no need to be rude, I just came to give you a warning." She said, a little put off by his rude remark. She was right, he is unfriendly. "I know what you're doing. You, Amamiya-kun, and Sakamoto. You need to stop, right now."

His expression went from annoyed to enraged. To think, he originally thought of her as a victim of rumors. Turns out she's just like the volleyball team and everyone else in this rotten school. A coward.

"It's for the best. Messing with Kamoshida will only get you in trouble. He goes after your weakness and once he has it, he'll hold it over you until you graduate or get expelled." She warned him. "Give up now before it's too late."

"So you're just going to let that guy prance around the school doing whatever the hell he wants? You're fine with that?" Kazuma fired back in a harsh tone which took her off guard.

"That... doesn't matter." She hesitated for a little bit. She had to stay strong, for Shiho's sake. "I-I don't have a choice."

"Wow." He shook his head in disapproval before frowning at her. What was wrong with her?! She was okay with having that scumbag waltz around this school after what he did to her friend?!

"You're pathetic."

"What?" Ann was taken aback by the cold tone he chose to give as he insulted her.

"I said, you're pathetic." He said again, causing Ann to frown a little. "I know who you are, Ann Takamaki, and I know of the nasty rumors about you and Kamoshida. You and I both know, it's a load of crap." He said, catching her off guard as he expressed his disbelief at the rumors about her.

"And yet, you do nothing about it. You just sit there and let people call you easy and a slut when it's clear that you hate him, probably more than Sakamoto does anyway."
"You don't..."

"I don't want to hear your excuses so shut up." He cut her off, causing her to recoil. "People like you make me sick. Your cowardice is worse than the rumors. If anything, you're just as awful as he is."

"Y-You..." His words hurt, tears threatened to break through and she was growing angry at this guy. He had no idea how powerful Kamoshida was, how he could end a student's future with the snap of his fingers. "You don't know anything about me."

"I know enough to know that you're weak. And a coward." He threw one last insult her way before ending the conversation. He walked right up to her, giving her the most hateful glare he could give to one such as her. "I'm done talking to you. If you know what's good for you, you'll stay out of my way." He finished as he walked right past her, not seeing the point in dealing with her any longer.

Once he was gone, Ann clenched her fists as tears threatened to break through. She walked away, heading to the girl's restroom, not wanting to cry in front of other students. If his objective was to make her feel like the worst human being in the world, mission accomplished. Now that she was alone, she allowed the tears to break free.

"F-Fuck you, asshole." She muttered as tears poured down her eyes.

Why was someone as nice as Ren hanging around with such a jerk like him? Why did he have to go and say such horrible things to her? Because she tried to warn him about the dangers of going up against someone like Kamoshida?

He didn't understand, he didn't understand why she couldn't help them.

As she wiped the tears, she resolved to keep strong for Shiho.

Even though deep down, his words may have been hurtful, but they weren't completely wrong.

Ren and Ryuji spotted the 2-D class rep about to leave school for the day. He was hunched over a little, likely worn out from the volleyball rally. They jogged up to him, hoping to get a word with him.

"Hey, got a second?" Ryuji asked, getting his attention.

"Sakamoto?" He asked before noticing who was with him. "A-and you too?!

"Hello, Mishima-kun." He greeted warmly.

"We just wanna chat." The spiky blonde tried to ease his nerves. "Kamoshida's been 'coaching' you, huh? You sure it's not just physical abuse?"

"C-Certainly not." Mishima took a step back, rejecting his accusation.

"What're talkin' all polite for? We saw him spike you today. Right in the face." Sakamoto argued.

"That was just because I'm not good at the sport." Mishima tried his best to rebuttal his claims but didn't sound so sure of it.

"One time, I can see that. But I counted five. He spiked you five times, Mishima-kun." Ren pointed out.
"And that doesn't explain all the other bruises you've got," Ryuji mentioned.

"They're from practice!" The boy exclaimed.

"Is he forcin' you to keep quiet?" The spiky blonde continued to push.

"That's..." Mishima couldn't take these accusations. He wanted to leave right away and escape them. Because if they keep this up, then...

"What's going on here?"

And in came the devil. They looked to see that Mr. Kamoshida himself had noticed their little interrogation of the blue-tinted haired boy and intervened.

"Mishima, isn't it time for practice?" The coach asked.

"I-I'm not feeling well today." He made a weak excuse.

"What? Maybe you're better off quitting then." Kamoshida added which made the boy shot up. "You're never going to improve that crappy form unless you show up to practice."

Ryuji didn't like the way he was criticizing him and decided to put a stop to it. He moved closer to the coach, getting in his face.

"Didn't you hear? He ain't feelin' well!" Ryuji fired.

"Tch." He clicked his tongue in annoyance, ignoring the insolent delinquent. "Well, Mishima? Are you coming to practice or not?"

"I..." He knew that no excuse he could come up with would be good enough. And with that, he gave up. "I'll go."

"Glad to hear it." He then turned to Ryuji, glaring at the troublemaker. "As for you, any more trouble and you'll be gone from this school for sure."

" Bastard. " The spiky blonde cursed under his breath.

"Same goes for you." He growled at Ren's direction, the lingering thoughts of being humiliated by this criminal and his partner still fresh on his mind. "Didn't the principal tell you to keep in line?"

"I was just leaving, sir." He adjusted his glasses, preventing the coach from seeing his expression.

"Hmph. Just don't get in the way of my practice." He warned him. "All these unsettling rumors are making the students anxious, after all."

"That's your own goddamn fault." Ryuji spat out angrily.

"Tch, this won't get us anywhere. Let's go, Mishima." He turned around, his back facing them. "Shujin Academy is a place where those with aspirations come to learn. Unworthy students like yourselves don't have any right to be here." He looked over his shoulder, glaring at the students. "Get with the program!"

"Y-Yes, sir." Mishima nodded.

And with that, Kamoshida left the boys, heading to the gym to begin practice.
"He sure likes to hear himself talk." Kazuma walked up and joined the others.

"Were you listening?" Amamiya asked.

"Yeah." He told them, leaving out his encounter with Takamaki. "Couldn't find anything new. Lead was a bust."

"That asshole." Ryuji stomped his foot forward in the direction where Kamoshida had left. "He's gonna pay for this."

"There's no point," Mishima told them.

"Huh?!" The spiky blonde heard him mutter.

"Proving that he's physically abusing us... is meaningless." He told them the cold truth. "Everybody knows. The principal, our parents. They all know and they all keep quiet and it."

"What?!" Sakamoto couldn't believe what he was hearing. "This has gotta be a joke!"

"Don't be a pain." He glared at him. "You don't understand what I'm going through. Shouldn't you of all people know that nothing's going to help?"

"Well..." Ryuji was shut down again, remembering how he tried to fight back, only to have his future ripped from him by Kamoshida.

"You're a joke." Kazuma intervened, not able to keep quiet any longer. "So fatass and your parents keep quiet? So what? If you're choosing to keep quiet about it too instead of standing up for yourself and your teammates, that doesn't make you any better. It makes you worse."

"Y-You don't know anything, new kid." He fired back, preparing to leave to go attend practice only to have his arm roughly grabbed by Kazuma.

"I know more than you might think." He brought the kid closer so only he could hear him. "I saw you yesterday. I know what you did."

"W-What?" His eyes widened at his words as he wondered what he was referring too. He couldn't reply as fear coursed through him. Once the transfer student released his arm, he walked away.

"What was that all about?" Ren asked curiously.

"It's nothing." He said.

"Dammit," Ryuji muttered before turning to his companions. "I'll try one more time to persuade the other guys. That's... all I can do."

"You did your best today, Ryuji. We all did." The probationer stated. "Let's all head home. We'll try again tomorrow."

"Right." The spiky blonde nodded in agreement.

"I have cleaning duty today," Kazuma told them. "Go on without me, Amamiya."

"Again?" Ren questioned.

"Seriously? Dude, Chouno must be out to get you or something." Ryuji added.
"It's whatever." He finished before leaving.

The investigation didn't end as planned but they were just getting started. The boys went to go change before going their separate ways.

Kazuma made it to the 2-E and begun cleaning the classroom. He took his sweet time, not wanting to hurry like last time. For his plan to work, he'll have to finish around the time volleyball practice ends.

As he continued to clean the classroom, the door opened. He feared it was Kamoshida, who wanted to confront him after helping Amamiya take a spike to his ego.

Thankfully, it wasn't.

"Oh, I'm sorry." The teacher apologized. "I thought Ms. Chouno was still here." She turned to leave before noticing that the boy on cleaning duty was non-other than 2-E's transfer student. "Excuse me, Kazuma-kun?"

"Hmm?" He looked up.

"We haven't officially met. I'm Sadayo Kawakami, your Japanese Language teacher." She introduced herself, reaching her hand out. "I understand that you're under Tori Ichihara's care? She's a really good friend of mine."

"Oh?" Now he remembered. When he first arrived, Tori spoke about how one of her friends works here. So this is Sadayo. He got up and shook her hand. "You're friends with Tori?"

"That's right." She nodded. "We've known each other since high school. If you don't mind, how do you know her?"

"She was my nanny." He told her.

"Oh?! So you were with the family she was working for." Her eyes widened before realizing his situation. "O-Oh, wait. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"Forget it, Ms." He brushed off her apology before deciding to get back to cleaning.

"If I may ask. You and Amamiya-kun seem to be together quite a bit." She brought up. "Are you two getting along?"

"Something like that." He commented.

"Ah. I'm glad to hear it." She replied. "I was worried he might have trouble making friends. But, I'm glad to see..."

"He's not my friend." He told her.

"O-Oh." She coughed a bit before deciding to take her leave. "Anyway, It was nice meeting you, Kazuma-kun. Enjoy the rest of your day."

Once she left, Kazuma resumed his cleaning. So that was Tori's friend? While not as weird as she is, there was something off about her. It's like she was fighting to keep the conversation going, almost like she was tired or something.

Whatever, it wasn't important at the moment.
Once he got done cleaning, he checked his phone for the time. Volleyball practice should've ended. The time was now to enact his plan. He put away all of his cleaning materials and left the classroom.

As he made it to the 1st floor, he put in his earphones to listen to music while he waits for Suzui.

_I should really get back into playing my guitar._ He thought to himself. _Listening to these same old tracks is getting old._

He remembered a time where he couldn't get off his guitar. He treated it like it was his child. He kept it in good shape, made sure the strings worked perfectly and loved performing in front of his parents who were marveled by their son's skill with the instrument.

As he pushed those thoughts aside, the person of interest finally arrived.

Suzui.

She kept her head down as she left the school. Before Kazuma could make his move, two students followed after her, their faces spoke of ill intent.

_What's going on?_ He removed his earphones as he watched those students go after her. They weren't members of the volleyball team as they didn't come from the practice building.

Whatever it was, Kazuma followed after, wanting to see what they were up too.

Once he was outside the front entrance, Suzui and those two students were nowhere to be found. He walked down the steps and couldn't find them. They had just left the building, where could they be. As he listened carefully, he heard chatter coming from the alleyway. He moved in closer and saw those students talking to Suzui.

"So tell us, Suzui-san. Is it true?" One of them asked.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about." She muttered.

"Oh, you know what I'm talking about. I heard you're friends with Takamaki? You know, Kamoshida's bitch."

"That..."

"It's completely unfair, you know. I hear that slut's always giving him some head. What does Mr. Kamoshida have that I don't?!" His friend argued.

"A national winning spike, you moron." The other one quipped before returning to Suzui. "What do you say, Suzui-san? Think you can hook us up?"

"N-No." She frowned at them. "D-Don't talk about my friend like that."

"Oh, someone's feisty!" He laughed a little. "What about you, Suzui-san? I bet you've hooked up with Kamoshida haven't you?"

"Nah, man. You don't know this, but I've actually caught this bitch staring at that new transfer student in 2-E."

"Really?" He replied. "So, you have a thing for that guy, huh? Why don't you forget about that loser and hook up with a real man."
Okay, this has gone out of control. He knew what he was seeing here. Just a couple of horny teenage douchebags who believe those stupid rumors about Takamaki and think Suzui is the same way.

"What do you say, Suzui-san" He spoke in a low tone as he pressed his hand against the wall behind her.

That's it. This has gone on long enough!

"P-Please." She pleaded.

"Hey!" Kazuma stepped forward into the alley, getting their attention. Suzui looked over to see who had called out to them and her eyes widened at who it was.

"Y-You." She recognized him.

"Holy shit, what a coincidence. It's the transfer student from 2-E." One of them remarked. "Wait your turn, we'll be done in a minute."

"You're done now." He told the two. "I'm going to give you both 10 seconds to get away from her and leave."

Suzui could only watch as the boy came to her defense. The two guys who were harassing her focused their attention on him who seemed agitated at having their "fun" interrupted.

"Can you believe this asshole?" He asked his friend. "This has nothing to do with you. Why don't you leave?"

"That was 5 seconds." He continued to warn them. "Leave her alone, now. I won't ask again."

"Oh, he won't ask again?" He and his friend laughed a bit. "You know what, fair enough big man. We'll leave." He said turning around, pretending to leave as he chose to throw a punch. "Fuck you!"

The fist landed on Kazuma's cheek, causing Suzui to gasp. Unfortunately, it didn't go as he planned as he wasn't strong enough to move his face with the force of his punch. If anything, it felt like hitting a brick wall.

Kazuma reached up, grabbed onto the man's arm whose fist was still against his cheek, and roughly pushed it away.

"Ow." He muttered as if it was nothing. "You really shouldn't have done that."

"W-What the..." He clutched his fist with his free hand.

"You know what they say: Eye for an eye." The boy told him and he stepped forward and slammed his forehead into his attacker's face.

"GAH!" He fell backward, hitting the ground and clutching his face in pain.

"Keita!" His friend cried out before attempting his own attack. "You asshole!"

He threw a fist but Kazuma dodged it. He then grabbed the fool by the neck and lifted him up in the air. He always prided himself on the training he received as a kid. His parents wanted to make sure their son could think, act, and fight like a detective would in any situation.

