Another Surprise [A Persona 5 Fiction]
by DaBigLemon

Summary

Set several years after the events of P5, our protagonist returns to Tokyo following a mysterious invitation. Life has progressed typically for the majority of the ex-Phantom Thieves. However, unforeseen events thrust our protagonist, the ever-loyal Morgana, and the unstoppable Sakamato Ryuji back into a life of covert crime fighting.
Wake up! Get up!

The space around me was quiet. A dull, lifeless haze coated all I could see in darkness. The dark, formless clouds chafed against my body for what seemed like hours. Try as I might, there was no escape from the endless black chaos that surrounded me. The uniform pollution filled every corner of my eye as far as I could see. Only as tiny swats meandered over my face did the illusion break.

“Hey. Hey!” a light, nagging voice called out.

Twice more I felt the swatting on my face. Once lightly and then again forcefully between my eyes.

“Helloooo?” the voice called.

I feigned ignorance to evade my attacker, but I was soon rewarded with an additional smack on the head.

“Hey, I know you can’t still be asleep.”

I released a disapproving grunt.

“Ugh!” the voice groaned, “You know for a guy who goes to bed as early as you do, you sure love to sleep in.”

I felt the cat turn and leap off the bed. I sighed in relief. Victory! However, the celebration would be short-lived since I was now fully alert. I exhaled regretfully while I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. I sluggishly rose from my clingy bed and wholeheartedly accepted a fresh morning breath.

I turned to Morgana, who sat on the floor with an angry grimace on his face. Those bright blue eyes did nothing to soften his gaze, but I was used to this tactic. He began to chatter at me as I waited for my body to awaken.

“You know this kind of slacking attitude isn’t going to get you a job. You need to stay motivated if you’re going to make it in this world. Looks like it’s up to me to get you on your feet and moving.” The spry Morgana bounded to the door. “Well, c’mon!” he jeered, “You’ll never get anywhere in life if you just sit there.” He made a cocky smile at me.

“Hush, cat,” I replied, “I told you to let me sleep.”

“Hmph!” Morgana grunted, “Now what kind of leader would I be if I let you slack off like that? We’ve got to get a head start on the day, starting with a good breakfast.”

“Oh my God!” I cried as I collapsed onto my bed, realizing Morgana’s ploy, “Are we out of cat food again?”

“We are,” the cat said, “b-but that has nothing to do with this. You’ve been lacking in your duties as a…”

I hurled a random trinket from the nightstand at Morgana’s feet. The small rubber ball I had grabbed ricocheted into Morgana’s face. A surprised meow followed as he darted through the open door far away from his oppressor.

“I-I’ll be waiting out here for you!” the cat called, “J-just take your time!”

Thoughts of returning to my cozy slumber dissipated. When Morgana wants something, I simply
must do it; there’s nothing that can free me from that fate. I got up to get ready for another day of errands.

Morgana slipped energetically into my bag while I nonchalantly sipped from my morning coffee. He was obviously excited to enact some new scheme to obtain decadent food despite my objections. I prepared for the usual bombardment of requests.

“So, I was thinking that since we need to pick up some groceries for the house, we could get some fresh ingredients for an excellent breakfast. After all, your cooking skills have improved drastically while we’ve been together. It would be a waste not to use them at every given opportunity.”

I disposed of my lackluster coffee in the sink. “You just want more fatty tuna,” I replied.

“That too,” Morgana said with an eager grin.

I grabbed my bag and headed for the door. “You’re not talking me into spoiling you this time.”

Morgana chuckled. “Is that a challenge?”

After our excursion to the supermarket, I returned home laden with groceries. Since my parents were usually busy during the day, the duties of caring for the house fell to me. My vacant schedule readily accommodated these tasks; without a job or college to attend, I had very few activities to occupy my time. Regardless of the justness of my brief imprisonment, my time in conflict with the law had a permanent effect on my social standing. Nevertheless, I was alive and well, and that was all I could ask, or so everyone kept reminding me. Seems my life had returned to a melancholy state.

At least Morgana was here to lighten my spirits. He happily chirped in my ear as we entered our home. “Oh boy! I can’t wait to see what you’re going to do with that sea bass! That hunk of fish looked kind of expensive too. I didn’t think you would actually get it, but I’m sure it’ll be worth every yen!” He curled around my shoulder in excitement. Despite his overbearing tendencies, Morgana’s youthful passion kept our day to day interactions full of joy.

As I set the bags of food onto the table, Morgana descended to the kitchen countertop. “Alright!” he said, “Let’s get started.” I opened a bag with the food for our morning meal and nodded in anticipation. Morgana laughed confidently. “This is going to be good.”

Morgana gave me a look of pure bliss. “Ah, that was delicious!” he cried, “I must say, I am truly impressed with your talent for cooking. It’s a surprise you don’t have people coming from all around the country to praise your culinary masterpieces.”

I looked skeptically at the overzealous cat as I chewed my own breakfast. “You’re just flattering me so that I’ll buy more fish.”

The cat smiled smugly. “Well, if it works…”

I wiped my face after finishing my meal. I was about to scold Morgana when there was a knock on the door.

Mona turned at the sound of the sudden noise. “Hmm, were you expecting someone today?”
With a puzzled expression on my face, I shook my head. Now that all the scandal and excitement had died down from my time as a Phantom Thief, visitors were an uncommon occurrence at the house. People didn’t like to get involved with a troublemaker like me, and my friends were occupied with lives of their own.

I hesitantly walked to the front door, and Morgana trailed behind. I peered out the window but failed to see anyone. Only the fleeting sight of a black car could be glimpsed. I opened the door and stepped outside. Glancing around I saw no signs of a visitor. This was confusing.

Morgana’s voice perked up. “Hey! Look at that,” he said. I looked at him and then to my feet where a strange envelope had been placed.

“What’s this?” I said grabbing the package in my hands. Looking it over, the envelope was composed of thick paper and was neatly folded. This certainly wasn’t a prank from Ryuji. Examining my surroundings once more, I retreated into my home and sat down to further examine the mail.

Morgana leapt onto the table beside me. “Who could’ve sent this? I don’t even know anyone who sends physical mail these days. Could it be a bill?” I set the envelope down. “Oh look, it’s addressed to you! This couldn’t be a bill then.”

“A letter addressed to me?” I said in confusion.

Morgana looked at me. “Well? Are you just going to let it sit there? Open it, and let’s see what’s inside!”

I unfolded the finely printed paper and withdrew a typed letter. The contents of the letter only added to the confusion:

Dear sir,

I am contacting you because I believe your circumstance provides a unique opportunity for our company. Your infamous reputation has drawn massive attention from the public eye, yet this value has not yet been used to its full potential.

The letter continued with additional honorifics and superlatives describing my situation and the writer’s company. Despite the wordy nature of the letter, the writer did not seem overly vain but strangely nervous. Eventually, the writer got to his point:

I would like to have the opportunity to speak with you in person on the matter of a position at our enterprise. Please take this matter into careful consideration. Though I understand the nature of your predicament, we will not be hasty about your recruitment. Please call the given number if you should find any interest in this opportunity. I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you at our local headquarters in Shibuya.

As the letter closed out, I set the paper aside to contemplate what I had read. Morgana wouldn’t allow his thoughts to be contained. He stared at the unfolded paper. “Huh? What is this? A job offer? But why is the letter so long? And who sends offers by mail? Why would someone drop this on the doorstep?”

I half-heartedly responded to Morgana. “Clearly because they know you won’t stop asking questions about it.”

“Hey, somebody has to look out for your well-being. This could be from some shady people trying to catch you off guard. Ha, that’s it! You should thank me. I just solved the mystery for you.”
Morgana had that serious yet condescending expression only he could muster.

“The letter mentioned they were located in Shibuya, so it’s a possibility,” I replied.

“Those bastards probably think they could ambush you on their turf, huh? Good thing I caught on to their scheme.”

I frowned. “You are seriously desperate for some excitement, aren’t you?”

“Huh?” Mona wailed, “What do you mean?”

I grabbed the letter and waved it in Mona’s face. “It’s just a letter,” I said. “It’s likely just a stunt to get my attention. I probably wouldn’t take conventional methods seriously anyways.”

“Wha?” Morgana cried, “Are you saying you actually mean to go through with this!?”

I shook my head. “Where’s the harm in it? Besides, it’ll be nice to visit Shibuya for a day or two.”

Mona grunted in defeat. “Ugh, fine,” he said, “I’m trusting you on this one… but if anything goes wrong, I’ll never let you live this down.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the cat’s prideful demeanor. “You don’t have to come.”

“And let you go by yourself when I anticipate trouble? Not a chance,” Mona shook his head defiantly. “I’ll remind you just how reliable I can be. We’re still a team after all.”

I nodded to Morgana with a smile. He looks excited too.

After relaying the situation to my parents, Morgana and I prepared for the journey to Tokyo. The following day, we began our trip, boarding a train bound for Jongen-Jaya. A stop there was practically mandatory.

A light spring breeze carried the fragrant aromas of the familiar city down the back-alleys as Morgana and I emerged from the station. Familiar faces casually strolled the streets in the morning buzz. I smiled as the sights and smells brought back memories of my temporary home. I suppose it was inevitable that I returned around this time of year. I was connected to this place now, for better or worse.

I paused momentarily as a powerful bittersweet scent overcame me. “Coffee and curry. I’m still not sure about that combination,” I remarked.

Morgana took in a deep whiff of the full-bodied aroma. “Ah… Well, regardless, this scent means home now,” he happily responded.

The jingling bell sounded as we entered the café. The tables were empty for now. Must be a slow day.

A familiar voice called from the kitchen. “I’ll be right with you.” The distinguished Sojiro Sakura stepped behind the counter sporting his usual quirky colors. He wiped his worn hands with a towel as he spoke, “What can I get…” He glanced at me and hesitated briefly. “Oh, it’s you.” He smiled, “Heh, almost didn’t recognize you.” He took a beat to look me over thoroughly. I might’ve been unnerved if not for our history. “You clean up pretty nicely, you know.” For my interview, I was wearing a button-up dress shirt and vest with dark pants. I had gone through a small ordeal to
formally groom myself as well.

“A compliment from the chief?” Morgana questioned, “Things have really changed, huh?”

“I’m just putting to use all that charm you gave me,” I replied to Soji as I took a seat at the bar.

“Charm?” Sojiro said befuddled, “Ha! If I had taught you anything, let’s just say you wouldn’t have left here with just one kitty.” He grinned with a charming smugness.

Morgana chuckled lightly. “He’s got you there.” I shook my head, smiling but clearly defeated.

“Ah, where are my manners,” Soji continued, “Can I get you anything?”

I smiled at my past guardian. “How about some curry?”

“Coming right up,” Boss said.

Morgana crawled out of my bag and onto the counter. “You know, I really missed the atmosphere of this place. Our little quiet hangout right in the middle of the city.” The cat flicked his tail with renewed energy.

“It certainly beats the crowded places in Shibuya,” I replied.

It was only a minute before Boss returned with two plates of curry. “Here you go,” he said laying the plate of savory curry down, “And one for the cat too.” He set the other plate in front of Morgana.

“Thanks,” I replied. Morgana made a muffled reply as he stuffed his face with food.

“Don’t mention it,” Soji said. “So, what brings you back here again? You’re not planning on stirring up trouble, are you?”

“No, no,” I said smiling as I enjoyed the curry, “It’s nothing like that,” I explained the situation with the unusual job offer. Sojiro, to my surprise, appeared excited to hear my plans.

“So, you might be taking a job at a company in Shibuya?” he asked, “Good luck with that. You know my place is always open to you if you need it.” He eagerly mentioned his hospitality.

“Thank you,” I replied, “I’ll remember that.”

Morgana took a brief respite from his gorging to speak. “The chief really tries to look out for you, huh? You should consider his offer if you get this job.” I nodded in reply.

Sojiro spoke up again. “Ah, if you’ve got some time before your interview, you should stick around for a while. Futaba will be back from school in a bit, and I know she’ll want to see the two of you.”

I wiped some excess curry from my mouth as I made to reply. “I would, but I’ll be heading straight to Shibuya after this.”

“Ah, I see,” Soji continued, “Well, I’ll let her know you stopped by. You know, she’s supposedly graduating this year.”

“That’s great!”

“It’s really something, huh? I can hardly believe it myself,” Sojiro smiled as he went into thought. I imagined this was something he hadn’t thought possible before I lived here those couple years ago.
An overexerted Morgana looked up at me. “Hey,” he said with cheeks full of curry, “What are you guys talking about? You know we don’t have a lot of time before we need to be in Shibuya.” I rose from my seat allowing Morgana a moment to return to my bag.

Sojiro glanced up at us. “Leaving already?”

“That’s right,” I replied, “Sorry we couldn’t stay longer.”

“That’s fine,” Soji said grabbing our plates, “This one’s on the house. You guys take care of yourselves out there alright?”

I nodded and stepped to the door. Morgana perked up in my bag, “You know, I wish we visited this place more often.” He adopted a somber attitude momentarily. “N-not that your house is bad but…”

“Hey!” Sojiro called out. I turned back to the shop to see what the matter was. He stared at us for a moment. I couldn’t truthfully put my feelings about this place into words. Sojiro: he was important to me, enough to cause me to question why I left. “D-don’t idle in the doorway! You’ll block my customers,” Boss said.

I laughed dryly and waved as I left the café. Now it was time to see about this job.

A tall building layered with windows stretched high above me as I stepped off the street. Crystal clear glass doors revealed a regal interior of a clean business establishment. Entering through the giant transparent gates, I was readily greeted by a smiling secretary.

“Whoa, this place is beautiful!” Morgana exclaimed, noting the atmospheric water feature that marked the lobby.

“Hello!” the beautiful, young secretary woman said, “You must be our famous thief!” Caught unprepared by her direct words, I simply nodded in reply. She giggled at my awkwardness. “That’s an adorable cat you have there.”

I noted that Morgana was completely visible, mesmerized by the building’s elaborate interior. I knocked my bag in irritation. He shouldn’t have been out if he wanted to shadow me. “Gah,” Morgana cried, “O-oh, uh… sorry.”

The secretary only smiled sweetly. “We don’t normally allow animals inside, but since it’s you, I think the director will allow it.”

I could only stare in surprise; however, Morgana was quite pleased. “This lady seems very wonderful. First, she recognizes my handsome appearance, then she permits me to accompany you. This is quite fortuitous, no?”

I ignored the cat and recomposed myself. “I’m here for an interview. Were you expecting me?”

“Of course,” the secretary said with her adorable smile, “Just continue down to the end of the hall there, and the director should be down momentarily to greet you.” She pointed to the adjacent hall.

I walked down the corridor glancing at the images painstakingly oriented along the walls. This company obviously had some history to be proud of, but the photos of people did little to illuminate
the company’s nature. The polished tile floors echoed my footsteps as I came to the end of the hall. An ornate elevator jutted slightly from the intersection flanked by two opposing halls with far more office rooms located along those routes.

Morgana freely commentated on our situation. “This place is quite something,” he said, “Still, I’m worried. Could this really be a trap with so much formality to this place?”

Having little to add to his thoughts, I stared up to the glistening ceiling, illuminated by more expertly positioned windows. I was ready to hear more of this job offer, and more speculation would do little good at this point. Thankfully, our thoughts were interrupted promptly.

“Hello,” a distinguished businessman with an immediately foreign accent approached, “You must be the one I’ve heard so much about. And you brought your cat too. Excellent.” He grinned from ear to ear, clearly eager to meet. The man wore a dark suit with minimal flair to his attire.

“Hello, it’s nice to meet you,” I replied.

The well-dressed man quickly took my hand and shook it firmly all the while maintaining his excited composure. “You must have a few questions for me,” the man said releasing my hand, “I’m sure it’s not every day an American businessman contacts you for an interview. Well, follow me. We’ll have plenty of time to discuss this in my office.” The man swiftly turned and walked down the hall.

Morgana offered his own opinion on the situation. “An American, huh? No wonder his methods were so unorthodox.”

“This is bizarre,” I quietly replied.

“You should follow him,” Morgana continued, “I want to know more about this strange man.”

I aimlessly traced the businessman’s path. Now, my unfamiliarity turned to unease as I began to realize the complexity of the situation.

The American diverted us into a large office before taking a seat behind a formidable desk. Despite the man’s pomp, the furnishings of his office were clearly lacking. A large bookshelf sat barren with only a scant few volumes resting within the frame. Likewise, there was only a single clock to decorate the plain walls.

The businessman motioned to the chair across from himself. “Please, have a seat,” he said. I sat, gathering the appearance of the room as I did. “My name is Samuel Zimmermann, and I’m the director of operations here at Z-Tech. I hope it wasn’t too much of an inconvenience visiting us here.” The man flashed a toothy grin.

I shook my head. “Not at all.”

“Good,” he replied. Samuel lowered his head momentarily before resuming conversation with a comforting smile. “Ya know, I was actually a bit nervous when I heard you accepted our invitation. I haven’t had to use my Japanese in years.” He chuckled softly.

“It seems fine,” I coolly responded.

“Ah, that’s a relief,” he said. The man looked down and winced. “Eh, sorry, I need something to relax.” Samuel reached into his desk and retrieved a small dish of candy. He unwrapped one of the brightly colored pieces and tossed it into his mouth. “Ah, that’s better,” he said with a sigh, “Would you like one?” He pushed the dish in my direction.
I shook my head, far more interested in why I was here.

The man scratched his chin before continuing. “So, do you know why I called you here?” he asked.

“You want to use my reputation to bolster your company,” I said. That was the best guess I could make.

“That’s right,” replied Sam, “Our company is very interested in working with someone of your… infamy. It’s quite a unique opportunity.” Samuel glanced at me as he contemplated what to say next. “Actually, that’s not the real reason I summoned you here. It’s true that our company could benefit greatly from your reputation, but…” He stumbled with his words, rubbing his face as he spoke. He stared intently at my face. “The Metaverse…”

I fidgeted nervously at the mention of my old place of business.

“Ah, so you do know of that place,” Samuel said as a broad smile crept across his face, “Well, I couldn’t expect any less from a person such as yourself.”

My body tensed, and I felt weighted to my chair. The Metaverse was dangerous to enter let alone to discuss.

“What?” Sam inquired, “You didn’t think that Japan was the only place with knowledge of cognitive psience, did you?”

I remained silent while Morgana muttered in hushed tones. “This guy knows the Metaverse? Just who is he…”

“Look, I understand that you probably don’t want to get involved with that world again, but I could really use someone with your expertise,” Sam continued, “That place is dangerous. Every interaction with that world reveals new threats, and yet I can’t shake the feeling that we could do a lot of good by using it.” Sam beamed at me. “I mean, if even half of the rumors about you are true, you certainly made a marked difference on our world by using that place.”

Unwilling to allow further corruption to infiltrate the cognitive world, I calmly refused him. “There’s nothing I can do for you,” I replied.

Sam just kept smiling. “Heheh, I’m not asking you to give me an answer right now.” The man slid a business card across the table. “Here’s my card,” he said, “I want you to think this over.” Sam stopped smiling to adopt a more serious tone. “We are at a breaking point. There’s still so much we don’t know, so much left to discover. Listen, I believe you’re a good sort of person, but our research will continue with or without you.” Sam took a beat to humble himself. “I want you on my team when we reach our breakthrough. With your help, I’m sure everything will turn out for the better.”

I grabbed the business card and slid it into my pocket. The news of this research was troubling, but I couldn’t let the draw of that world pull me into whatever scheme Sam was planning.

Surprisingly, Sam made to end our discussion. “That’s all I had to say,” he said, leaning back in his chair, “You’re free to go; just… think about what I said.”

I cautiously nodded before leaving with my disorganized thoughts.

As I returned to the bright and busy outdoors, Morgana was quick to speak. “That man was very suspicious; I’m glad you turned him down. I would definitely advise against getting involved with
shady organizations like that.”

I nodded absentmindedly. “He kept mentioning the Metaverse.”

Morgana was deep in thought. “To think there are more organizations out there abusing the cognitive world… it’s unsettling.”

“I agree.” I turned to walk down the street as we talked.

“But the cognitive world isn’t a place that can be so easily manipulated,” Mona continued, “I’m sure whatever plans they have will fail. After all, it was only through my expert training that we were able to have any effect on the real world at all.”

I briefly recalled my time as a thief. “What about Akechi? He was able to use the Metaverse alone.”

“Hmm, true,” Morgana replied, “But he was also the antithesis to your Trickster status. I’m sure he had some advantage.”

“I’m still worried.”

“We should…” Morgana was unceremoniously interrupted by the chime of my phone.

I took the device from my pocket and glanced at my messages.

A familiar yellow icon accompanied some cheery text. “Hey! You’re in Shibuya now, right? We still meeting up?”

“Ah, Ryuji,” Morgana commented, “So, you made plans?”

I nodded before returning the text. “Yep.”

Ryuji quickly replied, “Awesome, bro! Let’s meet up behind the old arcade. I got something I want to show you.”

“The arcade’s not far,” I said, “You ready?”

“For Ryuji?” Morgana asked, “I’m not sure anyone can be ready for him.”

As I exited the alley, I immediately saw Ryuji wearing a bright red shirt and leaning up against a patterned yellow car. He tapped his foot impatiently as he stared down a side road toward the setting sun. The evening light only made his changed appearance more obvious. His hair was much darker with only a few highlighting golden streaks. I wasn’t sure if that indicated he was getting lazier or increasingly mellow, but he looked good nonetheless.

I stepped out of the shade and took a moment to appreciate my friend. Ryuji didn’t take long to notice. Once his eyes laid on me, a charismatic grin cracked his face. He leaned off the car and released an excited laugh. “Hey, man! How’ve ya been!?”

“Doing alright,” I replied with a smile. I extended a fist, and Ryuji swiftly gave me a bump. “It’s been rough taking care of this guy though.” I pointed to Morgana.

“Hey!” Morgana exclaimed, “Let’s not forget all the advice I give you.”

“Wassup, Mona?” Ryuji happily greeted the arrogant cat. “It’s good to see ya.”
“Likewise, Ryuji,” Mona replied, “I see you’ve changed your hair.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah,” Ryuji stammered, “It was gettin’ to be a bit of a hassle, and this was a bit simpler so…”

“So,” I interrupted, “What did you want to show me?”

Ryuji perked up. “Oh, yeah! Here, look!” Ryuji extended his arms to the car behind him. “I finally got a car, dude.” The bright yellow car was covered in a stylish, black zig-zag pattern. The body of the vehicle appeared in good condition, but it was obviously an older model. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“It looks nice for you, Ryuji,” Morgana replied.

“It suits you,” I said.

“Yeah, I thought you’d say that,” Ryuji continued, “I got it for cheap too since it was an older car. All it took was a fresh paint job and bam! Looks pretty cool, huh?”

“I’m a bit jealous actually.”

Ryuji couldn’t hold his excitement. “C’mon, let’s go for a ride! You guys hungry? Cause I’m damn near starvin’, and I’m cravin’ some ramen.” He popped open the driver’s side door and slid inside the car.

I got into the passenger seat setting Morgana’s bag on my lap. I noted that the interior of Ryuji’s car, though worn, was clean and well kept.

Ryuji looked at me with excited anticipation. “You ready to roll?”

I nodded. Mona spoke up, “Hey, don’t drive to fast, okay? You know my stomach is sensitive.” Ryuji released a disconcerting cackle as he hit the ignition, and the engine sputtered to life.

A steaming bowl of noodles and broth sat in front of me. After that exciting car ride, Morgana was uncharacteristically quiet, but Ryuji made up for the lack of noise.

“So,” Ryuji said as he shoveled a spoonful of noodles into his awaiting gullet, “You’re all fancy dressed for that interview you had, right? You gotta tell me about it.” He gulped down another glob of wet noodles.

I paused my eating as I responded. “It was pretty weird,” I said. I told him about the quirky businessman and his intrigue with the Metaverse. Naturally, Ryuji was curious to learn more.

“So,” he said as he gasped for air, “This director guy calls you in and tries to get you to help him research that world?” I nodded. Ryuji frowned. “Well, I guess you and Morgana would make pretty good experts with all the knowledge we gathered from runnin’ around those places.” Ryuji stared at his now empty bowl. “But that’s kinda messed up, ya know? Nobody should be messin’ with that world! It’s dangerous, especially when stupid adults get involved.” He shook his head. “Gah! Stupid effin’ adults! Get’s me riled up just thinkin’ about ‘em.”

“Hey,” I calmly replied, “We’ve beat that stuff.”

Ryuji lowered his head. “I know, I know. But still. It feels like nothing’s changed. Was it all just a game centered around that controlling thing?”
“I don’t know,” was all I could say as I contemplated the unfathomable imagery that had briefly possessed the earth before the final showdown of the Phantom Thieves.

“Gah!” Ryuji exclaimed, “I’m all pissed now. I just…” Suddenly, Ryuji reached out and grabbed my bowl of ramen, bringing it to his lips. I stared wide-eyed as I watched him gulp down every drop from the dish.

Concerned, I continued to examine my friend as Ryuji slammed the empty bowl onto the counter. “Ah, that’s better,” he said with a sigh. Regaining some consciousness, he looked at me with embarrassment. “Oh, uhh, sorry about that.” He closed his eyes in shame. “‘Ah, look at me. Getting’ all riled up about stupid shit in the past, and then I go and act like one of the shitty adults I keep raggin’ on.” He sighed heavily. I was surprised at Ryuji’s sudden sobriety. I wondered if he was having some personal trouble of his own. “Here,” Ryuji continued, “I’ll buy us another round of ramen to make up for it.”

“Y-you’re getting another?” I asked.

Thankfully, by the time our next helping of ramen arrived, the conversation had calmed somewhat. Ryuji had found a job, having no interest in college. Otherwise, things around Tokyo had been relatively calm. Most of our other friends had relocated themselves or become busy with their own lives, so there wasn’t much to report on those fronts.

“Anyways,” Ryuji continued as he ate more ramen, “If you’re thinking of staying around for a few days, we should hang out at Leblanc. Futaba’s been teachin’ me how to play this new game that’s out, and I’m gettin’ pretty good at it.” He smiled as he slurped up another noodle. “I might actually beat ya this time.” I smiled, and Ryuji laughed. It was great to be back.

I turned my attention to my own bowl of ramen while Ryuji continued to devour his own. Abruptly, I was distracted by the loud, overhanging tv. A newscaster was apparently going through the main stories for tonight.

“And now for an important update regarding the prison escape that occurred early this morning.”

“A prison break?” Morgana squealed, “This should be good.”

I concentrated on listening to the broadcast while Ryuji continued to slurp.

“Police have confirmed that only one prisoner is unaccounted. Still, local authorities are warning to stay clear of the prison facility for the time being, and any visitations must be rescheduled. Additionally, the police have finally confirmed the identity of the escapee. This man…”

I rubbed my eyes as the image flashed into the tv. I could only assume Morgana was also in awe.

“Suguru Kamoshida was discovered to be missing earlier today from his cell. Furthermore, authorities are still struggling to explain this sudden disappearance.”

Ryuji suddenly gagged as an elongated noodle lodged in his throat. I broke my gaze from the tv and gave Ryuji a smack on the back. After a few wet coughs, he ejected the noodle from his mouth and inhaled heavily. “What the fuck!? Did you just hear that shit!?” He glanced at me as he rubbed his throat.

“Look!” Morgana cried.
I returned my attention to the television. “ Authorities have also reported that the convicted child-abuser has fled the country under a falsified identity. Reports indicated his flight was bound to Western Europe; however, authorities are encouraging any former associates of Kamoshida to suspend any trips outside of Japan, and that any associates already outside the country should seek safe shelter immediately. Here to add to our discussion of the convict and first target of the Phantom Thieves we have…”

“Holy shit, dude!” Ryuji shouted, “This is seriously effed up! I mean, how’d he escape from prison? Ah, Kamo-shit-bag is back to no good, and he’s out of the country too…”

I scratched my head in amazement. “The report said he was on a flight to Western Europe. That’s a weird place to go.”

“Y-yeah,” Ryuji stammered, “Western Europe is like…” He paused, staring wide-eyed at me. “W-wait a sec…” A fire suddenly boiled up in his eyes. “Wait a sec. That effin’ bastard!” Ryuji thrust up from his stool in a huff. “I can’t believe the nerve of that bastard!”

Puzzled, I kept my eyes on Ryuji. “What’s up?” I asked, “You know something I don’t?”

Ryuji stomped out of the shop saying, “C’mon, I gotta show ya something.”

Having little choice, I grabbed Mona and followed Ryuji.

Once we returned to the car, Ryuji pulled out a magazine from underneath the seat. “Look at this,” he said, straight-faced. There was a beautiful and sexy lady on the cover laying in a suggestive pose.

I made a slight grin. “Is this how you relieve stress nowadays?”

Ryuji frowned. “Quit that. I’m serious!” He began flipping through the pages. “It’s a fashion magazine. There’s an article about Ann somewhere in here.”

Now I was slightly more confused.

Ryuji glanced at me. “H-hey, don’t give me that look. I j-just happened to hear she was gonna do an interview for this magazine, so I wanted to check it out.”

I shook my head in disapproval.

“Ah, we don’t have time for this!” Ryuji rustled the pages until he found the article. “See! Look!”

Several blocks of text were juxtaposed by a full body shot of Takamaki in the most expensive red dress I had ever seen. Glistening light cascaded down her figure, highlighting ample thighs flanked by two elegant, black high heels.

“Holy mackerel!” Morgana cried, “S-she’s…”

“Hey, now who’s being the perv!” Ryuji retorted. He smacked his hand on the blocks of text. “Look here, dammit!”

“What am I supposed to be reading?” I asked. “It’s kinda hard to read when your hands are shaking.”

“Ugh, fine!” Ryuji interjected, “She’s being featured in an upcoming fashion show in France! You see what this means, doncha?”
“You need a girlfriend?” I responded.

“Ye- what!? No!” Ryuji yelled, “Mona, I never thought, I’d ask this, but… please tell me we’re on the same page here.” An uncomfortable, pained look crossed Ryuji’s face.

“Well, if my memory serves me,” Mona responded, “France is in Western Europe, and, given Kamoshida’s prior history of obsession with Lady Ann, I’d say she could be in real trouble.”

“Right!” Ryuji shouted, “We gotta do somethin’ about this!”

“Maybe we should contact her,” I suggested.

“Nah, that won’t work,” Ryuji stated, “Lately, when I’ve tried to contact her, my calls have to go through her agent and I can’t get through.”

“Well, let’s call the authorities then.”

Ryuji snorted. “What good’s that gonna do? Not like the police’ll send an armed guard to escort her around.”

“Well, what should we do?” I asked.

“You know what we gotta do!” Ryuji said with astonishing conviction, “We gotta honor our deals as thieves and look out for our own! We gotta do this ourselves.”

“Ryuji…” I replied with a sigh, “I can’t just go to France.”

“Wha?” Ryuji stammered, “Why not?”

I rolled my eyes. “I can’t spend that kind of money on a trip without an extraordinary excuse.”

“This is an extraordinary excuse! Kamoshida effin’ escaped from prison! C’mon, I can’t do this without my leader!”

“Ya know, I hate to disagree,” Morgana interceded, “But this guy’s right. We can’t just spend money without his parents’ permission right now,” Morgana and I sighed.

Ryuji scrunched up the magazine in frustration. “F-fine, I’ll pay for you guys!” Surprised, I looked to Ryuji for confirmation. “Y-yeah, I’ll do it! You can just lie to your parents and say it’s a trip to visit that company you were interviewin’ for.”

“Ah,” Mona said, passion welling up in his heart, “I knew there was a reason I liked you!”

“Now c’mon!” Ryuji said waving to the car, his voice growing intensely grim, “We’ve got a plane to catch.”

Morgana and I smiled with confident excitement. A new mission was just beginning.
Operation: Crepe-drop

Chapter Summary

In their search for an old enemy, Ryuji, Morgana, and our protagonist enter foreign lands in search of a former ally.

My heavy eyelids faltered as we rose high above dark, cottony clouds. The blinking lights along the edge of the plane’s wing blended easily into the starry sky. Now that several hours had passed since the initial formation of our plan, I was beginning to have some doubts. Ryuji was an excellent motivator, but I was still nervous. Flying outside the country to investigate a known criminal seemed like a job for my phantom side, not this mundane, everyday persona I had adopted.

I released a restrained yawn. The three of us had managed to find a flight to France; however, that plane departed in the dead of night. Morgana and I were extremely tired. The former had dozed off the moment he had been contained in the pet carrier. I did not have that luxury with Ryuji at my side.

Ryuji was attentively reading a brochure when he spoke. “Hey, that reminds me. Do you know any French?”

I shrugged as I leaned against the wall. “What do you think?”

Ryuji’s face sagged. “That’s a big nada, eh? Thought so.” He returned his eyes to the brochure. “Well, looks like we can get a crash course if we slap on these audio headsets on our way over.”

“Sounds great,” I said with another big yawn.

“Uh, here,” Ryuji handed me a pillow. “You try to get some sleep. I’ll slam back some caffeine and start learning some Francois speak.”

I stared blankly at Ryuji’s excited, grinning face before resigning to sleep. “Fine,” I replied, “You have fun with that.” I set the pillow against the wall of the cabin and rested my head on it.

Ryuji placed a slim, white headset on his head. “I wonder if we’re gonna get jet lagged like last time,” he muttered, “Ah, it doesn’t matter. I’m doin’ this for Ann. We can’t let her down.” He smiled as he sat back in his chair and opened a carbonated bottle.

I shifted to accommodate the unusual sleeping position. “You’re way too excited for this.”

My eyes fluttered open, greeted by bright, morning sunlight. I felt surprisingly comfortable with the minimal sleeping conditions. I stretched my arms to the cabin roof, taking in the full view of the runway. Then a thunderous snore caught my attention. I turned to Ryuji. He was unconscious, leaning forward face first onto the seat in front. A bulbous strand of drool dangled from his mouth as he haphazardly drew in breath. I winced at the noise.

A young flight attendant approached us. “Excuse me,” the lady said softly, “I didn’t want to wake you, but we’ve landed. We’ll begin cleaning soon, so please prepare to exit the plane.”
I nodded, and the lady smiled automatically. Ryuji mumbled some sleepy mouth noises as the lady departed. I tapped the back of Ryuji’s head in earnest. Ryuji shifted gradually. “Ugh,” Ryuji moaned, “I ain’t got school no more… Let me sleep.”

“Ryuji!” I called.

“Gah, wha?” he started. Ryuji sat up swiftly, scratching the back of his neck. “Dude, we there yet?” I nodded. A big, stinking breath floated my way as Ryuji yawned. I nearly gagged at the stench.

“Ah, I guess I couldn’t stay awake as long as I thought,” Ryuji said. He flashed me a weak grin. “But don’t worry. I am a certified French speaker now. Or should I say, “Je parloir Français.” He made a very serious expression, but since I knew nothing of the language, I could only assume he was speaking properly.

“We need to get going,” I said.

“Oh, right,” Ryuji responded, “First we’ll need to find Ann. They should be practicing for that upcoming fashion show. Let’s grab a taxi and head over to the venue, now.”

Morgana released a strained meow. “Sleeping in that stuffy cage sucked,” he said with bitter resentment.

I responded as we walked along the outside of the arrivals building. “Well, one of us had to, and I don’t think Ryuji would fit.”

“Uh, is that supposed to be an insult?” Ryuji calmly retorted. He was carrying our luggage, one suitcase in each hand.

Mona sighed. “Hey, can we get something to eat? I’m starving.”

“Oh, that’s right!” Ryuji exclaimed, “I bet they got all kinds of fantastic food here! France is, like, known for that stuff.” Anticipating some delicious French delicacies, Ryuji smiled.

“I want crepes,” I said, briefly licking my lips.

“Ah, yes!” Ryuji cried.

“Okay,” Morgana coolly responded, “But only if I get one with fish.”

“Alright, it’s settled then,” Ryuji said, “First, breakfast, then we go see Ann rehearsing for the fashion show.”

“Oo, oo! I know,” Morgana shouted with joy, “We should get one of those chocolate filled crepes for Lady Ann too.” He jittered with excitement.

“Ah, yeah, she loves those sugary-stuffed things,” Ryuji said with a smile.

I gave Ryuji a coy smile. “I hope your wallet can handle all this, Ryuji.”

“H-hey!” Ryuji said with a start, “I paid for the flight. Can’t you buy your own food!?”

We entered an available taxi and briefly discussed what restaurant we wanted to visit. Ryuji spoke to
the driver in broken French, but his speech was lacking confidence. After a few moments of banter, it was clear that Ryuji could barely articulate his name or his desire for food to the driver.

I shook my head. Mona spoke freely, “It’s alright, Ryuji. You could barely learn your native language over the course of your whole life, much less a foreign language in one night.”

Ryuji glared at the cat, but before he could debate, I engaged the driver with my limited English skills. Fortuitously, the driver could understand the lingua franca. I asked him to take us to a restaurant for breakfast in the city, and the driver promptly complied.

Ryuji sat back in a huff, obviously disappointed in himself and irritated by Morgana. I gently patted his shoulder and granted him a reassuring smile. He returned the smile. These little irritations couldn’t keep us down while on this foreign adventure.

As we distanced ourselves from the airport, the soft, grassy hills gradually gave way to antique, stony structures that lined the streets like colorful books on a bookshelf. This strolling pedestrians and quirky storefronts kept my attention fixated on the roadside until Morgana hopped up from my shoulder. “Look!” he cried, his blue eyes open wide to the bright, clear skyline. Overhead, we glimpsed the Eiffel Tower peering over the lowly houses and shops.

Ryuji stuffed himself against the window with us. “Woah…” he mumbled. We weren’t just in France but Paris, the city of love.

“Ya know,” Morgana chirped as he exited his daze, “Now that I think about it, this place really suits Lady Ann. It’s got food, fashion, and it’s beautiful to boot.”

“Hmm, yeah,” Ryuji responded, “Kinda makes sense that’d she’d end up in a place like this.”

I stared vacantly at the city as I processed my thoughts. “I wonder if Kamoshida would really come to a place like this,” I responded, “Seems like an awful place to hide.”

Ryuji sat back in his seat. “Well, that guy was never the smartest. He just exploited people and used their weaknesses to hide before.” Ryuji clenched his fists as his mind returned to the past. “We gotta get to Ann,” he said, “I’m sure he’d try to use her somehow, just like he did with all the students back at Shujin.” He folded his arms.

I looked at him, still attempting to decipher Kamoshida’s plans. “Any idea how?”

“No,” Ryuji responded, shaking his head, “It’s just like you said. This place ain’t a very good spot to hide.” He glanced down for a moment. “But why else would he come here?”

I contemplated that idea for a minute, and then my stomach growled.

Morgana sighed with contentment as we exited the café. “Ah, that salmon was so buttery I think I might melt.”

I glanced at my receipt in derision. “I’m going to make you get a job after this.”

“Hey!” Morgana cried, “That’s animal abuse.”

Ryuji snickered as we walked back to our cab. “So, you’ve finally given up on the being human thing, huh?”
Morgana whispered loudly into my ear. “You’ve got to admit I’m more human than this monkey will ever be.”

“What was that?” Ryuji said, making a fist.

“Enough, you two,” I calmly responded, “Sometimes, I wonder if you guys actually hate each other.”

“Ah, c’mon dude,” Ryuji stated, “You know we’re just givin’ each other a hard time.”

“That’s right,” Morgana replied, “Even though he may annoy me sometimes, we’ve been through too much to ever be separated.”

“Uh huh,” I just rolled my eyes. “Ryuji, did you write down the address of that venue where the fashion show is?”

“Yep,” he responded, “Got it right here.” He held up a napkin with some scrawling on it.

Mona sighed. “I hope the driver can read that.”

After several minutes of driving, we arrived at a sizable estate with an opulent villa nestled amidst a lush garden. A long, winding driveway led to a cul-de-sac of cars parked in front of the central structure. Massive marble pillars extended out of sight. Wide, stone stairs rose into the shadowy arches creating an inspiring entryway. The architecture could have been centuries old, but the mansion was clearly well-maintained.

Our cab came to a halt at the center of the paved parking, and the driver turned to the three of us. “Are you sure this is the place,” he asked in English.

I glanced to Ryuji, but he only quietly mumbled, “Yeah…” as he stumbled out of the car in a daze. I nodded to the cab driver and paid our fare before exiting the cab and dismissing the driver.

Mona sat on my shoulder with quiet admiration. “This place is something…”

I took a moment to examine our surroundings while Ryuji stared up at the imposing structure. The gardens around us were hedged with precisely trimmed bushes. The quiet and calming buzz of insects populated the otherwise isolated area. A colorful butterfly wafted past my face, drawing my attention to the large, flowing river, backdropping the extensive gardens. It was a beautiful place to display beautiful fashion, yet I suspected that ugly personalities would also be attracted to this posh residence. Having my fill of the luxurious vista, I strode up beside Ryuji.

He nervously rubbed his head and took a hard swallow. “I think we might be a little out of place here…” he whimpered.

I glanced again at the gigantic portico. “I doubt they’re going to just let us in.”

Ryuji scratched his head vigorously. “Ah, c’mon. We should try going through a backdoor.” He stepped from the main pathway around the side of the girded stairway.

I hesitantly followed my friend. Mona voiced his own opinion, “Maybe we should wait outside, you know, until the practice is done for the day.”

Ryuji vacantly responded, “Nah, we rushed all the way here. It’d be a waste if we stopped now.”
“Hmm… I suppose…” Morgana replied, anxiety hanging in his voice.

Eventually, Ryuji found a secluded rear entrance. “Ah, here we go. This is our way in.”

“Wait!” I said grabbing his shoulder, “What if there’s an alarm?”

“Wha? Oh, shit!” he responded, surprise consuming his face, “I didn’t even think of that, man.”

“Not to mention a lock,” an exasperated Morgana added, “Seriously, you guys were the first two Phantom Thieves, and you still don’t think about the basics?”

“Hey, that’s your job,” Ryuji said in a hushed voice, “I got us here. Now it’s your turn.”

“M-me?” Morgana inquired, “What am I supposed to do?”

Ryuji looked around, noting some small windows just above the height of the door. They appeared about Morgana’s size. Ryuji and I shared a glance before Ryuji smiled cockily. “Yeah, this’ll totally work!” he exclaimed, “Hey, Mona, think you can get through that window up there?”

Morgana’s nervousness quickly disappeared. “Of course, I can!”

“Alright,” Ryuji continued, “You get in through there and then unlock the door from the inside.” He nearly bounced with excitement.

“Mm, fine,” Morgana replied, “I don’t feel right breaking in, but it’s for Lady Ann.”

“Ah, hell yes!” Ryuji said with a laugh, “This really feels like we’re a team again!” Morgana sighed before jumping to Ryuji’s head and then to the window. “H-hey!” Ryuji spouted, “Watch it!”

Morgana glanced down at the two of us, displaying his full ego. “Just wait here for a sec,” he said with a reserved grin, “This’ll take a minute.”

It was a few minutes before Ryuji spoke again. “What do you think’s taking him so long?” Ryuji growled as his leg fidgeted.

I shrugged. “Maybe he needed a key.”

“Oh, huh, I didn’t think of that,” Ryuji responded.

Thankfully, the door promptly slid open. Morgana slid gradually into view as he clung to the door’s metal handle. He attempted to compose a timely comment while struggling to stay balanced. “Gentlemen, w-we’re in,” he said with a stutter.

Ryuji grabbed the open door. “Awesome! You’re the best Mona!”

I offered Morgana my shoulder, and he eagerly accepted. “I’ve done my part. Now, I hope you guys have a plan for sweet talking your way past the security. There’s no way the two of you could slip past unnoticed.”

“Ah, shit,” Ryuji sighed, “This keeps gettin’ harder and harder…”

I smiled. “Now’s not the time for getting harder,” I said. Ryuji giggled as he shook his head.

Mona sighed loudly. “You guys are such children. We need a real plan.”
I ran my fingers slowly over my mouth. “What if we say we’re here to deliver the crepe to Ann? And then we explain that we’re her friends, so she requested us specifically.”

Ryuji chuckled. “That’s pretty good comin’ off the top of your head.”

Morgana groaned. “It’d be great if we weren’t two Japanese boys and a cat in the middle of France.”

“Well,” Ryuji continued, “You got any better ideas?”

“I wouldn’t have asked you if I did,” said Morgana, frustrated.

“Well then,” Ryuji went on, “Looks like it’s time for Operation: Crepe-drop.”

I nodded. “Let’s do it.”

We emerged from the shadowy halls to be greeted by intense lighting focused on an elongated runway. A large curtain partially obscured the set, but we could see a fancy-looking model wearing a very sparkly dress. Cameras flashed as an astute fashion designer barked orders at the models.


“Quiet!” Mona ordered, “Here comes one of the workers.” He slipped into the bag for hiding.

A tall, suited man with a dark mustache approached us. “Hey, qui vous a laissé ici?”

Ryuji hastily made to respond, but I stopped him. “We’re here to deliver a crepe to Miss Takamaki,” I replied in English.

The man frowned. I was unable to immediately discern if he could understand my words. “You have the wrong place,” the man replied in a grim voice.

“Really?” I asked in feigned confusion, “She was very specific about the details.”

The man folded his thick arms. “Let’s see the package.” I held up the foil-wrapped parcel. The man squinted. He clearly wasn’t buying our act. Ryuji shifted nervously. “What are you two? Some crazed perverts come all this way to stalk our models?”

Ryuji couldn’t speak English well, but he seemed to understand that last bit. “H-hey!”

“Ryuji’s a total pervert,” I said, unable to pass the opportunity.

Ryuji looked at me in shock. “Dude! This ain’t the time for jokes!”

The large thug just grunted. “Acting cool isn’t going to get you anywhere. Get out of here before I throw you out!” He stepped towards us puffing out his naturally oversized body.

“D-dude!” Ryuji stammered, “Say somethin’!”

“Listen,” I calmly continued, “Miss Takamaki is very adamant about her morning calories, and we’re not going to let her down so…”

The man looked me directly in the eyes, and I returned the cold stare. “I see,” said the man, lowering his arms. He turned to Ryuji. “Then I’ll just have to throw you out!” The man lifted his arms over his head. The active muscular frame was truly intimidating.
Ryuji screamed as the giant arms clamped around him. The man plucked Ryuji from the ground and heaved him over his head like a pebble. Ryuji, now suspended midair and very disconcerted, began yelling spastically. “Hey! What the hell, man! Get the eff off me!”

The man nonchalantly responded, “You are going in the trash, little man!” Then he turned to me, still holding Ryuji in the air. “And you’re next!”

Morgana popped his head out of the bag. “T-this is bad!” he exclaimed. I could barely contain my horror as a bead of sweat rolled over my face.

Just then, another well-dressed man approached. He held a clipboard and appeared to be in a position of authority, but his intolerant demeanor gave me no comfort. “What’s going on here?” the man squawked, resting his clipboard on his hip.

“Just taking out this piece of trash,” replied the larger man. Ryuji was still flailing above his head.

“What’s it look like!” Ryuji cried, “I’m being freakin’ assaulted here!”

“Wait,” the commanding man responded with a tired look, “Is that Ryuji Sakamoto?” The man wiped his sweaty face.

“You know this dirt?” Ryuji’s attacker asked.

“He’s been calling for Miss Takamaki constantly,” the bitter man continued, “Damn kid’s been driving me crazy with the pestering.”

“Hey!” Ryuji replied from his precarious position, “We’re friends and you know it!”

“Ah, so you are a stalker!” the big man commented.

“Wha? No, that ain’t it!” Ryuji cried.

The smaller man impatiently tapped his sharp shoe against the concrete floor and frowned. “Throw them out, Gustave.”

The enormous Gustave loosed a bellowing laugh. “With pleasure!” I recoiled as the man carried Ryuji toward me.

“Hey!” a light and pleasant voice called, “What’s going on, Phillip?”

All the tension in my stomach unwound like a snappy rubber band as Ann stepped out from behind the curtains. She wore some surprisingly casual slacks, but that didn’t stop her from looking pristine.

Ryuji yelped as soon as he saw our lovely companion. “Ann! Holy shit am I glad to see you!”

“R-Ryuji?” Ann stuttered.

“Lady Ann!” Morgana chimed.

“Morgana? Wha…” Ann continued, “And you…” She glanced at me. I waved sheepishly.

“You know these men?” Gustave asked hesitantly.

“Yes, ugh! What the hell are you guys doing here?” Ann cried, a pale redness entering her cheeks.

“Leaving, I should think,” replied the clipboard man, with a disdainful look in his eye.

The large man grunted as he rolled Ryuji onto the floor. He brushed his hands clean.

“Don’t give these children the time of day, Ann,” Phillip went on, “You know these troublemakers would just waste your time.”

“I said enough!” Ann retorted, “I’ll be speaking with my friends now, so you can go suck an egg until I’m done.”

Phillip returned a strangely lighthearted smile. “Fine, but keep it quick,” was all he said. Phillip quickly turned on his heel to leave, and Gustave trudged behind him.

Once the unfamiliar gentlemen had left us, I bent over next to Ryuji’s crumpled body. Ryuji moaned unceremoniously, “Ugh, next time, you’re getting tossed in the air.”

Ann also came to check Ryuji’s temperament. “Hey, are you alright? You look a little pale.”

“Anyone would look pale with you around,” Morgana mumbled.

“Thanks,” I replied.

Morgana frowned immediately. “These claws aren’t for show, you know?”

“C’mon,” Ann continued, placing a hand under Ryuji’s head, “Let’s get him outside.”

After a short jaunt outside and into the adjacent gardens, Ann and I sat on a bench with Ryuji strung between us. The normally upbeat Sakamoto sagged from fatigue as we placed him onto the seat.

“Ugh,” Ryuji groaned, “I think that jetlag’s really catchin’ up to me…”

Ann shook her head vigorously. “Did you guys really fly out here by yourselves? What were you thinking!? And you guys could’ve been arrested for sneaking in like that!” Despite her biting tone, she couldn’t hide her instinctive concern for us.

I hadn’t noticed during the commotion earlier, but Ann was wearing her hair down. It was mildly jarring to see her without the usual, perky twin-tails. That full hair certainly didn’t require the extra lift, yet those two bouncy tails had seemed almost indicative of Ann’s joyously bubbly personality. Regardless, those creamy, flowing strands still looked gorgeous wrapped around her porcelain face. I required a moment of awkwardly staring at her to deduce that, but it wouldn’t be the first time. Once she had gotten her spat of anger out, she briefly returned my gaze before Morgana broke the silence.

“Hey!” Morgana snapped. The two of us glanced at him. He was sitting right in front of the bench on a grassy patch. “You guys looked like you were zoning out for a second.”

I gave my head a gentle rub. I had been through a wide range of emotions in the past few minutes. Nevertheless, I needed to recall the steps of our journey to explain myself. “Kamoshida…” I mumbled.

“That’s right,” Ryuji said with a grunt, “Kamoshida escaped from prison. Thought he might be headed this way, so… we came runnin’.” He strained to look at Ann.

Ann downcast her face. “I… already know,” she said with a sigh.
Ryuji and I both perked up at her words. “What do ya mean you know? That bastard didn’t show up already, did he?” Ryuji asked.

“N-no,” Ann quietly responded, “I heard he had escaped from prison, but security doesn’t think he came through any of the airports in the area.”

Ryuji looked at me in confusion. Our plan didn’t seem to account for the likeliest cases.

Ann shook her head in frustration. “Ugh, why didn’t you guys just call me?” she chided, “I could’ve told you that I was just fine…” Her voice trailed off quietly.

“You’ll have to ask your agent guy about that one,” Ryuji added. Ann pouted, holding her head in her hands.

“Something wrong?” I cautiously asked.


“Uh, wait,” Ryuji stammered, glancing between us, “Ain’t that bad?”

“Tactless as always, Ryuji,” Morgana said with a coy smile.

“Well,” frustration rose in Ryuji’s voice, “At least we know I’m not trying to hide anything.”

Ann inhaled deeply. “Ah… I missed you guys.”

Ryuji relaxed, running his hand gently through his hair. “Ya know, it does feel pretty great bein’ back together and all,” Ryuji added.

I nodded and smiled. “It’s been too long.”

Ann smiled too. “Still, what made you guys decide to fly all the way to France? I’m sure it wasn’t cheap.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Ryuji sighed.

“It was pretty much all Ryuji’s idea,” Morgana said, “Of course, we were quick to agree.”

“I’d hate to think you wasted all that money just to find out I was completely safe,” Ann said with a giggle. I couldn’t help but chuckle.

Ryuji tilted his head as he thought. “No, we still haven’t figured out what’s goin’ on with Kamoshida, so we can’t leave yet.”

“Huh? But nobody knows where he is,” Ann said.

“We were hoping you could help us with that, Lady Ann,” Mona cheerfully requested.

“Wha? Me?” Ann cried, “But I don’t know anything!”

“Even so,” Ryuji said, “We still need your help with trackin’ him down. After all, three sets of hands and one set of paws are better than… uh, well, you know what I mean.”

“Are you asking me to go with you guys on a search for a fugitive?” Ann inquired, a disparaging look in her eye, “Guys, I can’t do that.”
“Wha?” an addled Ryuji said, “Why not?”

Ann groaned. “Because I have a life here,” she said, “I’m a model. I can’t just leave that to go on some crazy adventure.” She looked to Ryuji, desperate for us to understand.

Ryuji thrust up from his seat on the bench. “So, you’re tellin’ me that after we come all this way to see you, you won’t even lend us a hand??” He stomped across the grass and leaned against a small tree behind Morgana.

All I could add was, “Ryuji, calm down.” He had a surprising passion for our mission, but not everyone would fly internationally for this sidetracking quest.

Ryuji just shrugged. “Hmph, so much for bein’ Phantom Thieves.” I cringed at those bitter words. Clearly, this wasn’t how Ryuji envisioned this meeting.

“Ugh!” Ann said, shaking her head, “Morgana, you can make him understand, can’t you?”

The cat nodded though he was already prepared to address our friend. “Getting mad about it isn’t going to help anything,” Morgana said to Ryuji.

Ryuji spoke rapidly through clenched teeth. “Getting’ mad’s the only thing I can seem to do in these situations…”

In frustration, Ann turned to me. “You understand, don’t you?”

I pursed my lips as I searched for a good answer. I understood her circumstance, yet I couldn’t deny our team was lacking. I looked meekly at her, replying honestly, “We need you, Ann.”

“Ugh,” Ann placed her head in her hands again, “You guys really suck sometimes.”

“Yeah, great to see you too!” Ryuji retorted. An ugly grimace polluted his face.

“You guys better stop fighting,” Mona interjected, “I won’t have you ending this on bad terms under any circumstances.”

I could only allow these harsh comments to fall flat. I knew this predicament would sort itself somehow; I just didn’t have all the pieces yet. So, I held up the foil-wrapped package to Ann and said, “How about a crepe?”
Chapter Summary

Ryuji and our protagonist continue their fruitless hunt for Kamoshida. Meanwhile, Ann and Morgana get a little bit closer.

The midday sun was soon to be eclipsed by a fast-moving front of clouds. Although our mission was not proceeding as initially planned, the serene French atmosphere prevented tempers from flaring. I leaned against the irregular stonework wall next to the rear entrance of the venue of Ann’s fashion show. My nonchalant attitude had seemingly won over Ryuji, who had calmed considerably. Meanwhile, Ann happily munched on her chocolate stuffed crepe. Her excited cooing was the only noise supplementing the mild hum of the local fauna.

“Mmmmm!” Ann exclaimed, “This is sooo delicious! Thanks for grabbing this for me!” Her vibrant cheeks puffed outward as she readily took another gooey chunk from the crepe.

Morgana, once again residing prestigiously on my shoulder, was quick to respond. “We wouldn’t be true gentlemen if we weren’t conscientious of a lady’s desires.” He happily flicked his tail.

Ann licked a dab of chocolate from her rosy lips. “Ahh. You know, if you guys are planning on staying for a while, we should hang out sometime,” Ann said with her characteristic smile, “I could show you around the city. I know all kinds of fancy places since I’m in the fashion industry.”

Morgana grabbed my attention. “Hey! I know we’ve got a mission to complete, but you’d better accept Lady Ann’s invitation.”

Ryuji let out a loud sigh. “Oh Mona, you’re the same as always.” He shook his head in disapproval.

“W-what?” Morgana squealed, “I-I just mean we won’t get another chance like this! How often does a beautiful lady offer to escort you around Paris!!?”

I glanced sideways at the cat. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but I had hoped Morgana would have grown past this lovesick phase. For now, I returned my attention to Ann. “We’ll be sure to take that offer,” I replied.

“Yeah,” Ryuji added, “Just make sure your agent takes our calls this time.”

Ann’s eyebrows furrowed as she said, “Oh, I will! We’ll be having a long chat about this.” A scalding attitude punctuated her statement. I didn’t envy her agent’s position. Then a sharp chime interjected our conversation, and Ann retrieved a mini-phone from her pocket. “Speak of the devil,” she said, reading the tiny screen, “I’ve got to run.”

“That didn’t take long,” Ryuji commented.

Ann returned the phone to her pocket and opened the rear entrance with her free hand. She took another bite from the crepe as she said, “Thanks again for the crepe! I’ll see you guys soon, alright?”

“I’ll be counting the minutes,” Mona mumbled.
Ryuji simply said, “See ya,” and I waved.
“Bye!” Ann replied as she disappeared inside, her hair flowing behind.

Everyone took a moment to process our circumstances after our fourth companion had left. Ryuji was the first to speak. “Okay, is it just me, or is Morgana somehow getting’ creepier?”

“H-hey!” Mona cried, “I can dream, can’t I?” He mustered an angry, imitation glare.

“C’mon, Mona,” Ryuji continued to whine. He looked at me. “You’ve gotta back me up on this one.”

I quietly shook my head. “Maybe you should give it up, Morgana.”

“Huh? You too?” Morgana stammered.

“We’re just worried about ya, Mona!” Ryuji said.

“Well,” Morgana continued, clearing his throat, “You guys may be right.” His voice strained as he attempted to contain himself. “It may be time to move on…”

Hearing Morgana’s faltering voice caused a bit of sorrow to bubble up into my heart. I sighed lightly before Ryuji redirected the conversation. “Listen, we don’t got time for this,” Ryuji started, “Ugh, even after all that we’re still no closer to Kamoshida than before.”

“You got a plan?” I asked.

“Nah,” Ryuji said, scratching his head, “There’s nothin’ to be done, I guess. We just gotta wait for a clue or somethin’.”

“He’s right,” Mona added, “We still don’t even know if Kamoshida is in France. He could have transferred flights and be on some remote island by now.”

Ryuji scratched his face while he thought. “It’s kinda weird, dontcha think? I mean, last time we saw Kamoshida, he wasn’t exactly squealin’ to get out of prison.”

“I suppose our final act in the Metaverse must have had a profound effect on him,” Morgana eagerly continued, “Perhaps even more so than stealing his heart.”

“Wha?” Ryuji jolted, “Ya really think so?”

“It’s possible,” Mona replied, “I-I think…”

“Hey, now’s not the time for hesitation!”

“Well, how would I know? My Metaverse form disappeared after all.”

Ryuji winced. “Well… in that case, I definitely don’t feel right leavin’ Ann alone here. Who knows what that sicko might try!”

“She’s really our only lead,” I added.

Ryuji paced around in the grass briefly before explaining a rough plan. “Alright, somebody should keep an eye on Ann in case anything weird happens. Mona, you up for it?” He pointed at the cat.

“Hmph,” the cat confidently puffed out his chest, “A stakeout mission is pure child’s play to a pro like me.”
“Hmm,” Ryuji paused for a moment. He briefly glanced at his phone before approaching us. “Here, take my phone.” He held his familiar device up to the cat.

“Huh?” Mona stammered in confusion. I too was sent off guard.

“Oh…” Mona said, glancing at the large object attached to his neck, “Good thinking.”

“Ah, that’s right,” Ryuji added, “My mom had me download this locator app thingy in case I got lost or somethin’. With that, we can look up your location if something happens to Ann.”


Ryuji’s face brightened with a friendly grin. “Ah, don’t mention it.”

I nodded, taking a beat to appreciate Ryuji’s handiwork. “So, what’s our plan for today?” I asked.

“Let’s see,” Ryuji said, “Mona should start observin’ Ann for now. Meanwhile, you and I can grab a hotel for the night.”

“Sounds good,” I replied, “Maybe tomorrow, we could see if Ann’s changed her mind about helping us.”

“Alright,” Morgana said, “Our plan’s all set. If everyone’s clear on the details, let’s split up for tonight. We wouldn’t want to be caught loitering.”

He smiled at me. “Who do you think you’re talking to?”

Morgana was invisible clambering between the rafters of the auditorium. Darkness enveloped his obsidian fur with absolute acuity. The feline traversed the midnight fluid of the obscure spaces like a viper slithering through a desert. His quick paws burned with every step as he flew over the blazing depths of the show hall. Every inch beneath him represented the incinerating despair of failure. This gallant cat laughed at failure. He was legend; he was hope; he was a great thief; he was… very uncertain of his emotions.

Morgana leapt onto a metal bar suspending a stage light high over the busy models. He perched himself, so he could get an excellent view of the ladies. Although he wouldn’t be deterred by some unusual misgivings, Morgana was suddenly being confronted by his longtime admiration for Lady Ann. The others had clearly noticed his favoritism, and he couldn’t hide the fact any longer. He thought they may have been right. After all, he was a cat or something like that and she was… perfect. They couldn’t possibly be together, even if she wanted to be.

Thankfully, the action below gave Morgana a break of thought. A lanky figure with a floppy hairdo
began addressing the ladies standing at the start of the runway. “Alright, ladies!” the powdered man shouted, “Let’s be honest… that was terrible.” He gave a disgusted stare at the women who shifted nervously at his words. “But thankfully,” the man nearly moaned, “we have a real professional here to show how it’s done.”

Beside this overly pompous egoist stood Phillip, apparently Ann’s agent from earlier. He was absently writing on his clipboard as the other man continued to speak. “Miss Takamaki is truly a breathtaking icon. Her vivacious passion makes me…” The man grimaced as he held out a fist, “Ugh!” This man was ludicrous, Morgana noted. If he was directing the models, Mona did not envy them. “Anywho, Takamaki will show you girls what a real model can do, so please pay attention.” His voice dripped with condescension. Then the man leaned to his counterpart. Luckily, Morgana’s hearing was excellent. “This show isn’t going to get off the ground if Miss Takamaki doesn’t display her full passion,” the man whispered, “You had better keep her on her toes.”

Phillip looked up from his clipboard to the stage, rolling his head. “That’s up to Miss Takamaki,” he replied calmly, “So, you’d better be nice if you want anything out of her.” Phillip smiled coyly as the other man stood upright and folded his hands.

“Heels clacked against the stage as the models parted. Morgana felt a knot rising in his gut. The concentrated stage lighting caused glistening sparkles to radiate from Ann’s reflective green dress. Waves of emerald sheen caressed the curvature of her body as she delicately walked onto the runway. Her movements were precisely timed and gracefully executed. Even a cat could envy her form. The motion of every part of her body was under her command. Those slender, sculpted legs could have pierced solid steel, yet she glided effortlessly across the stage. Her hair bounced with every step, complementing her sleek, green dress with a golden cloak of gorgeous beauty. Those illustrious eyes were like vacuous mirrors; they demanded attention. Her nose, her brow, her cheeks, her lips: every angle and every hue were marvelous perfection.

Phillip briefly glanced at the clipboard under his arm before asking, “Would you like a ride to the hotel? I’ve got a few more things to finish up here, but I’m sure Gustave would…”
“Nope,” Ann intercut with a smile, “I think I’ll walk.”

Phillip cocked his head curiously at the girl. “Well, at least let me get you an umbrella,” he insisted, “I heard it was going to rain today.”

“Ah, I’ll be fine,” Ann replied, “It’s not that long of a walk.”


This looked like a good time for Morgana to slip to the ground. He grabbed a nearby rope and descended to the floor. Despite the excitement of watching Ann modeling, Morgana still needed to remember his mission. Stealth was key for this phase. He needed to be concealed so that any evildoers, such as Kamoshida, would not be warned by his intimidating appearance.

Skipping rapidly between plastic crates and piles of stage supplies, Mona spied Lady Ann exiting the auditorium through another side exit. His window of opportunity was short, but he skidded across the floor and swiftly shot between the crack in the door. Once through the door, he darted into the adjacent bushes like a shadow in sunlight.

Lady Ann walked slowly down the path. Morgana smiled at his own skill. He had evaded detection successfully. Now, he just had to tail Ann to her hotel, and this op would be complete.

As Ann walked along the streets into town, the cloudy sky darkened. Morgana kept a generous distance between them, only changing cover when it was absolutely necessary. Nevertheless, the storm overhead would not wait. A crack of thunder roared through the open streets, encouraging many pedestrians to return indoors. Ann hesitantly looked skyward, and a drop of rain planted directly onto her forehead.

Lady Ann nonchalantly blew the drop from her face before continuing down the street. A covered bench was conveniently located at the start of the next block, so she made a beeline for it. Morgana now cautiously approached her, sliding around the corner of the adjacent building. Little droplets soon began pelting the roadways with musical frequency. Lady Ann sat at the bench, releasing a somber sigh. She slumped over and propped her head on her fist. “What a day…” she mumbled.

Another miniature water bomb erupted next to Morgana. Tiny flecks of vapor speckled his fur. Mona was in trouble now. He needed shelter, and he certainly didn’t want to get Ryuji’s phone wet. Ann loosed another reserved sigh. She seemed uncharacteristically downtrodden to Morgana. His compassionate spirit was boiling up now. He couldn’t just leave her there, sad and alone. This was the perfect convergence. He needed shelter, and his responsibility as the mentor of the Phantom Thieves was calling him to Ann.

Morgana calmly strode up behind the bench and jumped onto the seat beside Lady Ann. She exhaled slowly, still having not noticed him. Mona just observed her for a moment before saying, “Pretty crazy day, huh?”

Lady Ann jumped at the sudden voice. “Ah!” she shrieked. Ann looked beside herself to find the black cat. “Oh God! You scared me, dammit!” She clutched her chest as her breathing settled. She shook her head and flicked a stray strand of hair from her face.

“Uh, sorry…” Mona stumbled with his words.

Ann’s eyes suddenly went wide. “Wait! Were you following me?” The accusing tone of her voice was unmistakable, and the furious gleam in her eye would have terrified a less experienced individual.
Mona swallowed. “I’d like to think of it as protecting although that assessment would not be inaccurate…”

“Ugh, you were following me!” Ann insisted, frowning at the helpless cat, “I knew I heard something in the bushes.” Meanwhile, the rain had increased its pace considerably. The road was coated with vibrating puddles.

Morgana turned his head in shame. “L-let’s just forget about the following stuff,” he stammered, “We should talk about what’s really bothering you.”

“What’s bothering me?” Ann asked quizzically. Thankfully, her anger dissipated as Morgana continued to talk.

“Listen,” Morgana went on, “It’s been hard on me too. All the tension has been building up inside me for years… just thinking about this stuff is… painful…”

“Tension?” Ann inquired, “What are you…?”

“I just… felt like… if I could become human, then maybe you’d see the kind of person I really am, and we could be together. But that dream has sailed now.” Morgana sighed heavily as another blast of thunder rocked the sky.

“Oh,” Ann responded, “Uh.. uhm…” Ann stared dumbfounded at the sobering cat.

“I’m sorry, Ann,” Mona continued, “But we can’t be together. It’s better if we just both move on. Maybe then we can at least be happy.”

“Oh, riiight,” Ann said, “Mona, are you alright? You’re acting kinda… weird…”

“I know, I know,” said Mona, “But we shouldn’t cry any more tears for each other. Let’s just end this strange dance.”

“Ugh,” Ann sighed, “Are you just making this up as you go?” Morgana sat silently with his head down, a frown on his face. “Listen, Morgana, I know you like me, but don’t make things awkward like this.”

“Huh?” the cat wailed.

“Look,” Ann said, smiling, “I’ll forget this conversation ever happened. Just promise me you won’t talk about this stuff anymore.”

Mona turned his face down again. “I guess,” he mumbled. A flash of lightning illuminated the cat’s gloomy expression.

“Good,” Ann giggled. She gently took her hand and placed it on Morgana’s head. He instantly reacted, his ears perking up and his tail flicking side to side eagerly. Ann casually scratched the back of Morgana’s head, and the fur on his back straightened.

“Mm… Mrreoww…” Morgana happily purred. He pressed the back of his head into Ann’s palm. Morgana was now smiling, his face full of bliss.

Ann laughed cheerfully. “C’mon,” she said, scooping the merry cat up in her arms, “I’ll take you to my apartment.”

Another wave of thunder blistered past the pair. “B-but it’s still raining!” Morgana cried,
overwhelmed with his new position.

Ann snickered as she lifted her hood. She stood from the safety of the bench and entered the torrent of rain. “Well then, I guess we’ll just have to slide our way home!” She held Morgana against her as she ran down the sidewalk, splashing through the puddles. Morgana gasped. Water covered the pair like dandelions in an open field. The two of them were laughing and wailing the entire length of the block. They were soaked, but they were happy.

“Dammit!” Ryuji shouted, “Why isn’t this working!?”

I gently patted Ryuji’s shoulder as the residents in the lobby around us took notice of Ryuji’s loud exclamations. “Hey,” I said, “Maybe we should look for a different place.”

The receptionist sitting in front of us had once again declared that Ryuji’s card had been declined. “We can’t leave now,” Ryuji replied, “Look how hard it’s rainin’! Besides, this should work! I called the bank and everything. There’s no way I’m gettin’ outta here without a nice hotel room and a plate of room service.” Ryuji glared at the receptionist though they couldn’t understand each other.

I nervously addressed the young, male receptionist. “I-I think he wants you to try the card again.”

The receptionist gave me a serious expression as he pleaded. “Sir, this is the eighth time I’ve tried the card. It isn’t going to work. If it is indeed a problem with our card reader, you could simply travel down the street to the bank and have the money withdrawn.”

I nodded and turned to Ryuji. He was irritably grinding his teeth. “Ryuji…” I started.

“Dammit!” he shouted, “Ain’t you guys got some kinda law against leaving tourists out in the rain!?”

I slapped the back of his neck. “Hey!” I said, “Get control of yourself.” The other patrons were getting agitated now.

Thankfully, before the commotion could escalate further, the lobby doors opened followed by the squeaking of wet shoes. Ryuji and I were both surprised to see Ann carrying Morgana in her arm. She bent over as quickly as she had entered, clearly exhausted from running. Her short, rapid breaths dispersed the room’s attention to other matters. However, once she had finished hyperventilating, Ann burst into an unusual fit of laughter. I would’ve been less concerned were it not for the overbearing volume of Ann’s joy. Ryuji and I gave each other befuddled glances.

Ann leaned back and stretched. “Ah! That felt awesome!” she cried.

Morgana, who had been neatly tucked under Ann’s chest, shook the water from his fur. “Heh, I think I could get used to that.” He grinned from ear to ear.

Meanwhile, water continued to drip from Ann’s drenched hoodie, forming a puddle around her soggy boots. She didn’t seem to mind the water. Her face had a huge smile, and her eyes beamed with excitement. Then she saw us. “Oh, it’s you,” she said, “I was wondering where you guys were staying.”

Ann lowered her hood as she approached us. I nervously laughed, “Not here apparently.”


I glanced at Ryuji, but he just glared at me. “Ryuji’s broke,” I answered.
“Ohhh,” Ann smiled sweetly, “Ya know, I could cover your room cost if… ya do me a favor.”

“Oh boy,” Ryuji said, “Here it comes.”

I shook my head. “What’s the favor?”

Ann tilted her head before breaking her smile. “Stop spying on me!” Ann yelled, “I don’t need you guys’ protection!” She waved her hand past my face nearly smacking me.

“Woah!” Ryuji shouted, his eyes energized with fear, “Careful with those claws.”

Ann pursed her lips. “Keep talking and your pride won’t be the only thing that gets scratched.”

“Okay, okay!” Ryuji pleaded, “We’re sorry for spyin’ on ya. We were just tryin’ to keep ya safe.”

Just then, another man entered the lobby. A coated man holding an umbrella quickly stepped inside. He glanced around before approaching Ann. “Ann, there you are,” said the man, “I told you to take an umbrella.”

I quickly recognized the man as Ann’s rude overseer. This time, he seemed significantly less foul. Ryuji confirmed my assessment, “It’s that guy from earlier.”

Phillip also noticed us. “Oh,” he said, his brow furrowing, “I see Sakamoto has recovered from his incident.” He looked to me, his voice possessed by wavering sarcasm. “At least the cute one wasn’t harmed.”


“I probably deserved that,” Phillip added. He shifted as he adjusted to the newfound pain in his foot.

“And now you’ll pay for these young gentlemen’s room,” Ann commanded with a huff.

“Ah, yes ma’am,” the agent obediently replied.

“Gah! I can’t believe it!” Ryuji cried, “My phone’s freakin’ soaked!” He shook the phone, and a stream of water gushed out from the seam.

Morgana nervously laughed. “S-sorry about that.”

Ryuji clenched his teeth in frustration. “What were you thinking?” Ryuji shouted, “You blew your cover and busted up my phone!” He glanced at the drenched device.

“Uh, what was I thinking?” Mona started. His face contorted as he recalled the past hour.

I stepped between the pair. “Go easy on him,” I told Ryuji, “It’s been a rough day for all of us.”

Ryuji sighed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right…” He flopped onto the bed beside him.

Our limited room had two beds and a bathroom. Warm reds and browns decorated every surface from the covers on the bed to the patterns on the walls. Understated gold trimming gave the furnishings an air of elegance. Despite the modern structure of this hotel, these antiquated hues reminded me of this foreign country’s aristocratic history.

I stepped to the curtained window. The sun briefly peeked through the clouded horizon, glazing the
saturated city with an orange glow. Street lamps flickered to life in the waning light. The serenity of the Paris evening underscored my extraordinary presence.

“So,” I asked, “What are we going to do about Kamoshida?”

Ryuji stared blankly at the ceiling, all energy drained from his body. Several moments passed before he responded. “No clue,” he said.

Morgana hopped up onto the dresser which housed the room’s television. “Is Kamoshida even in France?” the troubled cat inquired.

“Dammit,” Ryuji mumbled. His brow furrowed as he gazed intently at the plastered roof. We all shifted uneasily in contemplation. This expensive excursion could not justify itself much longer. Eventually, our staunch silence was broken when Ryuji’s stomach winced in anguish. “Ah! I can’t think while I’m so damn hungry!”

I returned an uncertain glance before replying. “Didn’t you say you wanted room service?”

“That was when I thought I had money,” Ryuji sighed. He scratched his head and then sat up eagerly, “Hey, Ann’s loaded now, right? You think she’d let me borrow some cash?” He grinned as he considered his dining choices.

“You’re gonna ask for more money?” Morgana asked in amazement.

Ryuji slid to the side of his bed and grabbed the wired telephone. “Let’s see…” he began, “What was Ann’s room number again?”

I collapsed face first onto my own cot. Sounded like we were going to bed hungry.

Morning breakfast couldn’t come soon enough. Thankfully, the first thing to greet me the next day was a knock on our door. Ann came to invite the three of us to breakfast, and I wholehearted accepted on behalf of the group. I don’t think Ryuji would have forgiven me if I hadn’t. After a hectic morning scramble and some congestion around the bathroom, Morgana, Ryuji, and I were prepared for another day of tumultuous adventures.

After a brief jaunt to a nearby café, Ryuji set about making a new record for himself. I had never seen someone accidentally throw their silverware across the room while eating until today. The ferocity with which he ate was something close to admirable. A stack of cleared plates began building as our meal progressed. At a certain point, I believe Ann and I stopped eating entirely to focus on observing Ryuji’s mesmerizing display.

Ryuji stretched, releasing a loud sigh as he cleared another plate. “Wow, that hit the spot! Thanks again for taking us out, Ann!” He smiled warmly.

Ann stared wide-eyed at the lopsided tower of plates. “Uh, yeah…” she replied with a nervous laugh, “No problem.”

The quaint, little café was filled with the rich smells of fried dough and sweet coffee. Plainly dressed pedestrians came and went freely through the tranquil colors of the dining area. Our small, covered table was decorated with eloquent napkins and ornate dining ware.

I sipped from my now temperate coffee. “I thought he was going to steal my food again…”
Ann glanced quizzically at me. “He’s been doing that?”

“Hey!” Ryuji’s face adopted a somber expression, “I said I was sorry, didn’t I?”

Ann returned her attention to Ryuji. “I’m kinda worried about you now. Have you been taking care of yourself?” Ann inquired.


“You have eaten a lot these past few days,” I commented.

“Hah! Think so?” Ryuji replied with a smile, “I guess it’s cause of all this excitement with us getting’ the Phantom Thieves back together!”


“Ah, c’mom,” Ryuji pleaded, “It’s not like anyone here can understand me anyway.”

Ann frowned and glared sharply at Ryuji. “If Phillip were here, he certainly could.”

“Well, he ain’t,” Ryuji continued, “So lay off for a minute and relax, would ya?”

Ann sighed, flipping her hair back. “You never change, Ryuji.”

Ryuji leaned in his chair and placed his hand behind his head. “Sure I do,” he insisted, “Just the other day, we were talkin’ about how I changed my hair.”

Ann snorted, glancing at Ryuji’s streaked hairstyle. “You just did that to be lazy,” she replied, “I remember you complaining about how much work it was going to be to re-dye it.”

“Well, I’m sorry,” Ryuji retorted, “My hair doesn’t just pop out of my pillow all pristine and perfect like yours.” A childlike, mocking tone distorted Ryuji’s voice.

Ann sighed, glancing at me. “He’s still totally clueless, huh?” She smiled timidly.

I scratched the back of my neck. “Speaking of clues, we still don’t have any idea where Kamoshida is.”

“Hey!” Ryuji spat, “Ya don’t need to go blabbin’ to her.”

“Oh, come on,” Ann moaned, “Don’t lie to me about the Kamoshida case. I know you guys aren’t that stupid. You’ve gotta have a better reason for coming here.”

“I dunno, Lady Ann.” Morgana pipped up from the seat next to me, “I think these two have lost their intelligence since they graduated.”

“How can you be so calm about this!?” Ryuji shouted, “This is effin’ Kamoshida we’re talkin’ about!” He hit the table hard, causing the tower of plates to jiggle.

Morgana glanced nervously around the table. “Uh, I’m gonna go… take a walk…” I glanced briefly at the cat, nodding before he departed from the table.

“Ryuji,” Ann continued with a softer tone, “Normal people don’t just fly to another country on a whim to search for an escaped convict.”
“Uh, hello,” Ryuji waved as he continued his snarky reply, “We ain’t normal people; we’re the effin’ Phantom Thieves!” He glared bitterly at Ann.

“Ugh, this again?” Ann soberly asked, “That time is over. We can’t just do what we want anymore.” The light in Ann’s eyes wavered, imploring Ryuji’s better senses.

“Tch,” Ryuji caught himself before saying something regretful. He shook his head as he got up from his chair. “Excuse me. I need to make a trip to the bathroom.” He had his fists clenched tightly as he turned swiftly from our table.

Ann rubbed her face as she sighed loudly. I set my cold coffee aside; this discussion obviously had a more significant nuance than I had initially interpreted. I folded my hands while Ann flicked absentmindedly at her teacup. Every breath from Ann resembled a sorrowful sigh. My expression soured slightly at the thought of this conflict.

Ann suddenly spoke though her demeanor did not shift. “Do you ever think about it? About what it would be like… if we were still Phantom Thieves?” The curiosity in her voice was sincere.

I thought briefly before responding. “Every day.”

Ann quietly laughed. “You too, huh.” She circled the rim of her teacup with her finger. “I thought you might’ve been different.”

We sat in silence for a moment. I wasn’t sure how to respond to her unusual apprehension. Eventually, I resolved myself and told her something I had kept secret for a long time. “That god,” I began, “he offered me a deal.”

Ann’s eyes suddenly widened as she realized what I was saying. “W-What?” Her finger paused on the edge of her cup.

“He promised that I could continue the Phantom Thieves, that people would need us, that we would be hailed as the heroes we truly were.” My hands tightened as I spoke.

Ann shook her head as she laughed dryly. She continued circling her cup and said, “I bet he was just lying to you.”

“No,” I responded calmly, “I knew he wasn’t.” Ann turned her head to me again, finally pushing her cup aside. “I knew he wasn’t because he was afraid. I could feel it. He was terrified of the Phantom Thieves.” I cleared my throat as a bead of sweat rolled off my forehead. “I turned him down of course. I killed the Phantom Thieves, so we could be free.” Dumbfounded, Ann blinked at me. I turned to her with an uncomfortable feeling in my gut. “Think you would’ve made the same choice?”

Ann stared for a minute longer. “I…” she started. She looked at the table in shame, a redness flushing her cheeks. “I don’t know.” I could see a bit of moisture in the corners of her eyes.

“Hm…” I toyed with my own cup as I somberly contemplated the past.

Ann was quick to ask another question. “Y-you don’t think Ryuji would’ve…” She glanced at me. Her face was a stark contrast of pale white and burning red.

I laughed, a smile returning to my face. “No, he would’ve slapped that demon before he even finished talking.”

Ann chuckled. “Yeah,” she quietly replied, “You’re right.” She gently wiped her eyes. “He’s always
fighting for something. I guess he never stopped.”

“I won’t either.”

Ann smiled at me though her eyes were nearly closed. Her tears had dried, but I could still feel her suppressing a private dissatisfaction. “You ever regret leaving? Leaving Tokyo, I mean…”


“Oh,” Ann replied, “Hehe, i-it’s not important. I-I was just wondering. That’s all.” She spoke quickly.

“Mhm,” I nodded, “I see your acting hasn’t improved.”

Her earlier paleness gave way to a full-fledged crimson. She giggled. “I can’t hide anything from you, can I?”

“Yo!” an energetic voice called our attention. Ryuji plopped into his seat beside us. “Ah, I feel much better now.” He smiled cordially.

“Th-that was quick,” Ann stammered.

Ryuji gave Ann a serious expression. “Hey, when ya gotta go, ya gotta go.”

Ann cringed with disgust. “Ugh, gross…”

“Anyways,” Ryuji slouched in his chair, “We should talk about our plans for this week since we’re not gonna be doin’ anything regarding Kamoshida.”

Ann returned to her usual, cheery state. “If you guys are planning on sticking around for a few days, you should make time to come to my fashion show! I can get you free tickets after all.”

Ryuji sighed. “I hope they’ve got a few other hot girls in the show. Otherwise, there won’t be much to look at.”

Ann’s smiled faded, and she laughed nervously. “I’m not sure if that was a compliment or an insult.”

I absently swirled my melancholy drink. “I’m sure either way, it’ll be breathtaking.”
Show Stoppers

Chapter Summary

Though little progress has been made in the hunt for Kamoshida, our heroes take a break to visit Ann's fashion show. However, the lurking dangers of reality will soon catch our protagonists unprepared. The eyes of evil are set upon the Phantom Thieves.

“Ugh! I’m so bored!” Ryuji cried, “Can’t they let us in already?” Ryuji tilted his head backward in exasperation. He tapped his foot rapidly against the stone steps.

“Quiet down!” Morgana snapped from my bag, “You could at least pretend to be dignified. This isn’t exactly an informal occasion after all.”

I adjusted the cuffs on my suit. Ann had graciously provided us with formal wear to match the attire of this fashion show. Apparently, it was quite easy for her to rent a tuxedo or two. My own suit was typical, pertaining of a black jacket and a white undershirt, although I also had a red handkerchief peeking from my jacket pocket.

Obtaining the clothing had been simple, but wearing the complex suits was another ordeal especially for Ryuji. Online tutorials could only provide so much information. Morgana had been helpful enough, providing additional details on our instructions as needed. However, Ryuji seemed to naturally shirk such regulation. Even now, he failed to be seen in full attire. His jacket hung lazily over his shoulder. Though as I glanced at him, I realized he wore the other components excellently. His golden vest complemented his white undershirt well. Despite his nonchalant demeanor, he didn’t appear lazily thrown together whatsoever. I wondered if Ann had planned this fortuitous contingency.

“Still,” Ryuji said, looking at me, “Ain’t it boring just standing here?” We were standing outside the venue awaiting entry with other attendees.

“Can’t you do something to entertain yourself?” Mona wined.

“I would,” Ryuji retorted, “if somebody hadn’t wrecked my phone.” He glared at my bag.

I calmly intercepted Ryuji’s response. “He said he was sorry.”

Ryuji sighed. “Seriously. I go outta my way to come up with a half decent plan and I still get screwed.”

I gently patted his shoulder. “One day.”

“I was doubting that you two would show.” Phillip clopped down the stonework beside us. “Shouldn’t the likes of you be off propagating some idealistic vigilantism?” He stared at us with mocking indifference.

Ryuji’s face turned sour upon seeing the adversarial man. “Tch, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you look like a thug,” a chipper Morgana added.
Phillip sighed, and his face sagged. “You brought your cat?”

I returned a tame shrug.

“Fine, just don’t let anyone see it…” Phillip said, shaking his head.

Ryuji grimaced while Phillip remained in our presence. “You just here to insult us or what?”

“Well, I was here to escort you inside,” Phillip smoothly responded, “But I could leave you here to wait if you like.” He rubbed his fingers as he feigned checking his nails.

I snickered. “Aw, you do care.” Phillip glared at me.

“As if,” Ryuji scoffed, “He’s just Ann’s dog. Bet she sent him to get us.”

Phillip blinked at Ryuji without a trace of acknowledgment. “Miss Takamaki usually gets what she wants. If you’d like me to tell her that you didn’t want to see her then…”

“No!” Ryuji gasped, “Ugh, just take us in.”

Phillip chuckled as a grin crossed his face. “Follow me then.”

Although we had seen the inside of the auditorium recently, the atmosphere of the building had changed significantly. The intensity of a thousand expectant hearts lingered just beyond the curtains, yet the crowd had a bizarre pretentiousness about them.

Ryuji, as usual, was the first to vocally note any odd phenomenon. “Why does it smell like smoke?”

Phillip paused as if he suddenly remembered the stench hanging in the air. “That would be the scent of our benefactors.” He shot us a concerned glance while we walked. “They may smell disgusting, but they fund these events, and they’ve learned to keep their repulsive habit outside.”

Ryuji abruptly stopped and scratched his neck. “Man, I don’t get you,” he said to Phillip, “Are you a douche to everybody or just to us?”

Phillip slightly winced. “Let’s hope you aren’t around long enough to find out.”

Ryuji growled under his breath. “God! What an ass…”

“Hey! I was wondering if you guys would show up on time.” Ann appeared from the noisy backstage area. She wore a silky, blue dress, but her attire was not yet stage ready. Nevertheless, Ann’s rose-tinted skin radiated an enrapturing liveliness, and one could not look at her without noticing her exposed legs. Once she had the opportunity to examine us, her eyes widened with intrigue. “Wow, you guys look good.”

“It took some doing,” Morgana added, “But I do think we were able to bring out their inner charm.” Pride oozed from his voice.