"The more you struggle, the tighter I'll squeeze." He warned him, slamming his foe against the
wall. "Listen to me and listen well. You too." He turned to his friend, who was still on the ground clutching his nose. "You're going to leave now. Go home and forget this ever happened." He told them exactly what was going to happen. "And, if either of you gets the notion to make up a story saying that I attacked you out of nowhere, let me just say this. If I'm expelled, then I'm no longer held in check by the rules. Therefore, nothing will stop me from finding you both and finishing the job. Nod if you understand." He demanded and the fool he was holding by the neck nodded. He looked over, his friend Keita did the same. "Good. Now beat it." He then let the scumbag go who finally was able to breathe normally.

He and his friend got up and walked past him, reluctantly following his orders. Just as they left the alleyway, the boy known as Keita decided to get the final word in.

"This school was great until you and that criminal showed up!" He yelled. "Why don't you pieces of shit go back where you came from! You don't belong here!"

Kazuma simply looked over his shoulder and glared which was enough to send him running. 

_I'm from here, idiot._ He said in his mind, but enough was enough. They had been dealt with and he was certain they wouldn't tell anyone what happened here.

"Kazuma-kun," Suzui spoke, addressing him by name, startling him a bit. He looked over his shoulder, looking at her right in the eyes. She had her hands clapped together as she appeared worried. "Are you okay?"

He turned around to fully face her but kept his distance. She was clearly still shaken up by what happened and if he wanted answers, he couldn't be aggressive.

"You remember me?" He questioned, curious as to whether she remembered their first meeting.

"I do." She nodded before giving him a small smile. "It seems we meet again."

Its that same smile. He noted, the same smile when he unintentionally gave her advice at the train station. A smile of gratitude. He shook his head, needing to get back to the task at hand.

"Did they hurt you?" He asked.

"N-No. They didn't do anything," She responded.

"Where did you get that bruise then?" Kazuma pointed to the bruise on her left eye.

"O-Oh, this?" She reached up and touched the bruise with her hand, wincing a little as it still hurt to touch. "I-I got it from volleyball practice."

"A volleyball did that to you?" He raised an eyebrow at her story.

"Y-Yeah. Mr. Kamoshida's practices are tough." She tried to play it off but noticed that Kazuma was frowning like he was irritated about something. Did she upset him?

"How can you do that?" He asked.

"Do what?" She replied, wondering what he meant.

"How can you lie like that?" He answered which made her eyes widen at the glare that formed on his face when she asked him that question.

"W-What are you talking about?" She persisted. "I'm not lying.
"Really? Hmm." He crossed his arms. Time to go in for the kill. "Does the words "I'll happily remind you that your position can easily be replaced with another" mean anything you?"

"Wha?!" She gasped lightly, her lie had been destroyed, now aware that her classmate, this boy, knows about her "meeting" with Kamoshida. "You know?"

"I heard everything." He told her. "I heard him accuse you of being selfish. I heard you talk about your leg injury." He pointed at her leg brace. "And... I heard him hit you."

"N-No." She said weakly.

"It's not just you, is it? There were others that he's called to his office, right? And then the next day, they show up with bruises." He pushed. "I'm right, aren't I?"

She didn't say anything, she just kept her head down in shame, unable to answer him any longer. Kazuma couldn't abide by this, there was no need to keep secret any longer! So why isn't she saying anything?!

"What is wrong with you?! Why are you protecting him?!" He exclaimed which caught her off guard. "He's hurting you and your teammates! He punched you in the face! You have nothing to gain from this!"

"S-Stop. Please." She begged.

"I want answers, Suzui!" He demanded, getting closer to her. "Why won't you speak out against him?! Why haven't you told anyone?! What the hell is going on here?!"

"Stop!" She screeched out, backing away before tripping, falling to the ground. Kazuma's first instinct was to help her up, but then he saw her shaking in fear, fear of him.

What is wrong with him? This is precisely what he said he wasn't going to do. Hell, she was nearly assaulted by two douchebags and here he is calling her out aggressively. And now, she won't tell him anything. She was staring at him, frightened and quivering, all because of him.

"I didn't. I mean, I wasn't..." He shook his head. He had failed, she won't tell him anything now, especially with the way he was acting. "Nevermind. I'll just go." He turned away from her, preparing to leave and accept his failure.

Only he couldn't move.

"Huh?" As he took one step forward, he felt something weighing his other leg down, preventing movement. He looked down to see what the source was and in a shocking turn of event, it wasn't what he was expecting.

Suzui was holding onto his leg and wouldn't let go.

"Hey, what are-?!" He said in shock at the sight. "What do you think you're doing?! Get off me?!!" He struggled but her grip was tight. He didn't want to hurt her, he just wanted her to get off. "I said get-"

"I'm scared."

He heard her speak. At that moment, he stopped struggling against her.

"What?" He replied as her grip on his leg got tighter than before.
"I'm scared." She repeated. He realized he wasn't talking about him or those idiots from earlier.

She was scared of Kamoshida. Scared for her life.

"Suzui," Kazuma whispered, watching tears fall from her face as she verbally let out her pain.

"I'm scared!" She screamed out. It was a good thing they were further into the alley, otherwise, someone nearby would've heard them. "I'm so scared! I can't take this anymore!"

All of this made Kazuma hate himself a bit for how he approached her, not knowing she kept such pain inside her. This was her true self he was seeing, the part of Suzui that is sick of the continuous harassment and abuse Kamoshida was dealing out to her and her teammates.

He couldn't stand for this. He had to do something.

"Here." He offered her his hand to help her up.

Once she had calmed down a bit, she wiped her tears and grabbed his hand as he helped her back to her feet. She was going to offer an apology for holding onto his leg like that, but he didn't give her a chance. He turned around and walked away, only stopping when they had a few feet from each other.

"Come on." He beckoned her to follow him.

"W-What?" She seemed confused.

"I thought maybe you'd want to talk so I'd like to go somewhere where we're not out in the open." He explained.

"B-But." She muttered a little.

"You have no reason to trust me, Suzui, so if you want to leave, go ahead. I won't stop you. But if you want to talk, then follow me." He let her know that he wasn't forcing her to go with him, nor would he ever do such a thing. He started walking, leaving her to think.

She had a choice, leave and forget this ever happened or follow him and talk about everything. This was her chance, her chance to finally be able to confide in somebody. She couldn't with Ann, there was no telling what she would do or what Kamoshida would do if she knew.

And it was Kazuma who gave her the choice. Kei Kazuma, her classmate, the same boy she met at the train station who gave her advice when she was feeling down, the same boy who had been on her mind lately, the same boy who came to her defense and saved her from those jerks.

She made her decision as she ran after him.

They kept silent as they took the train to Shibuya. They both felt like whatever talk that would occur between them is best saved for later when they were away from prying eyes and ear. Although, Shiho was curious as to where they going.

Once they arrived, the two walked to Central Street. Shiho followed behind Kazuma as he lead her to their destination.

After a few minutes of walking, they had arrived.

"Sing-Sing Karaoke?" She questioned, noticing that he had brought her to Central Street's Karaoke
"Come on." He said as he entered with her following after him.

They walked up to the front cashier to speak with the employee operating it.

"Hello and welcome to Sing-Sing Karaoke." The employee greeted.

"Room for two." Kazuma requested.

"Alright. That'll be ¥ 1000 for two people." She said. Kazuma pulled out his wallet and handed her the exact amount. Shiho couldn't help but feel guilty for him having to spend money on her too but simply went along with it. "Alright. Shall I show you to a room?"

"Yeah. Let's go sing up a storm." He replied, going along with it even though they didn't come here to sing.

"This way please." The employee walked around the front cashier and guided the two to their room.

Once the arrived, the found the room to be quite spacious. It had a large couch with a table in the middle as well as open space from the TV so anyone could sing their heart out.

"Call us if you need anything." The employee said.

"Thanks." He nodded as she took her leave.

Shiho and Kazuma were now alone to finally talk. She would be lying if she said she wasn't nervous. She had agreed to go with him so they could talk, but now that they were alone, she didn't know who should make the first move or who should speak first.

"I..." She muttered a little, a bit anxious at the awkward silence. "I'm sorry." She apologized.

"Hmm? For what?" He asked.

"You spent money on me. Y-You didn't have to do that." She brought up but waved it off.

"Keep your apology, coming here was my idea after all." He walked away from her, sitting down on the couch. "If you want to order something, go ahead."

"But..."

"My guardian gave me a hefty allowance, so it's fine." He assured her. "You going to stand there all day or are you going to sit down?"

"O-Oh." She gasped a little, shaking her head as she moved to sit down on the opposite side of the table.

"About earlier." He tried to start.

"Oh, um..." She still felt a bit guilty about all of this, especially about what happened earlier, and what she did. "I'm sorry. I-I didn't mean to just... grab your leg like that."

"Oh, that?" He remembered her little breakdown, "It's whatever." He simply shrugged off.

"R-Right." She spoke.
This was too awkward. Kazuma wasn't going to get anywhere if they kept this up. She still looked nervous so he decided that the best thing to do is take charge and assure her. Where it anyone else, he'd be upfront about what information they were withholding. But he couldn't do that with her, especially after what happened earlier.

"Listen, Suzui." He said firmly which got her attention as she looked at him. "You have no reason to trust me at all, so if you don't want to talk to me, you can leave and I'll forget this ever happened. I just... wanted you to know."

That calmed her down a bit. He was much different than how he had been acting during the last two days of school. He always seemed so angry, always frowning as he walked down the halls and didn't appear friendly to anyone. He clearly didn't appreciate people's gossip, always giving off an intense glare which struck fear into their hearts.

But, something told her that there was more about him than what he portrays himself to be. She recalled when he rudely bumped into Taisuke, when he noticed that she was there. His hateful glare had vanished into thin air, which proved that he remembered her.

The advice he gave her on that day was advice she couldn't forget, it made her happy to have someone lift her spirits and give her hope. So, she felt like if there was anyone she could confide in, besides Ann, the only person she could think of would be this mysterious boy.

"It's true." She finally confessed. "All the rumors about Kamoshida, the physical abuse, it's..." She winced a little. "...it's all true."

Kazuma listened carefully as she continued.

"It's been happening since my first-year, probably longer. I don't know. H-He..." She choked a little. "He calls someone to his office for special coaching, but when they arrive at school the next day, they're..." She struggled to continue. "...they're covered in bruises. It happens at random, when someone's late to practice, does something wrong, or just whenever he gets mad."

"And he called you in because of your leg injury?" He asked and she gave him a weak nod.

"He... He said I was slacking off, but that wasn't true. I-I did my best, despite my injury, but he... he was just so angry." She kept her head down as the tears began to form again. She didn't want him to see her cry. "I-It hurts. It hurts everyday! I can't stand this anymore! I hate him! I hate his guts!"

That was it, that was all he needed to know. They weren't rumors, they were the truth. Kamoshida isn't some Olympic medalist, he was an abusive piece of garbage who takes his frustrations out on others. He clenched his fist in hidden anger at that man, for what he's been doing to people, anger at him, but also anger at the volleyball team for keeping it a secret for their own personal gain. They were so stupid and selfish they don't even realize the suffering of their own teammates.

He picked up a napkin from the table and handed it to her to dry her tears.

"Thank you." She accepted the napkin and wiped her eyes. She then noticed that he got up and pulled out his phone. "What are you doing?"

"I'm calling the police." He told her which immediately cause her to panic.

"No! Stop!" She immediately rushes off of the couch and snatched his phone from him.

"What do you think you're doing?" He frowned.
"You can't!" She protested. "Calling the police won't do anything except put you in danger!"

"Danger?! You're the one in danger, Suzui!" He argued, unable to see why she won't stand against him. "You need to tell the police! That man can't just get away with hurting you!"

"I can't!" She fired back, wanting him to understand. "If I do, then... he'll go after Ann."

"Ann? You worried about Takamaki, of all people?! Who cares about her?!!" He shouted out.

"W-What?" She replied, unable to comprehend what he had said.

"You're worried about that coward?! She refuses to fight back against Kamoshida or do anything about those disgusting rumors about her and she's who you're worried about?! She's not worth it! Why would you choose to suffer for some pathetic cowa-"

*SLAP!*

He felt his head move to the side and an unmistakable sting on his left cheek, along with a red mark that came with it. He reached up and felt the heat emitting off of his cheek and realized that Shiho had slapped him. It was strong, unlike that guy's punch from earlier, because the feelings of anger and rage were put into the attack.

He turned back to see Shiho gritting her teeth in anger and on her face was a glare that almost equaled his, only it was fuelled by strong feelings of rage she kept within her.

"Not worth it? How dare you!" She growled, not able to take any more insults about her best friend. "You want to know why I worry about her? Why I suffer for her?" She questioned and once their eyes met, she let it out. "Because she's my best friend! And she's precious to me!"

Friend? He thought. Her reason was simply because she's her friend? That's why she doesn't want the police involved? That's why she's endured the abuse all this time? Was because Takamaki is her friend?

"That's your reason?" He questioned, having recovered from the sting.

"It's the only reason I need." She brought her hand to her chest, still true to her words. "She's my precious friend, and when someone's precious to you, it's only natural you'd want to protect them, no matter what. That's what I believe." She did her best to explain. "That's why I can't let you do this."

With that, any argument or attempt to fight back was dropped completely. Her reason was so simple, stupid, and illogical. But the emotion she put into it made it strong, strong enough to completely destroy any retort Kazuma could've come up with.

And he had no choice but to accept her decision.

She reminded him of Amamiya in a way, once something was set, nothing could change their minds. The naive goody-goody immersed himself into this whole Kamoshida affair and he was going to see it through the whatever end it had in store. Just like him, Suzui wasn't going to change her mind. She was going to protect Ann even if it means having to suffer.

So annoying. He thought.

"Okay." He broke the silence. "I won't call the police or tell anyone."
She gave a sigh of relief, giving his phone back. "Thank you, Kazuma-kun."

"Don't thank me." He turned away from her. "I hardly did anything except give you a hard time."