“Hmm,” Ann looked us over with thrill, “Those outfits I picked out really paid off.”

“Oh, yeah?” Ryuji responded with a smirk, “Think you could introduce us to some of the models?”

Ann laughed. “Please, Ryuji. These girls are only interested in one thing: money, and we both know you don’t have any.”

Ryuji sighed, downcasting his face. I came beside him to offer some encouragement. “At least when you do find someone, you know they’ll want you for your personality.” With a half-hearted shrug,
Ryuji thanked me.

Phillip interjected briefly. “Have you ever known someone who liked Ryuji for his personality?” He glanced questioningly at me.

I timidly pointed to myself. “Me,” I replied.

“Oh, that’s cute,” Phillip said as he chuckled.

“Alright, enough bickering,” Ann crossed her arms, “Phillip, please show these guys to their seats.”

“I will do that,” he replied, craning his neck.

We followed Philip into the auditorium where contrasting shadows and blinding white lights replaced the dim lighting of the backstage areas. Patrons filled row after row of seats, having little regard for the three of us traversing the aisle. Though my sight was impaired by the overbearing dichotomy of lights, my nose comprehended the extreme opulence of the people surrounding me. The acidic perfumes of the patrons mingled with the scent of refined alcohol and the lingering aroma of a rich man’s cigar. The experience was altogether enlightening and repugnant. I might’ve abandoned this journey right there were it not a friendly gesture to Ann.

Ryuji coughed. “How do you breathe in a place like this?”

Phillip returned an absent reply, “You’ll get used to it quickly.” We approached the stage, and Phillip turned to an empty row of seats. “These are your seats.” Our row was only a few seats from the front.

“Wow,” Ryuji added with a hint of sarcasm, “Ann went all out for us. Didn’t realize she liked us so much.”

“You should give Lady Ann more credit,” Morgana said, “She’s a lot more than your teammate you know.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ryuji said, plopping down in a seat, “She’s a nag too.”

Morgana chuckled from my bag as I sat next to Ryuji. “You sure like to mock her, but if I recall, you weren’t so hostile when you thought Lady Ann was in danger.” I recalled Ryuji’s previous panic when he had believed Ann to be targeted by Kamoshida.

Phillip spoke briefly before departing. “Enjoy the show.”

“I was riled up cause of Kamoshida,” Ryuji explained, “Ain’t nothin’ weird about that.”

“Hmph,” Mona huffed, “He’d never admit it, but deep down I bet he cares for Lady Ann like a sister.”

“The hell gives you that idea?” Ryuji exclaimed.

“They do seem to have reserved feelings for each other,” I added.

“Ah, not you too!” Ryuji interjected, “You should know better than to listen to that cat!”

“Hehe,” Morgana snickered, “Now he’s all flustered.”

“Gah, you guys aren’t makin’ any damn sense!” Ryuji cried.
I just smiled at my friend. “Let’s just watch the show.”

A few minutes passed before the event began. The stage was glowing with light, yet I could glimpse indistinct faces throughout the darkness. Models began debuting the trendiest new styles. Beautiful men and women were on display, but some of the clothes were more shocking than enamoring. Eyes followed each item as it came down the runway. The shrouded heads throughout the auditorium moved in unsettling unison. The piercing gazes of the mirror-like pupils created a compounding pressure on the stage. I doubted I could perform as a model; I much preferred the shadows.

As the show progressed, Ryuji became increasingly uninterested. The bizarre fashion was becoming less and less attractive. Thankfully, the show had little content remaining. The star model, however, was yet to make an appearance. I could feel a palpable unease in the room, matching Ryuji’s own discomfort, but I also sensed that tension swiftly vanishing once Ann came confidently onto the runway.

Ryuji sat up in his seat, mumbling, “It’s about time…” Morgana also released a small gasp.

Personally, I’m embarrassed to admit I cannot recall an accurate description of what Ann was wearing. My mind reeled as I experienced an esoteric convergence. I could see the prestigious men throughout the room clearly. Each patron had a twinkling insanity etched on his face, and from each head, I glimpsed a different hypnotizing gateway to a distinct, mangled fortress filled with vile apparitions. The shadowy darkness of the auditorium had condensed into a perpetually enfolding sludge which supported these mad observers in their seats. The gaping maws of a thousand Palaces stretched around the room in every direction, yet I was serenely calm amidst this nightmarish vision.

On stage, Ann gleamed as all the light of the room bent toward her. Flashes of crimson weave danced through my memory with passion and grace. She was smiling. That’s all I can remember. I’m not sure if that’s normal for a model in a fashion show, but she was beaming. That fiery spirit broke through every deceptive machination surrounding us.

“Hmm, this reminds me,” Ryuji suddenly spoke up, breaking my daze. He turned to me with a questioning gaze. I saw the transparent form of an upper jaw smeared over his puzzled face. “Huh? You alright?”

I must have been slightly pale after that otherworldly experience. I gripped my head before getting up from my seat. “I… I don’t know.” I stepped out into the aisle.

“Woah! Dude,” Ryuji whispered.

I glanced back and forth. The room was completely mundane, but I still grasped the lingering presence of my vision. I kept walking. The glaring lights of the stage behind me, I pressed through the lanes of viewers into the secluded halls. Despite my distance from the crowds, the escape seemed to grow further and further away. I reached for the door, and the metal handle contorted away from me. The framework of the entire building groaned with displeasure until my hand finally contacted the doorway.

As I burst outside, I collapsed. My lungs expanded rapidly to allow for a full breath of fresh air. Sweat slicked my face, but I could only feel the drum-like pounding in my head.

Morgana suddenly appeared next to me. I guess I had unconsciously carried my bag outside in my stupor. “H-heyy,” he said, “What’s wrong?”

I gasped for air, my body trembling. “I can sense… something.”
Morgana sat on the sidewalk. “Huh?”

I forced my body upward only to fall back against the wall. I curled my knees inward, resting my head on the stonework. “I just need a minute. I’ll be fine. You should enjoy the show while you can.”

Morgana sighed and then Ryuji appeared from the doorway. “Dude? You okay? You ran outta there kinda quick.” He crouched down beside me. “Ya eat somethin’ nasty?”

I shook my head which only increased my pain. “Nah,” I replied, “I’ll tell you later.”

“C’mon, man,” Ryuji continued, “If it’s that bad, at least lemme take ya back to the hotel.” As I glanced at my friend through my glazed eyes, I saw Ryuji’s uncharacteristically concerned face. I strained to make a faintly recognizable nod. “Alright, here,” Ryuji said, extending his arm, “I’ll carry ya.”

I warped my limp arm around Ryuji and made the uncomfortable effort to stand up. With Ryuji’s assistance, I kept off the ground, but my body refused to cooperate further. My limbs ached, and fatigue possessed my mind. Even prolonged excursions through the metaverse did not have such a severe effect on my stamina.

Ryuji caught my reluctant body with his other hand. “Woah!” he shouted, “This is bad.” He turned to Mona, who paced frantically on the concrete. “Mona, could you tell Ann what’s happened? We may need a doctor.”

Morgana glanced between us nervously. “R-right…”

The show had finally concluded. The halls flooded with excess viewers as the models and staff gathered backstage. Shouting voices and clamorous feet joined the sounds of deconstruction. Bodies blurred into formless trains as legs plodded past one another. This melding of people reminded Morgana of the morning commute in Tokyo.

Nevertheless, Morgana did not feel placid enough for idle observation. He slipped energetically between shin and calf, evoking several shrieks from some unwitting ladies. The preoccupied stage crew paid little heed to the oil black feline, but the ditsy models promptly spied the alien creature.

The cat moved like black fire, bounding through shafts of light. Morgana was not concerned with a few ignorant civilians. He walked the walls like a shadow and approached Ann’s dressing room without hesitation. Boxes of stage equipment lined the hall, so Morgana utilized them. He climbed above the doors and prepared to strike. Mona found an excellent vantage point on a box overlooking the entrance to Ann’s room. He readied to leap onto the door handle, but a voice within caused him to pause.

“That was quite a performance you put on,” an incongruous voice stated.

“Hmm?” Morgana leaned onto the window of the door. Inside, he could see Ann sitting in front of a mirror while the obscured man sat on the opposite end of the room just out of Morgana’s sight.

“Honestly, I’m a bit embarrassed to admit it, but I’m a very big fan of yours,” the man continued. Ann politely giggled as she adjusted a pin in her hair. “I get that a lot.”

“I’d imagine so,” the man responded, “Your popularity in the West is quite astounding. Your PR manager seems to be doing an excellent job.”
Ann smiled. “He’s great! Isn’t he?”

“Yes,” the man chuckled, “Although I think your performances, like the one tonight, have played no small part in that. I’m sure practically everyone in the room could feel that fiery passion you exude. It’s an exhilarating experience really. Who could possibly resist?”

“Oh, you’re flattering me,” Ann shook her head.

“Hardly. I’m no fashion expert, but I know a unique masterpiece like yourself when I see one.”

“Do you see such masterpieces often?” Ann asked.

“Well, it’s my job to find them. Then again, there are only so many opportunities for such people.”

“Speaking of opportunities…” Ann turned around to face the man. “Um, Phillip mentioned you had a modeling offer for me.”

“Ah, right to the point I see,” the man noted cheerily, “Well, it’s not exactly a modeling opportunity, but I’d hate to belabor specifics on our first meeting. I simply came to introduce myself and deliver the information.”

“Oh, uh…” Ann stuttered as the man stood up, placed something on the table, and approached the door. With the man’s back to the door, Morgana could not clearly see him.

“I’ll leave this here for your discretion,” the man said, “I’m sure you’ll find the offer interesting.”


The man stepped to the door, and Morgana was forced to withdraw. “Apologies for the brevity of my visit, but business demands that I keep my schedule tight.”

“Well, alright,” a befuddled Ann replied.

“Please, be sure to take my offer into consideration. We could use a panther of the stage like yourself.” As the door creaked open, Morgana momentarily saw Ann’s awed face. “A pleasure meeting you, Miss Takamaki. Goodbye.” The man briskly parted from the doorway and merged with the flowing stream of crew members, disappearing from sight.

Morgana easily entered through the opened door. Ann barely noticed him, straining to process the man’s interactions. “That man…” Ann mumbled, “He couldn’t…” Ann suddenly stood up and went to the side table. She looked commandingly at the item the man had left: a neatly folded envelope. Ann reluctantly took the paper in her hands. The envelope fit nicely between her fingers like the parcel had expected to be handled. Ann closed her eyes.

“Did you know him?” Morgana asked, “I didn’t get a good look at him.”

Ann glanced down at her feline friend, her face a contorted mix of irritation and worry. “No, Phillip only just introduced us today. I believe he said his name was Sam something…” She tapped her lips.

Mona shook his head. “This is bad. It’s gotta be the guy we met the other day.”

“Huh?” Ann squealed, “You’ve met that guy before?”

Morgana grunted. “Ugh, we don’t have time. We have to get to the hotel!” He swiveled around and darted out of the room as fast as he had entered.
“H-hey! Mona!” Ann cried, “Ugh! Dammit! Why doesn’t anybody listen!?”

Ryuji thrust a cup of lukewarm water into my face. “Dude, ya gotta drink! Fluids’ll help ya fight this thing!” Waves sloshed over the edges of the cup, dripping into my lap as I sat on the bed.

I gently pushed Ryuji’s hand away. “I’m fine, Ryuji. It’s passed now.” I searched my body for any lingering pains, and, finding none, I was satisfied to close the issue.

Ryuji clutched the cup tightly as a cold grimace appeared on his face. “Like hell you are! You couldn’t walk a minute ago; quit actin’ so tough!”

A knock on our door quickly ended Ryuji’s rebuke. He growled and pointed at me. “Don’t you move from that spot!” He stomped to the door, obviously irked by my snide attitude.

A quiet chuckle escaped my lips. “Where am I supposed to go?” I smiled, adjusting the glasses on my face.

Ryuji opened the door of our room revealing Ann and Morgana waiting outside. Ann had changed into some casual clothing. As I glanced to the doorway, I noted that Ann’s face had an irritation to match Ryuji’s own. Their piercing gazes made me flinch. “Hey,” Ann started, “What’s going on? Morgana nearly dragged me out of the theater to get me here. I’m technically still supposed to be there, but he said it was some sort of emergency.”

“Yeah,” Ryuji scratched his neck, “This guy nearly fainted during the show.” He pointed lazily to me, and I smiled timidly.

“W-what!?” Ann stammered. She pushed past Ryuji and came alongside me, glaring at my nonchalant posture. “Ugh! This better not be a joke!”

I waved my hand through the air. “It’s nothing to worry about. I’m fine now.” I attempted to display a reassuring smile, but Ann’s convicting eyes broke my composure.

“So, you’re gonna lie to me, huh?” Ann said placing her hands on her hips. “God, why are boys so stupid!?”

While Ann vented her frustrations, Morgana jumped onto the bed beside me. “He acts so tough even though he’s clearly in pain. Hmm, it seems that my selfless attitude has influenced his own.”

“What!” Ryuji cried, “That ain’t it, ya narcissistic cat! He’s just bein’ a stubborn fool like always.” He scowled at the little feline.

“So, what’s actually wrong with him?” Ann inquired, her composure turning to intrigue.

“Eh, I dunno,” Ryuji replied, “He zonked out in the middle of your run, and then I found him collapsed on the walkway outside.” He cocked his head at me.

“Huh.” I could almost see a smile ripping through Ann’s worried composure. “Could it be jet lag? Has he been sleeping enough?”

Mona shook his head. “I made sure these two got plenty of sleep.”

Ryuji crossed his arms. “Ya know, you could let us cut loose a little on this trip.” He glared at Morgana.

“Guys,” I interjected, “It’s okay. I’m fine for now, but I have to tell you what happened. I… I saw
something.”

Morgana turned his head. “You said something like that earlier.”

“Wait,” Ann said, “What did you see?”

“I know I couldn’t see anything in that dark theater except for Ann’s gaudy dress,” Ryuji added.

“H-hey!” Ann squealed. She slapped his shoulder.

Ryuji flinched. “Jeez, sorry! I just happen to prefer a nice yukata to all this flashy Western crap.”

Morgana laughed. “As if. Ryuji would like any woman so long as she’s wearing as little as possible.”

Ryuji raised his fist. “Monaaa!” he growled.

“Hey!” I snapped, “Cut that out and listen for a second.” The others suddenly paused their feud to attentively hear my thoughts. “I was in the theater, and I saw… shadows… all around me.”

“Shadows?” Ann asked, her eyes widening, “You mean like Metaverse shadows?”

I nodded. “It was like a thousand Palaces were opening up in front of me.” I glanced to my friends’ faces. Ann was mildly surprised; Ryuji was unsettled, and Morgana stared vacantly into the distance.

“This is troubling,” Morgana remarked, his face humorless.

“You know something about this Mona?” Ryuji asked.

Morgana’s face brightened as he turned to face Ryuji. “Nope. I don’t have a clue what’s going on,” he calmly replied.

“What!?” Ryuji shouted, “Aren’t you supposed to be the expert on this stuff!?”

“Hmph,” Morgana huffed, turning his back to Ryuji, “Well, at least I know a few things, unlike somebody I know.”

“Ha-Ha,” a dry, lifeless laugh escaped Ryuji’s lips, “We’ll see who’s got the upper hand when I take your tuna away from you.”

Morgana smiled arrogantly at our friend. “You’d better come prepared then. I’ll snatch that tuna up before you get the chance!”

Ryuji snickered. “Mona, look who you’re talkin’ to! I’m too fast for eyes.” He smiled condescendingly.

Ann sighed. “Like I said, boys are stupid.” She glanced at me as the other two continued their boasting. “Hey, since we’re talking about the Metaverse, I should mention this weird guy contacted me today, and I think he knows I’m a Phantom Thief.”

“Oh, woah!” Ryuji’s eyes suddenly widened, “What if it was Kamoshida, but he got plastic surgery to change his face and stuff!?”

Morgana groaned. “Don’t listen to him. I’m already pretty sure of who it is.”

“So, you do know,” Ann said.
“Well, yeah,” Mona continued, “This guy could’ve figured it out too.” He pointed to me. “Ann got a letter and everything, so naturally there was only one candidate on my mind.”

I stroked my face. “Samuel Zimmerman, the American…”

“Ain’t that the guy who offered you that job back in Shibuya?” Ryuji asked. I nodded.

“Ugh, this is too weird!” Ann interjected. She crossed her arms and shifted her feet. “You guys better have a plan to deal with this.” A wavering glare passed over Ryuji and myself.

Ryuji smiled. “Does that mean you’re back with the Thieves!?” He gleamed with excitement.

Ann sighed. “Just because we’re teaming up doesn’t mean we’re the Phantom Thieves again.” A smile briefly crossed my face as I noted Ann’s reluctant dismissal.

“Aw hell yeah!” Ryuji shouted, thrusting a fist upward, “Whoever these guys are, they don’t stand a chance against us!” Ann stifled a laugh, hiding a fleeting smile beneath her hand.

Morgana levied a dispassionate gaze on Ryuji. “That’s great, but we still don’t have any idea what to do about Kamoshida, or Sam, or these visions.”

Ryuji rubbed his head vigorously. “Eh, well… I got a plan.”

Morgana’s eyes widened. “You have a plan?”

“Uh, yeah,” Ryuji meandered through his words, “Think about it. If this Samuel guy knows about the Metaverse, then that’s the connection.”

“Connection?” Ann asked, “Are you saying Kamoshida and Sam are somehow involved together?”

“C’mon, this is too much of a coincidence,” Ryuji pleaded, “We come here lookin’ for the first target of the Phantom Thieves; Samuel tracks you here, and our boy starts havin’ hallucinations of the Metaverse!”

“I dunno…” Ann said.

“He has a point,” I said.

“But how does knowing these things are connected help us?” Ann continued, “The Metaverse is gone, and I doubt Samuel is just going to tell us where Kamoshida is hiding.”

“That’s why we gotta spy on him,” Ryuji stated, “If he knows something, then we’ve gotta find out.”

Mona chuckled. “I was expecting you to say we’d beat the information out of him.”

“Don’t get ahead of me,” Ryuji added, “Once we see the shit this guy’s done, then we can wail on him.”

Ann glanced nervously at Ryuji. “But what if he hasn’t done anything wrong?”

“Pfft, of course he’s done something wrong,” Ryuji insisted.

Mona paced around the bed. “Well, regardless, if this guy’s investigating the Metaverse, that’s cause enough for suspicion.”

“Alright,” Ryuji cheered, “Then if we’re in agreement, we should start diggin’ up any information
we can on this guy.”

Mona nodded. “This is our responsibility.”

I nodded as well. “I’m with you.”

Ann sighed. “I don’t know how I feel about spying on someone like this.”

“Did you have a better plan?” I asked.

Ann closed her eyes and shook her head rapidly. “Nope! Just this one.” We all shared a friendly glance, fortifying our resolve.

“Alright, it’s decided,” Ryuji exuded great joy in his words, “So, how do we wanna spy on this guy?”

“Well,” Morgana began, “Ann has an invitation from Sam.” We glanced at Ann, but her brow furrowed.

“Nuh-uh! No way!” Ann frantically cried, “There’s no way you guys are using me as the bait AGAIN!”

I chuckled. “That’s alright,” I replied, “I have a better idea anyway.”
Finding the Thief

Chapter Summary

Our heroes solicit the help of Futaba Sakura to track the suspicious American businessman, Samuel Zimmerman. With time to burn, the team refocuses their energy on reawakening the bonds that connected them.

Chapter Notes

Dear readers,

Thanks so much for your patience. It has been a long slough to get through this chapter, but I am excited for what comes next. I have lots of plans for this series, but I need your support to keep it going. Anyways, I hope you enjoy, and if you did, please, let me know!

“Here’s the laptop.” Ann handed me her personal device before bouncing onto the bed beside me. Ryuji and I had already changed into our casual clothing.

Ryuji, who sat on my other side, quickly brought up his concerns. “Hey, is this gonna work? Ain’t it getting’ kinda late over there? Think she’ll even be awake?”

I opened the laptop and prepared to start a video call. “Let’s hope so.”

Morgana slipped between Ann and me. “To think a student would be up so late… there’s no way I’d let you be so irresponsible.” The cat glanced at me, but I ignored his grumbling.

Ann cocked her head at us. “But… hasn’t Futaba been more of a morning person?”

“Well,” Ryuji responded, “Her schedule’s been pretty normal with goin’ to school.” He grinned. “Although we have been getting some pretty late nights when we start gamin’.”

Ann sighed as her eyelids fell. “It’s a wonder that Futaba can keep up her grades at school with you influencing her.” A cheeky smile flashed across her face.

“Why’s everything gotta be my fault?” Ryuji moaned, “She plays way more games than I do.”

Morgana glanced at Ryuji. “It’s because you make yourself an easy target by displaying your faults openly.”

Ryuji threw himself backward onto the bed. “At least I don’t pretend like I don’t got any faults.”

The cat swiveled around to glare at Ryuji. “You trying to say something, punk?”

Ryuji sat up. “As a matter of fact…” He stroked his chin.
Ann groaned, her voice filled with agitation. “Can’t you guys go thirty seconds without fighting?”

Ryuji scowled in confusion. “Huh? We ain’t fightin’. This is just what bros do.”

“That’s right,” Mona added, “What kind of mentor would I be if I didn’t probe my team’s weaknesses?”

Ann gave me a pleading look. “Hey, you think they’re fighting too, right?”

I turned, brushing some disheveled hair from my brow. “Honestly, I stopped paying attention to them shortly after we landed.”

“Heheh,” Ryuji chuckled, “He just doesn’t wanna get involved because we know all his little secrets.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said as I faced Ryuji. All emotion suddenly left my voice. “Your insults are simply devastating to my ego.”

Ryuji’s face blanked as he attempted to process my words. “Stop tryin’ to act all cool. That shit don’t work on me.”

“Ryuji does have a certain resilience to assaults on his composure,” Morgana commented.

“That’s because Ryuji doesn’t possess one iota of coolness in his body,” I continued, my gaze resting steadily on my ill-prepared friend.

“Dude!” Ryuji cried.

Ann released a disturbingly bullish laugh. “Why is that the perfect summary of Ryuji?”

Ryuji’s face sagged. “You too?” he quietly asked, “I’ll have to pay you back for this.”

A musical chime emanating from the computer interposed our conversation. “The call is being answered,” I announced.

Ann’s face brightened. “She’s really awake?”

“Hey, hold the laptop out!” Mona prodded, “The camera needs to get us all.” He pawed my arm energetically.

I lifted the computer from my lap, and my friends leaned towards me. We stared expectantly at the black window for ages, but nothing happened. “Is it supposed to take this long?” Ryuji chimed.

“Type something in the chat,” Ann suggested, “Maybe it’s a bad connection.”

I lazily moused over to the text window and began typing.

> Hello?

Another moment passed before we received a response.

> OwO
> I see youuuu…

“Yep. That’s Futaba,” Ryuji said.
“She can see us,” Ann added, “but we can’t see her.”

I continued typing.

> We can’t see you.

A response came quickly.

> Uh… is this thing working?
> Hold on a minute.

“Looks like even Futaba has trouble with technology from time to time,” Morgana noted.

>I heard that, Mona

“W-well, I didn’t mean it in a bad way…” he sputtered.

> :P
> Got u

Morgana hung his head low.

“I see Mona has been neglecting his self-confidence stat,” Futaba’s snide voice resonated through the laptop. Ann, Ryuji, and I inched forward, awaiting our friend’s image to appear on the screen. The black pixels split to reveal a cheery face wrapped in an orange cloak of hair. Secondly, I noticed that Futaba was suspended from the ceiling, or rather she was upside down.

“Huh?” Ryuji exclaimed, “You’re upside down!”

“Wha?” Light glided through Futaba’s expanding eyes. “Oops! Gimme one second…” She ducked her head before disappearing from the screen.

“She’s gone again,” Ann exclaimed.

“At least we know she’s awake,” Ryuji added.

The screen was dark momentarily before Futaba returned in the proper orientation. She grinned as she pressed her glasses into place. “There we go! I was wondering when I was gonna see you guys again.” The room behind her was the typical discombobulated mess of posters, action figures, and other nerdy debris.

I couldn’t withhold a smile. “It’s good to see you.”

Ann leaned in front of me. “Sorry we called so late. We were wondering if you’d even be awake.”

Morgana popped up to the screen. “You’d better be studying. I won’t forgive you if you’ve been slacking.”

“Hush, kitty,” Futaba snapped, “Actually, I was busy putting Ryuji’s high score into the scoreboard graveyard, hehe.” She flashed a mischievous grin, and her glasses caught the light of the screen.

“No way!” Ryuji shouted, butting into frame, “I spent ten hours getting’ that score! There’s no way you could’ve buried it so fast.”

Futaba scoffed. “Think again, amateur. You’re dealing with a bonafide OG grandmaster here.”
“Hmph,” Ryuji responded, “Think that’ll matter when I beat your score again?”

Futaba frowned. “It ain’t happenin’ ya dummy.” She jutted her tongue outwards. Ryuji thrust out his own tongue, releasing a childish hoot in conjunction.

Ann growled. “Would you two stop that!? Why is everyone always fighting with Ryuji!?”

Futaba pointed a finger at Ann. “You stay out of this, mom!” she retorted.

Ann’s face ignited like a firework. “M-mom!?”

“Yeah, mom,” Ryuji joined in as he leaned over me, “Quit naggin’ us kids.”

Ann reeled. “I… I’m not a mom!” Mortified, she cradled her face.

Ryuji laughed. “Haha, she totally is the mom type!” Futaba and Ryuji continued giggling while I shook my head.

Ann curled her legs inward, placing her head between her knees. Somberly she said, “I’m not a nagging mom, am I?”

Morgana promptly reassured her. “Of course not, Lady Ann. These brutes just can’t understand your kindness.”

“I dunno about that,” Ryuji said with a smirk, “I’d say she’s one sack lunch away from being the unofficial mother of the Phantom Thieves.” He snickered, and Ann only buried her raspberry-colored face further into her hands. “Hey,” Ryuji hit my arm, “You agree right?”

I glanced from Ryuji’s smiling face to Ann. Through her slender, ivory fingers, I saw blazing puffs of reddened flesh. Her transient, baby blue eyes pleaded momentarily for my aid before she sighed and braced for my inevitable response. A dastardly smile broke my thoughtful composure. My lips parted.

“I’d call her mommy.”

The crimson of Ann’s face was replaced by the white of her eyes. “W-what!?” she shouted, “What the hell’s that supposed to mean!?”

“Oooo, kinky,” Futaba said, giggling.

“Haha, dude…” Ryuji covered his eyes as he convulsed with laughter, “That’s not what I… haha… meant…”

“C-can we just forget about this?” Ann squealed.

Morgana sighed heavily. “You guys seriously disappoint me sometimes.” He clambered onto my lap and positioned himself in center frame. “Futaba, we’ve got a serious request for you. This is Phantom Thief business too, so no more joking around.”

Futaba chuckled, peering at us from behind her glasses. “Oh, lighten up Mona. Let’s not forget, I was a professional hacker long before you guys had stolen any hearts.”

“I take it you’re up to the task then?” Mona asked.

“Hehe, I can crack any target you give me. Just give me a name, and I’ll get the Thieves all the info they need!”
“Good. The target’s name is Samuel Zimmerman,” Morgana stated, “He’s an American businessman investigating the Metaverse.”

Futaba’s fingers immediately went to work, tapping mercilessly at the keys. “Hmm, Zimmerman… sounds familiar…”

“We need ya to track him,” Ryuji added, “This guy’s already contacted both of these two, so he’s definitely got more intel than most people.” Ryuji crossed his arms and steadily spoke his next words. “We also think he might be connected to Kamoshida’s disappearance.”

“Oh… yeah,” Futaba replied without moving her eyes from the screen, “I heard about that prison escape. Did some digging, but no one seems to know where he is.”

“If we’re right,” Ryuji continued, “this guy might.”

“I’ll see what I can find,” Futaba said, “I’ll try and infect this guy’s phone with a virus too. That way, I can track him easily.” Happy to flex her prowess, she grinned. “It may take a few days though.”

“That’s fine,” Ryuji added, “Ann’s paying for our hotel room, so we can afford to stay awhile.”

Ann stoked a heated glare for the brazen Ryuji. “You guys owe me big time for this.”

Futaba snickered. She folded her hands on her desk and allowed the glow from the screen to fully overtake her eyes. “Speaking of ‘owing’, now’s a good time to discuss what you’re bringing me back from France.”

“Let me guess. Is it a game?” Morgana asked.

“Wait,” Ann interjected, “How’d she even know we were in France?” Ryuji and I glanced at her, but neither of us had a definitive answer.

“Look who you’re talking to,” Futaba answered with a wink.

Ryuji winced. “I’m not sure if I should be amazed or creeped out…”

I added, “Hope you’ve cleared your search history Ryuji.”

Ann, who was still considerably flustered, shrieked as a realization hit her. “She’s been looking at our personal information!?”

“Ah, shit…” Ryuji stammered.

I glanced at my friends. “What are you so worried about?”

Ann’s wavering gaze accompanied her rising voice. “My phone’s got private information on it!”

A chilling snicker resounded from the laptop. “Don’t worry Ann. Your… information… is safe with me.”

Ann produced a nervous hum. “That doesn’t make me feel any damn better!” she shouted.

“C-calm down, Lady Ann,” Morgana interjected.

“Jeez, it’s not that big a deal,” Ryuji said as he shook his head.

I idly fiddled with my glasses, a brief sigh escaping my mouth. “About your souvenir… I’ll bring
you something nice, alright?”

“Hmm…” Futaba responded with overly grave consideration, “Alright, I’m entrusting this task to you. Don’t let me down, okay?”

I nodded. “After this business is all done, we should hang out. This wouldn’t be a reunion without our navigator.”

A genuine smile crossed Futaba’s face. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Despite our penchant for banter, the five of us continued our discussion with some light chit-chat. The conversation was cut short, however, when another voice reverberated through the laptop. “Futaba!” a gruff voice called from outside Futaba’s room, “Are you still up?”

“Oh oh…” Futaba’s face paled, “I gotta go. I’ll talk to you guys later.”

Startled, I replied with a simple, “Bye.”

“We’re counting on you,” Morgana added.

Ann and Ryuji also made to reply, but Sojiro’s commanding voice echoed once more. “Seriously, how many times do I have to…”

The screen went dark as the connection closed. “That was quick,” Ryuji said.

We all briefly paused. I closed the laptop since we had finished using it. “Well, that’s that.”

“I hope Futaba can find some information,” Ann said, “It’s good knowing she’s on top of the issue though.” She smiled, obviously relieved of her earlier concerns.

Ryuji sprawled out on the bed. “Still, she said it would take a few days at least.” He sighed. “Ugh, it’ll be tough waitin’ that long.”

Morgana scoffed. “Weren’t you just complaining that you needed some time to “cut loose” on this trip?”

“Eh, that’s different,” Ryuji replied, “It’s like, doin’ Phantom Thief stuff is the only time I can be my true self…” Ryuji sat up and sighed. “And I haven’t been my true self in a long ass time.”

“Jeez,” Ann said, “You make your life sound so depressing.”

“Hey,” Ryuji replied, “If you think being a failed student without a future is exciting, I’d be happy to give you my life.”

“Oh, no thanks,” Ann said, mustering a derisive scoff.

Morgana hung his head. “He has a point.” I glanced down at the somber cat. “I mean, eating fish and lazing about is nice, but my talents are wasted when we’re not doing Phantom Thief missions.”

Ryuji tapped my arm. “Hey, you feel the same, huh? I know it can’t have been easy for you.”

Ryuji scuttled away from me as I contemplated my response. Despite my unbroken will, society had no desire to treat me as a normal member. My future was uncertain at best. Suddenly, I felt a chilling wind at my back. The hairs on my neck stood straight, and a momentous sense of peril overcame me. The motion to my rear alerted me to the threat. I ducked.
A soft, puffy pillow flew over me and landed with a thump. Ryuji lobbed the bedding at me, yet he hadn’t hit me. I raised my head in time to see the pillow peel from Ann’s face. The look of her furrowed brow and gritted teeth sent a worrying sensation down my spine.

Ryuji fumbled for words, “Oh shit, uh…”

Sparks flew from Ann’s mouth. “Ryujiiii!”

“Uh… uh…” Ryuji had no counter.

I heard a stifled laugh from Morgana as we both waited in deathly anticipation. Ann tightened her claws around the pillow sitting in her lap. She got up from the bed. “You’re gonna get it this time,” she hissed. She raised the pillow.

Ryuji jolted up from the bed, standing upright on the sheets. “Hey! Woah! I’m sorry! I was…” Ryuji blocked the bulleting projectile with his arms before it hit his face. “H-hey!” Ann grabbed another pillow from the bed, a malicious smile peeking through her irritated façade. Ryuji panicked. He leapt from one bed to the other before pleading for assistance. “Bro!” he shouted, “Don’t just sit there and let her wail on me!” He hesitantly grabbed a pillow from the other bed.

“Hey!” Ann cried as she shot another pillow at Ryuji’s head, “He was aiming for you. Don’t let him get away with that.”

Morgana nervously glanced between our friends from the safety of my lap. “I… I think I’ll just…” A stray pillow abruptly barreled across my legs, knocking Mona onto the covers. “That’s it,” he said, strengthening his resolve.

Ryuji lobbed a second pillow in my direction. I spun from the bed, swirling out of its trajectory. “Saw that,” I shot him a hardened gaze.

Another pillow suddenly enveloped my face as it impacted my head. The pillow fell into my hands, and my ajar glasses settled from the blow. I glanced to the other end of the room. Ann beamed at me. “Haha, I got you!” she said, giggling.

Ryuji also laughed before Morgana jumped onto his shoulder and hit him squarely with a miniature, decorative pillow. The cat descended while Ryuji recoiled. “Ack!” he said, nearly losing his balance. He shook his head before grabbing another pillow at his feet. “Alright! I’m going all out now!”

Ann gave a snide laugh. “Bring it!”

“It’s too late for apologies!” Morgana shouted, knocking another pillow my way.

I grabbed the secondary ammunition. “It’s show time.”

I awoke to the buzzing of my phone. As I turned to examine my device, I felt rough knots of carpet peel from the back of my neck. Somehow, Ann ended up staying in our room despite having a room for herself, and I ended up on the floor. I suppose that was the gentlemanly thing to do, but it still hurt like a bitch.

As my eyes adjusted to the light of my phone, I witnessed an ongoing conversation.

R> So? Any news on the hunt?
F> Ryuji! It hasn’t even been a day!
F> :[

R> What’s that got to do with it?
R> You could’ve dug up something by now.

F> Do you even know what time it is here?
R> Uh, can’t you just look on your phone?
F> _.
F> Is Makoto with you cause I need to ask her to beat your ass?

I heard Ryuji mutter, “Goddammit.”

A> lol
R> Laugh all you want, she isn’t with us.
F> That’s a shame.
R> No, eff that.
F> So where is she?
R> Dunno. Haven’t heard much from her since she went off to college.

I interjected into the conversation.

Me> I heard she transferred to a foreign school.

F> Fascinating.
A> Wow, that’s so cool. It’s just like her to be going above and beyond.
R> Yeah, yeah. Very cool. Now can we talk about the investigation?
F> oof
F> Fine.
F> I’ve only done a little digging so far, so there isn’t much to discuss.
F> I did look into Zimmerman a bit more, and he’s a lot more serious than I thought
F> Looks like he’s the owner of a large contract firm for the US government. Basically, he designs
weapons and equipment for their military

R> And this guy’s involved with Metaverse research? Wow, that sounds all kinds of shady.

A> This does sound serious.

F> I tried to look into this guys history, but that data is secured in high-level government facilities.
R> You can crack it, Futaba!
F> Are you crazy!?! Even if I could, how long do you think it would be before the United States
erased me from existence!?
A> I think that’s a no.
I didn’t think about that.

But get this. I started searching for mentions of the Metaverse on the web, and it looks like the US isn’t the only country interested. China, Canada, Russia, and a few European countries came up in my searches.

Ah, yes! We’re gonna mess up all these guys!

There he goes again.

Whoops, time for me to go. We’ll talk more when I get some new information.

I set my phone aside as I sat upright. Ryuji was huddled up in the covers of his bed staring at his phone.

“I thought your phone broke,” I said.

Ryuji grinned. “Fixed it.”

I glanced around. “Where’s Ann?”

“She went back to her room to get changed. That was a while ago.”

My bones creaked as I stretched. “We have plans for today?”

Ryuji set his phone down, so he could stare blankly at me. “I think Ann wanted to go shopping,” he said, “But eff that. I’m not down for this relaxin’ shit. I’ve gotta give everything to this investigation.”

I yawned. “You’ve gone crazy.”

“Yeah…” Ryuji said dryly. “Crazy bored. Look, you can go shopping if you want. Mona and me will be lookin’ for any clues about Samuel.”

“Huh?” Morgana suddenly piped up from his windowsill perch, “Why do I have to go with you?”

Ryuji glanced at the cat. “Don’t act like that. I know you want to get some new information too.”

“Well…” Morgana began reluctant contemplation, “I guess it would be a nice change of pace from eating, sleeping, and watching TV.”

“What do you even watch on TV!?” Ryuji cried, “There ain’t nothin’ but European shows!”

“Fine, fine,” Mona irritably replied, “I’ll go, but we’d better try some new food on the way.”

Ryuji grinned. “That’s more like it!”

After Ryuji and Mona had departed, I prepared myself for the day with a refreshing shower. I hesitantly anticipated shopping with Ann. Although I didn’t mind Ann’s tastes or company, my unfamiliarity with French commerce limited my ordinarily reserved personality.

Once my clothes were on, I realized that this trip was consuming the majority of my limited, travel wardrobe. The hotel had a washing room, but a new set of fashionable outfits would be a great boon.
I was rustling a towel through my damp hair when I heard a knock at the door. As I cracked the door, Ann greeted me with a wonderfully oblivious smile. She carried a stylish black purse that probably cost more than Morgana’s monthly food budget.

“Good morning,” she said with a cheery giggle.

I smiled pleasantly as several wet blades of hair settled onto my forehead. “Morning,” I replied.

“Are Ryuji and Morgana up and ready?” she asked, “I want to get started before it gets too crowded.”

“Actually,” I said with a sheepish grin, “They left earlier. Something about searching for clues.”

Ann looked at me and sighed. “Dammit, Ryuji, what’s gotten into you. We were supposed to buy some clothes, so he doesn’t have to keep wearing that same greasy outfit.”

Now that I thought about it, Ryuji had a talent for turning two shirts and a pair of pants into a season of clothing. “He has been acting pretty excitable lately.”

Ann’s gaze sharpened with her voice. “Seriously. He was always pretty brash, but now he’s going out of his way to do pointless activities.”

“It’s good to see him in his element though,” I responded.

Ann sighed again, this time relinquishing her entire argument. She briskly transferred the conversation to lighter matters. “So, it’ll just be the two of us then?”

I released a modest laugh. “That’s right.”

Ann’s eyes widened in curiosity. “Won’t you be bored? I mean, you’d probably have been bored anyways.” She nervously chuckled.

“I won’t be bored,” I quickly replied, “I feel like we’ve barely had a chance to catch up since I arrived.”

“Hmm, yeah…” Ann touched her lips. “Okay! Are you ready to go then?” She swung her arms to and fro happily.

I returned her merry expression. “I’ll get my shoes.”

Pristine racks of clothing filled every corner of my vision. Seemingly no item was deserving of scorn; every piece had a trendy design or fashionable flair worthy of praise. Eye-catching fabrics transformed simple mannequins into taunting succubae, and refined masculine attire commanded attention from the mild hangers.

Ann looked like she belonged on display as she strolled through the store. I walked nonchalantly beside her, my eyes drifting periodically between the clothing and the lady. Her creamy pigtails were impossible to ignore. One might think that being around Ann for such a significant period would desensitize me to her beauty, but, in my own opinion, understanding Ann’s character only leads to a greater appreciation of her charm. Nevertheless, I allowed those thoughts to wash aside as Ann began speaking.

“I’ve come here a few times,” she said, “It can get pretty crowded, so I like to come in the mornings when it’s not so busy.”
“Seems like a trendy place,” I replied.

“Mhm,” Ann continued, “The first time I came here, Phillip brought us here as part of a tour. There were so many people, I think they outnumbered the clothing.”

I glanced at the displays surrounding us, noting the obscene prices. “This stuff is really expensive.”

“Yeah, they’ve got sets from all the top fashion designers! I’ve even seen a few pieces from fashion shows I’ve been in!”

I awkwardly rubbed my neck as Ann latched onto a vibrant dress with a price tag well over one thousand euros. “I think I’m out of my league.”

Ann abruptly laughed. “You just leave the shopping to me. We’re mostly here to look anyways.” I nodded, and my timid laughing quickly turned to a smile. “So, tell me about your life. Have you been busy? You must have fans visiting you every day since your identity is public.”

My sobering familiarity with my mundane daily activities incited a somber demeanor. “Uh, no, not really. Actually, my life has been really boring lately.”

“Huh?” Ann was surprised by my unremarkable response. She frowned. “O-Oh…” A sad tone pierced her voice though I could not decipher if that sadness was pity or regret. “Uh-um!” Ann’s face lit up with alarm once she recovered from her distraught appearance. She giggled nervously. “We should go look over there!” she insisted, “I saw some outfits I wanted to try on!”

Ann nearly yanked me from my feet as we relocated to some clothing racks in the corner. She quickly feigned interest in the outfits to mask her embarrassment. Now mildly dizzy, I took a seat on the adjacent bench. Ann perused the items until she found a plausible distraction. As the clouds in my head settled, I faintly heard a nagging laughter off at a distant corner of the store. The echoing cackles reverberated in my ears, producing a burning sensation at the base of my neck. I ran my fingers briefly over the back of my skull until the disturbance had dissipated; however, I now felt a creeping unease as if someone was whispering into my ear. The thought quickly disappeared from my brain before it could become troublesome.

“So…” Ann began, “Since we’re clothes shopping, I guess I should ask. What kinds of colors do you like?”

Dazed by the simplicity of her question, I was momentarily paralyzed. I scratched my battered head. “I’ve always been partial to black. Black and red: I think those are my favorites.”

Ann’s eyes scrutinized the rack while she processed my response. “Hmm, black and red,” she quietly repeated, “Black and red… black and red~” Her voice trailed off whimsically before her hands plucked an appropriately colored dress from amongst the clothing. “What do you think of this?”

She held up a red dress with several curved, black stripes. The accentuating figure and shady color emanated a subtle yet commanding aura. “That’s a nice look,” I said.

Ann glanced at the dress before throwing it on her arm. “I think I’ll try this one on. It’s a bit high class, but I could use an excuse for some fine dining.”

I contemplated pushing the subject of my routine further but decided against. The discussion would be pointless since I could clearly deduce Ann’s reasoning. Conversely, I would have been upset had Ann been alone the past two years as well. “So, how long have you been working with Phillip?”

Ann cocked her head. “It’s been nearly a year and a half now. Almost feels like we just started
yesterday, but we’ve done so much.” Her attention fell fully on me while her thoughts assembled. “Funny story, how we met. I used to have plenty of modeling agents approach me, scouting me for a company or shoot. Then one day after a lengthy, joint-company photo-op, Phillip came up to me and insisted he be my exclusive manager.”

“I didn’t think you were the type to say yes to men like that.”

Ann scoffed. “Well, it’s more like he begged to be my agent.”

“Oh,” I said, nodding, “That’s more like it.”

“I felt sorry for him at first. He was kinda pathetic, but then he started talking about how tired he was of the shady fashion industry. Normally, I don’t fall for sob stories. I’ve met too many liars and cheats to believe every little tale, but Phillip was different. He reminded me of us.”

“The Phantom Thieves?”

“Yeah, the industry gets tough. I hear rumors of all kinds of shady business happening in the background, and naïve models are always being taken advantage of. Phillip was about to quit the modeling business once that shoot was complete. I guess my position as an honest model inspired him somehow.”

I chuckled. “An honest model?”

Ann eyed me with curiosity. “Y-yeah, you know. I treat the other models with respect, and I try not to get into fights. Stuff like that.”

“Heh, I knew that you’d never pull off a villain persona.”

“Hey!” Ann crossed her arms and pouted. “I can be strong, nice, and sexy all at the same time.”

A smile curled over my face. “I agree on all counts.”

Ann had a fierce look of annoyance, and her cheeks flamed. “Tch, stop that.”

I briskly stood on my feet. “Stop what?”

“Stop making fun of me!” Ann shouted, holding her arms to her sides.

A chuckle escaped my proud grin. “Jokes aside, your compassionate attitude is something I’ve been missing.”

Ann tossed her hair back. “Yeah, yeah.” While Ann shifted anxiously from foot to foot, her eyes stared beyond me. A deep sigh allowed her flustered heart to settle. “I’ve missed our little conversations. It’s nice to have someone who listens.” My smile softened as Ann continued. “Sorry if I surprised you before…” Ann turned her head down and meekly cradled her arm. “…when I said I didn’t want to get involved in the Kamoshida business.” Her somber face was idle as I conjured a response.

“No, that’s alright,” I calmly replied, “You have a life here, and I don’t have a right to ask you to leave that.”

“Well,” Ann spoke quietly while she continued her nervous shuffling. “That’s not why I turned you down.” She glanced warily at me. “Now that we’re all out of school, I don’t talk to the other Thieves much anymore. It’s the same for all of us I imagine. We’ve got lives that are leading us in different
directions and guiding us to new people. All of us except Ryuji. Flunking school didn’t give him many options. I would hear from him every month or so, and every time we’d end up talking about how much he misses the Phantom Thieves. No matter what we discussed: our jobs, our friends, our futures, he always managed to mention how he wishes the Thieves were still together, still working.” Ann shook her head vigorously before releasing a trembling sigh. “To tell you the truth, when you guys showed up, I was afraid that I’d fall into the same rut. Unlike Ryuji, everybody else had moved on and was leading normal lives. So, I tried to ignore you guys.”

“I’m guessing that didn’t help.”

“No. It only made me feel awful. I joined the Phantom Thieves so that I could get vengeance, but at the end, it was so much more than that. Modeling just seems trivial in comparison.” Ann’s face stiffened as she took a seat on the bench. “I used to think the Phantom Thieves were just a group of friends trying to help people find courage, but our group changed the world. We were the only people fighting for what’s right, even when it was tough. And if the world still needs the Thieves then we’ve got to keep fighting.”

“What convinced you?” I asked.

Ann reflected on the chaos of the past week. “Well, if this Samuel guy is secretly involved with the Metaverse, then there’s got to be people trying to abuse it. And you had visions of Palaces, right?” I nodded, and Ann’s eyes widened. “Yeah, so we already know there are distorted hearts out there that need a change.”

I gently scratched my chin. “I wish it were that simple. I don’t even know where to begin. It’s not like we can go into the Metaverse whenever we want.”

Ann displayed a bright smile as she stood. “Hey, I’m sure we’ll figure it out. If other people are meddling with the Metaverse, there’s gotta be a way in.”

I smiled back. “That’s exactly the determination I wanted to hear.”

The day concluded quickly. After our brisk shopping trip, Ann and I returned to the hotel. Ryuji and Morgana joined us there shortly after. As expected, they had found no information pertaining to either Kamoshida or Samuel Zimmerman, yet the two seemed in high spirits. The exotic locale or lavish foods may have been responsible for their cheery faces, but I certainly wasn’t complaining. We spent the evening discussing the best room service dishes and improving Ryuji’s French vocabulary.

The following morning, Ann promptly dragged Ryuji from our room to find some new clothes for him. At Ryuji’s dismissal, Ann fiercely rebuked him, “You’ve been wearing the same two shirts for the past week! And you’re starting to smell!”

“I told ya!” Ryuji retorted, “I ain’t got time for clothes shopping!”

“Oh, please!” Ann continued, “You wasted all yesterday looking for nonexistent “clues”. You can waste today on some basic grooming.”

Despite Ryuji’s further protests, Ann bested Ryuji’s will and escorted him away. Meanwhile, Morgana and I decided that we should try to enjoy the attractions of Paris while we were still in the city.

Paris had a myriad of historic sites and attractions that begged to be seen. The Eiffel Tower, the
Louvre museum, and the Notre-Dame cathedral were just a few that came to mind. However, our impromptu stay meant we would have difficulty securing a tour of these venues. As the unfortunate reality set in, we resolved on a simple city tour.

Morgana and I boarded a tour bus scheduled to feature all the icons of Paris in one day. Though our interest in the city’s landmarks was piqued, we both found ourselves drifting in thought as the tour progressed.

Morgana pressed his face against the window. “This city is beautiful, but I’m having trouble enjoying it.”

“Feeling antsy?” I asked.

A heavy sigh escaped his lips. “Well, yeah. Guess I shouldn’t have expected much though. We did come here at Ryuji’s request.”

I chuckled at Morgana’s biting wit. “We just have to be patient.”

He glanced at me with a glowing smile on his face. “I know. I’m just really excited to start working again!”

The gentle hum of our chattering fellow tourists drowned out the murmuring of my scattered brain. “Are we going to find our way back into the Metaverse?” I absently questioned.

“Of course, we will!” Morgana adamantly insisted, “That has to happen.”

“You’re just saying that because you want to be a thief again.”

Morgana tilted his head downward. “Maybe, but with all these coincidences occurring, I figure there must be something stirring in the Metaverse.”

“Any idea on how we can go in?”

“No, actually,” Morgana sighed, “This is so frustrating! Even after remembering who I am, I don’t have any new information to offer.”

I strained to clear my throat. “Don’t worry about that. We just need to make sure the team is ready when the Metaverse does open.”

Morgana glanced up at me, and I saw the genuine bafflement in his eyes dissipate. “Ah, right. You can count on me.”

A subtle smile crossed my face. “I know.”

“Still, I’m worried we aren’t prepared for what we’re getting into,” Morgana continued. “There’s a lot of mystery surrounding our American friend.”

“Hopefully, Futaba can dispel some of that.”

“Any word on her investigation?”

I glanced down at my phone. “Nothing yet. She said it would be a few days.”

Morgana returned his gaze to the streets. “I wonder what kind of secrets he could be hiding.”

An eerie calm possessed my voice. “I doubt we could be surprised at this point.”
“Heheh,” Morgana let loose a smug laugh, “It always impresses me how cool you can be.”

The tour guide at the front of the bus spoke up as we passed another landmark. The Arc de Triomphe filled our view with ornate stonework. “Woah!” Morgana cried, “That thing’s huge! And look at those stone carvings!” He eagerly pressed against the window.

As I glanced up to get a view of the landmark, I noticed a dark shadow blotting the sky. I squinted, attempting to identify the blemish, yet my mind made little sense of the image. The shadow rapidly extended across the skies, and I noted the strange texture of the looming object. Looking closer, I saw black feathers composing two apparent wings. The feathery appendages flapped, coating the sky in the darkness of night. As the wings folded rapidly toward me, I flinched, and when my eyes opened again, only gray clouds hung over the Arc.

My mind slowly returned to normalcy, and I shook the menacing images from my mind. Our tour guide’s voice resonated over the bus’s loudspeakers. “The Arc de Triomphe honors those who fought and died for France in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, with the names of all French victories and generals inscribed on its inner and outer surfaces.”

Morgana tilted his head at the words of the guide. “Hmm. A monument to remember heroes and their victories, huh? I wonder if anyone would make the Phantom Thieves a monument after we’re gone.”

I chuckled at Morgana’s hubris. “We don’t need a monument.”

Mona’s face sagged slightly. “Well, I’d like a monument…”

Meanwhile, the tour guide continued her narration on the history of the Arc. “Beneath the Arc’s vault lies the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier from World War I. Interred on Armistice Day 1920, it has the first eternal flame lit in Western and Eastern Europe since the Vestal Virgins' fire was extinguished in the fourth century. It burns in memory of the dead who were never identified, now in both world wars.”

“I guess we’re more like secret heroes: nameless but not forgotten.”

“But we aren’t dead,” I retorted.

“That’s no obstacle,” Morgana continued, “We’ll just need to fake our deaths again.”

I glanced in amazement at the presumptuous cat. “When did you fake your death?”

“Huh?” Morgana turned to face me. “Oh, you don’t remember? It was right when the Metaverse disappeared.”

I contorted my face as my memory reawakened. “Ah, right. I still haven’t paid you back for that scare.”

“P-paid me back?” Morgana’s eyes shot open. My hand swiftly infiltrated Mona’s exposed underbelly, prodding his vulnerable flesh. The cat leapt back at the touch of my finger, brushing against the bus window. “Woah!” he yelped, “H-hey! Don’t do that!” A smile and a laugh announced my true intentions while my hand lunged for Mona’s rustled fur. The cat squirmed and pleaded with every movement of my fingers. “S-stop that! You’re gonna make me… heh, hahahahaha!” As Mona’s protests broke into uncontrolled laughter, his staunch demeanor rinsed away. He rolled around energetically like a true feline, and I continued to tickle his underside.

Our brief lapse of composure allowed time to pass without regard. The tour quickly ended to my surprise, and the bus came to a halt a short walk away from our hotel. As the guide announced the
end of the trip, Morgana thrust his paws upward, displacing my tormenting hand. In a single, brisk motion, the cat leapt from the seat and darted wildly down the aisle. I promptly grabbed my bag and gave chase. Descending to the dank streets, I followed Morgana down the road to our hotel. Mona kept a brisk pace to avoid my jabs, but we soon stopped upon seeing a familiar face slouching by the hotel entrance.

An opaque flow of smoke passed between Phillip’s lips. Noxious fumes curled from his mouth and around his nose. A cigarette hung from his limp, right hand as he eyed us with melancholy intrigue. However, I was more startled by Phillip’s completely lax posture. Khaki shorts and a baggy tee made a wildly different impression than his work attire.

My awkward, analytical stare must have unsettled him because Phillip abruptly broke the silence. “What? Never seen a smoker before?”

Unhurried, I gradually came to a response. “I actually lived with a smoker for about a year.”

“Huh…” Phillip’s gray eyes trailed aimlessly to the dusty concrete underfoot. Balancing his glowing cigarette between his pale fingers, he took another long whiff before a blanket of putrid smoke fell from his mouth. Morgana stared at Phillip with morbid curiosity, and his unfocused eyes met the mesmerized feline. Phillip’s stony features betrayed a small grin. “What about you?” he asked Morgana, “You smoke?”

Morgana cocked his head sideways. “What?”

“I have seen him with a cigar once or twice,” I promptly added.

Mona turned to me in horror. “Th-that was just a prop!”

A cackle emanated from Phillip. “He seems like the hardened bad-ass type as well.” He raised his cigarette once more and then cast it to the curb.

Morgana swallowed. “I… I’m really not sure about this guy.”

Craning his neck, Phillip grunted fiercely. “It’s too damn humid today. Seems like a good day to stay inside.”

“Don’t you have work to be doing?” I asked.

Phillip glanced at me with disdain. “Who the hell do you think I am?” he growled, “If Miss Takamaki is going to slack off with you kids for a while, I won’t be caught dead scheduling shoots and filing paperwork. You must know a lot of boring-ass adults to think I’d do that.”

I shrugged. “I’ve known my fair share.”

“They’re more evil than boring,” Morgana interjected.

Phillip scratched his chin as he idly mumbled. “Boring, boring… Say, you familiar with card games? I need to sharpen my poker game.”

“I’ve played a few times.”

“Huh…” Phillip blinked at me, “Well, you’ve got the composure to play. If you and the cat don’t have anything better to be doing, I could use the practice.”

I looked at Morgana. “You up for a match?”
“Well,” Morgana replied, “It beats waiting around for Lady Ann and Ryuji to get back from clothes shopping.”

I nodded and turned to Phillip. “He says yes.”

Phillip lowered his eyelids in disapproval. “I knew cats could be kinda bossy to their owners, but you take it to a whole other level.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “You don’t know half of it.” Morgana just sighed.

“Shit…” Phillip ran a hand through his slick hair as he gazed despairingly at his cards.

I sat across from Phillip in the hotel lobby. Morgana perched on my chair’s armrest to gain a tactical view of our game. The cat grinned eagerly, “Nyeheheh. Phil wasn’t kidding when he said he needed to sharpen his game. He’s showing way too much emotion.”

I glanced over the table at our uncomfortable friend. “Are you sure it isn’t just an act?” I whispered.

Morgana puffed out his chest. “Trust me. Your hand’s a shoo-in.”

Nodding, I laid my own meager cards on the table. “Dammit!” Phillip cried. He tossed his cards down. “Again?” With a sigh, he shook his head. “You’re awfully lucky. You took that last ace too. I was looking for that.”

Morgana smiled coyly. “Guy needs to shuffle his decks better if you ask me.”

“I wouldn’t call it luck,” I replied.

Phillip only grunted. He scooped the cards from the table and began sifting them in his palm. “Call it bullshit then…”

With a chuckle, I asked, “So, you’re a gambler then?”

“Not really,” Phillip quietly spoke as he stared at his deck, “Though, fashion shows take me to all kinds of ritzy places, so I get the opportunity often.”

Morgana promptly released a longing sigh. “What a job…”

Phillip gave me a passing glance as I leaned into my chair. “I’m a bit surprised. For someone I’ve heard so much about, you’re pretty reserved.” He pushed back on his own seat, stretching his arms into the air. “Not that I mind. Ryuji talks enough for both of you and then some.” His eyes shifted across the lobby and settled on the main entrance. “Speak of the devil…”

A pained groan dispelled our relaxed atmosphere as Ryuji stumbled alongside us. Both his arms were tied with bags of clothes, and a large tote rested on his chest. Nearly tripping over the weight, Ryuji dumped the main bag into Phil’s lap before setting the other bags on the ground.

“Whoo!” Ryuji spun his arms around. “Jeez, who knew shopping could be such a workout…” He slumped down on the sofa beside us, splaying his arms and legs out in uncouth fashion. “Yo, can you carry this stuff up to my room?” His hand flapped aimlessly at Phillip like a tattered banner.

Phillip growled dementedly as he thrust the bag off his body. He jolted upward, his face wrenching with murderous intent. With his eyelids hanging low, Ryuji failed to notice the disturbance. Instead, Phillip tightened his talons around Ryuji’s collar and yanked him from his seat. Ryuji gasped as his
body was briefly suspended. His tired eyes met the clenched teeth of Phillip’s scowl.

Phil’s voice flared like the engine of a gangster’s chopper. “Listen good, Sakamato! I -AM NOT- your butler!”

Ryuji turned his head away in disgust. “Damn! Your breath reeks, dude!” He coughed haphazardly which only stoked Phillip’s anger.

Phil promptly dropped Ryuji onto the sofa like a fleck of dust. “Ugh, I used to wonder how Miss Takamaki could be friends with such a moron, but now it’s clear that it’s just charity work, caring for such a witless sap as yourself.”

Ryuji fumbled with the soft, unsupportive cushions. “What!” he yelped, “The hell’s that supposed to mean you asshole!” He eventually was able to stand upright before assuming an offensive stance.

Phillip scoffed at Ryuji’s clumsy display. “Punks like you just keep pressing their luck every chance they get.” Clenching his fist, he almost laughed. “Luckily for you, I don’t plan to put up with that shit.”

“Tch,” Ryuji shrunk back momentarily, “You wanna fight? Bring it on, ya pompous douche!”

“Oh my God!” Ann quickly found our increasingly noisy group, “Can’t I leave you alone for two minutes without you starting a fight!” Her shrill voice immediately caught everyone’s attention.

“This asshole started it!” Ryuji wined.

“I don’t care! No fighting!” Ann snapped.

Morgana yawned. “Just another day…”


Phil touched his curled lips and shook his head. “Oh, just you.”

“Phillip!” Ann’s eye’s flared as she again raised her voice, “You’d better not do anything to Ryuji.”

Phillip’s lips parted to reveal a carefree grin. “Don’t worry Miss Takamaki. I may not be a fashion designer, but I’m sure anything I did to him would be a massive improvement.”

Ryuji lost his breath. “Th-this guy!”

I simply sighed, bored with the decaying insults. I stood and grabbed one of the bags. “Grab the big bag, Ryuji. Let’s take this stuff to the room.”

Following the debacle in the lobby, Ryuji, Morgana, and I resigned to our room for the evening. As we lay on our beds, a faint restlessness crept through my body. My senses were peaking; at any moment, we could be thrust into action, yet the world was silent. I stared without regard at the ceiling while the unease polluted my mind.

Ryuji could never be content to sit idly in such circumstances, so naturally, his mouth ran. “Any news from Futaba?” He rolled over to face me.

I took my phone out of my pocket and glanced at it. “Nothing.”
Ryuji sighed. “Man, this is taking forever…”

“I’m sure there’ll be news tomorrow.”

“Yeah…”

Morgana spoke from his spot on the dresser. “You guys are being too impatient. All we can do is relax and prepare ourselves for the mission.”

A brief silence ensued. “Alright,” Ryuji began, “Tomorrow, we gotta do something fun, just the three of us.” He pulled out his phone and began searching. “There’s gotta be some amusement parks around here or somethin’.”

“What about Ann?” I asked.

Ryuji let out a pained sigh. “Ya know, I think I had enough Ann today for a lifetime, so I’m gonna have to say, “no thanks” to that.” Glancing at his phone again, Ryuji’s eyes ignited with passion. “Hmm, Aquaboulevard de Paris, a waterpark in Paris… What do ya think? This look good?” He held his phone towards me with a bright smile on his face.

“Do you even have a swimsuit with you?”

“Hehe, that’s one advantage of clothes shopping today,” Ryuji replied, smirking.

“You bought a swimsuit? Did Ann buy you a whole wardrobe?”

Ryuji’s face sagged. “You tell me. We carried it all up here.”

I glanced to the stack of bags in Ryuji’s corner of the room. I hadn’t thought much of them earlier, but the several bags were packed full, and together they piled above the windowsill. “Hmm,” Morgana carefully contemplated the lump of new clothing, “Let’s hope this lasts Ryuji the next few years.”

Redirecting the topic, Ryuji sat up. “What do you think, Mona? You down to visit this waterpark?”

Morgana frowned. “You know, I’m not exactly the biggest fan of water.”

“Aw, c’mon,” Ryuji pleaded, “You don’t even have to get wet. I bet you could just hang out by the pool and check out all the swimsuit babes.”

“E-excuse me? Who do you think I am?” The slighted Morgana quickly turned to offensive statements. “I’m not a senseless, carnal beast like you.”

“Huh? What’s that even mean?”

I shook my head. “He means you’re horny.”

“Oh,” Ryuji bashfully scratched his head, “I mean, yeah…”

Morgana sighed as he laid down on the dresser. “The waterpark is fine, so long as I don’t have to dive in a pool.”

“It’s settled then,” Ryuji said with a grin. Suddenly, his phone chirped in his hand. “Eh? Oh, shit…”

Seeing Ryuji’s bewildered face, I asked, “What is it?”
“My mom’s messaging me.” A sweaty sheen now framed Ryuji’s face.

“Tell me you at least made up a good excuse to be out of the country.” Morgana’s slurred speech suggested he doubted Ryuji’s competence.

With a heavy heart, Ryuji sighed. “That don’t stop her from asking.”

“Must be nice to have parents who check up on you,” I added.

“Tch,” Morgana scoffed, “Must be nice to have parents who exist in the corporeal world.”

Ryuji frowned. “Ok, guys. Thanks for the help.”

I responded. “You’re welcome.”

The next morning, I rolled out of my bed to the sound of snoring. Echoes of Ryuji’s gaping mouth drove me to the respite of the bathroom. As I closed the door behind me, I began wiping the filth from my eyes. The unfiltered, bathroom lights produced a near unbearable luminance, and I strained to keep my eyes open. Allowing a few moments for my pupils to shrink, I gradually removed my hands from my face.

I glanced to a peculiar image in the mirror. Where my hands had cleared the gunk away, streaks of blood now trickled forth. Tiny crimson tributaries cascaded over my pale face. I took my trembling hand as I stared at my broken visage and touched a finger to the bloody stream. In my reflection, I saw my finger drizzled with dark, thick fluid. However, glancing at my physical finger revealed only clean flesh.

As my eyes returned to the mirror, I met another startling sight. Long, sharp, black fingers curled around my shoulder like the legs of a deadly spider around her prey. I felt a bead of sweat break from my forehead, and my heart suddenly retched in my chest. The breath in my throat froze as I struggled to think. The nightmare claws gripped my body like a rusty steel trap. Though the fingers remained motionless, I felt them searing, burning into my flesh like cattle brands.

I was alone and completely enclosed in the bathroom, but I suddenly felt the gushing wind of a hurricane rip through me. I nearly fell from the force of the phantom gale, but the claws on my shoulder held me still. My hair tossed through my vision causing me to briefly lose track of the mirror. When the howling wind finally settled, I immediately refocused on the reflected image. Abruptly, there was nothing; just the simple reflection of an unsettled young man.

A wild cackle snapped into my ear. I swiftly turned, gripping the counter. The empty bathroom mocked my futile diligence with another laugh in the opposing direction. I turned again, this time more slowly, as I grasped that my own mind was taunting me.

Scratching at the door provoked my attention from the depths of my psyche. I pulled the door open and glanced down to see Morgana staring worriedly at me. The moisture on my own face couldn’t have eased his concerns. “Are you alright?” he asked.

I shook my head, having no explanation or need thereof. “I’m fine.”

“Well, you should probably get ready then,” Morgana continued, “Ryuji’s going to want to get going as soon as he wakes up.” I nodded. “Right, I’ll give you some privacy.”
Only a few hours later, the three of us had departed for the waterpark. Despite my initial assumptions, Ann did not protest our trip. Apparently, she had quite enough of Ryuji, but furthermore, she had some business finalizing her hiatus from the fashion world.

We hopped out of our cab and gazed anticipatingly at the sprawling indoor-outdoor park. A gentle breeze wafted the cooling scents of chlorine and water into my nostrils. Ryuji’s gigantic grin was unmissable, and my own face perked with excitement as we stepped toward the waterpark. Morgana popped his head out from our oversized bag of necessities.

Ryuji shook with excitement. “Aw, man, I’m so pumped! I heard they’ve got a wakeboard simulator!” His enthusiasm oozed from every syllable. “I’m gonna try it out!”

With excitement spreading to my own features, I replied, “Sounds fun.”

“What about you, Morgana?” Ryuji asked, “Think you can keep your balance on the wakeboard?”

“I doubt they’ve got a spot for cats on the board,” he said, chuckling.

“Ah, that’s right. You probably need to hold onto the rope pretty tightly,” Ryuji added. “Well, let’s make sure we get Mona a good view of the pool before we do that.” I nodded, and then we headed into the park.

After a short contest of skill regarding the wakeboard, Ryuji and I returned to our poolside location. A sizable swathe of sand bordered the pool forming an artificial beach. My toes sunk readily into the warm sand as Ryuji performed a running leap over our tote, startling the tranquil Morgana.

“Hey!” Mona squealed, “Careful! You’ll get sand in my eyes.”

Ryuji chuckled. “Have a little fun.”

As my friend took in the feigned beach atmosphere, I surveyed the muddle of young kids and adults enjoying the sun and water. The pool moved with every splash, and the cool waters invited aggressive action. The squeals of children reminded me of years when I could express the fullest joy in every moment of recreation. After all that had happened to me, these simple pleasures didn’t hold the same appeal.

Ryuji let loose a screeching howl as he sprinted across the sand toward the waiting pool. “C’mon!” he shouted, glancing back over his shoulder. Like a bolt of lightning, Ryuji dove into the waves causing a downpour of liquid shrapnel.

Ryuji’s spontaneous energy quickly spurred me into motion. My feet dug into the gritty sand and heaved my body forward. The soaked and disoriented Ryuji swiveled around to see me rapidly descending upon him. My shadow enveloped his widened eyes as I leapt through the air and plummeted into the water.

With the soaring burst of water blinding me, I allowed the waves to engulf my body in the shifting flow. Droplets of crisp, clear water slid down the lengths of my hair around my face to the awaiting tide. Ryuji sunk beneath the surge, melding with the incoherent reflections on the water’s surface. My eyes glanced from the brilliant, overhanging sun to the billowing waves below.

As I searched for my friend beneath the swirling water, another surreal visage caught my attention. Two glowing slits of chaotic red blaze pierced the depths of the water. The brazen lights called to me with the screeching fury of a demon; those familiar iron-link tendrils wrapped around my legs like
the arms of a sea-beast. The water turned to a dank, black puss as the darkened fingers of Hell rose up and reached for me. The water split open, and a pale hand smacked my face. I shook my head at the impact while Ryuji chuckled. The haunting imagery had again been dispelled before my eyes. I glanced around, but the pool was completely mundane.

I looked expectantly at my friend. The displaced water had left Ryuji completely soaked. I noted the glistening splotches of yellow highlight hidden beneath the disheveled mats of black hair. Smiling, Ryuji floated alongside me for a moment before responding to my unsettled appearance.

“Yo, you swallow some water or somethin?” he asked.

“No…” I briefly considered sharing my otherworldly experience with Ryuji; however, I decided to explain at a more private opportunity. “We can talk about it back at the hotel.”

Ryuji shrugged. “If you say so…” His concern quickly turned to a cocky excitement as he cradled water in his palm. With a quick thrust of his arm, Ryuji lobbed a slab of liquid into my face.

The blast of chlorine in my nostrils alerted my senses to an assault. Ryuji snickered, having provoked the desired wince from me. My gaze sharpened as my hand sliced through the water with acute precision. A watery whip formed at the tip of my fingers, lashing across Ryuji’s entire body.

Ryuji spat out a gush of pool water. With a smile, Ryuji flipped back, his legs causing an eruption of water around us. As the screen of droplets cleared, I dove after my friend and joined the frantic excitement of the pool.

Later, Ryuji and I returned to our seats at the pool’s edge. The sun had lowered considerably, but there was still some time before we would be returning home. Laughing about another crass joke, Ryuji shook some water from his dampened hair. Morgana whined at Ryuji’s negligence.

“Hey! You’ll get the towels wet!”

Ryuji scoffed. “That’s what they’re for.”

I took a seat on one of the recliners, the yellowing sunlight casting a warm glow over my body. Ryuji sat on the edge of a recliner beside me. Morgana maintained his comfortable position inside our bag with the afternoon light warming the top of his head.

Ryuji leaned into his chair, placing his hands behind his head. “Ah, this is great, huh?”

Morgana’s eyelids faltered as he responded. “Yeah, it’s pretty nice…” A large yawn escaped his mouth.

“Nice to be with people who get me, ya know?” Ryuji continued, “Everybody back home is always tellin’ me, “Ryuji, do this. Ryuji, why don’t you act like that?” It gets on my nerves. People just don’t understand the stuff I’m made to do, but you guys get it.”

I nodded. Mona quietly replied, “I don’t always like your methods, but you got us here. That much I have to admit.”

“Uh, thanks…” Ryuji stammered. “I know it can’t have been easy for you guys either. I mean, you have each other, but I doubt your parents would have been happy knowing you were a Phantom Thief.”
A flash of repressed darkness struck through my heart like a bolt of lightning. “No… not happy… but it’s my home.”

“His parents are the most reserved people I’ve ever met,” Morgana added, “Every time the family is together, I realize why this guy is so quiet.”

“That makes a lot of sense actually.” Ryuji’s eyes widened.

“That said, I’m still amazed he has such a powerful persona. His parents just want him to be normal and fit into society.”

“That’s gotta sting real bad, especially after everything we’ve gone through.”

“That’s just the kind of people they are,” I replied, “Nothing malicious about it.”

“All the more reason to get out of there, doncha think?” Ryuji folded his arms. “Once we can actually get out into the world, we won’t have to worry about people tellin’ us how to live. We can just… be ourselves.”

I turned and smiled at Ryuji. “Can I hold you to that?”

He glanced at me, making a smug laugh. “I should be asking you that. I mean, you’re not gonna bail on me once this is over, are ya? I don’t wanna go back to bein’ plain ol’ Ryuji.”

Befuddled by Ryuji’s hesitation, I stared blankly at the pool. I suppose normal life was simply impossible for a Phantom Thief. The taste of freedom soured every opposing flavor, and our rebellion placed us in direct opposition with the authority of society. The tormenting knowledge that others lived in suppressed agony inhibited our mere existence.

“Don’t worry, Ryuji,” Morgana interjected, “If you’re feeling down, you can talk to us anytime, day or night. It’s our responsibility.” The authority in his voice was unsettling for someone offering my services.

Ryuji snorted. “Somehow I don’t think that’s your call.”

Mona glanced at me, but I shook my head. “For real?” he pleaded. “Well, I’d talk to him.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” I said.

“Okay, I wouldn’t, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t.”

“Guys, jeez,” Ryuji sighed, “Look, I don’t need someone to talk to, I just… don’t wanna be alone again.”

“Aww, he’s gone soft.”

“Mona, shut your mouth,” Ryuji growled. Suddenly, he stood and violently raked his hands through his hair. “Ugh, damn! All this talk is making me anxious! Can’t Futaba go any faster?”

I shrugged while Mona said, “That impatience will only… woah!” The cat jumped mid-sentence.

“What’s up?” Ryuji asked.

“Something just moved in here!” Morgana squealed, “Hold on a second.” He disappeared into the bag for a brief second before reappearing with my phone in his mouth. “I think it was thish.”
I grabbed the phone from him and glanced at the tiny screen. “It’s Futaba. She’s got some info.”
Ryuji scratched the back of his head as he stared at Futaba’s image on the laptop screen. “Ok, so let me see if I’ve got this straight… You tracked this Sam guy’s phone, and then you lost him when he went inside the train station? Like, every day?”

“Not quite,” Futaba answered. Her fingers nimbly tapped on her keyboard. “See, normally I’d get some peripheral data about the subject’s activities: if the phone is off, what apps are being used, that kind of stuff, but when Sam goes into the station, the data stream goes completely dark. It’s like his phone doesn’t even exist.”

“For real? He just disappeared?” His curiosity piqued, Ryuji leaned forward.

“That’s kinda creepy!” Ann added.

“He must be going into the Metaverse!” Morgana declared. The three of us glanced at the cat. “W-what?” he stammered, “It’s the only logical explanation.”

“Mona might be right,” Futaba added, “Unless Samuel is disassembling his phone every time he goes into the station, I can’t think of another explanation that would account for this data loss.”

“Can you give us the location data?” I asked.

“Already sent,” Futaba replied, “Hey if you’re going to act on this, you’d better be careful.”

I looked to my teammates. “Are we ready for this?”

Ryuji grinned. “I was born ready.”

Ann gave me a determined gaze. “We’ve got to figure out what this guy’s hiding.”

Morgana suddenly clambered onto my shoulder. “Well then, we should stake-out the train station tomorrow.”

“All right,” Ryuji cried, “We better get to bed so we can get up bright and early tomorrow.”

“Good luck, you guys,” Futaba added, “I’ll be on standby if you need me.” With a nod, I closed the laptop.

Waking early the next morning, Ann, Morgana, Ryuji, and I followed Futaba’s data to the location of the train station. We all wore hoodies to disguise ourselves, excluding Morgana. The plaza surrounding the station was a perpetually crowded mess, but we found a secluded spot along the concrete wall of a nearby building to conduct our surveillance.
Faceless people passed our sullen corner for hours. The alluring scents of street food certainly didn’t aid our focus, but we were determined. With the sun quickly gaining height, our minds grew more interested in idle banter than tactical observation.

“I feel like a delinquent,” Ann remarked as she leaned against the concrete. I smirked. Our inconspicuous apparel masked our appearance but also made us look like some unsavory thugs. Ryuji chuckled quietly. Ann glanced at him. “What?”

“Eh, nothing;” he quickly replied, “I’m just really enjoying this.” The brimming smile on his face was unmissable.

“That’s impressive,” Morgana remarked. He had migrated to the ground so that he could stretch his legs. “I expected you to be complaining that you were hungry by now.”

A loud crunch punctuated Morgana’s statement. I glanced at Ryuji who was shoveling chips into his crumb-covered face. Indignant, he stared back at me. “What? We didn’t all bring snacks?”

Morgana sighed. “Any hits on the tracker?”

I glanced at my phone. Thankfully, Futaba’s data also included a live tracking app that would let us know if Samuel was nearby. Seeing the blank map, I shook my head.

“Dammit, maybe he isn’t coming today.” Mona reluctantly sat onto the concrete.

“Futaba said Sam was here every day the virus was on his phone,” Ann said. She looked briefly to the shifting crowds of pedestrians. “You don’t think he saw us and ran off, do you?”

I glanced at Ann, but Ryuji spoke up. “No way! What kind of guy has time to go lookin’ at every face he passes in a busy train station?”

Ann frowned. “It’s not that hard if you recognize someone.”

“Not to worry guys,” Mona interjected, “If Sam was nearby, the app would have alerted us.”

We peered over the ocean of humans, yet nothing appeared conspicuous. Then Ryuji elbowed me. “Hey, look!” He nodded toward the adjacent street. A long, black car interrupted the colorful flow of vehicles like a bit of rot on a ripened fruit. I glanced at the app as the car stopped.


Ryuji leaned onto the tips of his toes. “Dunno. Can’t get a good view.”

“We should wait,” Mona said, “Let him pass us, and then we can tail him.”

Ryuji nodded. Staring toward the stationary, black car, he whispered, “Alright Mr. Zimmerman, we’ve got a few questions for ya.”

Moments passed, and the noisy bustle of the station was strangely less noticeable. The four of us frantically shifted our vision from the street to the unassuming crowds and back. Desiring motion, my fingers scraped against the jagged concrete. Morgana paced nervously as he glanced into the forest of legs. Ann’s eyes found no rest, glancing from the cars, to the people, to us, and then away from the scene altogether. Unphased by the suspense, Ryuji maintained a careful eye on the black car although we could not see the occupants.
I glanced again at my phone. The red dot passed in front of us, swimming through the sea of commuters like a shark. I nodded to Morgana as I pushed off the concrete. The others instinctively followed me. With every step, my feet pounded to the beat of my heart. In this mass of bodies, we were predators hunting without regard for the unaware collateral surrounding us. Yet I felt an encroaching sense of dread. At any moment, we might lose our footing and be overpowered. The reality of our frailty could not be avoided. Concealment was our only asset.

We trailed the red dot into the station. The sun-bathed concrete gave way to smooth, dark stones tunneling into the earth. Our group descended on an escalator, and I noticed a tall figure wearing a dark coat and a brimmed hat. Given our proximity to the tracking blip, he was the only person who fit Samuel’s build. Ryuji, Ann, and I stared straight ahead, unable to feign disinterest any longer. Nobody spoke a word. Even the crowds around us appeared silent.

Morgana slipped between my legs and trotted down the escalator. The shrouded man stepped off the escalator and quickly turned a corner, the masses of blind people absorbing the figure. Mona kept a careful eye on our target while we descended to the floor.

Samuel’s tracker moved swiftly despite the congestion within the tunnels. We met Morgana at the corner, and he nodded to me. He swiveled around the tiled wall, leading us towards Sam. We moved without friction like a cloud passing by these travelers. Nevertheless, Sam kept well ahead of us, taking a brisk turn into a side tunnel, and then another, and then another. Slowly, we were forced to lag further and further behind as the congestion of the rushing foot traffic dissipated. With several interlocking tunnels between us and the surface, only a scant few civilians remained. Sam made a final turn into a dark and narrow corridor.

I paused briefly with my team as we came to the last bend. The dimly lit tunnel now obscured Ryuji and Ann’s faces to a heightened degree while Morgana’s eyes shone brightly in the dark. A putrid rotting scent polluted the dank air surrounding us, and I could hear the trickle of a leaky pipe in the distance. As Mona and I stepped forward, a rat suddenly darted out of the darkness, scurrying over my feet.

Ann squealed at the abrupt sight of the revolting creature, but Ryuji, who was behind her, quickly clamped a hand over her gaping mouth. My face an unsettling combination of shock and fear, I stared at my shaking friends. Ann’s wide eyes caught what little light remained in the tunnels, and Ryuji shivered with disbelief at his own proficiency. He promptly removed his hand from Ann’s mouth, and she exhaled deeply. I took a deep breath myself before checking my friends’ preparedness once more. Ann and Ryuji hesitantly nodded, and I resigned to accept their uncertainty. I stepped into the black of the adjacent tunnel, my friends to follow.

We progressed through the darkness easily. This portion of the station seemed surprisingly well-maintained despite its remoteness. Only a few moments of walking and we hit a rigid, steel door. I pressed my hand to the frame, and the door heaved forward, scraping the concrete floor as it moved. A serene and soft light greeted us on the other side. A large, featureless room sprawled out before us illuminated by windows of natural daylight. Square, concrete pillars dotted the room matching the gray of the walls and floor.

I glanced around for our target then Ann whispered, “Where’s Morgana?”

I looked to my feet, and then to my teammates, but Morgana was nowhere to be seen. Ryuji nervously shifted while Ann spun around, looking for the disappearing feline magician. With our searching efforts clearly in vain, my ears were abruptly punctured by the tapping of fine dress shoes.

“Nice place, isn’t it?” Sam stepped out from behind a nearby pillar, glancing nonchalantly at us before continuing his spiel. “It’s amazing how nexuses seem to form around clusters of people:
schools, companies, train stations.” His eyes came to rest upon the three of us. My body tensed as I
realized our unpreparedness for this situation, and neither Ryuji nor Ann made any indication to the
contrary. Sam worked his jaw thoroughly as he chomped on a congealed piece of candy. “Although
I must say, I’m surprised to see you here. I thought the noble Phantom Thieves wouldn’t spy on an
innocent civilian such as myself.” He proudly gestured to himself. “It’s very suspicious. I tell you that
I’m investigating the Metaverse and suddenly the most renown Metaverse users are tracking me? I
hope you aren’t working for a rival company. That would be… messy.” His eyes flared with
intensity, something unprecedented for someone so haughty.

“What do we do?” Ann whimpered.

With a growl, Ryuji stamped his ground. “Cut the crap, man! If anybody’s been spying, it’d be you.
How would you have figured out our identities otherwise?” His hands tightened as he brought his
unrefined honesty to bear on the American.

“Oh, on the contrary,” Samuel replied, “Everything I did was perfectly legal. I only looked up public
records and pieced the rest together myself. Surely, it is obvious how simple that is. You on the other
hand… well…” Sam tugged on his coat as a smirk crossed his clean face. He reached into his pocket
and withdrew a phone, showing it to us. “I don’t imagine this virus was implanted by legal means.”
Ryuji was silent, and Ann and I could not refute him. Samuel sighed, casting his eyes downward.
“That’s a shame. I was hoping we could work together.”

Clearly irked, Ryuji stamped his foot down. “Us Phantom Thieves don’t work with corrupt guys like
you! Ha! I never even got one of your stinkin’ letters. I bet you never even bothered cause you knew
what the answer would be.” He glared at Sam, but the suit was unphased by Sakamato’s
presumptuous insults.

Samuel scratched his chin momentarily. “Hmm, that’s probably because you never received it. I
imagine your mother wasn’t very pleased with its contents. She didn’t seem happy when I handed it
to her.”

Ryuji shook, his teeth clenching together. “You son of a bitch!” He leapt forward, but I quickly
catch him by the arm before he could leave my side. He glared at me, his emblazoned eyes boring
holes into my heart.

“What is that?” Ann nervously asked.

Samuel curled his fingers as a smile broke through his hardened composure. The blade suddenly
began to levitate, standing upright like a compass needle. Sam rolled his tongue over his chew.
“Behold! Excalibur!” Black flame burst from Sam’s palm, encircling the knife and engulfing his
entire hand. The blaze continued to grow, swallowing Sam’s arm while giving his wild grin an
unsightly glow. The fire whipped around Sam’s body as Ryuji, Ann, and I gazed in horror. Black
petals of unhindered blaze enveloped Sam and his sword before exploding in a violent eruption.
With my eyes entranced by the bizarre dance, the wafting heat blinded me momentarily. As the cloud
of ethereal ash cleared, we saw Sam standing rigidly with a curved plate of metal covering his face,
not unlike a knight’s helmet. Several consecutive slits in the metal barely illuminated Samuel’s
shadowy eyes. He raised his right hand, and to my dismay, a giant blade appeared from behind
Sam’s back. The floating sword had grown tenfold and now appeared to be at Sam’s command.
Ryuji stepped back as the glinting steel hovered in the air. “Wh… what the hell is that!”

“Could it be…” Ann said in a hushed voice.

Sam thrust out his arm like a majestic showman. I watched the sword carefully, the blade twinkling as it slowly spun in the air. “Go, Excalibur!” At Samuel’s behest, the tip of the blade swung to the side, and the sword shot through the air like a falcon. An irritating hum emanated from the steel as it circled the three of us. The sword swiftly returned to its master, splitting the air as it moved.

Ryuji gasped. “Wait, that thing’s a Persona!?” In confusion, he glanced left and right. “Wait, where’s my Persona!?”

Seeing the hovering blade accompanied by Samuel’s menacing grin, I waved to my friends. “Guys, get out of here! I’ll hold him off.”

Ryuji scowled. “Like hell I’m gonna do that.”

“Yeah, there’s no way we’d leave you alone,” Ann added.

The corners of my mouth rose. “Who said I was alone?”

A disturbing cackle resounded from Sam. “So, you’ve decided to stand your ground… Good.” He gazed up longingly at his ethereal blade. “Cut him down.”

The blade’s point tilted toward my face. The steel vibrated gently, producing the same alarming hum as before. Fear bubbled up in my gut, and I froze in place. I inhaled once more before the air in my lungs was stilled. I closed my eyes.

The sword aligned perfectly with my skull. It shot forward with unfathomable speed, howling through the dry air. I heard Ann shout a warning, but I had resigned myself. In that moment, all the noise dissipated, and I felt a biting cold embrace me. The frost gnawed at my heart while pitch black clouds distorted my vision. I was not content to submit to this idleness, so I conjured a flame. The clouds and freezing cold gathered all their strength around me in response to my defiance. I opened my eyes and stoked the fire to see what might come of it.

The clamorous sound of steel against steel echoed in my ears. The glistening point of Excalibur rested mere inches from my face. My gaze settled on the two interlocked chains restraining the sword and holding it in place. The iron links jostled, clanging against the brightly polished steel of the blade. A deep, joyous laughter entered the chamber, and crimson light stained the room.

Ryuji exhaled. “Dude…”

I glanced at my hands, now clothed by gloves of the most vibrant red. A voice loudly addressed me following another chuckle. “YES… YOU REMEMBER THIS POWER, DON’T YOU? LET US SHOW THIS PRETENDER THE TRUE STRENGTH OF OUR WILL!”

“Holy shit, dude!” Ryuji cried.

Samuel stood firm. “Ah, now this is what I was looking for.” He pulled his arm backward, and Excalibur came spinning back to his flank.