"No, you're not. You're helping" She walked around so they could face each other. "You know, you're kind of weird. I mean, you come off as this scary tough guy who looks angry all the time, but you're not like that at all."

"You don't know me, Suzui." He informed her.

"Maybe not, but I remember what you told me that day. At the train station." She brought up. "What you said, about creating special moments with my own power. It... It made me happy. Hopeful too."

"I..." He choked on his words as she smiled at him.

"The truth is, I've been wanting to talk to you ever since I saw you in class." She admitted which completely caught him off guard. "You looked so angry, a lot of people thought you were scary."

"That's fine with me." He crossed his arms, looking away.

"Well, I'm not scared of you." She told him up front. "I think... I think you're really cool, Kazuma-kun." She shyly said, blushing a little bit.

"W-What?" He was startled by her kind words. They weren't words of pity, they were genuine.

This girl... Kazuma looked as she smiled at him. Even with that bruise tainting her face, she still had the strength to smile. He couldn't believe it.

*RING* *RING*

They were interrupted by the phone in the corner. Kazuma went over to answer it, wondering what it was about.

"I'm afraid your time is up." An employee told him over the phone. "Would you like an extension?"

"N-No. We're good." He responded, feeling like it was time to go.

"Very well then. Please bring your microphones and payment slip to the reception desk when you leave."

And with that, the line cut.

"Our time is up." He informed her. "Guess we should leave."

"Y-Yeah." She nodded, still a bit red-faced.

Kazuma collected the payment slip and microphones as he and Suzui left the room. They went down to the front desk to check out.

"Thank you very much." The employee bowed. "We hope to see you again."

The two gave them a nod as they left the building.

"Well, I guess this is goodbye for now," Suzui gave a polite bow as she turned to leave.
"Suzui." Kazuma called out, stopping her in her tracks. "Do you mind... do you mind if I walk you home."

"Hmm?" She replied, a bit stunned at the offer.

"J-Just to make sure you get home safely, okay?" He looked away, frowning. She found it a bit funny to see him get flustered.

"Hehehe. Okay." She accepted his company.

Turns out, Suzui lived in an apartment complex in Shibuya. That made things easier, no additional train rides. The two walked in silence as Kazuma escorted her to her place safe and sound. Once they arrived, it was time to part ways.

"Thanks for walking me home, Kazuma-kun." She gave him her gratitude. "I'll see you at school tomorrow."

As she turned to head into her apartment building, Kazuma grabbed her arm, preventing her from leaving.

"Wait." He told her.

"Huh?" She replied as she turned to face him.

"If he..." He muttered. He figured if he can't call the police, he could at least try this option. "If he tries to hurt you again. I... I want you to come find me."

"Kazuma-kun." She whispered as he offered her an alternative solution.

"Please." He was in no position to ask her this, but he had to try. "I don't want him to hurt you again. Can you do this?"

He was asking a lot, especially if Kamoshida were to call on her again for another "meeting". The last thing she wants is put Kazuma under his radar, that man was already warning students to stay away from the "problem transfer students". But she believed her classmate to be strong, strong enough that he meant what he said. That would protect her from that monster.

And so, she saw no reason to decline.

"Okay." She accepted.

"Promise?" He asked one more time.

"I promise." She nodded. With that, he let go of her.

"Alright." He finished, realizing that he'd taken too much of her time, her parents will probably wonder where she's been. Thinking about it now, Tori will probably wonder the same thing. Time to head home. "See you later, I-"

He was interrupted when Suzui rushed up and wrapped her arms around him, one around his neck, and one around his back, hugging him tightly, resting her head against his neck.

He wasn't much of a hugger. Whenever Tori hugged him, he never hugged back.

But something took hold of him as this girl, his classmate, held him close. He reached up and placed one hand on her back, patting it a little.
"Thank you." She whispered softly.

After hearing Suzui out, he vowed that Kamoshida will pay for what he'd done to her and won't stop until he's exposed and jailed. After a while, they released each other from their hug, about to take their leaves.

"Later, Suzui," Kazuma said as he was about to take his leave.

"Shiho." She spoke before he could walk away. "Call me Shiho."

"Shiho?" He repeated. "That your first name?"

"Yep." She nodded. "Oh, and your first name is Kei, right? Do you mind if I call you that?"

"I don't care what you call me." He told her up front. "Just leave the honorifics out of it. It's annoying."

"Okay." She accepted, giving one last smile as she took her leave. "See you at school tomorrow, Kei."

And with that, she entered the apartment building.

Kei. Been a while since anyone's called me that. He thought.

With her home safe and sound, he left the area, heading to the train station to take a train back to Yongen-Jaya.

He thought over today's events and while it didn't go exactly as planned, it didn't matter. One thing's for sure, Kamoshida had to be stopped. There were some things he could ignore, but this wasn't one of them, especially after hearing Shiho's story.

He thought over how she came to Takamaki's defense when he called her a coward, still unable to forget her argument.

She's my precious friend, and when someone's precious to you, it's only natural you'd want to protect them, no matter what. He remembered her words.

"Precious friend, huh?"

It sounded so stupid, but it was the only part of her argument that he couldn't forget.

Chapter End Notes

So now we have Kazuma and Shiho starting a confidant together.

It was hard to write this part as I didn't want to make Shiho too OOC as we only know hints of her personality from her few appearances and conversations with Ann. I think I did her character justice.

That's all for now. Till next time.
I know it's been a while since I've uploaded anything to AO3. Actually, it's been a while since I've uploaded period. I do apologize for the long absence, life has been getting in the way. But, I'm back with a new chapter.

I am also in the process of editing my chapters to correct mistakes and grammar issues, both here and on FF.net.

Without further ado, enjoy the 10th chapter.

Kazuma made his way back to Beauty Heights, thinking over his conversation with Shiho. To be frank, the whole plan was a failure. He had gotten what he wanted, confirmation and testimony from an actual member of the Volleyball team that the rumors about Kamoshida's abuse were true. And now that he has it, he can't do anything with it. He knew that it was pointless to persuade Shiho to make a statement to the police, she was firm in her belief that if she made any move against him, he'll target her friend.

Ann Takamaki.

That same blonde who had the nerve to warn Kazuma to stop the investigation. Even after having disgusting rumors spread about her that she was sleeping with Kamoshida along with being harassed by him almost every day, she has the gall to tell him that stopping the investigation was "for the best".

_Idiot._ He insulted her.

But she was the reason why Shiho had endured his abuse up to this point, her sole reason for keeping quiet. All because they were "precious friends" as she put it.

_Precious friends._ Kazuma thought over the words. Regardless of what he thought of her, Shiho cared for Ann a great deal, so much that she was willing to take a punch to the face and deal with physical abuse. She thought not of her own safety, but her friend's safety.

Seeing that kind of selflessness, it made him question why he chose solitude over companionship.

_Because people are selfish monsters._ That was the reason and that was the truth. Human beings are selfish creatures whose natural instinct is to care for themselves and no one else. They look down on others who don't measure up to their standards and hate for no reason, simply because they don't like you.

To be friends with people like that, it made him want to gag.

And so he kept his head down and outright refused to become friends with anyone. Besides, he didn't need friends. He's survived the last two years without them.

_Are you happy?_ At that moment, Amamiya's words rang through his head. Are you perfectly happy
not having any friends?

"Shut up Amamiya." He blurted out, refusing to let that guy's words change his mind.

He entered the apartment complex, greeting Tori who sat at her desk, reading one of her novels.

"Kazzy-kun! You're back." She greeted him with a smile. "You look tired. Don't tell me they put you on cleaning duty again?"

"Sort of." He gave himself cleaning duty but he wasn't going to tell her that.

"Two in a row? Sounds like your teacher's out to get you or something." Tori reiterated Sakamoto's belief.

"It's whatever." He shrugged it off.

"Well, if you say so. Just be careful and don't overwork yourself, Ok?" She asked.

"Sure." He said, walking up to his room to go to sleep.

"I put your dinner in the fridge. Heat it up for about a minute, it should be good to go!" She gave a thumbs up.

"Alright." And with that, he left his guardian back at her desk. He entered his apartment and went to the fridge, hungry after such a long day.

Once he finished his dinner, he went into his room, got changed and laid down on the bed. He let out a huge sigh, the stress of exiting his body.

Even though what happened today didn't go as plan, Kazuma planned to keep his promises as he was a man of his word. He would keep what Shiho told him a secret but hoped that she would keep their promise as well: If Kamoshida called on her again, she would come to him instead.

Their promises, sealed with a hug, lingered on in his thoughts.

He heard his phone vibrate as if to interrupt those thoughts. He pulled it out and saw that Sakamoto texting him and Amamiya on the group chat.

Ryuji: Guys, this don't make any damn sense. The principal and even the parents know about the abuse.

Ren: It's no wonder Kamoshida hasn't been punished for the things he's done. Everyone knows and they do nothing about it.

Ryuji: This is bullshit! Why ain't anybody speaking up?!

Kazuma: Isn't it obvious? Mutual Gain.

Ryuji: What?

Kazuma: Suguru Kamoshida, the head coach of a successful Volleyball team, who also happens to be an Olympic medalist, leads his team to nationals, and you wonder why the principal and parents don't say anything? It's simple. In their minds, as long as they all gain something from it, who cares if the students and children suffer.
Ryuji: People can't be that selfish!

Kazuma: You underestimate just how horrible people are, Sakamoto.

Ryuji: But that don't give him the right to do whatever he wants! He's beating kids up, and all they're allowed to do is endure. It's bullshit!

Ren: We're not going to let it end like this Ryuji. We're going to expose him. Right, Kazuma?

Kazuma: Sure.

Ryuji: Anyway, I'm gonna try and find someone who knows about what's going on with Kamoshida during break tomorrow. Just watch, I ain't giving up!

Ren: That's the spirit, Cap'n!

Ryuji: Really, dude? Again with the pirate jokes?

Ren: Had to get one in. Anyway, let's meet up in the courtyard tomorrow after school. Have a good night you guys.

Kazuma shut off his phone, wanting to go to sleep.

As he closed his eyes, he allowed sleep to take him.

As his eyes slowly opened, Kazuma saw that he was no longer in his room nor was he in his bed. Having woken up from slumber, he looked around and saw where he was. Back in the realm between conscious and unconscious.

"This place again?" He got up from the hard floor he was sleeping on and looked around. There was no one else around, no person nor building. All that existed was this tower and Kei Kazuma himself. He walked over to the railing and looked down. Nothing, not even ground. "It really is just like last time."

"We meet again, my friend."

"Huh?!" He turned around and there he was. The Masked Man wearing the same black dress shirt, tie, and white blazer from last time. "Y-You again."

"Greetings, Kei Kazuma. I apologize if I've startled you." He gave an apologetic bow. "Tell me, have you gotten used to your Persona yet?"

"My Persona?" Kazuma questioned as to how this man has knowledge of his power.

He held out his left hand and what appeared to be a tiny version of Kazuma's Persona emitted from his palm.

"So, it was the Lord of Deception who heeded your call. A powerful Persona indeed." He said, closing his hand before crossing his arms once more. "It appears you have formed great partnerships since the last time you were here. Most impressive." The masked man held out his right hand and what appeared to be a card. Unlike the blank card that this man gave Kazuma the last time he was here, this one was different. It had what appeared to be a jester laughing very close to a cliff, accompanied by a dog at his heels. "The Fool: Innocence, Divine Inspiration, Madness,
Freedom, Spontaneity, Inexperience, Chaos, and Creativity. It represents the number 0, filled with infinite potential."

"What are you...? I don't understand." The boy said as the masked man closed his hand again only to open it up once more with a different card emitting from his hand.


Kazuma, while confused by why he was doing this, somewhat understood what he was doing. He was listing off Tarot cards, usually used for fortune telling and such, though why he was doing that here, he had no idea.

He finished by closing his hand before crossing his arms once more. "Through your connections with others, you awoke to the many and varied selves within you. In time, you will call upon them to assist you in times of crisis."

"I-I don't understand what you're saying." Kazuma fought back. "Look, it's Philemon, right?" He asked and received a nod from the masked man. "You claim to know me but I'm pretty sure I've never met you before in my life. Who are you, really? What do you want from me?"

"To help you." He answered.

"Help me? With what?"

"To set you back on the right path." Philemon cryptically answer. "Tragedy has torn you from your once peaceful life. You have chosen the path of a loner simply for the survival's sake. This is not who you are, Kei Kazuma. It is not what you feel deep within you."

"What do you know about me, huh?! You don't know how I feel! What I've lost!" Kazuma fought back. "I don't need anyone! I don't need these 'connections' you say I have! There's no point in befriending anyone in this sick twisted world where people care more about themselves than others! Human beings are selfish monsters! I hate them! All of them!"

Philemon kept calm, even though his guest was lashing out at him.

"If humans are selfish monsters, then tell me this, my friend." He pointed his finger in Kazuma's direction. "What are you?"

"I..." He stopped as soon as the question was asked, unable to give an answer.

"You desire solitude and would push away others to achieve it. That in itself is a selfish act. Hypocrisy does not befit you, my friend. Especially when your actions are evidence to the contrary." Philemon then clapped his hands together before spreading them apart. By doing so, he showcased the two cards he showed his guest earlier. "The Fool and The Chariot. They are bonds you have forged by opening your heart to them. Bonds that shall unlock the potential within you."

"Fool and Chariot." Kazuma repeated as he recognized those words. They were affiliated with that strange voice in his head, which appeared at some point during his interactions with his associates.

...  
Associates?!

"Amamiya and Sakamoto." He said spoke of the names those cards represent. "It's them."
"Exactly." The masked man nodded.

"But, why me?" He asked.

"It's because of who and what you are," Philemon explained. "You are the Aeon. An Outsider who must forge his own story. But, you must learn to open your heart to others. By doing so, a number of paths will present themselves to you. Down each of them, you will witness the karma of those you meet."

"I..." He shook his head, not wanting to believe in anything he's saying.

"I understand your reluctance, my friend." The masked man said to try and comfort his guest. "Just remember this: Whatever path you choose, remember that the choice was yours, and no one else's."

With that, he finished. Kazuma didn't offer an argument, reply, or retort of any kind. He just kept silent as he contemplated the advice that was given to him.

While this "Philemon" hasn't explained as to how he knows him, he didn't appear to be an enemy.

And Something told him this won't his last trip to this place

...  

I am thou, thou art I.

Thou hast established a new bond.

...  

From the self-suffused with divine love to the self-capable of demonic cruelty.

A new self has been born.

...  

Thou hast given birth to the Arcana of Aeon that shall grant thee new power.

...  

"That voice." Kazuma brought up as he finally understood why it sounded so familiar. "It was yours."

"I'll be looking forward to your next visit, my friend." He gave a formal bow. "Until then, farewell."

"Wait!" He reached out but fell to the ground as he suddenly felt tired. His vision began to darken until darkness overcame him.

4/14 - Thursday

Following his dream visit with Philemon, Kazuma simply woke up and continued his morning routine as if it never happened. He showered, ate breakfast, and left for school. He thought of the words and advice he gave him, even though half of what he said made little sense, especially the part about gaining power by forming bonds with others.
Power through bonds? Sounds like something you'd see in a cheap anime. He thought.

Leaving his apartment building, he let out a frustrated sigh at the situation he's in. Nothing has been going his way since his first day and he didn't appreciate all this annoying meddling.

*Why can't people just leave me alone?* He wondered.

"Kazuma."

"Hmm? He looked over his shoulder to find Amamiya outside his apartment building, waiting for him. He was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, who was apparently waiting for him. "Amamiya?"

"I had a feeling this was where you lived. It's the only apartment building down this road. I checked." He looked up at the sign. "Beauty Heights Apartments, huh? Nice name."

"What do you want?" Kazuma demanded, wanting to know why he was here.

"I just wanted to talk." He explained. "You were right."

"About what?" He replied.

"About trying to get testimonies. You were right, no one's going to talk to us. We need to find another way." He admitted.

"I assume you have a plan?" Kazuma believed.

"I do." The probationer nodded. "I'd like to go to the castle again after school, talk to Morgana and see if doing anything to Pink Undies will have any effect on the real Kamoshida."

"I was thinking the same thing." He said. "After all, if that place was created because of Kamoshida's distorted view of Shujin Academy, then we might be able to affect the real one by targeting his shadow-self."

"Then we have a plan." Ren smiled, glad to see he and his partner were of the same mind. "Let's get going. Don't want to be late again."

"Sure." With their talk finished, they left for school.

A few train rides later, they arrived in Aoyama, walking to Shujin. On their way, they could hear two girls talking amongst themselves.

"Did you see Mr. Kamoshida play yesterday? He was so awesome! I think I might ask for his autographs after school."

"I dunno if that's such a good idea. I hear that you shouldn't go near the P.E. faculty office. People say you can hear weird sounds, like screaming, even though no one's there."

_Goddamn it._ Kazuma winced at their comments, knowing full well what goes on in that office.

"I don't like the sound of that," Ren commented.

"Just ignore them," Kazuma said.

As the girls kept chatting about Kamoshida, Ren and Kazuma kept walking until they reached the school gate. Once they arrived, Kazuma noticed one particular individual waiting by the gate.
It was Shiho Suzui.

*What is she doing?* He thought as he froze at the sight of her. Her expression appeared neutral, her eyes glued to the ground. It looks like she's waiting for someone. Takamaki maybe?

"Kazuma?" He heard Amamiya call on him, wondering why he stopped so suddenly. "You alright?"

"I'm fine." He shook his head, not wanting to get him involved in what happened between him and Shiho. Seeing that she was alone, this might be a good opportunity to find out what she's doing. "You go on ahead, I have something to take care of."

He raised an eyebrow, wondering what was so important. "Alright then. See you after school." And with that, the probationer departed.

With him gone, Kazuma turned back to his classmate, still waiting by the school gate. He approached her slowly, not wanting to startle her.

"Suzui?" He called out.

"Huh?" Upon hearing her name, she looked to see who had called out to her. "O-Oh! Kei!" She smiled at the sight of him, greeting him by his first name. "Good morning."

He noticed her bruise was still painted on her left eye, not showing any signs of healing. Looking at it now still made him frown, anger at the scumbag that gave it to her.

"What are you doing out here? Class is about to start soon. Waiting on Takamaki or something?" He asked.

"Well, no." She shook her head, still smiling. "Actually, I was waiting for you."

"Me?" He raised an eyebrow, a little confused as to why she was waiting for him.

"Mmhmm." She nodded. "I was wondering if you wanted to walk to class together?"

That's why she was waiting here? So they could walk to class together? It doesn't even take that long to get to 2-E and she waited outside of school just for that reason?

*This girl is something else.* He admitted with a little roll of his eyes.

"Do what you want." He said, walking away from her, seeing no reason to talk any longer.

However, in spite of not giving her a 'yes' or 'no' answer, she followed after him, walking by his side as they both made their way to class.

If she was going to try and converse with him, she made no attempt to start so neither did he. Plus, he didn't really have anything to say at the moment.

As they walked to class, students were giving them looks and started to whisper to each other.

"Look at that? Suzui-san's with the transfer student in 2-E."

"Wow? I had no idea he was her type."

"Are they dating?"
Goddamn it. Kazuma said in his mind. To be frank, it was his own fault for not outright refusing Suzui’s request of walking to class together.

"Well, looks like we're quite the couple. Wouldn't you say, Kei?" She teased a little, giggling at the frown had at the moment.

"Hmph." He didn't make eye contact any longer, but his cheeks reddened a bit from the embarrassment.

Shiho took note of how he avoided eye contact and frowned because of it. She noticed that he would do this a lot in class. Whenever Ms. Chouno asked him a question or when Sakamoto tried to make conversation, he would always look away. What was he afraid of?

Once they reached class, they didn't say anything. They just sat down at their respective seats and waited for class to start. As more students entered the classroom, Sakamoto arrived and walked to where his seat was.

"Hey, dude." Ryuji greeted him, sitting down in his seat.

"Sakamoto." He gave a simple greeting.

"You can call me Ryuji, you know?" The spiky blonde insisted.

"What do you want, Sakamoto?" He corrected, ignoring his request to call him by his first name.

"I wanted to talk about... you know." He pointed to his phone, signaling his classmate to get on their group chat.

Kazuma pulled out his phone and waited for the conversation to start.

Ryuji: So about witnesses. I have an idea.

Ren: What is it?

Ryuji: I was wondering if we could get something outta Takamaki.

Kazuma mentally shook his head, not like the idea of interacting with her again. Besides, it's not like she'll want to talk him anyway.

Ren: You really think after yesterday, she'll want to talk to us?

Kazuma: Did I miss something?

Ren: It's nothing. Really.

Ryuji: Cmon guys, Just hear me out. You know how we didn't get a thing outta the volleyball team? I figured it'd be a good idea to talk to someone who knows them. Takamaki's BFF's with a starter.

Kazuma: You mean Suzui?

Ryuji: Yeah. How'd you know?

Kazuma immediately winced as Ryuji asked him the question. He had promised Suzui he would keep what she told him a secret but it still didn't sit well with him. To keep that promise, he
couldn't let Amamiya and Sakamoto find out about his association with her or their talk the other day.

Kazuma: Not important. What's the plan, Sakamoto?

Ryuji: Well, after yesterday, I doubt she'll talk to me. Maybe you guys could try talking to her, maybe convince her to get something out of Suzui.

Kazuma: I doubt she'll say anything the other volleyball members haven't already told us.

Ren: I have to agree with him, Ryuji. Everyone's too afraid to speak up, if we just stick to this current plan, we'll get nowhere.

Ryuji: Then what the hell do we do?!

Ren: I actually have a plan of my own. Me and Kazuma talked about it earlier today. Let's talk more after school.

Ryuji. Well... Alright, guys. We'll talk more after school.

Once they finished their chat, they put their phones back in their pockets. Kazuma thought it was over and done with but apparently, Ryuji wasn't finished.

"Hey, dude. You didn't answer my question." Sakamoto brought up. "How did you know I was talking about Suzui?"

He was about to reply before he looked past him to see someone apparently eavesdropping on them. Suzui, out of the corner of her eyes, was watching and likely listening to the two talk.

She was probably worried that he would tell Ryuji about what happened the other day, especially with how pushy the blonde could be.

"Volleyball rally." He said as if to answer his question and end the conversation.

"Ah, that's how," Ryuji said, remembering how the two were sitting next to each other during the rally.

Once he was done, Ms. Chouno entered the classroom and began the lecture for the day. Kazuma rested his cheek against his hand as he began jotting down the notes his teacher wrote on the board. With this, along with the plan to revisit the castle, he knew it was going to be another long restless day.

A few hours passed, boring classes went by, but thankfully, lunchtime finally came around. Shiho pulled her lunch out of her bag and planned to meet with Ann at their usual spot. But, before she could do this, she heard Sakamoto let out a loud groan which caused her to look over to where he and Kei were seated.

"Ugh. I hate math." He said, turning to his classmate. "Dude, do you even pay attention in class? You slept through every lecture."

"Just because my eyes are closed, doesn't mean my ears don't work," Kei replied sharply.

"Uh huh." Ryuji rolled his eyes a little, grabbing his bag. "I'm gonna hit up the caf, see if I can get any information from there."
"Do what you want." He said as the spiky blonde took his leave, finally giving the boy some peace and quiet.

Or so he thought.

"There you are, Kazuma-san!" She sat down in the seat in front of her, which coincidentally is her assigned seat in class.

Shiho watched as their class rep walked over to him. Emi Matsumoto, Representative of Class 2-E and member of Shujin's Newspaper Club. Kind and friendly while being stern and strict, she embodied everything a class representative should have. Shiho didn't have a problem with her, she was always nice to her and Ann, occasionally inviting them to sit with her at lunch. Her classmates have gone on to call her "our favorite newspaper girl" or something like that. Lately, she had been fixated on the newest addition to the class, Kei Kazuma, trying to strike up a conversation with him although it was always met with silence and grunts.

"You and Sakamoto-kun seem close." She observed. "When did you two become friends?"

"He's not my friend." He said.

"Really? But you're always hanging out with him and Amamiya-kun." She brought up.

"Are you deaf? I said he's not my friend. I don't need friends." Kazuma informed her as he grabbed his bag, got up, and prepared to leave. Shiho watched as he walked away from their class rep to get away from her.

"Hey, hold on." Emi got up and hurried over to him, getting in his way. "Why are you being so mean? I'm just trying to be friendly."

"Well, your friendliness is starting to border on harassment because you keep bothering someone who just wants to be left alone." He informed her. "Now quit pestering me."

"But..." She tried but he wouldn't budge as he walked past, leaving her to ponder what he had said. It was really mean of him to say that, but she really was just trying to be nice. "I just want to talk."

Having watched and listened to everything that was said between her classmates, Shiho was confused. She knew the boy was distant and had a bit of an attitude but that was nothing like the Kei Kazuma she talked to the other day, the one who came to her rescue and promised to protect her.

It's like the Kei Kazuma she knew and the Kei Kazuma others knew who two entirely different people.

"Kei." She whispered. She had been noticing a pattern. He's rude, tends to look away from people, not wishing for eye contact, and rejects company. Why was he so opposed to having friends?

Wanting to find out more, she sent Ann a quick text telling her she wouldn't be able to make lunch. After that, she got up from her seat and went after him.

Kazuma sat down on the bench of the courtyard where the vending machines were, the same place he and the others used as their base. When he arrived, there was no one else here so he decided that this would be the best place to have his lunch. It was quiet, just the way he liked it.

He put one earphone in his ear to listen to his music before pulling out the lunch Tori had prepared
for him along with a can of Mad Bull he bought from the vending machine. Opening his lunch, he found 6 Sriracha Chili Chicken Wings, an old favorite of his. He set the meal aside, opening his can of Mad Bull and took a sip.

He knew he was going to be busy soon so he'd have to relax while he could.

*Finally peace and quiet.* Kazuma thought.

"Kei?"

*I spoke too soon.* He groaned at the intrusion.

He looked up and saw Shiho Suzui once again, standing in front of him with her lunch in her hand, gracing him with that friendly smile she had this morning.

*She's a lot happier today than she was yesterday.* He noticed her change in attitude as he's never seen her so cheery before from the times he had seen her.

"What is it Suzui?" He asked her, not particularly fond of the fact that his peaceful lunchtime has been interrupted.

"I believe I remember asking you to call me Shiho." She pointed out.

"I never said I was going to." He brushed her off. "Now, what do you want?"

"Well, I wanted to talk to you some more." She offered. "Mind if I join you?"

"Depends. Are you going to slap me again?" He asked, not sarcastically because he really didn't want to get hit by her again. The punch he received from that loser that was picking on her the other day was nothing. Shiho Suzui on the other hand, had a mean right hook.

"Only if you give me a reason too." She replied cheekily with a wink, causing him to roll his eyes.

"Whatever. Do what you want." He moved over a bit, allowing her to join him.

"Thank you." She said, sitting down on the bench next to him.

Shiho took out her lunch and started eating. Seeing as she started, Kazuma decided to eat his as well, as he was hungry. He took a bite, and the taste of siracha overwhelmed his taste buds. He always loved spicy foods whether they were mild or insanely hot. However, it was the flavor that mattered most to him.

They stayed silent, both were probably waiting for one to start up a conversation. He glanced over at her to see her staring at him out of the corner of her eyes but looked back at her food when their eyes met.

*This is getting awkward.* Kazuma admitted. He wasn't the best conversationalist, especially for one who doesn't desire the company of others. But this wasn't just any person, this was Shiho Suzui. His classmate, a victim of Kamoshida's abuse, a girl he rescued and promised to protect. The best thing to do here was to say something just to break the ice and the awkward silence.

"How's your eye?" He asked, noticing her bruised eye hadn't healed in the slightest.

"Huh?" She got caught off guard by his sudden question. "Oh, it's fine. Still stings a bit."