I felt Arsene extend his wings behind me. I glanced to Ann and Ryuji. Aghast, they still retained their normal clothing. “FRIENDS, BREAK THE SHACKLES OF YOUR WAYWARD ISOLATION AND STEP FORTH TO WREAK HAVOK UPON YOUR FOE!” Clanging chains rattled around me, pulsing with arcane energy.
Another voice gurgled up from the depths of darkness. “WHAT GRUESOME RAID DO WE FIND OURSELVES IN THIS TIME, EH?” A shocking blast of flame swirled around Ryuji, and his clothes quickly morphed into his Thief attire. “LET’S WASTE NO TIME PLUNDERING THIS VAIN CAVALIER.”

Ryuji thrust his fist forward, Captain Kidd raising his cannon to match. “Aw, hell yeah!”

“YET ANOTHER FOOLHARDY SCHEMER STANDS BEFORE US?” A caressing fire wrapped around Ann’s body, replacing cloth with tight, red spandex. “WELL THEN GENTLEMEN, SHALL WE?”

With the entrancing Carmen at her side, Ann flicked her wrist, and her whip furled out with a snap. Her blazing eyes targeted Zimmerman without hesitation. “You made a big mistake, mister.”

[THE PHANTOM THIEVES -VS- THE KNIGHT PRETENDER]

I could barely contain my excitement. My smile was bold and unhindered.

“Magnificent,” Samuel chuckled quietly as he watched our Personas with awe, “Show me what they can do.”

To my surprise, Sam made no motion to protect himself. He maintained a defiantly stupid stance and asked us to attack. Following a moment’s hesitation, I realized he was truly oblivious or goading us into a trap. I caught glimpses of Ann and Ryuji at the corners of my eyes, both eager for my command. A devilish grin crossed my face. Nothing would stop us, no matter what Samuel thought he had in store.

We flew with renewed ferocity at the snap of my fingers. Ryuji bolted forward and sent Sam reeling with a quick jolt of lightning while Ann flipped overhead. Her crimson whip lashed out and coiled around Sam like a rocket-propelled python. Landing on her feet, Ann snapped her arm back and the tangled coil squeezed around Sam’s neck. Sam lurched backward as he reached for the reddened whip. Ryuji smiled as he gave the floating sword a slap and grabbed the hilt.

“Yoink,” he said as he plucked Excalibur from the air, “This is mine now.” Ryuji pointed the blade at Samuel before he could react. I walked up beside my friend while Ann maintained a tight leash on Sam. Ryuji was clearly enjoying his chance to flaunt over our opponent. “Alright… now how about you start talkin’.”

Sam coughed as his fingers pried helplessly at his flushed neck. “That was… quite impressive.” He feigned a smile although he was clearly struggling for air.

I kept my expression flat and serious. “Where’s Kamoshida?”

Sam wheezed. “Now that’s about what I was expecting…”

Ann yanked the whip, jostling Samuel. I could hear the leather struggling while he winced. “Talk,” Ann demanded.

Sam blinked twice before panning his eyes toward us like he was barely hanging onto consciousness. He grunted, “I don’t give out secrets for free…” He suddenly thrust his hand into his pocket, and I heard a metallic snap.

Ryuji planted his foot firmly onto Samuel’s gut. “Hey, what do ya think you’re doin’?”

I felt a strange surge of energy rush through my body, and then Samuel sighed. I watched as
Samuel’s body slowly dissipated as if he was only a mirage. Ryuji’s foot abruptly thudded to the floor, and Ann nearly tripped as her whip came loose. Ryuji stared at his empty, gloved hand where the sword had once been. We all gawked at the empty floor where Sam had just lied.


“Where’d he go?” Ryuji added. Ann examined the room nervously while Ryuji glanced back at our entrance. Despite our brief skirmish, the area was now deathly silent.

I glanced again at the open floor and noticed a glinting trinket Sam had likely abandoned in his escape. I kneeled to examine the object. “What’s this?” To me, it merely looked like a jumbled mess of frayed circuits and broken plastic. This indeed may have been what produced the metallic noise I had noted earlier.

“Find somethin’, Joker?” Ryuji said, turning to me.

I held the plastic object in my palm for Ryuji to see. He stared at it dumbfounded while Ann walked over to us. She glanced at the strange device before saying, “Huh, we should ask Futaba to take a look at this back at the hideout.”

I nodded. “Yeah, good idea,” Ryuji replied.

I placed the device in my pocket for later examination. Glancing around the empty room, I quietly mumbled, “Now where’s Morgana.”

Ryuji let loose a massive groan. “Hey, is it just me, or does it suddenly feel really muggy in here?”

Before I could answer a brief wave of nausea hit me. I winced, closing my eyes and gripping my forehead. I heard what sounded like a stack of cardboard boxes collapsing and then someone’s hands slammed into my chest. My body hit a hard wall with breathtaking force, and I heard Ryuji cry out.

“Ow! That’s my toe!” he shouted.

“Ah! Sorry!” Ann timidly replied.

I opened my eyes. Ann was standing directly in front of me with her hands firmly plastered on my chest while Ryuji, who was to our left, was cramped between us. I looked up and down and discerned that the three of us were now crammed in a small storage closet with a lone lightbulb hanging above us.

Ann blinked several times before she could speak. “Uhhhhh…” was the only noise she made as her face flushed red.

Ryuji grunted as he craned his neck. “Hey, bro. Not that this ain’t nice or anything, but do ya think you could open the door?” He reached across both of us and pointed to the doorknob at my right flank.

“R-right.” I turned the knob without hesitation but failed to acknowledge our precarious position. The three of us wailed as we tumbled out of the closet, boxes tumbling around us. I hit the cold, dirty concrete and regretted my shortsightedness.

I glanced at my bare hand, and I realized we were no longer in the Metaverse. Looking further upward, I was greeted by the unimpressed face of Morgana. Ryuji let out a huff of air, and I noted that a mop had landed awkwardly upon his head, giving him impressive locks. Morgana shook his head. Then Ann groaned, peeling her face from the floor, and I immediately noticed a mild abrasion
on her forehead.

“You guys really gave me a scare back there;” Mona hissed. He frowned at me although I had no cause for guilt. I scraped along the floor and brought myself to my feet. “Where were you guys!”

I took a beat to dust the muck of the subway tunnel from my body. Dazed, Ryuji tarried on the floor while Ann was quick to regain her dignity. I now gave my full attention to Morgana who impatiently awaited my reply. “In the closet,” I responded.

Mona sighed. “Well, while you were in the closet, tall, dark, and American ran back this way and out of the tunnel.”

“Huh?” Ann replied as she touched the scape on her head, “Sam came back this way?” She glanced at me. “He must have exited the Metaverse just before us.”

“Wait,” Morgana’s ears suddenly perked, “You guys were in the Metaverse?”

Ryuji finally rose from the dirt. “Ah, man, it was so cool! You shoulda seen it, Mona! Sam was all like wrrr-shoo! And then there was this sword that was all like… oooOOooOO!” He playfully circled his hand in the air. “And this guy was all like… grr. And then the sword was flyin’ at us! And then it was like whh-ching!” He made a cross with his arms. Puzzled, I turned to Ryuji. “And then it was like…” He puffed out his cheeks and spoke in a deep voice. “THOU ART DOOMED!” Ann now also stared wide-eyed at our shameless companion. “And I was like zap-zap! And Ann was like wuh-pshhh! And…”

I touched Ryuji’s shoulder. “Ryuji.”

He turned to me. “Huh? What?”

“Thanks for that.”

Morgana looked at me. “I have… no idea what he just said…”

I smiled. “I’ll tell you back at the hotel.”

I ran my fingers over the mysterious device in my pocket. Though our confidence had been bolstered significantly, we remained clueless with regards to the Metaverse and the question of Kamoshida. Nevertheless, Ann and Ryuji showed great enthusiasm to progress with the next step of our plan. Morgana, however, was disconcertingly quiet.

As we rode upward in the hotel elevator, I addressed my friend’s sedation. “Morgana, are you alright?”

“Huh?” the cat glanced at me, “Hm, it’s nothing. Like you said, we’ll talk about it in the hotel room.”

Ryuji stretched his arms. “Ohh, that really wore me out. I’m starvin’!” He looked at us. “Hey, I’m gonna grab some food. Anybody got a preference?”

“Ooh, something sweet for me!” Ann cried.

Morgana jumped to his feet. “I want seafood!”

Ryuji tucked his hands into his pockets. “So, sweets and seafood… what about you?”
I shook my head. “Anything’s good.”

“Riiight… I’ll remind you of that when you start complaining.”

I shot Ryuji a smug grin just as the elevator came to a halt. We stepped into the hall, and another companion caught our attention.

“Oh, there you are.” Phillip approached with an unsettlingly pleasant look etched on his face. “I was wondering why it was so quiet around here.”

Ryuji took one look at Phillip and turned around. “I’m going to get that food,” he aimlessly said, “See you guys in a bit.” He waltzed right back into the elevator and slapped the button.

Phillip cocked an eye at our skittish friend as he left. “What’s his problem?” He smiled proudly. “Oh, wait. He is the problem.”

Ann sighed. “Would you leave him be?”

Phil glanced at Ann, his gaze quickly softening. “Ann, are you alright? You seem to be bleeding a bit.” He pointed to his forehead.

Embarrassed, Ann glanced downward. “It’s nothing,” she said, touching the injury on her face, “I just tripped is all.”

Phillip straightened his back. “Well- that’s fine,” he solemnly replied, “As long as you two aren’t traipsing through storage closets.”

“Ohm, nope! Definitely not doing that!” Ann stammered.

I adjusted my glasses before adding, “It was her idea.”

Ann thrust her elbow into my arm. “Shut the hell up!” she hissed.

Befuddled, Phillip stared at me for a moment. He spoke slowly, “You really don’t give a shit what I think, do you?” I didn’t respond, but the childlike smile I maintained told Phil everything he needed to know. “Hmph,” he grunted, “You know, I like you kid. I really do. Just be careful with Miss Takamaki for me, alright? She acts tough, but she’s actually rather fragile.”

“You…” Ann’s words stuck in her throat.

Phil calmly adjusted his shirt. “Well, I’ll see you kids later, alright?” He strolled around us down the hall towards the stairs.

After Phillip had moved out of earshot, I turned to Ann who was burning. Her desperate, pouting face could not be refused, yet the cute act encouraged my cocky grin. She glared at me. “You! I should… guh… Stop smiling, dammit!”

“Ahem,” Mona spoke from his entrenched location on the floor, “Do you two need a moment?”

Ann glanced at the cat before returning her fury to me. “I don’t think all the moments in the universe could express what I’m feeling right now.”

I chuckled despite her tense stare. “That sounds vaguely romantic.”

Mona sighed at my lack of restraint. “I’ll be in the room.”
“Stop trying to embarrass me!” Ann snapped. My smile softened considerably as I relented. With a shrug, I signaled my concession. She sighed before brushing her stray bangs aside. “You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

“Not when I’m around you.”

Ann shook her head. “Heheh, there you go again. Always trying to act so charming.” A sweet smile erased her defensive aura. “You know, just between you and me, I kinda like it.” She ever so slightly tilted her head.

I glanced questioningly at her, but before I could extract further information, Lady Ann was already sauntering gracefully down the hall. Unwittingly my eyes followed her, the outline of her thin frame carefully directing my vision. Briefly, I felt a fluttering sensation in my chest as Ann shot a coy grin back to me. I looked down to my shoes, feeling the heat of embarrassment on the back of my neck. My breath flared along with the surging confusion in my mind. Another glance down the hall, however, dispelled my perplexity. In this game of probing emotions, I had been outplayed.

“So?” Futaba said as she beamed at me from the laptop screen, “You got something for me, right?”

With the laptop in hand, I held up the plastic device I had obtained from our botched espionage mission. Futaba’s eyes glowed like a pair of full moons. “Ooooh, gimme gimme! Hook that baby up!”

At her jubilant prompt, I linked the device to the laptop. Futaba was immediately enamored by its mysterious contents, and she quietly began analyzing the data. Her brow furrowed as the hues of the screen shifted across her glasses. I decided to allow her some peace while she worked, so I set the laptop aside.

I turned to my waiting friends, and Ryuji thrust a box of food in my direction. “I didn’t know what you wanted…” he said, munching on a battered cut of fish, “So I got you a variety meal.”

“As long as it’s not beans,” I replied as I took the box.

“Unfortunately, there were no beans on the menu.”

Morgana planted himself on the bed. “How… disappointing.”

“I know, right?” Ryuji replied, “Here’s yours, Mona.”

A platter of small, succulent fish cuts landed in front of Morgana. “Aw, this looks delicious!” He cooed happily as he elevated a dripping bite to his mouth. His tiny teeth tore apart the tender flakes with ease. “It is delicious!” Mona’s cheeks puffed with joy.

Ryuji tossed another bite into his own mouth. “Heheh, it’s pretty good, huh?” He flashed a wide smile in my direction.

“It’s sooo good!” Ann squealed from across the room with overbearing enthusiasm. I cocked my head at her abrasive tone. Ryuji glanced questioningly over his shoulder while Mona paused his feasting to address Ann directly.

“Lady Ann, is everything alright?” Morgana asked.
Ann kept her focus on her food although she shook her head. “I’m fine.”

Ryuji stared at Ann with unusual puzzlement. He belabored his thoughts before speaking. “Ann, are you... are you... are you crying?”

“What?” she retorted, “It’s really good food, okay?” She glared halfheartedly at Ryuji through glazed eyes.

“Pfft!” Ryuji snorted as he turned his disdained face back to his meal, “It’s not that good.”

“Yes, it is!” Ann insisted, “These are the best...” She held up a sugar-coated ball of dough between her fingers. “…whatever these are... I’ve ever had!” She immediately pressed the gooey mass between her glossed lips.

“Yeah, whatever...” Ryuji continued. I took a seat on the other bed and opened my own steaming box of fish. Our room transitioned to a still quiet as we occupied our mouths with the buttery fillets at our fingers. Nonchalantly watching my friends relax, a jolt of energy ignited my heart. Our comradery was beginning to catch up to me. Seeing Morgana’s content expression, enduring Ryuji’s flippant remarks, and admiring Ann’s flammable personality, I felt at home. Even Futaba’s feverish key tapping put me at ease.

Nevertheless, a thief is rarely in want for a reminder of his outcast status. Ryuji’s phone buzzed, and he withdrew it while maintaining a tenuous grip on his food. His face sagged.

“Is that your mom?” I asked.

His eyes didn’t leave his phone. “Y-yeah,” he said plainly. With a heavy sigh, Ryuji shook the worry from his mind and slotted the phone back into his pocket. Still, he couldn’t properly focus with such concerns inhibiting his eating. I kept my eyes on him despite his feigned indifference. Eventually, Ryuji’s composure broke. “Do you think she knows?” he asked solemnly. My eyes met his as Ryuji gradually accepted the possibility. “About me bein’ a Phantom Thief?” The corners of his mouth twitched while he stared at me as if I possessed the final word on his situation.

Ann released a derisive laugh. “Ryuji, I’m surprised the whole world doesn’t know you’re a Phantom Thief.”

Morgana chuckled. “It wouldn’t be the first time you’ve gotten into trouble either.”

“Yeah...” Ryuji quietly replied. Morgana’s cheery face quickly faded in lieu of one of Ryuji’s abrasive retorts. Ryuji set his food aside and walked from the bed to the wall. He leaned his head against it, propping himself on his forearm. “Dammit...”

“Hey,” Mona began, “You know your mom would be real disappointed if she could see your mopey attitude right now.”

“Tch, easy for you to say,” Ryuji said as he craned his head back in exasperation, “You ain’t got a mom who’s worried about you being a criminal.”

Mona glanced down momentarily before continuing. “It’s true that Phantom Thieves operate on the dark side of the law, but we’ve done nothing to be ashamed of.”

Ann nodded. “Mona’s right. If we hadn’t done what we did, just think of all the people who’d still be suffering.”

Ryuji peeled himself away from the wall, reluctantly nodding. “Still, this isn’t exactly a career with a
“We just need to focus,” I added, “We aren’t just playing around. We’re doing something your mom can be proud of.”

“Damn, when you put it that way, makes me feel like some kinda hero.” Ryuji smiled.

“Oh, god,” Morgana interjected, “You’re building up his ego again.”

Ryuji cast a sideways glance at the cat. “Look who’s talkin’.”

“Huh? I don’t have an ego,” Mona insisted.

A stifled snicker attracted my attention to the laptop. Futaba couldn’t hide her smug grin.

“H-hey! Don’t laugh!” Mona cried.

Futaba shook her head. “Sorry, I can’t help it.”

“So, find anything yet, Futaba?” Ryuji asked.

Futaba pressed her glasses onto her face. “Oh, I finished a while ago.”

“Woah, for real!?"

“Mhm,” Futaba replied with a patronizing nod, “Though, there isn’t much data. Whatever this device did, it certainly doesn’t work now.”

“Oh…” Ryuji sighed. “But you did find something, right?”

“Of course! I had to sift through a ton of broken code, but the device seems to be related to Metaverse travel.”

“How’d you figure that out?” Mona asked.

“I didn’t,” Futaba replied, “I’m just making a guess based on labels in the code, and I couldn’t say anything definitively without examining the components of the device in person. That said, it seems likely this is what put you guys in the Metaverse.”

Morgana quieted. “Except me…”

“That’s great,” Ryuji responded, “Buuut do you have anything more useful?”

“Well,” Futaba continued, “There’s a lot of communication logs. I think, in addition to its primary purpose, this device also functioned as a sort of Metaverse communicator.”

Ryuji’s eyes slowly glazed over. “A Metaverse communicator?”

Futaba adjusted her glasses as she glanced to Ryuji. “Someone may have been using the device to send and receive messages from within the Metaverse.”

Ann’s eyes widened. “People can do that now?”

Futaba grinned. “There is some very interesting information in these messages. I’ve even got an address for one Suguru Kamoshida.”

Ryuji straightened like a board. “You should’ve started with that!”
Futaba giggled. “It’s not every day I get to hold you in suspense like this.”

“So, you really know where he is?” Ann asked, “Is he being guarded or anything?”

“Dunno,” Futaba replied, “Message just says he was moved to… Here, I’ll send you guys the address.”

Our phones beeped simultaneously. “Woah!” Ann shouted, “That’s pretty close by.”

Ryuji shot me an eager grin. “Whatdya think? Should we give this to the police?”

Glancing at the address again, I knew skepticism was written on my face. “Maybe we should make sure Kamoshida is actually there first.”

“Hm, smart,” Ryuji said, “Might need some evidence to convince the police.” He glanced to his stack of belongings piled next to his bed. “Hey, let’s check the place out tonight before he slips away again.” I nodded.

Given our transient state of being, we were swiftly prepared for a reconnaissance mission. I allowed Ryuji and Ann to mingle in the hallway as I made the final preparations. Bunking with Ryuji had a messier atmosphere than I would have liked. While I tossed some stray trash, I noticed Morgana sulking on the bed.

“What’s up?” I asked.

His frown wavered as he turned his face from me. “I can’t go into the Metaverse.”

“And?”

“I’m not going with you. If you guys get into a fight, I’ll just slow you down.”

I frowned. “You’re a part of the team…”

“It’s fine,” Mona insisted, a slight hint of his former confidence returning, “I’ve been out of practice for a long time is all. I just have to figure out my own way back in, and I’ll be showing you guys up in no time.”

“R-right,” I timidly scratched my neck, listening to Mona talk himself out of depression.

“You guys go on ahead,” he continued, “I’ll keep an eye on things here while I…” He paused briefly before focusing on me. “While I do some training.”

With a subdued smile, I conceded. “Alright.”

Ann, Ryuji, and I waited in the shadows of an alleyway just across the street from an abandoned apartment building. The sky was darkened with tumultuous clouds dumping black raindrops into the scantly lit roadway. As I looked across the puddles to our target, the falling droplets glinted in the distant streetlight. Despite our moderate shelter, I could feel the elements beginning to soak into my jacket.

A taxi had brought us to the fringe of Paris to this dark and dreary neighborhood. The disrepair of the shops and homes suggested a declining trend for this locale, but the absence of people left a more substantial impression. The ugly apartment building which supposedly matched the address showed no sign of vitality.
Ryuji impatiently tapped his foot while we monitored the ghostly building. The constant droning of cascading water attracted my vision upward. I noted the dripping gutters above us and witnessed the overflow plummet onto Ryuji’s hood. The instant water touched Ryuji’s face he growled.

“Eff this!” he hissed. Ryuji pulled his hood tight and stepped out of the alley.

Ann reached after him. “Ryuji!” she cried, “Get back here!”

Ryuji glanced back at us, shrugging. “If nobody’s here, we’re gonna have to check anyways. I ain’t waitin’ around for nothin’ to happen.”

I frowned as Ann turned to me. “What should we do?” she asked.

Ryuji trudged over the damp road, the inconsistent lights drawing him in and out of shadow. I glanced at the bleak apartment, but it bore no warning. “Let’s go.”

Ann and I hurried through the rain until we had caught up with Ryuji. The apartment building itself was not overly large, but it possessed several stories. We approached the rusted entrance, and Ryuji gently pushed through the door. Normally, I might have inquired about the lock on the inner doors, but Ryuji walked through the second doorway with ease. I cast Ann a nervous glance, but she was presently concerned with draining the water from her jacket. She glanced up and gave me a warm, reassuring smile despite my doubts.

We walked into the complex, and a musky, mildew-laced scent greeted us. Ryuji made a revolting noise as he coughed and laughed simultaneously. Ann sneezed as the waking dust rose around us.

“Hey! Quiet!” Ryuji chided.

Ann shot him a glare of disbelief. “You’re the one making all the noise!”

Rolling my eyes, I jockeyed myself between my friends. “C’mon, the apartment is up a few floors.” I brought out my phone and activated its light.

We crept up an old, dirtied staircase while the sound of rain quietly pattered. Focusing on the climb only heightened my senses, and I began noticing our hands grazing against the walls and railings. Additionally, the give and take with each stair frightened me. My leg seemed to break the steps a little more on each successive move. The creaking noises also clearly bothered Ryuji and Ann.

“Dammit, how much further does this go?” Ryuji huffed.

Just as my patience was wearing thin, we arrived at our floor. Thankfully, this level was less dusty, and a lingering smell of paint obscured the stink of the lower levels.

Ryuji was quick to notice the difference. “Somebody must’ve been remodeling…”

I ignored his flippant comment and began looking at the room numbers. The light of my phone glinted on the metallic plates. I followed the id’s to Kamoshida’s supposed room, but I was doubting that claim.

Without a thought, I grabbed the knob, and, to my surprise, it opened. Once inside, the shabby, greyed-out interior of the apartment didn’t inspire my confidence though Ryuji swiftly began a search. He plodded from one end of the room to the other with minimal restraint. Ann and I quietly stood in the entryway watching Ryuji rummage through the nonexistent décor. The eerie marks of long disposed furniture framed the apartment like a murder scene, but I sensed that a murder had yet to take place. Ryuji meandered back into the living area after a minute, scratching his head.
Naturally, there was nothing to find.

I closed my eyes as a frown overtook my face. Ryuji said, “I guess there’s… nothing here.”

Ann nervously rubbed her hands together. “Hey… guys, can we go now? This place is giving me the creeps.” The infrequent noises of the abandoned building had her glancing around at even the slightest disturbance.

Ryuji looked to the ceiling, vainly searching for any clue. “Aw, man, I don’t get it. This doesn’t make any sense!”

My nose suddenly twitched at an abhorrent sensation. “Do you smell that?”

“What?” Ryuji asked, “Paint?”

“No,” I replied, now glancing around suspiciously myself, “It’s stronger.”

Ryuji sniffed curiously. “Uh, yeah, that does smell kinda weird…”

Ann shook her head in exasperation. “Aw, c’mon guys. Let’s go!” She swiftly walked back to the door.

Ryuji and I gave each other a dismissive glance before conceding to Ann. “Alright, I guess,” Ryuji stated.

Ann grabbed the knob and turned it quickly. The kinetic sound of the jiggling lock abruptly brought my fear to life. Ann frantically jostled the knob to little effect.

“I-it won’t open!” A hint of terror crept into Ann’s voice.

“Did ya like… mess with the lock?” Ryuji asked, confused.

“No…” Ann whimpered. She tried the knob a few more times, each hit smithing out a more poignant fate.

Ryuji stepped to the door in frustration. “Let me try it.” Ann retreated to my side as Ryuji fiddled with the knob momentarily. I noted Ann’s trembling body, but I could not offer any encouragement. I was only just beginning to understand the situation, and my nose didn’t like it. After manipulating the lock a few times, Ryuji lost patience. “Dammit! What’s wrong with this thing!?” He took a step back and then thrust his shoulder into the door with a snapping bang.

Ann jumped as the sound reverberated through the building. Unphased, Ryuji bashed the door again, the frame heaving under his strength. “C’mon, dammit! Open!” He thrust himself at the door again and again, but it would not budge. Eventually, he tired himself. He breathed heavily as he hunched over in the hall. “Whoo, damn door! Uhg, I gotta take a break…” Ryuji slumped down against the wall and hung his head.

My dead eyes stared at Ryuji’s motionless body. I took a few moments to process that he was unconscious. Once Ann realized, she was not calmed whatsoever. She ran to his side and began frantically shaking him.

“Hey, Ryuji!” Ann cried, “Ryuji! Are you alright!?” The shrill fear in her voice was a potent poison in my soul, and the sound of Ann hyperventilating sent a chill down my spine. Her trembling hands struggled to get any sign of consciousness out of our friend, but she was beginning to succumb as well. “Dammit!” Ann whined, “Why did you have to get us into this mess, Ryuji…” She fell to all
fours as she slowly made her way towards me. “Stupid Ryuji,” she mumbled. Ann then glanced up at me with a drunken bitterness on her face. “And you!” She pointed a finger at me, her eyes narrowing. “Fuck you.” I blinked, but Ann showed no interest in my reaction. She yawned. “I’m gonna take a nap.” Then Ann gently laid her head on the wood floor, and I knew she was unconscious.

Adrenaline flooded my veins as I looked at the still bodies of my two friends illuminated in the white light of my phone. The only thing I could do to keep from breathing was to focus on finding some escape. My mind flew through options: the Metaverse, a weapon to break the door, a window. I latched to the last idea, and I sprinted into the adjacent room. At the rear, the dim light of a window provided my sole salvation. I frantically leapt through the air, doing what I could to conserve breath. I dug my nails under the glass, but it would not budge. I looked for locks, but I could find none. I exhaled.

Knowing this was my only chance of escape, I tightened my fist and swung my arm. Pain shot through my knuckles as they collided with the resistant glass. The frame vibrated at my touch, yet it did not crack. Bracing my pulsing hand, I resolved to hit the glass again. Smack! I could see tiny white fractures beginning to form in the thick glass. Whack! The crack expanded, giving me a glimmer of hope. Crack! I heard the glass fracture, but my vision began to distort. Thwack! The white cuts in the glass now merged with the speckles in my vision. Tap! My fist didn’t do anything that time. I raised it again, but this time I felt my hand slip backward. My body slumped as my consciousness failed. The light of my phone filled my vision, and everything became white.
Visions of Truth

Chapter Summary

The Thieves learn of strange truths.

“Are you still sleeping? C’mon, get up! Your friends are already here.” A warming voice echoed in my ears at the start of a new day, and gentle morning sunlight graced my body through my lone window. The old, creaky steps wined as my caretaker descended. Thrusting bed sheets aside, I came to my feet with a rush of energy.

Morgana greeted me with a confident smirk. His tail flicked from side to side like a metronome. “Everyone’s gathered downstairs.”

I donned the appropriate day clothes before heading down with the cat. The delightful aroma of finely brewed coffee matched the tranquil scene before me. “Ah, there you are.” Makoto smiled pleasantly at me from the booth.

“Sleeping in, as usual,” Haru added with an endearing giggle.

“Yo.” Ryuji greeted me nonchalantly from his lax seat at the bar. He had a flashy magazine scrunched in his hands.

“Makes me kinda jealous…” Ann said, pouting.

“Ann, you should have some coffee.” Yusuke sat next to Ryuji, drinking some hot beverage of his own. “I feel that even the most rushed mornings can be transformed into a serene experience with just a sip of Boss’ rejuvenating liquid perfection.”

Ann glanced quizzically at him. “Uh… I think I’m good.”

Morgana pounced onto the table. “Alright, listen up everyone! We’ve got some business to take care of.”

Ryuji tossed his magazine down amid the group, his face turning grim. “I’m sure everyone’s seen the article by now. Some reporter’s accusing the Phantom Thieves of bein’ responsible for the recent crime surge.”

Futaba, who was slouched over the back of the booth, added, “They’re even suggesting that the Phantom Thieves “incite people to do evil deeds”.”

Makoto’s gaze hardened. “How can the media say such things when the people know we stand for justice?”

Haru frowned. “This is unacceptable. We have to do something about this.”

“Is this really what we get…” Ann asked, “after everything we’ve done to make life better for them?”

Yusuke crossed his arms. “We must put an end to this corruption where it stands.”
“Whoever this reporter is…” Ryuji continued, “He’s dishing up total bullshit! I think he needs a change of heart!”

Morgana nodded. “His heart and everyone in the whole damn publishing company if needs be.”

Ryuji turned to me. “So? What’dya say, leader?”

I looked around me, noting faces filled with malice and pride. I plucked the magazine from the table, but instead of words, I saw vile corruption: a sevenfold crime deserving punishment. The willful arrogance of these people incited retribution, and I felt a power within me rising to meet this rebellion. I opened my mouth to speak, and sound escaped my lips, yet I knew not the source of my words. "Rebels who dare defy our rule... You shall perish."

Air flooded into my lungs with a wailing gasp. The warmth of a family I abandoned still lingered on my skin, but the cold taste of despicable words left an enduring bitterness. Staring at a blank, unremarkable ceiling, I touched a finger to my tongue. The salty sensation indicated that my oral appendage was still intact. “Just a dream…” I murmured to myself. The hollow words did nothing to ease my racing heart. That god, I dare not speak his name, he was real, and I ended him. There is nothing to fear from dead gods.

My chest heaved a breath of relief, and I turned my attention to my surroundings. A cold, sterile cube made my current chamber. One metal chair sat against the wall, and a single metal slab provided a door. The cot I woke upon had no additional coverings, but I now noticed my leg had been cuffed to the bed. I took a deep breath of the odorless air and reflected on the circumstances that brought me here.

I had clearly been goaded into a trap by Zimmerman. It was foolhardy to follow the data he had left behind, perhaps more so to believe he would share any. Nevertheless, I was alive. Though I feared for my friends, I could only assume they were being held under similar circumstances. Answers would not be born from speculation, so I waited.

Moments of stilted breathing turned to minutes; minutes turned to tens of minutes. 20, 30, 40 minutes might have passed, but I could not tell. The adrenaline in my veins stretched each second to the infinite degree, yet counting time seemed to accumulate hours. Just when my mind was slipping into madness, I grasped muffled voices outside of my cell.

“What the hell were you thinking!?” a decidedly irritable voice shouted.

“I aimed to bring them here, and I did just that,” another voice replied.

“You said you were just going to talk to them!”

“I did… things just escalated a little.”

“A little!? I read the report; you tried to kill them!”

“They seemed to handle it fine.”

“That is unacceptable!”

“It’s over now. They’re here.”

“Listen, you put them in danger again, and I’ll walk out of here.”
The other voice was quiet.

“If this is just some game to you, we don’t need to be a part of it.”

“Hmph, one hour.”

The noise in the hall faded, and I sat up to monitor the steel door. An electronic buzz echoed through the thick metal followed by a mechanical whir. The door opened slowly with apparent reluctance. I had some inkling of my visitor’s identity, but my capture had left me in an unreliable state. A pair of sturdy combat boots tramped into my room. The camouflaged slacks provided cause to reexamine the thin, shapely frame in front of me.

“Heh, this is quite the reversal.” Makoto laughed as she averted her eyes from my subjugated person.

A friendly smile crossed my face. “Maybe when I start following you around Shibuya.”

Makoto shot a surprised glance at me before adopting a pleasant smile of her own. “Your nerves are as strong as ever I see.” She cleared her throat. “I suppose you’ll be wanting an explanation for all this…”

“How are the others?”

Makoto’s tense demeanor eased a bit. “Well, I haven’t visited them yet, but they’re alive at the very least.”

“I knew that much. I’m pretty sure Ryuji is immortal.”

“Ha, right, on that note…” Makoto gave me an uncertain look. “You guys have been getting into quite a bit of trouble from what I’ve heard: sneaking onto private property, hacking phones, even some fighting in the Metaverse. Congratulations, by the way. I haven’t actually managed to reawaken my Persona yet. That aside, I must apologize for not advising you regarding Samuel Zimmerman. Had I any knowledge of his insane plans I would’ve immediately warned you.” She closed her eyes and bowed her head.

Makoto’s somber apologetics strained my fatigued mind. “What’s going on, Makoto?”

Makoto grimaced. “I… I work for Sam. He’s personally overseeing the Metaverse research operation here at…” She laughed suddenly. “I guess I’m not allowed to tell you where we are.” She sighed heavily as she attempted to conceal her embarrassment. “Anyways, Samuel recruited me from my school, and he’s been trying to contact the other Thieves since. As for why he attacked and kidnapped you, he still has a lot to explain in that regard.” She frowned.

“Seems like quite the character.”

“He’s actually a very relaxed person when he isn’t using his Persona. That’s why I joined. There are some very dangerous things happening in the Metaverse, and this seemed like the best chance to stop them.” Makoto’s pleading voice caused me to wince in pain. I stroked my head tenderly. “Oh, I didn’t mean to overwhelm you,” she continued, “Here, let’s get you something to eat, and then you can see the others.”

“Sure,” I replied, exhaling, “Just take off my cuff first.” I raised my chained leg.

Makoto’s face filled with fierce bewilderment. “They chained you to the bed!? In a locked cell!?” She clasped her hands on her face. “What the hell is wrong with these idiots? It’s not like you’re a danger.”
I smirked. “Tell that to Sam when you ask about our fight.”

Makoto presented a new room to me, one with a long black table. At the back beyond the table, dim lighting barely illuminated an intriguing console. The oversized computer supported an oblong structure spanning the width of the room with a dark red ocular marking its center. I stepped into the shady meeting room, and Makoto left me to gather our friends.

Glancing around, my eyes glazed over the perfectly smooth stone walls to a colorful insignia hanging over a conjoined corridor. The English letters “USEI” arced over a depiction of a bald eagle, half of which was painted with negative coloring. I squinted at the foreign regalia and then heard a strange hum from the back of the room.

I turned my head to the peculiar machine stowed at the end of the large table. A gleam in the red light of its bulbous “head” caught my attention. Either nutritional deprivation had taken a toll on my psyche, or that menacing red light was watching me. I sighed, shaking my head. Every little detail of this bizarre place seemed to hide overwhelming nightmares. I decided to accept whatever madness was creeping around in my head for now.

I placed my fingers on the dark granite table and traced the edge as I walked along its side. The surface was absurdly clean, polished even. The alien nature of this facility towered over me once I had reached the end of the table. Looking up, the crimson eye stared directly at me. My brow lowered, but I didn’t have time to question it.

The main door of the room opened again, and Ann came screaming in. “Oh my God! You’re alright!” she shouted. Despite my quiet disposition, she swiftly wrapped me in a warm hug. “I was so worried.” I felt her cold tears dampen my shoulder.

I gently returned the embrace. “Glad you’re okay.”

Ryuji strolled up to us, his hands lazily tucked into his pockets. “Pfft! Ya gonna cry for him but not for me?”

Ann released me, glancing back at our bullish friend as she wiped a tear from her quivering eyes. “Sh-shut up.” She grabbed Ryuji’s collar and yanked him closer.

“Woah!” Ryuji cried.

Ann locked the two of us in her arms. “Never scare me like that again, okay?”

Ryuji frowned at his predicament. “It wasn’t that bad,” he insisted.

Ann giggled. “Aw, c’mon. You were super panicked a minute ago.”

“I- I was not!” Ryuji struggled to suppress his growing joy.

“Liar!”

Ryuji glanced at me. “Alright, so I might’ve been a little worried.”

I snickered. “Good to see you too.”

A suppressed chuckle called our attention to Makoto, who was smiling at our group huddle.

“Ah! C’mon, get over here, Makoto!” Ryuji shouted, “We know you want in on this!”
Makoto waved her hand at us. “Oh, that’s quite alright. I don’t think it’d…”

“C’mon, Makoto!” Ann squealed, “Join us.”

With a smile, I added, “This is a mandatory team huddle.”

Makoto sighed. “Oh, alright.” Reluctantly, she inserted herself into the fray, and Ann squeezed us all together.

I was uncertain of our present goal, but I was happy to participate. A subverted chuckle crept through my crooked lips. Ryuji returned an excited grin, seeing my whimsy as a challenge. He pressed his arms around Makoto and Ann, tightening our group further.

Ann squealed, and Makoto shot him an unamused glare. “Hey. You better watch your hands.” Ryuji’s eyes opened wide as his face paled. He made to apologize but not before Makoto could return a malicious smile. I felt the air erupt from my lungs as Makoto applied lethal force into our group.

“Oomf!” Ryuji’s face gained a bluish hue. Though we were uncomfortably close, Ann couldn’t help snickering at Ryuji’s discomfort. Makoto’s crazed exterior broke also, and she laughed. Her iron grip loosened, Ryuji broke from the group and drank a lung full.

I shook the light-headed sensation from my brain as my breathing returned to normal. Ann and Makoto continued their snickering, and I quickly caught the humorous air. Despite being the target of abuse, Ryuji also joined our laughter once he had regained his awareness. Our clamorous amusement echoed through the room. It was then I noticed another figure enter.

Sam was holding a cup of coffee and stirring it nonchalantly. He glanced bittersweetly to our group as he said, “Well, isn’t this lovely.”

Ryuji’s expression rapidly dried. “Of course, you’re the one who kidnapped us.” He gave Sam a confrontational stare.

Samuel glanced to Ryuji before rolling his eyes. “I prefer the phrase “provided with an involuntary change of scenery”.” He took a seat on the opposing side of the table, placing his cup on the dark granite.

Ann’s ire could not be hidden. “How gracious of you.” The biting snap in her voice was painful for me as a bystander.

Sam sighed as he stirred his coffee. “Have a seat, would you?” He gestured idly to the chairs near us.

“Eff that! No way I’m gonna sit down with you!” Ryuji shouted, pounding a fist on the table.

Makoto raised her hands defensively. “Guys, calm down,” she pleaded. She walked to the table’s end and pointed to Sam. “At least listen to what he has to say. It’s important.” Her soft, uncertain gaze gave the others pause for thought.

While Ryuji and Ann glanced around questioningly, I was prepared to act. “I’m listening.” I pulled out the chair in front of me and took a seat.

“What!” Ryuji cried, “You can’t be serious!”

I glanced at my friend. “Does it look like I’m serious?”
“I dunno,” Ryuji responded, “I can never tell with you.”

Ann sighed. “Fine. I’ll listen.” She pulled out her own seat.

Ryuji quietly glared at both of us. He growled. “Dammit! Fine! I’ll listen, but I won’t sit!” He pointed at Sam. “And you better start givin’ us some damn answers!” Seeing the three of us were open and listening, Makoto also took her seat at the table’s head.

“Yes, of course,” Sam replied, waving Ryuji off. “But first some coffee.” He raised the cup to his mouth and took a small sip. I stared in bewilderment as Samuel snatched his lips together repeatedly in disgust. “Oh, God, that’s bitter.” Sam set the cup aside and reached into his jacket, retrieving a silver flask. Ryuji glanced carelessly at me during the awkward delay. Unscrewing the cap of the flask, Sam poured a brown, viscous fluid into his mug. The palpable silence was cut momentarily by the sloshing liquid dripping into Samuel’s cup. Once he had finished, Sam took another sip of the coffee. Satisfied, he now turned to us with meek formality.

“My apologies. My manners seem to have left me in recent days. Nevertheless…” He sighed. “There is a reason for all of this.” He glanced between the three of us, searching for signs of receptiveness. “I suppose I should start with some official introductions. My name is Samuel Zimmerman, and I am the director of Metaverse research for USEI, that is United States Extradimensional Intelligence. We are currently located in one of USEI’s research facilities, the location of which I shall not divulge. Furthermore, you three are members of the Phantom Thieves, codenames: Panther, Skull, and Joker.” Sam folded his hands neatly, showing no pleasure in his speech; however, I noted Ann and Ryuji fidgeting uncomfortably.

“Now,” Sam continued, “Let’s discuss something of more importance.” He opened his jacket and withdrew a small case. Setting the furnished container on the table, Sam flipped the lid open with one finger. “This is Excalibur.” The white lights of the room gleamed over the blade’s silken surface, and we were quickly entranced by the weapon.

Ryuji leaned over the table. “Woah…” he mumbled.

“You will remember that Excalibur is the Persona I used in our prior engagement. However, the first thing you will notice about Excalibur is that it is indeed a physical object. This is not a circumstantial quirk but by design. You see, Excalibur is an artificial Persona. USEI has been working on harnessing the power of the Metaverse for several years, but we only recently uncovered the means to tease out these Personifications, if you will, without the need for a natural Persona user.”

Ann tilted her head sideways. “Wait, so anybody can use Excalibur?”

Sam nodded. “Theoretically, though I have yet to test it on the whole of humanity.”

“Tch, that doesn’t make any sense,” Ryuji said, crossing his arms.

Makoto looked disappointed. “Ryuji…”

Sam laughed to himself. “No, no… he’s right. Excalibur exists; this you know. But no one knows how to control Excalibur. It is indeed an entity of the Metaverse, yet it is not the true self of any person involved in its creation.”

I scratched my chin as I stared at the ornate and well-maintained blade. “You ordered Excalibur to attack me.” Sam looked at me, but there was no adversity in his eyes.

“Yes, and that’s quite… unprecedented,” he replied, “Being in direct contact with Excalibur has caused significant fluctuations in my mental state. I did intend to confront you in the Metaverse, but
my aggression was merely a product of this artificial Persona.”

Ryuji laughed haughtily. “This guy’s feeding us a bunch of bullshit. He’s just tryin’ to cover his ass cause he kidnapped us!” Ryuji’s fists tightened as he sent a heated glare to our unsettled host.

Sam nodded. “Of course, I doubted you would believe me. Nevertheless, you still illegally tapped my phone, giving me free reign to apprehend you.”

“Bullshit!” Ryuji shouted, “You tried to kill us!”

Ann sighed. “It’s not like we have evidence.”

Ryuji abruptly turned to her. “Huh?”

Sam smiled. “At least she understands the situation.”

Ryuji bore his teeth. “Fuck you, man! I don’t care what excuses you’ve got! There’s no goddamn way I’m gonna let you get away with attempted murder on my friends!”

Makoto pushed up from the table. “No one’s letting him get away with anything, Ryuji!” Her steady gaze caused Ryuji to waver. “Just listen, and then you can say your piece.” Makoto’s eyes were like lasers trained on Ryuji.

Ryuji couldn’t return her gaze. “Tch, let him talk then…”

Sam sighed. “Look. I’m not interested in justifying my actions to you all. We have far more important matters to discuss. There are evil people out there right now looking to abuse the Metaverse, and we need your help to stop them. If the Metaverse can be used to change one heart, imagine what would happen if someone could take control of them all.”

I could feel a knot forming in my gut. “We’d all be enslaved…”

Sam nodded. “That’s a very possible outcome. And I think we’ve recently discovered a lead on one such scheme.” He briefly glanced at the computer at the end of the room. “Did you want to explain this?”

I turned to the giant computer. The red ocular was clearly shifting between Samuel and the rest of us. I cocked my head, thinking to ask Sam about the strange machine, but I was interrupted.

“I’d be glad to,” a hauntingly familiar voice emanated from the computer, “Greetings, Phantom Thieves.”

Silence ensued as Ryuji, Ann, and I stared aghast at the talking computer. Its red eye met my gaze with startling readiness. I glanced at Sam, but he remained completely unenthused. Turning to Makoto, she only shrugged. I noted Ryuji’s amazed expression while Ann had turned completely pale.

“What?” Ann started.

“Dude,” Ryuji added, “No effin’ way!”

I gazed up at the bulky hardware. “Akechi?”

The machine mustered a calming laugh. “Yes, it is I. It’s been some time since last we met.” Ann, Ryuji, and I glanced hesitantly at each other.
“That irritating voice…” Ryuji continued, “It’s gotta be Akechi!”

Ann shook her head. “Well, obviously, you moron.”

Ryuji flailed his arms. “But I thought he was dead!”

“In all honesty,” the computer added, “That’s not an incorrect interpretation. I am but a shadow of my former self, retaining only fragments of my identity and being constrained entirely to this machine I inhabit.”

A moment passed while I processed this lathering of new information. I looked to Samuel. “Ok, explain this to me. How is Akechi here?”

Sam returned a proud smile. “Well, USEI had known about the Phantom Thieves for some time. The Thieves’ accolades had garnered them international attention, after all. Following the supposed suicide of the leader of the Phantom Thieves, USEI took it upon themselves to open a top-secret investigation into the matter. One of the first facts we uncovered was that a Goro Akechi had participated in the crimes of the Phantom Thieves to obtain evidence on behalf of the police. That alone was a ludicrous statement to us, but it also implied that Akechi had some knowledge of the Metaverse. So, we began a closer examination. Eventually, the trail led us to Masayoshi Shido, the clear mastermind of the various mental shutdown cases.” Sam glanced warily across the table as he cautiously scratched the back of his head. “I will spare you the details for the sake of brevity, but Shido became very concerned with his mental health thereafter. I suppose we have you Thieves to thank for that. During an extensive series of medical examinations, one of our operatives obtained a complete imprint of Shido’s cognition. The Akechi you can speak with here is an extrapolation of that cognitive data.”

Ryuji stared blankly at Sam. “Man, how am I supposed to take this guy seriously if I can’t understand a word he’s sayin’?”

Makoto sighed. “Just think of it as an Akechi from Shido’s brain.”

“But,” Ann stuttered, “If Akechi is just a cognition from Shido, then how does he know us?”

“Heh,” Sam scratched his cheek, “I was hoping to avoid the details. It’s not so simple. The real Akechi visited Shido’s cognition on several occasions, and with the trace elements he left combined with the structural data from Shido’s cognition, we were able to produce this replication. It is something akin to the Akechi shortly before his disappearance, and of course, he’s been a critical asset to us.”

“Quite shortly, I might add,” Akechi spoke up suddenly, “I even remember our battle in the belly of Shido’s Palace.”

“Welp,” Sam continued, “There ya go.”

Ryuji shook his head. “So, it’s basically Akechi… but he lived.” He sighed. “Guys, this is bullshit.”

Ann gripped her forehead. “Ugh, I’m so confused.”

“Huh, I’m surprised,” Akechi remarked. His single red eye glanced to Samuel. “I thought this would be a more emotional reunion, given our adversarial history.”

Ryuji scoffed. “Yeah, cause we were such great friends before…”

“Oh, I see. So, not only do you lack trust in the director and me, but you also have no interest in
rectifying our estranged relationship.” The computer buzzed as its red eye panned over the three of us. “Well, perhaps you’ll listen to the information we have regarding the recent disappearance of your Kamoshida.”

“So you did know something about Kamoshida!” Ann cried.

“It’s about time,” Ryuji concurred.

Nodding, I added, “Tell us what you know.”

“You’ve heard that Kamoshida escaped prison,” Akechi started, “Well, this is only half true. Kamoshida was assisted by Metaverse users, much like yourselves.”

“Damn! Nobody could find him cause he kept disappearing!” Ryuji shouted.

“That is a correct assumption although Kamoshida could never have entered the Metaverse of his own will. It is highly likely that the true culprits have discovered a way to enter the Metaverse without the need for a Palace.”

“That reminds me,” Ann said, “When Sam pulled us into the Metaverse, we weren’t in a Palace, were we?”

“No,” Sam replied, “Our Metaverse traversal tech does not require a Palace to be present though we can target such places directly.”

“Ya know,” Ryuji mindfully added, “We ended up in a closet when we came outta the Metaverse. If we weren’t in a Palace, how’d that big room get there?”

“The Metaverse is a terrifyingly chaotic place,” Akechi said, “It seems we have not even begun to tap the surface of its potential.”

“That’s just riveting,” I remarked, applying my most flattering smile, “But please tell us what happened to Kamoshida first.”

Akechi laughed pleasantly. “I see you are as singularly minded as ever.” He cleared his non-existent throat. “Very well. There are a very limited number of nation-states with the resources to carry out this operation, a number of which are directly involved with USEI. Thus, we have a prime suspect.”

Sam tossed a file across the table. “This man is Nikolai Androvsky, a kingpin amongst pro-Russian militants in the Ukraine and more recently the mastermind of the Russian Metaverse program.”

Ryuji scratched his head. “Say that again but without all the confusing words.”

Sam sighed. “This is Nikolai. He probably took Kamoshida. He works for Russia. Don’t you kids study the Russo-Japanese War?”

“The what now?” Ryuji started.

Makoto snorted. “You’ll have to excuse Ryuji. He’s got some catching up to do.”

Sam rubbed his eyes tenuously before continuing. “Nikolai has been running the Metaverse operation for several years. It is highly likely that he has access to tech comparable to our own.”

While Samuel spoke, I opened the file in front of me. A photograph of Nikolai was present along with various wordy documents. The dark-haired man had a sullen face, but a spiteful gaze kept his appearance intimidating.
“To all Metaverse researchers, the Phantom Thieves’ exploits provide a key pillar,” Akechi continued, “The link between the Thieves and Kamoshida is undeniable at this point, so Nikolai is aware of Kamoshida’s true nature, and he likely intends to exploit this fact.”

“What is he going to do with him?” Ann asked.

“We don’t know,” Sam interjected, “And we don’t want to find out. That’s where the Phantom Thieves come in.”

“What do you want with us?” I asked.

“It’s simple,” Sam went on, “Nikolai has a Palace. Since interrogating the real man is out of the question, his cognition is the only place we can safely gather intel. Our limited tools still struggle to combat cognitive beings, but the Phantom Thieves could easily infiltrate such a place.”

“So,” Ryuji interrupted, “You want us to do your job for ya, is that it?”

Samuel swallowed. “Essentially.”

I stared directly at our host. “And if we refuse?”

A minor sigh could barely be heard from Sam’s mouth. “Then…” He glanced uncomfortably to the side. “Then you all go home, and I will shortly tender my resignation as director of Metaverse operations.”

“What?” Makoto suddenly spoke up, “You’re quitting?”

Sam slumped in his seat as attention focus on him. “I’m out of options at this point. And the Metaverse business isn’t exactly good for my health.”

Ryuji shook his head. “You tryin’ to make us feel bad? That ain’t gonna work.”

Akechi responded. “Samuel is correct. Unfortunately, USEI operatives have no experience using the few artificial Personas we have. The Phantom Thieves are the only skilled Persona users we know of.”

“So that’s it?” My fingers steadily drummed on the table. “You’re just going to let this guy have Kamoshida?”

Samuel scoffed, a snide grin breaking his composure. “You think I give a shit what Nikolai does to some rapist from Japan? I don’t, and I know none of you do.” He scowled at us, but I remained steadfast. “No, the problem is that Nikolai is a madman and a Metaverse expert!” Sam’s voice rapidly escalated until it reverbered off the walls behind me. “He wouldn’t just break a piece of trash like Kamoshida out of prison for no reason! He’s planning something, and I’ll be damned if I stand by while that happens!”

Sam struggled to his feet, a sheen of sweat suddenly appearing on his face. He shakily wiped the sweat away as he glanced warily at each of us. After wetting his lips, Sam spoke to Makoto though his eyes drifted elsewhere. “Miss Nijima,” his words were interspersed with heavy breathing, “You may set your friends in a hotel for today. They have a little time to make their decision.” He snapped Excalibur’s case shut, tucking it into his jacket, and then he parted from the table. Sam paused briefly at the door, thinking better of his rapid departure. He turned solemn eyes toward us and said, “I apologize for the suddenness of my request, but we really do need you.” He inhaled as his gaze faltered. “Please consider my offer.” And with those words, Sam was gone.
Ryuji turned to me. “Am I missing something here? I thought he woulda threatened us or something.”

Makoto sighed. “I’m sorry about that. He’s been acting more unstable lately.”

Flustered, Ann added. “He seemed like he really wanted our help.”

“Yes, he’s...” Makoto sighed again though I sensed some pity behind her ashamed tone, “He’s worked up some mad theory that Nikolai is going to use the Metaverse to brainwash the entire world.”

Ryuji spun around. “Woah! For real? That’s super serious!” Ann covered her face with her palm.

Makoto didn’t flinch, instead adopting an educative voice. “Ryuji, you’re not supposed to take it seriously. Sam’s just become obsessed with his Metaverse research, and well... Nikolai is dangerous.”

“Indeed. He needs your help,” Akechi added.

“Oh, God!” Ann cried, “I keep forgetting that Akechi is here.”

I thought I heard the computer sigh. “Everyone does, heh,” Akechi replied, “After all, I’m just a tool to these government agents.”

I turned to Akechi. “Still a tool even in death I see.”

“Damn,” Ryuji whispered.

Akechi chuckled. “I do hope you’ll decide to join us. I think it’d be an enlightening experience for the both of us.”

“Hey, Akechi,” Ryuji interjected, “You know what kind of food they serve in a secret base like this?”

The gleaming red eye shifted to Ryuji, and I also peeked at my friend. “Hmm, Samuel often brings snacks into the labs, but I can’t say I’m familiar with the menu. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason.” Ryuji shrugged. “Just wonderin’ if they serve pancakes.”

“Ugh.” Ann buried her face in her hands.

“Huh, interesting,” Akechi replied, “Sam has been maintaining a high carbohydrate diet lately, so I wouldn’t be surprised to find such fine delicacies on the menu.”

I shook my head. “He’s messing with you.”

Ryuji smiled. “Hey, I was just...” Makoto’s hand slapped onto Ryuji’s face before he could continue.

“Not another word out of you,” she insisted, “Not until we leave the base.”

“So, Sam mentioned a hotel,” Ann inquired, “Do you have somewhere for us to stay?”

Makoto gradually released Ryuji’s bewildered face. “This is short notice, but we should be able to find something nearby. I could use the time outside anyways.”
Ann nodded. “Yeah, I need some time to register all this information.”

Feeling adequately bombarded with revelations, I also had a desire for a break. “Lead the way, Makoto.”

With a calming smile, she said, “Alright, follow me.”

The three of us trailed after Makoto, exiting the lonely conference room one by one. Being the last to leave the room, I glanced at the dimly lit table. The chairs were unceremoniously displaced, but the bulky computer was still fixed at the table’s end. Akechi’s red ocular vaguely traced my motions, and as I left the room, I heard a quiet, “See you soon, Joker.”

I sat in complete darkness, sensing the trembling reverbs in the vehicle underneath me. The bizarre tension of our silent drive cemented my displaced mentality. I awaited a sudden rush of air to jerk me back to my French hotel room, only to vaguely remember the details of the previous hour. However, that rushing realization never came. Instead, I heard Ryuji impatiently picking at his teeth, and the repeated clicking as Makoto signaled a turn.

Accompanied by a jolt of acceleration in our car, Makoto said, “Alright, you can remove your blindfolds.”

I peeled the black fabric from my face. Apart from the beige interior of the SUV, I noticed the sparse, brown landscape with tall, rocky hills covering the horizon.

Rather than admire our new surroundings, Ryuji began to interrogate the latest member of our party. “Hey, how come you don’t have to wear a blindfold?” He addressed Makoto.

I could no longer distinguish Makoto’s laugh from her abrasive scoff. “Because I already work for Samuel,” she said.

“Man, how can you work for that guy anyways? He seems crazy.”

“Well, the way I see it,” Makoto replied, “The Metaverse will exist with or without us, so it’s our duty as Persona users to protect it from those who would use it to fulfill their dark desires. Besides, Sam might be a bit unhinged, but at least he can keep a secret.”

Ryuji frowned. “Was that supposed to hurt my feelings? Cause I don’t care how many good traits your boss has, I haven’t tried to kill anyone.”

Makoto paused, clearly bothered by Ryuji’s harsh words. “It was just an accident. Excalibur is an unstable Persona.”

Ann, who was sitting beside Makoto, sighed heavily. “He didn’t exactly apologize.”

Ryuji shook his head, tempering his irritation while Makoto winced uncomfortably. We all sat in cumbersome silence for a moment. Exhaling, Makoto’s posture sagged. “I’m sorry.”

As he slumped into his seat, Ryuji crossed his arms. “Nah, it’s not your fault… forget it.”

Following the minor spat, we quieted. I took the opportunity to examine the passing cars backdropped by a cool blue skyline. The others also gradually noticed the vast open fields, and Ann soon brought a pressing question into the conversation. “Hey, Makoto,” she began, “Where exactly are we?”
“This is Nevada,” Makoto replied, “Southwest United States.”

Ryuji looked up to the clear skies. “Uh, anyone else wondering how the hell we got here?”

“Honestly,” Ann added, “I hadn’t even thought about it.”

“Yeah, this whole day’s been a huge information overload.” Ryuji slumped his head against the back of the driver’s seat. “I could really use Morgana’s help to explain all this shit.”

Hearing Ryuji’s words, a haphazard chuckle emerged from my mouth. I said, “We left the cat in France,” and everybody released some apprehensive laughter.

Morgana paced frantically around the cramped apartment. A fearful panic had set upon him, increasing exponentially with every hour of isolation. Though he glanced at the door hopefully, their extended absence indicated extreme peril for his friends. Morgana knew he would be utterly useless whatever danger they found themselves. As a mere feline, he had little power against an armed attacker, and furthermore, he had yet to find his Metaverse form. Morgana had many skills, but a soldier he was not.

Morgana suddenly held his head to the floor. He pawed at his scalp helplessly. The burden of inaction tormented him without end, yet he still required a plan. With the voice of his inner rebel screaming inside him, Morgana scraped the recesses of his mind for any trace of hope. He could not suffer a failure here.

He imagined the hideous wails of his friends: Panther crying in pain; Skull’s breath failing; Joker stark, raving mad. Mona’s mind bucked, filling with pain until a soft, quiet noise slinked into her ears. “Morgana…” Morgana opened his eyes and glanced around the still room. “Morgana,” a distance voice called to him from somewhere far, far away.

Abruptly, the electronic lock on the door buzzed, and Morgana shot into an upright position. The agitated voice of Phillip miraculously calmed his nerves. “How did you get to Nevada?” Phil trudged into the apartment, glancing only once at the downtrodden cat. He opened the closet to immediately retrieve a suitcase. Morgana also noted he was talking over his phone. “Ann, that doesn’t make any sense. What’s going on?” Hearing his friend’s name, Mona ran to Phillip’s side. “What do you mean you were kidnapped!?”

Morgana contemplated what he was hearing while Phillip listened. Mona mumbled, “What happened?”

“Ohuh,” Phillip sighed as he looked down at Morgana, “Why did they bring the cat anyways?” Ann replied, and he shook his head. “Yes, I’m sure many cat owners are friends with their cats, but that doesn’t mean you bring them on an international trip.”

Mona sighed. “Why did I have to be left with this guy?”

Phil continued mumbling agreements until he said, “I told you they would be trouble.” He flinched. “Don’t hiss at me! They’re the ones who got you into this mess.” Phillip tucked his phone between his shoulder and ear as he perused the various dresser drawers. “Um, no, I’m not going to be nicer to them. Being mean is my best quality.”

Mona sat in amazement. “Wow, this guy’s sassier than…”

“Really, Ann?” Phil continued, “Ugh, fine.” He tilted his head toward Morgana and began speaking
in a belittling tone. “Ann says, they’re fine, and you are coming with Phillip to Nevada.”

Mona stared bitterly at his newfound caretaker. He shouted back, “Ann, your agent’s a moron!”

Phil returned his attention to his phone. “Yeah, he says, he can’t wait to hit the casinos and to get some fatty tuna ready for him.”

Mona sighed, resting his dizzied head on the soft carpet. “This is gonna be a long flight.”

I leaned into the wooden bench as Ryuji plopped down next to me, stretching his own arms and legs like a beetle on its back. We took a moment’s rest just outside the motel Makoto had selected for our lodging. The waning sun cast deep shadows over the nearly vacant parking lot, yet the warm hues blended the grassy yard with the smooth asphalt. Despite the pleasant scenery and my fatigued mind, the unyielding heat of this alien country prevented me from nodding off.

Ryuji, however, had fortunate apathy for the distressing environment, fully committed to his peculiar thinking. “Today’s been one hell of a day,” he remarked.

I glanced wearily at him while I wiped some newfound sweat from my brow. “It’s been insane.”

My friend aimlessly examined the lot, only pausing to address me. “What do you think? Can we trust Sam?”

I shook my head. “No, not yet…”

“How, so you think he might be tellin’ the truth?”

I thought for a moment as I watched a large bird pass overhead. “Probably, but I don’t trust him enough to work with him.”

Ryuji nodded. “Hmm, it’s too much for me. I mean, this guy’s just makin’ Personas, plus he’s got robo-Akechi, then he needs our help for some reason. Ugh, it doesn’t make any sense; it’s hurtin’ my brain!” He raked his fingers across his dumbfounded face.

“Pff,” I let out a dry laugh, “Well, don’t think about it so much.”

Ryuji settled into his seat with a forceful grunt. “You’re right,” he replied somberly, “We should talk about something else.” He cocked his head sideways before finding a new baffling topic to distract himself. “So, are you and Ann, like, a thing now?”

“What?” I was uncertain I had heard him correctly.

“Or!” Ryuji continued, “Or… are you gonna get in with Makoto now that we’re here?”

“What are you…?”

“Wait! Don’t tell me you’ve been dating Haru the whole time!” Ryuji shoved a finger at me, his crazed face causing me to pull back.

I glared sternly at him as I pushed his hand away. “Ryuji, you better shut up before I give you another broken leg.”

Ryuji chuckled. “Aw, you’re no fun,” he insisted with a smile, “I’d play along if you asked me who I was dating.”
I stared flatly at my brash friend. “That’s because you’re single.”

“Heh, that’s what you think,” the haughty Ryuji said, “I’ve got girls eyeing me all the time. I’m hot merchandise.”

I pressed my glasses inward, uninterested by Ryuji’s bragging. “Mhm.”

His smile faded as he turned to me. “You don’t believe me, do you?”

“Not at all.”

“I swear, dude. Just the other day, the receptionist girl in our hotel was givin’ me the look.”

I smiled. “Well, you had better thank Ann for buying all your clothes.”

Ryuji suddenly looked disappointed with me. “God, I’m never talking to you again after this.”

Thankfully, Ann exited the motel at that time to save our conversation. “Hey, guys. I just got off the phone with Phillip. He’s going to bring Mona and all our stuff over tomorrow.”

Ryuji sighed. “Was that really necessary? I mean, we don’t know if we’ll be around much longer.”

Ann seated herself beside me. “Well, Makoto said we’ve got a couple days to make our final decision, so we might as well be prepared.”

Ryuji shook his head in dismay. “Great, so, now I’m not only going to be dealing with psycho Sam but also that asshat Phillip.”

I chuckled. “What is with you and not getting along with everybody?”

Ryuji glared at me. “I was getting along fine with you until just a minute ago.”

Ann released a calm sigh before she asked, “What’d you do this time, Ryuji?”

Ryuji sat up straight. “I was just asking the important questions. Speaking of which, Ann, are you dating someone?”

Ann stretched out her pale legs in the golden sunlight. “Why? You lookin’ for a pity date?”

Ryuji snorted. “No…” He shook his head. “It’s been a while, so I’m just wondering if you’ve got a boyfriend.”

“No…” Ann flashed a coy smile, “But there’s someone I’m interested in.”

Sensing a ploy, I neglected Ann’s words; nevertheless, Ryuji’s ears perked up. “Oh? Well, ya gotta tell us about the guy now.”

Ann lightly pressed a finger to her lips. “Well,” she began, “For starters, he’s always got a fierce look of determination in his eyes.”

Ryuji tilted his head. “Uh, okay…”

“And…” Blush appeared in Ann’s cheeks as she gently caressed her face. “…he’s always kind and gentle.”

“Hmm, right…”
Ann pressed her hands against her legs and curled her fingers. “And he’s got lush, black, matted hair.”

“Uhuh…” Ryuji’s eyes flicked towards me.

Ann squeezed her own sides as she stared longingly into the distance. “And I love the way he meows at me.”

As I ineffectively held back my laughter, Ryuji stared blankly at Ann. “What!” he shouted, “Is this some kinda sick joke?” His disgusted face was marred by his gaping mouth.

Ann beamed at him. “I dunno, but your face is pretty funny.” She giggled, and I chuckled too.

A grumbling noise resounded from our friend as Ryuji slumped back into the bench. “Why are you guys so lame?” A jingle then returned our attention to the motel entrance. Makoto appeared from the entryway with a dangling key in hand. Ryuji brightened considerably upon seeing her. “Hey Makoto, do you have a…?”

“Don’t even ask.” Makoto incapacitated the discussion before it could even begin.

Ann snickered. “I think we’ve all outgrown Ryuji’s antics.”

Ryuji huffed dismissively at her remark. “Yeah right. You guys are just a bunch of babies pretendin’ to be all mature, but I’ve embraced my true nature.”

“You should embrace some self-control,” Makoto replied.

“No way!” Ryuji evaded all rebuttals with ease. “Besides, you guys would miss me if I started actin’ all formal.”

I shrugged. “I dunno. I think we might need to test that theory.”

Ryuji attempted to conceal his smile with a flimsy frown. “You traitor!”

Makoto shook her head. “Anyway, here’s your room key.” She held out the lanyard.

Getting up from the bench, I took the small key in my palm. Ann also got up, saying, “Aw, you mean you’re not staying with us?”

Makoto chuckled softly, her pleasant smile reminding me of her permanent connection with us. “No, I am still required for research on the base even though it looks like our operation will soon be ending.”

I couldn’t understand what those words meant literally, but I did understand that she had an obligation. A nostalgic smile lit my face. “You really believe in this cause, huh?”

Her face was blank yet stern as she contemplated a response. “We never stopped being Phantom Thieves, you know?” She stared at us with hopeful reminiscence. “Nobody forced us to quit. Our powers may have disappeared, but that was never what being a Phantom Thief was about.” Her wistful talk suddenly turned to an impassioned appeal. “To allow people like Nikolai, or Samuel even, to exploit those same powers while we know it… Well, that would be worse than quitting.”

I stared in silence at Makoto, but Ann shuffled her feet, visibly bothered by the tense situation. Abruptly, a burst of color entered Makoto’s cheeks, and she glanced away from us in shame. “I- I’m sorry. That was too abrupt of me.” I kept my eyes on her, but no one responded. “I…” she glanced
warily at me, “I have to go.” I nodded to her before Makoto swiveled from us.

As our friend departed to her vehicle, Ryuji finally got off the bench and stood beside me. “Why is it that when Makoto is around, I always end up feelin’ like a shitty person?”

Downcast, Ann quietly added, “This isn’t how I imagined us reuniting…”

I shook my head in amusement. “You guys should relax.”

“Relax? Wait a minute…” Ryuji’s eyes suddenly doubled in size. “Isn’t Las Vegas in Nevada!?”

Ann glanced quizzically at him. “I’m surprised you knew that…”

“Aw, hell yeah!” Ryuji shouted, “This gonna be even better than Paris!”
Sleepy-Time Melodrama

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves meet an old ally and a new enemy.

“We’re not going to Las Vegas.” Makoto folded her arms as she gently dissuaded Ryuji.

“Aw, why not?” Ryuji bemoaned her inflexibility. “We gotta have some fun now that we’re all together.”

A stressed sighed escaped Makoto. “We have work to do here. Besides, it’s a two-hour drive, and I’m not going out of my way to take you there.”

While Ryuji continued bickering with our warden, I scanned the airport terminal for new arrivals. Ann had her eyes fixed on the main gate, but neither of us caught any signs of Phillip and Morgana. I assumed the recent revelations of the past day had us all mentally jarred. The reappearance of Akechi and the reveal of multiple secret Metaverse organizations tempted my mind to wander, but the placating hubbub of the various travelers kept my thoughts focused.

Makoto was asking for our help to confront a new Metaverse threat; she was asking for our help in conjunction with a man I did not trust. Questionable character of Samuel, Akechi, and their untamed Metaverse creations aside, my instincts appeared to be leading me to an inevitable conclusion. Evil was once again distorting that other reality.

Ann thrust her arm out, pointing towards the gate. “Look!” she shouted, “There they are!”

With a disgruntled look on his face, Phillip came plodding toward us. Morgana was hesitantly latched to his shoulder. While they were still some distance away, Morgana cried out, “Boy, am I glad to see you guys!”

Phil shot the cat an irritable glance before remarking, “There he goes again.” Ignoring his travel mate, Mona leapt to the floor and came sprinting towards us.

Upon seeing the little furball, Ryuji and Makoto offered their full attention to the new visitors. Ryuji grinned. “Hey, Morgana! Man, we’ve got some crazy stuff to talk about.”

Morgana happily examined the four of us. “Glad to see you’re all okay,” he said, “And you even found Makoto.”

Makoto smiled cheerily. “It has been a while, hasn’t it, Morgana?”

Phillip scoffed at our merry greetings. “I never thought I’d see the day when a cat was more important than me.”

Ann laughed nervously as she rubbed the back of her head. “H-hey Phillip. Thanks again for doing this.”

Phil shook his head. “You wanna thank me? Carry your own luggage.”
Makoto then formally stepped forward, her boots tapping heavily on the tile floor, and extended her hand to Phil. “Hello, we haven’t been introduced. I’m Makoto Niijima.”

Phil clasped her hand and shook. “Phillip Richter. And may I add that you’re quite intimidating.”

Releasing Phil’s hand, Makoto stuttered in confusion. “Uh, e-excuse me?”

Ann sighed. “Phil…”

“Oh, my apologies,” Phillip replied, allowing his eyes to settle in a pleasant yet pompous manner. “I am Miss Takamaki’s fashion agent. It’s my job to identify the aesthetics of beautiful ladies, such as yourself.”

By Makoto’s strange disposition, I couldn’t tell if she was flattered or disturbed. She blinked curiously at Phil. “Uh… oh.”

Ryuji made an irritated noise. “God, this guy’s only been here for two minutes, and I’m already pissed at him.”

“Phillip!” Ann chastised, “Don’t just go creeping on all my girlfriends!”

Phil passively glanced between my friends. “What?” He shrugged as he brought an unlit cigarette to his lips. “Girl’s got an ice-cold stare. With that kind of poise, she’d make an excellent counterpart for you, Miss Takamaki.” My friends were silent, but then Phil turned to me. “You think so, right?”

A smile subtly crossed my face. “Absolutely. Makes me go rigid every time.”

Morgana wheezed. “Yo, when did Ryuji start corrupting your mind?”

Dumbfounded, Makoto stared blankly at me while Ann reddened like a beet. “God!” Ann squealed, “You guys are so embarrassing!”

Makoto reluctantly swallowed. “Ahem, it’s fine.” She turned to face Phillip. “Thank you for the sentiment, Mr. Richter, but I find my current occupation to be quite fulfilling.”

Phillip chuckled softly. “Well, suit yourself.” He tilted his head in concession and started to walk off, adding, “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m dying for a smoke. Oh, and your luggage should be around the corner.”

Ann let out a long sigh. “I’m sorry about that. Phil can be a little annoying sometimes.”

Ryuji smacked his face in exasperation. “Yes, thank you for admitting that!”

Despite the oddness of our greetings, Makoto seemed unphased. “Let’s just get the luggage.” She strolled across the terminal, tossing her hair back.

“Right!” Morgana chirped. He propelled himself with stunning acrobatics from the nearby bench to my shoulder. “And once that’s done, I believe some fatty tuna is in order.”

Phillip had swiftly left us, citing he had business in Vegas, so the five of us ordered some lunch and returned to the motel. Our tiny apartment was quiet as Ann, Makoto, Morgana, Ryuji and I all munched on some greasy, American fast-food. With full cheeks, Ryuji said, “Mmm, these burgers are pretty good.”
Makoto sighed as she laid her half-eaten burger to the side. “It’s alright, but it’s no Big Bang Burger.”

Flecks of food escaped Ryuji’s gaping mouth. “Really? I thought this was kinda better.”

Makoto smiled. “Heh, I guess the flavor just reminds me of home.” She gently rested her head on her hand.

Glancing at Makoto’s wistful expression, I suddenly felt the vibration of my phone in my pocket. I pulled out the device and tapped the dim screen.

“Who is it?” Ryuji asked.

I shook my head. “Futaba again. More questions about USEI.”

“More?” Ryuji grumbled, “I thought we explained everything to her. It’s not like we understand all that crap.”

Sliding my phone back into my pocket, I said, “I’ll have to talk to her later.”

Morgana spoke from his seat on the floor. “Speaking of questions, you guys still haven’t told me anything about what happened.”

“Oh, right,” Ann interjected, “There’s a lot to talk about.”

Ryuji rattled his head around. “Don’t look at me. I don’t remember half the things Sam said anyways.”

As Morgana and the others gradually looked to me, I folded my hands neatly in front of my face. “Alright, I’ll start from the beginning.”

After an arduous amount of exposition, our meals had all but disappeared, and Morgana was left in a thorough state of shock, yet his childlike amazement rejuvenated us all. “So, is Akechi alive or not?” asked the cat.

Makoto shrugged. “He’s as alive as any cognition would be.”

Mona shot her a brazen glare. “Why does that sound like a non-answer?”

Ryuji gripped his forehead. “See! It’s all so damn confusing…” He sighed, having thought his way in circles around the topic for far too long. “We were hoping you might make some sense of it, Mona.”

Ryuji, Ann, and I looked expectantly to Morgana, but he quickly cracked under the pressure. “Why are you all looking at me like that?!” he cried, “This is all new to me too, ya know?”

Ryuji sighed. “Damn…”

Ann looked remorsefully at the cat. “We’re sorry, Morgana. We’re just really confused on what we should do.”

Mona cast his eyes downward. “Well, I’m pretty much useless without my Persona. Even if you do decide to join this group, I’ll just be dead weight.” His sorrowful tone caught us off guard. I tilted my head mournfully, attempting to decipher some solution to our predicament.
Makoto stooped down to pat Mona’s head. “That goes for me too, Mona. We can be useless together.”

In an attempt to break the somber atmosphere, Ann released a small laugh. “It’s too bad there aren’t any Metaverse doctors. If there were, we might be able to ask them how to fix you.”

Mona’s ear perked. “Wait…” he began, “Say that again.”

Ann stuttered. “Uh… too bad there aren’t any Metaverse doctors?”

Suddenly Morgana started pacing around the room, keeping his eyes down and focused. The four of us watched the cat’s strange act. I caught a questioning glance from Makoto, but I simply shrugged in reply. Ryuji eventually addressed the situation. “Uh, Mona, what are you doing?”

“Hmm,” Morgana mumbled, “This could work… yeah…”

“Um, Morgana?” Ann chimed. Despite her soft tone, the cat did not respond.

I found the circumstance to be amusing, but Makoto was beginning to worry. “Mona!”

The cat abruptly stopped in the middle of the floor, and having heard her cry, he turned to Makoto with a sly grin on his face. “Heheh,” he chuckled, “I’ve got an idea.”

“Well,” an exasperated Makoto replied, “Tell us!”

“I will!” Morgana cheered, “But first you all need to go to sleep!”

“Was it absolutely necessary that we all lie down on the same bed?” Makoto hesitantly asked. Morgana had goaded us into some inane ritual involving the five of us sleeping in close proximity. I had taken a central position on the bed with Ryuji and Ann to my right and Makoto to my left. Enduring the four of us cramped together, I strained my neck to get a glimpse of the cat who was perched behind us on the backboard of the bed.

“Well, no,” Morgana said, his face appearing thoroughly disappointed, “I still don’t know why you all did that.”

“I dunno,” Ryuji reluctantly replied, “It looked kinda comfy here.” Ann and I both glanced at him questioningly. “I- I mean… I thought the boys would share one bed, and the girls would use the other. If it’s anybody’s fault, it’s Makoto’s.”

Makoto heaved a weary sigh. “He said we needed to be close together!” The distressed tone of her voice brought an endeared smile to my lips.

“Hey! Ow!” Ann squealed, “Ryuji, you’re pulling my hair!” She scolded him with an agitated grimace.

Ryuji swiftly shifted position. “Shit! Sorry!”

Mona sighed. “Fine. Let’s just agree that it’s this guy’s fault,” he unflinchingly pointed to me, “And then we can get started.”

Makoto folded her hand on her chest. “Alright. How do we begin?”

Morgana smiled. “By sleeping of course! Now close your eyes.” Though we were reluctant to
comply, my initial feelings for Morgana’s plan were positive. A few minutes quickly passed before someone inevitably failed the simple exercise.

“Hey,” Ryuji whispered, “Is it working? I don’t feel sleepy.”

“You’re not supposed to talk, Ryuji,” Morgana chided, “You actually need to go to sleep.”

“But I ain’t tired!” Ryuji wined.

“Ryuji, quiet!” Makoto hissed, “We’re trying to sleep.”

“Exactly,” Mona confirmed, “You all should be as quiet as a thief.”

“What?” Ryuji exclaimed, “Thieves can be loud too though.”

“Hey!” Morgana retorted, “I’m the one making the analogies!”

I groaned in disapproval. “Mona, you need to be quiet too.”

“Seriously!” Makoto affirmed, “Shouldn’t you be trying to sleep instead of perching up there?”

Mona frowned. “But you’re all talking!”

Ryuji was quick to correct. “Well, all except Ann. She’s been quiet.”

We all abruptly turned to the right. I propped myself up on my elbow, and Makoto even sat up. Ann was peacefully resting, her face relaxed and her eyelids gently shut. “Is she already asleep?” Makoto asked.

“I dunno,” Ryuji responded, “Ann, you awake?” There was no answer, only the soft breaths of our Lady. Ryuji then stuck out a finger and pushed softly towards Ann’s cheek.

However, before he contacted her skin, Ann said, “Don’t you dare touch me.”

“Oh, she is awake,” Mona remarked.

Ann made a frustrated grumbling noise. “We’re supposed to be sleeping! You’re not supposed to talk when you’re sleeping!”

“R-right…” Ryuji said.

“Ya know,” Makoto quickly added, “If this is a Metaverse thing, I could just get one of our transference devices from the labs.”

Mona shook his head. “No, that won’t work. We’re going to a place that transcends both dream and reality.”

“Alright then!” Ryuji cried, “Let’s get to sleepin’!”

A few moments passed in high suspense as each of us anticipated another interruption. Thankfully, our dedication to this frivolity was rewarded with a tranquil calm. A heaviness gripped my eyes with surprising readiness, and my mind began to fade from consciousness. The Nevada heat slowly dissipated, parting to reveal a cool, blue oasis floating on the strings of human emotion. The lake sang to me from the dark depths of my heart: a poem for everyone’s soul.

As the concepts of time and reality melded into a whimsical backdrop for my slumber, a
subconscious partition of myself linked to this transcendent space. I felt a familiar heartbeat tethered to my own like the wills and wishes of all mankind conjoined at this ethereal wellspring for examination by the most tender of souls. Though I had awakened here many times prior, I felt more comfortable in this place than ever before. It was familiar yet transformed.

I opened my eyes to be greeted by the meager furnishings of the Velvet Room. Propelling myself from the rugged cot of my cell, I quickly noted the Thieves’ attire I had unconsciously donned. I glanced into the central chamber and saw the silhouette of the long-nosed man in quivering candlelight. Instinctively, I stepped into the light, striding proudly between the bars that once held me.

A comfortably unsettling voice acknowledged me. “Ah, Trickster,” the man spoke slowly but with purpose, “Welcome back to the Velvet Room.” Igor’s pale, lanky fingers extended to me in a gradual motion.

I recounted having met this incarnation of Igor only once, yet I felt a strange kinship that extended beyond that glancing encounter. The hideous character clearly knew more than was apparent. “We meet again.” I greeted him emotionlessly.

“Yes,” Igor began, “It seems fate has brought us together once more.” Igor looked beyond me, the strange lighting of the chamber casting deep shadows on his face. “And you’ve brought guests.”

I glanced sideways to the shadow-cloaked hallway and watched a spherical shape stumble out of the darkness. I immediately recognized the perfectly ratioed figure with its absurd proportions. Having lost his balance, Morgana spun around with a whimsical smile in near disbelief. His oversized head tilted to the side as he balanced on his rounded paw foot. I gently tapped the side of his oval noggin to set him in equilibrium, and Mona responded by wobbling in rhythmic motion as he came to a steady halt.

The cat looked up to me, his big eyes gleaming with intoxicating wonder, and exclaimed, “It worked! My Metaverse form!”

I smiled warmly at him. “Congratulations.”

“Woah!” Morgana and I turned to see Ryuji exiting the adjacent cell, his face plastered with astonishment, “It worked!!” He skidded towards us. “Does this mean that you’re all back to normal?” Ryuji examined Mona’s inflated head with renewed interest while he joggled the cat’s skull back and forth.

As vertigo overcame his senses, Mona struggled to respond. “I-I-I think… so…”

“Ah, Mona!” We heard Ann squeal before she abruptly appeared behind us. Exuding a doting affection, she plucked the cat from Ryuji’s clutches and squashed her cheek against the oblong portion of Morgana’s head. The tight hug pressed Mona’s tiny body into a hapless bundle, and his face was sent into rapturous ecstasy. “I’m so happy for you!”

Mona’s voice bubbled up like the steam from a teapot. “Purrr… wow…”

Ryuji averted his eyes from the overly affectionate scene. After a short interlude, Ann gently placed Mona on the floor though he was completely dazed. He tottered precariously on his two feet, but he soon righted.

With the four of us grouped together, I noticed Makoto trail out of her cell, grazing the metal bars with her hand as she went. She retained her plain fatigues, and for a moment I felt a twinge of
pensive remorse. However, as Makoto stepped towards us, her calm demeanor assuaged my fears.

“So,” Makoto began, “Your plan was to bring us here.” She glanced at the cat as she surveyed the room.

“Yup!” Mona cheerily replied, “It only makes sense that my master would be the one to fix me.”

“Indeed,” said the grizzled man, “I had been storing Morgana’s true form for just such an occasion as this.”

Ryuji spoke under his breath. “Is it just me or does that sound really creepy?”

Igor did not falter. “The world is not as it should be. There are those who would undo the past and see the world brought to ruin.”

Morgana straightened his shoulders. “Master, just tell us who’s causing trouble, and we’ll put a stop to it.”

Igor chuckled heartily causing several of us to flinch. “Your eagerness is astounding, but you will meet them soon enough.” The suited man shifted with some anxiety as he surveyed the chamber. “I fear our reunion may have attracted their attention.”

“What?” Makoto interjected, “You mean our enemies can find their way in here?”

“Indeed.” Igor promptly began strumming his fingers against the table. “We should waste no time restoring your full powers.”

I cocked my head. “Full powers?”

Ann promptly added, “You mean Makoto’s Persona?”

Morgana jumped at the words. “Oooh! Yes, we need to get our Persona’s back to full strength!” He carelessly strolled up to Igor’s table.

Igor presented Mona his most bemused glare. “Your Personas?” he began, “Morgana, your Persona is merely…”

A sudden twitch in the air caught my attention. The candle lights lining the walls of the room were unceremoniously extinguished. Before our eyes, Igor vanished into nothing, and his desk imploded into a fine mist. Morgana sputtered at the abrupt flurry, but Ann, Makoto, Ryuji, and I were even more shocked. I scrutinized the darkness as the others looked around frantically.

Then, while we were still in our stupor, Igor astoundingly reappeared, suspended above us in the shadows. I couldn’t even perceive the room we had just been inside with this intense darkness, but Igor had an eerie glow about him. A chill ran down my spine as I looked at the mysterious being. The gentle cool of the Velvet Room had been replaced by a sickening cold.

“Morgana, come closer,” Igor stated.

Morgana hesitantly looked to his master. “Uh… right.” The cat took a step forward under the ominous Igor.

Makoto’s better senses engaged. “Mona, wait!” She held out her hand in caution.

Mona cringed nervously as he turned. “Wh-what?”
Instantaneously, the apparition of Igor vanished, and an amorphous entity descended from the shadows. Dark, fluid miasma congealed on the floor, and intangible black claws erupted from the formless mass, latching onto Mona’s head. The darkness writhed as limbs coalesced, giving structure to this murky thing. A twisted likeness of a man rose from the blackness like a sea serpent rising from an ocean of oil.

His face frozen with terror, Mona struggled against the wispy, crooked fingers that held him. The alarming creature that stood before us flaunted something akin to a smile, a hole filled with rigid fangs of swirling mist. The man-thing’s face was also marked by a solitary rift crossing the right half of his face and containing an ethereal luminance.

The being spoke to Morgana through coarse vocals. “Greedy little thing, aren’t you? So eager for power.”

“H-hey,” Morgana falteringly responded, “Put me down!”

“Ha! I don’t think so,” the shadow rasped, “One Phantom Thief could be just what I need.”

“Hey!” Ryuji shouted, “Let him go!” He tightened his fists.

The shadow cackled. “Look at me. Do I look intimidated by such childish displays?”

“You should be,” Makoto promptly added, “Do you have any idea who you’re messing with?”

The shadow glanced at Makoto through its lone peeper. With a scoff, it responded, “What can you do? I have your friend tightly in my grasp.” The shadow grinned as it squeezed Mona’s head with trembling force.

Morgana winced. “Ah, ow!”

“Stop!” Makoto cried. The fury in her clenched face was unparalleled.

The shadow coddled Mona with one hand while extending the other. “Come at me!”

Before anyone could catch her, Makoto lunged at the entity, her body in full swing. She had good form despite her spontaneity, but the potency of her attack seemed dubious.

“Makoto, no!” Ann cried.

The shadow caught her immediately with a razor-clawed backhand. Makoto cried in agony as the shadow rended her cheek, streaking blood across his claws. Her limp body tumbled across the floor from the powerful blow.

“You damn bastard!” Ryuji exclaimed.

Tightening my own stance, I said, “You’ll pay for that.” Ryuji, Ann, and I all reached for our masks.

“Ah-ah-ah,” the shadow dissuaded. The shadow raised his free arm, and a whirlwind of smoke rose with it. Three pools of formless goo manifested in front of us. The bubbling black and red liquid ruptured in a violent burst of colors, and three more adversaries stood in our way.

Shiny, metallic, humanoid automatons with featureless cylinders for heads blocked our assault. Their thin, razor-like arms scraped harshly against one another as the robots eyed us curiously.

“Now the odds are a bit more even,” the shadow chuckled.
With our foes assembled and our allies in peril, I took hold of my mask. “Arsene!”

Black wings burst forth from a hellish rift as I called upon the power of Persona. Arsene’s bolstering laugh resonated throughout the chamber, even giving the shadow a start. The gentleman thief’s fingers twitched with arcane energy like the deadly hands of a gunman on the trigger.

I thrust out my gloved hand. “Ravage them!”

With a malicious cackle, accursed energy erupted from Arsene. A crackling wave of crimson and shadow enveloped the robotic adversaries, twisting and stretching their metal bodies. As the blast dissipated, the machines settled clumsily.