"Ice it every few hours, it'll reduce the swelling." He advised.
"Uh, sure. I'll do that." She nodded, promising to follow his advice and get an ice pack.

"Are those guys from the other day still bugging you?" He asked another question, wondering if those idiots learned their lesson.

"Nope. They won't even look at me anymore. Can't say I blame them after you put the fear of God into them." She joked, smiling fondly of the memory.

"Hmph." He looked away from her, not really caring for her teasing or her jokes.

Shiho noticed that he did it again. That same pattern. At some point during a conversation, he looks away to avoid eye contact. He did it yesterday when they spoke at Sing Sing Karaoke. He did it this morning and he's doing it again. She couldn't understand why and wanted to find out.

"Why do you do that?" She asked sadly.

"Do what?" He questioned.

"Why do you look away whenever someone tries to talk to you?" She asked again but received no answer, only a grunt. "Why are you so afraid?"

"Afraid? Afraid of what?" He wondered where she was going with this, finally turning back to face her.

"Holding a meaningful conversation with someone. You couldn't even do it with Matsumoto-san earlier and she was just being friendly to you." She pointed out how curt and rude he was with their class rep earlier. "Why are you so mean all the time? Why are you trying so hard to be alone?"

"If I want a lecture, Suzui, I'll ask for one." He told her off. "Why are you even here? Is it because you feel sorry for me or something? Or do you feel obligated because of yesterday?"

"Why do you think that?" She asked, wondering why he would assume that she's spending time with him out of pity.

He let out an annoyed sigh, turning to look her in the eyes. He wanted her to hear what he had to say. "You're a nice girl, Suzui. But, you don't need to feel obligated to be around me just because of what happened yesterday."

"What?" She was taken aback, not believing what she was hearing.

"I meant what I said yesterday. If Kamoshida tries anything, I'll protect you. I'm a man of my word." He explained as his face began to contort into a frown. "You went out of your way to wait for me by the school gate and join me for lunch but you don't have to do this anymore." And once again he looked away from her, angrily clenching his fist. "If you're being nice to me as some sort of repayment, then don't bother."

He believed after that, it would be the end. Shiho would leave him to his devices and he could have his lunch in peace. She would no longer affiliate with him unless Kamoshida made a move against her. Now that she's aware that she's under no obligation to be around him, there was no reason for her to be here any longer.

But when he looked to his side, she was still there, not having moved a bit. Her head was hunched over, her hair covering her expression so he couldn't tell what she was feeling at the moment.

"Y-You.." She whispered a bit before looking up at him, glaring right at him with a few tears in her
eyes. "You're such an idiot."

"What?" He was taken off guard by words and the few droplets of tears from her eyes really hit him hard.

"If we weren't on school grounds, I really would slap you again for the crap that just came out of your mouth." She told him. "It's not like that at all. I'm not here because I owe you or something like that. I'm here because I want to talk to you. Has that ever crossed your mind?"

He didn't answer her. He just looked away, not wanting to look at her anymore, if only to spare him the sight of seeing her upset. It wasn't the first time, he remembered the other day when his words became rough, she fell backward and got scared.

"Kei." She looked at him with pleading eyes. "I know it's none of my business and you don't have to talk to me if you don't want to. I mean, we barely know each other after all. But, I'd like to get to know you and if you're in pain, I want to help. I won't tell anyone, it'll be between us."

Oh no, this is what he was fearing. She was trying to pry into his personal problems just Amamiya tried to do. He turned around to tell her exactly what he had told him, but when their eyes met, he knew he couldn't. Her eyes were already stained with tears and her frown wouldn't let up. Not a frown of anger but one of genuine worry.

"If you want me to leave, just tell me and I'll never bother you again." She said before looking down at her lunch, awaiting his answer.

Even though she said that, he couldn't reject her, not like this. She was willing to tell him about her demons and trusted him, a new kid and complete stranger, with her secrets. He felt like he could trust her.

No, that's not the right word.

He WANTED to trust her.

"My parents were police detectives." Felling like he had nothing to lose by telling her, he began which caught her interest, causing her to look up at him again. "They were the best of the best, a force to be reckoned with. There wasn't a single case they couldn't solve. After a while, people started calling them 'The Best Detectives in Tokyo'. They were so renowned that they were often asked to do interviews, appear on talk shows, sometimes they were asked for autographs."

"They sound like good people." She believed.

"They were." He nodded. "Fame wasn't what drove them, it was to help people. To put the bad guys away and help the innocent." He got the good part out of the way. Now for the hard part. "But then, two years ago, everything changed."

"What happened?" She asked, noticing his demeanor changed quite drastically.

"They had some time off from a case they were working on. They were always so buried in their work that it surprised me when they told me they had a few days off. They wanted to spend it with me and asked me if there was anywhere I wanted to go. I asked them if we could go to Dometown. So, that's what we did. We spent the whole day there, riding rides, eating junk food, it was so much fun." His hands began to shake uncontrollably which made Shiho worry. "And then it was time to go home... and... and..."

"Kei." She seemed worried as he hunched over to keep her from seeing how he was feeling. She
then placed her hand on his, hoping to comfort him. "It's okay. You don't have to say anymore."

"They died." Was all he told her. At that moment, Shiho's eyes widened and let out a little gasp. "It was those breakdowns that the news won't shut up about. They both suffered one and died right in front of me. Fell into the train tracks as the subway arrived, crushed their bodies beyond recognition."

"Oh my god." She placed a hand over her mouth to keep her own shock in check. "Kei, I'm so sorry."

"Keep your sorry, Suzui." He told her. "You wanted to know my dirty secrets, there you go. The full package."

"So that's why you're so mean to people." She believed to have figured him out. "You're scared of losing someone close to you like how you lost your family."

"What?" He asked, wondering where she came up with such a conclusion.

"You don't hate people, Kei. Not really. You're just afraid." Shiho deduced. "But it's okay. There's nothing wrong with that. It's natural to be afraid."

"I..." He tried to argue but couldn't,

"I used to be like you, you know. I usually kept to myself and I hated coming to school. But then, two great things happened. I met Ann, someone who was alone like me. I don't know if I could've gotten through my first year here if she wasn't always by my side." She confessed. "And then, I met you."

"Me?" He questioned.

"Yep. When I met you at the train station, the advice you gave me, I felt hope for the first time since coming to this school. And when you saved me from those jerks, I couldn't help but admire you." She smiled. "Hehehe, it's like you're my knight in shining armor."

"Suzui." He whispered softly. Never before has he heard someone speak so fondly of him before. It was kind of overwhelming.

"Jerk." She then flicked his forehead. "I told you to call me Shiho."

"S-Shiho." He muttered, a little nervous right now.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get so emotional." She chuckled a little. "What I'm trying to say is, you can't really survive in this world without friends."

"That's not true." He said. "I'm alone. I've always been alone."

"But you're always with Sakamoto and that other transfer student." She pointed out.

"They're not my friends." He told her. "Just because you associate with someone and have conversations with them doesn't mean you're friends."

"Hmm. Is that so." She smirked a little, bringing her hand up to her chin as she started thinking. This kind of made Kazuma a little nervous as to what she's thinking about. Once she was done thinking, she gave him a smile. "Well, I guess that makes me your first friend."

"What?" He raised an eyebrow, confused by what she said.
"Yep. Because unlike them, you and I share something." She grabbed his hand and brought it closer to her, interlocking her pinky with his. "Our promise, remember?"

"Promise?" He questioned. He knew what she was referring to but didn't understand how it made them friends.

"Yep. It's a promise between friends." She said. "So, like it or not, we're friends now."

A promise... between friends. He thought of as the words repeated in his head. This girl really is a one of a kind. She was the most selfless and sweetest girl he's ever met. He couldn't rebuff what she had said because he knew it was true. The two of them shared something together, something he doesn't share with Amamiya or Sakamoto. He couldn't deny it. It was the truth.

...  

I am thou, thou art I.  

Thou hast established a new bond.  

...  

From the self-suffused with divine love to the self-capable of demonic cruelty.  

A new self has been born.  

...  

Thou hast given birth to the Arcana of Death that shall grant thee new power.  

...

He heard Philemon's voice again, signifying that he had forged a bond with Shiho Suzui.

"Tch!" He grumbled a little because of it but to be honest, it wasn't entirely unpleasant. In fact, it felt nice for once. "You talk too much, you know that?"

"Haha, can't deny that." She laughed a little at his words before noticing something. "Hey, Kei. Do you want to exchange numbers and chat I.D.?"

"Huh?" He said, caught off guard by her request. He would need it though if he was going to protect her from Kamoshida. "S-Sure." He gave her his phone, allowing her to put in her number and chat I.D.

"You know, I always see you wearing these earphones." She pointed out. "What kind of music do you listen to?"

"Oh, uh." He said nervously, as there are some tracks on his phone that he would prefer to keep to himself. "I pretty much listen to everything."

"Oh, cool. Mind if I listen to some?" She asked.

"Um, sure." He allowed her, praying that she won't listen to one of his tracks. She put in one earbud and put on a song.

"Oh, wow. I've never heard of this song before." She noted.
Oh crap. She must be listening to one of his tracks.

"Wait. That voice." She said, stunned as the voice on this track seemed familiar. "Wait... that's you
isn't it?"

"N-No. S-Shut up." He looked away, his cheeks red with embarrassment.

"Wow. You're a good singer." She stated. "Do you play any instruments?"

"Um, yeah. I play guitar." He nervously said without thinking.

"Really?! Kei, you have talent." Shiho told him.

"Uh, thanks." Kazuma said as she took out the earbud and gave him back his phone.

"That was really good. You have to play a song for me one day. You have too!" She insisted, a
little pushy at her request.

"Um. O-Okay." He said nervously.

"Geez, Kei. I didn't think you'd be so flustered. You're as red as a tomato." She laughed which
made him angrily look away.

"S- Shut up! That's your fault!" He said, turning away from her.

"Look at that." She smiled. "Looks like we have another promise together."

As if he didn't have enough promises with her. Although, he was really flattered to hear that she
liked his music and he really wanted to get back into playing guitar.

"We should probably get back to class." She stood up, throwing her trash away. "Want to walk
together?"

He answered her with his actions, getting up and throwing his trash away. They walked side by
side on their way to class, ignoring the whispers and glances people were giving them. It didn't
matter to him, he continued on as he walked to class with his...

Well... with his friend.

The one thing he didn't want, he now had. And you know what, he didn't hate it. He looked away
from Shiho as a small smile formed on his face.

Thanks, Shiho.

Chapter End Notes

So I went ahead and changed the confidant start between my OC and Shiho because
when I thought about it, it didn't make sense to me for the two to form a bond like that
so early. I figured it should be when the two officially become friends.

Hope everyone enjoyed. Til next time.
Here we are, back again with another chapter.

So, we were supposed to get more news on Persona 5 Royal May 9th but instead, we got a recap of pretty much everything we already know about the game. Typical Atlus. Still, I'm excited for more news and I hope you guys are too.

So, I went back and made some edits to past chapters, trying to fix grammar mistakes and such. Nothing major.

Warning: It gets a bit dark at the end. If you can't handle it, turn back now.

Without further ado, here's the 11th chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After class had ended, Shiho went back to the courtyard where she and Kei had lunch to meet up with Ann. The blonde showed up a few minutes after to keep her company until volleyball practice started. She had a lot on her mind today, happy thoughts mostly.

She couldn't stop thinking about her time with Kei Kazuma today what went down between them.

Part of her felt guilty for opening up the wounds of his past that he didn't wish to revisit, but part of her felt happy that he trusted her enough to tell her about his personal demons. It must be hard, living without his parents. He must've been so lonely.

He tried to hide it, but when they walked to class, she saw that smile that formed on his face. It was a far cry from his usual expression, mostly having a frown whenever she saw him. She was glad to have played a part in helping him smile.

He should do that more. She noted, giggling a bit about how flustered he was when she teased him. She couldn't help but push his buttons a little and felt a little proud of being the first to see this side of him.

"What's so funny?" Ann asked curiously.

"Huh?" Shiho almost forgot that Ann was with her. "I-It's nothing. Just thinking of something funny."

"Uh huh," Ann said, not really believing her. However, there were important things right now. "Shouldn't you be heading to volleyball?"

"I guess." She said, not really wanting to go to practice today.

"That bruise above your eye, is that from practice too?" She asked with concern.

"Y-Yeah." Shiho nodded. At the very least, Kei didn't tell Ann about the truth behind her black eye.
"Are you sure you're not pushing yourself too hard?" Ann questioned, concerned for her health and well-being.

"I'm Ok. Volleyball's the only thing I can do right." She said somberly. Her happy attitude was quickly withering away at the thought of attending volleyball practice later. Suddenly, she heard a ringing sound coming from Ann's pocket, likely her cell phone. "Shouldn't you take that?"

"It's probably just my part-time job. I think." Ann waved off her question. The blonde knew who it was but didn't want to answer it at the moment.

"Well, I should get going. Don't want to be late." Shiho stood up, preparing to head to volleyball practice.

"Shiho." The blonde grabbed her arm, preventing her from leaving as she appeared to be more worried than usual. "Are you sure you're OK?"

"I..." She muttered a little. She felt horrible lying to Ann about how hard the last days have been, about her black eye, about... well, everything really. Then she remembered something Kei told her when they had lunch together.

_Just because you associate with someone and have conversations with them doesn't mean you're friends._

And he was right. But, the promise between them is what cemented their friendship. She needed to make one right here right now.

"A lot's been happening, Ann. And, I know I've been worrying you. I'm sorry." Shiho said, giving her friend a small smile. "But, I think everything's going to be OK."

"Shiho..." Ann whispered, a little confused by her happy demeanor. "You know, you've been a little weird today."

"Have I?" She questioned.

"And also, where were you at lunch?" She brought up, glaring a little.

"I'm sorry, Ann. I didn't mean to ditch you. I was... well... I was with a new friend." She mentioned.

"New friend?" Ann asked, wondering who she was referring to.

"Mnhmm. He's... helped me realize some things." She said, still thinking about their earlier discussion. "I'll call you after practice and tell you about what's been going on. I promise."

Ann's eyes widened, her best friend was definitely acting weird. Shiho wasn't normally this talkative or... hopeful. It reminded her of the Shiho she met back in middle school, who was always so happy and cheerful as well as snarky and cheeky, using every opportunity to tease her. Whoever this "new friend" of hers is, they must've really done something special to bring back this side of her.

"I'll see you later, Ann." She waved goodbye before heading off to practice.

Ann stood up, watching her leave. As weird as it was, she was glad that Shiho was returning back to her old self. After she was made the starting lineup, she's been really tired and depressed lately.
She knew Kamoshida was putting her and her teammates through some tough training to prepare for nationals, she didn't know if there was anything she could do to cheer her up. But, seeing her smile again and laugh again, it was a sight to see.

However, her happy thoughts quickly diminished as she heard her phone ring again. She told Shiho it was a call from her part-time job. That couldn't have been further from the truth as she answered the call.

"Yes?" She answered disgustingly.

"Hey, sexy." She heard that voice, the one that made her cringe in disgust every time she heard it, whether it was in person or on the phone. "Want to head back to my place after practice?"

"T-Today won't work. I'm... I'm not feeling so good." She came up with the best excuse she had so she could end the call. "Sorry. Bye."

She ended the call putting the cell phone in her pocket as she slumped back down onto the bench, burying her face in her hands. Every time that man tried to talk to her or called her on her cell phone, she felt gross. No matter how hard she tried, avoiding him was impossible.

"I wish he would just... disappear." She wished but the hope that he would forget about her and leave her alone was nowhere to be found.

She tried to keep her mind off of it and focus on other things. As she thought about it, there was only one other person that was on her mind.

Ren Amamiya.

She felt bad for how things ended between them the other day. She initially approached him just to have a normal conversation with him, to see if he was settling in alright. Being a subject of false rumors herself, she understood what he was going through, being misunderstood for something that's probably not even true.

Looking past all the gossip, the one that's constantly being said about him is that he assaulted someone which is the reason he's here but Ann didn't believe it. He was just so nice and polite, not to mention kind and courteous towards her.

He had apologized to her on their first day of school when their classmates began to speculate if they were dating based on their familiarity with each other. It wasn't his fault yet he apologized anyway.

Then, he offered to buy her a drink from the vending machine when she confronted him the other day as payment for letting him borrow her textbook.

And to top it off, now she's hearing that he, along with Sakamoto and that other transfer student, were asking around about Kamoshida, as if they were all on some top-secret mission to take him down or something.

She was envious of his strength and determination to actually do something about that man.

*But, can't you help us?* she remembered his request. *It's clear you don't like him either.*

"I really wish I could." She whispered sadly.

"Hey, it's Takamaki." Ann heard someone say. Peeking through her fingers, she saw two boys
talking about her. She groaned, even if she was used to this, it was still annoying.

"Rumor has it she's dating Kamoshida."

"Seriously?"

"I heard people saw them in his car together."

"You know, she seems pretty easy, huh? I heard she's been fooling around with that transfer student in 2-D. You think I'd have a chance, too?"

"C'mon dude, you can't go after Kamoshida's bitch!"

She had gotten used to people saying all sorts of slanderous lies about her but even so, whenever someone referred to her as "Kamoshida's bitch" it was the one insult she hated above all else.

"Besides, if she's hooking up with that criminal, I don't want him coming after me too."

"Don't forget about her friend, Suzui-san. I heard she's dating that other transfer student in 2-E."

Wait, what? Ann thought of in shock as they continued.

"You mean that guy with the bad attitude?"

"That's the one. I heard they were seen walking together and some said they had lunch together."

"Seriously? Damn, are all girls into bad boys or something?"

"Who knows?"

She had heard enough. Ann got up from the bench and left the area, thinking over what she had heard. Was Shiho really hanging around that guy?

"That guy." She growled in anger just thinking about that jerk.

Kei Kazuma, the other transfer student of Shujin who just so happens to be in Shiho's class.

He already came off as the rude type, having bumped into Daisuke without apologizing, but after their encounter yesterday and the words he had for her, he was probably the rudest, biggest asshole she had ever met.

Honestly, she wondered why Amamiya was hanging around a guy like that.

Then she thought of what Shiho told her earlier, that she had lunch with a 'new friend'. She referred to this new friend of hers as a 'he' so is it possible that Kei Kazuma is who she was talking about?

Despite his rude treatment towards her, he did say that the rumors about her and Kamoshida were, in his words, a "load of crap" meaning he didn't believe her to be sleeping with Kamoshida nor did he believe her to be easy.

\*What the hell is his deal?\*

She asked but got no answer.

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After class had ended, Ren made a stop to the bathroom first before heading to the courtyard. Walking down the steps, he started making his way towards his destination to meet up with
Kazuma and Ryuji. He planned to tell the spiky blonde about his plan to visit the castle again and get more information about just how connected the shadow-self of Kamoshida is to the real one. Kazuma seemed all for the plan since he had the same idea and hoped Ryuji would be all for it too.

Once he made it down the stairs, he saw someone standing in the way of his destination. The girl known as Shiho Suzui stood in the doorway, barring his way to the courtyard. While they have never met officially, he has heard about her. She was Takamaki's best friend, Ryuji and Kazuma's classmate, and a starter on the volleyball team.

While he still planned to head back to the castle again, he may as well go talk to her while he has the chance. He walked up to her but she didn't seem to notice him as she was on her phone. It looked like she was writing out a text but to who he had no idea.

"Hmm?" She seemed to notice that there was someone in front of her so when she looked up, her eyes met Ren's. "O-Oh. I'm in the way, aren't I? Sorry."

"Don't worry about it. I'm not in a hurry." He held up a hand to assure her before noticing her black eye. "Are you hurt?"

"Huh?" She muttered before realizing he's talking about her bruise. "Oh, i-it's nothing. Just a little bruise from practice." She gave an excuse that the probationer didn't believe in the slightest. "Hm, you don't look familiar. Could you be the transfer student from class 2-D?"

"That's right." He said, giving a polite bow. "Ren Amamiya, nice to meet you."

"L-Likewise. I'm Shiho Suzui from class 2-E." She introduced herself, a little caught off guard by his polite attitude. "Um, this might not be any of my business, but don't let the rumors get to you, OK? My best friend is often misunderstood too, all because of her looks."

She's talking about Takamaki. He deduced. It appears the rumors about his blonde classmate are starting to affect her best friend as well. How could it not? He wasn't even friends with Takamaki and even he was appalled by the false rumors about her.

"Don't worry, Suzui-san." He started. "People are free to say whatever they want about me. I know who I am, all too well."

Shiho appeared stunned by his words but was glad that the rumors weren't weighing him down. He wasn't a bad person at all. If anything, he was like Ann, just someone who's misunderstood.

"I'm glad to hear it." She smiled before changing the conversation as there was something she wanted to ask him. "Say, Amamiya-kun, if you don't mind me asking, you and Kei seem close. Do you two get along?"

"Kei?" He questioned before realizing who she was talking about. "Oh, you mean Kazuma? Yeah, you could say we do."

"That's good." She replied. "He's a good guy and not at all what he makes himself out to be, he's just all bark. A really loud bark." She quipped and giggled a little as if she was remembering something.

Now, this was a little strange. It appeared that Shiho was familiar with his partner. First, she referred to him by his first name now she was expressing relief that Ren and Ryuji were getting along with him. He knew she must've had some familiarity with him as they were both classmates but this was beyond mere classmate association. It was... friendship.
"Anyway, I have to go to practice," Shiho said as she remembered she had volleyball practice. "It was nice meeting you, Amamiya-kun."

"Y-Yeah. You too, Suzui-san. Enjoy the rest of your day." He gave his farewell as she walked past him on her way to practice.

While he was curious as to how close she was with Kazuma, that could wait. Right now, he had to focus on the task at hand. He left and made his way to the courtyard.

Once he arrived, he found his companions in the courtyard, Kazuma sitting on the bench resting his cheek against his hand while Ryuji stood near the vending machines with his arms crossed, apparently agitated about something.

"Dammit. What the hell." The spiky blonde cursed.

"Something wrong?" Ren asked silently to his fellow transfer student.

"He tried to get info during lunch, he's been acting like this ever since," Kazuma informed him.

"God dammit!" Ryuji slammed his fist against the vending machine in anger. "All of 'em kept sayin' the same shit Mishima was talkin' about! Kamoshida had to have told 'em something!"

"My guess, threats of being kicked off the team. Or worse, expulsion." Ren believed.

"No shit." The spiky blonde commented. "Anyway, you said you had a plan, right?"

"Yeah, me and Kazuma talked about it this morning." The probationer explained. "Since getting testimonies is out of the question, the only option left. We'll have to go after the source."

"What? You mean, we'll have to go to Kamoshida directly?" Ryuji questioned.

"Not the real one." Kazuma intervened. "The one in the castle."

"Wait, you guys want to go back there again?" Ryuji questioned, not particularly fond of the idea of going back again so soon.

"Think about it, Ryuji. If Pink Undies is connected to the real one, maybe if we defeat him, something will happen to the real Kamoshida." Ren gave his idea.

"Wow." The spiky blonde muttered, impressed by the idea and how doing something to that other world's Kamoshida may have an impact on the real one. "I mean, I didn't think of that. But, is there any meaning to-"

"I finally found you!"

The three of them heard a familiar voice call them out, but as they looked around, there was no one around. Kazuma stood up from the bench, helping his companions look around.

"What was that?" He asked.

"Down here, Brown-Hair."

They heard the voice again and looked down to where it was coming from only to see a black cat with blue eyes approach them and hop onto the table.

"Don't think you can get away with not paying me back for helping you." The cat spoke.
"That voice..." Ryuji said in awe as he realized who it belongs to

"Morgana?" Ren questioned, wondering if the cat they were looking at was the same cat from the castle.

"How dare you, up and leave me like that!" Morgana said angrily.

"The cat's talkin'?!" The spiky blonde said in shock at seeing their former companion speak in this new form of his.

"I am NOT a cat! This is just what happened when I came to this world!" The cat angrily explained. "It was a lot of trouble finding you three."

"Wait. You came to our world?! Does that mean you've got a phone?!" Ryuji wondered curiously.

"Ha! You don't need one when you're at my level." The cat grinned smugly.

"Quit the lying, cat. You ran after us when we left last time didn't you?" Kazuma crossed his arms. "It must've been close to us when left the castle and got dragged into the real world."

"T-That's not what... well..." The cat sighed at being figured out so easily. "Fine. That's what happened."

"That aside, why can you talk?! You're a cat!" The spiky blonde asked.

"Tell me you guys are hearing this too." Ryuji turned to his two companions.

"Yeah." Kazuma nodded.

"Uh, Meow?" Ren questioned as if the calm down the situation but that just sparked a reaction from the spiky blonde and an annoyed glare from his partner.

"This is no time to be jokin' around!" Ryuji exclaimed to the probationer.

"You guys are having a rough time I hear. I heard you mention something about witnesses." Morgana brought up as if to change the conversation.

"That's right," Ren said, getting back to the task at hand. "We're getting nowhere in the investigation, people are too scared to speak out against Kamoshida. Me and Kazuma theorized that if we did something to Pink Undies, maybe the real Kamoshida will be affected. Is that a possibility?"

"Well, you guys are pretty close, but not close enough." Morgana playfully mocked.

"God, that condescendin' attitude! This thing's gotta be Morgana!" Ryuji spat out, easily recognizing that tone of arrogance.

"You were still doubting me?!" The cat fired back.

"Indoor voices you two, I'd rather the faculty not catch us arguing with a cat." Ren pointed out that they were getting a little loud.

"Quiet!" Kazuma shushed them as he looked over his shoulder and saw two teachers behind them talking amongst themselves.
"Ugh, we really have to be looking for a cat in a busy time like this?"

"I just heard a meow somewhere near here. Didn't you hear it?"

"Make sure you check every nook and cranny around."

Once they walked off, they breathed out a sigh of relief as they were no in the clear. It appears the faculty is aware of Morgana's presence and are searching for him.

But that was beside the point.

"Meow?" Ryuji questioned from what the teacher had said to his colleague. "Does that mean only us three can understand what you're sayin'?"

"Looks like it." The cat shrugged, even he didn't know why others couldn't hear him.

"What the hell's goin' on?" Ryuji scratched his head in frustration, all of this was becoming too overwhelming for him. "Anyways, what Ren and Kazuma suggested. Is it for real?"

"You're quite the skeptic for being an idiot," Morgana noted.

"What was that?!" Ryujji fired back, not appreciating the unnecessary insult.

"Can we take this elsewhere? We're out in the open here." Kazuma suggested.

"Yeah, good call." His classmate agreed before roughly grabbing Morgana by the neck, holding him up. "Here, one of you guys hide in your bags. It should be just small enough to fit."

"Hey!" The cat struggled in the spiky blonde's hold. "How dare you treat me like-"

"Shut up already." Kazuma intervened, grabbing the cat and stuffing him into his bag.

"Let's head to the roof, guys. It'll be quiet there." Ryuji suggested.

"Alright gang, let's go," Ren said, concluding the meeting for now as they head to the roof to continue this discussion.

Just as they were about to leave, Kazuma felt a vibration in his pocket. He pulled it out to see who the text was from.

It was Shiho.

**Shiho: Hey, Kei.**

He didn't want to delay so he walked behind the others and continued to text her secretly.

**Kazuma: Aren't you at practice?**

**Shiho: In the locker room, thought I'd shoot you a quick text first.**

**Kazuma: Alright then. What is it?**

**Shiho: Well, I wanted to tell you that I really enjoyed talking to you today and I'm sorry if I brought up any bad memories.**
Kazuma: It's fine. You did nothing wrong.

Shiho: Still, opening up to me like that. It took strength, Kei. Don't forget that.

Kazuma: I won't.

Honestly, it was surprising, telling someone about his past the way he did with Shiho. But, it felt right telling her and he felt better afterward. He felt... relieved.