Ryuji beamed with excitement. “Nice one, Joker! Ya made an opening!”

I nodded to him. “Go!”

My energetic friend leapt forward at my command. A metallic pipe manifested from his cognition as he landed on one of the drones. Wonk! The robot’s head easily snapped out of place after a forceful blow from Ryuji.

The other automatons seemed displeased at the dispatch of their comrade. One struck out at Ryuji, crossing its bladed arms together like scissors. The shrill clink when Ryuji’s pipe lodged between the steel blades echoed in my ears. Ryuji thrust the bot away with a shove and quickly pulled back to a safe distance.

The shadow glanced at his defeated minion. “Disappointing,” he said. However, the entity clearly wasn’t ready to concede. He lifted his hand. “Galatine! Come!”

Parting from the hazy darkness surrounding us, a crooked, black blade shot into the shadow’s hand. The angular piece of obsidian steel hummed merrily in its master’s palm. “Woah! He’s got a sword!” Mona squealed, squinting in the grasp of the shadow.

The shadow’s eye slit suddenly began glowing heated pink. “Now Galatine! Grant these vessels our strength incarnate!”

Black mist cascaded from the blade and contorted around the remaining automatons with enrapturing velocity. The violent energy ripped through the room like a biting wind. Ryuji, Ann, and I shielded ourselves from the gust, but through the darkness, I could see new forms taking shape. As the mist cleared, two armored horsemen had replaced the robotic machines. The horse-mounted knights wielded shimmering pikes to match their regally gilded platemail, and their steeds exhaled smog like the bellows of a forge. “For the King!” one knight shouted.

Ann winced as she caught the red eyes of the beasts of burden. “Wait,” she said, “Do these guys look familiar to you?” She flashed us a curious look.

Ryuji just smiled. “They look like a bunch of suckers to me! Let’s take ‘em down!”

Heeding Ryuji’s request, I turned to Ann. “Break their guard, Panther.”

She winked in my direction. “O-kay!” Her eagerness melded into an intimidating strength as Ann called forth her Persona. Ann extended her arms out to her sides, and Carmen appeared behind her, matching that power-hungry stance. The air itself seemed to ignite with embers forming like stars in a midnight sky. A hailstorm of fireballs manifested around her, lighting her silken hair with crimson
hues. Ann exhaled a burst of force and extended her arms forward, the firestorm to follow her command.

The room whistled as Ann’s fiery rush spewed onto the witless knights. Blinding bombs of heat splattered over the equestrians, causing the horses to whinny in displeasure. One knight was set off balance by an explosion while the other made a daring charge in my direction.

The approaching knight screamed furiously, thrusting his deadly, glinting blade towards me. As the tip of the spear clipped through cloth and leather, I flipped effortlessly into the air. I slid through the atmosphere like a winged creature, and adrenaline-fueled thrills soared me to new heights. Carefully balancing my descent, I landed perfectly on the horse’s back alongside the startled knight. A grin encapsulated my emotions perfectly. “That was a mistake.” My dagger appeared in my extended hand, and with one flick, I struck a damaging blow to the knight. Then, I jumped from the horse and glided swiftly back to position.

Ooze of black and red gushed from the underside of the knight’s helmet as he struggled to contain the life essence. “Gah!” the knight screamed through his choked throat and haphazardly drove his horse backward.

“Ooh! Lookin’ cool, Joker!” Morgana said as he spectated. “Gah!” He winced as the shadow tightened his grip.

“Quiet, pet!” the shadow snapped, “I could do a lot worse to you and the girl!”

I glanced from the waning guards to Makoto still limp body, distant and obscured in the darkness. I cast my ire to the shadow and his minions.

Ryuji laughed at the pathetic state of the shadow’s soldiers. “Shall I finish them off?”

I nodded. “Do it!”

Ryuji’s eyes flared as he jutted his arm to summon a stream of electrical energy. One blast was all it took. The arcing bolts of light flowed like water from Captain Kidd’s cannon and ripped through the ill-fated knights like paper. The last energy of the automatons spent, they dissipated into noxious dust and finally disappeared.

Furious, the shadow’s vacuous eye seethed with chaotic power. “So, it seems I underestimated you. I’m sure that must be depressingly typical for your motley group.”

“Yeah,” Ryuji snarked, “And you won’t get the chance to again. You’re goin’ down!”

“No…” the shadow retorted. He gently tapped his strange sword to Mona’s underjaw. “One move and this cat’ll be out of lives.”

Ryuji grimaced. “Damn you…”

“You so much as scrape him, and I’ll rip you to pieces!” Ann shouted. Though she spoke fiercely, I saw the trembles in her hands.

I shook my head, cursing our disadvantage. “We’ll pay you back for this.”

The shadow laughed. “Not likely. See you Thieves might’ve had it easy when nobody could chase you into the Metaverse, but things have changed. You’ve got no idea what you’re up against.”

“Don’t matter who we’re fightin’,” Ryuji replied, “We’ll shred ‘em! Same as your goons here!”
“No, we’ve got big plans for you,” the shadow snorted, “That’s why I’m here. That’s why I’ve been watchin’ for you.”

“Watching us?” Ann scoffed, “Why am I not surprised…”

“Soon the Metaverse will be a civil place. Thieves like you would be better off falling into line… After all, slaves like you should just behave.”

My ears twirled at the words. I saw Ryuji stamp forward, but the shadow wasn’t going to permit his advances. “Ah!” Mona cried. A sickening grin covered the shadow’s face as he pressed the edge of the blade against Morgana’s soft fur.

“Now, I’m leaving.” The shadow stepped back. “Poor Thieves. Who knows what kind of torture I’ll put this little guy through.”

“G-guys…” Mona said shakily. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, Mo…” Ryuji said. “Ah!”

I lit my face with a gentle smile. “It’s going to be okay, Morgana.”

The shadow cackled. “Hahaha! Oh, Thieves! So pathetic when I’ve got one of your friends, huh?”

The shadow dangled Mona’s frail body like a toy for a dog as he laughed ecstatically.

Suddenly, another hand latched onto the blade, Galatine. Looking beyond the shadow, I saw the dim light of the room refracted in stark, yellow-tinged eyes. “You wanna see something pathetic?”

Makoto let out a loud shout as she drove her fist through the shadow’s face.

“Ack!” the sinister being flew across the room like a tumbleweed, and Mona was flung into the air.

“I got him!” Ann slung out her whip and latched onto Mona’s leg.

“Woah!” the cat exclaimed. With a tug of the whip, he went zipping back to Ann’s arms.

The shadow sputtered as he hit the wall. Ryuji laughed. “Nice one… Queen!” Makoto stepped into the light, her facemask gleaming. “You’ve got a hell of a left hook!”

Makoto looked sternly on the dazed shadow man while a droplet of blood trailed down her cheek.

“Let’s finish this.” A flash of iridescent green and the reverb of a motor engine heralded Johanna’s arrival.

The five of us turned to the shadow. The beast’s ghostly claws raked across the floor, leaving white scars in their trace. He snarled at us though we were already immune to his taunting. The shadow came to its feet and said, “A modest display of trickery. We’ll see if you can meet the master’s expectations yet.”

“Hey!” Ryuji shouted, “We ain’t done!”

The shadow glanced at him before bursting into an amorphous form once again. The black pus swirled frantically and then shot out like a beam. The flow of shadow flooded past us like a stream. Before we could even react, the being had been exorcised from the room. The five of us glanced hesitantly to one another until we were certain that the shadow had departed.

“Wooo!” Mona bounced happily on the floor. “Now that’s what I’m talking about!”

Makoto laughed nervously. “Well, you’re chipper for someone who just had a sword to his throat.”
“Ah, please,” Morgana continued with a snide smile, “I’ve trained you guys too well to have such a big slip up.”

Ann frowned. “Mona! You could’ve actually been…”

“Hell yeah!” Ryuji shouted, “That was so freakin’ crazy when Makoto walloped that shadow thing!”

Makoto sighed. “It was actually a rather lucky contingent…”

I gently patted Mona’s head. “Just glad you’re okay.”

The cat grinned at me. “Hey, I’m not planning on leaving you yet.”

Ann sighed as she shook her head. “Oh, Mona…”

The five of us were startled upon hearing a distant chuckle accompanied by methodical clapping. “Excellent!” Igor’s voice radiated throughout the Velvet Room, and suddenly light returned to the chamber. “I’m looking forward to more displays of your growing strength in the coming days.”

Ryuji shook his fist at the blank ceiling. “Hey! You could’ve warned us someone was breakin’ in!”

Igor snorted. “My apologies, but I’ve been forced to take certain… precautions regarding intrusions.”

Ann tapped her face. “What do we do now? Should we stick around?”

“Let’s return to the real world for now,” Makoto said, “We can try returning when we’re sure we aren’t being tracked.”

The rest of us nodded in agreement. “Right!” Ryuji added, “Uh, wait… how exactly do we get out of here?” In confusion, he glanced slowly around the room.

I smiled at my friend as I spoke in a condescending tone. “Probably the door.”

“Tch,” Ann shook her head, “You’re such a smartass, ya know that?”

I pressed two fingers to my lips and kissed them, flashing a smug grin. Ann just squinted at me.

Ignoring my antics, Mona scurried towards the rear hallway. “Everyone, follow me!” We casually strolled after him while Igor left us with some parting words.

“Good luck, Phantom Thieves. I’ll be watching.”

After reawakening in our reality, Makoto suggested we report our incident to Samuel, and although Ryuji had his objections, we eventually agreed if for nothing more than an opportunity to educate Morgana. The five of us piled into Makoto’s vehicle and drove to the secret facility.

Sam greeted us with mild surprise on our arrival, but he was chiefly concerned with seeing to Makoto’s injury. The rest of us trailed them aimlessly through the base. As we walked, Morgana was captured by the intense formality of the place while I allowed my mind to wander.

A mysterious threat had been unveiled: a shadowy hunter with bizarre power and strategic knowledge. Petty insults were one thing, but when that being spoke of others plotting our demise, I was tempted to believe it. After all, Preparation was my duty. Ryuji was willfully ignorant of such dangers though I was sure he could be swayed to put some extra dedication into his training. Then
Ann’s mind was free and unfettered by potential obstacles, but she rarely had a straightforward thought and struggled to think strategically. Morgana, on the other hand, was apt to design plans, yet our brains were already so closely linked that I could barely distinguish my thoughts from his own. Incidentally, Makoto’s studious nature rounded out our team well.

A myriad of questions still plagued my head, and I was yearning for some answers. Shortly, I found myself voicing those concerns openly.

“That shadow…” I mumbled, scratching my chin, “Why was he after us?”

An electronic voice interrupted my thoughts. “You may very well be the most pressing threat to their organization.”

I glanced up at the red-eyed computer node before Ryuji remarked, “Is Akechi in every room?”

Morgana, Ryuji, and I were waiting in a small break room. Ryuji meandered around the area snacking on a protein bar, while Morgana and I sat idly on the table. Akechi also had a minor presence in the room with a small communications hub being mounted near the ceiling. “That’s the advantage of being a digital construct,” Akechi responded, “I can be anywhere I please.”

Ryuji rolled his eyes. “Right. Cause we all wanted more of that pompous attitude.”

Morgana laughed. “I see you two are getting along well.”

“Indeed,” Akechi added, “My attitude may not be to your liking, but I will do my best to keep my knowledge at your disposal.”

“So,” I interjected, “What about this shadow?”

“As I mentioned before, Nikolai is likely the one who orchestrated the escape of your former enemy. Given his interest in the Phantom Thieves, I think it’s a plausible assumption to believe that this shadow could be one of Nikolai’s agents.”

“Well, if he wants to send the bad guys to us,” Ryuji said, “that’s fine by me. Makes our job easier.”

Akechi turned solemn. “You should be more concerned. These are not mere pawns looking out for their own benefit but sadistic men with goals that could ruin your lives… or the very fabric of our existence.”

“That’s some pretty big talk,” Mona said, “But what evidence do you have of this?”

Then the door opened, and Makoto and Ann stepped inside, Makoto sporting a strip of gauze on her cheek. I slipped off the table as Ryuji turned. “Yo, is it bad? Is it gonna leave a scar?”

Makoto chuckled softly. “It’s a minor cut. I think I hurt my pride more.”

Ann snorted. “That was not minor…”

“Ahem,” Akechi suddenly spoke up, “Now that you’re all here, I have some disturbing news to share.”

“What’s the news?” Makoto asked as she strolled into the room.

“A report has just come in from Japan,” Akechi continued, “Apparently, the police are cataloging a new prison escape. This time three prisoners have mysteriously disappeared, their identities I’m sure you can guess.”
My body felt numb as I listened to Akechi’s words. “No… it can’t be.”

Akechi sighed. “One Ichiryusai Madarame, another Junya Kaneshiro, and lastly Masayoshi Shido.”

Ann gasped, covering her mouth. “That’s impossible.”

A fierce grumble could be heard from Ryuji. “Dammit! Aren’t the damn police good for anything!?”

“Without any evidence of a breakout, the police are entirely powerless to do anything in this circumstance,” Akechi said.

“Why would someone try to undo all our work?” Morgana asked.

“I’m afraid it couldn’t be as simple as trying to undo the work of the Phantom Thieves,” Akechi replied, “Rather, it seems likely that the perpetrator will use the knowledge gained from these individuals to some unknown end.”

“So,” Makoto held a disappointed face, “Whoever’s doing this is already a few steps ahead of us.”

“And lemme guess,” Ryuji added, “You guys want us to team up with Sam, so we can do something about it.” He scowled at Makoto.

Makoto released a faltering sigh. “USEI has the resources we need to locate and engage any Metaverse threat,” her pleading voice eroded my placid composure, “We can’t even go into the Metaverse without their technology!”

“Dammit! How can you trust him!?” Ryuji shouted, “He could be workin’ with these guys for all we know!”

“Ryuji!” Ann retorted as she glared at him, “We don’t have a lot of options here!”

Ryuji shook his head. “Sure we do. Ain’t that right, leader?”

Caught between my arguing friends, I couldn’t decide on a favorable solution. I wanted to act, but Samuel had not proven trustworthy. I cast down my face, and Ryuji stared at me in shock. Then Morgana spoke, “Waiting around while those people are out there could be dangerous. We’ve got no idea what they’re planning.” He glanced between the few friends in the room. “Maybe we should consider Sam’s offer.”

I asked, “You got a better idea, Ryuji?”

Ryuji looked at me and sighed. “I was hoping you did.” He bashfully tucked in hands into his pockets as the room slowly cooled. “Fine, if you wanna join Sam, I won’t complain anymore.”

The others shifted nervously, desiring an answer but uncertain of their preferences. Ann sunk into the sofa as she squeezed her arms comfortingly. Meanwhile, Ryuji and Mona somberly contemplated the situation.

I pressed off the table in a huff. “I’m going outside.”

A gentle evening wind furled my hair while I traced the starry heavens with invisible, tangential lines. I was sitting, curled up on the top of a grey, indistinct building, surrounded by other plain structures and grotesque, mechanized towers. Wherever this secret base existed, it was very lonely with miles of dusty terrain extending outward for miles in every direction.
I tugged at the hem of my shorts, contemplating the joyless decision that burdened me. Though my options were clear, my mind seemed unable to make a choice. Our circumstance was quickly becoming overwhelming, and I could hardly bear it. Allying with Samuel compared favorably to awaiting our opponent’s next move, but I hesitated. Something remained mysterious about him.

I sighed. “What do I do?”

A fluttering of wings answered my call, perhaps in mockery. “WHY CONCERN THINE SELF? HAST THOU FORGOTTEN THY IDENTITY?” The burning slits of judgment were upon me.

“There’s too much risk. I won’t let the Thieves be duped again. I can’t.” I felt my body tense as my pulse rose.

A bellowing laugh rung in my ears. “WHAT DOES IT MATTER? THOU DOST AS THOU PLEASES. I AM INVINCIBLE! THOU ART UNCHAINED!” Arsene’s fiery glow cast a terrifying shadow like a witch doctor rising from hell.

“I won’t put them in danger.”

I could feel the hairs around my ear being singed by his flaming maw. “THOU ART DANGER. THOU ART…” Arsene’s voice left me with a whistle of smoke and a howl of damnation. “…DEATH.”

My heart was a furnace, hot as hell in my world of conflict. One goal was what kept me going: to protect my friends and everything I held dear. The thought burned so intensely within me that I could feel my eyes beginning to twitch.

I straightened upon hearing the door latch. I sat still for a moment before Makoto took a seat beside me. Her face was reddened although in a different way from her scar. I could tell this had affected her too. She adjusted her hair to the calming wind and then turned to me.

“I don’t suppose you’ve made up your mind,” she said, prompting me with a melancholic smile. I shook my head. “Hah, I didn’t think so.” She lifted her chin skyward and let out a long breath.

In my reluctance, I attempted to shift topics. “How’s your injury?” I asked, pointing to the large bandage marking her face.

“Oh, this?” Makoto replied, “It’s nothing.” To my dismay, she immediately began peeling the gauze from her flesh. However, the abrasion had sealed well over the past few hours, and it wasn’t visually unappealing. “I can’t even feel it anymore. Here.”

Suddenly, I felt Makoto’s hand on my own. Without warning, she pressed my fingers to her cheek, permitting me to trace the scar. I was stunned but not unaware. The irregular ridges formed a well-defined cut across Makoto’s cheek. The pinkish line contrasted the mellow tone of her pale face, but I could not analyze one without the other. That simple, white complexion was understated yet so diligently presented. The softness of her skin, the gentleness of her voice, the elegance of her hair: Makoto radiated beauty.

My hand might have lingered too long, but I withdrew with even greater regret. I rubbed my palm nervously as I attempted to clear my throat. Makoto made a sound akin to humored embarrassment and stroked her hair aside.

“You know,” Makoto began, “I thought reawakening my Persona would make things easier, but…” She turned a nervous smile to me. “Now I’m just worried.”
I nodded. “It’s a lot to process, but I’m sure it’ll work out.”

Makoto shook her head as she chuckled. “How can you not worry at a time like this? We still have a decision to make.”

“Eh, I’ve got a few friends I can count on.”

Her smile warmed. “We’re counting on you too, ya know?”

“That’s what worries me.”

“Oh, so you are worried!” Makoto laughed, and I found myself chuckling too. Our joy faded into the cool breeze like a glowing fire on a bitter night. As the thrill dissipated, Makoto turned to me with a troubled look. “So, what do you think I should do?” I tilted my head, uncertain of her meaning. “Should I stay on with USEI?” Makoto asked, “Or should I go back to Japan with the Phantom Thieves? Assuming you decide to leave, of course.”

I turned my eyes to the glistening stars. “You’d leave with us?”

“Is that supposed to be a trick question?” Makoto jokingly asked, “Of course I would. Being with you guys is way more important than this government job could ever be.”

“What about your education?” I asked, “Don’t you have classes to attend?”

Makoto sighed heavily, and I could tell she had resigned herself to her decision. “School can wait. It’s waited for this job; it can wait while I figure out the rest.” We sat in silence for a moment. Her tone was sad and cumbersome, yet her words imparted such a blissful sensation. “Besides,” Makoto continued, “Sam is resigning. It’s not like I want to be left alone with Akechi.”

“Oh? But he’s got such a pleasant personality.”

Makoto gave me a passing glare. “Must I remind you that this person attempted to kill you?”

I smiled sweetly for her. “Ah, everyone looks at me with murderous intent at least once.”

“Th-that’s not really the same…”

I laughed. “It’s a good thing I’ve got you to tell the difference.”

“Well,” Makoto added, “I think you’re safe here. I’ve been living with these people for a couple months now despite Akechi’s history.”

I gently scratched my chin. “Hmm, yeah…” As I looked to the star-laced horizon, I perceived a shift in my cognition. The Trickster within wanted to take a gamble. “Yeah, I think you’re right.”
Reunion

Chapter Summary

With the tension of mysterious Metaverse threats lingering, the Phantom Thieves are forced into an unsavory alliance with the untrustworthy American businessman, Samuel Zimmerman. Samuel, however, overcomes the Thieves’ doubts, granting them the full power of his resources to unite the Thieves and defeat the Metaverse Threat.

Samuel tossed a pink chew into his mouth while I expectantly waited for him to speak. The other Phantom Thieves had gathered: Ryuji grudgingly stood in the doorway to Sam’s office; Ann aimlessly perused the ornamental bookshelf; Morgana sat patiently on the side table; and Makoto flanked me. I had summoned us together because I intended to meet Sam’s request. Joining together offered the greatest advantage.

Sam laid a green dish of the pink candies at the front of his desk. He motioned to the container. “Candy?”

Makoto’s posture sagged with an accompanying sigh. “Do you have to offer candy every time I come into your office?”

Sam slumped back into his posh, swiveling chair. “What? The world’s too dark and dreary all the time. Might as well enjoy yourself with a sweet every now and again.”

Ann’s delicate fingers discretely slipped into the green dish and plucked one of the wrapped candies from its place. Sam tracked her motions as the candy silently disappeared into Ann’s mouth.

With a shrug, Sam resigned his point, and added, “So, I don’t suppose we’re here to air out our emotional baggage.”

“Let’s forget about what happened in France,” I said.

Sam nodded with a smile. “I can agree to that.”

“And…” I continued with abated breath, “Let’s work together.”

Sam’s grin opened to show his bright teeth. “Ah! Now that’s what I like to hear!” Before I could even respond, Sam grabbed the landline phone off his desk and pressed one of the numbers. “Hello? Sonny? Yeah… Is the jet ready? Mhmm… good, keep the engines warm!” Sam replaced the phone and got up from his chair in a single, rapid motion. He smiled widely as he clapped his hands together.

“Woah, a jet?” Mona inquired, “Are we going somewhere already?”

“Of course!” Sam replied with a boisterous laugh. Morgana jumped when he realized Samuel was talking to him. “I’d like every Phantom Thief to join, so we’re off to Japan!”

“He can call up a plane?” Ryuji asked, “Just like that?”

Makoto slowly shook her head. “He must’ve had it waiting for us.”
“Well, obviously!” Sam exclaimed, “I was either resigning or taking us all to Japan!”

“He’s really into this,” Ann remarked.

“I’m just glad we’re on the same page,” I timidly added.

“Another plane ride?” Mona whined, “Feels like I just got out of that cage…”

“Hey, don’t worry kiddo,” Sam merrily replied, “This is a private jet. All agents get the first-class treatment.”

“Woah,” Ryuji said, “Does that mean we get like… professionally cooked meals and stuff?” His animosity for Samuel seemed to dissolve away.

Sam cracked a smug look, chuckling at Ryuji’s immaturity. “I dunno. Depends if you stay on my good side.”

Ryuji’s face paled as he stared at Samuel. “What!? You for real?”

“I suggest you all gather your things from the hotel,” Sam continued, “We leave as soon as possible!”

The distant roar of jet engines kept my mind in the present. We had returned to the airport with what little we had, and now I was waiting with Ann, Ryuji, and Morgana for our plane to begin boarding. Despite the noise of incoming flights, the terminal was serenely quiet at this time of night.

I turned to Ryuji who was slouching next to me. “Hey, you’re not mad about this, are you?”

Ryuji glanced in my direction. “Mad? Nah…” he replied, scratching his head, “But when Samuel stabs us in the back, I’m blamin’ you.” He shot me a cocky grin.

As I laughed, I returned the smile. “How about I give you the first chance to slug him for me. Would that make up for it?”

“Eh,” Ryuji feigned a modest appraisal of our deal, “That’ll be a start.”

“You know,” Morgana added, “I think we were too hasty to judge this Samuel guy. He seems alright to me.” Ryuji and I glanced down to our feet where the cat had sprawled out.

“You just like him cause he’s lettin’ you sit in front with the rest of us,” Ryuji retorted.

“Yeah…” Mona stated, “That and he treats you like a monkey.”

“Uh… what was that?” Ryuji glared at Morgana and reached out his hand with violent intentions.

Mona quickly sensed the oncoming danger and slipped himself and his tail right through Ryuji’s grasp. The cat pounced across the floor before glancing back at us. His arrogant grin was absolutely disgusting. “What’s wrong, Ryuji?” chided Mona, “Are you getting slow?”

Ryuji turned to me and said, “Excuse me while I give this cat a piece of my mind.” Strengthening his resolve, Ryuji stomped towards Mona, and they began an elongated chase sequence.

While I intermittently observed the pair making fools of themselves, Ann crept up beside me. “There they go again,” she said with a sigh. “I guess I shouldn’t worry.”
I nodded. “This is all normal displays of affection,” I tranquilly replied, “For toddlers.”

Ann blurted a snorting laugh. “They’re like our rowdy little children.”

We both laughed, allowing the tension to rest. Ryuji and Morgana continued their shameless display, and Makoto was yet to be seen. Then Ann addressed me more formally.

“I’m glad you decided to get along with Sam,” Ann said. I glanced at her, and she cast her gaze downward in embarrassment. “I… don’t exactly understand everything that’s going on,” she added, “But if this gets us one step closer to finding out what’s happening to all the criminals we’ve faced then…” She looked up at me and laughed nervously. “…I think it was the right choice.”

Noticing her obvious humility, I pressed her further. I asked, “What if I had decided against this?”

Again, Ann giggled. “Well, I probably would’ve been happy with that choice too.” She touched her lips briefly, adding, “I think I’d be happy with any choice you make.” She smiled candidly at me, and that only ingrained my sense of duty further. The flurry of color in her cheeks didn’t assist me either.

I pushed the splits of hair on my forehead aside as I conjured a witty response. I returned her smile but asked the inevitable question. “Any choice?” The fringes of my lips curled.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” Ann said, quickly averting her face.

“Yo!” Ryuji approached us with Morgana safely tucked around his neck, “What’re you lovers doin’?”

I cocked my head in a derisive fashion. “Uh… lovers?”

Ryuji smiled to himself. “Yeah, you guys are all in love an’ stuff.”

“Oh, please, Ryuji,” Ann said patronizingly, “You love him more than I do.” I had to admit, she was proficient at deflecting.

Ryuji, however, had upped his game as well. “Uh, yeah!” he condescended, “We got true bromance! Up top!” He raised his hand for me, and I energetically gave Ryuji the high-five.

“Pfff,” Ann snorted, her gaze hardening, “Grow up.”

“Oh…” Ryuji held his chest desperately as he pretended to be hurt, “At least I’m honest about my feelings.” Ann gazed sternly at him.

“Careful, Ryuji,” Morgana scolded, “Ann might tell Makoto you’ve been bullying her.”

“Tch,” Ryuji scoffed, “Let her come. I’d like to see whatever karate-kendo-jiu-jitsu crap she can throw at me.”

“I’d be happy to demonstrate my technique on you.” Makoto made her presence known.

Ryuji swiveled around like a startled animal. Makoto’s flat expression was nearly as terrifying as her threats, and I knew that went doubly for Ryuji. “Oh, uh, h-hey Makoto…” Ryuji began, “So, um…” He rubbed his head and laughed. “You can ignore what I was sayin’ just now… I was just, uh…”

“Not thinking before you speak?” Makoto retorted, “Yeah, I know. We’re going to have to work on that.”
“Uh…” Ryuji gulped down his last bit of pride, “Please no.”

Ann snickered. “Now you’re in for it.” The smug inflection in her voice betrayed her cruel impulses.

“Ann, please,” Ryuji made a dire appeal, “You know I was just kiddin’ around, right?”

Makoto released a dry laugh. “Ryuji calm down. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Phew!” Ryuji sighed with relief.

“Aw,” Mona interjected, “But I wanted to see Ryuji get a beat down.”

“Hey!” Ryuji cried.

I shook my head feverishly. “Makoto, is the plane ready? I don’t want to be here when these two start going at it again.”

“Oh, yes, the plane,” Makoto said as she flicked her hair to the side, “It’s boarding now actually. We should get going.”

“Welcome aboard!” the dislocated voice of Akechi greeted us as we entered Samuel’s jet. We were funneled into the tight entryway of the plane and carrying heavy luggage, but Ryuji saw fit to stop and gawk at the abrupt greeting.

“Wha? He’s on the plane too!?” Ryuji exclaimed.

Ann, who was directly behind Ryuji, made an agitated grunt as the surrounding bodies and suitcases compressed the five of us into an exceedingly tiny space. “Ryuji!” Ann howled, “Don’t stop in the middle of the hallway!”

After some difficulty boarding, we entered a posh seating area. Had I been less aware, I could have mistaken the innards of the jet for a VIP lounge. The few seats were immaculately cushioned, and each had a translucent monitor display. A host of additional control switches tailored the climate of each chair to its owners liking while the overhead LED’s could be modified for any brightness or color. Makoto nonchalantly strolled past the ritzy décor, but the rest of us were entranced by the opulence.

I stored my carriables into a hidden compartment underneath my seat and then heard Ann squeal in delight. “Ahhh!” she cried, “These chairs have seat warmers!” Her bright smile made pushing the arbitrary buttons appear fun.

Ryuji shook his head at Ann. “Why would you wanna warm your seat? Ain’t it hot enough already in this freakin’ desert?”

“You don’t get it,” Ann sharply replied, “It’s not about warming the seat. It’s about having the feature when you need it.”

Ryuji scoffed as he took up the seat adjacent to me. “There are better ways to warm up.” He scratched his chin. “Like gulping down a steaming bowl of ramen!”

Ann sighed, rolling her head in the process. “You and your ramen.”

“Ramen is great!” Ryuji cried.
Morgana tilted his head as he hopped into his own, personal seat. “Mmm,” he contemplated Ryuji’s comments, “I could think of a few better ways to warm up.”


“Like…” Morgana paused, “Curling up under a soft blanket.”

“Ooh!” Ann leaned forward with anticipation, “Or cozying up by a fire.”

Makoto finally chimed in on our conversation. “Or you could just start talking to Ryuji. He never fails to expel some form of hot air.” Ann and Morgana stifled their giggling while I cast a knowing glance to my friend.

Shaking his head, Ryuji retreated into the cushions of his seat. “Whatever,” he grumbled.

Our chatter gradually diminished, and the five of us sat idly for a few minutes while we acclimated to the complexity of our seating. Though we had been together for days, this gathering was the first time I considered us unified to a single, explicit goal: reuniting the Phantom Thieves. I believe Sam and Ryuji both had that goal in mind from the very start, despite their differences. Promptly, Samuel entered from the forward cabin.

Smiling, he addressed us. “You’re all here. Excellent. I thought it appropriate to discuss our plans before we arrive in Japan, so… Akechi, if you would…”

The lighting in the cabin suddenly dimmed, and a holographic projection of Japan appeared at Sam’s fingertips. Our individual monitors also came to life as Sam began manipulating the diagram.

“There are three PTs yet unaccounted for,” Samuel continued, “First, Futaba Sakura, the master-class hacker.” Sam touched a node on the projection, and Futaba’s profile appeared on the display alongside a comprehensive map of Tokyo. “I attempted to contact her several times through my usual means, but Sojiro Sakura has intercepted my messages on every occasion. I assume he will not be forthcoming regarding his foster daughter. Nevertheless, Futaba’s skills will certainly be invaluable to our mission, so we will need to make a concerted effort to persuade Sakura-san.”

Makoto took on a sobering tone while she added, “Boss isn’t going to like us pulling Futaba out of school. I don’t like it either, but considering her technical skills, it can’t be helped.”

“I am hoping that his familiarity with each of you will grant us a persuasive edge,” Sam went on, “But if all else fails, we have some resources at our disposal as a government agency.”

“You better not be thinkin’ about threatening him!” Ryuji hissed.

Sam was dumbfounded. “What?” he stammered, “I meant we could compensate Sojiro with a lot of money.”

“Oh…” Ryuji said, calming.

“Somehow, I doubt that Boss would accept cash in exchange for Futaba,” Mona interjected, “So let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Sam tapped the hologram again, but this time, Yusuke appeared on the screen. “Next is Yusuke Kitagawa.” Samuel tilted his face down as he stroked his face thoughtfully. “I had left several invitations for Yusuke at his current residence; however, my messages were met with no reply. A brief investigation into the matter only revealed some cursory opinions from his neighbors who regard him as ‘strange’ and ‘solitary’. That said, I anticipate that this member will be agreeable to
our plans once he learns of the Thieves’ involvement.”

“Strange and solitary, huh?” Ann repeated, “Yeah, that sounds like Yusuke.”

“Yo, why do you bother with the letters?” Ryuji asked, “Wouldn’t it have been better to talk to us in person?”

“Well,” Samuel responded, “I doubt many of you would have listened to a suspicious American such as myself. Besides, if there’s one thing I know Thieves appreciate, it’s subtlety, and letters are quite understated.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Morgana responded.

Ryuji was quick to interject. “Yeah, it makes sense. In a stupid, American businessman way!”

Makoto shot a hard glare across the cabin. “Ryuji.”

“Me and Futaba never even got the letters!” he retorted, “And Makoto’s the only one who seriously considered his offer.”

“He’s got you there,” Ann added, “I threw mine away almost as soon as I got it.”

“Ah, w-well…” Makoto abruptly realized the shaky ground she was standing on.

“Yes, yes…” Sam relieved her burden, injecting his admission into the conversation, “It seems I’ve made every possible mistake in avoiding a Metaverse breakdown. Ridicule me all you like, but we’re here now. Let’s try to focus on the task at hand.”

“You’ll have to excuse our ill-mannered friend,” Mona said, “He’s not very good at communication.”

“Hey!” Ryuji retorted, “Since when are you on his side?”

Sam nodded to Mona, saying, “Very well, let’s move on.” Then Samuel moved his fingers across the diagram once more to reveal the image of Haru. “Last but certainly not least, we have Haru Okumura, who continues to elude me. The Okumura mega-corporation is unwilling to entertain my advances on their majority shareholder. In fact, I haven’t been able to contact Haru at all.”

Observing the glowing screen, I added, “We should probably text her.”

Sam sighed as he massaged his forehead. “Yes, sure, we could do that…” he replied, “Or you could visit her café in Jinbocho.”

Makoto cleared her throat. “Well, we could surprise her since we’ll be in Japan anyway. It’ll be a surprise for all three of them actually.”

Ryuji glanced at her in confusion. “What? Since when are you into fun stuff?”

“Huh?” Makoto frowned, “W-what’s that supposed to mean?”

Ryuji allowed a grin to peak through his curious face. “I thought you wanted us to move quickly, so we could deal with this… Metaverse threat.”

“Th-that’s…” Makoto was amusingly unbalanced, and I couldn’t restrain a smile.

Ann stretched out of her chair and playfully jostled Makoto by the shoulder. Surprised by the sudden
coddling, Makoto’s face reddened while her tongue faltered. Ann smiled joyously. “Don’t tease Makoto,” Ann said, “It’s cute that she wants our reunion to be a surprise.” Her probing words only made Makoto blush further. She covered her mouth in shame, preventing any additional embarrassments.

Mona yawned. “Is that all then? I’m getting kinda tired.”

“Ahem,” Sam redirected attention, “Yes, that is all. Unless you had anything to add, Akechi.”

The synthesized voice promptly responded. “Yes. I’m glad our plans are finally moving forward. However, we need to be cautious. Our enemies are paying close attention to our every move, and we cannot allow them to manipulate us.”

“Indeed,” Sam agreed, folding his hands behind him, “This will be exciting, but our circumstance could prove perilous at any moment, so please, Ryuji, don’t do anything stupid.”

Ryuji sighed. “Goddamnit…”

Makoto reassured the director. “We’ll be on guard, sir.”

Sam gently nodded. “Good.” Sam then tapped the lingering hologram, and it vanished instantaneously. The room’s lighting also returned to normal. “Now then, you’re free to do as you will for the length of the flight,” Sam continued, “If you should need anything, staff is on standby. Simply call them via the virtual displays attached to your chairs. Also, bunks are in the rear of the plane when you require sleep. No reason to sleep upright.”

“Alright, tomorrow, we complete the team!” Ryuji started pumping himself up at the most inopportune moments. “We’ll have to celebrate.”

Mona yawned again before hopping down from his seat. “Yeah, whatever… I’m going to bed.”

“Well, goodnight team,” Samuel said, “I’ll see you in the morning.” The businessman disappeared as quickly as he had entered, returning to the forward compartments of the plane.

“Right,” Makoto said, standing up, “I guess that’s a good enough cue as any to get some rest.”

Ann also stood up. “So, it’s bunks right?” She tapped her lips thoughtfully. “C’mon, Makoto. Let’s bunk together!”

“Uh,” Makoto flinched as Ann took her arm and began pulling her away, “Okay.” The two of them trailed to the rear of the plane, and I noted Morgana longingly gazing after them.

Ryuji then slapped my arm. “Hey, you’re gonna help me plan for tomorrow, right?”

My eyes glazed over my eager friend and landed on the distracted Morgana. “Morgana,” I began, “You’re bunking with me.”

Mona swiveled his head around to me with mild hesitation. “Huh? Oh…” He turned back to the rear hall with a sigh. “Yeah, I guess.”

Accepting his reluctant reply, I got up from my seat and meandered to the back of the room. Ryuji, nonetheless, remained undeterred. “Hey!” he cried, “Where are you going, man? We got stuff to plan.” I paid him no heed as Mona and I took our leave. “Hey! Hello? Are you hearin’ me?”
One plane ride later, we had traversed the world’s largest ocean and arrived in the homeland of the Phantom Thieves. Though I had been here a mere week ago, entering Tokyo felt like a welcoming of mind and body. My last visit to this city was one of whimsical choice, but now I was determined to unite the Phantom Thieves to some greater end. I had returned, and the Thieves had returned too.

With sunny rays streaking across the storefronts around me, I stepped hesitantly towards the quaint café nestled in the depths of Jongen-Jaya. The quiet atmosphere of this place always caught me off-guard, even in the most desperate of circumstances. Thankfully, I hoped to make this visit a pleasant one, but that didn’t stop me from worrying about Sojiro’s reaction.

Mona’s voice derailed my transient thoughts. “Well? Are we going in?”

I glanced at the cat in my bag. “I’m not sure exactly how to say this.”

I suddenly felt Sam’s hand on my shoulder. “It’s a tranquil, little place, isn’t it?” Sam said, “I wouldn’t want to overcrowd Sakura-san. Perhaps we should go in, just the two of us, and let everyone else wait outside while we make our deal.”

Makoto nodded in agreement. “I don’t think Boss would appreciate us all pressuring him into this.”

“Well, do whatever you guys think is best…” Ryuji replied as he leaned against the outer wall.

I nodded to my friends, and Samuel added, “Let’s go in together then. You can do most of the convincing, and I’ll offer any necessary support.”

With a sigh, I unenthusiastically accepted Sam’s proposal. “Alright.”

Although I found a confrontation with Sojiro to be unsavory, Ann’s bright smile was encouraging. “Good luck,” she said, “We’re counting on you two.”

With that, I pressed forward and opened the door of the café. The familiar jingling bell eased my nerves once I had entered the shop. Samuel trailed behind me, lingering for a moment in the doorway. As my eyes collected the warm interior, I noted Sojiro smoking in his usual, lonely corner.

“Slow day?” I suppressed my nervous edge with a casual coolness.

Sojiro gradually glanced in my direction, and quickly raised his eyebrow. “You again?” he curiously asked, “I thought you had gone back to the country after your last visit.”

“I did go to the country,” I replied, making my way to the counter, “Just not this one.”

That statement only confused Sojiro further. “And who’s this?” He asked as he caught sight of Samuel.

“Greetings, Sakura-san,” Samuel bowed slightly, “My name is Samuel Zimmerman.”

“Ohuh…” Sojiro gave Sam a cock-eyed glare before turning to me, “Is he with you?”

I took a seat at the bar, but Morgana took my reply. “I’d like to think he’s just following us,” said the haughty cat.

Sam hung his head, and I snickered. “Sam and I are working together.”

“That so?” Sojiro slowly examined the third party with subliminal suspicion, “What’ll your order be then?”
I opened my mouth to redirect the conversation, but Samuel gladly replied to the request. “I’ll have a coffee. Blue Mountain variety, please.” Sam straddled one of the barstools, rasping his knuckles on the counter to Sojiro’s chagrin.

Sojiro set aside his smoke while keeping his eyes trained on the American. Though Sam was oblivious, something about him clearly unsettled Soji. “Right…” Sojiro flew into his work despite the upset.

Then a loud smack attracted our attention to the far end of the café. Futaba burst out of the café restroom like a violent windstorm, causing the door to rattle. Unfettered by our presence, she hummed a rhythmic melody and performed a strange twirling motion as if she was casting a magical spell.

“Hello,” I chirped.

Futaba jumped, appearing for a moment like a frizzled, orange hedgehog. She blinked at me twice, but words would not form from her gaping mouth. Her head swiveled between Sojiro and me repeatedly as Mona clambered over my backside.

“Some welcome,” Mona remarked.

“It’s you! You’re really here!” Futaba cried. I smiled at her enthusiasm, and I was soon met with a full-bodied embrace. Futaba’s minuscule frame nearly dragged me from my seat by the quaking force of her hug. As she peeled away, an adorable smile on her face, Futaba began making her demands. “You’ve got to tell me all about what happened! And don’t think I’ve forgotten about that souvenir you owe me.”

Morgana frowned. “Hey! What about me?”

In an instant, Futaba turned her doting eyes on the cat and snatched him up by the face. The feline shrieked in horror as his entire visage was stretched to its limits. “Ooo! Mona!” Futaba squealed happily, bringing their noses together.

The cat moaned unpleasantly while his cheeks were tightly pinched. “This is true suffering…”

“H-hey, careful with the cat,” Sojiro dissuaded, continuing his work on the coffee.

Having teased Morgana thoroughly, Futaba set our exhausted companion onto my lap. Then she noticed our other guest. Futaba’s prying eyes peeked around my body like two soldiers poking over a ridgeline. Sam nonchalantly acknowledged her although he understood that he would soon be probed to the fullest extent plausible. Futaba zipped towards the staunch businessman disregarding any apprehensions she possessed and began investigating. In her flurry of motion, I couldn’t tell if she was sniffing or stabbing him.

“What are you hiding?” she inquired, “You got any weapons? Sharp objects?”

Sam chuckled humorlessly. “The only sharp object on me is my wit.”

Futaba’s madness slowed once she had been satisfied. “Well, your charisma stat seems particularly low.” She took a step back to get the full view of my tentative ally.

Sam scoffed. “You’re one to talk,” he goaded.

Futaba smirked. “I bet I’ve got a lot more friends than you do, sir.”
“Uhuh,” Sam mumbled, “Cause trolling internet forums definitely counts as real human interaction.”

“Wow. Just… wow,” Futaba said, shaking her head. She turned to me with a frustrated glare. “Why did you bring him here?” She pointed unceremoniously to Sam’s back.

I laughed dryly to ease the tension. “We have some business to discuss with you.”

Sojiro had finished Sam’s coffee and set it in front of him before sternly addressing the situation. “Ah, so that’s why you’re here.” His firm brow evoked a thin layer of sweat from my body, yet his slow, thoughtful mannerisms kept my nerves abated. Soji steadily closed his eyes and stroked his beard. “I hope you’re not planning on stirring up trouble.”

“Well, we need to borrow Futaba,” I replied, “Maybe for a few days.”

Sam sipped from his coffee, adding, “A few weeks, more like it.”

Sojiro loosed an incredulous laugh. “You can’t be serious,” he began, “There’s no way I’m letting Futaba skip school, much less for a few weeks.”

Sam lowered his cup, taking a beat to address Sojiro’s concerns. “If it’s the education you’re worried about, that can be easily remedied,” Sam said, “The work should double as foreign studies.”

“Woah!” Futaba gasped in surprise, “You mean you can get me out of school?”

Sojiro fumbled with his words. “N-now hold on a minute!” he spat, “Just what is going on here? Who are you?” He examined Samuel’s composure with unnerving intensity.

“As I said, I’m Samuel Zimmerman. I’m the director of Metaverse research at the United States’ Extradimensional Intelligence branch.” Sam was calm all through the interrogation, but I sensed that our position was souring.

Sojiro grunted. “I knew there was something suspicious about you. We’ve met before, haven’t we?”

I noted Sam’s collected face, but Sojiro’s unwavering suspicion was beginning to infect me. Sam rested his cup as he took a moment to breathe. “It’s possible,” he replied, “Though I can’t recall.”

Again, Sojiro made a disapproving chuckle. He turned to me, his face grave, and made a request. “Now, tell me the truth. What’s this all about?”

I cast my face down in shame though I had little reason to feel guilty. “The Phantom Thieves,” I replied, “Someone is undoing our work and targeting us.”

“Sojiro shook his head, “I thought you were done with that.” He waved at Sam. “Now you’re just going to follow behind this foreigner and do whatever he says?”

“Ah,” Mona chimed in, “He’s got you there.”

Samuel smiled gently at the harsh remarks. “Truthfully, I’m just playing a supporting role here,” he interjected.

“I don’t like him very much either,” I added, “But there are dangers out there that we can’t deal with alone.” I recalled our violent skirmish in the Velvet Room.

Sojiro still frowned. “You’ve got to be kidding.”
Sam nodded in support. “I’m afraid it’s no joke,” he said, “I’m sure you’re familiar with the recent prison escapes. Well, it’s no coincidence that the escapees are directly linked to the Phantom Thieves.”

“Ooo! You’re talking about all the escaped criminals the Phantom Thieves put away, right?” Futaba jumped at the chance to share her knowledge. “I’ve been keeping tabs on the police investigation, and they still haven’t found any clues!”

Startled, Sam, Sojiro, and I turned to Futaba. Sojiro was quick to shut down her overjoyed attitude. “Wha? Police investigation? Futaba, we talked about this.” The grief on his face was genuinely upsetting.

Futaba shrunk back in embarrassment. “Eh-heh… sorry,” she said, twisting her hands together, “B-but this was really important, so I thought…”

“No, you shouldn’t be spying on confidential material,” Sojiro chastised, “It could put you in danger!”

“But Sojiro!” Futaba cried, “My friends might be in danger!” The intensity of her voice made me feel loved but also very unfortunately positioned between the arguing parties.

Sojiro couldn’t immediately respond to Futaba’s heated reply. He sighed heavily, weighted by his parental burden. The position was unenviable, yet he still contributed to the dilemma. “Please, we need Futaba’s skills,” I said. It was all I could do to rationalize stealing his daughter to further the Thieves. If we couldn’t validate that expectation, my remorse would be immeasurable.

Sojiro turned his troubled gaze to me. I knew what he said was sincere. “I’m never going to let Futaba out of my sight again. I won’t allow myself to become an absentee parent. Not after all we’ve been through.”

Futaba’s voice quivered. “Ngh, S-Sojiro…” She shook her head and tried to hide her teary eyes.

A brief silence ensued, filled only by Futaba’s trembling breaths, as Samuel and I cast uneasy glances to one another. Attempting to diffuse the situation, Mona hopped to the floor and rubbed his warm fur gently against Futaba’s legs. The sight was grievous and reminded me of my shame: I brought conflict where there was peace.

Sojiro looked at his sullen daughter. His winced expression and crooked lips explained the complexity of his desires. Sojiro was a compassionate man after all but not one fond of taking risks. As he relaxed momentarily, he cast a wistful glance around the shop. The ornate display of beans, the cramped kitchen, the storied tables, and the rustic windows represented a haven and modest home. He finally smiled, sighing once more. “So… I guess I’ll have to close up the shop for a few weeks.”

“Huh?” Light glinted in Futaba’s watery pupils.

Sojiro’s posture loosened as he gave a mellow chuckle. “You heard me.” He casually stroked the back of his neck.

The strain on my heart miraculously vanished with the cheery words from Boss’ mouth. I turned to him in giddy astonishment. “You mean you’re coming with us?”

Soji nodded. “Well, how else am I supposed to keep watch over her?”

Futaba abruptly belly flopped onto the bar counter, parting Samuel and I like two slices of bread. She
reached over the counter and wrapped her arms around Sojiro in a fervent hug. “Soji!” Futaba squealed.

Though surprised, Sojiro reluctantly smiled. “H-hey, careful. You could break the counter doing that.” He gently placed a hand on Futaba’s head, rustling her hair a bit.

Samuel took a long and warranted sip from his cup. He glanced at the pair callously before returning his somber eyes to his dwindling coffee. “Hmm, that went rather well,” he remarked, “I guess I should finalize your additions to the team then.”

Sojiro looked at Sam, Futaba still awkwardly latched onto his side and draped over the bar. “We’ll need some time to prepare.”

Sam nodded. “That’s fine,” he replied, “Our team will be waiting a few days while the logistics get sorted out, but we’ll be in touch.”

Sojiro laughed as he gazed out toward the street. “Before you go, tell your friends to take their faces off the glass. I don’t want to have to clean it before I close the shop.”

Sam and I turned to the alleyway to greeted by Ryuji and Ann’s faces plastered against the window with Makoto a few feet behind them. Both Ryuji and Ann were abnormally shielding their eyes, trying to get a better view inside. Makoto raised her brow at our sighting, and I heard her muffled voice.

“Oh, they’re looking at us,” she said, mildly ashamed for participating in this espionage.

Ann and Ryuji just smiled cluelessly, waving at those of us inside the café. Ryuji even chimed into the conversation. “Hey, guys! What’s up?”

Now it was Sam’s turn to sigh. “And I thought leaving them outside would make this less awkward.”

The gentle rocking of the mid-morning train lulled me into a translucent state. Our plans were progressing with startling simplicity, yet I had some misgivings about Samuel’s true intentions. Despite the necessity of our alliance, Sam had not been forthcoming about his history or his investigation of the Metaverse threat. He used fake Personas; he spied on rival Metaverse agents; he reconstructed Akechi. Still, I did not understand the meaning of these actions. Sam could have been a government drone simply seeking to satisfy the hunger of his overlords, or he might have been a manipulative traitor with the aim to abuse and discard the Thieves. Then again, Makoto had seen something noble in Sam’s cause though no one else trusted his word.

Sojiro’s accusations still rattled in my head. At some point, he had known Sam or briefly met him. I glanced to the dry-looking American beside me, who sipped from a can of soda. I had thought to ask him an impertinent question. I needed to know Sam if I was to continue this journey.

Standing directly in front of us, Ryuji eyed Sam with unprompted curiosity. “ Didn’t you already have a coffee at Leblanc?”

Samuel’s shoulders seemed to extend as he straightened in his seat. “And?” he replied coldly.

Ryuji shrugged. “Ain’t caffeine like… bad for you?”

Ann let out a snort from behind Ryuji, causing him to flinch. “When did you become health
You’re one to talk,” Ryuji bitterly scoffed, “You eat sweets all day without a second thought.”

Ann let out a sly laugh, winking mischievously. “I go better with sweets.”

Sam’s head sunk as he resigned himself. “Coffee is nice, but it lacks a certain ingredient.”

Ryuji shook his head. “What? Flavor?”

“Sugar,” Sam replied, “My exposure to certain… tools of our trade has left me with a dependency on rapidly metabolized carbohydrates.”

“So… ya addicted to sugar,” Ryuji stated, “Gotcha.”

Sam relaxed again as the noise of the railway overshadowed our conversation. The irritatingly calm posture of his face magnified a morbid intrigue, my question still lingering. I turned to him with an inquisitive demeanor. “What was that back at Leblanc? How does Sojiro know you?”

Sam’s eyes barely registered my motion as he chuckled. “Now that’s a very boring question coming from you,” he replied curtly, “One with a very boring answer. Why don’t you ask what’s really on your mind?”

Ryuji blinked at us. “Huh? I miss somethin’?”

My narrowed eyes were focused dead on Sam’s crass grin. His overconfidence only stoked my desire to learn the truth. “Fine,” I blankly stated, “Did you know Wakaba Isshiki was going to die?”

“Woah!” Ryuji cried, “What!?”

Sam laughed again as he took another sip from his can. The lights of the train car abruptly shuddered as if it had just experienced a bizarre electrical surge. “That’s a much more interesting question… and one that’s highly dependent on what you mean by “know”.” Sam hunched over slowly, obscured in the flickering light. “If you’re asking if I knew that Masayoshi Shido was an egocentric maniac with no regard for the lives of his fellow man, then yes. Yes, I knew he was a bastard since the first time we spoke.” Sam gritted his teeth as he poured out heated accusations. “Or if you’re asking if I knew that Wakaba’s research would ultimately lead to her demise, then yes. Yes, I knew Metaverse research was attracting the worst of humanity.” He shook his head somberly. “Or if you’re asking if I knew that Goro was being groomed to be an assassin, then yes. Yes, my intelligence network was aware of that. But if you’re asking if I knew that Shido had ordered Goro to eliminate Wakaba, then I’d say no. No, I didn’t know that.” A half smile surfaced on Samuel’s face.

Although his irreverent expression was irksome, I felt no reaction to Samuel’s vague admission. Perhaps Sam’s lack of competence diminished his threat, or my willpower may have simply multiplied in the presence of my friends. I noted Ryuji and Ann’s stunned faces, and by Sam’s carefree look, I knew that was the response he had been hunting. Regardless, my mind was unconcerned with Sam’s possible links to Shido’s conspiracy. He was like a pawn in my hand to be used and discarded should I so desire.

Samuel could pretend to be a ruthless, morally bankrupt individual, but the real terror was the black claws I had preemptively gripped around his heart. Demonic eyes pierced the thin veil guarding Sam, the fiery wisps of hell stretching out to consume him. I’d rip Sam’s desires from his mind at the first whiff of a malicious plot. The delightful image of Samuel groveling at my feet sprung into my head briefly, but the thought was quickly swallowed in shame as my conscience overtook me. I would ignore him until he threatened the Thieves.
Ryuji released a harsh sigh. “Jesus, man…”

“So,” I continued, “You knew, but you did nothing about it.”

Sam’s confidence broke when he finally addressed me sincerely. “What would you have had me do, hmm? Send my agents on a suicide mission into a cognitive world whose existence we had only just come to terms with?”

Makoto leaned toward the two of us with a stern look. “Should we really be having this conversation right now?”

Sam and I shared a confirming glance just as Ann’s voice began to bubble up. “Uh-uhh… Y-yeah!” she said in a strangely loud tone, “W-we can talk about who did what wrong next time we play that killing game!” Ann turned like she was addressing the entire car instead of our small group.

Ryuji shook his head. “Ann, what the hell was that?” he whispered.

Though her cheeks quickly reddened, Ann’s eyes were decidedly angry. “I-I panicked!” she hissed, “A game is like… the only time you could talk about death and get away with it!”

“Well, yeah,” Ryuji replied, “But you don’t have to make it so obvious!”

“Ugh! You try covering our asses next time!”

Makoto let out a slight chuckle at the argument. “Hmm, I didn’t think I would, but I kind of missed these little spats.”

I smiled, adding, “Ann’s cute when she’s flustered.”

“Tch…” Ann glared at me, “This is your fault.”

Sam pinched the bridge of his nose. “Miss Niijima, you failed to inform me that your friends were such idiots.”

Makoto seemed unphased, glancing pleasantly to the American. “Lucky for you,” she said, “You fit in perfectly.”

Sam’s foot clacked impatiently against the steel floor as he let out a rasping growl. “Can’t this damn train move any faster…”

We emerged from the underground station into the bustling Shibuya streets. Surrounded by adventurous youths and beelining salarymen, I gazed up to the crystal-clear heavens. The gleaming sun stretched out it’s warming tendrils through the proud high-rises and down to my bare flesh.

Ann nearly skipped into me as she ascended the subway steps. Jittering with excitement, she cooed happily. “Oh, it’s been too long…”

Makoto also paused to intern the Shibuya atmosphere once more. The familiar hubbub of Tokyo bestowed a soothing tranquility on all of us, but Makoto wore it openly. Her peaceable look was catching. “Ah… hasn’t changed a bit.”

Morgana latched to my shoulder. “Well, it’s nice but… it’s better now that we’re together.” I grinned, and Makoto and Ann showed their smiles as well.
Ryuji stepped up beside me, completely ignorant of the ongoing bonding and staring at his phone. The grating volume of Ryuji’s electronic device drew my attention. “So, we’ve all heard of the recent prison breaks,” a sleek television host stated, “It’s quite troubling news to have four high profile prisoners escape in such a short time period, and furthermore, the police have yet to find a shred of evidence of the escape! That’s right! The criminals have simply vanished! I, for one, find that quite startling. But! I’ve been doing some investigating of my own, and there’s one thing that connects all these dirty convicts together. Yes, yes! One very important detail has been neglected: these criminals are all targets of the famed Phantom Thieves!” An overplayed gasp rattled the phone. “Just when I thought the memory of our slick and stylish vigilantes would fade into history, I get this thrilling news.” Moderate acclamations emanated from a distant crowd. “With these criminals on the loose who knows what kind of excitement could be brewing! You know I’ll be paying close attention to see if the Phantom Thieves appear! But for now, I’ve got a special guest to help us speculate. Please welcome local enthusiast and Phantom Thief conspiracy theorist, Yuuki Mi-”

“Yo, are you hearin’ this!?” Ryuji roared, “People have started talkin’ about the Phantom Thieves, and they haven’t even done anything yet!”

I stopped myself at Ryuji’s words. “They?”

“Uh, yeah…” Ryuji said, glancing at me, “They must be pretty cool to be gettin’ people stirred up like this.”

Ann smiled at Ryuji and laughed. “Aw, he finally grew up.”

Ryuji returned his eyes to his phone. “Okay, I guess all but one of them is cool.”

Ann frowned. “Uh! Hey!”

Mona snickered. “Don’t worry, Lady Ann. Ryuji was talking about himself.”

“And make that two on the uncool list,” Ryuji snarked as he flipped through icons on his phone.

“Uncool list?” Makoto inquired, “Ryuji, what century were you born in again?”

Appearing from the subway, Samuel gently patted Ryuji’s shoulder. “Don’t answer that,” he said, “Whatever it is, it wasn’t long enough ago.”

“Okay, old man,” Ryuji rolled his eyes, “Why don’t you do something useful and take us to this place Yusuke’s been stayin’?”

Sam landed a heavy slap on Ryuji’s back as he stepped away from our group. “Nope, you guys can deal with that. I’ve got business at the Z-Tech building.” He swiveled toward me. “Still got that address I gave you?” I nodded, and Sam flashed a quick smile while the flowing crowds absorbed him. “Good!” he shouted, “We’ll meet up later in Jinbocho, alright?” He didn’t wait for a reply as the pedestrian waves swiftly separated us.

“And he’s gone…” Mona remarked, “Ya know, that guy is really unnerving, but it’s like he has complete faith in us.”

I stared out into the swirling masses. “He has me worried.”

Ann tilted her head slightly. “Hey, uh… what’s Z-Tech?”

“That’s the contractor company Samuel works with,” Makoto answered, “It’s a family-owned business: the “Z” standing for Zimmerman.”
“So,” Ann continued, “Sam controls the government side while his family controls the business? That sounds… weird.”

Ryuji scoffed, glancing to the looming towers of Shibuya. “Sounds like typical effin’ adult shit. Bet they can get away with all kinds of shady stuff with Sam scrubbing the records.”

“That may be,” Makoto replied bitterly, “But for now we have bigger issues to deal with.”

“Yeah,” Ann said with a sigh, “I guess we’ll just have to keep an eye on Sam for now.”

Ryuji shook the spiteful thoughts from his head and glanced to me. “Yo! Where is this place we’re goin’?”

I scratched my neck as I took a step forward. “Follow me.”

The sounds of congested traffic had long since evaporated, replaced by the gentle chirping of nesting birds. The calm neighborhood we were entering wasn’t far from Shibuya, yet it possessed all the charm of a quaint, country town. The meager surroundings caused me to reminisce on the first time I had visited Yusuke. The humble shack of Madarame seemed a familiar comparison to the very lodging we now witnessed.

Old, faded paint peeled from the misaligned siding. The rusted iron railing of the external staircase scraped against my palm as I ascended to the higher level. Vines extended from the overgrown vegetation plots below to the second story awning. Disregarding my better sensibilities, I thought the apartment complex might’ve been cursed; it seemed like the earth could swallow it up at any moment.

Ann absently commented on the scenery while noting the various plant shoots. “Does anyone even live here?”

Intrigued, Ryuji also paused to consider the disrepair. “Yeah, I thought my place was bad…”

I glanced to the folded scrap in my hand before uncertainly adding, “This is the right address.”

“Are you sure?” Mona asked, “Maybe you were reading it upside down.”

Makoto chuckled. “I think he would’ve noticed such a glaring issue.”

“No, look,” I said, showing the paper to Morgana, “Here’s the door.”

The five of us turned to the worn entrance of Yusuke’s residence. What I imagine was once a lovely shade of baby blue finish had devolved into a sickeningly pale beige. Splatters of dirt and grime marked the spots where rot had begun to take hold of the wood. I reconsidered my judgment on the location, but there was no doubt.

Ryuji looked the door up and down. “Damn, so this is really it, huh?”

I stepped forward and raised my hand to knock, but as my knuckles touched the shabby frame, the door creaked open.

“Woah! It opened!” Mona stared wide-eyed at the ominous crack.

“For real!?” Ryuji exclaimed, “Okay, this is startin’ to freak me out.”
Ann slinked backward, tenderly pushing Makoto in front of herself. “Uh… You guys go first.” Makoto could only glance nervously at her timid friend.

Mona shook his head. “Okay, what are we waiting for?”

I paused a moment before shaking my head and turning to Ryuji. “Remember what happened last time we went into a weird apartment?”

“R-right!” Ann interjected, “Why don’t you guys go on ahead, and me and Makoto can stay out here just in case.”

“Jeez, Ann,” Ryuji sighed, “It’s just Yusuke. What? Are you afraid he’ll ask you to pose nude again?”

“Wait,” Makoto chimed, her face paling, “That happened? I thought that was just a joke.”

Ryuji sighed again, this time scratching the back of his neck. “He asked, but nothing ever happened.” The inflection in his mouth informed equal parts regret and flippant taunting.

Mona raised his brow. “We can have our dreams…”

Ryuji, Morgana, and I all rested our eyes, taking a moment of silence for our fallen fantasies.

“Ew… guys…” Makoto shook her head.

Ryuji cocked his head back. “What’s wrong, Makoto? You don’t think Ann’s ugly, do you?” His ill-born smile already had amusement bursting within me.

“W-what? No!” our stoic friend stammered, “I mean, she’s… nice… b-but…”

Ann’s fuming visage broke from behind Makoto’s back. “Ugh! Just go into the apartment already!”

With a smile on my face and a skip in my step, I placed my open hand on the waiting door. The frame gave little resistance as the rickety slab easily moved forward. Stepping inside, I noticed the apartment was quite dark. What little light entered through the doorway and windows, however, revealed the entry to be clean, excluding a few splotches of color dotted over the carpet which I assumed were stray droplets of paint.

I stepped inside, Ryuji cramping himself in the small doorframe. The short entryway opened into a larger kitchen and dining area although, with the appliances and table, there wasn’t much additional space. The room was tidy excluding a few pots laid haphazardly over the sink and stove. On closer inspection, I found that the pots did not contain food or water but stagnant paints. Furthermore, I could not find evidence that any food had been here whatsoever.

Ryuji strolled behind me, and upon finding a light switch, he flicked it. The following plastic snap left an empty sensation in my gut when I realized that no lights had been sparked to life. Ryuji fiddled with the switch several times, but the lights remained off.

“Well, shit,” Ryuji said, “Looks like Yusuke hasn’t been paying the bills.”

“I hope everything’s alright,” Mona quietly added, “A talented artist like Yusuke should have no trouble finding some work.”

I spun around in the empty room. “Where is he?”

Ryuji turned and jaunted to another door at the corner of the tiny dining area. “Maybe back here?”
Ryuji postulated. He took hold of the knob and swung the door open. “Hello? Yusuke?” Ryuji dipped out of sight, and I quickly followed.

Joined to the kitchen was an equally confined bedroom. A small cot had been stuffed into the corner under a wide window. Tan plastic slats allowed a tiny sliver of sunlight to ripple over the bedsheets and across the floor. Ryuji strained his eyes to survey the dim room while Mona immediately departed from my shoulder to begin investigating. Though his body blended perfectly with the shady scene, Morgana’s bright blue eyes were prominent enough to notice. The cat quickly gathered the scene, but Ryuji and I still struggled.

“Huh, not here either,” Ryuji said, “Maybe he’s out doing errands.”

Mona’s gleaming pupils pointed at us. “Wait, a light’s coming from there.”

Ryuji and I followed the cat’s stare to a third door with a subtle, yellowish glow protruding from its edges. I scratched my head. “Uh… the bathroom, I’m guessing.”

“Ah, jeez, he’s been in the bathroom this whole time?” Ryuji said, shaking his head. “Alright, let’s see him.” Ryuji stepped to the bathroom door.

“Wait!” Mona exclaimed. Both Ryuji and I glanced at his horrified face. “You can’t just go in there!”

“Don’t worry,” Ryuji casually replied, “I was gonna knock first.” With Mona’s nerves settled, Ryuji raised his fist and rasped his knuckles against the door twice. “Yo! Yusuke! You in there?” Ryuji shouted, “It’s me… uh, ya know, your pal Ryuji.”

The three of us waited, but there was no reply.

“Uh… so… maybe he needs his privacy?” Ryuji said to no one in particular.

“I hate to suggest this,” Mona soberingly began, “But given the circumstances, it’s plausible that someone might have tracked Yusuke here to ambush him.”

“You really think the bad guys would attack someone in their own bathroom?” Ryuji asked, “That’s low.”

I glanced between my friends before adding, “He might be in trouble.”

Ryuji sighed despondently. “Fine, fine.” Ryuji grabbed the bathroom doorknob and said, “Yusuke, we’re comin’ in!”

As Ryuji thrust the door aside, the three of us poked our heads into the small bathroom. At first glance, I didn’t notice anything supernatural; however, an electric lantern was sitting on the sink to our left. We walked into the room, and my eyes gradually adjusted to the glaring light. Opposite the sink, I noticed a bathtub full of water with a strange green stick breaching the surface. We crept over to the tub slowly, and once we had arrived, I stared down in absolute bewilderment.

“Oh my God…” Ryuji mumbled.

Mona was baffled from his position on the tub’s rim. “I-it can’t be…”

I blinked repeatedly to confirm the image, and indeed it was real. In the tub lied Yusuke, wearing a green snorkeling mask and surrounded by tiny, grey shrimp. Thankfully, he was also wearing swim trunks, but that did not help me to comprehend the visual.
Ryuji’s mouth gaped. “Uhhhhhh… Uhhh…”

“Is he… sleeping in there?” Morgana asked, “And why are there shrimp!?” I watched as the little crustaceans crawled across Yusuke’s skin like underwater centipedes. I felt my breakfast stirring within me.

“Well…” Ryuji swallowed. “There’s only one way to find out…” Ryuji stooped down and flicked Yusuke’s green airpipe. Needless to say, what followed got us a little wet.

Yusuke rustled a white towel over his dripping head. We had moved back to the bedroom, and now that the shades were open, there was ample light for everyone. Despite his abrupt removal from the bath, Yusuke still looked pristine as ever. His silky, blue-tinted hair fell effortlessly into place once the water had been extracted. While Yusuke wiped the last droplets of water from his body, Morgana, Ryuji, and I waited patiently for him to explain the situation.

“I must apologize for the state of my apartment,” Yusuke began, “Had I known you were coming, I would have prepared a welcoming celebration.”

Puzzled by Yusuke’s melancholic stare, Ryuji shook his head. “Yo, forget that. What the hell were you doin’ in there?”

“Ah, you mean the shrimp bath?” Yusuke replied with a nod, “I had been inspired to create such startling imagery. You see, I recently read an account of an artist who was obsessed with death and desired to experience the phenomenon for himself. So, he took his friends down to the beach and asked them to keep a careful eye on him as he attempted to drown himself. The artist then tossed himself into the cold embrace of the ocean and allowed the waters to fill his lungs. Of course, he was then resuscitated moments later by his friends, but with the enlightened knowledge of death and the afterlife.”

My eyes rolled. “Remind me never to take you to the beach.”

“Wait,” Ryuji interjected, “You were tryin’ to drown yourself in the bathtub?”

“That still doesn’t explain the shrimp,” Mona added.

Yusuke crossed his arms as he reflected. “No, attempting to drown myself would be reckless endangerment. Instead, I opted for a long-term exposure approach. I thought that by entering a sleep-like state, surrounded by the bottom feeders of the ocean, I might grasp the concept of what it feels like to be a drowned corpse in the depths of the sea.”

“Yusuke,” Ryuji sighed, “You’ve gone crazy.” He motioned to the bathroom. “What were you even gonna do with all those shrimp anyway?”

“Eat ’em, I hope,” Mona said.

Yusuke shook his head. “Oh, no. I suppose I’d have to start an aquarium. Those creatures possess a certain aesthetic that is truly captivating.”

Ryuji closed his eyes. “Ya know what? Forget I asked.” Though Ryuji seemed to be tiring, I was just beginning to feel excited.

“Anyways,” Yusuke continued, “What brings you three to my humble abode?” He stepped to the adjacent dresser and began rummaging through the drawers.
I opened my mouth, but Ryuji quickly responded on my behalf. “We’re getting’ the Phantom Thieves back together!”

Yusuke abruptly turned to stare. “Is that so?”

“Yup! Turns out somebody’s been breakin’ our old enemies, like Madarame and even Shido, out of prison.”

Mona added, “Plus, there’s that whole thing with that shadow person that tracked us into the Metaverse.”

“Oh, yeah,” Ryuji continued, “If we didn’t get lucky with Makoto, that shadow dude might’ve stolen Morgana.”

Yusuke appeared intrigued. “Hmm, you mean you’ve reawakened to your Personas?”

“Well, I sure have,” Ryuji responded, “This guy too.” He smacked my shoulder. “Ann awakened hers, and Makoto did yesterday. Uh…” He turned his eyes to the cat. “Morgana? Have you got your Persona back?”

Mona glared at him. “If I had, do you think we would’ve had that battle yesterday?”

“Okay, I’m just asking.” Ryuji reeled back. “Then all that’s left is Futaba, who we just got back on the team… Haru, but we haven’t even talked to her…and you.”

“Impressive,” Yusuke said, “But how are you even able to go into that place? I thought it was destroyed.”

“Uhhh…”

Morgana quickly supplemented us with his knowledge. “The Metaverse can never truly be destroyed. After all, it is a place born of the human cognition.”

“Eh, what he said,” Ryuji continued, “Anyways, that’s where things have been tricky. This American guy, Sam, has been tryin’ to work with us. Seems to want to help.”

“He sent some letters,” I added, “Thought you might’ve ignored them.”

Yusuke raised one eyebrow. “Letters?” he slowly asked, “I… probably thought it was another bill. I dispose of most of my mail since I can’t afford to pay general expenses.”

“But you can afford a tub full of shrimp?” Ryuji scoffed.

Yusuke dismissed Ryuji’s comments and stuck out his hip. “One must make difficult choices in order to reap the benefits.”

“What!”?

Mona hopped onto the bed. “Listen, we just want to know if you’re willing to join us. The Phantom Thieves won’t be complete without you.”

“Of course,” Yusuke replied, “If you need my help, I will gladly lend you my aid.”

“Really?” Ryuji blurted, “Huh, I thought you’d put up more of a fight.”

“Why would you think that?” Yusuke inquired.
“I dunno,” Ryuji said, rubbing his neck, “Ann kept going on about her new life she was attached to, so I kinda figured you’d be the same.”

Yusuke’s tone lowered. “Does it look like I have a life to be attached to?”

Ryuji smiled nervously while I shot Yusuke an encouraging gesture. “Well, now you can be attached to us.”

“Indeed,” Yusuke replied, smiling, “This calls for quite the celebration.”

“Aw, hell yeah, man!” Ryuji pumped his fist. “We’re heading over to Jinbocho next, right? Apparently, Haru’s got a whole café set up. We should celebrate once we get there!”

Yusuke chuckled. “Ah, a café. Food sounds lovely.”

“Ha,” Mona laughed, “Why am I not surprised?”

Our group of six strolled confidently aside the various shops of Jinbocho. As I glanced to the windows lining the street, I noticed the burgeoning smiles that followed me. Together, we created great joy, yet I couldn’t perceive its source. Whether it merely be the company that surrounded me or the renewal of our eternal bonds, I found the emotion intoxicating. I wondered why I had taken so long to realize this, but I clearly yearned for this adventure. Perhaps in all the ill-fates I had avoided, I had found a true purpose: not something interned or decided but an identity I had carried since the very moment of my conception. This team was far more than a group of friends to me. Even the term “family” would sound cliché as our descriptor. We were bound by our souls. Hope was our language, and justice was our weapon. If we held to our ideals, nothing would stop us.

My thoughts growing increasingly weighty, I barely notice the oncoming obstacles. Morgana, however, spoke as we rounded the corner. “Is this the place?”

I stopped abruptly, the others halting behind me. A line of pedestrians stretched the length of the block before us. The noisy crowds were a surprising sight; I stared momentarily at the chattering people.

“Did we make a wrong turn?” Yusuke postulated, “This area is never so busy.”

“No, this is definitely the place to be,” Makoto calmly refuted.

“No way!” Ryuji cried, “Is this line for Haru’s café!?” He cackled. “Holy shit!”

“Wow,” Ann remarked, her eyes filled with delighted curiosity, “Haru must have some amazing treats to be this popular.”

“Hmm,” Yusuke scratched his chin, “I would certainly like to try her confections and see what a true Okumura is capable of.”

I nodded in agreement. “As long as there are no elephants involved…”

“Uh, elephants?” Ryuji started, “You feelin’ alright, man?”

I waved him aside. “You don’t want to know.”

“But how are we supposed to get in there?” Ann asked, “I don’t wanna wait in this line all day!” She pursed her lips irritably.
“Yeah, no kiddin’…” Ryuji added as his body slumped, “This is gonna suck.”

“Yo, Sakamoto!” I saw an unfamiliar kid wearing a blue shirt approaching us from the opposing direction. He carried a cream-topped pastry wrapped in foil, and he wore an obnoxious smile. Additionally, I found his nasal voice grating. “Bet you’re regretting not getting in with Okumura Senpai when you had the chance, eh?”

“Huh?” Ryuji gave the kid a hard stare, “You tryin’ to start somethin’?”

The kid just laughed. “Have fun waiting! Took me an hour to get my food, and the line was ten times shorter back then.” The arrogant boy trotted down the street, snickering at our predicament.

Ann followed the kid with her eyes. “That puffy pastry thing looked really good.” Her wide smile was further evidence of her massive sweet tooth.

Ryuji suddenly fell to his knees, causing the rest of us to recoil in confusion. “Noooo!” he wailed, “I want a puffy pastry thing now…”

I shook my head. “Get off the ground, Ryuji.”

“Seriously,” Mona added, “Just because you’re a monkey doesn’t mean you need to act like one.”

Ryuji hefted himself upright and looked directly at me. “Sorry, did you just hear somethin’?”

I blinked at him. “Hear what?”

“Oh, nothin’…” Ryuji replied, “I just thought that chunk of carpet on your shoulder insulted me.”

“Carpet!?” Mona exclaimed.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” I coolly answered, “It’s a pretty talented piece of carpet.”

“Hey,” Mona turned to me, “You’re not supposed to encourage this behavior.”

“A cat carpet…” Yusuke mumbled, “Cat fur is soft, but I think the styling is more appropriate to women’s fashion-ware. What do you think, Ann?”

“Uh-umm,” Ann stammered, “I think that’s a question better suited for my agent. He’s savvier than me when it comes to what’s in.”

“Oh, yeah,” Ryuji interjected, “How is that asshole? You tell him we were leavin’ America?”

“I did,” Ann responded, “But he seemed more concerned with his poker game than scheduling another sudden flight.”

Ryuji huffed. “Good.”

“I’m sure he’ll be along soon,” Ann continued, “He’s always following close behind.”

I smiled purely. “I like Phil. He has a good eye for women.”

“I would very much like to meet this agent,” Yusuke said, cutting off any possible reprimand, “Perhaps he could help me identify a new subject for my art.”

“Pfff, don’t give the guy so much credit,” Ryuji scoffed at Yusuke and at me, “I mean, he only noticed two of the most attractive women we know.”
Makoto eyed Ryuji with startled bewilderment. “Ryuji…” Her cheeks blushed.

Ann smiled softly. “Hah, whaddya know…”

“Ah, gee…” Ryuji said, sighing, “What did I do?”

I smiled at Ryuji, patting his shoulder. “I don’t think you’re in trouble this time.”

“Speaking of trouble,” Morgana said as he gazed down the street, “I think I see some coming.”

Sam was walking towards us. I caught the jaded look on his face, but he didn’t appear to be directing that ire at us. His expression brightened as he neared our group, and he began chatting without concern.

“Hello, everyone,” Sam said, “I wasn’t sure you would be here yet.”

“Everything went smoothly with Yusuke,” I responded.

“Ah, yes,” Sam said, nodding, “A pleasure meeting you Kitagawa-san. I look forward to working together.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Yusuke replied with a respectful bow, “Although I expected you to be a bit more… eccentric.”

Samuel chuckled incredulously. “What exactly were you expecting?”

Yusuke closed his eyes as he visualized the American’s hypothetical appearance. “I suppose a tall, lanky man… with a gangly, yellow beard… a striped hat… and a thick leather belt filled with gun holsters.”

Four of us snickered, but Makoto had a bit more respect. “I’m an American!” Sam cried, “Not a nineteenth-century caricature!”

“Well, if it’s any consolation…” Yusuke continued, “You have the appropriate height.”

Sam sighed. “What have I gotten myself into?”

Makoto quickly cleared her throat. “Well, it looks like we’ll be waiting for a while,” she bluntly added, “So unless you’ve got a better idea, I think maybe we could spend this time to get the group acquainted with you.”

At Makoto’s words, the other five of us looked at Sam expectantly. He passed an uncertain glance around the group. The enthusiasm slowly drained from Sam’s face until he had crafted a reluctant solution. He pursed his lips cheekily, saying, “I do have a better idea, Miss Nijima. Wait here.” Then he turned on his black leather heels and walked into the street.

“Uh…” Makoto was left speechless.

Ann placed a hand under her chin as she thought. “You’d think a guy so insistent on working with us would try a little harder to fit in.”

“Perhaps he is socially inept,” Yusuke remarked.

Makoto nervously offered a feeble excuse. “I—I’m sure he’s just… trying to help us.”

“Yeah, right,” Ryuji replied, “I bet he’s bribing his way to the front of the line right now.”
Mona frowned. “He’s probably going to be sitting in there with a smug grin on his face.”

“God, makes me wanna punch him right in his mou—”

“Attention everyone!” Samuel’s booming voice jarred our senses. I glanced out into the street where I had last seen Sam and saw him standing large in the middle of the roadway. The others also swiftly noticed our rogue supervisor.

“What’s he doing?” Ann asked, staring wide-eyed.

“Well,” Yusuke interjected, “At least we know he’s not afraid of public speaking.”

“Attention! Attention!” Sam called. Gradually, some of the patrons in the crowd took notice of the bizarre man, despite the noise of the locale. “Yes! Listen to me!” Sam loudly bellowed. For a person of average girth, his voice projected amazingly. “To every person… who gives up their spot in line and goes home… I will give… ten thousand yen!” He pulled out a wad of Japanese bills and waved them above his head.

“What!?” Ryuji exclaimed, throwing up his hands.

“Oh my God!” Ann cried.

Makoto gasped, “So this was the idea…”

“To throw away money so flagrantly,” Yusuke wistfully remarked, “He must truly be void of all worldly desires.”

I chuckled. “I think he’s just rich.”

“Rich…” Morgana laughed, “…or insane.”

Members of the line gawked openly at Samuel’s proposal. “I’m quite serious,” he added, “Each and every one of you could walk away from here ten thousand yen richer. I have a lot more where this came from.” The people gossiped like schoolgirls witnessing a petty crime. One or two even stepped forward, curious of the stranger’s offer.

Sam greeted the comers with a proud smile. A young man approached him, and Sam readily extended a fistful of bills to the youth. “A smart choice for some easy cash,” Sam said as he placed the money into the man’s hand.

The young man blinked at his filled palm. “Ah! Th-thank you!” he stammered.

Grinning from ear to ear, Sam nodded. “Of course! Enjoy your day!” And he sent the young man packing.

“He’s really doing it!” Ann commented with excitement.

Other patrons quickly verified the source of the commotion, and soon the whole block had transformed into a crazed mob. Sam was flooded by the rushing crowds. The six of us watched dumbfounded while the swarm engulfed Sam like flies on a corpse.

“Ha! I can’t believe that actually worked,” said Mona.

Ryuji flicked his head around. “Yo! The line’s movin’, guys! We should move up while we can!”

Glancing down the walk, I saw bare concrete and brick where the crowds had once been. I turned
aside and pointed to our destination. “Forward! To desserts!”

Ann put on a beaming smile. “Sweet treats, here we come!”

We made a mad dash across the block past the distracted customers, stopping at the storefront where a stub of the once great procession remained. The lightly colored signage overhead read, “Otherworld Delights”.

As I peered into the stuffed yet tranquil café, my olfactory senses were met with the harmonious aromas of warm bread and ground coffee. I eagerly welcomed the soothing nasal sensation, and I heard the others inhaling in unison. My eyes also savored the pleasant shop. The subtle pinks, and yellows, and whites touched every wall and table down to the very cutlery. The patrons within paid little heed to the commotion outside, enraptured by the immaculate fidelity of this refined experience.

Makoto plainly expressed what we were all thinking. “Wow.”

“Amazing!” Ann cooed.

“Is anyone else feeling hungry?” Yusuke asked in a faltering tone.

Ryuji smiled. “Heh, you’re not alone there, dude.”

Having fully grasped the thrills that awaited us within the café, I paused, returning my attention to the bustling street. The crowds had finally begun to dwindle. I could just barely make out Sam’s heightened frame through the final cluster of patrons. Then I heard a high-pitched voice ring out sharply.

“How dare you, sir! How dare you steal away my customers in such an unsportsmanlike ploy!”

“Beg your pardon?” Sam offhandedly replied.

“I will not tolerate this blatant harassment,” the other voice snapped, “I don’t know why you’ve targeted me, but I must ask that you stop such appalling use of corporate wealth.”

As the last few customers cleared away with their money, I saw Sam smile pleasantly. “You’ll have to forgive me, Okumura-san. Perhaps I can make it up to you by… letting you meet my partners.” His hand slowly extended to me, motioning slightly for us to join him.

I gave Ryuji a jab in the side and motioned with my head to the others. “C’mon…”

Glancing from me to the street, Ryuji smiled and nodded, the others following suit. “Ah, gotcha.”

We approached the now lone pair of quarrelers in the middle of the street. Sam maintained his peaceable composure. Though he might have been accustomed to such heated disagreements, his disposition seemed more likely to stem from the pleasant nature of whom he spoke with. The buoyant, light brown, nearly red hair was unmistakable and neither were her elegant mannerisms or vocabulary.

“Meeting with your associates is out of the question!” Haru exclaimed, “I will not be privy to this commercial game!” She pointed fiercely at Sam; I thought her finger might poke a hole in him like a rapier.

“Are you sure?” Sam knowingly continued the debate, stroking his chin, “Perhaps these people were making false claims of friendship?”
Ryuji was too excited to play along. “Yo!”

“Ah!” Flinching, Haru turned around. Her eyes filled with surprise when she saw us, and she couldn’t say anything for a moment. She gripped her chest, swiftly examining us from right to left. Words hung in her mouth as she stared at us. “My…” Her voice failed, and her eyes faltered.

Seeing my normally composed friend become so stirred brought a smile to my face. “Hello.”

Haru lurched forward. “You’re back!” she shouted, wrapping her arms around me. Warm fluff caressed me as Haru buried her head into my chest. Her intense embrace nearly split me in two before the pressure subsided. Looking up, her teary eyes latched onto Mona, and she promptly snatched him from my shoulder. “Mona-chan!”

Morgana purred happily as Haru cradled him in her hands. “Heheh, miss me?”

“Oh, yes!” Haru squealed, clutching the cat tightly. I swiftly found Mona back in my own arms while Haru scampered from person to person.

“Mako-chan!” The two ladies grasped hands, and Haru surveyed Makoto like a proud mother appraising her astute child.

Makoto giggled sweetly, a gentle smile on her face. “Hello, Haru.”

Next, Haru darted toward Ann. The pair magnetized to each other immediately, embracing with tender affection. “Ann-chan!”

“Haru! It’s so good to see you!” Ann said, giggling as they pressed their faces together.

Separating from Ann, Haru assaulted our vulgar friend. “Ryujiiii!” Her arms snapped around Ryuji like hungry jaws.

“Woah!” Ryuji winced at the bombardment of emotion, “Hey! Not so tight!” Haru just giggled at his uncomfortable squirming before turning to Yusuke.

Holding a melancholic smile, Yusuke addressed the lady. “Greetings, Haru.”

“Oh, beautiful Yusuke,” she replied. Haru gently tugged at his sleeves and then gave him a delicate squeeze. Finally, Haru stepped back, her face alight with a euphoric smile.

“We’re sorry about your customers,” Morgana began, “But it was a necessary sacrifice.”

Haru laughed, her smile growing ever brighter. “Oh, forget about the customers! I think I’ll close the shop early. Why don’t you all come inside?”

So, we seven Phantom Thieves entered Haru’s café for some leisure. Clearing out the remaining patrons required several minutes, and we were eager to catch up. Meanwhile, Sam called Sojiro to inform him of our plans. Once Futaba and Sojiro had joined us, the eight Thieves were prepared to formally reunite.

Naturally, we couldn’t allow the seriousness of our gathering to overcome us. We were in a café after all; it would’ve been a shame not to eat. So, Haru provisioned a delicious meal worthy of her personal stature. We ate our fill while talking of many things. Smiling and laughter contaminated the place so much so that we could hardly escape from their effects. Happiness overflowed. Even
Samuel found some vicarious thrill in this.

The moderate table seating the Thieves would have been uncomfortable for any disjointed group, but ours was reaching across and shouting like we were too far apart. Though smiles began to hurt my face, I couldn’t restrain myself. Haru’s gleeful expressions were contagious, and Ryuji’s bad humor had everyone chuckling ironically. The day progressed quickly with us in high spirits. However, there was a purpose to our meeting.

Mona spoke up at an appropriate time. “Alright everyone, listen up! We’ve got serious business to discuss.”

Makoto nodded in agreement. “Morgana’s right. Thanks to recent events, we cannot ignore the possible dangers that surround us.”

“I’m sure everyone’s heard about the recent prison escapes,” Mona continued, “It’s clear these aren’t isolated incidents, but furthermore, whoever’s behind this could be targeting us directly.”

“Someone tracked us into the Metaverse,” Ann added, “and attacked us without cause.”

“That’s terrible!” Haru cried.

Yusuke frowned. “Who would do such a thing?”

Futaba put on a playful smirk. “Well, I could think of one person who could have done it.” She glanced to Sam who stood near the table.

Sam growled as he returned a heated gaze. “Are we going to have a problem?”

Makoto sighed. “She is technically correct. Sam does have that capability, but we can discuss who our suspects are once we are in a secure environment.”