Kazuma: Do you need me to stay until you get off?

Shiho: Nah, it's good. But, if you're free this Saturday, how about we hit Sing Sing Karaoke again. Only this time, we'll actually sing.

Kazuma tensed a bit, not expecting the sudden invite. What should he do? Accept it? Reject it?

As he thought about it some more, he had to admit that Shiho's company was very refreshing and he wouldn't mind hanging out with her again.

Kazuma: Sure, I've got nothing planned.

Shiho: Promise?

Kazuma: Promise.

Shiho: Will you look at that, looks like we've got another promise in the bank. Better start cashing in or you're going to start owing me. ;)

Kazuma: Ha ha, very funny.

Shiho: Anyway, gtg. Ttyl?

Kazuma: Sure. Later.

Once he was finished, he found himself on the rooftop with the others staring at him. He must've been texting Shiho for a while now.

"Who you texting, man?" Ryuji asked.

"Just my guardian." He lied, keeping who he was texting a secret from the others. He put down his bag and Morgana walked out of it, staring at his companions with a vile glare.

"Don't be so rough with me, you jerks!" The cat attacked.

"Enough of that!" Ryuji retorted. "You said that Ren and Kazuma's suggestion might work, right?"

"That's right." The cat nodded. "You need to attack his castle."

"What do you mean?" The spiky blonde asked for an explanation.

"That castle is how Kamoshida views this school. He doesn't realize what happens in there, but it's deeply connected to the depths of his heart. Thus, if the castle disappears, with would naturally impact the real Kamoshida." Morgana explained.

"What would happen to him, exactly?" Ren asked.
"A Palace is a manifestation of a person's distorted desires." He went on further. "So, if that castle were no more..."

"His distorted desires would be erased." The probationer finished the sentence.

"He would turn into an honest man," Kazuma added.

"Precisely! You two sure pick up things fast!" The cat complimented the two transfer students.

"For real?! H-He's gonna turn good?!" Ryuji couldn't believe it. They actually had a chance to stop him! "But, hold on. Is that really gettin' back at him?"

"Erasing a Palace essentially means forcing the owner to have a change of heart," Morgana explained. "However, even though their warped wants disappear, the crimes they committed remain. Kamoshida will become unable to bear the weight of those crimes and he'll confess them himself!"

"You for real?! That's possible?!” Ryuji exclaimed excitedly, Morgana's explanation wiping away any further doubt in his mind. This was his chance, their chance, to finally put an end to Kamoshida's reign.

"And since the Palace will no longer exist, he'll forget what we did there as well. Not only will we be able to bring Kamoshida down, but there won't even be a trace of our involvement." The cat went on to explain further.

"T-That's amazing!" The spiky blonde cheered. "You are one incredible cat!"

This is it. Kazuma thought. This is the only way I can protect Shiho. I have to take this chance.

"True. Except for the cat part!" Morgana replied.

"So, how exactly do we get rid of Kamoshida's Palace?" Ren questioned.

"By stealing the Treasure held within." The cat said which only confused them

"Stealing?" Ryuji asked. He knew there would be fighting with all those shadow monsters in the castle, but now they would have to steal something?

"I'll tell you more once you agree to go ahead with this. It's my most valuable, secret plan, after all." Morgana said.

"This sounds like a good method, probably our only chance at taking down Kamoshida," Ren added. "But, what's the catch?"

"Catch?" The cat asked.

"We're talking about changing a man's mindset, basically the fundamentals of what makes a person a person. It can't be as easy as you make it out to be. There has to be a catch. Am I right?" He asked, his arms crossed.

"Impressive. You're a sharp one, Frizzy-Hair," Morgana stated. "Yup, there's a catch. If we erase a Palace, there's no doubt the person's distorted desires will be erased as well. But desires are what we all need in order to survive. The will to sleep, eat, fall in love. Those sort of things."

"So it's not just his distorted desires that will be erased. It will be all of his desires." Ren said.
"And?" Kazuma asked for an explanation.

"If all of those yearnings were to vanish, they'd be no different than someone who has shut down entirely." Morgana started before getting to the dangerous part of this method. "They may even die if they're not given proper care."

Their eyes widened upon hearing this information. Sure, what Kamoshida was doing to the volleyball team was horrible and for that, he deserves to be punished. But to kill him?

"They might die?!" Ryuji was to say something.

"Will you listen to everything I have to say first?" The cat scolded.

"Would their death be our fault?" The spiky blonde questioned, now once again having doubts about this method.

"Aren't you determined enough to face those kinds of risks?" Morgana brought up, knowing just how much Ryuji wanted to make Kamoshida pay.

"We want him to be punished for what he's done to the students here. That hasn't changed, Morgana. But you're talking about cold-blooded murder. That's crossing a line." Ren brought up

"Sheesh. I come all this way, and this is what I get. It's not like anyone will ever find out." The cat mentioned.

"That's beside the point, Morgana!" Ren exclaimed which stunned everyone as they never expected to see such anger from him. "Regardless of what Kamoshida has done, if he gets killed because we destroy his palace, that's still on us because we made it happen. I am not a killer."

"Damn right." Ryuji nodded in agreement before noticing his classmate has been silent the whole time. "Dude, you've been quiet the whole time. What do you think?"

The consequences are great, Kamoshida could end up dead, or worse. But, this was the only option they have. No one would dare to testify against him, even Shiho won't. This was the only way to get rid of him for good, the only way to protect Shiho.

And he was going to keep his promise to her.

"We should do it," Kazuma said, greatly shocking the others.

"Dude, we're talking about a guy's life here! Are you for real?!" Ryuji fired back.

"Unless either of you has a better idea on how to get rid of him, this is the only way." He replied.

"Kazuma, do you understand what you're saying?" Ren asked. "If there's even a small possibility that our actions could lead to his death, we have to take it as an absolute certainty. The risks are too great."

"Then it's a risk we have to take, Amamiya!" Kazuma yelled at him. "You heard what the cat said! Kamoshida will confess if we destroy his Palace! This is our only chance to finally stop him!"

"At the cost of possibly ending his life?!" The probationer replied.

"We have to take that chance! We're running out of time here!" He exclaimed rather angrily at Ren's persistence.
"Running out of time?" Ren said confusingly, wondering what he meant by that.

"Whoa calm down, you two." Ryuji was the one to step in and stop the argument. They backed away, taking a moment to calm down. Once they did, the spiky blonde decided to question his classmate about what he was so insistent on the plan. "Dude, you okay? When did you get so fired up?"

"It's..." He shook his head, avoiding their gaze. "It's nothing."

Ren didn't believe that as he had never seen Kazuma act this way in the time that he's known him. It was like he was in a hurry to take down Kamoshida.

"Seems like you guys need to work things out so I'll come back later. Make sure you've made your decision by then." The cat finished as he ran off. Seeing as how he was able to get past the faculty the first time to talk to them, they all believed he would be fine trying to exit.

"Man, we're gettin' all worked up for nothing! Dammit!" Ryuji kicked the ground annoyingly for his indecisiveness.

"Look, guys, I think we should sleep on this and talk about it tomorrow. I'm not saying we shouldn't go through with this method but the risks are too great. Let's just think it over and discuss it tomorrow. Sound good?." The probationer decided the best thing to do would be to take a deep breath and go over their options before deciding what to do.

"Sounds good to me." The spiky blonde agreed.

"Fine." Kazuma relented, a little annoyed but decided that rushing into this without thinking isn't the way to go.

"Alright. Let's get out of here before we get caught." Ren concluded, ending the meeting for the day.

Once the three left the rooftop, they decided to call it a day. Ryuji bid farewell to his companions and headed on home. Now that Ren and Kazuma were alone, they each struggled on what to say as their little argument made things a little tense.

"Hey, Kazuma." Ren decided to start, not liking the tension between them. "Is everything OK?"

"What do you mean? I'm fine." Kazuma said defensively.

"Are you sure? I mean, Ryuji had a point, I've never seen you so fired up before. Is Kamoshida harassing you again?" He asked, wondering that asshole was bothering Kazuma about joining the volleyball team.

"No that's not it." He shook his head, trying to come up with an excuse. "I'm just tired of all these delays. We have a way to take him down so let's just go and do it."

"You're right, we do have a way. A way that could possibly end up killing him, and if that were to happen because we weren't careful, we could have blood on our hands and I don't want that on my conscious or yours." He reasoned. "I'm not saying we dismiss it. Let's just think it over, OK?"

The boy let out an annoyed sigh, wishing things weren't so complicated. But, Amamiya had a point. He wanted to take down Kamoshida but he doesn't want the man dead. To commit such an act would be a stain on his status as a human being and as a Kazuma. The last thing he wanted was
to dishonor his family's name. "Alright."

"Thank you, Kazuma. I mean it." Ren smiled, giving him a pat on the arm. "We should get going."

"You go on ahead," Kazuma told him. "I need to take a walk and clear my head."

"You sure?" He asked and he nodded. "Well, if you say so. I'll see you tomorrow." He waved goodbye before departing.

"Amamiya." He called out, halting Ren's movement as the boy approached him. "Before you go. I just wanted to answer your question."

"My question?" He raised an eyebrow, not knowing what he meant.

"On our first day, you once asked me if I was happy not having any friends. I never answered." He brought up the question he asked on their first day of school. "And well, the truth is. I'm not."

"Kazuma." Ren turned to face him as he noticed a sudden change in his partner's behavior. It wasn't the same mean and rough Kazuma he's used to dealing with. It's... something else.

"I've been a loner for so long that I'm used to it. I never really thought about whether or not I was happy with it until you asked me." He explained. "The thing is... I don't hate the idea of having friends. Rather, I'm... afraid of having friends."

"Afraid?" The probationer crossed his arms as he listened to his partner opening up to him.

"It has a lot to do with my..." He winced a little as if he were in pain. "...my parents. I don't like talking about them so back then, when you asked about them, I did get mad."

"I had a feeling it was a sensitive issue." Ren believed. "Once again, I'm sorry if I upset you that day."

"It's fine, Amamiya," Kazuma said. "I know you mean well, you're a good guy if not a tad bit annoying."

"I'll ignore that part." The probationer quipped, clutching his chest pretending to be hurt.

"I'm just not accustomed to talking about my past very much. At all, actually." He confessed. "I'm more used to taking action. Focusing on the present and the task at hand. That's just who I am. But... one day, when I'm more comfortable about it. I'll tell you everything."

"Wow." Ren was actually impressed at his partner's change in attitude and a little glad that he was starting to trust him. "Who are you and what did you do to the tough guy Kazuma I used to know?"

"I'm trying to be serious here, moron." The boy huffed, looking away to hide his embarrassment.

"I'm just teasing." He smiled, holding out his hand. "I appreciate you telling me this. Thanks, Kazuma. Or... should I call you Kei now?"

"Stick with Kazuma. I prefer it." He told him before grabbing his hand, giving him a handshake.

"If you wish, but from here on out, call me Ren." He ordered.

"Well then, I'll see you tomorrow. Ren Amamiya." Kazuma gave his farewell.

"You too, Kei Kazuma." He watched as his partner left. Something must've happened to him today.
He's never seen him like this before. He's... nicer in a way. Or rather, nice-ish.

Either way, it was a sight to see and hopes to see more of that once this Kamoshida issue was resolved.

As Ren walked away, he made his way to the train station, taking the subway to Shibuya. After arriving, he exited the subway and felt his phone vibrating. He looked to see that Ryuji was texting him but not from their group chat.

Ryuji: Dude, we need to talk. Do you think Kazuma was acting weird today?

Ren: You could say that.

He chose to leave out his earlier discussion with Kazuma as it was something between them.

Ren: Why do you ask?

Ryuji: Well, I wanted to talk you about something. I've heard some people in our class talking. They're saying he's dating Suzui.

Ren: What?

Ryuji: I know right! But people are saying they were seen walking to class and eating lunch together! What's up with that!? I've never ONCE seen those two together!

*Walking to class and having lunch together? Ren questioned. He remembered Kazuma telling him to go on ahead to class this morning because he had something to take care of. Come to think of it, he was sure he saw Suzui by the front gate. Is it possible that she was waiting... for Kazuma?*

Ryuji: What do you think, man?

Ren: I think you're on to something. I spoke with Suzui earlier today and she asked me if me and Kazuma were getting along. She even called him by his first name.

Ryuji: Seriously?! What the hell is going on here?!

Ren: Well, the dating rumors are probably bogus but this must mean they've been talking. Let's not text him about this, it's been a long day. Let talk to him about it tomorrow.

Ryuji: If you say so, man.

Once the text conversation was over, Ren placed his phone in his pocket and headed to the next subway transfer. Once he arrived, he waited patiently for the train while thinking over what he had learned from Ryuji.

*Kazuma and Suzui, huh? He thought it over and wondered just when did those two get acquainted. Is she the reason why Kazuma was acting so weird today? Plus, Suzui seemed happy when she spoke of him. It was like she thought of him as a friend or something. Kazuma, what are you hiding?*

"Will you please give it a rest?! I told you, I'm not feeling up to it!"

"Huh?" He heard a yell nearby and as he looked to his right, he saw someone he wasn't expecting.
Ann Takamaki.

He didn't know she took this train, not once did he ever encounter her while heading to or from school. From the looks of it, she appears to be arguing with someone over the phone.

"Wait, what?!!" She exclaimed, a wave of fear coursed through her body. "That's not what you promised! And you call yourself a teacher?!

*Is she talking to a teacher?* He wondered why she would be arguing with a teacher before realizing there was only one teacher she could be arguing with right now. *Kamoshida?*

"This has nothing to do with Shiho!" She yelled out.

*It's definitely Kamoshida.* He deduced, there's no doubt that it was him that she's talking to right now.

She removed her phone away from her ear and look at it, seeing that he had hung up on her. She fell to her knees and clutched her head with her, having apparently fallen into utter despair.

"Shiho's... Starting position..." He heard her whisper.

It looked as if she were about to cry. Seeing her like this, Ren couldn't stand it, especially if it was that scumbag that upset her. If Kamoshida is the reason she's in this state, he had to do something. He approached her, keeping some distance from her so he wouldn't startle her.