“The point is this,” Mona said, “The Phantom Thieves must return… if not for our own sakes then for the sake of our justice.”

“So,” Yusuke added, “Not only are our lives at stake but our previous enemies have been released from prison. There’s no telling what kind of tactical advantage that might give our foe.”

“That’s right,” Samuel replied, “We must act quickly in order to stay ahead of this threat.”

“So, whaddya think?” Ryuji asked the three newest additions, “You guys up for this?”

“Of course!” Futaba yelped, “I’m already in deep with you guys. There’s no backing out now.”

Yusuke smiled and nodded. “I too will give my assistance. We cannot allow those criminals to escape justice.”

Following the two boisterous answers, Haru glanced timidly around the table. I tilted my head, addressing her. “Haru?”

“Oh… sorry,” she quietly replied. “If it’s alright, I’d like to ask a question.”

I nodded.

“Am I correct in assuming that we would need to reawaken our Personas?” Haru asked.

“That’s right,” Ann swiftly replied, “We’re already halfway there with four of us having them and
Mona and you three without.”

“It’s no big deal though,” Ryuji added.

“I see.” Haru sighed before down casting her face. “I hate to suggest this, but I am not exactly the most valuable member of the Phantom Thieves.”

“Haru…” Makoto’s voice strained. “Don’t say that.”

“Please don’t misunderstand,” Haru continued, hardening her gaze, “I loved working with you all, but if speed is a necessary requirement for this mission as you say, then I would loathe myself for slowing you down. After all, there is no guarantee that our Personas will reawaken. It could take a long time, time we don’t have to spare.” The table became gravely quiet. Nobody wanted to face that difficult choice of separation.

Yusuke’s face darkened. “She has a point. Perhaps we should remain on standby until a time when our Personas do awaken.”

Ryuji blinked. “Huh? You serious?”

Ann looked sad. “Yeah… I guess that could work…”

Futaba appeared dejected. “I guess I can… continue using my skills from the outside.”

Makoto sighed in exasperation. “I guess I wasn’t really thinking about it, but we did get very lucky with my awakening.”

Sam idly observed our conversation. “It’s up to you guys what you need. I thought you would work better together, but if that’s not the case then we can proceed without them.”


I glanced to my friend as he pleaded for intervention. The downcast faces surrounding me held abiding sadness. Clearly, they grasped the meaning of our bonds, yet I would need to remind them of their purpose. I stood. “I’m not here for your Personas,” I said. All eyes turned to me. “We’ve got the power in our hearts to fight against this, but I came because you guys are the only people I know I can absolutely trust. You’re the only people who share that same sense of justice.”

“Damn right!” Ryuji shouted, “Don’t matter if we got Personas or not! We’re the only people that can keep all this crazy shit in check!”

“Ryuji’s right. We can’t give up!” Mona added, showing fierce determination, “Even if I don’t have my Persona, these guys still need everything we’ve got. So, I’m not giving up, and I’m certainly not letting any of you.”

“Hell yeah!” Ryuji cheered, “If we can keep each other believin’ till the end, then nothin’ can stop us!”

“Ooo! You guys are really heating up!” a whimsical Futaba remarked, “I can feel my blood starting to boil right now!”

“That’s the spirit!” Mona shouted exuberantly.

Haru giggled at the uproar. “I see you won’t be dissuaded. Well then, I shall indulge myself and
renew this covenant with you all.”

“Hmm,” Yusuke stroked his chin in thrilling anticipation, “It seems our bonds have grown stronger with time like a fine wine or cheese.”

Makoto snickered at Yusuke’s comment. “Apparently, we also go better together.”

Ryuji shook his head. “What, are you guys food critics now?”

“That’s not a half bad idea,” Yusuke replied, “Getting paid to review aesthetic flavors…”

I smiled. The burden had been removed from our hearts, and we again became a joyous bunch. Haru then stood up. “Ahem… I feel a little awkward rejoining the team so informally, so I’d like to propose a toast.” She raised her tiny teacup. “To our dear leader!” She posed emphatically, pointing the cup towards me. I smiled, happy but unaware of an appropriate reaction.

Ann glanced to Haru. “A toast? Oh, you mean like how people will raise their drinks to celebrate something?”

“Yes, exactly,” Haru replied. She returned her gaze to me as a giggle broke her composure. “I thought it would be fun to try.”

“Well, in that case…” I picked up my own cup. “I toast Ryuji.” I turned and pointed my glass toward my adjacent friend.

“What!?” Ryuji was flabbergasted as he stood up. “You can’t just toast somebody else!”

“Actually,” Ann interjected, “I think you kinda can.”

Ryuji put on a quick frown. “Um, well then I toast you back!” He grabbed his cup and thrust it at me.

Mona cocked his head at us. “Uh, that’s not how it’s supposed to…”

Having received the toasting power once more, I turned around to Morgana. “Then I toast Morgana.”


“C’mon, Mona!” Ryuji cried, “Ya gotta toast somebody else!”


“Um, sure. I accept your toast,” Ann replied. She looked across the table, raising her glass. “And I give your toast to… Makoto!”

Makoto readily grabbed her cup. “And I’ll toast Futaba.”

“Ha! My turn!” Futaba cried, “And I toast… Inari!” She thrust her arm toward Yusuke.

“Very well…” Yusuke retorted, “Now, for the sake of circularity, I shall toast Haru.” He lifted his cup toward her, nodding slightly.

Haru laughed, and the rest of us did as well. “I don’t think that’s exactly how it works…”
“I’m glad you’re all having fun,” Samuel approached the table with a serious expression, “but I have one last piece of business to discuss before I adjourn this meeting. Significant preparations are being made for our mission; however, this could take several days. In the meantime, we’ve prepared lodgings for you in the local Z-tech laboratories. There, we can make use of Z-tech’s state-of-the-art training and testing facility.” I nodded along with the others.

“It’s good to see you’re taking this seriously,” Makoto replied.

“Of course,” Sam continued, “Persona or no Persona, this mission is my responsibility and by extension all of you. I need to ensure you’re all properly prepared for what’s to come.”

“Ha! prepared…” Ryuji snorted, “Maybe you haven’t heard; we’re the effin’ Phantom Thieves, and nothin’ gonna stop us!” We all could raise our glasses to that.
Dark Sun

Chapter Summary

At long last, the Phantom Thieves are together again. The disappearance of Kamoshida, Madarame, Kaneshiro, and Shido prompted them to unite against a mysterious threat, and now, the Phantom Thieves' focus rests solely upon the preservation of justice. However, the struggles of young hearts still tug at each of them. The Thieves overcame a deadly fate once before, but the powers of the Metaverse are moving in unforeseen ways.

A dull, lifeless haze surrounded me. Formless dark shrouded my vision. It was a familiar dream, a recurring nightmare. I walked on a plane of surreal glass. My body moved through the mists, but the distant and flat horizon remained an eternity away. Struggle as I might, I grew no closer to my destination. Even the clouds around me swirled in mockingly similar shapes. No matter how many steps I took, the same wisps of fog would form before me. They had no definitive design although I had grown accustomed to staring at them.

However, this time I felt a new presence: a whistling on the wind. I turned to the noise, blinking and losing track of the misty horizons for only a moment. Yet when I opened my eyes, a warming glow had appeared at the edge of the glassy sea. I knew it instantly. A comforting feeling of closeness, the light held both great comfort and great danger. I reached out to it, stepping between the abstract clouds. My hand grasped an immolated shard of hellfire. It stung but for a moment as my hand adjusted to the heat. I could feel the darkness closing in around me now. It didn’t want me to have this!

Holding fast to my comforting prize, I began to resent the looming fog’s oppression. A spark caught within me, and I resolved myself. I rebelled against that darkness. I held the shard and pushed forward.

The solid door creaked open. The warmth of a loving household touched the skin of my face as the sweet, enthralling scent of cinnamon entered my nose. I was in a home, my home: a place I had felt myself in a hundred times over and yet never once before. The crackling of a fireplace drew me into the cozy living room. The stone mantel was decorated for some jovial holiday, and I could hear merry music singing in the distance.

As I closed the door behind me, I noticed my plain, grey business suit along with the dark brown briefcase in my other hand. Just when I had ascertained my attire, I heard the indelible voice of a child.

“Daddy! Daddy!” the tiny voice squealed. An elated, brown-haired girl hopped towards me. I stooped down instinctively, and the little girl leapt into my arms, clasping her own tiny hands around my neck. She tucked her chin against my shoulder, and I squeezed her tightly. My heart thundered like a crashing ocean surf. This little thing I loved; this little thing was mine. I dropped my briefcase as I picked her up and swung her around.

The girl shrieked in delight, her feet dangling against me. Her laughs filled my ears before we came to a swift stop. Her joyful smile revealed her developing teeth, highlighted by her beautiful, blue eyes.
“Daddy, look!” cried the girl. She pulled her hand from behind my back to show me a messy piece of paper splotched with irregular coloration. “I drew Mona,” said the girl.

I fondled at the paper, tracing its edge until my thumb was caught in the girl’s tiny palm, entangled by her tiny fingers. A texturized, oblong shape composed the body of the pictured cat while sharp triangles formed the ears, and blue dots made the eyes.

“He looks gorgeous,” I said, poking my daughter’s nose. She giggled happily.

With the little lady doting upon me, I happened to survey the homely room. The gentle fireplace cast a golden warmth across the space, and I spied Morgana curled up peacefully under the mantel, basking in the fire’s heat. The plush furniture had been arranged in a welcoming array: a cozy place for a cozy party. My gaze trailed over the vibrant ornaments which adorned the parlor table, and eventually, I came to the alluring woman of the house.

Ann leaned against the archway to the adjacent room. A soft smile parted her pale red lips as she looked affectionately at us. Ann’s silken hair flowed freely down her back, contrasting her maroon sweater that hugged her curves tightly. Her slim figure was still as catching as ever, and presented in the glow of the fireplace, she instilled a striking attraction.

Once the fleeting moment of reunion had passed, Ann carefully maneuvered toward us. She caressed our daughter’s head tenderly, stroking her mahogany-hued locks. Ann planted a soothing kiss onto the little lady’s tiny head. Together, we savored every inch of this one’s precious being: our bright star.

Ann looked at me, and I looked at her. The cradled love in her eyes reached out to me with flirtatious invitation. We leaned inward, and I felt the soft press of her lips against mine. Her lingering flesh imparted a gentle kiss accentuated by a bombastic cherry flavor.

Though my mind enjoyed the sensation, I didn’t have time to consider my excitement. That titillating citrus burst floated away, and I abruptly found myself seated. My conceptions of a home and family melded with a sprawling auditorium filled by a multitude of tables with elegant guests. The lighting of the chamber dimmed, drawing our attention to the bright stage clothed in golden curtains.

The calm, refined atmosphere of this place maintained a subtle anticipation. As I gazed over the numerous guests, I knew I was here for a reason but not for my own sake. This was an important ceremony, an event that only happens once in a lifetime.

Though I was not to be honored, I did hold a place at the table of an honored guest. The lavish decorations covering the placemats at our table proved this. Nevertheless, I was alone, and I was waiting.

I adjusted the cuffs on my black suit, checking the time while I did. The ever-present voice beside me noted my impatience. “She should be out any minute,” Mona said. I glanced at the bag seated next to me. The cat kept his eyes focused on the stage, and I subconsciously followed his vision.

The buzzing guests quieted suddenly. The air in my chest stagnated. My eyes shot to the corner of the golden curtain where I saw Makoto stepping onto the stage. The light caught the side of her deep blue dress, and everyone was entranced by her elegant poise. Makoto approached the podium at the center of the stage, but I remained captivated by her beautiful fidelity. The guests paid careful attention; she was our reason for being here.

I knew words were spoken. I saw the movement of lips and hands, yet I had no need to comprehend the speech. I had heard it a hundred times in practice. Furthermore, my primary concern lied with
Makoto herself. Her commanding aura was undeniable, and her desires held equal parts passion and grace. I felt my breath pass gradually in and out of my body although time proceeded rapidly for everyone else.

“Hey!” Mona said, “She’s calling you.”

I looked toward the stage and saw Makoto beckoning to me. My heart stilled as I rose from my seat. The clutter of the auditorium dissipated from my mind, and I reached the foot of the stage without considering the walk. Makoto turned to me, her eyes pleading with anxious expectation. I then ascended the wooden stairs and into the light.

Makoto glanced hastily to the audience as she motioned to me. “My husband.”

A low hum of applause propelled my transition to the podium. Though I was directed to the myriad of personages in the auditorium, I could only see Makoto. My covetous gaze must have been unsettling because her staunch visage soon melted into nervousness. I leaned out to the microphone.

“I don’t think I have anything to add.”

Makoto would have laughed had her breath not gotten caught in her throat. She was expecting me to say something different, but my contrary mind had already concocted an amusing ploy. Makoto’s eyes pierced me with uncertain contempt as she encroached on the podium.

“You must have something to say…” Her words were tainted by faint irritation and dread.

A smirk curled across my face. “There is one thing…” I skillfully placed my hand on the small of Makoto’s back. Her nervousness quickly turned to humiliated surprise as I tipped her backward.

The audience cooed and cried once our lips had connected. Makoto’s hand gently caressed my face, and we accepted each other’s love. Relinquishing all apprehension, she drew me closer for a breathless exchange of passion. Heat and energy exploded through our bodies like a firework.

My overwhelmed comprehension swiftly robbed me of this new joy as the heated cheers withered into a cooling wind. I came upright and looked around myself, yet the crowded auditorium had disappeared. My lonely hands recoiled from the cold air, writhing their way into the pockets of my jacket.

A distant shout pulled my eyes upward. The glistening, metallic frame of a looming roller-coaster rocked with the startling velocity of a thrill-seeker’s carriage. The squeals of passengers echoed around me, populating the clean streets of this artificial paradise. Only the chilling gusts of winter dampened this wild experience.

My wispy hair fluttered in the shunting wind. Then I heard, “Brrrr! It’s so… c-cold!” I glanced to my side where Futaba was shivering helplessly. The contrast of her flushed nose and cheeks with the rest of her pale white skin was concerning.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

Futaba squeezed her body as she turned stiffly to me. “H… hold me,” she demanded.

Chuckling softly, I could not refuse her. I cupped my arms around Futaba, wrapping her in the warmth of my jacket and body. She nestled her tawny head under mine and exhaled in contentment. Now that I had a steady hold on her, the trembling had ceased.

Futaba turned her face up, rubbing her nose against the base of my chin. She emitted a smug giggle.
as we cuddled together. Feeling the sparking friction of her touch, I tightened my embrace and brought our bodies closer together. Futaba released a pleased murmur, and in response, she slipped her own arms around my back.

Futaba and I squeezed each other emphatically. While Futaba grinned with satisfaction, I heard a different, muffled voice cry out. “H-hey! I’m being crushed down here!”

“Squeeze harder?” Futaba replied, “Okay!”

“N-no!”

Futaba put surprising force into her hug. Then again, when she had set her mind to something, Futaba possessed moving passion. The ardor of that thought wound its way into my heart, and I instinctively returned the fervent embrace.

Our unfortunate friend squealed in dismay, “I… c-c-can’t breathe!”

“Whoops.” Futaba released me, allowing my bag to dangle freely.

“Guh… ugh…” Mona popped his head out of the bag promptly. “God… ngh… warn me before you do that next time.”

“Hehehe…” Futaba reached out and stretched Mona’s face like a ball of dough.

“Hey! Stop!” Mona cried, “I did not consent to this!”

“C’mon, Mona!” Futaba lifted the cat out of my bag, intensifying her efforts to elongate his face. “Smile!” I chuckled at the pair of miscreants. Futaba’s playful grin barely compensated for Morgana’s distressed cries, but I had grown used to the charade.

A fleck of moisture hit my face, accompanied by a loud crashing noise. I glanced in the direction of the sound, but the cordoned lots of the amusement park had little water to spray. Ignoring the pleas of Morgana, I stepped toward the side of the path. The edge fencing marked a dip in the terrain surrounding each enclosure. As I reached the railing and looked down over the edge, a cresting wave of ocean water rose to meet me.

The briny scent of sea salt wafted into my nostrils. A white-capped rush from the ocean broke against the metal siding beneath me. My eyes were drawn to a bright light in the dark waters, and as I looked up, I saw the glowing moon isolated over the flat horizon. A tranquil sea extended endlessly in every direction, connecting seamlessly to the star-speckled sky.

A harmonious vibration tickled my ears. Shifting my gaze from the vast waters, I glanced across the bow of a large ship. However, the quiet hum I had heard resonated from above me. A short, semicircular overhang protruded from the higher deck, and I saw several musicians playing stringed instruments on the upper level. They played a stirring melody although the beat of my heart would not be dictated by music.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

Haru was standing on my other side. A warm sea breeze gently lifted the curls of her voluptuous hair as she leaned out over the railing. She glanced tenuously at me before returning her gaze to the night scenery. The pitch of the complementary music rose, and I noticed Haru’s fingers curl around the rail’s edge with matching intensity.

My hand moved instinctually, and my fingers found the gaps between Haru’s own. She inhaled as
her hand coiled around mine. The soft lights of the ship captured the fleeting desperation hidden in Haru’s eyes. A trembling anticipation passed between us; I could feel the pining palpitiation.

The melodic tune of the violin and cello slowed, and I glanced to the upper balcony. Morgana had claimed a precarious spot on the edge of the deck where he could follow the song easily. One musician was thrusting his whole body into each impassioned note. The heated cry of the stringed instruments sang with yearning and anguish.

I sensed a heavy burden in the short distance separating Haru and myself, so I drew closer. Accepting my advance, Haru laid her fluffy head on my shoulder. Her fingers clasped around my arms like a tiny child clutching a wet bar of soap. That gentle embrace held me fast in a warmth I never wanted to escape.

Haru whispered a phrase to me, and my ears tingled. “I love you.”

“I…” A word caught in my throat as the vibrant strings swelled into a resounding chorus. The open waters echoed with voices, familiar yet alien.

A heaviness gripped my eyes with surprising readiness, and my mind began to fade from the subconscious. The black, ocean waves coalesced, condensing into a cool, blue oasis floating on the strings of human emotion. The pool sang to me from the dark depths of my heart: a poem for everyone’s soul.

I reeled violently as control returned to my body. A tingling static rolled through my limbs, filling the cavities of phantom emotions. My first instinct was to escape my bed, and I haphazardly strolled out into the darkness. A crippling pain shot through my head while I struggled to remember the fading images my mind had dreamt.

“Ah…” I gripped my head.

A deep chuckle echoed in my ears. “My, my…”

I glanced up at the noise and saw Igor sitting patiently at his desk. His stoic smile ignited a flash of irritation in me. “What are you laughing at?” I asked.

Igor laughed again, slowly this time. “You,” he replied. The dim yet lively candlelight flickered across Igor’s wide face. “It seems that even a master of the arcana can experience a trite heartache.”

I stumbled forward in my agonizing stupor. “Ngh… and that’s funny to you?”

“Of course,” Igor continued, “Overcoming this may even prove more interesting than the approaching conflict.” Igor paused briefly as he shifted his weight from one hand to the other. “Indeed, I summoned you here so that we might speak of more serious matters. I should apologize again for the interruption during our last encounter. We should keep discussions short this time to avoid such disturbances.”

My mind finally quieted as I began to intently converse with Igor. “How were our enemies able to enter this place?”

Igor snorted. “That is beyond even my knowledge. However, I do know that these foes have begun to quantify the Metaverse in terms that have never been used by human minds. They will surely employ tricks and deception in an attempt to undermine your strength.”

Though Igor seemed to have a concerning impression of these enemies, I remained steadfast. “That’s nothing we can’t handle.”
Igor smiled at me, releasing a quiet laugh. “Indeed… I am most looking forward to it.” Igor flicked his long nose. “You have reawakened bonds of immense strength. All that remains is the cultivation of your true powers.”

I stroked my chin nonchalantly. “The Personas… Is there a way to reawaken them?”

“For those who have previously awakened to the power of the heart,” Igor said, “it is a simple matter to recover a Persona. Yet these abilities are ones of necessity; they cannot be called upon without reason. Thus, it may be prudent to consider your companions as full-fledged Persona users and merely call upon them when conflict arises.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

“As is the way of a Trickster, the life of a thief.” Amused, Igor had no qualms with offering questionable tactics, yet he seemed to hold high expectations for us. “Still, it is my intention to grant you a new power, one befitting of this new and turbulent age.”

My posture straightened when I considered Igor’s words. “What is this power?” I asked.

Igor’s sharp eyes penetrated my being, gazing past every superfluous trait into my very essence. “That will be for you to decide.”

A whistling wind abruptly swept through the chamber followed by the slamming of some distant door. The warm candles shook with frightful excitement, and the long shadows slung about the room shrunk into reclusive corners. Igor cocked his head quickly to one side. “It seems our time is drawing to a close.”

I allowed my hands to settle into my coat, feeling no anxiety while in Igor’s care. He had given me much to consider, and I did not understand what he meant by this new power. Nevertheless, Igor maintained a consistent level of evasiveness. He was certainly an existence beyond my comprehension, but I was glad to have him as an ally.

“Farewell, Trickster,” Igor said in a calm, low voice, “We shall meet again.”

A faint roar like that of a distant, rolling ocean woke me from my sleep. I rubbed my eyes as I rose, yet my room was dark and shrouded. Once my vision had adjusted, I witnessed the gaping maw of a demonic ventilation grate. I shook my head at my own ineptitude; my unhinged brain lacked common sensibilities.

I sat up, glancing around the small room that had been designated to me. An analog clock ticked dutifully on the wall over the waist-high dresser. I scoffed again. The Z-Tech facility appeared as a mirrored extension of Samuel’s eccentricity, and becoming accustomed to this seemed a dubious prospect.

Then a blinding, red beam singed my retinas from across the room. The splintering laser touched the contours of my face, tracing me like the lines of a sketch. I shielded my eyes and cringed at the abrupt disturbance.

A musical blip played once the sensory attack had ended, and the probing laser light transformed into a more sinister red eye. I participated in a short contest with the wall-mounted monitor while Akechi presumably awaited a reaction. The ever-inquisitive Goro Akechi, turned computer construct, maintained an unsettling sense of familiarity even in the afterlife.
The red eye blinked first, adopting a pleasant form as Akechi’s voice reverberated through my room. “My apologies for the disturbance,” he said. Somehow electronics could be made to seem apologetic. “I noticed you might be awake and thought you might be having trouble sleeping.”

I grunted, my eyelids settling into place. “I am now…”

“Oh, I see,” Akechi reiterated, “I know you’re probably worried about the mission, but we still have a few days yet. You should try to relax in the meantime.”

“It was just a bad dream,” I replied, yet Akechi persevered to overstay his welcome.

“Dreams…” Akechi’s bright eyes continued to offend me with its presence. “You know, occasionally, when I must rest for a system reset, I catch glimpses of strange patterns of light. Sometimes, I even hear things that sound like whispers, like something is calling out to me, something I lost a long time ago.”

I exhaled a low breath. “How interesting…”

“Oh, now I’m rambling,” Akechi said, with a synthesized laugh, “Honestly, I should be congratulating you. I didn’t expect the Phantom Thieves would be so easily reunited, but it seems you still possess that unique luck.”

“Well, we are teammates.”

Akechi chuckled. “That’s quite the modest appraisal. No, I think you all have something a bit more serious. It makes me slightly jealous to tell you the truth. I doubt anyone even cares that I’ve disappeared from reality.”

I could never consider Akechi a friend. He was a backstabbing, murderous fiend after all, but I still felt a twinge of human sympathy connecting our plights. Had I fostered less noble ideals, the Phantom Thieves may have become a terror far worse than a singular Metaverse assassin. Alone and embittered to the world, Akechi never had a chance to consider the righteousness of his actions. He was engendered with hatred and grief, and so he bred hatred and grief. Akechi’s power was a tragic waste.

Yet countless lives had been irrevocably damaged by Akechi’s blind quest for revenge. Honorable people were disgraced or dead due to his immorality. He had sought to murder me and pin all his crimes on the Phantom Thieves. He had killed Haru’s father, causing us to doubt our justice. Perhaps I could forgive the sins of Akechi, but I would be suicidal to forget his numerous, deadly flaws.

Now, Akechi inspired a mote of pity, this sorrowful feeling I could not tolerate. He was a despicable bastard, and the notion that I would have compassion on him was sickening. He tried to take everything from me; he perverted justice to the ultimate degree. He would have done anything to discredit and destroy my friends. I should have wished hell upon Akechi, but I refrained. Nevertheless, charity was too gracious for him. Whatever fate he received, he deserved.

I swallowed down the tumultuous emotions broiling within me, and said, “Perhaps that’s for the best.”

“Yes,” Akechi replied, “I suppose my relationships were primarily disingenuous. I guess it was only natural that they would fall away.”

Akechi’s ignorance stoked my anger. I shook my head. “I meant that if anyone remembered you, they’d be calling for your arrest. Shido’s confession brought the truth to light: you’re a crooked detective who murdered and mutilated a long list of people.”
“Tch!” the monitor box screeched at me, just exceeding its volume range, “Don’t remind me of that!!” A sharp hiss followed Akechi’s exclamation, and then I heard a short buzz like electricity warming a cold circuit.

The red eye blinked twice before Akechi spoke again. “Ah, excuse me,” he said, nearly monotone, “I’m sorry. What were we talking about?”

Uncertain and uncaring, I scoffed at Akechi’s question. “You were just leaving.”

“I see. Yes, of course,” the pleasant vibe returned to Akechi’s voice, “I leave you to your rest.” As the noise slowly faded, the glassy, red ocular dimmed, finally leaving me in peace.

I exhaled softly while my eyes relaxed in the gentle darkness. With Akechi gone, the resentment I had harbored dissipated, but my stirring mind would not be quieted. Though anger left me, an abiding depression remained. My dreams no longer manifest from quaint fantasies. The dormancy of my heart had hidden great power but also great desire. Presently, my heart had cleaved into two halves: one that I controlled and another that rejected my body. I was like a man who has starved himself for many days yet only realizes his hunger at the first rousing sensation of nourishment. My red-flooded veins were a shrunken belly, and my dreams were the salty scrap placed onto my tongue.

Damn this strange temperament. I discarded the vague memories of my sleep and resolved to deny my frail emotions for the present. There were still a few hours left before morning. I laid back down, shutting my eyes to my burgeoning pains. Now, I needed to get some sleep.

“Right this way…” Samuel said as he guided our sizable group through the lonely halls of the Z-Tech building.

Sam had called us all together this morning, citing our “lack of proper equipment” as the primary reason. I had to take stock of our team to remember how many people were here. All eight Phantom Thieves were present. Sojiro was also with us, and Sam was leading the way.

“There’s still a lot I need to teach you about the tech we’re using,” Sam said, “I can’t let you act as Metaverse agents without properly training you on the use of our gear. Of course, it’s not too hard. I’m sure you’re familiar with the basics by now, but today, I thought we could see how you handle the tools we’ll be using on the other side.” We came to a bland splitting door; two shiny metal rectangles butted together, forming an imposing barricade.

Makoto shot Sam a probing glance. “What exactly are you planning on showing us?”

Futaba stared at the chrome doors with unsettling infatuation. “Oooh! Are we gonna see some super-secret Metaverse toys!?” A manic laugh escaped her as she extended her insatiable hands toward the sealed room. “Lemme see! Lemme see!”

Sam scoffed at Futaba’s eagerness. “Huh! These are some damn expensive “toys”, Miss Sakura. So please keep your hands under control.”

Futaba blinked and then frowned, lowering her hands. “Ugh, geez! You’re more of a wet blanket than Sojiro!”

Boss went into a sputter. “H-Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?”

Morgana mumbled in contemplation from my shoulder. “Given all the stuff Sam has done,” Mona added, “I’m interested to inspect his equipment.”
Yusuke nodded. “Yes, my curiosity has been piqued as well.”

Sam shook his head vigorously while he drew a keycard from his pocket. He tapped the card reader once, and a bright chirp echoed through the corridor. The metallic plates slid apart suddenly. Inside, fluorescent lights flickered to life, illuminating racks of gunmetal and bizarre devices. The walls were adorned with deified weaponry; beautiful guns dotted the shelves like black drops of paint on a canvas. Laboratory benches lined the center of the room with various displays covering the surfaces. The Metaverse tools held therein were meticulously presented like fine jewelry.

Sam was the first to step into the room, closely followed by Futaba and Ryuji who gawked at the intimidating display. I had grown accustomed to being surrounded by weaponry of seedy origins; however, the pageantry of this armory amazed everyone.

Sam turned to face our group, maintaining a melancholic dignity. “Welcome to the Arsenal.”

Ryuji stumbled forward. “Woah! Dude, these guns are massive!”

“Oooh! What’s that?” Futaba cried, referencing some flashy gadget.

Yusuke entered the room beside me. “Now this is quite the stash of firearms,” he remarked, “It seems Sam is more like my initial assumption of him than I thought.”

“G-guns?!” Sojiro shouted as he saw the dangerous equipment. He quickly surveyed the room with a frightened look.

Samuel angled his brows. “Sakura-san? How familiar are you with the work of the Phantom Thieves?”

Sojiro turned suddenly and scratched his neck. “Uh… that’s um…”

Sam sighed. “Uh… Listen, maybe it’s better if you remain on stand-by while the rest of us worry about the details.”

“Hmph,” Sojiro grunted, “If I had known you guys would be staying so close, I could have just stayed at home.”

“Well, it shouldn’t be long before we’re ready to leave,” Sam replied, “Best to keep you nearby for when we need to move quickly.”

Sojiro sighed with a heavy, disappointed face. “Alright, I’ll go back to the quarters.” He turned to me before leaving. “I’m leaving it to you, okay?”

I gave a slight smile. “Don’t get into any trouble.”

Sojiro shook his head. “Aren’t I supposed to be telling you that?” With a mild chuckle, he passed through our group and returned down the hall. “I’ll see you guys later.”

Makoto touched her lips as Sojiro left us. “I hope we aren’t making a mistake involving Boss in this situation.”

“Well,” Ann replied, “Futaba is his family. It wouldn’t feel right to separate them.”

“Right,” Haru added, “Plus, Boss already knows about the Phantom Thieves. I doubt he’ll cause us any trouble.”

“Oh, of course,” Makoto swiftly responded, turning in embarrassment to the other girls, “That wasn’t
quite what I meant though. I’m just wondering if having him with us will put him in greater danger.”

“Oh, I didn’t even think of that,” Ann said.

“He was already in danger,” I calmly interjected.

“True,” said Makoto, “Whoever is targeting us probably already knows about our connections.”

Yusuke shook his head. “What a chilling thought.”

“To think that someone would threaten us so suddenly,” Haru continued, “What could they possibly want from us?”

“Considering they’ve already freed our past adversaries,” Mona responded, “Perhaps they wanted to stop us from retaliating.”

Samuel slowly approached us. “Unorthodox as this is, I must agree with the cat. The Phantom Thieves are the only known Metaverse threat although we cannot rule out ulterior motives.”

“Yo!” Ryuji abruptly shouted, “Are you guys seeing this!! This shotgun’s bigger than my effin’ arm!”

Ann sighed loudly, placing a hand on her forehead. “Some things never change…”

Makoto levied a prodding gaze at Ryuji. “Ahem, Ryuji?” she said, folding her hands in front of her.

Ryuji absentely replied as he toyed with an extending baton at one of the benches. “Huh? What’s up?”

Makoto continued firmly. “Perhaps you’d like to take this opportunity to weigh in on our current situation?”

Ryuji flicked the baton, and it suddenly extended, smacking the tiled floor. He awkwardly recovered by hefting the stick onto his shoulder and came bumbling toward us. He smiled, appearing wholly content and oblivious. “I think you guys have it covered.”

“You know,” Mona disparagingly added, “We’re in a very dangerous situation here. You should really start taking things more seriously.”

“I am taking this seriously!” Ryuji insisted. He glanced incredulously toward the cat. “It’s just… Worrying about all that side stuff doesn’t matter if we ain’t gonna do anything about it. So, I’m just gonna keep movin’ forward with what we can do.”

Yusuke shook his head. “You’re still as hasty as ever, Ryuji.”

A half frown appeared on Ryuji’s face. “Eh? Shuddup!”

“Aren’t you curious though?” Ann asked, “I mean, you’re the one who started this. Don’t you want to know why someone would free Kamoshida?”

“Well… yeah…” he replied, “But we can get our answers from the source once we beat this shit.”

Sam firmly patted Ryuji’s shoulder. “I appreciate that enthusiasm. In any case, we need to be properly equipped before we enter the Metaverse.”

“You’re gun collection is impressive, Mr. Biz!” Futaba calmly remarked on the display as she poked
a weapon with a glowing magazine appended to its underside. “You must’ve exhausted all your
resources getting this stuff shipped here.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed as he monitored Futaba. “Is she talking to me?” he dispassionately inquired.

Futaba turned quickly when the bizarre mechanisms finally lost her interest. She walked slowly
towards Sam. “So, how’d you do it, Mr. Biz? Was it Yakuza? A shady political deal? Hmm? How’d
you get all these guns here?”

Intrigued, Sam faced Futaba and casually pocketed his hands. “It was a lot easier than you think
actually.” He waved graciously to his arsenal. “None of these guns actually shoot anything. They’re
entirely legal possessions although a bit unscrupulous.”

“Oh, I see,” Haru said, “That’s clever.”

Makoto adopted a pleased smile. “He’s not a completely clueless businessman at least as far as it
concerns the Metaverse.”

“Hmph, I’m standing right here you know…” Sam retorted.

“Wait…” Ryuji interjected, “I don’t get it…”

“They’re Metaverse weapons,” Makoto replied, “They don’t need to shoot in the real world to work
in the Metaverse.”

“Oh, riiiiight!”

“But wait!” Futaba exclaimed, “Then what’s all this techy stuff on the guns for?”

Sam crossed his arms. “Well, all that Metaverse research I’ve been overseeing didn’t just result in
artificial Personas. We’ve been experimenting with cognitive amplification technologies for a long
time. The weapons in here can link to the wielder’s cognition and manifest your will as varying
degrees of destruction.”

“Aw! Sounds badass!” Ryuji grinned in excitement as his hands tightened around the loose baton.

Haru let out a small giggle, and Sam’s face flared with smugness. “That’s an appropriate reaction,”
Sam continued, “It pains my heart to see all these weapons shelved without anyone to use them.”

“Cut the melodrama!” said Morgana, “Are we gonna shoot these things or not?”

Sam twitched as he shifted his gaze to Mona. “Calm down, kitty. I’m not sure I have any guns for
cats anyways.”

“What!”? Mona cried, “This is outrageous! It’s unfair! How can I be a member of the Phantom
Thieves and not have a gun?”

Makoto faced Morgana, her look discouraging. “What are you complaining about? You never had a
gun anyways.”

Mona tilted his head. “Eh… that’s just semantics.”

She crossed her arms. “A slingshot is not a gun.”

“Besides,” Futaba added, “I never had a gun, and you don’t hear me complaining.”
Caught in the trivial team arguments, Sam laughed nervously. “Heheh, regardless, you should all pick out something you like before we go to the shooting range, and I’ll see what I can do for the cat.”

Sam stood aside, distracted by thoughts of feline weaponry, while the rest of us freely explored the armory. Mona whispered into my ear, “You had better pick out something cool since I can’t.” I shrugged off the cat’s request and focused on the tools before me. Each weapon was precisely placed to attract the eye, but I found little attraction in the excessive gunmetal.

“This is a little overwhelming,” Yusuke said. He stood beside me, gazing dispassionately at the weapon racks. “You always handled these matters. I don’t even know where to begin. What kind of weapon would I like?”

I heard Yusuke’s concerns as I absently traced the plexiglass shielding the guns. “Pick something beautiful.”

“Beauty?” Yusuke questioned, “Is that really something one considers when choosing a weapon?”

“Maybe not,” I responded, “But if you can appreciate its appearance, then perhaps you can appreciate its mechanics.”

“Ah, I see.” Yusuke placed a hand under his chin. “You’re saying that understanding the superficial aspects of a weapon can assist me in understanding its deeper spirit.”

I cast a wayward glance to Yusuke as Mona propped himself on my shoulder. “Yusuke? Are you feeling alright?”

Yusuke closed his eyes. “I’m feeling a flash of inspiration coming.” He let out a soft chuckle. Again, Mona spoke to me in a hushed tone. “Let’s just leave him be for now.”

Wisely sidestepping Yusuke’s flaring passion, I grazed the adjacent counter for any interesting guns. The intricate technological bobbles on display flashed with sharp, blue lights. Mysterious energies seethed across the geometric lines etched in each weapon’s surface. Although the flair of these guns appealed to me, I glossed over each one, disinterested. Subtlety lacked in their design; I required something with more finesse.

Then I noticed a simpler gun. A dark grey pistol had been bracketed onto the midsection of the bench. A longer, polygonal barrel extended from the classically styled body, and rough, black leather wrapped the rugged steel grip. I reached out and touched the gun along its bumpy handle. A jolt of energy passed between my fingers and the gun as I ran my finger along the exterior. The static shock was startling, but given the energy flowing through all these weapons, it seemed natural.

“That’s one of our older ones,” Sam said, approaching me, “A prototype from the earlier days: it’s functional, but it lacks the limiters we incorporated into later designs. I keep it around for posterity’s sake despite its instability.”

“I like it,” I said. Sam searched my face for a moment before sighing in defeat.

“Of course you do,” he replied, “Very well. Bring it with us.”

Boom!
Razor-light pellets shattered through the ruby red target nestled at the far end of the test chamber. The glassy splinters ruptured in a brilliant, glinting burst. Ryuji howled joyfully as he confirmed his mark. The long-barreled shotgun he had been eyeing earlier was proving to be a potent tool and a greater distraction. Samuel sighed in disappointment when Ryuji insisted on another round of targets.

“Woo!” Ryuji cried, “I could do this all day!”

Sam stamped over to the adjacent wall and took hold of the large electrical lever in frustration. With a swift tug on the red switch, a mechanical snap echoed through the range followed by the descending noises of the power system.

The lights on the range softened from their sharp gold to a soothing white, and the red targets strewed about melted from vision. Ryuji gasped before releasing a flash of irritation. “Hey!” he chided, “I was shooting at those!”

Sam frowned. “Enough. We’re not here to humor your antics. Let someone else shoot.”

“…Goddammit,” Ryuji cursed under his breath, “Fine. Who’s next?” He set his gun onto the side bench as he approached the group.

Hearing no volunteers, Makoto looked kindly toward the remaining six of us. “Ann?” she asked, “Would you care to go?”

Distracted by the hefty piece of metal in her hands, Ann gave a start upon hearing Makoto’s voice. “Uhm,” she began, “It’s been a while. I think I need another minute to prepare myself.” She quietly turned her face down again.

Makoto brushed her arm nervously, feeling an awkward weight. A soft laugh escaped her lips as she attempted to relieve the tension. “You know, it’s not—”

“I’ll go.”

Samuel chuckled when Haru stepped forward. “Miss Okumura, I must say, I do appreciate your tastes in weaponry.”

Haru glanced dryly at Sam, heaving a bulky gun with an oversized, clear cylinder in the center of its body. A metallic rod drove through the clear chamber; the cylinder seemed akin to a cheap electrostatic generator.

In the few years that had passed since the disbandment of the Phantom Thieves, our scattered group had forgotten the excitement and danger of live combat. Even more so, we had forgotten each other’s true selves; we recalled idealized versions of our friends. This dichotomy could not be more pronounced in anyone than Haru Okumura.

Makoto had lost her words, and the others struggled to maintain composure, caught between nerves and surprise. Naturally, Mona was the least disturbed although he refrained from his usual bolstering remarks.

Haru stepped toward the firing range, allowing the gun to sink into her hands. The bulky firearm bobbed up and down in her elastic grip, yet Haru’s form was confident and controlled. Glancing from the corner of her eye, she nodded to Samuel. This time, Sam reversed the switch and threw the lever downward. A brief flicker of the lights indicated the surging power, and the telltale sensation washed over me once more. The guns in our hands lit up as red targets manifested from nothingness down the range. There were no threats here, but the otherworldly atmosphere remained. We were in the Metaverse.
Haru raised her weapon, one hand on the foregrip with the other resting on the trigger. The barrel of the gun was like a straightedge from Haru’s sights to the waiting targets. Pinching the trigger, the chamber erupted with life. Sparking energy coiled around the cylinder like the heat in Haru’s eyes. The brightening electricity filled the barrel, congealing into a luminous projectile.

Fwap!

A bright blue bomb loosed from the end of Haru’s cannon, arcing through the chamber like a falling star. The translucent targets shimmered in the overwhelming light before the plunging orb collided with the range. Force, sound, and light filled the room in an awe-inducing eruption. I recoiled at the abrupt discomfort, and the others winced too.

Haru let out a soft, “Oh my,” and as the distortion settled, only shattered debris and warped metal remained in the explosion’s wake.

Mona lurched forward. “Woah! She destroyed everything!”

Sam leaned over Haru’s shoulder, glancing at the scorched firing range. “Impressive shot. I can’t remember any tester blowing up the whole range like that.”

“Uhm! Sorry!” Haru squirmed, cradling her weapon.

Samuel laughed. “Don’t be. That’s what this room was designed for.” While he said that, the fragmented shards of the targets began melding together. A glassy, red substance born from these fragments reformed the targets’ bodies. With slow, unearthly movement, the targets warped back into position. Sam turned back to our group. “Alright, who’s next.”

A quiet lull allowed our ears to reset before Yusuke came forward. “I guess I’ll go.” He wholeheartedly made the less than certain reply.

Samuel patiently observed as the rest of us displayed our finesse with his weaponry. Yusuke had chosen a long yet lightweight rifle. With serrated rounds, he had little trouble dispatching the few targets. Beams of refracted light pierced the hollow wounds of the spattered bullet fodder. Next, Futaba surprisingly volunteered herself, proudly hopping to the firing line without prompting from Samuel. A compact, wrist-blaster was her tool of choice; none of us quite realized what she was doing until a wafting, green projectile shot out from her extended arm.

The crescent-shaped energy blast obliterated one target, and Futaba exclaimed, “Wow! I totally vaporized that thing!” She grinned at her weapon of arm-mounted destruction. “This thing’s powerful.”

After a short exchange enlarging Futaba’s ego, Ann took her chance at the range. Her stout, automatic weapon matched the technological features of the other guns; however, the weapon’s styling appeared almost gothic with the fringes of the gun curling into ostentatious spikes. Ann fondled the gun uncertainly; perhaps she was feeling embarrassed by her weapon’s fashion.

“You know,” Samuel smugly prodded, “It might look scary, but it’s not going to bite you.”

The remark didn’t register with Ann immediately, but she quickly cringed. “I’m not scared of it, you moron! I just haven’t fired a gun in a long time! That’s all!”

Though smiling with hubris, Sam put up his hands defensively. “Well, we’re waiting.”

“Fine.” Ann lifted her automatic with ferocity but little aplomb. Instantly, we were mesmerized as the muzzle flashed with gunfire. The bright heat dwarfed the room’s lighting, and the rapid fire-rate
made for a dizzying show. I doubt Ann knew exactly how long she held the trigger, and neither did we since even a few rounds could have left us dazed.

Once the blinding had ceased, we were treated to another spectacle on the firing range. Ann squealed as she witnessed the damage. “What!”? The targets had ignited into a fiery blaze. “They’re on fire!?”

Sam stroked his chin at the sight. “Hmm, incendiary rounds… very interesting…”

“Incendiary rounds?” Ann inquired, “I didn’t know this gun had those…”

“Well, technically none of the guns have rounds,” Sam refuted, “Of course, the guns have form, but what comes out of the weapon is only what you think should come out of the weapon.”

Ryuji whispered to me, stifling a chuckle. “That’s the first time I’ve ever seen Ann successfully deliver a burn.”

Yusuke, who was paying far too close attention to Ryuji’s quips, aptly replied. “I believe you are mistaken, Ryuji. We’ve seen Ann burn many things over the course of our time as Phantom Thieves.”

Ryuji’s face scrunched as he looked to Yusuke. “What? No, that’s not what I… Ah, forget it!”

Makoto shook her head, quietly adding, “It was a bad joke anyway.”

This time, Ryuji took some offense. “Oh yeah?” he said, glancing with disdain to our strategist, “That’s big talk coming from someone who’s afraid to go up to the shooting range.”

“Ryuji,” Morgana interjected, “Do you just make up your insults as you go, or do you plan them out ahead of time?” Ryuji just huffed in reply.

Regardless, Makoto wouldn’t waste any energy on Ryuji’s goading; however, she was ready for the shooting range. Ann, looking quite befuddled by her own display, retreated from the firing line while Makoto stepped toward the platform.

Ryuji snorted in my direction. “Huh, watch. This should be good.” I wasn’t sure if he was being condescending or genuine, but I could sense his excitement regardless. I had nearly forgotten that this was his team too, after all.

Makoto held a tempered revolver, weighty but streamlined. The subtle illumination around the chamber indicated the presence of the same strange energy present within all our guns. She raised the piece with both hands as she took careful aim at the waiting targets.

Sam folded his arms and chuckled. “Seriously? Both hands? That’s not exactly what I’d expect coming from you.”

Makoto glanced to the overseer but didn’t move. “It’s a new gun. I’m not familiar with it yet.”

Sam put out his palm in a gesture of humored understanding. “Oh, sure,” he said, “Have respect for the weapon and all that…” He nodded several times, adding, “Just let us know when the gun decides to let you shoot it.”

Makoto barely reacted to Sam’s words: only a faint breath before pursing her lips in determination. The room became very quiet. I was expecting a shot or some quick rebuttal, but none came. Glancing across my group of friends, I noted their placid faces. All humor had left Ryuji as he watched with inquisitive tension while Futaba and Ann had more curious looks. Yusuke seemed
piqued, and Haru exuded support for Makoto. Even Morgana was paying close attention.

I saw Makoto abruptly yank her revolver down to her hip. The gun shivered in her hand. She pressed against the top of the chamber as the first shot sounded, and before the first target had stabilized, another shot was fired. Each booming discharge covered a rhythmic click of the hammer and the following snap of the trigger. I counted five in total: one for each target.

A discrete wisp of smoke trailed from the revolver’s barrel. Makoto relaxed her posture, moving her dominant finger off the trigger to the side of the chamber. She cast a quick and cold glance towards Samuel. “Was that what you were expecting?”

Sam nodded. “And so much more…”

“That’s our Queen!” Futaba cheered with a snicker.

“Yes,” Yusuke added melancholily, “Her technique is quite something.”

Mona smiled proudly. “She might be slow to speak, but she’s lightning quick on the draw.”

“Heheh,” Ann giggled, “That’s like… the exact opposite of Ryuji.”

“Hey! You ain’t exactly a gunslinger either!” Ryuji hissed.

“Hey now…” Haru intervened, “You both performed excellently in my opinion.” She smiled.

Makoto lightly grazed Ryuji’s shoulder as she slipped back into our group. With a coy smile, she said, “Don’t let it bother you, Ryuji.” I might’ve thought she was serious upon first hearing her words, but I sensed a lingering bite behind them that would leave Ryuji stinging for days to come.

Disregarding our private competitions, Sam waited patiently for our conversation to conclude. “Alright, that leaves one.”

I acknowledged my turn at the range with a nod before Morgana spoke. “Hey! What about me?” he squealed.

Sam sighed, stroking the bridge of his nose. “I told you I don’t have any guns for cats.”

“Hmm,” Mona grumbled irritably, “I’ll remember this.”

Sam shook his head. “Not if you want me to keep paying for your meals, you won’t.”

Straight-faced, Mona replied, “Mmm, you drive a hard bargain… but I accept.”

Sighing again, Sam motioned me toward the firing line. A new holster at my side held the rugged pistol I had chosen. Tingling anticipation wafted through me as the gun on my hip emitted an excited heat. Shooting was perhaps the most trademark skill of the Phantom Thieves, and I certainly desired to experience that kinetic sensation again.

My fingers clasped to the gun like static-charged fabric. That sweet tension perfectly aligned with the weapon’s intangible disposition. I could feel the others’ eyes upon me, waiting to see what their leader could do, to see him back in his element. I drew my gun with instinctive poise; my feet dug into the floor while my arm extended. A straight line leading from my eye to the barrel, I could see the energies in the weapon beginning to surge. This would be exhilarating.

I stared downrange at the arrayed targets, visualizing a menacing grin on each of them. If a few shadows stood between me and my objective, I’d show them no mercy. All I needed was a
passionate goal, my team beside me, and a kickass tune playing in my head.

A little slice of teeth showed through my cracked lips. Holding that gun, I felt it connecting with me. An electrical link manifest between us. It accepted my will as its own, shaping it into powerful chaos.

Then my fingers twitched as I felt the weapon send a numbing shock into my body. A jolt of pain ran up my spine and into the back of my skull. I was stunned, nearly paralyzed, as the gun drilled into my brain. It scoured every thought in my head even gleaming my inmost desires. I looked up, dazed but only for a nanosecond. Returning my eyes to the range, I felt a sudden paralysis no imaginable pain could induce. There in the room between myself and the targets was a brown-haired girl with blue eyes and not yet over four feet tall.

A quiver ran through my arm although I’m sure only I could perceive it. She wasn’t real. I knew she had never existed before, and yet just a few hours ago, I had cradled her so closely. The soft, tender warmth still lingered on my skin; I thought I had discarded that memory. Still, there she was, staring at me, ensnaring me, and I stared back. I could have said anything, but that would be to acknowledge my insanity as truth.

“Well? What are you waiting for?” a voice said from the other side of the range.

My eyes darted from one wall to the other as one of the gloomy targets seemed to manifest a human form. The recognizable figure instantly shunted my emotions into greater instability. A sharp jawline complemented by every feigned and condescending emotion imaginable denoted the appearance of Kamoshida.

He folded his arms in that all-mighty way he does and continued, “Oh, what’s that? You can’t have her?” He knelt over laughing, considering his taunt far funnier than it actually was. He smiled wide. “That’s right. You finally understand. The kind of life you chose to live has consequences and not the kind you can shirk off.”

Uncertain of the bounds of fantasy and reality, I could only listen in silence. Kamoshida’s smile quickly faded as he became introspective. “Still, it doesn’t seem quite fair, does it? I had to lose everything: my identity, my power… my career. You’ve gotten off with barely a slap on the wrist in comparison. It seems like you should have more serious consequences than that.”

My lips did not move, but words exited my body though I knew not where they came from. “You deserved whatever punishment you got.”

“It’s true we’ve committed grave crimes.”

Startled, I twitched to the right as another figure appeared from the shadows. The old man, Madarame, looked so humble in his dingy robes, but that pleasant exterior hid the venomous corruption within. Folding his hands under his flowing sleeves, the old man smiled at me despite his sagging face.

“I polluted everything I touched from the impressionable mind of my star pupil to the very fabric of the art world. I tainted it all.” Madarame cast his gaze down, shaking his head. “And that lifestyle came with consequences. Not only will my artwork never be accepted in the greater art community, but I doubt Yusuke will ever again believe that I truly cared for him.”

“You’ll have to live with that,” I replied.

Madarame looked up, but he seemed unphased by anything I said. “Allow this old man to impart some wisdom to a young man such as yourself. The choices you’ve made in this life will have
consequences. Rebelling against society? Reforming it? That is a noble goal indeed. But the change you’ve affected is only a temporary blip on the world’s path to its inevitable destruction. Now, to society… you’re not just an outcast; you’re an enemy. You could never have a normal life such as this.” He gestured to the small girl standing quietly beside him.

I glanced from the girl to Madarame’s sullen face. My hand was really shaking now, and I could feel moisture bubbling into my eyes. “That’s not true. I changed my fate!”

“So did all of us.”

I didn’t have to turn to see the embittered face of Kaneshiro. His stylings were still as pompous as ever, yet he deigned to address me directly.

“Each one of us took fate into our own hands. Turns out, we just happened to use the chaos of society to our benefit… so we wouldn’t have to be its slaves anymore. You on the other hand…” Kaneshiro ground his teeth. “You sent us back there, remember? Right back into the mindless society you brats had been proliferating the whole damn time.”

A pang of guilt stabbed at me. “We didn’t know…” I whispered.

“Exactly,” Kaneshiro hissed, “You kids didn’t have a damn clue what kind of game you were tangled up in: the kind of game you play with your life! An’ you kids near about lost the whole damn thing too. What could you possibly do to save yourselves?” Junya snorted, calming. “The only thing you could do: reform society. You traded normalcy for your lives, and now society’s starting to wake up from what you’ve done. It may forget, but it ain’t gonna forgive as easily.”

The big man folded his arms as his voice lowered. “That means there’s a price to be paid. Last time you cheated death; this time the debt’ll be paid, or else you and your friends’ lives will be nothing but misery from here on out. Take it from the sad sack of shit that I am. Once you’re in a criminal organization, the only way out… is death.”

My fingers felt cold, but I spoke firmly. “We beat this before. We’ll beat it again.”

“You’re wrong.” A hauntingly hollow voice echoed in my head as Okumura rose from the ground. His finely pressed suit no longer matched his decrepit visage. Black, bloody ooze trailed from the corners of his hopeless frown, and his sad eyes amplified my horror.

“When you go against society, it comes for you eventually. It came for all of us.” Okumura glanced to his fellow apparitions. “The Phantom Thieves may have changed fate for themselves, but concerning us, they were only the tool of society’s retribution.”

I shook my head. “Somebody had to stop you.”

Okumura sighed. “I can’t fault you for your part in it. We had disrupted the lives of countless people after all. My fate was sealed long before I had encountered any of you, but I wonder if there’s still time for you to escape yours.” He remained hauntingly motionless until turning to me in earnest. “Please, if it comes down to it, don’t throw away all your lives for some pointless struggle with humanity. Society wants its own demise! It can’t be restrained for anything, even its own people. There must be a compromise that would save some of you.”

Half nodding, half shaking, I said, “I won’t let us be destroyed.”

Okumura’s mouth straightened somewhat into a peaceable expression. “Good. That’s all I have left. My only remaining desire is to see that Haru is happy.” Slowly his voice trailed into a whisper. “If only I could travel back a decade and see my daughter’s smiling face… one last time.”
I watched as Okumura collapsed to his knees and his body fell silent. The dark stain of death was upon him. I recoiled from the sight just when another voice interrupted the moment. “It’s those kinds of wishes that must be traded for a life.”

The grating voice remarked on the deceased Okumura. The sound haunted me eternally. It’s impossible to know what a madman like Masayoshi Shido thinks, but he looked remorsefully upon the corpse. “You can keep these dreams… or you can trade them for your life. That is the toll for those who stand opposed to society. I’d like to think that… Okumura died because he still had some of those.”

My hand clenched around my gun. “You killed him, you bastard!”

Shido scoffed. “Still so naïve.” He shook his head. “It was society that desired to be ruled over. It was society that put me into power. It was society that allowed all these distorted men to take control of them. Blame me all you wish, but society unwittingly asked for all our lives in the pursuit of its own destruction.” Shido pressed his laminated glassed into his face. “Okumura had simply not fulfilled his debt, so society took his life. Soon it will ask for yours, and you will grant it your desires or your life.” Shido chuckled softly, maturing swiftly into a full laugh. “I wonder how many of your friends will throw away their lives trying to stop that from happening. After all, my bastard son already did.” An unrestrained grin spread across Shido’s face.

“I- I won’t…!” Words lodged in my chest as my breath shortened.

“Rebels!” A bright light engulfed the five adversaries before me, cutting across them like two venomous eyes. The room around me faded until I could see the golden shape of a giant monstrosity. My brain and heart lurched, but they could not keep pace. That deity was gazing at me again. “Those who dare defy my rule shall perish! There is no escape, thief.”

My blood began to thin as my quickening thoughts exceeded my brain’s capacity, and soon I lost consciousness.

“Make some room people!”

“Oh my gosh!”

“Is he alright? Should we call a doctor?”

“His pulse is stable. Temperature is normal.”

“What the hell happened?”

“Could it be another fainting spell?”

“Wha? You mean this has happened before!?”

“This is the first I’ve heard of it as well.”

“Only once.”

“I thought we didn’t have to worry about that.”

“Seems we were wrong.”

A splitting pain hampered my stirring mind. Lifting my eyelids felt like tearing a muscle in my feeble
state. However, the sudden embarrassment of my complete failure drove my body further.

“Look!” I heard Yusuke say, “He’s coming to.”

My limp fingers scraped against the stone-cold floor as I propped myself on the counter. Light seeped into my vision like watery paint, and I struggled with my eyes for a moment. The pale faces greeting me didn’t provide much consolation. Traces of the midday, waking terror still lingered with me, but I managed a sane response.

“What happened?”

Mona, who was cradling my left leg, said, “You fainted. Collapsed right on the floor.”

“You had us really worried for a sec,” Ryuji added, slapping my shoulder.

Samuel was crouched beside me. “Falling to the floor was probably the last thing I expected you to do.”

“Seriously,” Makoto continued, “Why didn’t you tell us you were having these issues?”

I shook my head as I searched for a suitable answer. “That gun… did something weird to me. I felt a shock and…” Unable to bring the truth of my thoughts to light, I mustered a tertiary cause. “I’m probably just jet-lagged. Didn’t get enough sleep, but I should be fine.”

“Are you sure?” Haru inquired, “I could make you some tea if you like. Let you rest.”

Although I did find rest appealing, a nagging threat kept prodding at the back of my skull, demanding that I keep vigilant. “Nope, no…” I groaned, “I’m fine.” I pushed forcefully on the ground to raise myself, and the muscles in my arms ached in lamentation.

“Uh, what exactly about fainting on the floor in the middle of the day is “fine”?” Futaba asked.

With Ryuji as a reluctant prop for my ascent, I came to my feet. “I don’t know…”

Ryuji patted my back as I stood upright. “See? He’s fine guys. Probably just needs some fresh air.”

“Oh,” Ann interjected, “Should we head outside then?” The others looked towards me, and I nodded.

“Very well then,” Sam said, “Let’s wrap things up for today.”

A mild heat kept the vibrant Shibuya streets humming. The overbearing sunbeams served to agitate my anarchic senses and remind me of my awful hallucinations. Though the outdoor air was somewhat refreshing, a heavy depression still weighed on my heart. I lowered my head in despair. I had no control over myself. For the first time in years, the future felt outside of my grasp.

“Ah, feels great to be back in Shibuya, doesn’t it?” Ryuji shot me a bright smile.

Ann glanced toward us. “Well, it beats that dark basement.”

Futaba peered unceremoniously into our conversation. “I dunno. I kinda like it down there. It’s cool and quiet.”

Morgana came curling around my leg. “You always live where it’s dark and quiet.”
“Hey, not true!” Futaba said, stamping her foot. “I’ll have you know I’ve been going to school and making friends.”

Having delicately infiltrated our huddle, Haru applauded. “Oh! That’s wonderful, Futaba-chan.”

Yusuke also joined the talk. “How interesting. I’d very much like to meet the kinds of people Futaba naturally associates with.”

Taking offense in Yusuke’s dissociative speculation, Futaba scowled. “They’re much less annoying than you, Inari.”

Yusuke disregarded her jab. “Given your social mannerisms, I highly doubt that.”

“O-Okay, you two!” Ann said with a hesitant smile.

“Hey, I’m getting’ kinda hungry,” Ryuji promptly chimed in, “Does anyone wanna hit up the beef bowl shop on Central Street with me?”

“Oh! Beef bowl time!” Futaba cried gleefully as she shivered with anticipation, “I’m feelin’ it! Let’s go!”

A half-hearted chuckle exited Ryuji’s lopsided mouth. “Uh, right… So, anyone else?”

“It is quite kind of you to offer to provide lunch,” Yusuke said, “I shall graciously accept.”

“What!?” Ryuji frightfully exclaimed, “Wait, I don’t have any money.” I regretfully recalled our debacle in Paris. “Uh…” Ryuji scratched his neck as he turned to Yusuke, “I don’t suppose you have any money.” The thin, pleading expression on his face made me smile.

Yusuke looked at Ryuji dead on, his face grave and menacing. “Do you think I have money?”

With his face reddening, Ryuji laughed weakly. “Uh, Ann? I don’t suppose you could…”

“Bye, everyone!” Ann shouted from a few paces away, “I’m heading out! I’ll see you guys laterrr!” She walked as fast as her tall boots could carry her.

“Hey!” Ryuji shouted after her, “Don’t just leave me hangin’!” But Ann would not have turned around for any plea. “Goddammit,” Ryuji mumbled. He looked around our group, begging for any support he could find.

Sam caught Ryuji’s gaze. “Don’t look at me,” he said, “I’ve got work to do.”

“It’s okay,” Haru said, consoling Ryuji, “I’ll buy lunch.”

Ryuji shoulders relaxed greatly. “Oh, thank God…”

“C’mon, guys!” Futaba exclaimed, “Futaba grows hungry!”

Sam quickly waved his hand. “Say, before you go, I’ve got something for you all.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, black disk with tiny markings like a clock. “Here. One for each of you.”

“What is it?” Haru asked, taking one of the devices.

“A watch?” Ryuji added.
“Not a watch,” Sam corrected, “They’re Metaverse transference tools. You can use them to get in and out of the Metaverse at will.”

Futaba plucked up her device and examined it carefully. “You sure like giving out free stuff, don’tcha, Mr. Biz?”

“Well, it’s the least I can do to help you guys protect yourselves,” Sam explained, “We know our enemies aren’t waiting on us to act. Uh, just be careful with the devices. They keep you tethered to the Metaverse, so you need to protect them.”

“Oh, yeah!” Ryuji exclaimed as he flipped his device in his hand, “You totally pissed yourself and hit one of these like a panic button the first time we met.”

Sam gave a long sigh, mumbling, “I should have left you in Nevada.”

The others were more interested by the unique devices than Sam and Ryuji’s petty feud. “Hmm, the Metaverse could act as an emergency retreat,” Yusuke remarked, “But some of us aren’t exactly prepared to defend ourselves.”

“Don’t worry, man!” Ryuji said, clapping an arm around Yusuke’s shoulders, “I’ve got you covered!”

Yusuke glanced at his friend. “Somehow, that doesn’t exactly give me more confidence.” Ryuji’s energy drained swiftly from his face.

“Save roasting Ryuji for later!” Futaba interjected, “I’m about to die of starvation over here!”

“Alright then,” Haru merrily replied, “Shall we?” Haru, Yusuke, and Futaba separated from the group as they began the trek toward Central Street.

Ryuji turned to me briefly. “Hey, you comin’?”

I shook my head. “Nah, I’ve heard enough of the bickering for today. I think I’ll just take it easy.”

“Alright, man,” Ryuji replied with a grin, “Take it easy. I’ll see you later.” He left with a wave as he ran after the others.

“They’re rather unassuming for the skills they must have,” Samuel said, commenting absently on my friends, “They’re not bad shots either.”

“That’s what makes them good thieves,” I responded.

“Yeah… Hey, are you sure you’re feeling alright?” A brief flash of concern showed on Sam’s face.

“I’m fine.”

Sam’s shoulders rolled back. “Right. Well, I’m sure whatever’s happening in the Metaverse has been eating at you. I know it’s been bothering me, but I promise we’re going to get to the bottom of this. I just need you to hold out a little longer.”

I nodded slowly, suppressing all the turmoil of my mind just beneath the surface. Sam returned a disheartened smile.

“Alright, well, if you need anything, you know where to find me.” Having concluded his thoughts, Sam turned and trudged back into his workplace.
A gentle gust of wind tossed a curl of hair across my face, grounding me in reality. I stood quietly at the street’s edge while my mind attempted to piece itself together. My memories and fears had been ripped from the deepest parts of my psyche and now floated freely through my consciousness. The team I cherished had reunited; my beloved friends had joined me; our plans were falling into place despite the threats against us. Everything was proceeding too simply. A grander plot was guaranteed where the Metaverse was involved, and the phantoms of my mind had made a point of this inevitable fate. Perhaps I had something to fear in their cryptic words.

Mona let out a bellowing yawn while he stretched beside me. “So,” he began, “Any plans for what you’ll do with your time in Tokyo?”

I shook my head. “What are you going to do?”

Morgana turned his big eyes upward. “Now? Eh, I’m gonna hang around here- find a good place for a nap.” He turned nimbly aside as he began to survey the property. “Let me know if anything comes up, okay?”

Dazed, I watched the cat skip into a back alley, and I noticed Makoto standing a few paces away in the same direction. She was mindfully tapping at her phone screen, and I reasoned that she must be doing something important to have evaded the group’s energetic conversation. With my unfocused mind saddled with curiosity, I wandered toward her.

Numb to the irrationality of my language, I spoke. “Texting your boyfriend?”

Thankfully, Makoto did not catch my words. She glanced abruptly from her phone. “Oh, sorry,” she began, “I zoned out for a minute. Did you need something?”

I paused, befuddled by her bland response. “I’m just curious,” I finally admitted.

“Oh, I was just texting my sister,” Makoto responded, “We haven’t seen each other in almost a year, so we’re planning on spending some time together.” I smiled instinctively at the thought of Sae Nijimia. Our relationship was complicated, but Makoto’s history with her sister was undoubtedly more complex. Makoto let out a faint laugh, turning her head down. “I’m feeling a bit nervous about meeting up, what with the USEI business. It’s not every day you have to talk about being in a foreign government agency.” I could feel Makoto’s discomfort rise as she rubbed her arm. “Actually, do you think you could come along too? I think I’d feel better if I had someone else with me.”

Again, I fumbled in surprise. I ran the words through my mind repeatedly until I was certain of their correctness. Although I knew Sae to be an intimidating presence, I doubted her sister would be so unsettled by an honest conversation. I decided to reply firmly before my brain could diverge into some wicked fantasy. “You don’t need me,” I said with a smile, “She’s your sister after all. I’m sure she’ll understand.”

A short, relieved sigh escaped Makoto’s mouth. “Ah, of course, you’re right. I shouldn’t worry so much.” She smiled gently, bolstered by the encouragement, but then she continued. “Oh, but… I already told my sister I was bringing a friend.”

I nearly laughed at Makoto’s abrupt turnaround. She might have been nervous to reunite with her sister, but clearly, that had little to do with this sudden invitation. The minor, nagging sensations at the back of my mind faded into a renewed excitement. Win or lose, I had a passion for flirtatious games like these. “It seems I have no choice.”

A subtle smirk announced Makoto’s victory. “Do this for me,” she said, “And I’ll be sure to return the favor.”
I dared not remark on that comment.

When Makoto had mentioned that we would be meeting Sae at a fancier restaurant, I hadn’t thought much. However, standing in front of the gold-pillared awning, I believed I’d need a Metaverse wardrobe transformation to fit in. Even during the midday lull, I could see ritzy patrons ostentatiously dining with pomp that would make Ryuji’s skin crawl.

I turned to Makoto with a quizzical glance complemented by a newly formed sweaty sheen. “Did you bring me here just to make you look better?”

Makoto shot me a scrutinizing glare. “Of course not,” she began, “Besides, we’re both underdressed for this venue.”

“But you have your military slacks to rely on,” I responded, “I just have a sweatshirt.”

“Well…” Makoto tilted her head away from me, realizing the awkward situation. She cleared her throat unceremoniously before continuing. “You’re my guest. Anyone bothered by that will just have to deal with it.”

I sighed melancholily. “I’m more concerned with making you look bad.”

“Oh,” Makoto glanced aside as she tuck a stray strand of hair behind her neck, “I see.” We stood idly in front of the restaurant for a moment while the mood settled. Makoto was too modest for her own good, but that gave me ample time to tease out her feelings. “Um, let’s head inside.”

I followed Makoto through the glass doors into the building. In contrast to the dank and polluted streets, the restaurant had many crisp and enticing scents flowing within. The fragrant smell of fresh seafood complemented the undertones of sautéed vegetables, and the sweet flavor of fried dough primed my mouth for dining. After a brief interaction with a hostess, Makoto and I were directed to the far end of the dining area where a table had been reserved.

The delighted hum of guests grew louder as we exited the foyer. I noted a few sideways glances from the various patrons; however, the reaction to our presence was not as severe as I had imagined. Perhaps society had grown somewhat in my seclusion, or I was developing natural camouflage. Actually, the captivating cuisine likely had the guests ignorant of any minor discrepancies.

Eased by the lack of commotion, I prepared myself. We approached a small table set apart from the bright lights of the central area. A short, opalescent glass wall dampened the activity of the guests and tinted our seating in a soft teal. I glanced up from the pleasant décor and saw Sae’s silver outline against a tall-backed seat.

Makoto approached her sister gradually. Having been separated for the better part of a year, I expected some emotional reaction, but I wasn’t keenly aware of their sisterly interactions. I lingered a few paces back when Sae spotted her sister.

Spontaneously, a smile broke out on Sae’s face. “Makoto,” she said as she got up to greet her sister.

Makoto also wore a smile though it couldn’t quite bear the emotion she was experiencing. “Hi, sis.” The two girls embraced warmly.

In contrast with her flowing, silky hair, Sae still had a rigid and commanding air about her. The finely pressed corners of her dress suggested a continued lifestyle of work and formality, but her pastel red smile revealed the newfound joy in her occupation. Clearly, her relationship with her sister
was far more important than winning any case could ever be.

Once the moment of reunion had concluded, Sae looked tenderly from her sister to me. “Oh,” she started with a laugh, “When Makoto said she was bringing along a friend I didn’t expect it to be you.”

I nodded in greeting. “People don’t often see me coming.”

Sae quickly acknowledged my greeting before jumping to a more methodical notion. “I imagine that’s quite deliberate what with your public profile. I know hardly a day goes by without someone mentioning the Shido case to me.”

“Well, you deserve the credit,” Makoto remarked, “You worked really hard on that case, sis.”

Sae laughed. “You and I both.” Some short giggles bubbled up between us. “Ah… we’re not here to talk about the past. Please, have a seat.”

As Sae motioned to the table, Makoto and I took up positions opposite her. We wasted no time accommodating ourselves with the menu, but conversation continued. “So,” Makoto began, “Things must be very interesting over here with the recent disappearances.”

Sae expressed a calm seriousness. “You mean the prison escapes?” she asked. She sighed heavily before glancing down in frustration. “Is that what they’re calling them online now? Disappearances?”

“Well, the media is saying a lot of sensational things,” Makoto replied, “But I was thinking you might have a clearer perspective on the subject.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have much information,” Sae said, “As a lawyer, the police aren’t obliged to grant me information… although the other day, I called one of my old contacts out of curiosity. He said the police haven’t found anything. It’s like the suspects just vanished from their cells without a trace.”

Makoto nodded. “So, it’s just as everyone’s been saying.”

“Yes, some of the most notable convicts in recent memory are missing, and to make matters worse, there’s a clear connection between these incidents and the Phantom Thieves’ case.” Sae vainly distracted herself by rereading the menu. “I’ll likely be called for questioning regarding these incidents in the next few days.” She glanced up at us. “You two should be careful. There’s a possibility the innocence of the Phantom Thieves will be jeopardized in the eyes of the police. They may try to pin this on you.”

Troubled by Sae’s words, I asked, “Without any evidence?”

“It’s unlikely,” Sae said, “It’s not as if Shido could coerce the police into doing anything. He’s stigmatized as a convicted criminal after all.” She adjusted her head contemplatively. “Then again, I find it hard to say anything definitively when the whole situation is so mysterious.”

Smiling, Makoto added, “Well, I’m sure the truth will reveal itself eventually.”

Sae relaxed as she discarded the thoughts of tumultuous society. “You’re right. I’m here to relax.” She glanced up from her menu and scanned the isles. “Are you ready to order? I think that’s our server now.”

A lean man with a short head of hair approached our table. His black apron and prim clothes marked him as one of the restaurant’s attendants. Bowing politely, the man greeted us in a robust voice.
“Hello. I will be your server today. Are we ready to order?”

Sae began. “Yes… I’ll have the…”

While the ladies gave the server their orders, I noted the irregular complexion of the waiter. A faded scar ran over his right eye nearly reaching the corner of his mouth. I contemplated the peculiarity of a fancier restaurant employing a waiter with a facial scar, but I was promptly interrupted by the server politely asking for my order. After all the orders had been taken, the server left us quietly.

Sae initiated some harmless discussion of Makoto’s life overseas to fill the time before our food arrived. I found my thoughts wandering as the subject turned to more technical matters. The nuances of an A-grade did not concern me, and there was still plenty on my mind. Sae had mentioned it briefly: those escaped criminals were directly linked to the Phantom Thieves. Though I had often considered and dismissed the connection, I now examined the facts in greater detail. Four targets of the Phantom Thieves had been imprisoned, and all those targets had been released or abducted by an unknown perpetrator.

A short buzzing sensation interrupted my concentration. I drove my hand instinctively into my pocket where my phone was vibrating. I glanced across the table amidst the idle banter, but neither Sae nor Makoto appeared disturbed by my phone’s quiet humming. I held the dim screen on the peripheral of my vision.

M> I hope this isn’t too awkward for you.

Surprised, I had to review my contacts to confirm who was texting me. Having excellent familiarity with my phone’s architecture, I kept my eyes above the tabletop while replying.

Me> Makoto texting mid conversation? How scandalous!

M> Don’t give me that! You used to text in class all the time.
M> Besides, living in America has loosened me up in a number of ways.

Sae had no inkling of our tangential conversation, but she continued to ask questions. The list of topics to discuss with her transitory sister was long and encompassed many subjects. Luckily, she seemed to save the most interesting questions to freshen the conversation.

“So, Makoto,” Sae gave her sister a curious look, “I don’t suppose you’ve started dating while overseas.”

Makoto gave her sister her full attention. “What?” she frantically replied, “Uh… I think I would have mentioned if I had started seeing someone.”

Me> C’mon Makoto, no secrets between sisters.

Sae nodded calmly. “That’s fine. But you’re still young; you should enjoy yourself while you can.”

Me> Yeah, Makoto. Enjoy yourself.

Makoto allowed her eyes to slip down to her phone momentarily.

M> You stay out of this.

Composing herself, Makoto brushed her hair back and cleared her throat. “Well, sis, you’re older than me and you aren’t dating. Why aren’t you seeing anyone?”
Sae blushed slightly as she laughed off her sister’s question. “I’m just so busy that I…”

Me> So much for this not being awkward.

M> That’s your own fault.

Sae finished her explanation, saying, “Perhaps we should change the subject. I doubt your friend wants to hear about the nuances of being a single, adult woman.” She smiled apologetically at me.

I smiled politely in kind. “Actually, I have some experience with the subject.”

“Oh,” Sae stopped suddenly, and Makoto turned red. “I suppose you have been known to associate with some interesting characters.”

M> Oh my God. You did not just say that to my sister!

Seeing that neither Makoto or I had taken the opportunity, Sae had a moment to add, “Well, since you’ve heard about our romantic difficulties, I suppose it’s only fair we hear about yours.” She smiled subtly.

I finally focused my attention on Sae after hearing the sudden request. I had a minor aversion to discussing my wanting affections, but Sae’s boldness surprised me, nonetheless. There were some repressed desires I would be certain to leave unmentioned.

Makoto decided to taunt me in my pressured state. I could see her struggling to contain a grin.

M> It’s your turn now.

Her little jest made me smile; she should know a Joker beats a Queen every time.

I folded my hands neatly in front of my face. “Well, I haven’t had many options. Even though my record was cleared, people still recognize who I am.” A gentle sigh escaped my lips. “I’ve been trying to find jobs, save money, and leave my parents’ house…” As I thought about my expectant mother and father waiting to hear about my job interview, my heart sank. “But people don’t like to hire a Thief, innocent or not. So, I’m stuck scrounging for cash and acting as my parents’ errand boy on most days. It’s a poor environment to find a significant other.”

“That sounds difficult,” Sae said, quietly mulling on my situation. A smile gradually appeared on her face, and she released a muted laugh. “Well, if I know you, I’m sure you’ll find a way to overcome the odds.”

Humoring her polite concern, I rubbed my neck while I continued. “I take things day by day, but my parents feel differently. Every time his deadbeat son is mention, my father can’t help but hang his head. Then there’s my mother. On most days, she copes with my tenuous prospects, but on bad ones, the only thing holding back her tears will be a plate of my homemade curry.” I let out a long breath, slumping back in my seat. “That’s not a burden I would want to share with anyone, much less ask someone to be a part of. So… yeah, I’m single.” I shot the girls a tepid smile.

“Oh…” Sae touched her chest once I had finished speaking, “I… I’m so sorry… I didn’t realize.”

Makoto stared blankly at the table. Her face had gone pale. “Eh, um…” Finally, something down the aisle caught her attention. “Oh, look here comes our food.” She emphatically noted the server, but her voice quivered with uncertainty.

Ignorant of the discussion, our server approached the table with a large tray of food. The wafting
steam from the hot dishes masked the faint sadness on my face. Still, seeing the savory meal laid out before us did give me a smile.

“Thank you for waiting,” said the server, “Please enjoy.”

“Ah, this looks delicious,” Sae said as her plate was placed on the table, “Thank you.” She smiled at the waiter, and the waiter nodded in return. We each consciously attempted to focus on the incoming dishes until our server had finished.

Everyone quickly forgot about the previous conversation now that our meal had arrived. Gentle chatting and probing question were replaced by the quiet noises of eating. I assume the silence was in part due to my uncomfortable confession, but that was a satisfactory result to me. I knew the truth would be the simplest way to reverse the Nijima sisters’ abrupt curiosity. And it felt good to admit my struggles even though I did feel a hint of guilt for flaunting my burden. I had intended to keep the matter private.

Although I had nearly forgotten it in my hungry haste, my phone stealthily buzzed on my thigh.

M> Why didn’t you tell me?

I let one hand type while the other shoveled food.

Me> About my life?

M> About that. About the jobs, and your parents. Why were you keeping this a secret?

I stopped chewing just long enough to answer the question for myself. My problems weren’t something to be overcome by emotional support, and I didn’t want anyone to be unnecessarily exposed to them. That said, I wasn’t trying to hide my circumstances; everyone had just been so busy over the past few years.

Me> You were across an ocean.

M> So, what? Have you talked to anyone?

Me> Ryuji knows, but I’ve never expressed it so dramatically to him.

M> I can’t believe this. You could’ve asked someone for help, you know.

Me> There’s no need.

M> So, you’re fine with being jobless for the rest of your life?

Me> I don’t know. There’s this government job I’m working on. Plus, I’ve already got a friend on the inside.

M> Is this really the time for joking around?

M> I want to help you.

I glanced away from my phone stumped.

M> A long time ago, you helped me realize who I wanted to be. Let me return the favor, okay?

Slowly, I typed:
Me> It’s your choice.

I heard a short exhale from Makoto.

M> Thank you.
M> We should talk about this more when things calm down.

“Makoto, are you alright?” The two of us swiftly looked up at the sound of Sae’s voice. Sae pointed gingerly to Makoto’s plate. “You’ve barely touched your food.”

“Oh, uhm…” Makoto indiscreetly tucked her phone into her pocket. “It’s nothing.” She smiled though unable to look her sister in the eye.

Sae continued. “You know you can always request another order if something’s wrong with your food. That’s what the staff is for.”

Makoto chuckled. “Oh, sis. My food’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“But if I don’t, who will?” Sae said, laughing smugly. Makoto smiled sweetly, and I also let a grin peek through.

Casting us an unnerving glare, Sae looked slowly from her sister to me. I thought she was beginning to catch on although she had probably caught on when Makoto invited me to their family reunion. Regardless, the rest of our meal proceeded cheerily.

Once lunch had concluded, we took a short jaunt down the block to the parking garage where Sae had left her vehicle. Sae was a busy lady, but Makoto wanted to eke out every moment they had together. Despite my usual sedation, I found the abundance of conversation to be nearly oppressive. The threat of separation seemingly prompted several spontaneous discussions.

A chilly breeze whistled through the quiet, concrete structure as we approached Sae’s car. The grey walls and dim lighting reminded me a bit too much of the underground shooting range, but the happy voices accompanying me kept my mind from worse thoughts. I would not let those illusions deter me when next we entered the Metaverse.

I heard Makoto remark, “I think you’d look lovely in camouflage, sis.”

Sae snorted back. “Was that a joke?” she asked with an amused smile, “You know, I thought your sense of humor might’ve improved when you left for university.”

“H-hey! I have an excellent sense of humor!” Makoto stammered. She quickly turned to me, looking for aid. “You agree, right?”

“I’d actually like to hear his opinion on this,” Sae added, “What do you think? Is Makoto humorous?”

Pausing, I stroked my chin. “She’s funny when she is trying to act normal.”

Makoto winced painfully. “Oh no…”

Sae chuckled. “I think I’d have to agree with you.”

“Ngh! Not you too!” Makoto cried.
Sae smiled at her bewildered sister. “I think you could learn something…” Sae abruptly halted along with the sound of her heeled shoes. She gripped her forehead sluggishly as she looked downward.

Makoto turned to Sae, her perturbed face becoming concerned. “Sis? What’s wrong?” She reached out tenderly to her sister.

Sae shook her head. “I’m sorry. I just… felt a bit dizzy.” I noted Sae’s face had become increasingly pale, and Makoto added to the distress.

“Maybe you should go home, sis,” Makoto said, “Lie down for a while.”

Sae laughed at her sister’s worried look and smiled. “I think I’ll do just that actually.”

Following Makoto’s lead, I asked, “Need us to help you to your car?”

I think I saw a half smile from Sae before she replied, “Thank you, but it’s just over there. I think I can manage the few steps.” She nodded to a grey vehicle just a few paces away from us.

Makoto glanced at the car. “Okay. You let me know if you need anything, alright?”

“Oh, Makoto,” Sae gave her second biggest smile I had seen that day, “I’ll be fine. It’s just a little dizziness. A quick rest at home should take care of everything.”

“Well,” Makoto twisted her mouth, “When you say it like that, I suppose I have to agree.”

“Mhmm, I’ll see you later,” Sae said confidently. She strolled past us elegantly before quickly turning around. “Oh, and Makoto?”

“Yes?” Makoto also turned, the two sisters looking at each other.

Sae returned a doting smile. “I love you.”

“Ah,” Makoto nodded shakily, “I love you too.”

Sae didn’t say anything more; she just smiled and walked to her car. Makoto and I watched quietly for a moment as her sister left us. Having an older sibling elicited emotions I seldom experienced, yet I was thoroughly surprised by Makoto’s changed demeanor. I could see her full vulnerability displayed as Makoto fiddled with her hands briefly, glancing at the shadow of her sister. Her polar personalities made me chuckle.

“You are funny,” I said, “when you act normally.”

Makoto turned to me, an irritated flash in her eyes. “This again? You should know better than to bring that up so soon.” A coy smile warped my face as my hands settled into the comfort of my pockets. Makoto sighed at my stubborn appearance, but she held her nerves. “Well… I won’t give you the satisfaction of a reaction this time.” She tilted her head up just a little. Seeing Makoto take this so seriously, I loosened my shoulders. She seemed to be enjoying this as well, so I couldn’t help but continue smiling.

A loud crash interrupted our playful interaction. It was a unique yet indistinct sound, so I failed to recognize it. Makoto swiveled in the direction of the noise and glanced in alarm at her sister’s car. “Sis?” she called out. There was no response, yet we were not met with silence. Quiet scuffling could be heard beyond the darkened vehicles. Makoto immediately went to Sae’s car while I shortly followed. That cold air in the parking garage was prickling at my skin now.
Makoto froze at the gap between the cars. I came beside her, regarding her ghastly face and allowing my eyes to cut through the dim lighting. Sae had apparently collapsed beside her car as her hair had fanned over the concrete during an abrupt fall. She was laid out irregularly with one hand outstretched and the other under her torso. More pressingly, I spotted a man in the shadows hunched over Sae.

“Sis!” Makoto wailed not knowing what to say.

I heard the man curse under his breath. If there had been any doubt before, it had instantly left me. Like a pane of glass bursting in a cold snap, I shouted, “Get away from her!”

I saw the man’s pupils glint a simmering yellow as he glanced at us. Being much closer to Sae’s body, he touched her head swiftly and pulled something from his jacket. I heard a quick snap before the man blurred into the shadow. Without further warning, the man and Sae disappeared like a nearing mirage in the desert.

Makoto’s arms and hands tensed as she began to panic. “Wh-what…? Sae!” She stared at the blank concrete where her sister had been.

I blinked twice at the residual image of Makoto’s sister before remembering who I was. I dug into my pockets frantically, searching for the item. It was still there, but the adrenaline rocketing through my veins caused me to doubt everything. I pulled the round, Metaverse watch from my jacket and held it in my palm.

Makoto took one look at the device and then snatched it from my hand like a hunting falcon. She tapped the device a few times, transfixed on it with grave eyes. I had no time to object as she latched onto my arm and sent us plummeting into the Metaverse.

The moment we had finished the transference, I felt the oppressing threat upon us. My Phantom coat loosened in a haunting wind that flushed the parking garage. Makoto snapped her palm shut around the transference device and tucked it quickly into her pocket. Her hardened gaze trailed over me through her steel visor as she scoured our surroundings for her sister.

The rattling vibrations of an unrestrained engine tickled my spine with wary anticipation. I lunged toward Makoto, latching my arm around her midsection, and hurling us between the ghostly vehicles. What sounded like rotary blades grating against stone shot past us, and I thought I felt heated sparks dash over my thick garb.

With great urgency, Makoto thrust up from my body with a borderline combatant force. I ignored the uncomfortable pressure and sprung up also. Makoto darted into the driveway and turned after the passing vehicle. That suspicious man had requisitioned a car and, I assumed, taken Sae with him. I only caught a brief glimpse of the man’s shaded face as he cut around the corner, but I noted a long glowing scar swirling with amber color.

“He’s getting away!” Makoto shouted. Teeth gritted, she raised her right arm and leg while taking hold of her mask. An explosive ignition heralded Johanna. The translucent bike materialized just as her handlebar met Makoto’s grip like a baseball snapping into a catcher’s mitt. She straddled the bike without flinching.

I stood aside, readied but uncertain of our plan when Makoto reached out to me. The lash of her gaze demanded my attention. “Get on!” she commanded over the roaring engine.

Mildly dumbfounded, I made an awkward gesture with my hand. “Is that even possible?”
Makoto stared ahead, letting out a rumbling growl. “I’ll make it possible.”

Hearing Makoto’s retort, I had no room for doubt. I leapt over Johanna and grabbed Makoto’s midsection. I had never ridden a motorbike nor attempted to interact with another user’s Persona, but as I settled into position, my confidence grew.

After a split-second check from Makoto, she twisted the throttle. Johanna’s rear wheel jerked slightly to the side as we propelled forward, and my legs lurched away from the floor, finding stability on the bike itself. Though I was certainly riding the motorcycle, the seat itself dug into me like a sheet of needles. Johanna herself seemed to have a begrudging acceptance of my presence. Or maybe Makoto was just pissed.

I peered over Makoto’s shoulder through a whipping wind. The parking complex was a concrete maze, but Makoto had no intention of taking the long way. Closing ahead, the floor separated from the ceiling in a radiant slice of white between the concrete. The gap shone like the fringe of a bright star in the shrouded building. Makoto cranked the engine, causing Johanna to surge violently, and we shot toward the wall at lightspeed.