"Takamaki-san?" He called out loud enough so that she could hear.

"Huh?" She then looked up and jumped up in surprise, nearly bumping him in the chin with her head. She probably wasn't expecting to run into him like this. "A-Amamiya-kun?"

"Hey." He greeted.

"W-What are you doing here?" She asked, wondering why he was here.

"I take this train to Yongen-Jaya. It's where I live." He informed her. "Are you alright?"

"I'm, um..." She muttered nervously before realizing something. "Wait. Were you listening?"

"To your phone call?" He brought up. "Not on purpose."

It wasn't his intention to eavesdrop on her, it wasn't even his intention to meet her like this. But that didn't exactly convince her as she got angry at having her privacy invaded.

"Haven't you heard of privacy?" She angrily asked.

"I wasn't trying to eavesdrop on you, Takamaki-san. I swear." He tried to assure her which seemed to have worked as she backed off.

"I-I'm sorry, Amamiya-kun. I was out of line." She said apologetically. "So, how much did you hear?"

"A lot of arguing." He brought up.

"Y-Yeah. I was..." She shook her head, not wanting to get him involved. "It was nothing. Nothing at all, okay?"
"But, Takamaki-san..."

"I said it was nothing!" She screamed out at him before taking off, sprinting away from him.

"Takamaki-san!" He called out as she ran from him. Something was definitely up, she was really upset. He won't stand for this, he wasn't going to leave her while she's upset, he had to help her.

He made the decision to go after her.

He ran onto Station Square to catch her running down the steps into Shibuya Station which lead to the Underground Walkway. He followed after her and looked around to see where she could be. As he looked down the escalator, he saw her run around the corner. He ran after her, moving past pedestrians so he could catch up.

Once he rounded the corner, he caught her leaning against a green pillar. He then approached her slowly only to hear her breathe heavily, catching her breath.

"Takamaki-san?" He called to her. Once she heard his voice she turned around and glared at him before shoving him away rather roughly.

"Stop following me!" She demanded. "Just leave me alone!"

"I can't. Not when you're hurting." He argued, not wanting to leave her like this.

"W-Why?" She pleaded. "Why do you keep worrying about me, Amamiya-kun?"

"Because I know you're suffering, Takamaki-san. I can't just... ignore you." He explained by that didn't help as he broke into tears.

She started crying, tears flowing down her face at this boy's selfless care for her. He didn't move a muscle nor did he say anything, he just stood there until her tears ran dry. She could just run off again but she knew deep in her heart that she didn't want to be alone right now. She wanted... no, she needed to talk to someone. Anyone.

Shiho was busy with Volleyball and if she knew about Kamoshida's harassment, she didn't know what her best friend would do. She couldn't talk to Sakamoto, they haven't spoken in so long and after the other day, she doesn't want to talk to him at the moment.

There was only one person she could think of that would understand. The one person who's been so nice and kind to her since the first day of school. The one person who's a victim of false rumors just like her.

The one person who was lonely, just like her. And that person is standing right in front of her.

"Amamiya-kun?"

"Yes?" He replied.

"Can we... go somewhere?" She suggested but didn't know where would be a good place to talk.

"Of course we can." He smiled, nodding at her request. "I know where we can go."

He beckoned her to follow him and she did as they both left the pillar and headed towards the destination of Ren's choice.

"I don't really get you, Amamiya-kun." Takamaki said quietly as she followed him. "How can you
Ren led her to Central Street where they arrived at the Shibuya Diner. He led her in as the waitress took them to a booth in the far back where they could have their privacy, probably under the belief that they were a couple. Once they were seated they just ordered some water.

"You seem to know your way around," Takamaki noted.

"Well, I was tired of getting lost all the time so I decided to make myself familiar with the area, although this is my first time here." He told her. "Word is this Diner sells some really strange food items. Nostalgic Steak, Totem Pole Ice Cream, I hear some people just come here for the coffee and nothing else."

"Guilty as charged." She admitted. "I would come here all the time and order nothing but coffee. It helps me study."

"Really?" He raised an eyebrow, happy she was able to talk freely with him.

"That's right. It was always me and..." She stopped for a minute as she thought of her best friend and the times she would come here with her, drink nothing but coffee and study together. Those were good times, good times that were ripped away from her.

"Takamaki-san." He whispered, saddened at seeing her upset.

"And here are your waters." The waitress arrived, setting down their drinks. "I'll be around if you need me." With a bow she took her leave.

Now it was just the two of them. Ren believed that Takamaki was holding in some immense pain, seeing her look so stressed out indicated as such. She leaned her cheek against the palm of her hand while using her other hand to draw lines on her napkin.

"Amamiya-kun. You've heard the rumors, right?" She asked. "About me and... Mr. Kamoshida." She cringed at the mere mention of his name, trying her best to hide the contempt she had for him.

"I've heard but I know they're not true." He told her which caused her to look at him. "But, I do know that he's harassing you."

"That's right." She nodded, confirming his harassment of her and very glad that he knew and believed in the truth. "That was him, on the phone. "I avoided giving him my number... for the longest time. He told me to go to his place after this. You know what that means, right?"

"My God." He gasped a little, nearly on the verge of throwing up from what he had learned.

"I..." She angrily clenched the napkin she was playing with. "If I turn him down, he said he'd take my friend off as a regular on the team. I've been telling myself this is all for Shiho's sake. I can't take it anymore."

Now he understood why she couldn't help them the other day, why she hasn't fought back against the foul rumors about her. It was all for her friend. Her best friend. Everything was to help and protect her.

"I've had enough of this. I hate him! I have to come to school every day with that asshole looking at me like I'm some doll to play with and I can't fucking take it anymore!" She exclaimed loudly as she unleashed her pain for Ren to see. "But, Shiho. She's my best friend. She's all I have left at that
"Tell me, what should I do?" She asked before noticing his tears. "Amamiya?"

"What should you do?" He thought it over before wiping his eyes, looking back at her. "What do you want to do Takamaki? That's the real question here."

"I... I just..." She shook her head. "I just want him to leave me alone. To just forget about me and Shiho. But, that's impossible." She confessed what she wanted before drying her eyes. "I-I'm sorry Amamiya-kun. It's not your problem anyway."

It is now. He thought.

"I mean, we've barely talked before, you know?" She brought up.

"Maybe that's why you can talk to me now." He believed.

"Yeah, maybe you're right." She nodded, agreeing with him. "You're such a nice guy, Amamiya-kun. And a bit of a weirdo too."

"Oh, I'm weird?" He crossed his arms, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, duh. Most people just ignore me." She told him.

"Everyone ignores me too. Guess we both have that in common." He stated.

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Takamaki giggled a little, feeling better after letting it all out to him. "I always knew you weren't a bad guy. You never came off as the "bad boy" type."

"Really? I don't know. If anything, I'm... bad to the bone." He joked a little which seemed to have worked as she covered her mouth to hide her laughter.

"Pffft." She tried but failed as she removed her hand from her mouth and just started laughing. "Hahahaha! If there's anything bad about you, it's your jokes!"

"Hey! My jokes are great!" He fired back, pretending to be hurt but ultimately started laughing alongside her. Once they calmed down a bit, they both smiled.

"I haven't laughed like that in a long time. I really needed that." She said. "Thank you, Amamiya-kun."

"Anytime, Takamaki-san."

"Call me Ann." She requested, not as a classmate, but as a friend. "We're friends now, no need to be so formal."

"Heh, sounds good. But that means you have to call me Ren." He stated.

"Gladly." She nodded. "Seriously, though. I never believed in any of the rumors about you. You were so nice and kind but you seemed lonely too. Almost like you didn't belong anywhere."
"I'm used to it so it doesn't really affect me." He brushed off her concern but it didn't convince her.

"Really? Can you look me in the eye and say that again?" She dared and while he could've tried, he knew he could lie to her face.

"Heh, guess you caught me." He said. "I didn't really have any friends back in my hometown. I just kept to myself and stayed in my lane but after I was falsely accused, people started looking at me differently. I was expelled and my parents. Well, my Mother wasn't exactly fond of her son turning into a 'deranged assaulter'."

"It must've been hard. I'm so sorry, Ren." She apologized for bringing up bad memories.

"But, I'm okay now." He smiled as if to assure her. "I have friends here. Ryuji, Kazuma, and now you."

"Yeah, about your friend, Kazuma." Her happy demeanor changed in an instant at the mention of that name. "How is it that you're friends with that asshole?"

"Asshole?" He raised an eyebrow, wondering where this venom was coming from. "Did he do something to upset you?"

"You could say that." She sighed a little, wanting to push aside any contempt she may have for the other transfer student. "It was when I warned you and Sakamoto about Kamoshida. I gave him a warning too and he..." She didn't really want to remember what he said to her but thought Ren should know. "He called me weak and a coward."

"What? He said that?" Ren grew angry at what he had learned. He can't believe Kazuma would say such hurtful things to her. Just when he thought he was seeing the guy in a new light, he puts down Ann just because she was afraid.

"And you know what pisses me off the most. He... wasn't wrong." She admitted. "Kamoshida's no joke, Ren. I've seen that man have people expelled simply because he didn't like them. And to speak out against him... well..."

"That doesn't make you a coward, Ann. Kazuma's wrong." Ren assured her. "After what he's put you through, it's natural to be afraid. But, that doesn't make you a coward. It makes you a human being."

"Heh, you have a way with words, you know?" She complimented. "But, I can't really hate him if he wants to take down Kamoshida. How's that working out by the way?"

"We... we have a method that we're are going to talk about tomorrow." He said, not really wanting to divulge the castle's existence to her at the moment. "You should join us, Ann."

"Really? You think we have a chance?" She asked.

"I do. So let's take him down. Together." He offered.

"Together, huh?" Ann smiled. She didn't know what method he was talking about but because of him, she was starting to feel hope again. And more than anything, she wanted to believe him, especially after today. "I'd like that."

"Then it's settled. Welcome to the team, Ann." Ren said.

After hearing everything that Kamoshida has been putting Ann through, Ren promised that he will
be punished, and with her help, he was certain that they will defeat him once and for all.

"Well, I should probably get going," Ann said, standing up.

"Yeah, me too," Ren said as he got up, walking with her out of the Diner.

Once they were out, Ann turned to face him with a smile.

"Oh, right! Want to exchange numbers and chat I.D.? I'm part of the 'gang' now so we should keep in contact." She offered.

"Sounds good to me." He exchanged numbers and Chat I.D. with Ann. "Sure you don't want me to walk you home?"

"Nah, it's Ok. Thanks anyway." She said. "See you in class tomorrow?"

"Count on it." He nodded.

"See ya." Ann walked away, heading on home before stopping a moment which confused Ren a bit. Suddenly, she turned around and marched on back to the probationer.

"Ann? Is something..." He was cut off as she hugged him, wrapping her arms around his waist. He was startled by the sudden attack but soon wrapped his arms around her shoulders as they both ease into a nice comforting hug.

"Thank you, Ren. Thank you." She showed her gratitude as she hugged him tightly.

"Anytime." He said.

Once they released, Ann felt her face lit up. She doesn't really know why she hugged him so suddenly but didn't regret it one bit. Once they let go, she waved goodbye.

"See ya, Ren." And with that, she left.

Thank you, Ren, for stopping me from making the biggest mistake of my life. She thought as she headed on home. I'll never forget this.

With practice over, Shiho got dressed and left the locker room. As she walked down the hall, she pulled out her phone and checked the time. If she hurried now, she might be able to make the next train to Shibuya.

I still need to call Ann. She thought, remembering that she promised to talk to her about everything.

"Suzui." She heard someone call out to her. She turned around and saw that it was Mishima. "Are you leaving?"

"What is it, Mishima-kun?" She asked, wondering what he wanted.

"Um, Mr. Kamoshida's asking for you." He informed him "He's in the P.E. faculty office."

N-No! She thought, fear coursing through her body.

"W-What did he say?" She questioned.
"I don't know." He shook his head. "Well, I have to go."

And with that, he left.

Shiho started to panic, realizing that Kamoshida was calling for her again.

*I have to call Kei!* She thought as she pulled out her phone and started texting.

**Shiho: Kei! Kamoshida's call-**

She suddenly stopped texting before setting her phone down by her side. She knew what would happen if she sent that text. She knew what would happen if she disobeyed Kamoshida.

It wasn't just her starting position she could lose, but she could also lose Kei too. If Kamoshida found out that she refused his call because of him, he would most definitely target him, either by spreading false rumors about him or just outright expel him. She didn't want to lose her friend so she knew what she had to do.

She had to break her promise.

*I'm sorry, Kei.* She said as if he was here. She deleted the text she was about to send as if it never existed.

Suddenly, her phone vibrated, sending her text to the draft section and showing a new text from Ann.

**Ann: Hey Shiho. Call me whenever you get the chance.**

"Ann..." She whimpered at the text

She steeled herself as she put her phone away and headed to the faculty office. Once she arrived, she remembered the last time she was here and prepared herself for what was in store.

"Mr. Kamoshida?" She called.

"Come in."

Once she heard him, she opened the door and closed it behind her. He was sitting in his chair, turning around to face her.

"You wanted to see me?" She brought up.

"Yes." He nodded while frowning at her. "You're still slacking off during practice. I'm really disappointed Suzui. At this rate, I'm going to have to give your position to someone else."

"N-No. Nationals are coming up, sir." She argued, not wanting to give up her position.

"I don't know what to say." He shrugged before bringing a hand to his chin, offering a suggestion. "Unless you're willing to do anything to keep it."

"I..." She didn't like where this was going but she knew she didn't want her volleyball career to end like this. "I... I am, sir."

"Well, in that case." He then gave off a smug grin, showing teeth as he stood up to his full height. He approached her slowly causing her to back up against the wall. When he saw him reach down to unbuckle his belt, she knew what he was implying.
And she was scared.

*Kei! Help me!*

"Now." He grinned evilly. "Undress!"

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, not proud of writing that last part but it had to be done.

Thank you for reading, til next time.

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