Though pain still seared into my body, I cracked a grin. Cackling echoes rose in my soul with the climbing reverberations of Johanna. The imminent wall should have been terrifying, but the threat of destruction only emboldened me.

Makoto screamed, waving her arm at the wall. A bright light encompassed us just as we should have smashed into the concrete, but instead, chunks of stone encompassed our sudden descent. The residual warmth of Makoto’s nuclear blast caught up to me just as the passing air ripped the heat from my body. We plummeted. The fall only lasted a second, but the wailing cry of Johanna’s engine made it seem far longer.

The willpower of our minds cradled our impact, and the bike handled it well, having a surprisingly elastic suspension. Rubber smoke shot into the air along with a squeal of the tires as Makoto and I glanced around for the evading car. Our foe cascaded across the street from the joining alleyway. We must have startled him because I could hear his car’s engine straining even over Johanna’s ear-piercing shriek.

I kept myself fastened to Makoto. Despite our present momentum, I knew Makoto was about to give Johanna everything. The target was leading us on a high-speed chase through a cognitive Shibuya, and Makoto did not intend to lose him. The wind battered us as we increased velocity. My coat flapped wildly in the wind, but somehow Makoto’s scarf maintained a rhythmic flutter. I glanced to the glassy, street windows in passing. The silent, sky-scraping buildings of Shibuya blurred past like splattered paint, yet there wasn’t a single obstacle to block the streets.

We rounded a corner sharply as the enemy attempted to shake us. Makoto was completely silent, but I could perceive her tensity in her rigid clutch on the handlebars and the tightness of her abdomen. She kept her gaze focused solely on the fleeing vehicle while the distance rapidly closed.

My own eyes shifted watchfully when I saw one of the rear windows open. Long, slender blades reached out of the car like a spider awakening from a slumber. Scraping the roof of the sedan, a machine similar to the ones we had fought in the Velvet Room crawled out of the car. The robot stood defiantly atop the vehicle although I was unsure it was capable of doing anything.

A glint from the head of the car attracted my eye as a familiar, twisted sword appeared. Abruptly, a tentacle of dark energy leapt from the blade to the automaton, enveloping it in a black miasma. The shadows departed in a quick shockwave revealing a new creature in the machine’s place: a lion-like beast with a primate’s head and a serpent for a tail. The large and weighty shadow caused the car to
bounce as its massive claws dug into the steel body.

Makoto glanced at the beast, swiftly analyzing it. Whether she found it threatening or inconsequential, she continued our pursuit at maximum speed. Keeping her eyes forward, she shouted, “I’m gonna get close!”

The shadow bore its teeth, making a fearsome sneer. Like a cat sparing with a rival, the creature stiffened its tail, and the fanged serpent head glared tantalizingly at us. Glistening oil trailed from the snake’s maw, flinging into the whipping wind as the snake teetered back and forth. Makoto saw some impending attack in the creature’s motions and commanded me to hold on.

The serpent widened its mouth until I could clearly see the red flesh inside. A bright glow filled the snake’s throat, and a smoldering sphere appeared on its tongue. I braced myself. The snake reared back before snapping outward and launching a broiling fireball at us.

Makoto swerved hard, and Johanna leaned heavily to the right. The street burst into molten fragment beside us, sending a wave of heat across my body. As Johanna adjusted, I had to quickly rebalance. The shadow had spat more flaming projectiles in our direction, and the road was narrowing. We skidded one direction and then the other, but Johanna’s supernatural wheels kept us steady. Makoto worked her bike’s snappy mechanics to their limit. Avoiding firebomb after firebomb required precise and deathly motions. I found the chase exhilarating. I might have reached out and grazed my hand on the asphalt were we not traveling at break-neck speeds.

Johanna’s engine flared with each fireball dodged. Makoto and I had fallen behind some as the flying projectiles came in quick. The beast ahead, however, soon tired. A fading smog plumed from the serpent-tail while the shadow hissed incoherently.

Makoto saw her opening. Johanna straightened like a knife in the road and cut down the middle. Makoto pushed the engine, and we sped towards the car unhindered. The shadow looked up just in time to witness our approach, but by then it was too late. Makoto glanced at me. “Jump!”

I kicked my legs back and jumped from the bike seat over Makoto’s head. The drag force from my jacket softened my descent as I landed on the rear of the vehicle and lashed out with my dagger. Having seen the attack, the shadow recoiled quickly and imprinted its hind legs into the car’s cabin.

Makoto eased back from the vehicle gradually as my fight with the shadow intensified. I slashed back and forth, but the beast had recuperated some of its stamina. The shadow dodged side to side, continuing its retreat. I thrust my knife at the creature, and it shrunk onto its hind legs.

A frustrated taunt could be heard from within the car. “Do something useful! Dammit!”

The beast heeded its master’s command and slammed its forepaws onto the vehicle. I slid back to avoid being struck, but another attack came swiftly. The shadow lowered its head, and the hissing tail came lunging toward me. I ducked, narrowly dodging the strike, and I watched while a newborn fireball shot out of the serpent’s mouth.

Taking a quick peek from my upturned position, I saw Makoto swerve abruptly, losing some ground to dodge the fireball. Regardless, the beast came at me. I felt the heat of its breath as its jaws nearly snapped me in two. I struck out quickly to avoid being eaten and slashed the shadow’s head, causing it to recoil and affording me some room. I then flipped my body over and came to my feet. The shadow lobbed a few more fireballs at me, but I avoided them easily at this range. Makoto was giving the car a wide berth during this barrage. Now that I had boarded the vehicle our urgency had eased.
“You’re supposed to be getting rid of them!” shouted the driver.

I flipped the blade in my hand, taking a defensive stance. As the shadow prepared its next attack, we swung around another corner, and both of us struggled to keep balance. An elevated railway briefly cast a shadow over the car, but I saw the growing fire in the serpent-tail’s mouth. The beast held fast as it charged a more potent shot. An overwhelming fireball came surging toward me. I ducked low to avoid the fiery blast but soon realized that I was not the shadow’s target.

Concrete and steel ruptured when the molten missile hit the elevated track we had just passed. The public transit structure crumbled under the immense force and energy imparted by the explosion. Bits of broken stone and warped steel filled the roadway, forming an impasse. I could barely spot Makoto through the falling debris as she braked forcefully to avoid the rubble.

“Excellent!” cried the driver, “Now deal with the other! I don’t care how.”

I grimaced, preparing my dagger for a deadly thrust into the beast’s heart, but the shadow was unconcerned with finesse. The creature leapt at me with a boisterous growl. Its massive size aided by extended limbs enveloped me in an instant. I tumbled with the shadow, locked in its grasp, as we were flung from the vehicle.

The beast hit the ground first, rolling several times across the harsh pavement. Our high speed prevented any adept maneuvers from myself, but I managed to redirect the motion with my forearm. I skidded along the road for a moment and caught a minor scrape on my head though I quickly righted. At my tumble’s end, I vaulted upward with one hand, coming to a proper landing on my feet.

Glancing down the road, I saw the shadow shake its mane as the screeching car swerved out of sight. The shadow returned my gaze with a focused glare. The beast moved slowly and prowled like a lion, but cheap intimidation had no effect on me. Both of the shadow’s heads hissed at me as I gripped my blade.

[JOKER -VS- SYNTHETIC NUE]

The shadow took a rare opportunity to speak. “This is where your path ends. The master has no time for petty Thieves.” The creature scraped the asphalt with its giant claws.

I scoffed, a grin appearing on my face. “Do you know me?” I said softly. The shadow swiveled its head toward me. “Or shall I introduce you!?”

A faint remembrance of blistering pain seared across my face as I ripped my mask from my eyes. I stared at the feeble shadow with sadistic contempt, and blue flames erupted from the earth around me. A burgeoning laugh swelled in my soul until it could be heard all around. I clutched my mask tightly as Arsene’s crooked fingers manifest from the inverted fire. Stray winds stoked the blaze, and the hellish bonfire burst upward. The accursed flame darkened the whole of Shibuya until the condensed light pierced the shadowy veil surround Arsene’s vile maw. My coat fluttered with the fabric of Arsene’s body. We moved, and the air cracked with nightmarish power.

Fear flashed through the beast’s eyes for a moment before its twin heads dared utter a defiant howl. As if to retort, Arsene furled out his twisted hands and let forth a chilling wail. The shadow gaped its mouth in awe while firelight danced across its mane.

I stretched out my hand and gave a command. “Rid us this foe.”

Arsene’s eyes blazed as he focused on the enemy. Shooting out a tumultuous gust of air, Arsene
incited a tidal wave of the blue fire. The helpless shadow braced itself in a hopeless defense. The flames gushed with the insidious energy of a thousand screams of repentance and swiftly drowned the large beast. Howling shrieks seeped from the hellfire as it stripped the essence of the creature away. Its body broke against the tide of energy, and the remnants were swallowed up in the ebb.

The fires finally cooled once the enemy was defeated. I pressed my mask tenderly onto my face again, and the light of day returned to Shibuya. The whipping flames dissipated reluctantly while Arsene slipped away into the ether. While I examined the indistinguishable burns on the pavement, my fingers clenched in succession. My true target had escaped, and I felt a crack beginning to form on my psyche.

A glorious noise swiftly put those thoughts aside. The howl of an engine replaced the formidable cries of my Persona. I turned around, listening to the rising noise of Johanna. Finally, I saw Makoto ramp onto the fractured overpass. She steadied her bike with her leg as she turned back towards the road. Johanna rocketed off the rail tracks, her tires spinning in the open air. They hit the ground and bounced on the pavement.

Makoto shot me a steely glare as she accelerated in my direction. Keeping a hand on the throttle, she extended her arm outward. I began running in the opposite direction so that I could ease into her momentum. As Makoto zoomed by, our arms locked, and I saddled onto the bike.

Makoto surveyed the roads ahead. “Which way?” she shouted.

I pointed my hand in one direction. “That way!”

We accelerated rapidly around the corner to compensate for lost time. I could barely make out the distant car as a tiny blip on the horizon. The buildings on either side of us shrunk down, and the sparkling bay quickly replaced the concrete vista. As we approached a series of low-lying warehouses and industrial cranes, I realized where our enemy was leading us.

Makoto voiced my concerns. “Isn’t this the way to the bridge?”

I stared ahead, judging the distance between us and our target. “We should hurry.”

Makoto was quiet as she silenced her fears. “Right.”

The wind was shredding us with the absent protection of the city high-rises. Makoto lowered her profile, attempting to decrease resistance, and I shortly followed her example. The sprawling sea rippled in tandem with the strength of a brewing storm, yet the inclement weather concerned me little. Ahead lied a lengthy double-leaf bascule bridge, and the enemy appeared to have crossed already.

Our target vanished as the roadway began to rise before us. The flesh-peeling speed of Johanna suddenly seemed like the velocity of a boulder-hauling snail considering this gradually engaging obstacle. In only a few moments, Johanna would be unable to jump the increasing gap; a few more, and we couldn’t take the incline.

Makoto remained frighteningly still during the lead up to the bridge. Blood pulsed through my ears while I calculated the remaining distance. Our pursuit would die swiftly if we could not overcome this obstacle, yet the pavement rose steadily like a mountain eclipsing the sun. My brain knew that driving over the bridge would certainly land us in the cold waters below, but I absolutely refused defeat. Likewise, Makoto could not come to terms with the loss of her sister and kept her hand firmly on the throttle despite the danger.
We zipped onto the first leg of the bridge, and the sound of clacking, metal gears resounded in my head. The road had lifted to a precarious angle though we could still ride the ramp upward. Makoto glared at the bridge desperately, clenching her teeth. “We’re not going to make it!” she shouted. Nevertheless, Johanna’s engine did not falter.

I exhaled slowly, examining the bridge one final time. Even doubting my eyes, the gap in the bridge was clearly too large to pass with such a heavy bike. The sharp, upward angle would cost us some additional speed, and then we would fall into the bay. Makoto could drive as fast as she wanted; Johanna did not have wings.

“Keep going!” I shouted, “Take the ramp at full speed!”

Makoto glanced back at me. “What?”

I replied quickly. “I have a plan!”

My short assuagement was the only thing Makoto needed to hear. Every doubt in her mind erased, she pressed one hand against me and forced both of us backward. The abrupt shift of weight caused Johanna to rear, but her raised wheel was soon met with the rising pavement of the bridge. Makoto and I slammed forward with the sudden change in momentum. Wincing momentarily, we glanced up the rapidly shortening roadway.

The mechanics of the drawbridge clacked periodically as we swung higher and higher into the air. Johanna’s engine strained loudly, fighting through the force of gravity, but she kept a fast speed. Makoto pressed the throttle to its limit, sending us blistering towards the edge.

As we disconnected from the pavement, the engine became surprisingly quiet. Johanna’s roars echoed behind us, and a gentle breeze lifted the hem of my coat. Rising into the overcast sky, my vision slowly dipped with our slowing vehicle. We rose for a split second before gravity demanded control. The waters beneath us stretched out into an infinite ravine between the two bridge leaves. We began to fall, and a silent prayer went up from my heart.

The groans of the struggling engine were swapped with scraping noises and straining metal. In a fearful flinch, Makoto recoiled against me as she was certain we had hit a something in our descent. A chilled breath escaped me with a shiver. Moments passed, but we did not touch the water. Instead, what should have been a paralyzing cold came as a warm gust from above.

Makoto opened her eyes and saw that we were not sinking but sailing through the air. Another gust of air rushed down upon us, and Johanna teetered at the force. Makoto looked up as we careened toward the other end of the bridge. Pitch black feathers stretched out against the bright sky like a blanket of midnight at noontime. In the scattered lighting, the only illumination on the great phantom thief’s body was from the condensed flames bursting from Arsene’s face.

Arsene’s fingers hooked onto Johanna’s body. Makoto had released her grip on the handles in a moment of disbelief, but she quickly regained composure as we drifted closer to our landing. Still, I felt both our breathing calm now that this obstacle was being crossed. I caught a flash of humor on Makoto’s face, and I smiled back.

Regardless, we still had a clear goal. Makoto positioned her hands on the handlebars and told me, “Let me know when we’re going to drop.”

I faced forward, watching carefully as the lip of the opposing bridge floated toward us. Arsene’s wings flapped in conjunction with my heartbeat and pushed us toward the road. The angle of the bridge was steep, but a well-timed landing would net us significant speed. I focused on the edge of
the runway and trusted in my instincts.

“Now.”

Arsene’s claws detached from Johanna’s chassis, and Makoto spun up the wheels as we entered a rapid descent. The screaming engine matched with the rising wind. We hit the angled pavement, thrusting us downward while Makoto eased the bike’s nose to the asphalt. By her expertise, the vertical drop felt like a shallow curve, and we swiftly rocketed away from the bridge.

Thanks to our stunt, we had gained significant ground on the car we were chasing. Makoto spotted the vehicle driving onto one of the adjacent docking areas covered in shipping containers. Neither of us had much patience remaining, so Makoto took a sharp turn and banked off the curb, guiding us onto the joining road easily.

The street leading to the docks was clear and straight. Though we may have been able to surprise our enemy, I suspected that they were not planning on dragging Sae around the Metaverse forever. We needed to be quick if we wanted to rescue Sae from the clutches of these mysterious foes, and Makoto portrayed no desire for caution.

The possibility of stealth was promptly erased when Makoto drove directly through the chain-link fence surrounding the docks rather than driving around to the open gate. If the alarming noise of the fracturing metal fence wasn’t enough, Johanna’s engine naturally reverbed on the stack of shipping containers strewn about the dock. Fortunately, at our speed, the enemy had little time to prepare. We drifted into a central loading hub where our foe was waiting.

As I suspected, Sae’s kidnapper was the twisted shadow man we had encountered days earlier. He stood in the middle of the arena, conversing with two of his robotic lackeys. Next to the enemies was the car we had chased here. The vehicle was open and empty although I saw no sign of Sae in the immediate vicinity. Aside from the obvious targets, my eyes were drawn to a large ship floating beside the docks and prepped for boarding. The metal boat had a distinct appearance, setting it apart from any ship I had ever seen in Tokyo waters. It did not have signs of technological, Metaverse tampering, but the ship clearly would not have been within a cognitive imprint of Japan.

The shadow man begrudgingly noticed our approach, turning his seething yellow eye toward us. I was transfixed by the shadow being’s face momentarily. The amber hues swirled through his maelstrom-like visage and backlit his toothy maw with a faint glow; however, I swore his color had been pink the other day.

Makoto drove quickly toward the shadow, considering just running over him there. Yet we stopped with Johanna skidding to a halt, and I disembarked from the vehicle. Makoto kept her bike readied as she glared at our enemy. It’s difficult to antagonize an expressionless foe, but Makoto’s unrelenting fury certainly came close.

The shadow raked his clawed hands over his blank face. “Goddammit, you kids again?” The shadow extended an open hand as if we were a nuisance to be swatted away. “I had to go through a lot of trouble to get that bridge to move.”

“You’re going to be in a lot more trouble if you don’t get the hell out of my face,” Makoto snarked.

The two robots flanking the shadow moved restlessly while their chief continued the discord. “Now, now,” the shadow dissuaded, “I still haven’t repaid that jawbreaker you gave me the other day.”

The shadow eyed me menacingly. “Oh, she’s being looked after. But before you see her, I think we should deal with our business first.”

In her plain tone, Makoto responded, “I couldn’t agree more.” I nodded to her.

“Very well then,” said the shadow, “Allow me to introduce you to my associates.”

The shipping crates stacked around us suddenly burst open, and more blade-armed automatons poured out. Robots surrounded us in a frantic clamor of metal against pavement. I glanced over my shoulder as the robots enclosed behind us. They monitored us meticulously, whetting their blades in the meantime.

Makoto, though aware of the danger, kept her sights locked on the shadow. She said to me, “I hope you didn’t spend all your energy in that last fight.”

I smirked. “Not a chance.”

[JOKER & QUEEN -VS- THE SINISTER SHADOW]

The fighting began without prompting when one of the automatons leapt toward me. I swiveled around in time to see the swiftly descending razor edge and readied my blade. Metal to metal, the two swords clashed together as I parried the robot’s attack. The larger blade-arm of the machine bounced off my own, unbalancing the attacker. Preparing to follow on the first attack, another robot lunged from behind the one in my focus. Since the first was momentarily unguarded, I thrust my foot into the bulk of the robot and sent it sprawling into the other, and both foes tumbled over the pavement.

Meanwhile, Makoto had problems of her own. Her bike wasn’t suited to close quarters combat, so she allowed it to dissolve as she stepped to the side. The robots came at her fast, striking from multiple directions. One dropped from above and lashed with both its arms. Makoto sidestepped the attack quickly and gave the automaton a swift kick to the back of its single-jointed leg. With the robot kneeling on the ground, Makoto launched a jab to the back of the robot’s cranium. Her brass knuckles dented the metal plating and snapped the head clean out of its housing. As the robot fell to the concrete, two more prepared to attack. The first struck quickly, stabbing its blades rhythmically at Makoto. Queen dodged three swipes in succession as the second robot came slashing. The first robot thrust again, but this time Makoto ducked under the attack and caught the robot’s left arm under its shoulder joint. She forced herself upwards and hurled the first automaton toward the other. The attacking robot’s blades snagged on the other’s body, and the two enemies collapsed, skidding backward.

I quickly refocused as a frantic robot lunged toward me. It slid through the air, striking low on my body. I jumped, naturally, and ended up springboarding from the robot’s backside. I propelled myself toward Makoto who was engaged in a brawl with two more automatons. Landing nimbly on one robotic head, I stunned the foe and afforded Makoto a crucial opening. She slammed the robot away with her foot as I flipped through the air. Twirling my blade, I came down hard on the other robot and plunged my dagger into its skull.

Makoto and I now stood shoulder to shoulder: she clenching her fists and I gripping my knife. The automaton gang promptly filled in the gaps in their assault despite a few injuries. They approached us slowly while the shadow overlooked his troops in confidence.

Makoto pressed her back against mine. “There’s a lot of them.”

I made a tense grimace as our space rapidly dwindled. “No turning back now. Give it all you’ve
Makoto nodded solemnly. “I intend to.” She straightened as she clutched at her mask intently. “Persona!” With a blinding flash and an ear-shattering screech, Johanna sped to Makoto’s side. Her engine still ran hot.

“Now, Johanna!” Makoto cried, “Bring down the sun and turn them to ash!” At her words, Johanna beamed brightly like a shrunken star and sent a quaking roar across the city. An overpowering light ripped open the sky, and a tendril of energy shot down like a plummeting locomotive. The robots braced in vain as they watched the display. The pillar of light struck the ground and tore into the various automatons, vaporizing them in sweltering energy. Lightning cracked from the surface of the destructive beam, and wisps of fire churned the air. Our foes were naught against the power of a star.

On the other end of the arena, the metal soldiers surged in retaliation. Robots dashed toward me, challenging our position. While Makoto held one flank, I would command the other. The clueless charge of my enemies brought a smile to my face.

“Arsene!” The winged demon posed like a giant over the battlefield, mustering a boastful laugh. I thrust out my hand and pointed to the enemy. “Take control!”

Arsene sent out a startling cackle, and a bright wave of twisted energy quickly followed. Purple, chaotic beams propagated across the ground like burrowing snakes. The automatons had no respite as the beams tainted their bodies and tore into their brains. The machines sparked and sputtered, the energy taking control. The encroaching push halted, and the robots fumbled around sluggishly.

The distant shadow shook his head at the sight. “Aren’t you machines capable of anything!?” he chastised.

Arsene chuckled as he extended an arm over the battlefield. Those robots now held the volatile, purple energy, and their metal flesh resonated with arcane symbols. They turned at Arsene’s beckon and focused their eyeless faces on their master.

Unnerved at the sight of his brainwashed troops, the shadow flinched. “Ah… Galatine!” The shadow extended his hand upward, and that familiar, crooked, obsidian blade shot into his grip. Now that the shadow had his comforting toy, he quickly turned to his adjacent guards. “You two had better do me some good.”

With Galatine held high in the air, those same shadowy tendrils fanned from the blade and curled around the unmoving automatons. Black haze consumed them, and soon their husks lost all form in the shadow’s grasp. The darkness swelled and pulsed as the robots were transformed into mighty foes.

The black energy ruptured violently, revealing the demented creations. One took the form of a gilded warrior in bulky armor and he sat atop a silken, black steed. His ornate lance gleamed in the sunlight contrasting the two beastly horns which protruded from his helm. The other had become a ghastly blacksmith. A lone eye glared through his torturer’s mask as he stood tall on a single, rotted leg.

The shadow thrust Galatine forward. He shouted, “I don’t care who controls these machines! You will cut through them and destroy those Thieves!”

The mounted warrior was first to heed his master’s command. He straightened his lance under his arm and spurred his mount forward. The confused automatons between myself and the knight eagerly lashed out at the oncoming target. Despite their height disadvantage, the machines compensated with impressive agility. They leapt through the air, slashing their blades furiously.
The horse and knight thundered into the fray while the knight’s thick armor resisted all attacks. His great lance cut down any robot reckless enough to fling itself upon him, and many others were trampled under the iron-girded hooves. Metal scattered over the battlefield, disorienting the remaining automatons. However, the evading robots were soon crushed by a sudden swing from the blacksmith’s hammer.

The crazed smithy moved through the fight like a lumbering behemoth, swinging his long hammer with blind passion. Robotic shells were flung every which way as the demon cleared a path. One defiant robot jumped and struck a quick blow on the blacksmith’s thick coat, but that witless bravery caught the demented smith’s attention. The giant turned and snatched up the robot in a pair of oversized furnace tongs. The seized automaton struggled for only a moment before his head burst under the pressure of the blacksmith’s grip.

As the brainwashed robots finally cleared away, the mounted knight made a relentless charge toward me. His steed flared its nostrils, and the knight shouted a rallying war cry. Arsene moved in front of me, obscuring us with his massive, feathery wings. The knight thrust his lance into my haunting Persona, but Arsene swiftly vanished in a lingering mist, granting us a parting laugh as he went.

The armored warrior had completely missed me behind Arsene’s veil, and I moved quickly aside. The warrior stared briefly at the fading mist as he searched for my body, but I used his unawareness to creep under his mount’s belly. I made to strike the knight from behind; however, the lagging smith noticed my covert attack.

A wide hammer shattered the pavement where I had stood. The blacksmith peered vehemently at me through his intimidating mask. My agility kept me one step away from death, but I needed an advantage. Thinking creatively, I skipped onto the waiting hammer and darted for the smith’s head. The ghastly giant emitted a startled wail as I traveled over his body. He snapped at me with his clanging tongs but missed entirely.

I mounted the smith’s head to his dismay, and he stumbled awkwardly for a second. I took the brief intermission to gather my thoughts and survey the fighting. Makoto had nearly cleared the remaining automatons with her electromagnetic judgment, and the brainwashed ones had scattered to the wind. Then I glanced up and realized that our shadow nemesis was abandoning the fight. He was retreating to that unusual ship.

I turned back around just as a sharp lance thrust toward me. I evaded but immediately lost balance, so I flailed my arms to prevent an abrupt fall. The warrior and smith now worked in tandem to overcome me; the giant smith had stooped over to give the knight a perfect angle on my body. Another swift strike of the lance came at me as I called to Makoto. “Queen!”

Makoto glanced away from the chaotic inferno momentarily. I pointed dramatically to our fleeing adversary; however, it must have looked quite odd since I was spinning and jumping so frantically. Still, Makoto looked towards the distant ship and the cowardly shadow to which she promptly scowled.

Makoto snatched a hold of Johanna’s handlebars and quickly straddled the bike. As the final automaton disintegrated to ash, the flaring solar beam dissipated, and Makoto shot off toward the ship. She zoomed across the dock, moving to intercept the enemy. The deafening growl of Johanna’s engine called everyone’s attention as she went into a screeching drift. The shadow man was cut off with Makoto now between himself and the ship.

Although a massive vehicle came barreling towards him, the shadow adopted a firm stance. Makoto allowed her bike to speed forward freely before she made her attack. The shadow moved sideways to avoid the collision, but Makoto had a different approach. She leapt from Johanna’s seat and
throttled toward the shadow with a powerful haymaker.

Bits of concrete splintered from the pavement. Furious at having missed her target, Makoto pulled her fist out of the ground. She turned around to see the shadow rise from his rolling escape. Enraged, he scraped his claws against the cement, drawing sparks from the friction.

“Fine!” shouted the shadow as he turned to face Makoto, “If you want this fight so badly, I’d be happy to take your sister and humiliate you at the same time!”

Makoto stepped forward. “Bring it!”

The shadow lunged at her, swiping both his claws through the air. A battle of fisticuffs ensued as Makoto aptly blocked two oncoming strikes with her forearms before delivering her own blow to the shadow’s abdomen. The shadow recovered fast, however, and struck back. He snagged Makoto’s arm in one of his claws and then slashed her with the other. Makoto flinched, stumbling back, and the shadow snarled heinously.

The shadow hissed through his widespread fangs seething with giddy energy. Undaunted, Makoto refused to curb her assault. The brief shock of pain only fueled her ire. She glared intensely at the shadow while she calculated her next attack, and after a moment, she retaliated, launching a flurry of jabs at her opponent. Regardless, the shadow was an adept combatant and caught each forward jab with ease. Makoto used that simplistic façade to placate the enemy, and a quick hit across the shadow’s torso connected, setting him off balance. She followed up with a swinging kick which led into another. The shadow stumbled back frantically, leaving himself open, and Makoto finished with a thrusting punch.

The shadow stumbled, finally collapsing to his knees. Makoto adjusted her fists as she surveyed her weary opponent. Despite the blows he had taken, the shadow would not go down. He released a vicious cry as he propped himself on one knee, and he lifted one arm to his side. The shadow man wretched while his right arm divided like bone and sinew being torn apart. The black, shadowy mist that composed his body congealed into a slimy, bubbling puss along his arm, and the shadow’s claw-like hand began to contract and contort as the whole became a gelatinous organ.

Abruptly, the shadow shot up, his arm moving like a writhing python. He pulled the gurgling mass of otherworldly flesh behind him and recklessly lunged forward with a chilling scream. Disturbed and confused, Makoto crossed her arms in an impromptu but sturdy defense. The shadow thrust his arm forward, and the oozing darkness sucked his whole body along with it. He shot toward Makoto with the speed of the wind, and those shadowy tendrils latched onto her bracing body. Although she withstood the impact, brute strength was not the attack’s purpose. The shadow-infused goo flowed through her arms and around her body. The vile substance nearly choked Makoto as it moved over her mouth and nose, but it also burnt like acid.

Unable to scream for fear of suffocation, Makoto shunted herself forward aggressively, wincing all the while. The shadow touched every part of her and left stinging pain, but the puss continued moving with its original momentum. Eventually, Makoto thrust out of the gooey mass and clambered away from it swiftly. The shadow then tumbled to the ground, rolling like a drop of oil before beginning to reshape the man within. The black claws reached out from the contorting puddle, and the shadow heaved himself out of the ground.

In the meantime, I remained engaged with the knight warlord and demonic blacksmith. Now I noted that Makoto and the shadow had grown significantly closer to me, but I still had to deal with my current predicament. During the fighting, I had moved to the ground, but the two summoned beings were relentless.
A crushing strike from the blacksmith’s hammer impacted the shipping crate next to me. The smith then struck with his tongs, nearly squashing me, yet I bounded off the shipping crate and managed a sideways flip over the smelting tool. On my way down, I interfered with the adjacent warrior’s horse. A swift kick to the face caused the steed to abruptly rear. The knight swung at me, but I kept out of reach thanks to his mount’s sudden motion. I rolled swiftly underneath the befuddled horse, finally escaping immediate danger.

I gripped my mask quickly. “Persona.” And I turned to face my opponents. Arsene swung rapidly, mirroring my motion, and sliced the back-turned knight with the heel of his boot. Though the knight’s armor was strong, Arsene’s power struck true, and the warrior slipped from his mount with a wail. The blacksmith glanced in confusion at his fallen comrade, but before the knight had even begun to fade, I attacked again. I leapt to the horse’s saddle and flung my dagger at the unaware smith.

Plunk!

The dagger promptly sunk into the slit on the smith’s mask. The giant released a weak, guttural groan as dark blood seeped from his eye hole, dripping gradually to the earth. The smith wobbled unsteadily for a moment and then fell to the ground with a breathtaking thud. With my enemies defeated, I flipped from the horse’s back, landing firmly on the pavement, and plucked my weapon from the blacksmith’s eye.

I now turned my attention squarely on Makoto and the shadow man. They were sparring near the car and still a healthy distance away from the ship. We finally had the advantage, and I had to execute. I clutched my dagger and forced myself into a sprint.

Queen and the shadow traded blow for blow, scrape for scrape. They had each other’s full focus, and I saw my opening. My boots quickened against the concrete, but I kept my steps light. The tempo of my heart surged as I launched toward my opponent. The shadow glimpsed my figure on his peripheral, but he was too late. I thrust my blade into his side.

The shadow screamed as I ripped my dagger from his body. He instinctively clutched at his side, losing all composure. Then I gripped the shadow’s shoulder and thrust my forearm behind his head. Nodding to Makoto, I shouted, “Do it!”

Makoto leapt forward and began slugging the shadow’s face and body. Despite his twisted form, Makoto applied pressure that warped the being unnaturally. She slammed his head repeatedly while I held him, and the shadow’s razor teeth began to melt into his jawline. His torso lost all solidity as she pummeled his midsection. Even if this had no effect on the shadow’s form, the rapidity of Makoto’s attacks certainly exhausted him of stamina. Nevertheless, we would not relent for the sake of Makoto’s sister.

Finally, I released the shadow, and Makoto sent a kick to his jaw as she backflipped away. Black ooze spurted from the shadow’s mouth, and he shuffled back, completely stupefied. Makoto exhaled heavily, but she would not be satisfied until her enemy was prone and pleading for mercy. Indeed, the shadow still managed to maintain a fragile stance, so Makoto took hold of her mask.

“Johanna!”

I heard the distant rumble of an engine, and turning around, I saw the bike approaching from across the dock. Her wheels screeched as the metal reached its limit. Makoto commanded her at full throttle, and she blitzed toward the hobbling shadow. The following impact caused me to wince. I saw the shadow fly and crack against the open car he had used earlier. He slumped over, feeble but alive.
Makoto and I calmly approached the limp shadow. Puss dripped from the shadow’s mouth as he hung his head. A black stain rippled over the vehicle’s surface and even splattered over the car’s exposed interior. The being quivered in a puddle of his own goo while his chest heaved with every breath. His limbs twitched unnaturally, yet he remained whole. As we stepped closer to the shadow man, he struggled to raise his head to eye us with amused spite.

We stopped a few feet from the shadow. “Where is my sister?” Makoto asked peaceably.

The shadow’s breaths became short and quick. He might’ve been laughing, but I couldn’t tell from his hastened panting. A thick, black tongue rolled out of the shadow’s mouth, and dark fluid overflowed with it. Flecks of the disgusting puss splayed from the shadow’s mouth as he spoke. “Th-th-that was quite imp-presive…” His breathing increased again, and he nearly keeled over from his own amusement. “…for some kids who can’t stop a kidnapping.”

Makoto was silent, but she moved toward the car. She took hold of the front door with both hands and slammed it into the shadow’s face. The loud impact resounded. The shadow growled as black blood spattered across the rear half of the car, his body struggling to conform to the shape of the vehicle. I watched, stone-faced, while Makoto kicked the door, again and again, further brutalizing the kidnapper until she was satisfied. When the door finally pulled back, the shadow’s jaw had unhinged, and his tongue hung low, waving uncontrollably.

Makoto stepped back to my side before yelling, “Where is my sister!” Fuming, she shook as her fists tightened.

This time the shadow had to snap his jaw back into position before responding. One shaking claw lifted the two halves together. With a crack, the shadow’s mouth was functional again, but instead of pleading he grinned.

“Tell Samuel he needs to update his tech.”

I blinked at the shadow. “What?”

The shadow unfurled his right arm from underneath the car and flicked something from his hand. A tiny object skidded across the pavement toward us, sparking as it landed. Makoto and I both looked down. When I realized the object’s purpose, I refocused my eyes in hopes that my senses had failed me. It was a small, black disk that looked like a watch, and it was cracked and broken.

Makoto squealed once the thought had settled in her mind. “No!” She shot downward, grasping at the object, but it was too late. Her hands smacked the ground the second the car and its owner had disappeared.

The sun beat down on me, glaring through the corner of my glasses, yet a chill ran down my spine as Makoto lowered her head to the rough pavement and curled into a ball. “No,” Makoto whispered, “No. No… no-no-no-no-no!” A sharp cry went up from her, mocked by the roaming gulls. Gradually, Makoto’s breathing became increasingly uneven, and I could feel her tears dripping onto the concrete. My own body began to shake as I was laden with undeniable reality; we had lost.
Sae Niijima has been taken. The Phantom Thieves' emotions swell in response to the attack on their friend, but the enigmatic Samuel Zimmerman's inaction leads this cohort to seek additional solutions. Although they have little hope for an immediate resolution, these friends can still help each other overcome this painful struggle.

The elevator ride down was slow, quiet, and agonizing. My stomach rose as the carriage descended, but nothing could lift my listless heart. Makoto trembled beside me, staring vacantly at the opaque elevator doors. The grey metal in front of us gave me a distorted view of her sunken face. Those crimson irises bled into her whites, and the tops of her cheeks swelled like terrible blisters. Even in the dim reflection, I could barely stand the sight of her because I was reminded of my own distressing inadequacy.

As the doors finally opened, I briefly wished my existence would end so that I would not have to persevere through this horrifying reality. Nevertheless, I stepped forward as life demanded that I continue. I was greeted by a myriad of smiling faces, and my impassive visage could not convey the necessary emotions. Everyone was cradled in the quaint living area juxtaposing the bunker entrance. Even Sojiro was here though Samuel was presumably busy elsewhere.

Makoto shuffled out of the elevator along with me. She kept her sullen eyes focused on the ground, but the others soon called to us. Ryuji and Ann sat on a sofa on one side of a low-lying coffee table, and Yusuke was sitting with Haru on the other. Futaba held the chief position, sitting cross-legged in a recliner at the table’s head, while Mona rested tactlessly in the middle.

Sojiro stood aside from the others and noticed us when we came in. He sipped from a cup of coffee, saying, “Hey, look who’s here.”

Ryuji turned promptly as the others looked up. “Yo! Pull up a seat, guys!” The team smiled complacently with their heated beverages, expecting us to approach momentarily.

Makoto held her arms at her side as she looked toward the group. I could see the tears rising in her eyes, preparing to overflow again. Then, quaking, she said, “I… she’s…” She choked on the words. “Ah! I can’t!” Makoto hastily covered her eyes with her palms and swiftly abandoned us. She bolted down the hall twice as fast as we had entered.

The others stared in confusion at the hallway. I glanced after Makoto, but the others’ perplexed looks spurred me onward. I shook my head at my own reluctance; I could barely bring myself to say it.

“Uh… did something happen?” Ann asked slowly.

“What’s wrong?” Haru dreadfully inquired.

An increasing pain in my throat stifled my words, but I managed a reply. “Sae Niijima… has been abducted.”

Futaba cocked her head at me although the others didn’t move. “Wait, what did you say?”
Yusuke abruptly stood. “I hope I have heard you incorrectly.”

I quivered, clenching my fists as I repeated myself. “That shadow, the one who attacked us the other day… took Makoto’s sister!”

A flurry of alarmed and bewildered cries burst from the group. Ryuji dove straight to the point: “The hell happened, man!?”

I trudged to the table and took a seat at the end. The memories of this afternoon remained fresh in my mind, but regurgitating the ordeal certainly did not appeal to me. Nevertheless, my friends needed to know, so I began the laborious task of expounding my recollection. I told of the locations: the restaurant, the parking garage, and the cognitive city. I recounted the oddities: the distinct waiter, Sae’s sudden dizziness, and the foreign ship inside the cognition. Worst of all, I remembered emotions: the joy of two sisters, the desperation of Makoto, and the agony of our failure. After I had finished recalling all the events, we were only left with more answerless questions.

Ann stared somberly at the table as her strong empathy dictated. “Why? Why would someone do this?”

Ryuji slammed his fist on the table, and the spoon beside Haru’s teacup jumped a little. “Goddammit!” Ryuji cried, “First, that bastard shadow guy tries to take Mona, and then he goes after Makoto’s sister!?”

Yusuke shot me a disgruntled look. “Just who are these people that they’d kidnap someone in broad daylight?”

Hearing Yusuke’s remark, Ryuji knotted his hands together tightly. “Ya know, I bet these guys are responsible for the disappearance of Kamoshida and the others too.”

Morgana shifted his head toward Ryuji. “It seemed likely before, but there can be no doubt at this point.”

Haru nodded, her brow furrowed. “If this coincides with the suspect Samuel has mentioned, that would mean we’re only dealing with one entity.”

“A single group that uses the Metaverse to abduct people…” Yusuke reiterated the notion with a laugh, “What a sickening thought.”

Futaba chimed in as well. “What kind of twisted game are they playing?”

The group became silent for a moment as we allowed thoughts of human depravity to vacate our minds. Thankfully, Sojiro brought up a reasonable point of concern. “Wait, I’m lost. Why abduct Niijima-san? I mean, the criminals I can understand. The previous targets of the Phantom Thieves might have some information, but why target Niijima?”

“Perhaps they wanted to intimidate us,” Haru replied, “In hopes of preemptively silencing us.”

“Hmm, no…” Sojiro continued, “I don’t think so. If that were the case, why not target someone less visible? Like me for instance. I slave away all alone at Leblanc for hours each day. It would have been easy to take me.”

Futaba looked at him sideways. “Slave away?”

“H-heyy…” Ann lifted her head as we all faced her, “You don’t think… Niijima-san got abducted because we changed her heart, do you?”
“Now that you mention it,” Mona replied, “That is what connects all these incidents together.”

Yusuke crossed his arms as he considered the idea. “But how many people even know that we stole Niijima-san’s heart? There could certainly be rumors within the police department itself, but there was no public notice.”

“And we never actually stole Niijima-san’s heart,” Futaba added, “We just faked it to fool Akechi.”

Sojiro grunted affirmatively. “Given the media uproar about the suicide, no one had any time to think about what had happened to the public prosecutor.”

Yusuke nodded. “Taking all this into account, the only people we can definitively say knew of our involvement with Niijima would be Niijima-san herself and…”

“Did someone call my name?” A curious and brazen voice entered the room, and the others flinched in surprise. I shifted my eyes with abiding contempt to the red-eyed monitor hanging on the wall. Akechi’s omnipresence continued a trend of irritancy.

“…Akechi.” Yusuke cast a deadpan look over the group.

“Oh, God,” Haru exclaimed, gripping her chest, “I forgot he was here.”

Ryuji turned to her with a sympathetic smile. “Right!? It’s so freaky.”

“So, Mr. Ace Detective,” Futaba quickly focused on the speaking probe, “We’ve got a few questions for you.”

“Oh, please,” Akechi responded, a modest chuckle emanating through his speakers, “I’m not a detective anymore. Just Akechi is fine, or Goro, if you prefer.”

“Fine. Akechi,” Futaba continued, pressing her glasses into her face, “I’m still not down with the whole being a robot thing. Sam said you were made from a cognitive imprint, but just how much do you know?”

The speaker wavered slightly in pitch as Akechi spoke. “Hmm, well, to answer your question, I know about as much as the real Akechi ever did, but furthermore, I’m not actually a robot. Being a robot would imply that I had physical autonomy; I’m more of an… artificial intelligence, if you would.”

Futaba shook her head. “Sorry, what was that last bit? All I heard was “beep-boop, beep-boop,” and I don’t speak robot.”

Ann nearly snorted. “Futaba…” Her intent was to dissuade our resident forum troll, but her repressed smile wasn’t delivering the message.

“Hmm? Oh, was that a joke?” Akechi sluggishly replied, “I’m sorry to say it, but I don’t find much of anything humorous these days.”

“Hey, Akechi!” Ryuji interjected, “How much have you told Samuel about us?”

The red-dotted pupil swiveled to Ryuji. “Well… considering he’s the one responsible for piecing me back together, I told him everything I knew about the Phantom Thieves.”

Yusuke scratched his chin. “Hmm, I see.”

“I hate to suggest this,” Haru began, “But is Samuel entirely trustworthy?”
“No,” I stated plainly, “But if abducting Sae was his plan, I doubt he would have bothered assisting us.”

Ryuji raised one eyebrow and glanced at me. “You never know…”

Akechi then reinserted himself into the conversation. “Personally, I can vouch for Samuel. His methods may be a bit unorthodox, but his intentions are noble.”

Irked by Akechi’s continued interruptions, Mona clambered onto all-fours. “You realize you’re not exactly a trustworthy source yourself, Akechi.”

A gentle yet haughty laugh reverbed through the speaker. “Well, I have to start telling the truth sometime.”

“Akechi,” Yusuke abruptly perked from his contemplative posture, “Who else knows about what you’ve told Samuel?”

“Oh, I suppose a great many people do by now,” Akechi replied, “It was a few years ago when I presented the information, and most of it was transcribed and recorded in databases, so numerous people could have access. I suppose there could also be any number of partner organizations that USEI shared the information with.”

Ann’s shoulders slumped. “Well, that makes things more complicated.”

A weary groan came from Ryuji as he rubbed his neck. “Yeah, no kidding.”

“I must applaud your efforts to link a culprit to these crimes,” Akechi added, “However, Sam has been quite adamant about his suspect. Personally, I am not privy to the American intelligence network, but if Sam says he’s making preparations, perhaps we’d be better off simply waiting.”

Haru let out a short sigh. “He certainly is familiar with us, isn’t he?”

“Yeah… you’re tellin’ me…” Ryuji said with an exasperated chuckle, “He showed up in my room last night just to check up on me.”

I glanced at my friend. “You too…?” We shared an uncomfortable look.

Another moment passed as the group fell into silence. Our fruitless discussion had borne no revelations on a mysterious enemy, yet a numbing pain had wafted over us all. The unspoken threat that our loved ones might become targets cast us into a gloomy mood, and our hearts mourned on our team member’s behalf. Although there was no action to be taken, I grew uncharacteristically impatient.

Yusuke abruptly stood again and looked at me. “Do you think you could take us back to the scene of the crime? I know there isn’t much chance of finding anything, but I don’t think I can sit still any longer.”

I stood myself, nodding to Yusuke. “I feel the same.”

“Alright!” Ryuji exclaimed as he jumped to his feet, “Let’s do this!”

“Wait!” Haru quickly interjected, “What about the Metaverse devices? We wouldn’t want a repeat of what happened to Makoto’s sister.”

“I still have the one Sam gave me.” Yusuke pulled the tiny, round device from his pocket.
“And I’ve got mine,” Ryuji said, grinning.

I surmised, “So, we have a backup.”

Ryuji nodded. “Okay, who else is comin’?”

Ann pursed her lips as she put on a grave look. “I think I’ll stay here and try to talk to Makoto.”

Ryuji scratched his head. “Right… yeah, you should do that.”

Futaba next added, “I’m going to do some research on this suspect Sam is targeting.”

Haru managed a small smile. “I think I’ll brew some fresh coffee for us girls.”

Sojiro was also happy to be of service. “I can help with that.”

The ladies gradually moved from their seats. Ann left us, proceeding tentatively down the hall to the personal quarters; Haru began transitioning to the kitchen; and Futaba bounded off to find her laptop.

Ryuji turned to Morgana, the only unaccounted member of the group. “So, Mona, you coming?”

“Well,” the cat began, “I’d probably just get in the way if I stick around here, so why not.”

“Awesome!” Ryuji shouted, “Let’s go!”

Before we could leave, Akechi had one final remark. “I’ll be sure to notify Samuel of what has occurred, and I’ll inquire again as to the timing of the coming mission.”


Since everyone was updated on the situation, Ryuji, Yusuke, and I parted from the living space with Morgana clambering to my shoulder. The four of us walked the short distance to the waiting exit, and then Sojiro put on a serious face.

He said, “Hey, you guys be careful. Alright?”

Smiling, I gave Boss an affirmative nod before stepping into the elevator.

“This the place?” Ryuji asked in a hushed voice.

“ Seems so,” Morgana quietly responded.

The four of us gazed up at the towering, concrete garage. A cold wind rustled through our jackets, echoing through the hollow structure like a fading wail. I listened unwillingly to the foreboding quiet which drew us forward. The dark openings across the building revealed little in the faint interior, yet I could sense its emptiness. There was nothing here but dread and pain.

I wondered why I had pressed myself to return so quickly. Although I was eager to reverse the abduction incident, my heart stung from the bitter remembrance. A friend had been captured before my eyes, and despite a desperate counterattack, we had suffered a humiliating defeat. My shameful failure had cost Makoto dearly, and I would ache until I could right that wrong. Yet, regardless of my oppressive grief, I stared forward, unrelenting in my steps. Underneath the chilling surface of my skin broiled a vehement rage. I wanted to shred, to tear, to rend something asunder. I wanted to feel
the crackle of fire at my fingertips as I tore into my enemies. No burden would weigh me down. I would neither slow nor falter until the ones responsible for this had been brought to justice.

I glared into that abyssal, concrete maze and cast all my hesitations aside. “Follow me.”

Though I advanced ahead confidently, Yusuke and Ryuji appeared warier of our surroundings. The recent kidnapping had us all on edge, and the garage was dark and quiet. The building’s cheap lighting left shifty traces in the windshields of secluded vehicles, yet that minor movement was enough to attract attention. Yusuke opted to keep a steady gaze as he rotated his head slowly about the parking area. Ryuji, however, flicked his head side to side more liberally while Mona barely moved at all. The cat’s stellar vision certainly had its perks.

We proceeded up the stairs after realizing the elevators were occupied. Once we arrived at the appropriate floor, only a short walk remained. We now traced the same steps I had taken with Makoto and Sae a few hours earlier.

I stopped just short of the gap between the vehicles. Sae’s car was still here, cold and dark. “This is where it happened.”

Ryuji glanced around, scouring for any signs of activity. “Damn, it’s so dark in here. No wonder this guy was able to get the drop on ya.”

Morgana dropped from my shoulder and began searching the area. “Hmm, I don’t see much of anything. Actually, this spot looks really clean for a parking lot.”

“Well, they did go into the Metaverse,” Ryuji responded, “Maybe any evidence got carried with ‘em when they crossed over.”

Yusuke turned to me. “You mentioned that Sae-san fainted, correct? If this plan was so meticulously planned that Sae would faint and be captured here, perhaps the enemy was not expecting you to be here.”

Now that I thought about it, the only reason we had been with Sae was Makoto’s insistence that we accompany her sister to her vehicle. The notion did not ease my pain, but I was glad to be aware of our enemy’s actions. Mona then approached us and sat on the pavement. “In that case, that shadow guy might not have planned to use the Metaverse at all.”

Hearing the feline’s remark, I shook my head. “They were too prepared.”

“Hmm,” Yusuke looked down as he folded his arms, “You did say the shadow acquired a car quite quickly.”

“Well then,” Ryuji added, pulling a transference device from his pocket, “We should definitely check out the Metaverse and see what’s over there.”

“Sounds good to me,” Mona replied.

Ryuji nodded, flipping the device over in his hand; however, he quickly realized he had no knowledge of how to operate Metaverse tool. Yusuke focused his attention on the device as well. “So, how exactly do these transference devices work?” Yusuke asked, “Sam never actually explained that before.”

“Uhhh…” Ryuji brought the device closer to his eyes as he examined the little markings on its face. “I have no idea…”
“Hmm,” Yusuke carefully examined the object’s form before turning to me, “You used the device earlier. How does it work?”

I rubbed my head in humiliation. “Makoto was the one who used the device.”

“Shit,” Ryuji moaned, “Are we gonna have to go all the way back just to get this thing to work?”

Morgana shook his head derisively. “You guys are hopeless,” he chided, “Let me see the device.”

Ryuji stooped down and placed the small disc on the pavement. “You know how this thing works?”

Mona leaned over the device, slowly tracing the outline with his big, blue eyes. Then he raised one paw and paused briefly like he was making a calculated decision. His paw tapped the device gently, and the disc wobbled whimsically on the pavement. Then Mona tapped the device again with similar aplomb.

Ryuji frowned as he watched the cat toy with the Metaverse tool. “Hey! Do you actually know what you’re doing?”

Morgana ignored him, swatting the device a third time. Yusuke sighed. “It seems he doesn’t have the slightest clue.”

Upon hearing his good name sullied, Mona glared up at the three of us. “Would you be quiet? I’m trying to get this thing to work.”

“So sorry,” I swiftly replied, “We’ll let you concentrate.”

Ryuji let out a hollow groan as he smeared a hand across his face. “Seriously, even I could have poked the thing ‘till it worked.”

“Aha!” Mona abruptly cried, “This should do it.” He gave the disk a resounding slap.

I felt a brief tingle in my toes, and Morgana transitioned to his bulbous and bouncy state before our eyes. Yusuke, Ryuji, and I all remained in our casual attire. Ryuji turned to me, scratching his head. “Huh,” he began, “I guess I was kinda expecting to change outfits.”

“At least this means there are no present threats,” Yusuke added.

“True,” Ryuji replied as he picked up the Metaverse device and pocketed it.

“Alright!” Mona shouted, “Let’s search the area.”

Yusuke glanced down the parking strip. “There are quite a few cars here. Should we check all of them?”

Morgana looked sideways. “That’d probably be the safest way to go about it.”

“What!” Ryuji yelped, “There’s gotta be like… a hundred cars on this floor!”

I tilted my head, looking past my friends at row after row of grey vehicles. Having ample time to examine the lot, I now noted the identical appearance of each car. The simplistic sedan forms had no unique markings and would have looked appropriate almost anywhere in the city. Their dusty grey bodies concealed dim and undetailed interiors as if the cars were just set pieces for this oversized cognition.

“Do these things even drive?” Ryuji continued as he waved a hand over the car next to us, “They
don’t look like they do.”

Brushing my lips together, I said, “The shadow’s car looked different than these.”

Ryuji’s eyes widened. “Oh! That’s right! You guys chased him down on Makoto’s Persona!”

“I must admit,” Yusuke interjected, “Even I was impressed when you said that.”

Mona tapped his chin thoughtfully. “Normally, that type of thing isn’t even possible. Only the person wielding the Persona could interact so directly with it.”

I gave a stifled laugh at Morgana’s unnerving appraisal. “I think it was more Makoto’s doing.”

“Well, that’s a possibility,” Mona replied, “Although she’d have to be extremely focused to pull it off.”

Ryuji suddenly stepped toward me. “So, how’d it feel?” He stared intently at me, grinning as he awaited my next word. “Riding on that bike must’ve been pretty cool, huh? Always wished I’d get the chance.”

I coyly dismissed Ryuji’s enthusiasm. “It was prickly.”

“P-prickly!?” Ryuji frowned. “You got to ride a demon motorcycle around Shibuya, and you’re gonna tell me it was effin’ prickly!?”

Yusuke shot Ryuji a curious glance. “He’s quite invested in this, isn’t he?”

“No shit I’m invested!” Ryuji said, swaying around, “I’ve been dreamin’ about that bike ever since the bank job.” Ryuji’s eyes practically rolled into his head.

Morgana suddenly spoke up to grab our attention. “Hey! Aren’t we supposed to be looking for clues?” he chastised, “Ryuji, you can salivate over Makoto’s Persona later.”

Ryuji shook his head, glaring at the boisterous cat. “Ugh, dammit. Why you always hafta ruin my fun?”

“No, now,” said Yusuke dissuading, “We’re here to do anything we can for Sae-san. Let’s at least stay focused until we clear the area.”

A loud sigh evaporated from Ryuji’s lips. “Yeah, you’re right.”

A few minutes passed as we spread about the parking garage. Unsurprisingly, dusty cars, dingy concrete, and dark crannies did not make for interesting scenery, and we wasted most of our effort combing through dim spaces. Morgana did his best to compensate for the low lighting, but there was little to find in the shadows. Although I wasn’t expecting to uncover anything, that desperate sensation kept edging me forward. Regardless, staring at this grey room had to end at some point.

We gradually came together as Yusuke said, “It seems this level is completely devoid of evidence. Shall we check the other floors?”

Mona sighed, shaking his head. “It’s no use. There’s nothing here.”

“Nothing except that giant hole in the wall,” Ryuji corrected. He looked past the group at the irregular shape blasted out of the concrete.

I glanced at the wall where the pale light streamed into the building. “Also Makoto’s doing.”
“I can’t believe you guys jumped from all the way up here,” Ryuji went on, “That’s pretty bold, even for Makoto.”

“You know,” Yusuke added, “It’s amazing how each of our temperaments can change so rapidly under pressure.” He turned his head down. “Although, I’m sure I’d be much the same if someone close to me was threatened.”

“Yeah,” Ryuji slowly replied, “I don’t even know what I’d do if something happened to my mom.”

“No kidding,” I interjected, “Remember what happened with Sam?”

Ryuji shook his head, averting his eyes. “That guy can be a complete jerk-wad when he wants.” He chuckled before returning my gaze. “But I’m glad you were there to stop me from doin’ somethin’ I’d regret.”

“It’s too bad he can’t stop you from talking,” Mona said, snickering, “Maybe then your life wouldn’t be such an embarrassment.”

Yusuke and I braced for an aggressive retort, but Ryuji bit his lip, mustering a shallow grin. “Is that why you’re always perched on his shoulder?” Ryuji mockingly inquired, “Because you can’t be bothered to think for yourself?”

Yusuke rolled his head, staring wide-eyed at our friends. “I honestly can’t believe these two can still tolerate one another after everything that’s happened.”

I glanced at Yusuke. “Fighting is the secret to a good relationship.”

Dumbfounded, Yusuke blinked at me. “Well…” he began fumblingly, “I suppose I would question the legitimacy of a relationship which had no disagreements.”

“Yeah, man,” Ryuji added, turning to Yusuke, “Any time I’m workin’ out, I just think about how bad I wanna punch Mona’s pudgy face!”

“Yeah! I mean…” Morgana paused as the words registered with him, “Wait, what?” He looked up at Ryuji who simply snickered.

Yusuke released a brief sigh. “Very well. I’m abandoning all efforts to understand these interactions between the two of you.” He glanced at me. “Now, shall we move on? Perhaps the docks you mentioned earlier would be a likely place for evidence.”

“Can we go back to the real world and get a cab first?” Ryuji asked, “It’s gonna be a long walk otherwise.”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Mona said with a little skip, “I’d offer my services, but…” He laughed nervously. “I’m still working out the kinks.”

“Alright,” Yusuke answered, rolling one shoulder, “Now, who has money for the cab fare? I certainly don’t.”

Ryuji stared at Yusuke. “Uh… Ah, shit, I probably don’t have enough to pay…”

The three of my friends turned to me with weak expressions on their faces. I scratched my head. “Looks like we’re walking.”
When we finally neared the docks, the cognitive sun was dipping toward the horizon, wrapping the desolate world in a calming, orange embrace. Thick clouds still trailed overhead, and the evening light flowed gently around their clumps. I gathered my courage as we approached the final point of conflict. The shock of today continued to gnaw at me, and reviewing the site of our defeat would likely be the most difficult obstacle to overcome. Nevertheless, I knew stopping here would only elongate my grief’s lifespan.

My friends, thankfully, were not so downtrodden. Following a fatigued sigh, Ryuji initiated some dialogue. “I think I’m gonna need to get a new job once we settle this mess.”

“Can’t you just use some vacation time?” Mona asked, trailing behind us.

“Well, the one I got is only part-time,” Ryuji responded, “But I can’t just show up whenever I feel like it.”

“Why not?” I asked nonchalantly, “That’s what I do.”

“Ha-ha.” A dry laugh rolled out of Ryuji’s mouth. “My boss’d have my head if I did that.” He scratched his neck with mild irritation.

We walked onward for a lengthy moment until Yusuke added, “I think I shall need to seek some supplementary work myself when we return to normal life.”

Strangely bothered, Ryuji released a slight groan as he responded. “Yusuke… There’s gotta be at least a hundred jobs that’d pay good money to have a guy with your talents. Why are you struggling to find work?”

Yusuke contemplated the question briefly before responding. “Well, for starters, there aren’t many places that would finance my work and allow me to explore the full breadth of creative freedom. Then there’s the issue of…”

Ryuji cut him off. “So, you’re tellin’ me you’re willing to starve in order to… ahem… ‘explore the full breadth of creative freedom?’ Man, you’re crazy.”

“You could have always asked one of us for help,” Mona chimed in, “Why didn’t you call us?”

Yusuke stopped, snared by a sudden tangent of thought. Ryuji and I turned only a pace ahead. “I suppose it was a matter of pride,” Yusuke began, “I… could not ask for help or independent investment because I wanted my art to stand on its own… as proof of my development.”

Mona shot me a worried glance, but Ryuji replied promptly. “Ya know, I probably shouldn’t say this, but you’re a lot more like that old man Madarame than I think you’d like to admit.”

Morgana flailed his arms. “Ryuji!” he hissed.

“No, no…” Yusuke sighed as he motioned to Morgana. “He’s right.” Yusuke’s shoulders sagged with a heavy breath, and he looked to the ground. “Madarame raised me for the majority of my life and throughout my entire youth. It was inevitable that I adopted some of his traits, even his shortcomings.”

Ryuji laughed awkwardly. “Eh, well… I didn’t exactly mean it like that.”

Yusuke released a despondent chuckle. “I suppose it was foolish of me to believe the world would bend under the sole power of my own will.”
“Hey man, don’t give up hope yet,” Ryuji aptly replied, “Just a couple weeks ago I woulda said my future was in the dumpster. And now look! We’re going after international, Metaverse criminals.”

Yusuke looked up, inhaling deeply. “Right. I’m sorry,” he stated, “I’ll try to remain focused on the task at hand.”

I acknowledged Yusuke’s renewed focus with a nod. “The dock is just ahead.”

Resuming our walk, we left the road and strolled into the blockade of shipping containers. The multicolored crates obscured the vacant battlefield awaiting us on the other side. As we rounded the final stack, we could see bits of charred metal lining the approach to the bay waters. The space where the foreign, maritime vessel had previously floated now lied open with no remnants of its presence in sight. Still, the pavement between us and the water was scarred and dotted with mementos of the fight. Even the shadow man’s car remained at the center of the area, open and blood-splattered.

“Holy shit…” Ryuji quietly remarked as he kicked a burnt fragment of steel aside.

Staring in awe at the battlefield, Morgana skipped forward. He stopped where the concrete buckled on the fringe of a smoldering crater. The pavement had dipped under the force an attack from Makoto, so we had to skirt the edge of the basin to glimpse the bottom. Mona followed a faint wisp of smoke as it parted from the crater’s heart.

“Is it wrong of me… to wish I had seen the battle?” he asked.

Yusuke stroked his face as he examined the smoking hole. “Perhaps I am forgetting,” he began, “But I do not recall us ever causing such visceral devastation as this.”

Although I had witnessed many overwhelming attacks from my allies, this display certainly rivaled the greatest of those strikes. “She definitely pushed her limits,” I stated plainly.

Ryuji turned his head and surveyed the broken husks of the defeated automatons strewn over the lot. “Look at how many there were…” Dazed by the spectacle, he fumbled through his words. “They wanted to stop you this badly… and you still took them all out?”

The others also examined the area, amazed by the remnant chaos. Yusuke turned to me slowly. “You mentioned this shadow man used a sword to transform some of his lackeys into true shadows.”

“Yes,” I replied, “I had to deal with those.”

Yusuke nodded. “Interesting that the base robotics remain but the shadows have dispersed as normal.”

“Must mean the robots are real, right?” Ryuji added, “I mean, if they were cognition things or whatever, they would’ve just vanished like everything else.”

Mona glanced to the ground, shaking his head in concern before hopping off in a new direction. The cat drew our attention to the broken car separated from the fighting, so we followed him through the debris. Black, undulating pus streaked across the ground and vehicle as an imprint of the long-absent shadow man. Yusuke and Ryuji had no immediate response, but I knew the sight was unsettling at the least. Once we neared the vehicle, Mona stooped over and touched the black ooze with a paw.

Morgana examined his goopy hand with the bubbling liquid smeared on its surface. “What is this stuff?” he slowly asked.

I cringed at Mona’s swift curiosity. “That’s blood from that shadow man.”
Mona looked to me and then to his hand. “E-Yuck!” he cried. He shook his paw frantically, and the blob of goo slung from his waving hand onto the open pavement. The bloody orb bounced and rolled on the concrete, sliding like an unbroken droplet of oil on an impermeable surface.

Disgusted, Yusuke shook his head. “How repulsive.”

Ryuji stepped toward the black puddle and gawked at its extent. “This is all blood?” he cried, “I mean, he is made of similar stuff… but still!” He faced me in distress. “Ain’t this a bit much?”

I had my private concerns with Makoto’s unbridled wrath against our adversary; however, the brutality mattered little in the face of a living and unwavering enemy. I asked, “When did you start shying away from physical action?”

He smiled weakly. “Hey, it’s not like that. I’ve just never seen this much blood come out of a shadow that wasn’t dying before. Plus, we know he’s an actual person now.”

“Well, it certainly doesn’t look like human blood,” Yusuke stated. His eyes flowed along the writhing pool of blackness. “For that matter, it doesn’t look much like blood at all.”

“It sorta looks like raw soul energy,” Morgana remarked, keeping a wary eye on the squishy blob he had lobbed from his paw.

“Uh,” Ryuji scratched his head, “What?”

Mona turned to him. “It’s the stuff that appears whenever shadows fade in and out of existence. Shadows were originally a part of the greater human cognition, but their essence must adopt new forms based on the demands of the cognition, and this is what that essence looks like.”

Ryuji shifted from one foot to the other. “Wait, so, that shadow guy is actually made of shadow?”

Mona frowned. “Well… it’s just a theory.”

“That doesn’t seem possible though,” Yusuke interjected, “They saw the kidnapper as a human man. Could someone like that transform into a being made from the souls of other humans?”

Distraught by his lacking knowledge, Mona tiled his head downward. “I don’t know. I can only guess that this person has awakened to some kind of horrific power.”

Ryuji shifted again as he thought. “Just like that psychotic ability Akechi had.” He rubbed his chin. “If that’s the power the Metaverse cooked up last time, what kind of twisted shit has it got to surprise us now?”

Yusuke nodded. “Yes, if there was any doubt remaining, we must strike quickly before any more people fall prey to this fiend’s plans.”

My eyes glazed over as I watched the simmering blood. “If only there were something to strike.”

My friends became solemn, contemplating the futility of our predicament. We were vigilantes looming over an unattributable crime until Samuel granted us some tangible information on our target. Although my scant interactions with Sam had not indicated him to be a layabout, the mounting pressure for action incited unease. He had his bureaucratic processes to go through, but I desperately wanted command of the situation.

Applying his selective focus, Ryuji altered the flow of conversation. “So,” he began, “Is this car, like… even real?” He motioned limply to the vehicle beside us.
Yusuke captured the car’s entirety in his vision. “Hmm, it does appear different from the gray vehicles we saw earlier.” He shook his head. “But how could we even tell?”

Ryuji glanced at our friend and then to the car. “Well, there may be one way.” He turned to the cat. “Mona, pop the hood for me.”

“Right.” Morgana took care to avoid the bloodstain as he clambered into the open vehicle and manipulated a switch inside the doorframe.

Ryuji walked to the front of the car and slipped a hand under the dented hood. After a moment of fiddling, the engine hood swung open, and the rest of us joined Ryuji at the front of the vehicle.

Yusuke asked, “Do you have experience with cars, Ryuji?”

Ryuji didn’t glance away as he observed the inner workings of the vehicle. “Not much,” he stated, “But I did have to do some repairs on my new, old car.”

“You mean the one you left at the airport?” Mona inquired.

Ryuji glanced up. “Oh yeah… Shit, I’m gonna have to go get that.”

“Sounds like another bill to pay,” I added.

“Ah, shit…” Ryuji turned around, leaving the hood propped. “Am I going to have to beg Ann for money again?” Instinctively, he scratched the back of his neck.

Mona released a short sigh as he shook his head. “I hate to say this, but… maybe you’d be better off asking Haru. I doubt that kind of payment means anything to her.”

Ryuji groaned as his skin flared. “Ugh!” He raked his hands frantically through his hair. “Godammit.”

I smiled lightly and gave my friend a pat on the shoulder. “C’mon, let’s take a look at the engine.”

Exhaling, Ryuji and I faced the car’s grimy interior. I ran my eyes over the mesh of pipes and wirings, but my abstract mind could make no sense of the unpolished, metal tangle. The distraction of the engine was enough to restore Ryuji’s focus, however. He swiftly spied a peculiar feature wedged against the car’s battery.

“What’s this?” he said, reaching across the engine. With a quick shimmy, he dislodged the rectangular bobble from its hiding place and lifted it out of the systems. Several wires dangled from the underside of the object, linking directly to the battery, but otherwise, it was an indistinct, plastic cube.

“Don’t look at me,” I quickly deflected.

Ryuji rotated the component in his hand. “I don’t think this is part of the car. Nothing should be linked to the battery like that.” He pointed to the non-standard splicing between the wires.

Mona tapped his chin saying, “Maybe that device is how they were able to get a vehicle into the Metaverse.”

“If that is the case,” Yusuke added, “perhaps we should deliver the device to Samuel, so that he may examine it.”

Ryuji glanced back, maintaining his grip on the cube. “Yeah…” He turned back to the car and
leaned over the engine. “Yeah. Alright, give me a minute. I’m gonna try to remove this thing without electrocuting myself.”

My hands slid into my pockets as I stepped backward. “I’m sure you’ll be fine. You’ve got a resistance to electricity after all.”

Ryuji groaned while unhinging something from the engine. “I’m just gonna pretend you didn’t say that.”

With our friend focused on his task, Morgana and I watched quietly. Ryuji wiggled his arms around the engine components, but the strange device was difficult to disconnect. The haphazard wiring could cause damage to Ryuji or the component if not handled carefully. Still, I brought nothing to aid the situation, so I had to patiently wait.

As I permitted my eyes to divert from Ryuji’s awkward, mechanical dance, I gazed toward the burning horizon. The low-hanging sun radiated across the smooth waves, leaving a glistening sparkle on the bay. I saw Yusuke standing at the water’s edge, his pale body appearing as a black shadow against the stark light. Ryuji continued prying at the device, so I separated from my friends to join Yusuke by the water.

I caught a subtle sigh from Yusuke as he sat over the dock’s end, and I approached. Dichotomic shades of bright orange and deep blue splashed against the metal girding of the dock. I stopped with one foot extended onto the grooved plating and waited for Yusuke to express his thoughts.

“What did I think was going to happen?” he said, “That people would respect my pretentious decisions and satisfy my inbred desire for approval?” Yusuke gradually lowered his head from the horizon. “The world remains corrupt and distorted, yet that same deplorable attitude had secretly sprouted from within my own heart. I have been rendered completely useless against this newfound threat because I foolishly neglected the balance we strived for so eagerly.” Yusuke glanced at me sideways. “What good has displaying my art in dusty corners done for the world, hmm? Meanwhile, everyone else had been bettering themselves or struggling against their fate.” He released a harsh sigh. “In my contentment, fate had turned me into its subservient slave. I was like a witless child deaf to its own screams. Honestly, I should be thanking you for finding me when you did. Had I gone any longer in isolation, I might’ve driven myself to death.” Though I remained silent, Yusuke pushed off the ground and turned to me. “Clearly, I am not worthy to be a member of the Phantom Thieves. I have lost my Persona and my will, but… you requested me anyway.” He shook his head. “Perhaps I am missing something…”

I faced my friend. “You and I are in more similar circumstances than you think.”

Yusuke mustered a sad laugh. “You say that, yet your own Persona awakened at the first sign of trouble. Despite all the recent chaotic events, I have not received an inkling of my own.”

“And how does that make you feel?” I asked.

Yusuke’s brow tightened. “Was that a joke?” he snapped, “I am beyond despair.”

I nodded, glaring toward the setting sun. “Then we are the same.”

Yusuke shook his head. “But what good is a Phantom Thief without action?” At his words, a bemused smile crossed my face.

“Sounds like he’s ready.” Yusuke and I turned as Morgana teetered toward us. The cat struck a confident pose to counteract the downtrodden nature of our conversation. I had nearly forgotten
about his good hearing.

“You think so too?” I said, more stating than inquiring.

Feeling slightly uplifted, Yusuke exhaled in resignation and directed another question to Mona. “Morgana, how can you stay so upbeat? I would have expected you to be distraught without your Persona.”

Our smaller friend glanced to the side. “Well… to tell you the truth, it has bothered me. Watching these guys fight in the Metaverse without my support is a heavy blow to my pride.” Mona shook his head vigorously. “But that’s beside the point! We’ve only just gotten back together, and we’ve got to stay focused. Soon, we’ll get a chance to fight back, and then…” The cat clenched his paws as he shivered. “Ooooh, my Persona’s boiling just beneath the surface, ready to pounce!”

Yusuke gawked at Mona’s mild display of fury. “I… did not expect you to be so in tune with your own spirit.”

The little cat looked up. “Hmm? Don’t you feel it too? Doesn’t it make you feel sick to think that someone’s out there, abusing the Metaverse? Doesn’t the thought of Makoto’s sister being taken make you want to scream?”

“I assure you,” Yusuke straightened his posture and clenched his hands, “I would like nothing more than to see these criminals brought to justice.”

Mona shot Yusuke a stern look. “When you feel the need, make those desires your sole focus. Your Persona won’t fail you.”

Yusuke chuckled softly, and he turned sideways to gaze across the docks. “That doesn’t explain much… although I suppose I’ll understand in the moment.”

The cat crossed his arms pridefully. “Yes, exactly.”

“Hey!” Ryuji jaunted in our direction, carrying a big grin and holding the cubic device aloft. “I got the thing!” Once he had reached us, he paused to gather the dangling cords streaming from the object. Ryuji bundled the whole unit under his arm and sighed. “This probably isn’t going to tell us anything, is it?”

“Probably not,” I replied.

Ryuji turned his face down. “Damn. Ya know, I was kinda hopin’ there’d be a leftover, enemy grunt or personal device for us to interrogate the information out of.”

Mona frowned. “Looks like we’ll just have to trust Samuel’s intel.”

“Man, that guy is too slow for his own good,” Ryuji retorted, “When he finally lets us loose, we’ll have to show ‘em how it’s done.”

“Absolutely,” I said, nodding.

After a beat, Yusuke propped his head on one hand. “Actually, there’s been something that I keep thinking regarding our American friend.”

“What’s up?” Mona asked.

Yusuke continued, “Doesn’t this whole operation seem a little… convenient? Samuel is connected
with a government agency and a family-owned contractor, but we’ve been seemingly thrust in the midst of it all without any formality.”

“Now that you mention it,” Mona’s eyes widened, “I’ve only seen a handful of other employees working here and in Nevada.”

Ryuji tilted his head. “This is a sort of secret Metaverse group. Maybe they just like to keep things small and quiet.”

Yusuke lowered his hands. “That doesn’t explain why we’ve been allowed inside. As an overseer, wouldn’t he be responsible for our conduct?”

“Well, he has been working with Akechi and Makoto for some time,” Mona said, “He certainly knows more about us than I’m comfortable with.”

“Still,” Yusuke laboriously continued, “Is that enough to waive regulation and reveal his secrets to us?”

The group was silent for a moment as we wracked our brains for an answer. I recalled the first conversation I had with Samuel in Nevada. The American was stoic and strange, but I remembered a brief hint of unhindered emotion that he had shone that day. I barely had a name for that supposed target Samuel had given to me, yet he had insisted on the necessity of this operation. While I didn’t trust Sam, he seemed more than adamant regarding his suspect. He went insofar as to prepare his own resignation should we have rejected his deal. This mission may have been of greater importance to Samuel than I assumed.

“There’s something more to this,” I calmly stated.

Yusuke nodded. “You’re certainly right about that.”

Mona rested his eyes. “Nothing to do but wait now.”

Ryuji released an easy sigh. “Waiting, huh?” He shook his head and gazed over the bay. The sun melted into the distant waters now, spilling golden fluid from the horizon to the shore. “Ya know,” Ryuji began, “I’ve seen a lot of stuff in the Metaverse, but this… this is pretty nice too.” Ryuji plopped down by the edge, and the rest of us yielded to join him, our feet dangling over the smooth water. He set the device down on the pavement, and we were quiet.

The water played a melodic tune as it jumped and broke against itself. I remained bitter from the events of today; however, the union of our sorrowful emotions instilled a sense of hopefulness in me. Like waves on the bay, our lives kept moving. Our troubles might be painful, but they wouldn’t last forever.

With all of us looking wistfully to the horizon, Ryuji eventually spoke up. “You guys ever wonder if we’re not supposed to be a part of society?”

“Those thoughts have been crossing my mind a lot lately,” Yusuke unhesitant replied.

“That’s silly thinking,” Mona absently interjected, “Not even the ignorance of all humanity could erase us.”

Ryuji laughed softly. “No, I mean like…” He paused to consider his words. “Like even after everything, society still doesn’t want us to be a part of it. We did so much for them, but nothing’s gotten better for us. We’re still outcasts in this totally effed up world.”
No one said anything for a moment. He was right regarding us four. The ladies were living decidedly better lives than us, but even so, we had all rejoined the Phantom Thieves for some obligation. “I like it better this way,” I said.

Ryuji turned to me with a smile on his face. “Yeah, me too.”

“You guys should remember,” Mona added, “It’s not about what happens to us. We affected change on all of society.”

Ryuji’s shoulders sagged as he let out a long sigh. “Yeah… Yeah, I hope you’re right, Mona.”

We became quiet again as the waters gradually rolled in. That glowing, amber orb sunk mesmerizingly into the waves while we sat close together. At some point, Yusuke said, “It’s a long walk back. Should we get going?” We all quietly shifted in our positions, but no one made any sudden motions.

Ryuji slowly rubbed his neck. “Maybe just another minute.”

“Yeah,” Mona whispered.

I crossed my legs and added, “Maybe two.”
Chapter Summary

With a mission to investigate the Metaverse crisis on the horizon, tension within the Phantom Thieves have reached their height. Still, our heroes must struggle to prepare for the coming challenges.

I stepped out of my personal quarters and felt a wave of cool air rush over my thoroughly cleansed skin, causing tingling bumps to sprout along my bare arms. I paused to acclimate to this new day and slid my glasses onto my face. Gentle vibrations echoed through the ventilation of the quiet halls in the Z-Tech complex, but I could hear some distant voices emanating from the facility’s canteen. Although recent events had brought intense stress to our small group, becoming agitated would not speed our goals. Samuel insisted that our patience was not being wasted.

“Good morning, Joker!” a pleasant voice called out to me.

My brain still waking, I briefly stretched my limbs before looking up at the red-eyed monitor. Unfortunately, I was becoming accustomed to Akechi’s continuous interjections, so I remained quiet. I simply couldn’t be bothered to chastise him on every occasion.

“The others have already gathered in the cafeteria,” Akechi continued, “Feel free to make your way there at your own discretion. I suspect Samuel will want to speak with you shortly.”

I released a mild groan as my bones and muscles creaked. “Okay,” I said.

Immediately, I noticed another individual approaching from down the hall. “There you are,” I heard Mona say, “I was wondering when you were going to be up. Everyone’s already in the…”

“In the cafeteria,” I replied, cutting him off.

“Oh, yeah,” Mona frowned in confusion, “Wait, how did you…?” He glanced up at the wall monitor. “Oh, right.”

“Greetings, Morgana,” the monitor cheerily reverberated, “I was just informing our leader on the group’s current status.”


I gently placed a hand on my face, shaking my head. “Why does it feel like I have two animals perched on my shoulders now?”

“Hey! Don’t compare me to him!” Morgana hissed.

“My apologies for the disturbance,” Akechi quickly added, “I shall return to my duties.” A short click echoed from the speaker before the red eye gradually faded.

Mona shook his head, dislodging the brief encounter from his mind. He returned his eyes to me and asked, “Can we go?” I nodded to him, and we departed.
The walk to the canteen was short, but my mind wandered during the few steps. I anticipated that Samuel would delay us at least one more day, so I contemplated what I might do with my remaining time in this place. Since the Phantom Thieves were all together, I could spend time with any of them. However, recreation didn’t seem appropriate on such a tense occasion. Perhaps my friends would have a clearer plan of action.

I stepped into the expansive cafeteria and surveyed my surroundings. Fluorescent lights bathed the plain tile flooring in a white glow, and the grey tables and walls added to the dull aesthetic. I promptly noticed Sojiro idling beside me, but otherwise, the room was very sparsely populated for its size. Ann, Futaba, Haru, Ryuji, and Yusuke sat together at one of the several benched tables while the remainder of the area was devoid of life. Even the conjoined kitchen was empty.

“Well, look who’s finally awake,” Sojiro scathingly remarked. He crossed his arms, appearing ever-so haughty despite my independence. Still, I returned a humoring smile. He motioned to the kitchen window as he continued. “Made some breakfast for everyone, so make sure to eat up.”

I meekly rubbed my neck. “You know, you don’t have to do that.”

Sojiro frowned, turning away from me. “Actually, I think I’d go crazy if I had to be cooped up here without doing anything. Too bad I can’t go back to Jongen. That foreign guy, Sam, sure is a stickler for his rules.”

“Well… thanks.”

Sojiro nodded. “Mhmm. I’m gonna head outside for a smoke now, so I’ll see ya.”

The old man passed by me as Morgana trotted further into the room. With the cat leading the way, I shifted my attention to the kitchen sill and the steaming bowl of delectable curry. Familiar aromas of sugar and spice filled my nostrils, so I eagerly took up a plate. The simmering gravy poured readily onto the empty dish, coating the white porcelain in a caramel-colored soup. I grabbed a utensil, and a satiated grin appeared on my face as I approached the tables.

Futaba was typing away on her laptop while sitting in a foldable chair at the end of the table. I chose my spot at the corner of the bench between her and Ryuji. Yusuke sat on the other side of Ryuji, drawing in a large notepad, and the other two ladies sat across from them. As I sat down to eat, Ryuji mindlessly toyed with his round Metaverse device. With one finger, he rolled it back and forth before launching it inattentively toward Ann. The lady caught the disc with one dexterous index and heaved a great sigh before sinking her cheek onto her fist.

With a spoonful of warm curry on its way into my belly, I watched the uncannily mesmerizing game of disk rolling, yet none of the other table occupants seemed quite as interested. Yusuke fixated on expounding another preliminary sketch, and Haru focused her eyes on her phone. Eventually, Futaba did acknowledge my presence when Morgana hopped onto the bench beside me.

“Oh, hey,” she said, adjusting her glasses as she looked at me, “Still as timely as ever I see.”

I gradually chewed through another bite before speaking. “Any news?”

She sighed while swapping the positions of her legs. “Not the kind you’re hoping for,” she stated, “I barely found anything on Samuel’s suspect. And don’t even ask me about Makoto.”

Persistently nodding at her response, I swiftly turned to Ann. She, however, commented quickly before I could even ask. “It’s bad,” she sleepily moaned, “It’s really bad.”

Haru abruptly glanced up from her phone. “I think we must have set a record for tissue use last
night.” She laughed uncomfortably. “And I have some experience with the matter.”

Ryuji released a disgusted laugh as he caught the Metaverse disk in his hand again. “Shit…”

“I wish there was something we could do to brighten her mood,” Yusuke absently remarked, “But I doubt anything could alleviate this crisis.”

Ann cocked her head as our minds recoiled from the uncomfortable subject. “What are you drawing?” she asked Yusuke.

“I’ve been in a sour air lately,” he replied, lifting his pad, “So I thought I’d try depicting something more outlandish.” Yusuke held the notepad up for all to see. On the white parchment, I saw a distinctly American figure. Yusuke had drawn a man with a broad rimmed hat and wide chaps flowing from his legs. A smoking lollipop trailed from the figure’s crooked smile, and a massive revolver hung openly at his side.

Ryuji glanced at the picture once and chuckled. “Yusuke,” he began, “What the hell have you drawn?”

Yusuke chuckled, lowering his picture. “If that’s your reaction now, I must have succeeded.”

“Succeeded at what?” Futaba said, gawking.

“Forget about that,” Mona piped up, “Tell us what you found on the suspect.”

Futaba grinned, tapping Mona’s nose with a finger. “Jeez, so impatient. It’s just boring stuff anyway.”

The cat swatted Futaba’s hand away. “We still should hear what you have.”

“Okay, fine,” Futaba sighed, “But all I found was that this guy, Nikolai, was involved in some unnamed conflicts during the 20-teens.”

“So,” Mona ruminated, “Is he… dangerous?”

“Well, from what I’ve found, he seems like a real warmonger,” Futaba replied, “So, yeah. Danger is kinda his whole deal.”

“I expected nothing less,” I answered.

Ryuji slumped over, resting his chin on the table as he flicked the Metaverse disk back to Ann. “Sounds like a real bad-boy type.”

Halting the rolling device, Ann yawned. “Shut up, Ryuji.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Ryuji said with a snicker, “You’re into bad-boys, aren’t ya?”

Ann let out a disapproving sigh. “Ryuji,” she began, “You don’t have a clue who I’m into.”

“Ugh…” Ryuji shook his head. “Would you quit bein’ so stuck up?”

“Ha! I am not stuck up!” Ann retorted with snide condescension, “You’re just being a moron.”

“Oh, sure,” Ryuji nodded, “Whatever you say Miss Windsor.” He mockingly bowed his head.

Ann snorted. “Uh, Miss Win-? Oh, God. Are you really gonna bring that up again?”
Futaba winced. “Ngh, and just when I had nearly expunged that memory form my brain.”

“Honestly,” Ann continued berating Ryuji, “I’m surprised you even remember that.”

Morgana chuckled to himself. “How could he forget?”

“It was his idea,” I added.

Ryuji smiled, raising his hands apologetically. “Aw, you guys give me too much credit.” He gestured to Ann. “We should be thanking Ann’s spontaneous desire to launch an acting career.”

“Hmm,” Yusuke pondered the idea, “ Stranger things have happened.”

Haru set her phone aside to join the discussion. “I know a lot of actors get by on their looks rather than talent.”

Ann suddenly straightened. “Ah! Haru!” she cried, “What are you implying?”

Her cheeks quickly flushing, Haru turned frantically to her friend. “Ah-um! I just meant that it wouldn’t hurt your chances, was all.”

Ann’s pouty look quickly broke into a joyous laugh, and she threw an arm around Haru tightly. “Oh, Haru! I’m kidding! Acting’s not my thing anyways.”

Haru smiled, leaning into the warm hug. “Well, you did manage to give me a start there.”

An abrupt buzz from Haru’s phone cut the merriment short as she plucked the phone from the table and ogled the screen. Maintaining a loose grip on Haru’s compact figure, Ann peered curiously at the personal device. “Who are you texting?” Ann inquired. She blinked quickly, glancing to Haru. “Oh! I hope we didn’t force you to abandon your café.”

“Oh!” Haru returned her gaze to her friend. “No, the shop will be fine without me. No… it's actually the company.” She slowly looked again at the phone and sighed.

“I’ve been monitoring Okumura Foods on the market,” Futaba promptly interjected, “You wouldn’t even know they were in a slump a few years ago. They surpassed their net-worth all-time high months ago.”

Haru giggled at the generous appraisal. “Yes, it seems our ‘quality over quantity’ approach has really resonated with customers, but I’m still a bit surprised myself.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Yusuke said, “But aren’t you just a shareholder? You don’t actually manage the day-to-day affairs of the company.”

“That’s right,” Haru replied, nodding. “However, as the majority shareholder, all the board’s decisions have to go through me.” A smile swiftly returned to her face. “Plus, President Takakura and I like to discuss our plans for the future.”

“Sounds rough,” Ryuji remarked.

“It is difficult,” Haru firmly added, “But I enjoy fulfilling my responsibilities.”

Mona sent a confident smile in Haru’s direction. “Well, we’re super proud of you!” The others, including myself, nodded in agreement.

Haru giggled brightly. “Thank you, Mona-chan.”
I lifted another dose of savory curry to my lips just as my eyes caught an additional body meander into the cafeteria. Ryuji also glanced in her direction and quickly refocused on fiddling with his device. While Yusuke and Haru remained distracted by their own activities, Futaba watched curiously, and Ann showed tentative concern.

Mona quietly mumbled, “Here we go…”

Her solid boots traipsing across the floor, Makoto took a seat next to Haru without saying a word. Generally, her appearance was completely typical; her slacks were smooth, and her hair was primped. Still, one could not ignore her sunken, downcast eyes. Even her mouth was slack and devoid of emotion.

Haru glanced at Makoto upon noticing her friend and mustered a gentle smile. “Good morning, Mako-chan,” she softly said.

“Boss has kindly provided breakfast for us this morning,” Yusuke added without looking away from his notepad, “You should have some before it disappears.”

Makoto’s head slowly tilted downward. “Thank you,” she replied, “but I’m not hungry.”

“Not hungry?” Mona questioned.

Ryuji shifted nervously at the newfound awkwardness of the conversation. “Eh, ah, um… Say, Haru?”

“Hmm?” Haru turned toward him, “What is it, Ryuji-kun?”

Ryuji scratched his neck although this divergence clearly alleviated some of his tension. “Ah, this is kinda embarrassing to ask, but… do you think I could borrow some money?”

Ann shook her head, groaning. “Ryuji…”

Haru just giggled. “And what do you need this money for, Ryuji-kun?”

“Ah, it’s like…” Ryuji slumped over the table with a sigh. “I left my car at the airport a week or two ago, and… Well, I don’t have the money to pay the parking fees.”

Futaba chuckled. “And I thought Inari had money troubles.”

Yusuke frowned. “Let’s not pretend like you don’t have a working guardian that provides everything for you.”

Ryuji continued, “I spent all my money flyin’ me and this guy to France, so I’m kinda screwed.”

Haru kept smiling. “I’d be happy to help you, Ryuji-kun. Actually, why don’t I call one of my drivers, and we can go together.”

“For real?” Ryuji exclaimed, “Ah, thanks, Haru. You’re a lifesaver.”

Haru snickered. “You’re welcome, of course. Um, why don’t we go ahead and get ready. It shouldn’t take long for my driver to arrive.”

Ryuji nearly jumped out of his seat. “Alright! I’ll meet you outside.” Then he bolted off toward the dorms.

Haru laughed gleefully as she also rose. “Have a good day, everyone. I’ll see you all soon.” She
waved at our table before leaving. The remaining members of the team were slightly dumbfounded by the new vacuum in our ranks. Luckily, I had my curry as a persistent and necessary distraction, but the others were more susceptible to the growing discomfort.

Futaba threw up her arms abruptly, releasing a noisy yawn. She squinted but looked at me with one eye. “Yo, I think I’m gonna go take a nap. I stayed up way too late researching last night.”

I nodded at her, chewing through yet another bite. Mona also approved. “You should do that,” he said, “We need to be well rested for our mission.”

“Okay, kitty…” Futaba patted Mona’s head forcefully. “Don’t get too excited just because I’m going to sleep.”

Mona frowned, glancing from her to me. “What is that even supposed to mean? I’m only thinking of your health.”

Futaba folded her laptop. “Yeah, whatever you say.”

I placed a comforting hand on Mona’s back. “To be fair,” I added, “He interrupts my sleep as often as he sends me to bed.”

Futaba shook her head while snarking. “Somehow, I think I got the better half of the deal keeping Sojiro.”

Morgana pounced onto all-fours. “Jeez! It’s not a competition!”

Standing and grabbing her laptop, Futaba gave a coy laugh. “I’m pausing our game for now, but I’ll be sure to pick up where we left off after my nap.”

I shook my head at the foolhardy girl. “Our powers will have doubled by the next time we meet.”

Futaba slowly pressed her glasses into her face. “Good. Twice the pride, double the fall.” A self-satisfied grin appeared on her face as she departed.

An amused chuckle escaped my lips while I watched Futaba leave. I glanced down at my plate and noted the dwindling nourishment, but I still had a few more spoonfuls. Given the table’s deathly quiet atmosphere, I resolved to savor every remaining bite. Chunks of meat marinated in gravy coated my palette while I surveyed the present team members. Yusuke endeavored with his sketching, but I couldn’t tell if he was making precise adjustments or simply stalling for time. Ann also appeared uncharacteristically disengaged. The pervasive emotions stemming from recent events certainly brought discomfort; however, I wasn’t expecting such undue tension. Regardless, gazing at Makoto’s sobering face caused me to retreat into my shell of silence. There was nothing I could do to abruptly lift her broken spirits.

Apparently, today was an extremely busy day in the canteen because Samuel walked into the room right then. Despite a grim look on his face, he managed to carry himself with his typical, high dignity. He spotted our diminishing group promptly as he adjusted his suit jacket and approached us quickly.

He came behind Makoto and formally addressed us. “Greetings team,” he said, “Have we seen the others today?”

Seeing as no one else volunteered, Mona spoke up. “Haru and Ryuji are out for the day, and Futaba just decided to take a nap. Oh, and Sojiro is out smoking.”
Sam nodded. “I see. Well then, I’ll have to offer my extensive apologies for yesterday. Had I known something like this would happen, I would have taken greater precautions.”

Makoto closed her eyes as her face turned a sickly pale color. She frowned bitterly, her head shaking. “Sae…” Makoto whispered. She swiftly drove her face into her hands, and her breathing became ragged.

Witnessing her friend’s grief, heavy tears formed at the corners of Ann’s eyes. She scooted toward Makoto and set an arm around her. “It’s gonna be okay,” Ann quietly whimpered, setting her head against Makoto.

Morgana shot Samuel a disapproving stare. “Ugh, nice going.” Sam was quiet, but he returned the biting glare.

My chewing came to a halt as I was subjugated to Makoto’s sobs. Ice and inferno collided in my veins. All I could do was contain the simultaneous anguish and rage that threatened to rupture my heart. I needed to put this pain to use before I imploded.

I don’t believe Makoto had the energy to cry much more because her involuntary shudders were shortly replaced by miserable sniffling. Yusuke somehow maintained his composure through all of this, but given his proven unpredictability, this did not surprise me. He looked up from his work, glancing at Samuel. “Have you made any discoveries on the device we brought to you?”

Sam sighed and closed his eyes. “Analysis hasn’t gotten back to me,” he said, “But it’s probably as you thought: just a tool for transporting vehicles through the Metaverse.”

“So?” Mona interjected, “Can’t you reverse engineer that tech and put it to use?”

Sam returned his gaze to the cat, crossing his arms. “Look, I know what you want me to say. ‘Oh, whoops, looks like I gave you our rubbish transference devices. This all could’ve been avoided with one simple fix!’ Unfortunately, no such luck. Transference devices require an emergency ejection feature. Without that, you could easily be stranded in the Metaverse, and you don’t want to know what happens to people who get lost in the Metaverse.”

Morgana scoffed. “Pfft, I’ve spent plenty of time in the Metaverse and it’s never affected me.”

“Of course,” Sam said, rolling his eyes, “And might I remind you that you are a four-legged, talking creature who appears in the form of a conventional house pet.”

“That’s right,” Mona huffed, “Do you have a problem with that?”

Yusuke broke from his art to momentarily intervene. “Let’s not dwell on the past. What’s done is done, and clearly, no one desired this outcome.”

Sam grunted at Morgana’s derision but quickly turned to Yusuke with a better temperament. “I’m glad someone around here has enough clarity to stay focused.”

“That’s funny,” Yusuke remarked as he resumed sketching, “I would not describe anything about my current mindset as clear.”

Jarred by the young man’s words, Sam stiffly tucked his hands into his coat. “Uh, what are you drawing anyways?”

Yusuke set down his pencil and slowly turned his picture around for the others to see. I noticed an uncomfortable grimace appear on Samuel’s face as his eyebrows became crooked, and having
relaxed her breathing, Makoto lifted her darkened eyes to glance at the drawing. A shallow smile surfaced on her colored face, and I heard a short yet humorous breath escape her lips. Ann also smiled, witnessing Makoto break through the prison of her heart.

“Is that supposed to be me?” Samuel gawked.

Yusuke gave a slight nod. “Well, if you can recognize it as such, then there must be some accuracy to it.”

Sam’s shoulders slumped, a great sigh echoing around the room. “Why does it feel like I have a personal entourage just for mocking me?”

With the amusement gradually propagating across everyone’s faces, Makoto permitted a stifled snicker, and I chuckled myself. Mona laughed too before offering a suggestion to Yusuke. “All he’s missing is a nice, curly moustache.”

Sam winced in his current torment. “Hey now…”

Yusuke glanced curiously at the cat and then to his drawing. “Hmm, you may be right actually.” He flipped down his notebook and set to work.

Sam shook his head. “You know,” he continued, “I don’t appreciate being made fun of like this.”

“Oh, Sam,” Makoto softly replied, “Lighten up a little.”

Sam frowned strangely. “Ahem, excuse me!? Weren’t you j-…!?" He stopped. “Ugh, nevermind.”

“There.” Yusuke laid his pencil aside. He tilted the notebook toward himself and examined his work. “What do you all think?” He flipped the pad around and held it out for everyone to see the glorious image. A dark outline protruded from underneath the gunslinger’s nose and curled like a furry caterpillar toward his ears.

Only just glancing at the image, Ann’s voice cracked, and she immediately clasped a hand over her hysterical face. Makoto’s subtle laughs also joined in the whimsy as I cracked a loose grin. Sam merely shook his head. “This abuse of my image isn’t getting you any favors.”

Yusuke smiled. “Ah, so you’re admitting that this is what you normally look like.” Ann nearly toppled herself with a fit of laughter as tears leaked from her eyes. Makoto tried to steady her friend, but her own laughter rendered her instable.

An irked Sam turned aside. “Smartass.”

“You should be grateful,” Mona proudly stated, “It’s not often that Yusuke depicts someone so vividly in his art!”

Sam ground his teeth to the sound of fading laughs. “Enough of this frivolity!” he said, stamping his foot on the floor, “I don’t need a psychiatric evaluation!”

I swayed my head, saying, “Jury’s still out.”

“Oh, ha-ha,” Sam dryly responded, “We have actual business to discuss. Specifically, we’ll be leaving early tomorrow should there be no more delays.”

“Well, it’s about time,” Mona swiftly replied.

Hearing the news, Yusuke glanced up. “Where are you taking us anyway?”
Sam crossed his arms. “Moscow. And we leave tomorrow, so you’d best be prepared.”

“Moscow?” Yusuke repeated, “You’re taking us to Russia?”

Sam pulled a lollipop from his pocket and rolled it between his fingers. “Were you expecting a tropical resort?” He ripped the wrapper from the candy sucker and popped it into his mouth.

Yusuke’s face slumped. “Well… no. But this is rather sudden.”

Makoto twisted her head around. She mustered a calm voice. “Sam, shouldn’t you be informing everyone of the details?”

Sam toyed with the sucker in his mouth before responding. “I would like to, but all these abductions have forced me to accelerate plans. Details will have to wait until we’re enroute.”

Glancing back, Ann craned her neck. “Why’s it always waiting with you? First the mission, now the details… Like, we don’t even know anything that’s happening. It kinda feels like you’re just stringing us along.”

Sam smiled, hanging his head a little. “Now why does that sound like a compliment coming from the girl with the whip?”

Mona shifted his paws in agitation. “Can’t you at least tell us more about why we’re doing this?”

Sam was quiet for a moment. He looked up at us and shifted his lollipop to the other cheek. “Look, you already know we’re after Nikolai. You already know he’s a war criminal. If you need some grander justification for this covert espionage mission, I can’t provide that until we infiltrate his Palace.” He dismissively waved his hand. “Regardless, Nikolai’s cognition is the only link we have to the victims. We must infiltrate, and you are the only ones who can do it.”

“You’re hinging a lot on our dedication to your cause,” Yusuke calmly added, “If we find no signs of the missing persons then all of this will be for naught.”

“And that’s why this is so urgent,” Sam said, exhausted by the brief discussion. “Now, you.” He pointed at me. “Yes, you. Come over here a minute.” Startled, I glanced hurriedly at Samuel as he beckoned me. “I need to talk to you.”

Sam stepped away from the table, expecting me to follow. I set my utensil on my now empty plate and gave a parting glance to my friends. Ann shrugged derisively, but Morgana held his suspicious temperament. The others didn’t pay much mind; however, I still felt apprehension before any interaction with Samuel. I strolled cautiously around the table and walked the short distance to the edge of the room where Samuel waited.

Sam pursed his lips around his candy while maintaining a grave expression. His dark eyes fixated on a distant point like he was completely unconcerned by my presence. Despite this meeting being of his own making, Samuel somehow appeared inconvenienced. The pretentiousness of his general mannerisms was beginning to wear on me.

After a moment, Sam relaxed his face. He looked down at me and allowed a timid smile to break his façade. “I need your help with something,” he began. My typically blank expression skewed slightly. “I want you to meet me at Shibuya station in an hour. We can talk more when we’re there.”

A sideways frown crept over my face as I crossed my arms. “You want me to go alone?”

Sam leaned to the side and glanced past me. “I’ll tolerate the cat’s presence if that’s what you’re
I shook my head. “What is this about?”

Sam sighed heavily. “Just… humor me. This is important.”

Slowly exhaling, I glanced down in contemplation. I unfortunately didn’t have a reason to deny Samuel, and a mote of curiosity did linger within me. Finally, I nodded.

Sam nodded in peaceful affirmation. “Thank you,” he stated. A lonely frown overcame him as he looked back toward my friends. “I don’t think I’m fitting in very well.” He returned his eyes to me following a moment of rumination. “I’ll leave it to you,” he said, sighing, “We’ll see each other later.”

I watched as Samuel turned on his heel and strolled to the doors. I was only slightly less confused, but our discussion was over, so I returned to the table. Surprisingly, the others did not ask me any questions. The stress and fatigue of recent days suppressed everyone’s energy, but I could not afford to become sluggish. I noted the empty plate at my seat and quickly took up my dishware to return it to the kitchen.

As I entered the cooking room, I glimpsed Morgana trailing faithfully behind me. Confident that he would soon bombard me with questions, I calmly delivered my plate to the sink. I opened the hot water while Mona leapt to the counter beside me.

“So, we’re meeting Sam at Shibuya station?” The cat gazed seriously at me while I reached for a sponge.

“Seems so,” I stated.

“I wonder what he wants,” Mona continued, “It’s frustrating that he doesn’t tell us anything.”

I smiled as I squeezed a dab of soap between my fingers. “Maybe if you pester him enough, he’ll start talking.”

Mona’s eyes widened. “You’ve seen how he threatens to take away my food! I can’t do that.”

“Never stopped you from pestering me.” I began scrubbing my plate as suds bubbled around my wrists.

“H-hey!” Mona wailed. I quietly chuckled at his expense.

As he glared contemptuously at me, Mona’s ears twitched curiously. He glanced back to the kitchen door, hearing another noise, and I followed his gaze. Makoto had entered the kitchen and stood motionlessly with a reluctant look on her face, so I kept my hands inside the sink and avoided flusterling her with unnecessary attention. I continued my scrubbing while Mona used his natural unobtrusiveness to watch Makoto carefully. She stepped forward with conscious poise despite her somber appearance and began to play with the overhanging cabinets. Briefly, Makoto stared up into the dull interiors of the cupboards, but she didn’t seem to be searching for anything.

Eventually, I heard a quiet sigh from her. “I hope Samuel isn’t taking advantage of you.”

I didn’t look away from the sink as I flipped my plate over to check for any leftover stains. “You’d know better than I do,” I responded.

Makoto closed the cabinets and allowed her hands to rest on the counter. “I don’t know anymore,”
she slowly said, “I thought I did, but… everything’s changed since the abductions began.”

With my plate satisfactorily clean, I shut off the water and set the plate onto the drying rack. Then I heard Makoto inhale deeply, and when I turned to her, she was smothering half her face into one hand. I patiently plucked a hand towel hanging adjacent to the sink and began drying my hands. Mona and I kept silent as Makoto’s expression turned to one of misery.

Makoto’s lips coiled in a pained wince. Her trembling voice was barely audible through the weepy congestion. “I don’t know what I’m doing anymore.”

Right then, anyone would have burdened themselves with a fraction of Makoto’s sorrow to ease her suffering. As her close companion, to see my normally stoic and rational friend so wholly broken brought me to the precipice of my own sanity. I set the towel onto the kitchen counter and stepped toward Makoto. She turned her face toward me as I approached.

I paused momentarily. The distance between us was short, and my time to convey the vital sentiments was shorter. Though I could feel my heartbeat rising, I put all my effort into the stability of my words. “We have to do everything we can until we get her back.”

Makoto clenched a fist tightly in front of her breast, and her upturned eyes glistened with desperate tears. With a quivering breath, she responded simply, “Okay.” Makoto blinked, rolling a tear down her pale cheek. A sudden flash of resolve lessened her bitter frown, and I summoned a reassuring smile. Makoto shifted a bit closer to me as she released a tense breath. She stared firmly at me with a renewed flicker of hope behind those weary, crimson eyes. “Okay,” she said.

With less than an arms length between us, I found myself fixating on Makoto’s stirring gaze. Abruptly, Morgana interrupted our thoughts. “You have to try to stay motivated!” exclaimed the cat, “But if you’re feeling down, we’re all here for you.”

Makoto cast Mona a startled glance before brightening her face. She forced a polite laugh, replying, “Of course.” Then Makoto took her nearer hand and gently rubbed Mona’s fluffy, left ear to which he immediately released a resounding purr.

I stepped back and returned the hand towel to its proper hanging position. As I spun back around, I noticed Ann’s bouncy, silken hair through the elevated kitchen window. She peered into the room and tucked her chin on the window sill, displaying a cheery smile.

“Hey!” she began, “Phillip just texted me, and we’re gonna hang out this afternoon. You guys wanna come along? Yusuke said he’s coming.”

Makoto swiveled her head around, surprised by another interruption. “Oh, u-uh-uh…”

“Actually,” I responded, “I’m hanging out with Sam.”

Ann’s brows rose, but she kept smiling. “Oh! Good luck with that.”

Makoto turned her gaze to me. “Wait. Is that what he was talking to you about?”

“Yup,” Mona replied in my stead, “and I’m accompanying him, so I’m sorry, but we won’t be able to go with you Lady Ann.”

Ann leaned her head on the window sill. “Mmm, that’s okay. Sucks to be you. But what about you, Makoto?” She glanced at Makoto, giggling. “I can’t leave you here all alone.”

Makoto ran a single finger over her lips. “Well, I suppose I should try to get outside a little.” She
glanced at me, and I nodded. “Ah, as long as it’s okay with you.”

Ann laughed. “Of course it’s okay with me! We’re gonna have some fun!” Ann’s overbearing joy incited a timid smile from Makoto.

Mona frowned and shook his head. “Why does it suddenly feel like I’m missing out on so much stuff today?”

I faced him and replied, “At least you don’t have to put up with Phil.”

Glancing at the two smiling ladies, Mona sighed. “You know, absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

“Is that so?” I asked, smirking at him. “Maybe I should have you shipped off for a while then.”

Mona sighed in defeat. “Let’s just go already.”

Wind ripped through my hair as I watched another train slide into the station. Even as the crowds abated, the Shibuya train network presented a rhythmic pattern of activity to keep me distracted. The clattering tempo of hard-soled shoes followed the melody of humming signals and singsong callouts. A new train would arrive at regular intervals and overwhelm the dense tunnels with an emphatic whistle, and then the clamorous noises of speeding commuters would swiftly crescendo.

Morgana waited patiently in my hanging bag as the lines of passengers dwindled. I glanced at the dust speckled ceiling in my boredom and considered my current circumstances. My friends were moderately coping with the tension of our mission, but relations remained cold with our necessary leader, Samuel. Furthermore, the abduction of Sae Niijima had shaken us all. If Makoto had any less familiarity with Sam’s methods, I believe she would have lost her mind. The others were gracefully enduring these struggles, but I was yet again doubting my alliance with Sam. Only the progression of our mission come tomorrow would prove otherwise.

An abrupt tap on my shoulder freed me from my thoughts, and a brisk voice swiftly greeted me.

“Hey.”

I flinched only slightly as I turned to see Samuel standing next to me. My bag whipped around a little faster, and Mona released a cry of shock. “Gah!” Mona wailed, “Don’t sneak up on us like that! Jeez, you’d think a wealthy businessman like yourself wouldn’t be acting like such a creep.”

Sam frowned at my bag. “You know I can understand you, cat.”

Morgana grinned. “I was hoping so!”

Sam groaned in disgust. “You know,” he said to me, “of all the extradimensional beings I’ve conversed with, none of them were as disrespectful as this domestic cat.”

“You must not have talked to very many then,” Mona chided.

I dismissed the goading banter. “What are we doing here?”

“Well, I need your help obviously,” Sam answered, “But let’s go somewhere private to discuss this.” Samuel passed me and began walking down the length of the tunnel. “Come. I’ve set up a research laboratory in this station.”
“A laboratory?” Mona inquired, “Hey, be careful. Remember what happened last time we followed Sam down some creepy, train tunnels?”

I began following Samuel a few paces behind while responding, “I do, and I bet Sam remembers too.”

“Come on!” Sam called out to us again, waving. I jogged behind the suited man as he directed us into a nook at the end of the boarding area. The shadows obscured us in the small enclave, and Sam took hold of a steel door nestled in the darkness. Holding it open, Sam ushered me into the inconspicuous entrance.

I passed through the doorway and came to a dimly lit tunnel unfurnished and vacant. Sam closed the door behind us before continuing forward. The passage quickly intersected with a larger, ribbed tunnel with train tracks faintly illuminated in the darkness.

“Where are we?” Mona asked.

Sam glanced back and forth as he came to the intersection. “A maintenance tunnel.”

“Do trains run on these tracks?” Mona continued, “This feels kinda sketchy.”

“Eh…” Sam wobbled his head. “Just move quickly, okay?”

Morgana grumbled incomprehensibly, but I continued along with Samuel. The light of the adjacent station starkly lit one half of his face as he pressed into the rail tunnel. “Don’t worry,” he said, “It’s not much further.”

Sam and I tread lightly over the tracks, hugging the support beams girding the tunnel. An irritating sensation accompanied the floodlights on my back as we slipped between light and dark. Sam ducked into an alcove between two girders, and I promptly followed him through another hidden doorway.

Sam removed his overcoat upon entering the secluded closet. A dying, incandescent bulb lit the four cement walls with a weak, yellow hue. As the hefty door shut behind us, Sam hung his coat on a rack cramped into the corner.

“Is this your lab?” Mona questioned.

Sam shot the cat a momentary frown before shaking the feline’s derision. “No,” he responded, “Just wait.” Sam reached behind the adjacent shelving piled with mechanical trinkets and dusty oddities from the subway tunnels. I heard a sharp snap and then the far wall melted away to reveal a clean, red door. Sam turned to the door, confirming that his input had worked. “It’s a Metaverse lab for Metaverse secrets.”

“Oomf!” Mona tumbled to the floor as his bulkier form overflowed from my bag.

“Ahem, are you alright?” Sam asked.

Mona wobbled dizzily, coming to his feet. “Warn me before you do that next time.”

Sam shook his head and pressed into the red door. “Alright, through here.”

We passed through a final door and the décor of the joined chamber was surprisingly familiar. Reddened steel and brick met in the mangled architecture of a vacuous tunnel. Twisted train tracks ran haphazardly along the ground in irritating irregularity. The whole, eerie room recounted hours of
trekking through the abyss underneath Shibuya station. Mona gawked endlessly at the scene; his own connection to Mementos ran slightly deeper than my own.

“This… looks familiar,” Mona said.

Sam stepped further into the chamber, adjusting his vest and allowing his hands to settle into his pants. “Yes, Akechi mentioned as much before.”

“Ah,” Mona continued, “Of course he did.”

Sam nodded, turning to us. “It’s strange really. Despite the strong imagery, my own investigations have revealed a lack of activity in the area. The masses of people that come through here facilitated the development of a lab, but I was expecting to find some secret societal desire expressed in this bizarre cognition. Seems the warped decorations are just defunct window dressing though. I don’t suppose you have any experience with this, do you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I replied.

“Hmm, yes…” Sam said, nodding, “Of course. Now, I suppose we should discuss why I brought you here.” Sam methodically drew a small, ornate dagger from his pocket and fondled the inert Persona between his fingers. “Sometime tomorrow, we’ll begin our mission to solve this Metaverse crisis, but we’re not ready. Your team isn’t.” He waved at me. “I’m not. None of us are prepared. I wouldn’t be taking this risk if I had another choice, but again, the Thieves are the only capable Metaverse users I’m aware of. Even my own skills are meager in comparison to your Persona-less allies. I’ve trained, experimented on myself, but I can barely control Excalibur.” He balanced the miniature sword on his fingertips. “When we fought before, I intended to lose. That said, Excalibur and I don’t have the sync to do much in a fight. As the leader of the Thieves, I want you to train me, so we won’t have to struggle through our mission.”

I wobbled my head in bewilderment. “You want me to train you?”

Sam glanced downward as he tapped his shoe on the hard flooring. “Is that… uncustomary for you?”

“That’s not the point!” Mona wailed, “Aren’t you supposed to be highly trained or something!?”

Sam frowned at the cat and blinked in puzzlement. “I’m sorry. Metaverse combat isn’t exactly a well-studied field you know.”

“Why not ask Makoto to help?” I asked.

“Oh, don’t take me for a fool,” Sam chided, “I’ve learned what I can from her and Akechi, but Nijjima has only just reawakened to her Persona. Plus, she’s not exactly in a reliable state to assist me.”

As Sam stared at me, I shuffled my feet timidly. I was not mentally prepared at present to nurture another teammate, and Sam’s standoffish attitude still irked me. However, Sam anticipated this situation.

“So, you still don’t trust me?” Sam started with a weak chuckle, “Well, maybe if I offer something in return you’ll reconsider. Train me, beat me in combat, and I’ll tell you everything you want to know about Nikolai and the mission.” I sent a testing glance at Samuel. “Trust goes both ways. Do this, and I’ll put some in you.” Morgana and I shared an inquisitive look. “I’ve been holding a lot of information from you,” Sam continued, “Surely you’re a bit curious about what secrets I’ve been hiding. Don’t the guarded contents of my heart send a tingling thrill down your spine?”
I scowled at Sam’s half-mocking remark. “Do you even understand what you’re asking for?”

“Probably not,” Sam smirked. “But I can’t stop now.” Sam lowered his hand and allowed Excalibur to slide off his palm. A surge of black fire enveloped Samuel for an instant like a flashy magician’s trick. When the distortion cleared, Sam had donned his peculiar knight’s mask, and Excalibur had enlarged in his grip. I watched motionlessly as Sam lifted the sword and pointed it at me. “Come,” Sam beckoned, “Test me.”

I gradually stroked my chin with a mildly amused smile on my face, but before I could speak, Morgana leapt between the two of us. “Woah, woah!” he cried, thrusting out his paws, “Let’s not do this. There are much safer ways of training than fighting each other.”

Breaking his stance, Sam scoffed. “Oh, calm down, cat.” Sam shooed the feline aside with his blade. “I’m not asking some unarmed, unlearned novice to fight me. If I was asking you, it’d be a different story.”

Mona glared at Sam, felling a slight on his pride. “H-hey!”

“What?” Sam continued, “Do you feel vulnerable without your Persona?” He crouched down to Morgana’s level. “I’m curious how a blob of Metaverse energy like yourself even got a Persona.” Sam lodged Excalibur into the ground at his feet, and the blade resonated with a light, irritating hum. He glanced at the sword and smiled softly at the cat. “We’re both curious.”

Sam extended his free hand toward Mona, who instinctively recoiled. Mona’s voice faltered. “You secretly enjoy being unsettling, don’t you?”

Ignoring the bizarre shift of conversation, I addressed my friend. “Step aside, Mona.”

Morgana turned to me with an uneasy look. “What? You’re serious about this?”

I stepped forward, maintaining a composed face. “It could be fun,” I added.

Samuel stood back up and raised the sword over his head. “Finally.”

“Oh no…” Mona sighed despondently, darting away from our standoff.

Sam focused his gaze on me as he tightened his grip on Excalibur. “Now! Show me what the Phantom Thieves are truly capable of.”

[JOKER -VS- THE KNIGHT PRETENDER]

Sam’s eyes flickered in the splintered light piercing his mask as he tentatively shifted toward me. His aggressive stance struggled to contrast his conscious absurdity, but he insistently pressed forward. While I smirked in a tepid reaction, Samuel’s gaze flicked curiously from side to side.

“What are you waiting for?” he growled in a gravelly yet entirely unintimidating voice.


Sam cringed. “Would you take this seriously for a moment?”

I returned a patronizing glance. “You first,” I stated.

Samuel pursed his lips in irritation, and I saw his fingers chafe along the hilt of his blade. A swift flash of decisiveness preempted a surprisingly quick lunge from the suited man. The glinting steel of Excalibur shone brightly as it crashed into the irregular concrete floor. Sam hefted the sword from the
attacked location but was startled to find his target completely unphased.

By the time of his telegraphed strike, I had already moved outside Sam’s reach. I navigated behind him as he struggled with the bulky steel and retorted with a nimble kick to his backside. I shunted Sam aside although he quickly steadied himself and turned to face me.

I swiveled around from my acrobatic attack and slapped the hem of my overcoat as it manifest from my consciousness. I clenched my red gloved fist before my face and beckoned my novice partner to strike again.

Samuel stood tall, steadying his Persona. “You’re faster than you look.”

“C’mon,” I continued, “Surprise me.”

Sam reluctantly loosened his hold on his living blade. The heavy steel rose of its own accord, appearing weightless as it floated from Sam’s hand. Sam watched his Persona with exertion and doubt, yet the sword moved gracefully through the air. A faint buzz resonated throughout the chamber while the blade rotated mesmerizingly. The light twinkled along Excalibur’s razor edge, flashing at me like a winking eye. Something inside my head flinched at the abrupt interaction, and I could sense a deeper connection yet to be unveiled.

Sam extended a hand, shouting, “Excalibur! Now!”

A shrieking whistle followed the blade as it tore through the space between us. Though I could see Samuel’s careful focus, the assaulting Persona emanated a foul purpose, but I naturally reacted with humble amusement. I leaned away from the sword, allowing it to easily slide overhead. As the blade passed by me, Sam refocused, and the sword spun and banked behind me. With Excalibur now at my back, I needed to consciously track its motions. The flying weapon swung low to strike at my legs, but a quick jump elevated my body beyond the blade’s reach.

The steel Persona vibrated in contempt as it narrowly missed me a second time. The point of the sword swiveled around recklessly without significant prompting from its master; however, Samuel remained concentrated on our duel. I tightened my stance once my feet hit the ground and readied for another attack.

Sam lowered his hand and slowly exhaled while his Persona hummed loudly. My adversary relaxed his shoulders, but I soon felt a jolt of energy contrary to Sam’s ease. Excalibur emitted a piercing wail as it flew toward me with a sudden burst of speed. The steel announced its deadly intent with its signature howl, and a defiant spark of anger rose within me in reply.

Cutting edge collided with cutting edge when Excalibur finally reached me. The heel of Arsene’s hardened boot caught along Excalibur’s edge and sent the sword tumbling backward through the air. The steel blade flipped head over heels until its point lodged into the ground at Samuel’s feet. Dumbfounded, Sam gazed in startled apprehension at his disgraced Metaverse tool while Arsene and I held firm.

Gazing at the artificial entity, my Persona’s visage burnt with a constant yet spiteful hellfire. “NO HUMAN HANDS COULD CRAFT THIS VILE WEAPON,” I heard Arsene speak, “ITS SINISTER WILL HAS YET TO BE REVEALED.”

With Arsene hovering at my side, I returned my attention to Samuel and his blade. Sam cautiously reached for his sword with a look of bewildered confusion. “I don’t think you can control that thing,” I huffed.
My brisk comment only served to infuriate the man. “Of course I can,” Sam quickly insisted, “That’s why I’m here: to learn.”

Mona, who had kept quiet to this point, couldn’t keep from interjecting. “That thing seems to have a will of its own.” He glanced from the blade to the man. “Are you sure this is safe? You did mention having trouble controlling yourself before.”

Sam frowned, plucking the sword from the ground and thrusting it at Morgana. “Quiet, cat!” he hissed.

“Hey!” I said, attempting to redirect Sam’s attention, “Stay focused.”

Sam glanced at his Persona vibrating melodically in his hand. “Yes, there’s still much to test.” Sam mumbled words over his blade as he pointed it toward me.

Suddenly, Excalibur began to emit a bright glow. A shining, white light expanded from within the sword and swelled to quickly envelop the room. Blinded by the singeing light, I recoiled, and my connection with Arsene wavered. The all-consuming aura inhibited my abilities; however, a faint pulse of dread pierced the veil, warning me of an impending attack. I swiftly raised a hand and summoned my dagger into my grip. A steel clang resounded as the bright haze cleared, and Samuel stood bearing down on me.

Witnessing our entangled blades, Morgana gawked at the frightful struggle. “H-hey!” he said, an uncertain quiver in his voice, “Careful! Don’t hurt him!” Mona glanced around nervously as we grinded our blades against one another.

With my dagger caught on Excalibur’s crossguard, I held Samuel at bay while he forced his sword toward me. I saw his emblazoned yellow eyes burning through his shadowy mask completing his ravenous face. Then, in an unsettling show of force, Sam moved one hand onto the edge of his blade and pressed downward. He gave a pained thrust with the perpendicular sword and shunted us apart, leaving a bloody spat on Excalibur’s edge.

Sam grimaced intensely while I put some distance between us. Those yellowed eyes had quickly lost all sense of humanity and now gazed at me with an unfounded hatred I had scarcely seen before. Sam swung Excalibur once to dispose of the excess droplets of blood and then took the sword in both hands to assume a rigid forward stance. He angled the sword out toward me, and it emanated with its familiar energy. A biting noise accompanied a softer yet still irritating glow within the blade, and I felt sweat forming on my exposed skin like I had drawn too close to a bonfire.

“Come on…” Sam goaded, “Attack me.”

Despite my lacking familiarity with Samuel, I could clearly detect the growing madness within the man. Nevertheless, continuing our fight might have been the only way to free him outside of a swift departure from the Metaverse. I steeled my resolve and drew on the power of my mask.

Arsene rippled forth with a shockwave as I pulled my mask aside. I thrust out my hand and commanded my Persona to unleash upon our foe. Emitting a nightmarish cry, Arsene shot writhing tendrils of screeching, demonic energy hurtling toward the enemy. I let loose the strength of our will, and darkness choked the light from the chamber as the onslaught encroached around Samuel.

Still, Excalibur grew ever brighter amid the vile shadowy forms. The blackened beams of energy seemed to contort around the sword as they bombarded Samuel, yet my opponent appeared unharmed. The quick flash of a grin through the dwindling darkness gave me pause while I watched Sam withstand the entirety of the attack.
With the shadows expunged, Sam drew his sword back, and Excalibur surged with light. My expression loosened as I anticipated a retaliatory strike. Sam thrust forward, and I dove backwards, narrowly dodging a lance of pure light shooting underneath me. As I flipped over and landed, the bright energy of the lance flickered around me, but I immediately noted Samuel readying another attack. This time I leapt up and propped myself on the wall behind me while another beam struck between my legs. I spun into a roll as I rebounded from the wall, and Sam continued to shoot at me. One beam ignited over my head, and then another passed in front of my twisting body. The laser-like shots came in rapid succession, so I could barely hold still, yet Sam remained focused. Watching my swift footwork, he cunningly delayed one of his shots, flicking to where I had been rather than where I was. The bright lance rocketed out of Excalibur and struck my body at center mass, injuring me and confining my body to the ground.

I collapsed against the wall and sputtered as my breath vaporized in my lungs. I strained to raise myself, but I could not; my strength failed me. Tiny feet pattered swiftly to my frail body while I struggled to keep my eyes open.

“Hey… Hey!” I heard Mona shout. I felt his little paws grip the fringes of my collar and rattle me against the wall. “Now’s not the time for a nap!”

An aching pain wafted through my frame as Mona shook me. “Ah!” I groaned, “It’s nothing…” I mustered a firm look for Morgana, but in my suffering I could only wince disconcertingly.

“N-nothing!?” Mona wailed.

Heavy footsteps echoed through the vestigial Mementos chamber as Samuel’s darkened visage approached us. The detached indifference covering his face reminded me of a hunting beast unimpressed by easy prey. He lifted his sword from his side, stepping behind the cat.

Mona turned slowly, his face turning from panic to pleading desperation. “That’s enough, okay?” he said, putting up his paws, “You hit him pretty hard. Let’s say you won this fight.”

Sam gently set the tip of Excalibur under Mona’s chin, his gaze unwavering. “Step aside, cat. I’m just getting started.”

Mona looked at the blade pressed into his fur, its sharp end digging into his skin. Finding some offense on his pride, Morgana returned Samuel’s steely glare before swatting the sword aside with an open paw. “I said that’s enough!” He clenched his paws and took a deft stance.

Sam chuckled softly. “You’ll need better swordsmanship than that dull wit to stop me.”

Mona gave a slight shake of his head. “Never underestimate a master thief.”


Morgana turned away, smirking. “You’re not the only one the Phantom Thieves are counting on.”

Sam snorted. “So, now the attendant… Very well, I shall destroy you both.” He took a step back and raised his blade.

“Hmph,” Morgana solemnly bowed his head, “I don’t know what that abominable sword has done to you… but if there’s one thing I do know, it’s that arrogant bastards like you need to be taught some humility!”

In a flash of rage, Sam drove his sword downward, striking at the small cat. Excalibur gleamed with
energy as it powerfully cut through the space. The shimmer on the blade’s surface surged into my eyes and exploded violently about the room. When the sword came down, it was met with flame and force. Excalibur’s own light was enraptured by another, brighter flash, and Sam’s attack halted as blade collided with blade.

A razor-thin, pinprick of a sword nimbly shunted Excalibur away from Morgana’s tiny body. Appearing aside the cat, a pitch-black and enormous demon rose from the bluish fires about Mona, guiding a paper-width rapier against Samuel’s broadsword. The Persona’s imposing figure towered over Samuel while the legendary Zorro swiftly overpowered Sam’s blade. Morgana and his Persona stared intensely at their foe, and their eyes shone with reflections of fire and holy light.

[MONA -VS- THE KNIGHT PRETENDER]

Sam stepped backward as he unhooked his blade from Zorro’s and grimaced fiercely. “Such defiance…” The madman cracked a smile. “Good, I will enjoy thoroughly crushing you.” Sam tightened his grip on Excalibur and the sword lit with white light.

Seizing full control of his Metaverse capabilities, Mona leapt forward with a furious cry. “Yah!” He hefted a curved sword in his paws and arced through the air with a similar bend. The two adversaries thrust their blades at one another, and steel struck steel in a glittering eruption.

Heated sparks lit the ground as Mona flipped over Sam’s head. Mona drew back, but Sam continued his relentless aggression, defensively swiping his blade around himself. Although Sam was quick, Mona was far more agile, so he evaded each swipe and summoned up his Persona. Now Samuel had a nimble feline striking from one side and a mighty Persona advancing on the other.

Samuel spun Excalibur around as Zorro thrust toward him with a guttural warcry. Though Zorro’s rapier was capable of deadly piercing strikes, Excalibur’s weight could easily deflect each attack from the slimmer blade. Still, Sam maintained a flurry of action as he was battered by Morgana and his Persona simultaneously. Powerful, steel collisions sent shrieking metallic cries ripping through the room. The rapid assault on Sam was pushing him to his limit, and he growled primitively while throwing his heavy sword around his body. Watching from my resting position, I was surprised by Sam’s abrupt surge of strength. He had not shown to be this capable before losing all his sanity.

Nevertheless, Mona kept excellent pace with Samuel’s wild swings, likely due to his own animalistic prowess. Possessed by relentless fury, Morgana showed no sign of slowing. His eyes shone brightly in the dark, and his silvery blade gleamed with every thrust.

In a perilous attack, Sam thrust his sword at Mona, forcing a retaliation, yet Mona quickly responded. The cat unleashed a whirlwind of blows, balancing on one foot and striking thrice at Excalibur. Sam braced fatefuly as his blade reeled from each strike, and Mona pressed his advantage. Zorro’s rapier swatted Excalibur down, firmly holding it against the cracked ground. Sam turned to face his other adversary, but his sword would not follow despite his violent yanking. Mona clutched his blade tightly and struck while his opponent’s eyes were distracted. He lodged his curved sword under Samuel’s and hefted it upward, freeing it from the ground and Samuel’s hand all at once.

Sam released a quick cry of shock as he watched Excalibur tumble across the room, yet his breath was shortly taken from him. The large fist of Zorro displaced the man entirely. Sam skidded along the hard concrete before deflating limply.

As I observed Sam being incapacitated, the waning stress in my mind soon failed to cover the burning pain in my chest. Ragged breathing restricted a relived sigh, and Mona promptly turned his attention to me. His Persona dissipating, the cat darted to my side with a somber look. I returned a brief glance and let out a short laugh because I could not bear the genuine concern on his face. I
stifled the issue by placing my palm in the center of his head, patting gently.

“Nice work,” I said although my voice was heavily encumbered.

Morgana softly prodded my hand away with his paws. He sighed, asking, “Can you stand?”

I glanced side to side as I asked my body the question. Preliminary exertion revealed some residual tightness, but my muscles could still move. I pressed against the wall at my back and strenuously began lifting myself up. “Ye… yeah,” I answered. I tenderly clutched my side where I had been hit. While my body remained intact, my strength had been sapped by Excalibur’s magic.

Rightfully concerned, Mona kept his eyes on me for a moment before surveying the small, Mementos battle area. Sam laid motionless in the lifeless dust, and his sword rested inert a few paces from him. Mona crossed his arms, saying, “It’s hard to imagine that this guy had you on the ropes a few moments ago.”

I winced as I felt a wave of heated pain resonate through my side. “I don’t think a demon like Arsene mixes well with holy light.” I glanced down at Morgana, hoping my simple response had somehow assuaged his fears.

The cat glanced sideways at me before continuing, “I’m more concerned about where that power came from.” He stepped toward Sam’s incapacitated body, and I sluggishly followed. “Sam didn’t show this potential before the fight.”

Looking at the man’s limp form, I considered our odd battle. Though we had tangled briefly, Sam had quickly lost his mind. He had mentioned similar concerns regarding Excalibur’s instability before; however, this change had been more than increased aggression. Sam had fought with deadly intent and unprecedented power. Had Mona not surprised Samuel, I might have been destroyed. I glanced to the adjacent Excalibur and bent over it. The uncannily clean steel glimmered even in the dim light. “Maybe this technology is more dangerous than we thought.”

“Or he’s hiding something from us,” Mona replied, focusing on Samuel.

Suddenly, a groggy moan echoed through the room as Sam flopped a hand onto his face. “Oh!” Mona exclaimed, “He’s waking up!” I glanced at Sam as Mona cast me a worried expression. “What should we do?”

I looked hurriedly around the room while Sam continued groaning incoherently. I spied the red door that had been our entrance and swiftly concocted an emergency solution. “Flip the switch,” I said, turning to Mona, “Turn off the machine that’s keeping us in the Metaverse.”

“Oh, yeah!” Mona said, excitedly jumping forward, “That could work.”

The cat scurried frantically to the unopened door, yanking it open with a quick tug. I watched Morgana disappear into the entryway, but I could not exert myself to leave the room. Regardless, if my assumption was correct, we would exit the Metaverse outside this room, and I wouldn’t need to move. The correspondence of spaces between realities was making less and less sense to me although I had not considered the concept much prior to my reawakening.

Presently, the Metaverse was a bigger mystery than it had ever been, and despite all our efforts to uncover its secrets, we had only gained more questions. In our first encounter, the Metaverse had been born of a mass conspiracy far grander than anything I could have fathomed. Now however, numerous, multinational entities were entering the Metaverse by catalogued, artificial means, and the intangible forces of this alternate reality were being harnessed for weapons like the sword before me.
I glanced cautiously at the weapon as it refracted light into my eyes. Whatever power it possessed clearly stemmed from human cognition, yet I found myself drawn to it. I was a part of the greater cognition too, yet I had certainly mastered my own power. If Sam could not control the power of this tool, then the bond between himself as the user and this Persona must be unbalanced. Perhaps I had taken my own abilities for granted, or the sword was something quiet peculiar.

I reached for the hilt in a moment of thoughtless curiosity. That gleaming radiance followed my raised hand over the blades edge as I knelt to touch it. Then I recalled my earlier debacle while using another of Samuel’s Metaverse weapons and thought better of the idea. The manipulation of these cognitively wired devices was ominous at best, and I needed to be more cautious of them in the future.

My body suddenly lurched forward as the blade in front of me vanished. I tumbled to the floor and quickly found myself within the hidden maintenance closet through which we had entered. Rising, I noticed Samuel slouched against the wall, cradling the miniature incarnation of Excalibur. Mona was there too, and he eyed Sam humorlessly.

Morgana stretched his long, feline body, expressing his satisfaction. “Well, that seemed to do the trick.”

I observed Sam coddle his Persona effigy. He contorted the toy-like blade instinctively between his fingers, hovering his downcast face over the device. His lifeless eyes and slight frown revealed little emotion, but I couldn’t speculate as to his thoughts. I turned to Mona briefly before being interrupted.

Sam suddenly chucked the sword from his hand, and it bounced off the hard wall. “Useless trash!” he exclaimed. In a violent fit, Sam lurched up from his seated position. He stood poised over the blade. “How long have I spent studying and investing to get to this point? Yet this piece of childish junk tries to solder my will to its own!” Sam stamped on Excalibur as his voice welled up with anger. “Fucking useless! There is no point to anything anymore!”

Mona shunted himself in front of Samuel once more. “N-now hold on!”

Samuel glared at the cat, his eyes touched with madness. “Don’t you see, cat? If I can’t control this simple toy, then I can’t do anything! My own mind betrays me. How can I be responsible for sending you on this mission while I remain in this state?” Mona stared agape as Samuel breathed rapidly. He seemed to choke down his emotions and then cradled his head in anxiousness. “This whole fucking endeavor was pointless. I can’t go through with this.”

Sam allowed his words to settle as he reached into his suit pocket and retrieved a small candy. He quickly lobbed the piece into his mouth when Mona spoke up. “Whoa, whoa,” he began, “You’ve been playing coy with us, delaying this mission for the past few days, and now you want to call it off?” The cat mustered a bitter frown. “You can’t do that! It’s not fair!”

Samuel returned a scornful gaze while his candy kept him muted, and my two associates locked into a standoff. I brushed past the two of them, not caring to humor this fleeting discussion. “Let’s go back,” I said. My firm voice seemed to dislodge the two from their feud, but I could sense an exhaustive discussion of our scheduled mission was inevitable. Still, we moved toward the exit reluctantly, and began our return to the Z-Tech building.

We all made a conscious effort to suppress discussion on our journey home. The rush of the bustling Shibuya streets overpowered the murmuring emotions within our heads. Mona walked beside me, and Samuel kept a fair distance behind us, content in his somber rage. As we rounded toward the
imposing corporate building, my eyes caught on an unexpected obstacle. A large black car was parked squarely in front of the building’s glass doors, and two men in dark suits flanked the vehicle.

I paused on the walkway opposite the building with Mona. “Those don’t look like Sam’s men,” Mona remarked.

I called back. “Sam?”

The American swiftly met us, brushing my shoulder. “What? What’s wrong?” he asked shortly before noticing the vehicle, “Oh no.” Sam’s face paled as he jogged recklessly across the open road, and although we were still confused, Mona and I had little choice but to follow.

Sam pushed through the glassy gateway and dragged us into the foyer. A young, lady secretary whom I recognized quickly turned to greet us with a thoroughly flustered expression. “I… I’m sorry, sir!” she stuttered, “I tried to stop her, but she…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sam cut her off, “I’ll deal with this.” He strode past the secretary into the hall.

As I walked past the bubbling water feature, I saw another lady down the hall wearing a constricting business suit. She had tied most of her dark hair into a ponytail except for two longer ribbons of hair setting in front of her ears. A quick motion from the lady’s pointed eyes denoted her impatience, but Sam approached her with reserved coolness.

“Amanda,” Sam began, tucking his hands away, “I wasn’t expecting you to…”

“You’re a difficult man to track down, brother,” the lady confidently cut through Sam’s spiel, “What with all the flying you’ve been doing, it must be difficult to concentrate on your work.”

Sam blinked hesitantly at his sister. “Ahem, yes, well, that’s been go-…”

“I didn’t come to talk about that, Sam,” Amanda said calmly. The lady hung her head for a moment before nodding solemnly to me. “What’s he doing here?”

Sam gave a halfhearted laugh though he didn’t smile. “We’re working together. I needed…”

The lady pressed her index and thumb against her forehead. Her next words held a condescending irritation. “You realize you’re breaking every protocol I can think of just by having him here?”

“Well, what was I supposed to do?” Sam snapped back, “We’re in a crisis…!”

Amanda winced. “Oh, not this again.”

“Amanda,” Samuel retorted, “You know the danger.”

The lady pursed her lips as she silenced her brother with a blistering gaze. “There is no danger,” she insisted. A quick sigh escaped her before Sam could further object. “No one is conspiring behind your back. All our allies are on the same page when it comes to the hazards of extradimensional science, and Nikki has been very cooperative with…”

“We can’t trust him!” Sam blurted out, shivering involuntarily. His sister gave him a pitying look.

Amanda reached up and placed a gentle hand on her brother’s neck. “Oh, Sam,” she murmured, “I think your project is starting to get to you.” Both were quiet for a beat. “You should take a vacation. Put the research on hold for a while. Find a nice beach and spend some time off the job site.”
“Y-yeah…” Sam replied quietly.

His sister smiled, giving him two short pats before releasing him. “Good. I’ll be in touch.”

Amanda swiftly stepped around her brother and set a pair of designer sunglasses on her face. Her heels clacked on the tile floor as she went by, and I couldn’t help but observe her suspiciously. She returned a blank stare, masked by her glasses, but I apparently held little interest for her. The lady refocused her attention when she passed and promptly walked out the doors.

I watched until the dark car had zoomed out of sight before turning to Sam. “What was that?” I asked.

“My sister,” Sam said, sighing, “She doesn’t like when I do things without her permission.”

“Clearly,” Mona interjected, “What was all that about taking a vacation? Are you actually going somewhere?”

“As luck would have it,” Sam stood up straight, regaining his haughty composure, “I already have a trip planned.” He smirked. “Though… I’m not sure there are any beaches in Moscow.”
With the final preparations set, the Thieves leave to begin their mission. However, Joker continues to struggle with his purpose and identity unbeknownst to his closest allies.

“Must I explain it again?” Sam said, releasing a long sigh.

I sat in a quiet breakfast diner alongside Ann and her agent, Phillip. Yusuke, Haru, and Mona were also here although none were involved in the current conversation. Phillip was not keen on our sudden departure, having only arrived in Japan the previous day, but Samuel could not seem to rationalize the situation for him.

Phil sat back from the table with his knees crossed as he took an undisturbed sip from his cup of tea. He set the cup down and laid his hands on his propped knee before replying to Samuel’s question with a bemused stare.

“I doubt listening to you spout exposition any longer would make the situation clear,” Phil stated.

Sam wiped his irritated face as he replied in amused disbelief. “Then why continue to interrogate me?”

“I’m not interrogating you,” Phil humbly apologized, “I’m simply stating that it’s a bit weird to drag my model over to Japan only to leave for Moscow in a matter of days for some research project.”

Sam heaved a defeated sigh and sank into his seat. “Well, you have the word of your model to convince you otherwise.”

Phillip tilted his head back as he looked toward Ann. She moved to respond, but Phil cut her off before she could. “You really shouldn’t rely on Miss Takamaki to explain anything.”

Ann’s face went red as she nearly choked on her words. “H-hey! You idiot, don’t say things like that!” She moved to hit Phil but stayed her hand. Nevertheless, Phillip looked quite pleased with himself.

“The details are a bit fuzzy to me as well,” Yusuke admitted. He leaned over his clean plate as he pondered. “Still, it was important that we were all reunited for this project, so here we are.”

Phil glanced in the direction of my friend. “Ah, you starving artist types go wherever the next meal is.”

Yusuke closed his eyes and bowed his head. “I cannot deny that my need for sustenance may have had something to do with it.”

“Ah, nothing to be ashamed of,” Phil replied. He gave a light chuckle as he reached over and gave Yusuke a pat on the shoulder. “I’m somewhat familiar with that lifestyle myself.” He reached for his tea and took another long sip.

Yusuke glanced up with a look of intrigue. “Oh? Does Ann not pay you enough?”
Phil snapped his mouth shut as he haphazardly set his tea aside. Forcing the liquid down his throat, Phillip burst into a fit of coughing, and he quickly lost composure. Scoffing at the absurd inquiry, Mona made a little noise from the bag beside me. “If anything she’s probably paying him too much.”

Ann looked disapprovingly at our teammate. “Yusuke…” she chided.

Oblivious, Yusuke just returned a puzzled glance. “What? Have I said something to offend?”

I glanced over at Haru, who had been listening to the conversation in stifling bewilderment. Yusuke’s uncouth remarks shocked Haru from her ambivalent state, and she swiftly interjected into the discussion. “Ahem, you know, Mister Richter, I was wondering how you came to know Ann. It surprises me a bit that she has a personal manager like yourself.”

Ann suddenly got a cheery smile and gave a small laugh at Phil’s expense. “More accurately, I’m the one managing him most of the time.”

“Oh, excuse me?” Phillip said, shaking his head at Ann. He turned right around to give Haru a straight answer. “Honestly, I’m not sure how she survived so long without me. I mean, her schedule was in a desperate state, and she barely had a clue how to negotiate through the fashion industry gauntlet.”

Still having little tangible information, Haru slowly nodded. “Ah… I see…”

“Uh, please,” Ann vigorously continued, “You were basically groveling at my feet when you found me, desperate to get away from the pigs running the show.”

“Hmm, I’m having some difficulty imagining that,” Yusuke interjected, “It must have been quite the scene.”

Haru wrestled control of the conversation again by clearing her throat. Then she calmly asked, “Are there unsavory types operating in the fashion industry?”

His brow furrowing, Phil took another sip of tea. “You could say that.”

“I suppose it’s only natural,” Ann humorlessly added, “All people want to see these days is more skin.”

Haru’s face darkened as she responded. “It’s unfortunate that I am so familiar with bad business practices. I’m sure whatever despicable things are occurring in fashion, they couldn’t be worse than what I’ve experienced.”

Phil sighed briefly, saying, “You’d be surprised.”

An awkward silence hung in the air as everyone settled into their own thoughts. The somber look on Phil’s face suggested he had sunken himself into a depression, yet when I glanced to Ann, I caught a trace of a smile peeking through a mellow exterior. Neither Yusuke nor Haru seemed to notice the hint, however. Yusuke appeared fully absorbed in his emotionless pondering, and Haru still held some remaining confusion from the passing conversation. I looked to Mona briefly while he sat in a comfy yet attentive position, and I simply enjoyed the moment of quiet.

“God…” Sam abruptly hissed, “You people are so damn melodramatic.” He thrust out of his seat and pushed away from the table. “I’m going to walk back to the office. I’ll have the car swing around in a few minutes to pick you guys up.” Wrapping his overcoat around himself, Sam glanced to me for some acknowledgment, so I returned a solemn nod.
With the details sorted, Sam briskly left the diner and surrendered us again to our discussions. Gazing after the uptight businessman, Phil sipped absently from his tea before posing a question. “Is that guy always so anal?”

Ann turned to her agent in disgust. “Phil,” she said sharply.

“What?” Phillip retorted, “I’m not at work. But please, don’t let my heated language scold your precious ears.” His mouth coiled smugly as he taunted Ann.

The lady rolled her eyes, mustering a slight pout. “Phillip, you need to keep that attitude in check.” Despite her calm tone, I could feel a chilling seriousness emanating from her order.

Phillip shook his head and slouched into his seat. “As you wish, m’lady.”

Yusuke finally broke his silence as a curious thought occurred to him. “You know, I’ve been thinking that Samuel and Phillip share some uncanny similarities.”

Morgana also took that moment to chime in. He propped his front paws onto the table with unusual excitement. “Oh, you mean that they’re both uptight and pretentious.”

Ann swiftly turned and frowned at our feline companion. “Mona,” she hissed. The cat quickly shrunk down under the pressure of the lady’s scornful eye.

Meanwhile, Phil glanced around the table as he relinquished his tea. He cocked his eyebrow curiously, saying, “You know there’s something that keeps bugging me.”

“Is it Yusuke?” I asked. I didn’t see Yusuke himself react, but I saw Haru give a flicker of a smile.

“Uh, no,” Phil said, stumped by my abrupt interruption, “Actually, I noticed that you all turn to that cat every time it meows.” He glared at Mona and scratched his head. “Is it trained to do that at specific times or something?”


Mona sighed amidst the discussion. “Wow,” he quietly muttered, “I know what Lady Ann is saying, but… that hurt me slightly… deep down.”

Hearing Morgana’s downcast spouting, Haru moved swiftly to steady the conversation. “Oh, but Mona is very talented. Um…” She turned to Phil and gave a candid smile. “Like he’s very quick!”

“Oh, yes!” a flustered Ann said. She began nodding, and Haru shortly began nodding in unison. “And he can jump really high.”

Phil glanced at the girls and then at the table. Befuddled, he spoke while scratching his chin, “Okay, well, I don’t see what that has to do with anything…”

Seeing the conversation was heading nowhere, I offered my own tidbit. “He’s just needy,” I said, mustering a condescending smile.

Mona quickly glared at me in irritation. “Hey! Don’t tell him that!” he cried.

“Yes,” Yusuke offered his agreement, “He can’t seem to go a minute without demanding the spotlight.”

Phillip stroked his face while considering the angrily bouncing cat. “Hmm, I see.”
“Hey!” Mona continued blabbering in a bittersweet rage, “Don’t think I can’t hear those truthful undercurrents in your tone of voice!” The cat shot a piercing gaze at him although Yusuke would not give Mona the satisfaction of acknowledgment.

Averse to the rising tension of our conversation, Haru spoke up to redirect our attention. “Uhm,” she said softly, “Perhaps we should finish up. Samuel did say the car would be here momentarily.”

Ann gave a quiet sigh as if she was enjoying the banter. “I guess you’re right,” she admitted.

Yusuke also politely concurred. “I must make a trip to the restroom before we depart,” Yusuke said as he stood, “Please excuse me.” We watched him idly as he wandered off through the calm diner.

Phil turned back to the table with a look of mild disappointment. “So, you’re leaving me again, are you?”

Haru smiled sweetly, holding one hand to her breast. “I’m sorry we couldn’t make this a full introduction, but it was nice meeting you, Mister Richter.”

“Oh, no, the pleasure is all mine,” Phil replied, mirroring Haru’s posture and bowing his head slightly. “I had heard plenty about the Okumura heiress before meeting Ann, but she had never mentioned that you were so lovely in appearance.”

Haru had to blink before she could reply, but she quickly reaffirmed her smile. “Thank you. You’re very kind.”

Ann’s face had reddened considerably, and she could be heard muttering Phil’s name under her breath. Nevertheless, her agent remained bullish as usual. “If you ever get tired of all the corporate bureaucracy,” Phillip continued, “I definitely think there’s a place for you on the fashion stage.”

“It’s nice of you to say that,” Haru said, her words having a humorless tone, “But I don’t think I’m cut out for…”

“That’s just why I like you,” Phil cut in, “You’re so modest, but I sense a fiery pa-ah!” He abruptly winced and nearly collapsed onto the table.

Haru gave him a puzzled look. “Are you alright?”

Phil clenched his teeth as he growled a response. “Yeah, I just stubbed my toe.”

“Pfft, what?” Mona freely offered, “How’d he manage that under the table?”

With a genuine look of concern, Haru added, “You should be more careful.”

Phil sighed as he smiled in humiliation. “Yep, you’re very right.” As I glanced from the suffering man to his quiet model, I noted Ann’s lack of concern for her anguishing agent. Her previous bitterness also seemed to have vanished with the appearance of Phillip’s injury.

Once the final conversational topics had been closed, Haru slowly got up from her seat. “I think I’ll make a quick stop at the bathroom before we leave.”

Ann then promptly got up as well. “I’ll go with you.” Only a moment later, Philip and I had the table to ourselves, but Phil did not intend to sit around.

“Damn,” Phil said, rising from his chair, “I need a good smoke after taking that shank to the foot.” He reached for the pocket on his tightly fitting jeans.
“You were shanked?” I also stood and grasped my cat laden bag.

“Yeah,” Phil nodded, “You’ve noticed how pointy Ann’s heels are. It’s surprising how sturdy those things can be.” He glanced briefly at me, but noting my neutral face, he had to glance twice. “Oh, right. You probably get away with way worse than the things I say.”

I tilted my head to the side. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Uuh…” Phil mumbled as he stared into the distance, “I’m sure obliviousness works wonders on the dating scene.” He withdrew a cigarette from his pocket at motioned to me. “C’mon, I need to go outside.”

I followed Phil to the entrance, and we squeezed between the various patrons. The dull hum of the morning bustle eased the biding tension within me as we came onto the street. The promise of an infiltration mission had me equally excited and apprehensive. With the fate of Makoto’s family on the line, I couldn’t afford to be indecisive, yet I had many uncertainties. I could scarcely trust in anything around me, but proceeding with the mission was the only immediate way forward.

Phil’s haughty voice abruptly splintered my thoughts. “You know, I’m a bit disappointed that after working up the will to come back here, I’m being abandoned again.” He had finally lit that cigarette and lifted it to his lips.

Mona let out a stifled laugh. “I thought I was supposed to be the needy one…”

Displaying a charming smile after the cat’s cry, Phillip approached and gave Mona a gentle stroke. “Yeah, yeah,” he mused, “Can’t leave you out, can we?”

Morgana swatted at Phil’s hand. “Hey!” he cried, “You do not have my permission for that!”

I believe Phil interpreted the act as a playful gesture, and he continued smiling. He added, “Energetic little thing, isn’t he?”

I nodded, glancing at the grumpy cat. “You don’t know the half of it.”

Having mercy on my feline friend, I continued with our small talk. “I never asked, but how was Vegas?”

Phil scratched his face and shrugged. “Eh, it was fine. Lost near as much as I gained, so no surprises there. Still, I felt a bit more comfortable there than I do here.”

I eyed him curiously. “You don’t like Japan?” I asked.

“Oh, no, it’s not like that,” Phillip responded, “Japan is fine. I just have some bad memories. That’s all.”

With a newfound intrigue and my boredom persisting, I decided to pursue the topic. “Was it some bad business?”

Phillip frowned and gave me a long, hard stare. His calculating gaze left an unnerving sensation in its wake, but finally, he took a deep breath and exhaled sharply. “Eh, sure, why not?” he began, “It’d probably make me feel better.” Phil allowed his cigarette hand to dangle and leaned back against the brick wall. He crossed his arms while Mona and I listened carefully. “A few years back, I was just starting my search for a position in the fashion industry. I had a bit of experience coming out of an American school, but nothing career-defining yet. It took me a while to find a position, but eventually, I came here following a very nice offer from a minor modeling agency. Mostly my job
was scouting talent, but in our small organization, I had to dabble in a bit of everything.” He cracked a brief smile. “I got pretty damn good at it too. Ended up traveling internationally with the head of the agency to scout and coach the models.”

Mona quietly sighed. “Okay, I’m jealous.”

“Seems like a great job,” I added.

“It was,” Phil said, closing his eyes and lowering his voice, “Too great. Maybe if I’d had some more experience outside that one company, I would’ve noticed the problem.” He sighed. “The agency rotated quickly through a lot of models. I was always bringing in new candidates, many younger than you. Most of them stayed for a few months, but only a handful of the models remained in the industry. The rest just went away. I never really questioned why until my boss got a little carried away one evening. I ended up finding one of our newer girls unconscious in his room, and I realized pretty quickly that she had been drugged out.”

“So, he was taking advantage of the models?” Mona absently pondered, “That’s disgusting.”

“My boss, the head of the agency, was there too, and I confronted him about it,” Phil continued melancholily. “He tried to play it off for a minute until he understood that I was legitimately upset, and of course he threatened me. You see, I had been working alongside him for a decent length of time, and I was unwittingly delivering girls to him all the while. All those disappearing models weren’t just temporary hires. They were victims, and my boss was implicating me in a human trafficking operation.”

“So, what did you do?” I asked.

Phillip gave an uneasy smirk. “What do you think I did? I ran the fuck outta there. I knew I couldn’t work with a man like that, but he obviously wasn’t going to let me get away. If I talked about anything that had happened, I would be discredited, or jailed, or worse. This was a mob operation as it turned out. They could’ve killed me if they had wanted, so I needed an equalizer. Luckily, I had a perfect opportunity at hand.”

Considering his words, a solution dawned on me. “You mean Ann?”

Phil nodded. “Maybe you’ve heard. The agency was doing a joint photo shoot, and Miss Takamaki was on center stage. She was an independent at the time, and everybody had their eyes on her. Now, don’t get me wrong,” Phil explained, “My boss had no qualms about snatching up independent models for his own. The problem was that Miss Takamaki had the ferocity to ward off any advances, and she was generating more profit as a model than anyone could as a...” Phillip paused and swallowed. “Anyways, I thought if I attached myself to her, no one would want to risk tarnishing their golden goose. The next day, I made my case to her, and that was that.”

“Wow, so he used Lady Ann as a sort of bargaining chip,” Mona exclaimed, “Mmmm, I don’t know if I like this.” Though I didn’t voice the opinion, I did shoot Phil a peculiar look.

Phil returned an honest chuckle. “I suppose that makes me sound quite pretentious, using our fair lady so heartlessly, and no doubt, I am self-admittedly pretentious in the highest degree. However, that boss of mine got arrested no more than a month after I began working with Miss Takamaki. Still makes me sick to think about, but at least he got what he was due.” Finishing his tale, Phil lifted his smoke to his mouth again and inhaled deeply.

“Seems like everything worked out for the better then,” I gradually admitted.
Phil exhaled a smoky cloud before giving me a carefree shrug. “Yeah… yeah, I suppose you’re right.” He relaxed his posture and turned to me. “Well, uh, thanks for that. I don’t often get to talk with someone so mellow.”

“What’s he thanking you for?” Mona whined, “You just stood there while he talked at you.”

Phil smiled at the cat, shaking his head. “Alright, alright,” he said. He placed his free hand firmly on Mona’s head. “There. You happy now?”

“Argh! Why do you keep touching me!?” Mona cried, “If I wanted your attention, I would say so!”

“Is everything alright out here?” I heard Yusuke posture the question as he approached us from behind.

Mona turned and pleaded to our companion with desperate eyes. “Yusuke,” he huffed, “Hey, Yusuke, can you get Phil off me please.”

Despite his inability to comprehend the cat, Phil did stop petting Mona. “Ah,” he said, “Doesn’t seem to satisfy him when I do it.” He stepped back and frowned, having disappointed himself.

“Morgana is quite picky,” Yusuke stated, “Sometimes we have to accept the fact that he cannot be satisfied.”

“Hey, that’s not true!” Mona protested, “All my requests are completely feasible.”

Regardless, Phil gave a modest chuckle. “Yeah, I know a few people like that.” He placed his cigarette between his lips and then nodded to the diner’s entryway. “Speaking of which…”

Ann and Haru swiftly exited the diner and joined us on the street. Ann bounded up to us like her usual, perky self and said, “Sorry to keep everyone waiting.”

Yusuke promptly replied. “Actually, I believe you’re right on time. I can see the car pulling up now.” I followed his gaze, and as assured, a black car was slowly approaching the curb.

Phil saw the car too and quickly removed his cigarette from his mouth. “Well, I wish you all good luck with whatever it is you’re doing.” He smiled at us all with a flippant grin. “I think I’ll stick around and refamiliarize myself with Tokyo.”

The five of us returning to the Z-Tech building began piling into the car while Phil waved us off. We exchanged some minor pleasantries before Ann finally added, “I’ll keep you updated.” In the recesses of my subconscious, I hoped those updates would denote a completed mission and a swift return.

Once we had returned to the Z-Tech hideout, only a few hours remained until our flight into unknown territory. Ann and I set about finding Ryuji, Futaba, and Makoto while the others finished packing. Directed to the rec room by the all-seeing Akechi, we encountered the echoes of an ongoing argument long before entering the room itself.

“Hey, you started it!” Ryuji shouted.

“Did not!” Futaba swiftly retorted.

“Did too!”
“Well,” Futaba continued, “You’re twice as big as me, so it’s only fair I get to use twice as many paddles.”

I pressed through the rec room door with Ann following closely, and we both paused to observe our combative friends. Apparently, Ryuji and Futaba were engaged in a game of table tennis although it had devolved into something more barbaric at some point.

“Tch, that doesn’t even make sense,” Ryuji goaded. He stood poised to strike with a paddle in one hand and a ping-pong ball in the other.

Futaba shot him a pouty glare holding two paddles at her sides. “Well neither does kicking the ball to serve, but—”

I sought to disrupt the nonsensical debate. “Yo.”

The two table tennis innovators turned in unison. “Oh, hey guys,” Futaba said.

“Wassup?” Ryuji added.

Ann had to laugh. “Uh, shouldn’t you guys be packing? It won’t be long before we have to leave.”

Futaba shrugged. “Eh, Sojiro packed most of my stuff last night since he was bored.”

Ryuji got a lopsided frown as he mumbled under his breath. “Nice to have your own personal butler.”

“Ahem.” Both Futaba and Ryuji stood up a little straighter as Ann crossed her arms. “And did you pack your things, Ryuji?” The interrogating emphasis in Ann’s voice drew out a smirk from me.

“Ha!” Ryuji snorted and flailed his paddle around like a sassy aristocrat. “I finished packing this morning while the rest of you went to see that pain-in-the-ass, Phillip.”

Ann glared at our mouthy friend, and her brow tightened. “Then why are you wearing those, Ryuji?”

Ryuji glanced down at himself and then turned his face up with a puzzled expression. I noted his knee-length shorts paired with a wrinkly t-shirt. “What? What’s wrong with my clothes?” Ryuji asked.

Ann tossed her hair from one side to the other. “Ryuji, we’re going to Russia,” she firmly stated, “It’s super cold there. You can’t go in shorts and a t-shirt.”

Ryuji shrugged, checking himself again. “Mmm, but I like these.” He smirked briefly while Futaba released a light snicker.

“Ryuji!” Ann snapped, “Why did I buy you all those clothes if you’re not going to wear them!?”

Becoming slightly agitated, Ryuji shook his head and grimaced. “Ah, quit tryin’ to be my mom, would ya? It’s gettin’ on my nerves.”

“Ugh! Ryuji…” Ann growled intimidatingly, and she stamped toward him.

In a frantic defense, Ryuji threw his arms up. “Woah! Woah!” he wailed at Ann’s approach, “Violence is not the answer!”

A taunting smile broke through Ann’s face as Ryuji flinched apprehensively. She quickly latched
onto his exposed arms and yanked him from his place. “C’mon,” Ann said, barging back to the door, “We need to get you dressed properly.”

As the pair passed by me, Ryuji cried out. “Wait! Ann! We can talk about this.” He resisted and groveled, but Ann was determined. “Hey! Ow! You’re hurting me Goddammit!”

“Oh, hush,” Ann chastised, “You’ve been through worse.” Despite his continued protests, Ann dragged him outside and down the hall. Nevertheless, I could still hear Ryuji’s exclamations while I returned my attention to Futaba.

The table tennis champ held a look of mild amusement and confused repulsion. Returning a timid smile I said, “Sorry for ruining your match.”

Futaba shook the bizarre memories from her head and returned to her normal self. “Ah, that’s okay,” she reasoned, “I was about to disqualify him for cheating anyway.”

“Let’s see… Is that the last one?”

Sam stood overlooking a bundle of luggage cases arranged along the foyer wall. Most of us had gathered to deliver the last of our possessions for our upcoming flight. Sam scratched his chin and turned to Sojiro who stood beside the luggage.

“Don’t look at me,” the older man deflected, “I’m just here to carry stuff—I’d rather not be roped into being your personal assistant too.”

“That’s all my belongings,” a tepid Yusuke added, “I put everything I had into that bag.” He nodded to the pile.

Giggling, Futaba threw a hand over her mouth. “Not like you had much to begin with.”

While the demented Futaba and ire-sparked Yusuke gave each other nasty looks, Ann observed our luggage and tapped her lips. “Yeah, I think that should be everything,” she said slowly.

Haru, who was standing next to her, quickly piped up, appearing quite concerned. “Oh! What about Makoto?”

“Oh, right!” Ann cried, “I got so busy I nearly forgot about her.” She glanced around the room in mild embarrassment. “Um, I haven’t seen her all day.” She glanced at Ryuji.

“Nuh-uh,” Ryuji said, shaking his head with apparent unease, “Don’t even ask. I ain’t seen her.”

“That’s fine,” Sam said with a wave of the hand, “We can just ask Akechi. He should know.”

Ryuji’s face quickly sagged. “Uh, can we not?”

“Yeah, maybe we shouldn’t,” Ann added.

“I’m not particularly enthusiastic about the idea either,” said Haru.

“For what it counts,” Mona interjected, “I’d like to vote against this as well.”

Despite our clear disdain, Sam ignored our complaints and contacted the virtual overseer. “Akechi!” he shouted while the rest of us braced for impact, “Where’s Niijima?” We all cringed hard as the red light appeared over the PA system. I could feel my teeth grinding in unison with the buzz of the
warming speaker.

“She’s in her room,” Akechi said.

I glanced at my friends before we realized that the danger had passed. “Well, that was surprisingly
painless,” Yusuke remarked.

Ann chuckled nervously. “We should probably go down and check on her.”

With Sam and Sojiro staying behind, the six of us made our way into the basement. I had to consider
that Makoto was not coping well with her guilt. Although all of us had made some effort to lessen
the pain, there was only so much emotional support we could provide. Her state of mind could
inhibit her capabilities on our mission, but more importantly, it pained me personally to see her so
distraught. I’m sure we all felt similar comradery; however, we still had to get Sae back.

I approached Makoto’s door and knocked timidly. The others crowded around me, and we waited
for a moment. Seconds passed, but no reply came. I felt a dense knot swelling in my gut. My
concerns had vividly realized before my eyes, and I was unsure of how to act.

“Maybe we should go in?” Haru offered. I broke from my own uncertainty and nodded promptly,
but I tried the handle with no luck, the resounding clack of the mechanism lingering in my ears.

“Locked,” Mona noted.

Ryuji leaned his head back while fidgeting in boredom. Sifting through some idle thoughts, he
suddenly had a decent idea. “Hey, aren’t the locks electronic or somethin’? I bet we could ask
Akechi to open it.”

No one immediately objected to the idea, so I breathed a heavy sigh and looked up to the local floor
monitor. “Akechi, can you open Makoto’s door?”

The crimson light of the monitor flared and gazed down upon me. “I’m sorry, Joker,” Akechi coolly
replied, “I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“The hell!?” Ryuji exclaimed, “What do you mean you can’t open the door!?”

Akechi responded, “I mean, I physically cannot open the door. Sam was quite insistent about
installing manual locks on all personnel quarters. Something about ‘a right to privacy’.”

“Jeez!” Ann squealed, “Don’t word it so creepily next time!”

“My apologies,” Akechi replied, “I’ll try to be more explicit in the future.”

Amid the conversation, Yusuke piped up. “Can you at least use your cameras to make sure she’s
alright?”

Akechi emitted a light sigh. “I would, but Niijima-san asked me not to disturb her with the monitors,
and I am obliged to consent.”

“Wait, what?” Ryuji gawked, “You mean it was that easy to get you off my case this whole time!?”

“Of course,” Akechi swiftly added, “Although I was actually quite delighted to accept your abrasive
tolerance.”

Irritated by the derailment of the discussion, Futaba gave a heated shout. “That’s not the point!
Makoto isn’t in a good way right now, so we need to know if she’s okay.” Futaba’s face flushed red
as she breathed rapidly, and the rest of us exchanged worrisome looks.

Before my mind could trail any further into despair, Makoto’s door creaked open, and I was greeted by a humorless visage. Unphased, Makoto nulled our startled faces with her deadpan gaze. She appeared like she impatiently expected one of us to ask a question while she stood holding a luggage bag firmly in her free hand.

“Well?” Makoto initiated, “I don’t think you all came down just to stare at me.”

Ann shook her head, dispelling her assumptions. “Ah, we were worried about you.”

Makoto made a tiny smile. “Ah, I see,” she replied, “Well, you have nothing to worry about. I was just gathering the last of my things.”

“Heh, see guys—she’s fine,” Ryuji said, stretching his arms behind his head, “I knew we should all just chill.”

Ann flashed him an angry glance. “Your tone wasn’t very chill a moment ago.”

“Eh, whaddya mean?” Ryuji whined, “That was my usual ‘annoying Akechi’ tone.”

“She does have a point,” Akechi abruptly added.

Ryuji growled. “I don’t remember askin’ for your opinion.”

Her smile wavering, Makoto sighed. “If you’re going to argue on my account, at least allow me through.” She brushed past me while Ryuji glared irrationally at the wall-mounted monitor.

“We’re done here, yes?” Yusuke said, “Allow me to join you upstairs.”

Haru nodded. “Yes, we’re leaving shortly anyways.”

Makoto and the others began walking, but Mona paused to chastise Ryuji. “C’mon, Ryuji,” he said, “There’ll be time for arguing with the cameras later.”

My friend glanced to me and simply shrugged. “Whatever.”

Now that Makoto had merged into our ranks, everyone’s demeanor had been tempered by her grave expectations. We approached the airstrip quietly with only direct, crucial words passing between us. Nevertheless, I viewed the looming jet with bubbling excitement. Sam’s nondescript grunts were moving our luggage onto the plane along with boxes of gear and an oblong metal shell supported by a cart. Sam also watched faithfully from the plane’s onramp like a sentry welcoming an oncoming army.

I walked up the steps as Sam nodded to me. He ushered us into the cabin earnestly, and I could sense his desperation had reached a crux. While the Thieves and I settled into our seating clusters, Samuel brooded tentatively over his control panels.

Sam began once we had seated. “So, this is the briefing you have been due. You know we’re headed to Moscow, and our target is Nikolai Androvsky. More importantly, he has a Palace, as you call them, localized in the region.” Sam expanded his holographic display, displaying the topography around Moscow. “We’ll be operating out of a safe house on the outskirts of the city,” Sam continued, “Intel is short since my agents lack adequate combat abilities, so I’ll be relying on all of you to
infiltrate the enemy stronghold. There, our primary objective is to verify the presence of the missing persons. Once this is done, we can formulate a plan to extract the victims and hopefully neutralize Nikolai himself.”

Yusuke calmly interjected. “So, will we be using more of your transference devices to access the Metaverse?”

“Not this time,” Sam replied, “That method would be too risky for this combat zone. That’s why I’ve had a stationary Metaverse tether set up at the safehouse. We can use that to enter the Palace without fear of ejection so long as no one tampers with the safehouse—another reason for its obscure location.”

I leaned forward with my own concerns. “What if the missing people aren’t in the Palace?”

Sam smiled patronizingly at me. “Then we’ll be back to square one, and I won’t have a clue what I’ve been dragging you around for.”

Ryuji grunted a short laugh. “Guess we’ve just gotta buckle in and go along with this shitty plan if we wanna get some answers.”

Sam’s smile twinged as he glanced to my friend. “Yes, thank you for your generous understanding.” He cleared his throat and tugged at his collar. “The flight will be about nine hours, so you should get some rest while you can.”

“Director?” Akechi’s smooth voice abruptly echoed over the plane’s intercom system, “Your assistance is requested in the biomedical unit.”

“Ah, shit, again?” Sam glanced at the ceiling and then said, “Uh, excuse me.” He stepped toward the rear of the plane. “Go ahead and settle in. We’ll be taking off shortly.”

Indeed, the private jets owned by Samuel’s business conglomerate operated on a far timelier schedule than conventional aircraft. We were flying high before I had even begun to consider the length of the trip, and yet no one seemed to mind. I sat on one side of the cabin with Morgana, Ryuji, and Futaba. Futaba sat next to me, tapping merrily away on her laptop while Ryuji and Mona had a pair of seats directly across from me.

Glancing out the window, I watched the shifting clouds contentedly, but Futaba had other ideas of entertainment. “Ok! So!” she suddenly chirped, “I was thinking of things we could do to entertain ourselves on the flight over.”

The boys looked intrigued. “Like what?” Mona asked.

“Well, we’ve been apart these past few years,” Futaba continued, setting her laptop aside, “So it only seems right that we find out what we’ve each been up to.”

“Eh,” Ryuji shrugged, “But you and I have been seeing each other at least once a week. It’s not like there’s anything I don’t know.”

Futaba smirked and shook her head. “Yeah, but you don’t count, Ryuji. You’re not a real person.”

“What!” Ryuji jumped a little, grasping the arms of his chair.

Mona curled into a relaxed ball as he added, “Ryuji does seem to act more like a caricature than an actual human being.”
“Huh?” Ryuji glanced at the cat, but Mona and Futaba were already snickering at him. Ryuji gave them a slow, unamused glare. “Okay, I see how it is.” He turned aside and gave a sudden shout. “Mom! I’m being bullied!”

Futaba pouted angrily. “You tattling twerp!”

Stationed comfortably across the cabin, Ann gave Ryuji a dismissive, sideways glance. He was disappointed, but he wouldn’t be receiving any aid from the others. He emitted a loud sigh and then said, “Alright, I give up.”

Futaba beamed. “Okay!” She turned to me with a mischievous smile. “Since I’m so generous, I’ll let you ask the first question.”

“Wait,” Mona interjected, “How does this work?”

Futaba bounced in her seat with excitement. “Well, one of us asks a question, and then each of us has to answer.”

Ryuji sunk into his seat a bit. “I can already tell this is gonna be rough.”

“No complaints!” Futaba chastised, defiantly holding out her finger, “You have to answer no matter what.”

Ryuji grimaced. “Okay! Okay!”

Meanwhile, I had to consider my next words carefully. My question needed to be probing, but it shouldn’t reach too far into obscurity. Futaba again faced me as a thought popped into my head. “Well,” she said, “Go ahead and ask a question.”

I slowly turned to the group with a smile. “What is the most embarrassing thing that’s happened to you?”

“Aw, that’s easy,” Ryuji boasted. The others looked at him in anticipation.

“Uh?” Mona prodded, “Are you gonna tell us?”

Ryuji blinked. “Oh, yeah.” He leaned on the arm of his chair and prepared himself emotionally. “Okay, so, a couple of months ago, my mom arranged a date for me…”

“Ohoho!” Futaba laughed, “That’s pretty good. I’d be totally embarrassed if Sojiro did that to me.”

“Yeah,” Mona earnestly concurred, “I could see how that would be embarrassing.”

“That’s not even the embarrassing part,” Ryuji replied, “The real embarrassment came when I got stood up and had to eat alone at a two-person table in the middle of the restaurant.”

“Hoo boy…” Futaba blew a long breath. “That sounds depressing.”

Turning his face downward, Ryuji sighed. “Yep.” Then he quickly looked up and smiled. “Okay, your turn.” Futaba and I blinked curiously at our friend.

“He sure got over that quick,” Mona grumbled.

“Hey, I shared mine,” Ryuji continued, “Now I want to hear some embarrassing secrets.”

“Oh, fine,” Futaba stammered. She dropped her gaze to the floor. “I…” Futaba abruptly clenched her
hands against her chest and winced. “I slipped on a ketchup packet!”

“Wh-what?” Mona gawked.

Futaba opened one eye to peek at us. “At school I was in the cafeteria, and I slipped on a ketchup packet and broke my pelvis.”

“Oh, yeah,” Ryuji chimed in, “I remember that.”

“Ketchup spilled everywhere, and people thought my guts had burst,” Futaba said, “But when they realized I only hurt my bum, they laughed at me.”

“Hey,” Ryuji added, “At least you got a week off to play games.”

Futaba shook her head. “Pfft, Sojiro would barely leave me alone.”

“Right,” Ryuji smirked as he looked to the cat, “So, what’s your embarrassing moment, Mona?”

Averting his eyes, Mona pursed his lips in a regretful frown. “Vet trips.”

“Huh?” Futaba asked, “You mean, the veterinarian?”

The black cat gave a frightful shiver as he recalled his humiliation. “Yes. I have been violated.”

“But you’re a cat,” Ryuji teasingly stated, “You’ve gotta do that stuff.”

Mona returned a chilling stare. “You try being groped every time you visit the doctor.”

“You’re being melodramatic,” I remarked.

Naturally, Morgana wouldn’t yield easily. He got on all fours and cried, “That’s easy for you to say! All you do is stand there and watch while I am subjected to unusual punishment.”

“Cat’s need their shots,” Futaba interjected, “You know, you could stand to be a little more grateful for proper medical care.”

Mona sat back down but maintained a nasty frown. “No way. I don’t even want to think about it.”


Eager to continue the theatrics, Ryuji leaned toward me. “Alright, your turn.”

Thankfully, I had a satisfying answer at the top of my head, but I took my time to deliver a timely response. “Once, I was fired over a pack of gum.”

“Wait, what!?” Ryuji shouted, “I never heard about this.”

Futaba watched me with amazement. “How’d you get fired over a pack of gum?”

“Well, I was working at a convenience store,” I explained, “And a customer approached me and said he knew who I was. He said he wouldn’t rat me out if I let him take a pack of gum. Of course, I wasn’t going to let him steal, so he called the manager over, made a big fuss, and got me fired…”

“Haha!” Ryuji chuckled before gritting his teeth, “What an absolute shitbag! That guy’s got no place dumping that shit onto you, and you never even did anything wrong!”

“Well, you did the right thing,” Mona said reassuringly, “That guy was pretty shady. He probably
would have kept stealing from the store if you had let him blackmail you.”

“Yeah,” I said, sighing, “That didn’t make it any less embarrassing to explain to my parents.”

“Wow,” Futaba mused, “You’ve got that high-level grit. I totally would’ve cracked under the pressure.”

I glanced to her and cracked a weak smile. “Eh, enough about that.”

“Okay…” Futaba said with a nod, “It is my turn to ask a question, after all.”

“What…?” Ryuji squinted at her, “Why do you decide who goes next?”

Futaba boldly chastised him, “Because it’s my game, Ryuji, and you don’t get a say.”

“Grrr, fine…” Ryuji grumbled in response.

“Alright!” Futaba let loose a mischievous snicker. “Hmmm, I’m thinking…” She turned and showed a wicked smile. “I wanna know who you guys have been dating.”

Ryuji cocked his head. “Ah, shit. Here we go again.”

“I think I already know your answer, Ryuji.” Futaba gave a slight wave of her hand.

“Gah! That’s not what I meant!” Ryuji wailed, “I mean, Mona’s a cat, and I’m pretty sure you aren’t dating.”

“Excuse me!” Mona bitterly interrupted, “I permit the defamation of my species, but I don’t appreciate all these assumptions you’re making.”

“Ah, shaddup.” Ryuji shook his head.

“Fine!” Futaba pouted and stuck up her nose, “I’ll change the question. Who do you guys like?”

“Oh! Like that’s any better!”

Futaba swiftly leveled her gaze. “So, you’re saying you don’t like anyone?” She crossed her arms, waiting patiently for her words to draw out an answer.

Ryuji paused and scratched his head. “Uh, I dunno…”

Mona scoffed at Ryuji’s uncertainty. “He likes anything with moderate proportions.”

“Quiet, you!” Ryuji snapped, “We all know who you like anyway.”

Mona turned his head aside and became even more aloof than usual. “Excuse me, I’ll have you know that I have matured, and I have freed my heart to seek affection wherever I may find it.”

Ryuji slumped over at the pompous droning of his friend. “Uhuh…” he mustered, “Ya know, I’m gettin’ the feelin’ that this question ain’t for us.” He turned to eye Futaba with a smirk.

“Oh, c’mON, Ryuji,” Futaba whined, “I bet you wanna know too.”

“Well, of course I do,” he replied, “But this guy won’t say a damn thing about it.”

I tapped my fingers uncomfortably on the arm of my chair. “I’m right here, you know.”
Futaba swiveled around to me suddenly with an uncontrollable desire in her eyes, and I had to shrink back in bewilderment. “Hey, you have to tell us! I *reeaaally* wanna know. Please.”

Feeling the heat on my neck, I responded hastily. “Keep your voice down.”

“Oh?” A coy smile swiftly replaced her beggar’s scowl. “Are you afraid someone on this plane might find out?”

“Holy shit,” Ryuji muttered, “She actually caught him off guard.”

Morgana glanced between our friends. “I mean, it is a small cabin. You probably shouldn’t be shouting.”

“Don’t be so gullible, Mona,” Futaba said, snaking her way toward me, “He’s hiding something, and I want to find out what.” She tipped over the edge of her own seat until she was nearly in my lap.

“Uh, but how?” Ryuji asked.

Futaba observed my motionless face carefully while Ryuji and Mona waited in suspense. “Hmm,” she mulled, “I have an idea.”

“I’m not saying a word,” I retorted.

“Good,” Futaba chirped, “I don’t need you to say anything.” Futaba quickly scampered out of her seat and wedged herself between my chair and the window. I watched her uneasily, but she soon placed her fingers on both of my temples and directed my gaze afar.

Ryuji recoiled in confusion. “What are you doing?”

“Just watch him,” Futaba insisted. She massaged her forefingers along my scalp as she emitted an alarming chuckle. “Alright. Look there.” My vision focused across the plane’s cabin where Ann and the others were situated. I sensed her ploy was to get a reaction from me, yet my heart beat with undue tension. I could look away, but I feared that by averting my eyes I might give the signal Futaba was seeking. Unsatisfied with my stoicism, Futaba whispered into my ear. “You see Ann. How could you miss her? That long, flowing, golden hair that just goes and goes and goes… over her fair skin right down to her boingy chest.”

Though I was unnerved by Futaba’s probing, I did not falter. Still, I could feel her gaze upon me. “Hmm,” Futaba mumbled, continuing her observation. She pressed her fingers together and directed me further. “Okay, maybe you’re more into the stern type,” she whispered, “You want Makoto to look you in the eye and tell you ‘no’… or maybe that commandeering exterior just makes it more exciting to seduce her.”

Amid this mad plot, I was torn between my caution and this open invitation to fixate. Futaba’s language was shameful and crass, but she did evoke something primal within me. “No? No…” she continued, “Your tastes are a bit more refined than that, aren’t they? A balance of tenderness and maturity is what you’re after… with a kick of spice underneath. Who could have more noble charm than Haru Okumura?”

“Eh, Futaba?” Ryuji interjected, “You’re really startin’ to creep me out.”

Mona nodded in agreement. “It’s time to stop.”

Just then Sojiro walked by our seats and paused when he saw Futaba creeping behind me. “Uh, what’s going on here?”
Swiftly moving upright, Futaba removed her hands from me. “Erm, nothing! I’m done anyways.” She crept discretely back to her seat. Confused and disturbed, Sojiro shook his head and walked off.

“So?” Ryuji asked eagerly, “Did you figure anything out?”

“Hmm, well…” Futaba pondered, “What did you guys see? Notice any reactions?”

“Eh, I don’t know…” Ryuji replied in discouragement, “Seemed like he held a normal, straight face to me.”

“I didn’t notice anything either,” Mona added.

“C’mon, guys,” Futaba prodded, “Just take a guess if you’re not sure. Anything would help.”

Ryuji exerted his facial muscles as he delved into new frontiers of thought. “Uh, I mean… I guess he might’ve had some sorta reaction to Ann. That’s just a guess though.”

“Good, good,” Futaba said, frothing with excitement, “You too, Mona. Give me your best guess, even if you need to pull from your everyday experiences.”

The cat glanced from Ryuji to Futaba. “Well, I have noticed that he hasn’t interacted with Haru very much. Maybe he’s avoiding her intentionally.”

Futaba moved her fingers across her lips while the others impatiently awaited some revelation. I cast a disgruntled look over the group. “Now you’re all just making up nonsense.”

“Mmm, no…” Futaba began, “I think we’re close to the truth.” She turned to me and propped herself on her chair’s armrest. “You’re in love with all of them, aren’t you?”

Pulling away from her, I gave a chuckle. “I think you’ve been reading too many doujinshi.”

Futaba rolled her eyes, flipping her bangs from one side to the other. “Actually, most of my collection is on loan to Ryuji.”

“Hey!” Ryuji spouted, “Don’t tell him that.”

“Well, regardless,” Futaba continued, “You clearly don’t have a clue what you’re doing and are in dire need of assistance.”

I blinked at her in confusion. “Excuse me?”

“You need a wingman!” Futaba insisted, “And luckily, I know someone who’s available.” The petite girl motioned to herself pretentiously.

“What?” Ryuji blabbered, “You can’t be his wingman!”

“Yes. I can,” Futaba confidently retorted.

Suddenly, Ryuji was standing and making a grim face. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve been waiting to hook this guy up!?”

Mona pounced up as well. “Hey! I’m the one who’s always with him. If anybody deserves to be his wingman, it’s me!”

“Guys!” I barked, “I don’t need a wingman!”
My three adjacent friends stared at each other with animosity, but as our voices rose, others in the limited enclosure took notice. Yusuke glanced in our direction, raising an eyebrow. “What are you shouting about?”

Ryuji clenched his fist as he glared at Futaba. “Stay outta this, Yusuke.”

Futaba held him back with a fierce gaze. “Yeah, it’s none of your business, Inari.”

Makoto’s sharp voice interrupted the conversation. “That’s all fine,” she stated, “But please keep your voices down. We all have to share this space, and that’s difficult enough without you two arguing.” Her firm tone suppressed my friends’ antagonistic urges.

“Ah… okay…” Futaba groaned.

With a sigh, Ryuji added, “Fine…”

As the atmosphere of our small cabin returned to normal, Mona revitalized the discussion. “Ahem, I have a suggestion,” he said. The others glanced at him as they took their seats. “Perhaps we’d be better off combining our skills. I’m sure if we worked together, we could satisfy his desires.”

“Yo,” Ryuji quietly remarked, “Why you gotta word it like that?”

Disregarding the phrasing, Futaba nodded along. “Hmm, I like it.”

“Alright, so how do we start?” Ryuji asked.

Mona added, “This is probably a bad time to mention that I’ve never had a romantic relationship.”

Ryuji stared blankly at him. “Uh…”

“That’s no problem, guys,” Futaba cheerily beamed, “We can do what I always do when I don’t know something: we can ask the internet.” She snatched up her stowed laptop and began manipulating the keys.

My mouth hung open in disbelief. “I still don’t want this.”

Ryuji naturally ignored my concerns. “Ooh, look up how to get a date to start.”

“Oh! Oh!” Morgana squealed, “Ask it about appealing to someone you like.”

“Mhmm,” Futaba replied, “Got it!”

I glazed over my friends’ whimsical faces and scratched my head. They weren’t listening, and they were clearly going to make this a long flight.

Hours passed as I sat confined to the recess of my chair and subjugated to the mad ruminations of my three companions. The heavenly sky grew darker, and so many of the passengers resigned to a bed for the night. Although Sam had advised us all to rest, I could not find the will to force myself to sleep. Instead, I had dozed off for short intervals while the others droned on about bizarre findings. I was certainly appreciative of their passion, but as far as my conscious mind was concerned, this had nothing to do with me.

As I began to stretch and wake from another momentary lapse of consciousness, I noticed a weight upon my shoulder. Looking to my side, I saw Futaba’s colored hair strewn over my arm. Her
delicate head leaned on me, and her body rocked gently with every tender breath. She was fast asleep, likely exhausted from today’s excitement.

Mona had wandered to bed at some point, and I now found the cabin to be very quiet. My eyes winced groggily as I surveyed the dark interior. Ryuji’s concentrated face was dimly lit by the holographic console attached to his chair. He had remained strangely focused throughout the flight, and I think he had learned much more than I had.

Feeling a nagging sensation in my gut, I realized that there was no need for me to remain in my seat any longer. Food and bed were elsewhere; however, I didn’t want to disturb Futaba’s sleep either. Twisting my body slightly, I gently guided her head with my hand into the pillows of her seat. She huffed quietly as she snuggled into the cushiony fabric, and thankfully, she hadn’t fallen asleep with her glasses on.

I stood over Futaba and smiled. Nevertheless, her unconscious body managed to make a mess of this as well. Futaba flipped over, her arms contorted uncomfortably, and soon she began to slide from the seat. My smile fading, I knew I couldn’t leave her here in good conscience. I thought for a moment and then remembered the bunks.

I glanced to my friend, Ryuji, seeking aid. “Hey, can you help me carry her to bed?” I asked.

Ryuji did not even look up at me. “Huh?” he muttered, “Uh, yeah, yeah, I’ll head to bed in a minute.” Scratching his chin, he remained entirely focused on his screen. I sighed, realizing that he had not comprehended my question in the slightest. I returned my attention to the silently slumbering Futaba and resolved myself.

I began by placing a hand carefully behind Futaba’s head, gently parting her reddish strands of hair. Then I crouched and slid my other arm underneath Futaba’s legs. With the proper form, carrying Futaba to her bed would be a simple exercise in strength and stability. I slowly lifted Futaba from the chair and began moving out of the cabin.

Unsurprisingly, Futaba was on the lighter side. That said, she did have ample give where I was holding her. Most of Futaba’s body fat seemed to be concentrated around her thighs, providing a natural and pleasant cushion. I swiftly found my way to the bunk room designated for Futaba and Sojiro, and I entered freely.

With Sojiro nowhere to be found, I followed the dim light of the corridor and laid Futaba on the bed. Her tiny frame floated atop the dull covers. Glancing from her exposed legs to her pale face, I recalled Futaba’s earlier enthusiasm and investment in my personal affairs which had led her to this tired state. A bemusing thought rose weightlessly through my congested brain. She might have loved me too.

Of course, that was merely my mind telling itself what it wanted to hear, and I couldn’t entertain the thought beyond that. My life could never be one of stability, family, and love. So long as I remained a denizen of humanity’s dreg heap, I was destined to endure society’s judgement through my false mask, and my true face would persist to keep that same society in balance. That was not an existence I should want to share with anyone or pass on to children, yet my internal desires railed against me, clawing at my soul. I needed to focus; I needed to find purpose so that I would not destroy myself in this conflict.

I retreated into the light of the hall and let a deep breath filter my lungs. My thoughts were a garbled mess of nonsense it seemed. I needed food and rest and time to think. I continued down the hall until I arrived at the plane’s kitchen and dining area. The room was quiet and dark, a good place for thinking, so I sat down at the bar. The overhead lamps flickered to life immediately, souring the
mood but revealing a small dish of assorted nuts on the counter. I shrugged and popped one of the salty snacks into my mouth. “Convenience is the death of good taste,” I thought.

I sat for quite a while, but time has a way of slipping by when you’re just thinking. My mind continued with its drivel although I had drowned out the worst of the thoughts. Nonetheless, I was pleased when some distracting company joined me.

“Hey.”

I glanced lazily to the side as Ann approached and took the seat next to me. “ Couldn’t sleep?” I asked.

She sighed, wiggling onto the chair. “Nah, not really,” she said, “It’s just… well, Makoto needs her space.”

I grunted humorously in agreement. Munching another legume, I asked, “Still bad?”

Ann idly surveyed the counter and said, “Like a train wreck.”

In the mix of my tumultuous mind and the supplementary news, I felt profoundly depressed. I propped my head on my hand and turned toward Ann. Now seeing her in full, I noticed she was wearing a dark tank top and had her hair down. I never really considered how Ann might have to change her hair while she slept since I normally only saw her with the trademark twin tails, yet she looked nice regardless. Actually, I probably never thought about it because I wasn’t sleeping with her, but that wasn’t a mental rabbit hole I wanted to go down.

I shook the gunk from my brain and redirected my attention. I motioned to my snacking bowl. “Want some nuts?”

Ann peered into the dish. “Ooh! Are there any cashews?”

“You like them?” I asked.

She showed her bright smile and nodded. “I do,” she said, “but Phil hates them.” She ate one of the snacks, keeping her happy look.

I almost laughed. “He’s quite the character,” I said, “You two seem pretty close.”

Ann tilted her head. “Well, he has his moments, but he doesn’t like to talk about personal stuff much.”

I blinked in surprise. “Oh? He was talking to me about his old job earlier.”

Ann turned to me, equally amazed. “Really? He told you about that?” She looked down and curled her fingers. “I’m surprised he brought it up. I thought he didn’t want anyone to know about that stuff.” Her smile faded. “He won’t even talk to me about it…”

“You didn’t know?” I continued, “Seems like he was in some trouble.”

“Oh, I figured it out, of course!” Ann said, swiftly perking back up. “I mean, he clearly wasn’t giving me the whole story when he started working for me. I did some investigating of my own, and I ended up finding some pretty disturbing stuff happening with the managers.”

“How did you avoid being caught?”

Ann smiled again. “You’d be surprised how far a cute smile and a ditsy model act will get you.” I
smiled back. “Anyways, I realized the models were being abducted for human trafficking. I had always thought the managers were making some shady deals with the company models, but I never imagined it would turn out to be so despicable. I mean, some of those girls were younger than I was when I started modeling.”

“That’s awful,” I replied.

Ann nodded as she glared into the distance, her voice and face tensing. “I got so mad when I realized what all those two-faced recruiters had been doing behind my back, I could barely keep a straight face. I mean, they had been abusing those poor girls.”

I nodded, processing the true gravity of the situation. “You thought of Shiho.”

“Ha,” Ann had to grin to ease her grief, “Of course…” She held a bittersweet look, and her eyes glazed with moisture. “Still, I couldn’t let my emotions get the better of me. That wouldn’t have solved anything.” She continued as she turned away, “I found the drug stash the managers were using on the girls, and I tipped off the police.”

Recalling what Phillip had told me earlier, I smiled. “I’m sure you saved a lot of people.”

“It still makes me sick to think about,” Ann continued, “All those girls that went through there before I found out…” She winced tearfully at the idea.

Watching Ann now reminded me of our first few encounters several years ago. The carefree girl who had wanted to strengthen her heart had grown into an impressive lady. She was still impulsive and temperamental, but somewhere along the path, Ann had found her self-confidence. There was an air of intentionality in each of her actions, and I could admire that.

I waited for a minute as Ann sat in her somber mood, but I could not stop myself from smiling foolishly. “You’ve really matured, Ann.”

Ann glanced at me with tepid surprise, the slight moisture whisking away on her eyelids. A small, dismissive laugh escaped her lips before she averted her gaze. In her emotional state, she didn’t appear ready for the sudden compliment, so she tried to conceal a minor blush. “That…” Ann stopped and released a long sigh. “You shouldn’t say things like that out of the blue.”

I lobbed one more nut into my mouth and asked, “Why not?”

Ann stared blankly at me. “I… I don’t know,” she stammered, “It’s hard to know how I should act when you say those kinds of things.” She gently allowed her head to settle into her hand.

I chuckled as I grabbed another handful of nuts. “You seem do be doing a good job so far.”

“Haha!” Ann laughed, “That must be a pretty big compliment coming from the master of understated reactions.”

“I just wanted to see you smile.”

Ann glanced away, but she held her delightful expression. I smiled too as I crunched into the last almond in my hand, but the empty feeling in my gut still lingered. While Ann and I flirted with fitful eye contact, I absently reached for the snacks and grazed my hand through the empty bowl.

“Oh, the bowl’s empty,” I said, glancing at the dish and withdrawing my salted hand.

Ann shot me a curious look before inserting her own hand into the bowl. “Are you sure?” She
tapped her fingers along the inside of the dish, adding, “I think there’s something in there.”

Puzzled, I put on a crooked frown and reluctantly returned my hand to the dish. The tips of my fingers pressed against the ceramic surface of the bowl, but I could not detect any nuts inside the bowl. Indeed, nothing was in the bowl except fingers. As I moved to retract my hand, I had glancing contact with Ann’s slender fingers. The warm sensation that passed through us acted like an irresistible magnetism, and so my fingers seemed to lumber in place. Ann’s fingers slipped effortlessly between my own, and I felt my hand trip drunkenly into her tender embrace. With her delicate appendages intentionally tangling with mine, I lifted both our hands from the dish.

I stared dumbfounded by the star pattern formed by the two interspersed hands. Ann’s fair skin made even my pale body look dark, and that pronounced difference only made my attraction stronger. “Huh,” I began, tilting our hands to examine them more closely, “You have very nice nails.”

“Really?” Ann snickered, finding my humor unbearable, “That’s what you’re going to say?”

“Well, I don’t know if you’ve heard, Miss Takamaki,” I continued, “But I’m pretty sure holding hands is illegal.”

Ann watched our hands with a pleased look. “I’m a Phantom Thief,” she said with sultry words, “I don’t concern myself with the law. Besides, if anyone finds out, we can just tell them it was an accident.”

I rubbed my lips together as I considered my next action. My fingers almost instinctively coiled around Ann’s hand. “This doesn’t feel like an accident,” I replied. Ann squeezed my hand back, and she slowly bit her lower lip. I felt a steady and intense pulse radiate from her skin while my own chest constricted with hefty adrenaline. We looked directly at each other. Though my eyes were locked in place, I could hardly stand the intensity of her gaze. I knew what I wanted to do with absolute certainty, yet my body had frozen like a thin pool of stagnant water.

“Hello?” A sudden red flash nearly made me jump from my seat as an unnerving voice entered my head. I glanced up to the spot of mechanical whirring where a camera now emitted a stark, red light. Akechi’s voice rang out. “Ah, Joker,” he said, “I didn’t realize you would be here! Shall I tell you what refreshments we have available.”

With the abrupt interruption entirely eradicating the moment, I grimaced in contempt. Ann relinquished her hold on me, slinking back into her seat with a humiliated blush. The cold void staining my hand chilled the blood of my heart. I glared at the nosy camera and replied, “No thank you, Akechi.”

Akechi’s red-dotted iris swiveled in my direction. “Oh, Joker, you have something in your teeth.”


I closed my mouth and gave my teeth a lick. “Thank you.”

Ann flicked the speck from her finger and then sat up in her seat. “Okay, now, do me.” She opened her mouth and pointed to her teeth.

Blinking uncomfortably, I quickly complied with Ann’s request and leaned forward to examine her. It only took a moment to verify that Ann’s mouth was completely clean; however, now that I was so
near her, I could not pull myself away. I slid a bit closer and straightened my back. Ann looked up at me, her smile parting. In a nerve-wracking maneuver, I carefully guided my hand along the underside of her cheek and tilted her head upward toward me. A slight tremble wafted through Ann, and I shook in reply. Her bright, baby-blues glistened up at me, and I paused.

“Is it good?” Ann softly asked me.

I replied, “I want to find that out,” and I moved.
Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves are poised to begin their first Metaverse operation, and an exciting buzz can be felt throughout the entire team. Yet some of this team's members are in high spirits for alternative reasons. Our protagonist continues his journey of introspection while delving into this Metaverse mystery.

We arrived in Moscow during the night, so most of us were unsurprisingly disconcerted and groggy. On the other hand, I felt more awake than I had in years; my whole body vibrated with energy. Though a harsh wind swept over the open airport runway, a lively heat ran through my skin. The others muttered various complaints against the biting cold, especially Ryuji, but I couldn’t have been more content.

A large truck arrived swiftly to take the supplies and equipment that Sam had brought on the journey. The dark, snow-skirted airport wasn’t much for scenery, but luckily another car came along shortly to provide transport. Sam had a brief word with the driver before turning to address our huddled group.

“Alright, there’s a couple more cars coming,” he said, raising his voice over the wind, “But this one only has room for four. Uh, let’s see… I’ll take Sakura-san, Makoto, and Haru.”

Sojiro made a grumpy scowl. “Wait, why am I going with you?”

Sam turned to him and shrugged. “I need someone to carry my bags.”

Sojiro let out a long sigh as the others boarded the vehicle without complaint. “Fine…” he grumbled, and then he got into the car. The doors quickly slammed shut to seal out the cold, and the remainder of our shivering company watched as the car’s red, rear lights dissipated in the distance.

Ryuji—who had somehow failed to equip the proper clothing—turned to me, clenching his naked arms and legs tightly. “Oh damn, it’s cold…” He shivered as he glanced around the group for some sympathy.

Having adorned a puffy, winter coat, Ann just laughed mockingly at him. “Serves you right. You should have listened to me while you had the chance.”

Ryuji returned a nasty glare while his body shook wildly. “Sh-sh-sh… sh-sh-sh…” Instead of Ryuji’s usual retort, his teeth chattered, and then he gave a frightful sneeze. Releasing a sickly groan, Ryuji hung his head in defeat.

Ann graciously offered him a pitying chuckle. “Well, I’m going to give Phillip a call while we’re waiting… let him know we landed safely.” She took her phone from her cozy jacket pocket. “Ah, excuse me.”

As Ann separated from the group, the others quieted. Russia’s distinct, oppressive climate had stolen the rest of their enthusiasm. Still, Morgana was able to give us all an earful from my shoulder. “You know, I guess being a furry animal does have its upsides.”
Ryuji attempted to look bitter, but his quaking body would not allow it. Regardless, he did glance up at Mona and me, and his forceful expression slowly turned to one of perplexity. “Yo... b-b-br-br-bro, y-you got s-s... some... th-thin...” He lifted a hand from his shorts pocket and pointed it limply at me.

Ryuji’s blabbering also attracted the attention of Futaba. She was completely engulfed in a dark green coat with her head barely peeking through the hood. She had her sleeves connected, and she yawned unabashedly. “Ah, I must still be dreaming,” she sleepily mumbled, “You look like you’re wearing lipstick.”

My eyes widened as I felt a twang of panic surge through my heart. I touched my lips and examined my fingers, and indeed, some light, residual color had been left on my face.

Standing beside the others, Yusuke tilted his head to look at me. “I didn’t think you were into that sort of thing,” he quietly remarked.

I shook my head calmly. “It must have been something I ate.”

Ryuji struggled to laugh. “Y-y-yeah... m-my th-th-th... thoughts exactly.” While Ryuji chortled to himself, I gave my mouth a strong wipe and bit down the last of my pride.

Soon thereafter, a second car rolled up to the curb, and Ryuji instinctively waddled towards it. Futaba also made a beeline to the vehicle while Yusuke took a moment to make an astute observation. “There’s only room for four in the car. One of us will have to wait for the next.”

Futaba promptly turned around and said, “Well, I’m not staying out in the cold any longer!”

“You three should go,” I replied.

“Lady Ann is still making her call,” Mona added, “We gentlemen will accompany her, and keep her safe.”

Yusuke held his signature, blank stare. “I see...”

Glancing at Mona, I said, “You should go too. I’m not sure your fur is meant to withstand this kind of temperature.”

“What? No way!” Mona responded with a jolt, “She’s my responsibility too.”

“I mean it,” I replied, shooting down the cat. Before he could utter another contradiction, I grabbed Morgana by the scruff of his neck and called out to Futaba. “Hey!”

The girl understood and smiled coyly. I gave Mona a quick swing and then lobbed him toward Futaba to his dismay. He screeched erratically, but nonetheless, he landed safely. Futaba held Mona up to examine him or rather to mock him with her amusement. “C’mon, kitty,” she said, “We’re going.”

Mona exhaled rapidly as he looked around in disbelief. “You saw what just happened! This is proof I’m being abused!”

“Oh, hush,” Futaba chided, frowning, “You’re so high maintenance.”

Meanwhile, Ryuji chided, frowning, “You’re so high maintenance.”

Meanwhile, Ryuji leaned against the car door unable to will it open. “G-guys,” he stammered, “C-c-car...”
“You three and Mona should go,” I said, “I’ll wait for Ann.”

Yusuke nodded. “Very well.” Then Yusuke stepped to the car and opened the door. Ryuji promptly dove inside, and Futaba was quick to follow, cradling Mona in her arms. Once the four of them had piled inside, the door snapped shut, and the car split from the curb.

I watched the vehicle vanish into the distance behind wispy snow drifts and my foggy breath. Now that the others had gone, a gentle calm washed over me. I knew the probing inquiries of my friends would only grow more intense with every further incident, but I wanted to ward off their meddling a while longer. Even now, I felt a sharp thrill from the bubbly excitement churning within me.

I turned around as Ann called softly to me. “Hey,” she said, “Where did everyone go?” She glanced momentarily to the empty walk.

“There wasn’t enough room in the car for everyone,” I explained, “So I thought I’d wait here with you for the next one.”

Ann smiled. “Oh? How thoughtful of you,” she said with a playfully mocking tone, yet her gleeful cheeks weren’t telling me to stop.

I leaned forward slightly and closed my eyes. Ann reciprocated the motion, connecting our lips somewhere in between. We kissed in a slow yet intentional manner while we sensed the contours of one another’s lips. Hers had a silky touch that lingered on my skin and ignited like accelerant, and I could only imagine how plain my own felt in comparison. Still, the way Ann’s lips reluctantly parted from mine caused my heart to jolt and suggested that she had a higher opinion.

I opened my eyes, but Ann still had hers closed. She stood there silently for a moment, smiling and savoring the sensation. When her baby blue eyes did open again, her smile widened, and I unwittingly leaned inward and pressed our faces together. She naturally rubbed her nose against mine, sparking some warmth between us.

Ann whispered, “I must be getting out of shape. I don’t think my heart’s ever beaten this hard before.”


“What?”

“I love you.”

Ann exhaled sharply and her body pressed firmly against me. “Well,” she replied, “as for you… let’s just say that Ryuji has some pretty strong competition for first place.”

Hearing this, I chuckled, but I had to embrace her. Ann was already so close, and my body needed to expend some energy. I placed my hands on the small of her back and lifted slightly. “Ah!” Ann gave a joyful shriek as I spun the two of us around. Even though her face was already red, she managed to brighten further in delight.

As we both laughed in delirious excitement, I gently set Ann back on her feet. She placed her hands on my shoulders for some convenient stability. “Hey,” Ann began, her tone softening, “I know we’re in the middle of some business, so I thought maybe we should keep this a secret until afterwards. I don’t really want Ryuji to start any drama while we’re here.”

“So,” I replied smugly, “It’s a secret deal between us thieves?”
“Yes,” Ann answered, “A hidden love.” She kissed me quickly, and as she withdrew, she had to steady herself. “Although… I’m not sure I can last that long, heheh…”

“Careful Lady Ann, you might end up becoming a femme fatale after all.”

“Oh, please,” she snorted, “I’ll be the one chasing you to my death.”

A smile broke through my lips as my heart fluttered. “Well then, we’d better make use of the time we have left.”

Nearly an hour had passed by the time we drove to the secluded cabin. The snow-dusted roads hid asphalt craters that hampered our progress repeatedly, but our party arrived at our destination without serious incident. While Sam and his goons moved the last of our cargo into the quaint building, the group observed our new living space with tame curiosity. Ann and I approached our friends at the edge of the motor pool.

Ryuji was still sitting halfway inside the car to avoid the cold, and he threw his head back as I approached him. “You seein’ this, dude?” he said, gesturing to the wooden house, “Sam’s throwin’ us in a shack in the middle of this snow heap.”

Readjusting my glasses, I looked up at the cabin. The log-bound building appeared like a dark blot amid the sloping snowy banks, yet appreciating the texture of the exterior was impossible in the dark. Overall, the cabin would be small for the ten of us—including Mona—and it only had one floor covered in a rustic, shingle roof.

“Looks… cozy…” Ann remarked, tenuously gazing at the structure.

“Oh, it has a certain homely charm to it,” Haru deliberately added.

“Well, don’t worry about how it looks too much,” Makoto stated with a mellow tone, “We’ll be eating and sleeping here, but most of our time will be spent in the Palace. There should be plenty of space to run around in there.”

“That Nickle guy better not have filled his Palace with effin’ snow,” Ryuji grumbled, “I think I’ve had enough of this stuff already.”

“Nickle guy?” Makoto repeated, “You mean Nikolai?”

Ryuji nodded. “Mmm, yeah, whatever.”

“You know,” Mona interjected from his comfy spot in Futaba’s arms, “I have taken Ryuji’s lack of intelligence for granted. He never fails to make me feel like a genius.”

“Really?” Futaba asked the cat quizzically, “I think I can feel my IQ lowering just being here.”

Yusuke rubbed his chin. “Hmm, interesting. Do you think you could describe the sensation?”

“Now, now,” Haru said, bearing her warm smile, “Let’s not give Ryuji a hard time over a simple mispronunciation.”

“Right?” Ryuji excitedly concurred, “Thank you.”

“Hey!” Whilst the group was conversing, Sojiro had approached. “Shouldn’t you guys be helping with the luggage?” asked the older man.
Ryuji leaned back, addressing Boss nonchalantly. “Nah, that’s why Sam pays all those grunts. Ain’t no way I’m doing any lifting in this cold.”

Sojiro shook his head irritably. “Tch, then what am I doing all this for?”

“Eh?” Ryuji scratched his chin. “I dunno.”

Futaba discretely chimed in. “Maybe it’s because you’re getting anxious since you have no purpose being here, and Sam is giving you a menial task to help you feel better about yourself.”

Sojiro scrunched his face. “Huh? What are you saying?”

“Uh,” Futaba quickly smiled, “Nevermind. He probably just wants to boss you around.”

Sojiro put his head in his hand as he grunted dismissively. Then Sam arrived with some better news. “Hello all,” he began, “It’s been a long trip, so I know you’re probably still tired. The heat’s on inside, and there are a couple rooms for sleeping: one for the girls and one for the boys plus the cat. Sojiro, you can sleep in the boys’ room if you prefer or you can room with me.”

Boss let out a sigh. “Well, I’d hate to ruin all the boys’ fun.”

I woke calmly amid my dreams as my ears were subjected to another chord from the poem for everyone’s soul. I rolled once again out of that dense, prison mattress and wandered aimlessly into the dimly lit chamber of Igor’s workstation. The grizzled being stared silently at me through the warm candlelight, wearing a contented smile. Though my understanding of Igor only seemed to diminish with each visit, the bizarre one still treated me with kind familiarity.

“Welcome back, Trickster,” Igor said.

I addressed him curtly. “Nice of you to check in again.”

“Indeed,” Igor replied, “Last time I granted you a new power, and it seems you have applied that to a surprising end.”

I glanced to the floor as I painstakingly recalled my previous Metaverse encounter with Makoto. “Ah, you mean touching the Personas.”

“Yes,” Igor continued, “Making your Personas tangible was a simple choice but an effective use of power. Even I was not anticipating that twist.”

“It didn’t seem to help us much,” I added.

Igor let out an unnerving chuckle. “The pathways of fate are many,” he said, “but they all lead to the same junctions. Allow me to say that you are still on a good path. Your choices are wise, and you have not failed yet, Trickster.” Igor’s energy slowly faded. “But I have called you here to address a more pressing danger… You have yet to face the most difficult challenges, Trickster. Do not neglect the bonds you have forged with your allies. For if you do, you will surely be met with defeat.”

“I won’t let them down,” I replied.

“Good. And do not forget where the strength of your heart lies. That is the key to overcoming all those who would stand against you in the name of evil.”

“Whatever’s going on, we will put an end to it.”
“Indeed,” Igor replied, smiling, “You never fail.”

On the dawn of the next day, we had to go through quite an ordeal to wake up. Our sleeping chambers were merely two bunk beds crammed between four wooden walls and an adjacent bathroom. Washing and getting dressed required some patience from each of us, although I was certain the girls were having a rougher time. Still, the anticipation of our nigh mission kept us all buzzing with excitement. I believe Yusuke was particularly hopeful since he had yet to reawaken his Persona, but we all had reasons.

Outside of our quarters were two larger rooms. The first was a dining area, complete with a minimalist kitchen, and the second contained the Metaverse tether which Samuel had mentioned. I left my room assuming that we would soon convene in the dining area and somehow found myself alone at an empty table. Regardless, I still had company.

“Greetings, Joker,” I heard to my surprise.

Akechi’s systems weren’t quite the same as in his other installations—he lacked the omnipresent red cameras. Yet he was still able to see and hear me in this room at least. Once my body had settled from the initial shock, I strummed my fingers on the tabled and acknowledged the voice.

“Hello, Akechi,” I coldly replied.

Akechi sounded nonetheless pleasant than his usual self. “Sam has gone out briefly to radio his associates and confirm some final details. He should return with breakfast shortly.”

I nodded slowly to the open air, but my thoughts quickly swept back to the excitement of the previous night. If I really wanted my relationship with Ann to be kept a secret, there was something I needed to say. “About the incident last night…”

“Incident?” Akechi repeated, “What incident?”

Not desiring to mince words, I continued, “Please keep that a secret.”

“Joker…” Akechi patronizingly addressed me, “I’m not one to openly discuss others’ personal lives. And if there’s one thing we both agree that I can do, it’s keep a secret.”

I exhaled a frustrated sigh. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” Akechi politely added, “We are allies now after all. I’ll leave the elaboration to Sam, but I will be providing oversight for your Metaverse excursions, so I’d like it if we could get along.”

“Don’t slow me down, and we’ll work together just fine.”

“Naturally,” replied Akechi, “You can rely on me.”

Having no significant opinion on Akechi’s devotion, I remained quiet. Ultimately, I felt little connection with the reconstructed intelligence, but I was tentatively accepting of his presence.

Before the dead silence could become awkward, Sam entered the cabin carrying a rustling box. He glanced at me saying, “Hey, I brought breakfast.” Then he dropped the cardboard box onto the table and pulled out a small pack with gray wrapping. “Ever had an MRE?” Sam asked with an energetic smile.
“What?” I replied.

Sam crooked his smile. “An MRE—a fully edible, pre-packaged meal. They’re mostly used by US soldiers.” He tossed one of the gray packages toward my spot, and it landed on the wooden table with a solid noise.

I grasped the unusual package and eyed it peculiarly. “This is what you’re feeding us?”

“Yeah,” Sam nodded, “Is there a problem with that?”

I set down the MRE unenthusiastically. “I don’t think Ryuji will like it very much.”

Sam crossed his arms and huffed proudly. “Screw Ryuji. We’re not on vacation. We’re in the middle of a fight.”

The closing of a door interrupted our brief squabble, and both of us turned as another joined the dining room. Makoto entered from the hallway, wearing her standard military slacks. I was impressed that despite the chaos of the past few days, she still presented herself with rigid discipline. Otherwise, her slight smile indicated an uplifted mood, and she began conversing casually as she approached.

She plucked a gray package from the table. “More MRE’s?” Makoto began with a sigh, “That’s going to get a few complaints…”

Sam rolled his eyes. “They’re not that bad…”

Makoto raised her brow as she returned the MRE. “We’ll see what the others have to say about that.”

Following a tumultuous breakfast—if you could even call a ceremonious opening of plastic bags a breakfast—Sam gathered our attention for one more group address. We were about to embark on a mission to uncover a Metaverse plot and rescue the unlawfully taken. The Phantom Thieves were reunited and soon to be fully engaged as with the operations of our heyday. Once again, we gathered to kindle that fighting spirit and formalize every rule and tactic that had yet to be spoken.

Sam stood at the head of the table and said, “So, I have presents for you all.” He placed a small box on the table and slid it to the middle. Inside, I saw tiny, crescent-shaped devices with a bulbous protrusion on one surface. “Those are the new Metaverse communicators,” Samuel explained, “I had to scramble the US team to manufacture these in time, so please be careful with them. They’ll allow us to communicate over large distances inside the Palace and radio messages back to the real world.”

Futaba clambered over the table with her petite body and grabbed one of the earpieces. “Ooh, cool!” she beamed, “Now I can tease Sojiro even while we’re working.”

The man in question was propped against the wall, but he stirred upon hearing his name. “Please don’t,” he sighed.

Sam chuckled. “Actually, Sojiro won’t be handling base communications if we can help it. Akechi should be able to monitor our situation without any assistance and answer any questions we have.”

The whole team was somewhat unsettled by the news, but Haru was the first to speak. “Oh, how… helpful… of him…”

Futaba wrinkled up her face. “You mean I’m gonna have to listen to this guy the whole time we’re in there?”
As the others subdued their discomfort, Ryuji made a bold suggestion. “Hey, Sam!” he started, “Can’t you like… change Akechi’s voice or somethin’ to make this a little less awkward?”

Akechi emitted a small laugh, but Sam was not so amused. “Heh, that would actually be quite expensive to engineer,” he said, “And besides… Akechi’s voice has a bit of a pleasant ring to it, don’t you think?”

Mona shook his head. “It seems that even Samuel has fallen to the charms of the ace detective.”

Ryuji slouched in his seat “Tch, more like ass detective.”

“Ass detective?” Futaba repeated, “Oh, that reminds me of this one comic…”

Makoto quickly interrupted our enthusiastic otaku. “Uh, now’s not the time to discuss such things…”

“If I may butt in for a second,” Akechi interjected. He made a brief throat-clearing noise as the group gave him their indefinite attention. “I know this is not an ideal situation for you all. To be truthful, it is uncomfortable for me also. Having to exist with the knowledge of the person I used to be is not easy. I’m sure that most of you will never be able to accept me for anything more than a despicable fiend. Indeed, I was quite the wretch towards the end of my previous life. However, if you allow me, I promise I will do everything I can to repent for the crimes I’ve committed.”

The group wavered uncertainly, glancing at one another, but Ann soon asked, “What do you think, leader?”

Hearing the voice of my hidden lover, I released a slow breath. My stake in Akechi’s business was nonexistent, so I only cared for the inconvenience it would be to reject him. “I’m sure he won’t be a problem.”

“Alright, then if there are no objections,” Makoto added, “Akechi will act as our comms manager.”

“Wonderful,” Akechi replied, “I promise I will work diligently for every bit of trust you grant me.”

“Ahh, quit your sappy whinin’!” Ryuji exclaimed, “You’re on the team. Ain’t you happy?”

“Actually, happiness is not really something I experience anymore,” Akechi softly bemoaned.

Ryuji held his head against the table. “Oh,” he growled, “for cryin’ out loud.”

“Perhaps we should move on,” Yusuke clearly stated.

Sam gave him a nod. “Agreed. Next, I thought I should offer one more opportunity for any of you to back out of the operation. It goes without saying that this will be exceedingly dangerous, and those without Personas will be relatively defenseless.” Sam straightened his back. “I think you all should reaffirm your intentions. I don’t want there to be any regrets on the battlefield.”

Mona then abruptly leapt onto the table from his position beside me. “Well, I guess that’s my cue,” he said as he sat near the center. “To be honest, I don’t really care what happens to those scum bags we put behind bars, but the people behind this clearly have a darker motive, and I can’t turn a blind eye to that.” The cat smiled meekly to himself. “I am a being of that realm after all, so it’s kind of my responsibility to keep the Metaverse in balance. We’ve all seen the sort of damage that abusing its power can cause, so I’m committed to stopping it… no matter what.”

“Mona’s right,” Futaba added. “These people are using the cognitive world to do whatever they want, and that’s going to hurt people.” She downcast her face and sighed. “It’s just like what Shido
did to my mom before… We can’t let that happen to anyone else even if it means putting ourselves in harm’s way to do that.”

Sam gave Futaba a solemn acknowledgment and then turned to the next one. “Miss Okumura?”

Haru glared downward and held her hand near her chest. “I’ve made my choice,” she said, “I am a Phantom Thief, and I will stop at nothing until every unjust human has been punished.” She turned her eyes up and gave Sam a stalwart gaze. “That goes doubly for anyone who would use the Metaverse to harm another.”

“Well said,” Yusuke nodded in response. “Even though my Persona has not yet manifest, my other self would not allow me to turn away from those in suffering. My spirit shall not be crushed. Though my body may break, the enemy would have to utterly destroy me before I could be cast aside.”

Makoto chuckled quietly. “I see you all are still as passionate as ever… I, on the other hand, wouldn’t know what to do with myself if I turned back now. They have my sister, after all, and I would give everything I have to get her back. Even if you all left with Sam and went home, I’d still find a way in by myself.”

“Well, ya don’t gotta worry about that,” Ryuji quickly responded with a smile, “You know me—I’m good for knockin’ some sense into a few shitty people anytime.” He leaned back in his chair with a smug grin and propped up his legs.

Ann laughed at his simple words. “I suppose that about sums up my feelings on the situation too.”

I nodded, glancing around the table. “Seems we’re all in agreement.”

“Seeing that it was your decision that brought us here, yes, I’d say we are,” Ann cheerily added.

I smiled back at her and chuckled humbly. “I didn’t really decide anything. I was just following Ryuji.”

Ryuji glanced at me. “Huh? What do you mean? I’ve been lost since we were in France.”

Makoto sighed. “I don’t have any trouble believing that. I doubt Ryuji could even point out Moscow on a map.”

“Eh… Uh…” Ryuji fumbled with his words as he thought, “Well, uh, it’s north, right?”

“Yes, but north of what?” Makoto prompted.

“Uh… mmm… uh, Finland?”

“Ryuji,” Ann addressed him heatedly, “Russia isn’t even north of Finland! And I should know—I used to live there.”

Sam groaned aloud as the conversation diverged further from the subject. He popped another of his sweet chews into his mouth before seizing the discussion once more. “Ahem… moving on… I did have a team perform reconnaissance around our entry point. For their own safety, they were only inside for a few minutes, but they did report seeing several structures near the entrance. I’m not sure exactly how big Nikolai’s cognition is overall, but we can start our search for the nexus there.”

For a moment, the room fell quiet, but Sam placed his hands in his jacket pockets and soon continued. “I also brought the equipment you all tested the other day. Thought the extra firepower might come in handy.”
Ryuji sat up eagerly. “Alright! Just point me to the targets! This is gonna be good…”

Again, Makoto sighed at his antics. “You’re way too excited for this,” she said, “We’ll be battling live enemies this time, you know?”

“Hey! Hey!” Morgana suddenly addressed Sam, “Please tell me you brought a gun for me!”

“You too?” Makoto somberly added.

Sam showed a smug grin. “Well, since you were so adamant, I had the boys in R&D whip up a little something just for you.”

“Hmph,” Mona puffed out his chest. “Glad to see someone recognizes talent when they see it.”

Futaba quickly latched onto the cat, pinching him around the neck. “Careful, Mona. Don’t get cocky.”

“Excuse me,” Mona whined, “I can’t help being this skilled. It comes naturally.”

Futaba just rolled her eyes as she rustled his fur. “Uuhh…”

“Anywho,” Sam continued, “That should cover about everything. The tether—our entry point—is in the next room.” Sam motioned past the far end of the table. “Gather there when you’re ready. We know the objective, but I’ll be counting on you all to lead the way.”

[MISSION START!]

After the meeting had adjourned, the team gradually made their way into the adjacent room. We were all very familiar with brief meetings before an infiltration, but I believed returning to full-fledged Phantom Thievery remained a foreign idea to most of us. My friends exchanged charged expressions of anticipation and gravity, anxiousness and excitement. As our group meandered around the table, Sam quietly pulled me aside.

“Hey,” he said, gently prodding my shoulder, “I almost forgot, but I brought this for you.” Sam plopped a weighty piece of metal into my hand. Noting the glowing stripes, I immediately recognized it as one of Samuel’s Metaverse guns. “It’s standard issue for my agents. Thought it might cause fewer blackouts than that experimental model.” I ran my fingers of the pistol’s sturdy frame to appreciate its texture. It wasn’t a fancy weapon, but it didn’t need to be. I looked up again and thanked Samuel. He nodded appreciatively before striding into the next room.

As I waited briefly in the doorway, I carefully tucked the gun away on my person. The others slowly walked inside, but everyone maintained a high energy. Ryuji and Morgana definitely had the most excitement although Haru and Yusuke were not far behind. Despite that, I think Yusuke had the heaviest expectations for himself next to Makoto. She, of course, felt a grave responsibility to her sister, and that had manifest in her straightforward attitude. Surprisingly, Futaba was the hardest to read with her hyper-focused expressions. Still, her eyes shifted from her handy laptop to the Metaverse equipment, showing she was clearly invested.

Finally, Ann walked through the doorway and gave my stray hand a gentle squeeze as she did. She was asking to be caught at this point, but feeling the tingling warmth on my palm, I didn’t mind. Beyond my obligations to partake in this mission, I anticipated an evolution of intimacy between myself and my friends. We had reawakened bonds that were soon to be steeped in camaraderie and re-forged in the blazes of combat. I certainly wasn’t losing anything to have a little fun with Ann in the meantime.
Merging with the group, I stepped toward the middle of the room where the bulky Metaverse tether resided. The tether was a hefty, black block approaching chest height, and several intimidatingly complex control panels lined the outer faces. Sam was hunched over the machine, tapping intermittently at one of the screens.

Yusuke asked him, “What are you doing?”

Sam grunted uncomfortably from his crouching position. “Just… checking the settings,” he replied, “This thing takes a lot of energy to keep running. One thing goes wrong and we’d all be stranded.”

“And what if the power does go out?” Haru tepidly added.

“Well, Akechi should have no trouble keeping the generator going,” Sam said as he stood, “Especially with Sakura-san here to help.”

Futaba shook her head. “Uh, is that supposed to make us feel better?”

“Mmmm, no,” Sam replied, “It’s supposed to make me feel better.”

“Can we begin the operation now?” Makoto interjected, “We’ve wasted enough time already.”

Sam let out a long sigh. “Fine… fine…” He unceremoniously stuck out a finger and poked one of the machine’s buttons.

Eight Thieves and their overseer were dumped into the Metaverse. I blinked, and the dusty, wooden cabin we were just inside had vanished, replaced by a wide snowbank next to the decrepit country road. The sweeping cold returned to greet me and promptly drew my attention to my unfavorable attire. Thankfully, my lengthy overcoat and vest had some natural insulation, but the others were less fortunate.

Ryuji jumped at a sudden gust of wind and nearly fell over as he sunk ankle deep into the snow. “You’ve gotta be shittin’ me!” he cried, “This Goddamn cold again?” He forcefully pulled his legs from the snow, but his movement only caused more wet globs to stick to his black pants.

“You think… you’ve got it bad?” Ann shrieked. She had her arms clasped over her exposed chest. “This suit wasn’t made for this weather!”

Ryuji grimaced, forcing himself to trudge through the snowbank. “Ha! That’s what you get for makin’ fun of me yesterday.”

While Ryuji and Ann fumbled their way to the clearing on the road, Makoto mumbled quietly. “Maybe we should’ve brought some extra clothes…”

I saw Sam glance at her and remark. “Hmm… speaking of clothes, I think I imagined your outfit a bit differently.”

Makoto’s eyes narrowed as she glanced back at him. “And what exactly did you imagine?”

“Well,” Sam shrugged, “Something with more armor, I suppose. Although, the spikes do fit your personality.” He stretched out his hand as to touch one of Makoto’s shoulder nodules.

“Don’t!” she reprimanded him, flicking her hands up defensively, “…touch that.”

With both of them staring awkwardly at each other, Futaba abruptly appeared between them. “There it was! The spike!” she exclaimed, “Did you see it!? Did you see it, Mona!?” She glanced to our
knee-high friend.

Mona scurried easily over the snow. “I saw,” he said, nonchalantly humoring the girl.

Futaba clenched her trembling hands in excitement as she walked toward the road. “I swear, Queen is scary! Sometimes, I get chills just being near her.”

The woman in question somberly lowered her head while the others split off. Sam scratched his face timidly. “Did she just call you ‘Queen’?” he asked.

“Ah, I almost forgot,” Makoto said, “We use code names inside the Metaverse. There’s Joker, Mona, Skull, Panther, Fox, Oracle, Noir, and I’m Queen. You’ll need a code name too actually.”

“Wait, what?” Sam gave her a puzzled look.

“Perhaps we should call him ‘Uncle’,” Yusuke suggested, “It seems appropriate.”

Sam sighed. “Would you stop with the American stereotyping already?”

“Hmm, maybe ‘Corporate’?” Makoto continued, “No, that’s probably too cynical. What do you think, Joker?”

Watching Sam carefully, I remembered the few tussles we had shared and concocted an appropriate code name. “Squire.”

“Squire?” Sam repeated, “Really?”

“Huh, I like it,” Makoto meekly appraised, “It fits his purpose and aesthetic.”

Sam shook his head and sighed. “Fine, whatever.”

Before I could prod our overseer, my eyes were pulled upward as a great rumbling noise echoed from above. The sky became deafening as two black shapes moved rapidly overhead. Though there was a great distance separating us, I could see the sharp wings and finely hones tips of two jets rocketing through the clouds. The others observed the foreign objects, sharing looks of doubt while the thundering noise muted all communications. The planes continued with their suppressing sounds for another minute, but most of us were too confused to muster a reaction.

I stepped beside Makoto and granted her a reaffirming look of confidence. “Are you ready for this?”

Makoto glanced at me and nodded. “Of course. Lead the way.”

Returning a mild grin, I led the rest of our group away from the snowbank and onto the dusted roadway. Where a modest road had existed in reality, a craggy strip of unmaintained asphalt jutted through the white mounds. The sky was overcast, but enough light passed through the elevated clouds to see that the surrounding lands were completely covered in snow. On the horizon, only a few splashes of color could be differentiated from the encircling white backdrop: a ghostly incarnation of our Metaverse tether; some dark, distant mountains; and an outcropping of buildings further down the road.

As I glanced toward the structures, I noted several shadows—one of which reached a bit higher than the others. Yusuke also took note of the distant town. “Those buildings…” He held up his hands and framed the faint structures. “Looks like a picturesque village.”

“Those must be the buildings that Samuel mentioned,” Haru quickly added.
“Ahem,” Sam gave a slight cough, “It’s ‘Squire’ now.”

Haru returned a delighted smile. “Ah, I see.” However, the other Thieves appeared indifferent to Samuel’s assertion.

“What do you say, Joker?” Yusuke continued, “Shall we investigate those structures?”

“Seems like a good place to start,” I responded.

Ryuji knocked his snow-covered shoes on the pavement. “Well, there sure ain’t anything around here.”

Sam gazed at the distant town and sighed. “It’s a long way… We’d better get walking.”

Ann shivered as she considered the harsh journey. “Uh, nah,” she said, “I’d rather take the car.”

“Umm… car?” Sam repeated.

I glanced at Mona, who placed his paws firmly on his hips and gave his neck a crack. “Ah, looks like this is my moment.”

“Are you alright, Squire?” asked Haru, “You look a little pale.”

I glanced to my side where Sam was seated and noted his sickly appearance. Being inside the bouncing Morgana van, contracting car sickness was a prime possibility, but Sam soon assuaged those fears.

“I just…” With a sweaty sheen on his forehead, Sam glanced back and forth across the cab. “He’s a fucking car.”

Despite his strong language, the reaction from the vehicle’s occupants was tepid at best. Regardless, Futaba did chime in from her seat at the front beside Makoto and Ann. “You get used to it.”

“Can we just appreciate that Mona can produce hot air?” Ann added in a light stupor. She leaned back over the front seat, exhaling intensely and allowing her pigtails to dangle over my lap. “I think feeling is starting to return to my face.” She closed her eyes and began rubbing her cheeks rhythmically.

“Glad I could be of service,” a disembodied Mona voice responded.

“Oh, God,” Sam flinched, “He can talk while he’s a car too?”

“And purr,” I replied.

Sam looked at me in disbelief. “Wha… Where’s his mouth?”

Yusuke, who was seated in the far back, leaned forward and said, “That is a question I’ve learned to stop asking.”

“Oh, dear…” Sam breathed a long sigh and returned his gaze forward. “You know,” chuckling, he continued, “I think I might actually be sick. Not to offend, but are we sure uh… Queen is the best driver of the vehicular cat?”

“It’s not my driving,” Makoto quickly replied, “This road is just bumpy.” The car promptly gave
another jostle as if to confirm.

Ryuji also offered his opinion from the rear seat. “Yeah, and there’s no way you’re gettin’ me to put my hands on that steering wheel. I mean, who knows what part of Mona’s body that corresponds to!”

“I take offense to that, Skull,” interjected Mona, “If you were a cat who transformed into a bus, I’d put my hands on your steering wheel.”

Ryuji squirmed as a burst of giggles went up from Futaba. “Ew, dude,” Ryuji responded, “don’t say shit like that.”

Sam laughed uneasily. “On second thought, I think Queen’s doing an excellent job.”

As we drove along peacefully, my mind began to wander about the cab. Considering the volatile emotions I had experienced over the course of a few days, the breadth of my concerns was unsurprisingly vast. Still, I forced myself to focus on the task at hand and eventually began staring out the window. The rolling, white hills had a mesmerizing beauty to them as one bled into another. Wispy billows of sparkling snow danced over the rises in an inspiring display of deathly cold. My eyes careened upward to the shrouded ranges beyond detailed visibility, and the mountains beckoned to me with offers of adventure and peril. Yet, as I daydreamed, my pupils caught a flicker of motion hidden in the horizon.

I pulled myself a tad away from the window and refocused my eyes on the faint motion. Once my mind had comprehended the image, I realized that I was staring directly into a face, one staring right back. A quick blink of the illusory visage betrayed Ann’s characteristic lashes, and so I coyly locked my own eyes on her reflection. Moments later, Ann realized that I had noticed her and abruptly averted her gaze. The idea that Ann was still reluctant to be caught looking at me amused my senses, but her act was reassuring of her genuine affections. I waited, staring into the window, and her eyes slowly returned to me with a more passionate expression.

I lost track of my thoughts as Ann and I shared some informal communication, and soon Makoto was stating that we had arrived. I had to shamefully pry myself away from that window in order to get out. Nevertheless, the team disembarked from the Mona van and was greeted by a startling view. If anyone had given the area a swift glance, one would have seen a typical, snow-covered town and moved on. However, that false impression only heightened my unease. The white drifts of snow which followed us down the road from the outskirts did not match the darker piles blocking the storefronts along the street. The chilling air was taken with the scent of char and smoke, and flaky chunks of ash fluttered across the road. As I stepped forward to investigate further, the brick wall on the building beside me abruptly halted to reveal an empty, bombed-out husk within. Ashen powder poured from the rubble—from windowsills and broken doorways—and flooded the streets with gray snow. The town was completely lifeless, and everything had been coated in a fine layer of ash like a lathering of monochrome paint.

As Morgana recomposed himself, the team surveyed the town nervously. Haru quietly asked, “What happened here?”

Ryuji kicked a broken chunk of brick as he wandered down the street. “Looks like somethin’ exploded.”

While looking at a shattered storefront, Makoto stooped over to examine a charred, black stain. “This is all a part of our target’s cognition,” she stated, “But why all this destruction? What could it mean?”
“I keep telling you,” Sam added, “Nikolai is insane. He’s a warmonger and wants to bring the world as close to total annihilation as he can.”

“So, he is the probable cause of this destruction then,” Yusuke surmised, “Would he perhaps be hidden somewhere in this town?” He turned to Sam.

“I don’t know. You guys are the professionals,” Sam replied, “But answer me this: would a Palace ruler build the pinnacle of his pride on a heap of ashes?”

Yusuke relaxed his posture. “Well, when you put it that way, it does seem unlikely.”

Ann struck a thoughtful pose as she added, “Thinking back, most Palaces were centered in the most impressive structures inside of the cognition.”

“We should look around,” Makoto said, “Try to find any clues that would point us toward the core of Nikolai’s cognition.”

As the others nodded in agreement, Haru gazed over the town. “Say,” she began, “Do you guys see that?” She pointed up and across town to the tallest building in the area.

“That tower?” Mona asked.

“It’s a clock tower,” Samuel observed.

Haru smiled politely. “Maybe we could see what’s going on from up there.”

“Works for me,” Mona lauded.

“Ah, it’s so far though,” Ryuji observed, “Can we use the car?” He shook with the bitter wind. “Gah! It’s still effin’ cold!”

“Are you kidding me?” Mona retorted, “There’s way too much rubble! It’d be worse than the choppy road we were just on.”

Ryuji threw his head back. “Ugh, dammit…”

Ann laughed. “Come on, Skull. You can tough it out.”

Giving his head a slap, Ryuji glared back at her. “Excuse me? Weren’t you just braggin’ about how cold you were?”

“Actually…” Ann posed confidently, “I’m feeling a little hot right now.” She gave her narrow collar a quick tug.

“That’s just because you were hoggin’ all the air in the front!” Ryuji snapped.

“Oh, yeah right!” Ann shouted back, “You’re just going soft!”

Ryuji inhaled dramatically. “You…!”

Amid the tumult, Futaba gave me an exasperated look. “Uh-oh, Joker, do something!”

Skimming over my bickering friends, I simply stepped forward. “Let’s go,” I ordered. The others were a bit dumbfounded, but the team soon fell into place, and we strolled toward the tower.

Walking down the scorched lane, the sturdy brick façade was slowly replaced by burnt and
blackened craters of destruction. What few front-facing walls remained veiled smoldering heaps of stone and ash, but most of the lots had less structure than rubble. The derelict city blocks were like cavernous catacombs that channeled the cold winds of the pseudo-Russian tundra into an eerie howl. Naturally, the others clumped closer together as we approached the looming tower—both to navigate the clogged city streets and to settle their frightened nerves. Despite my constant, stoic mannerisms, the haunting ruins did imprint a foreboding sense upon me but only as an inkling of the greater cognition.

When the clock tower was one city block away, another noise overpowered the somber cries of the town; however, this sound did alert us to an imminent danger. A familiar rumbling grew in our ears more rapidly than before. All of us glanced fearfully to the sky as a pair of jets flew overhead for the second time.

Ryuji clamped his hands over his ears. “What the hell are those things!?” he shouted, “So damn loud!”

“They look like military fighters!” Sam observed.

Makoto glanced turned to him and asked, “Do you think Nikolai brought military weapons into his cognition!?”

“Uh, I don’t know!” Sam replied, “It could be possible! He has the technology!”

While the others flinched from the overwhelming noise, Futaba adjusted her glasses and continued tracking the jets. “Uh, guys!” she suddenly exclaimed.

Looking back to the sky, Futaba’s point of contention was obvious. One jet had now split from the other and was banking toward the horizon. As the fighter screamed through the air, it flew nearer to the city and left a thin grey line in its wake. Soon, the jet had turned around completely, aligning itself with the street that we occupied. I froze in horror like I was watching a bullet travel down the barrel of a gun toward me.

A supersonic shockwave wafted over us, prompting several screams from my teammates. Nevertheless, we all stared in terror while the fighter jet disassembled in midflight. The roaring jet engines curved forward, and the wings slid toward the cockpit. The fighter’s metallic frame—which I had only begun to mentally describe—folded apart like a chain of dominoes and revealed multiple extending limbs. As the aerial craft slowed before us, the jet’s form resembled a humanoid figure more than a plane. The fragmented wings locked into place around a steel-molded face—forming some bizarre, foreign headdress, and the engines thundered soundly onto the ground like two giant feet. Two more metal appendages linked to the craft’s sides like arms, yet with an imposing arsenal of rockets and explosives lining its body, the automaton didn’t seem to need them.

Now that the noise had subsided, Sam said, “Nevermind… that’s not a jet.”

“Is this for real!?” Futaba squealed, “It’s like some kind of anime mecha!”

A loud, metal snap echoed through the street as the giant machine opened loaded missile ports on its shoulders.

“Holy shit! It’s real!” Ryuji shouted. He glanced back quickly to bark at the others. “Oracle! Squire! You guys should run for cover!” The businessman and our navigator both nodded and promptly complied. Turning to the other side, Ryuji shouted, “Fox! Noir! You guys should probably do the same.”
“Understood!” said Fox, “We’ll hang back for now.”

Haru winced, saying, “We’re sorry…”

“It’s fine!” Mona quickly added, “Keeping you guys safe is way more important right now.” Seeing their presence would hinder the fight, Yusuke and Haru retreated from the open roadway and left five of us to face the opponent.

Turning back to the lumbering machine, I was surprised to hear it speak. A feminine voice bellowed from deep within the automaton, saying, “Trespassers, none are permitted to walk these corrupted grounds by edict of the master. As such, you must submit or be annihilated.”

Makoto stepped to the front line beside Ann, Ryuji, and me. Transfixing her intense gaze on our challenger, she did not waver as she spoke. “So, this is the power that Nikolai’s cognition has to offer.”

“It’s gotta be some kinda mega shadow, right?” Ryuji said with a nervous jitter, “Normal shadows aren’t that big.”

“Exactly,” Makoto replied. She raised a tightened fist. “The faster we take down this one, the easier it’ll be to tear through the rest of the Palace.”

“What!? Ryuji turned to her in shock, “Are we looking at the same thing?”

“Outlaws!” cried the robotic shadow, “Lay down your arms at once, or you will be baptized with fire!”

“Listen to it talk,” Ann hissed, “It’s like it doesn’t even know why we’re here… even after they took Makoto’s sister.” She flexed her fingers at her sides. “We should remind these shadows who we are.”

Mona appeared on the other side of Ryuji, drawing his saber. He readied his sword and said, “I couldn’t agree more, Panther.”

“It’s time to go all out,” Makoto added as she peeled off her mask. Johanna rolled up beside her. “We’ll run right through them until they break!”

Glancing around the group, Ryuji gave a grim smirk. “Well, shit…” He pounded a fist into his other palm and cracked his knuckles. “I can’t let you guys outdo me.”

“Ignorant impudence!” the shadow roared, “Very well! You shall have the full strength of my arsenal!”

[THE PHANTOM THIEVES -VS- MiG-URT]

A blast of puffy, white smoke emerged from the mecha’s shoulder ports as a flurry of rockets swarmed to our location. Like little, fiery barbs, the missiles shot at us. Ryuji yelped out a warning and dove toward the curb. “Get down!”

The group splintered while the bombs burst around us. Mona and Queen were quick enough to maneuver through the barrage, and Ryuji found solace behind some piled bricks. I—on the other hand—flew backward over a rocket aimed straight for my body. The projectile exploded as I sailed through the air and granted me a boost to finish my backward handspring. Ann also managed to dodge a projectile; however, her rocket placements were not as lucky. One explosion knocked her from her feet, and another sent her flying.
Positioned squarely at the rear of our company, I rolled elegantly over the pavement to cushion Ann’s landing. She hurled and spun, but I moved adeptly. Ann plummeted into my arms just as I had arrived, and I was able to prevent any serious damage. Lightly shell-shocked, Ann glanced at me in surprise before promptly hopping to her feet. She flashed me a quick smile and said, “Thanks.”

I glanced back toward our enemy where now the smoke was clearing. I saw Makoto skid through the dust, emitting bright sparks from Johanna’s tracks. Mona also bounced spryly from the rubble and returned to center stage. Makoto shot him a contemplative glance before shouting, "Mona! With me!"

The cat turned to his partner with a brief, uncertain reaction, but he soon embraced his instincts and leapt aside Queen, mounting her back like a stunt rider. Johanna screeched ahead while the rest of us regrouped in her wake. Undaunted by the looming beast, Mona and Queen zoomed down the road in the shadow of the giant mecha. The machine, however, did not hesitate to assault its oncoming foes.

In a slow, ungainly maneuver, the mechanized shadow raised one of its engine-powered feet and emitted a fiery trail from its heel. Scorching flames streaked across the roadway as the flamethrower beam chased Johanna from the pavement. Queen swerved her bike to avoid the incinerating blaze and banked off a collapsed wall at the road’s edge. Johanna let loose a raging howl as she left the ground, bounding toward the extended mecha limb. The motorbike swiftly collided with the shadow’s leg and the whole unit careened unsteadily. In response, the shadow gradually lowered its leg, but Makoto gave everything she had to maintain her bike’s grip.

As the smooth metal appendage became increasingly steep, Morgana took his cue. He sprung from his place on Makoto’s shoulder and ascended the mechanical behemoth with his feline dexterity. Mona clawed his way up the plated torso while Makoto eased Johanna back to solid ground. From afar, I watched Mona move along the vertical surface like a lion sprinting after its prey. He flipped onto the mecha’s shoulders with energy to spare and stared down his target as he called forth his Persona.

Ryuji and Ann shouted cheerful cries, and I had to grin. Ryuji added, “Give it to ‘em, Mona!”

Standing atop the broad shoulder plates, Morgana and Zorro drew their blades in parallel. Mona lifted his blade in preparation for a thrusting attack, and Zorro pulled his rapier back. A wild shriek echoed across the battlefield as Mona lunged forth in unison with his Persona. He cried, “Zorro, show your might!” The blade of the legendary outlaw surged with violent, cognitive energy, and Zorro thrust out his weapon for a keen attack.

Another metallic noise rang through the area like someone had smacked a bell with a hammer. Zorro’s blade ricocheted off the mecha’s steel skull, wobbling flimsily from the impact. The precision strike had left little more than a dent in the shadow’s thick plating, and our excitement shortly died.

Ann’s eyes rolled back in her head while her face froze in a flabbergasted smile. “Eh… maybe it was too soon to start celebrating.”

Mona shot a startled glance at the mecha’s undamaged head, yet he continued to hold his ground. The shadow, however, had grown tired of the feline’s presence. The unsightly, metal head slowly rotated ninety degrees to face Morgana, and its bizarre headdress suddenly split—the wings pointing and focusing on Mona. Zorro’s body faded into the ether as Mona sprung into action. Glowing, orange lasers burst from the wingtips, searing the length of the mecha’s shoulder and chasing Morgana into the sky.

Mona somersaulted towards the weaponized head and readied his crooked blade. With the lasers
following closely, he needed to be very precise with his movements. Mona vaulted overtop the head, between the wings, and his blade slid expertly into the joint of one wing and the skull itself. A loud pop ensued as the lasers dissipated and the targeted wing piece fell away in a brilliant explosion.

Ryuji gave an exuberant shout, seeing the massive shadow writhe angrily. Still, the mecha jerked its body back and forth mercilessly while sparks poured from its head. Mona dangled from the edge of the metallic scalp, but his tiny claws could not grip the polished surface for long under such duress. The cat soon slipped from the giant’s head and plummeted toward the ground. While he twisted and tumbled through the air, Mona collided with the robotic body several times, slowing his descent. Eventually, Mona smacked onto the cold, rough street pavement and collapsed from exhaustion.

Once the shadow mecha had dealt with our tiniest ally, the giant machine took a sturdier stance to perform varied physical attacks. Ryuji stepped forward, an urgent look on his face. “C’mon!” he shouted, “We gotta do somethin’!”

Nodding to our friend, Ann and I followed Ryuji’s charge, and we all sprinted toward our downed companion. The mecha was watching Mona carefully as it raised its fist for a devastating blow. Naturally, Ryuji was the first one there and the first to act. He pulled aside his mask and lunged with his whole body for the counterattack.

“Let’s go, Captain!” Ryuji’s Persona crackled forth on a flaming surf and channeled their momentum into a vicious corkscrew. As the shadow’s fist came down on Mona’s pitiful body, Captain Kidd struck with a bright, blistering mass of kinetic energy. The mecha recoiled with a mighty crack, and its arm plating splintered into glistening metal fragments. Ryuji landed soundly over Morgana and stopped to guard him, but he had to crack a smug grin as he watched the giant shadow stumble a pace backward.

With Ryuji holding the flank, Ann and I continued the rush forward for a follow-up attack. I turned to Ann and shouted, “I’m going up! You good?”

Ann smiled and replied aptly, “Don’t worry! I got this!”

Still jogging at a brisk pace, I pulled my mask away and spread my arms as Arsene carried me away. We ascended rapidly with each flap of Arsene’s blackened wings, yet the shadow was enormous. I glanced back down and watched the frantic action below.

Ann approached the mecha’s sturdy leg, unfurling her whip to strike. She raised her hand and curled her arm around her head so that the cord would deliver a brutal lash. The whip cracked noisily as it thrashed against the mecha leg’s thick plating, but despite the unseen power of each blow, Ann’s physical attacks did little damage to the enemy.

The shadow now focused its attention solely on Ann since she was clearly exposed. Kicking up one foot, the mecha swept its leg across the frontline and belched a rippling blaze over the street. Ann could scarcely recover from her vigorous attack before the swelling flames engulfed her. The bright blazes of yellow and orange swallowed her whole, and the asphalt crackled with intense heat.

As I gazed from above, I had to temper my excitement for knowing what would come next. The mechanized shadow returned to its proper footing and watched the dwindling fires carefully. A shimmering burst caught both our attention as the blaze parted, encircling Ann. With one hand on her mask and the other clenched tightly before her, Ann showed a wicked smile through the fading flames. The fires had done no harm to her, and now her eyes shone with frightful intensity. With the illustrious Carmen at her side, Ann stretched out her hand to take command of the inferno.

“Carmen, make ’em dance,” Ann said with glee. The Persona obeyed with a decisive snap of her
wrists, unleashing molten hellfire. The road itself fractured and cracked as plumes of pyroclastic
devastation ruptured the earth. Lava spewed onto the roadway with tremendous force, and the metal
armor protecting the shadow began to groan. While the mecha urged its legs to escape the molten
pools, the bulky frames only sunk farther into the viscous earth.

Meanwhile, I had risen above the shadow, and I commanded Arsene to glide over it. We swiftly
coasted towards the mecha until I released Arsene and dove at the machine on my own accord. My
cloak wafting through the air, I balanced myself for a soft landing; however, the shadow responded
suddenly in its panic. The head swiveled around to me as I touched down and quickly fired its
remaining laser. Instinctively, I flipped over the beam and drew my gun. Each laser bolt warranted
another flip, and yet I easily dodged the shadow’s tracking. A single retaliatory shot from my
weapon desynced the firing mechanism as it collided with the wing’s joint. I took the opportunity to
displace myself, so I leapt over the mecha’s cranium. Swinging back around, I took aim and
unloaded my firearm into the weakened component.

The other wing fell away as the joint snapped and tore, leaving the head completely defenseless.
Although it could do nothing, the mecha’s head turned to eye me. I yanked off my mask and
commanded Arsene to strike.

My Persona moved like a blur, rending a gash in the protective metal dome. I approached quickly
and clung to the side of the skull while the head jittered sporadically, and sparks flew from its
innards. Glancing into the darkened hollow, I saw masses of frayed wires and complex,
computerized components. With the inner workings exposed, I plunged my hand into the vitals and
grabbed hold of everything I could grasp. My gloved hand emerged in a sparky explosion with a
bundle of cords torn from within.

I cast the useless mass of circuitry aside and vaulted from the shadow’s head. The protective dome
now surged with unstable electrical energy as the damaged mechanisms released uncontrolled volts.
Concluding that my assault was complete, I fell from the mecha’s shoulders and embraced a rapid
descent.

Once I had settled on the ground, Ann’s fury was just beginning to cool. With hardening rock
contracting around its legs and its brain cracked, the mecha teetered listlessly. Ann gave me a
cautious glance, and we both retreated to where Ryuji and Mona were stationed. Then the four of us
tensely observed the unbalanced machine.

“That thing’s still standing,” Ryuji keenly denoted. Mona—who had recovered from his nap—also
gazed uneasily at the giant shadow.

Ann leveled her vision on the roadway and promptly redirected our attention. “Look!” she cried,
pointing down the street.

As we glanced to the road, I spied Makoto approaching rapidly with much anticipation. Apparently,
she had managed to flank our enemy in the chaos, and we soon realized her purpose. Makoto sped
toward the exposed foe and carried the momentum for a decisive blow. Johanna blistered across the
smoking crags and struck one of the mecha’s legs with a powerful shockwave. The brittle ground
cracked as the giant mecha tipped backward, yet the shadow remained standing.

With Makoto now skidding to us, Ryuji decided to bear the responsibility of finishing the enemy.
“C’mon, Mona,” he quickly shouted, “We’ve gotta take this thing down for good!”

Mona nodded in agreement, and the pair rushed forward to ensure that the enemy would fall. Mona
leapt into the air and called upon his Persona while Ryuji readied his own. Then Morgana slashed at
the air, summoning ethereal cutters by Zorro’s edge. The blades of air struck the leaning mecha
squarely in the chest, and Ryuji was quick to increase the pressure. Ordering a bombardment on the shadow, a gurgling ball of lightning launched from the Captain’s canon. The explosive energy speedily dispersed across the machine’s bulk, and the shadow could no longer maintain its balance.

While we five Phantom Thieves steadied ourselves, the mecha came to a resounding plummet, shaking the earth for a moment. The metal husk laid silent, but the five of us still watched tentatively. Shadows normally faded into nothing when defeated after all.

Ryuji hunched over and huffed from exertion. Mona also breathed quickly, but he mustered, “Did we get it? Is it done?”

Ann and I carefully scanned the quiet body while Makoto gazed sternly from her bike. The whole area had gone mute aside from a rustling wind, and the cold air chafed against the heat of my skin.

Ann sighed. “Maybe it’s…”

“Bahahahahahaha!” A starling laugh echoed from the shadow’s remains. “Oh, miserable outlaws! Do you truly covet your fruitless lives so desperately?”

The ground trembled as the shadow gripped the earth with its massive, steel arms. It tore through the road to sit upright. Though the head was battered and the body damaged, the hulking shadow sustained an intimidating presence. Chuckling, it said, “I shall take special care to expunge you from existence.”

The metal plates covering the mecha’s chest suddenly split open and folded away from the inner cavity. My friends recoiled warily as spinning Gatling guns emerged from the hidden compartment alongside a salvo of explosive rockets. I could barely react to the alarming noise of the whirring mechanics before the hail of munitions began.

Bullets kicked up dust from the road and missile exhaust choked the air with smog. I lost track of the others while dodging for cover, but there was little I could do to shield them. Now, in the Metaverse, we certainly had the power to absorb unnatural amounts of damage; however, I doubted we could last long under this continuous fire. Resolving myself, I stepped out from my rocky heap to face the enemy, but just as I did, a rocket landed at my feet and took away my vision.

Amid the chaotic fury, Yusuke watched helplessly from behind a skeletal, brick wall. Haru was beside him, cringing with horror as her friends were tossed about the street. As Joker tumbled onto the roadway before them, they knew this strategy was failing.

“They need our help!” Yusuke stated.

Haru glanced grievously to her friend. “What should we do?

Yusuke ripped through his mind as he watched the street tear with explosions. Despite the emotions welling up inside him, Yusuke could not fathom a solution involving his cunning or skill. The situation appeared truly hopeless, yet he could not keep himself from moving. His passion was rising. He would never be able to unveil the world’s true beauty if he allowed it to be swallowed in vice. Someone must stand for his friends and salvage the hope born from within his heart.

Yusuke stood, knowing what he had to do. “I’m going,” he said. Haru gave him a fearful look, but she herself was uncertain. Instead, she turned back to the unfolding scene, mesmerized by the conflict.
As the cacophony of gunfire and missiles persisted, Yusuke moved deeper into the rubble. He fumbled mindlessly through the brick and stone until the ash had risen to his knees. Here, the light broke through the fractured ceiling and drew Yusuke’s attention upward. A scorched wall beckoned, composed of ashen bricks jutting sequentially as one looked to the top. Controlled by desire that preceded his own consciousness, Yusuke steeled himself and slipped his hands between the disheveled bricks.

Employing hand and foot, Yusuke hefted himself up and clambered along the wall. Ashy dust smeared between his fingers as he scraped his hands over the jagged stones. The charred mortar affixing brick to brick cracked with each pressure Yusuke applied. Nevertheless, he focused his eye upward and followed his instincts. Though his muscles tightened painfully to lift his scrawny form, Yusuke’s spirit was only emboldened by the resistance. Blood trickling from his sullied hands, he spurned his body onward.

I weaved haphazardly as another barrage of ammunition came my way. Meanwhile, the others were subjugated to a bombardment of scattered explosives. Makoto stumbled behind another ashen pile, clutching her side, and Ann tumbled to the pavement as a concussive blast hit her backside. Makoto swiftly reached for her and arduously dragged Ann’s body into the nook while I watched in torment. A fury was building steadily in my gut, but as I would move to grab my mask, an untimely missile would knock me from my feet.

Neither Ryuji nor Mona had any greater luck. The pair dodged frantically, trying to find an opening on our opponent, but their efforts were in vain. Ryuji could not withstand the recurring blasts, and Mona was a fragile target for the shredding auto guns. As another line of bullets streaked the sky, Mona took another hit and toppled onto the road. Ryuji fell next, quickly bracing himself against Morgana’s smaller frame to shield him from any harm.

I lunged for my mask once more, and yet again a rocket struck me down—this time onto my front. Tiny fragments of crumbling asphalt dropped from my face as I glanced toward our massive foe. The overcast lighting nearly blinded me with the mecha’s body appearing as a dark shade on the horizon.

The shadow seemed haughty and ready to gloat of its victory. “Let us hope this serves as a warning for the rest of your kind,” bellowed the shadow, “True peace can only be achieved through subjugation.” The heinous entity cackled maniacally.

“You there!” cried a stalwart voice.

We all glanced up as the battlefield suddenly quieted. From my view, a new character had appeared atop the smoking ruins and now stood above our mighty adversary. With the stark lighting blocking my vision, I could barely make him out, but the signature tail flapping in the wind and lengthy sword holster were enough to identify Fox.

“How can you talk of peace when you are so clearly constructed as a weapon of war!” Yusuke thundered, “Only those with merciful hearts should speak of uniting the world under such peace. The hearts of man are full of impurity, and thus only one steeped in mercy could impart the knowledge of truth you so clearly impersonate. As such, I must destroy you… in the name of justice!”

Yusuke latched onto the hilt of his blade and unsheathed the glinting weapon with a swift thrust of his arm. As it gleamed in the white light, he carefully moved the edge of the katana onto his face. The blade slid under his mask and emerged through one eye slit. Yusuke swung out his arm and sliced with the blade, ripping away his mask.
A feverish cold swept through the town as Yusuke showed a furious grin. The brick foundations behind him began to crumble, and a bright and hulking Goemon rose from the ashes. With his Persona wielding his unique, bladed hammer, Yusuke held his katana in one hand and his mask in the other.

“Goemon!” Yusuke commanded, “Strike!”

The man and his Persona fell from the heavens like two bright stars descending on the earth. As Yusuke’s blade came down, so too did Goemon’s. A dazzling light surrounded them while Goemon sliced into the shadow’s body. The blade ripped through solid steel and cut the mecha’s armaments precisely in two. The shadow behemoth gave a writhing scream as its weaponry shattered and spilled onto the rocky ground. Immediately, I felt my own fury coming to a head and forced myself off the pavement.

Yusuke landed on the road, squarely in front of the shadow, and swiftly sheathed his katana. With disjointed components showering around him, he turned to observe the rest of us. I had moved up the road, and the others were now standing in awe nearby me.

Yusuke held out his arm and called to us. “What are you waiting for?” he asked, “Fire your weapons and destroy this monstrosity!”

We didn’t require much prompting. I had my handgun out at once, and the others swiftly followed. Makoto had her pistol; Ann had her submachine gun. Ryuji had his shotty, and Mona had a two-handed, projectile-launching tube loaded with glowing orbs. Raising my gun to the exposed chest cavity, I lined up my sights and fired.

Through the flaring muzzles and rapturous noise, I watched our shots penetrate the enemy’s core. The stray belts of munitions and dislocated missiles added to the devastation as our hot bullets ignited an explosive chain reaction. The mecha’s belly lit up like a firework and ruptured the entire frame. Fire and metal plumed outward while the shadow was enveloped by crimson smoke.

My clip ran empty as a parting fireball erupted from the mecha’s heart. The metal carcass dismantled before us, and the surviving machinery gradually disintegrated into fine, smoky dust, trailing with the wind. The shadow vaporized like worthless chaff, yet a smoldering, blackened crater remained where the mecha had stood.

I lowered my weapon as Yusuke approached. He smiled meekly and said, “That was… a bit too close.”

Ryuji almost keeled over. “Woo, yeah…” he breathed raggedly, “Hey, next time a plane tries to land on us, maybe we should just run.”

Makoto took a deep breath as she straightened. “Is everyone alright? No one got a serious injury, did they?”

Mona threw himself to the pavement and closed his eyes. “Ugh, every part of my body is sore.”

“Ngh, yeah, tell me about it,” Ann added, gripping her side, “On top of that, I think I’ll be cleaning gravel out of my hair for weeks.”

I glanced at Ann and took stock of her disheveled appearance. Although her blonde hair was dirtied and her face had been scraped, she still looked breathtaking. There was something definitively attractive about a refined lady sporting battle damage. Nonetheless, Ann did have a slightly bloodied lip, and I took the liberty of pointing it out.
“Hey, you’ve got some…” I said. I pointed dumbly to my lips, but Ann just blinked nervously at me. Eventually, I resolved myself and took matters into my own hands. I pressed my thumb to Ann’s lips, and the blood quickly disappeared into the color of my glove.

“Ahah,” Ann’s voice skipped a beat, “Thanks.”

An exclamation from Ryuji cut my thoughts short. “Wooh! But man, that jet thing was so damn loud, it’s like I can still hear it.”

Morgana narrowly opened one eye. “Huh?”

Yusuke suddenly placed a hand on his blade. “Look there!” he shouted, pointing upward.

The other five of us turned together and shuddered. Another enemy fighter was rapidly approaching, descending from the sky and aiming right for us. I quickly dug my feet into the ground and tightened my fists.

“Get behind me!” Yusuke cried, “I’ll lead the charge since you all are spent.”

Ryuji rolled his shoulders and gave a hoarse grunt. “Like hell,” he said dryly, “My second wind’s comin’ in. This one’s not gonna know what hit ‘em.” Mona also stepped to his side.

At the other end, Makoto faced our next opponent grimly. “Get ready,” she stated, “Here it comes!”

Just as the plane’s shadow was cast over the distant townscape, a bright flare emanated from the jet. I squinted at the light, but I could not identify the source until the fighter began to pull away. As the jet peeled off, leaving a grey trail, another object shot toward us with startling speed. The fighter had launched a sizable missile at us, carrying a shimmering warhead.

I heard several gasps as Ryuji cried, “Oh shit! Look out!”

However, I knew it was too late to react. No jump would propel me from this explosion’s reach. No dodge would render this missile harmless. All I could do was stand and wait for the fires to begin eating away at my skin. It might have even killed me.

Someone screamed as I was blinded by a white flash. Thick smog mangled with singeing heat invaded every orifice on my body. I coughed and sputtered while my face became slick with greasy tears. My skin tingled with sparking embers, yet I remained completely unburnt.

A chilly breeze filled my lungs with a new breath while the smoke curled freely around my head. As the dust cleared, my eyes flickered open and witnessed the same cloudy sky over the same dilapidated roadway. I began to consider my own surprise, but quickly a translucent sheen of iridescent polygons appeared in front of me. The crackling noise of energy caught my ears, and so I looked up.

At my side towered an imposing presence, donning a regal gown and a posh mask. Her hand was extended with a deeply shaded fan, and an electric, blue aura flowed from its edge. Startled, I turned around swiftly and saw Haru standing in our midst with one hand on her brimmed hat and the other raised gallantly to the sky. She held a burning gaze pointed directly forward, and she breathed heavily as her body slowly gave way to trembles.

The exhausted Noir had to place her hands on the ground to stop herself from collapsing. Mona immediately pounced to her side as did I while the others gawked in astonishment.

“Are you okay, Noir?” Mona inquired, “That was really dangerous. You shouldn’t throw yourself
“And let you die in that explosion?” Haru added with a huff, “You’ll have to excuse my actions and let me be the one to protect you this time.”

Seeing that she still had her defiant spirit, I smirked and said, “Nice reflexes.”

Haru gave a small laugh though she was short of breath. “Oh, that?” She shook her head. “I’m not sure. I haven’t practiced in so long…”

“Hold on, guys,” Makoto interjected as she watched the skies, “We should move off the street. I think that plane’s coming around for another pass.”

Looking up, I saw the single fighter zooming over the town and beginning to bank for a turn. I prepared to move, but before I could, Haru pushed herself up from the pavement.

“No,” Haru replied, “it won’t be.”

Makoto relaxed her posture. “Uh, I’m sorry, I don’t follow.”

Finally standing, Haru centered her hat on her head and turned her eyes skyward. She observed the looming aircraft momentarily and then addressed the rest of us. “Step aside please,” she motioned Yusuke, Mona, and the others out of her path.

Haru glanced at the fighter once more before turning to her Persona. “Milady, if you would…”

Milady turned her fan onto her face and glided forward. “FINALLY, A TRUE TEST OF OUR SKILL. WHAT BETTER WAY TO REINAUGURATE YOURSELF AS A PHANTOM THIEF?”

Haru nodded her head and thrust out her hand. “Take aim.”

Milady’s dress split open with a resounding clack, and an intimidating arsenal of barreled weaponry manifest from the darkness. Glistening rotary cannons and projectile launchers of multiple sizes simmered in anticipation. Watching the distant jet curve over the horizon, I believe we all held a measure of disbelief; however, that awe soon turned to shock.

“Fire,” Haru commanded.

A deafening shot erupted from Milady’s guns, and a blazing streak of orange zoomed through the air. My eyes were transfixed upon the shrinking projectile. The others did not speak. Like the sun eclipsing the moon, Haru’s shot moved onto the grey aircraft with precise inevitability. A flash obscured the pair of objects as they met, but the fighter swiftly resurfaced, carrying its own burning trail. The now unidentifiable object spun uncontrollably while smoke and flames poured from its tail. Eventually, the smoldering object fell out of sight, leaving a black pillar of smog behind it.

Yusuke was the first to open his mouth. “My word…”

“That was incredible!” Mona lauded.

While Milady’s form gradually dissipated, Ann skipped beside Haru and gave her a squeeze. “You’re amazing, Noir!” She replied with a modest giggle.

Makoto turned to them, still dumbfounded. “I-I didn’t even realize you could do that…”

Haru’s cheeks reddened as she smiled. “Hehe, neither did I.”
“Holy crap, Noir!” a jubilant voice cried, “That must’ve been an 800-meter kill-shot!” An excited Futaba bounced into our midst as she nearly salivated over Haru.

“Remind me never to piss her off,” Samuel added as he approached the group. Witnessing the general elation of our team, he relaxed a little and allowed his hands to slid into his jacket. Swiftly, however, he withdrew his hands from the pockets and rubbed his open palm tenuously.

While I gave Sam a curious look, Ryuji finally spoke up. “Hey, this is pretty sweet and all, but maybe we should get movin’ in case those things called for backup.”

“That is an excellent idea,” Sam replied with a nod, “But first…” He reached behind his back and pulled out a small satchel. “You should probably take a med booster.” He lobbed the bag at me, and I caught it easily in my arms.

Peering into the mystery satchel, I asked, “What’s in here?”

“Injection capsules,” Sam explained, “Just point one at your arm and give it a tap. It’ll restore your vitals and give you a nice energy boost.”

Removing one of the white pods, I examined it and then tossed it to Ryuji. He held the device up to look at and then slapped it onto his arm. “Nice.”

“Ah, wait,” Ann stammered, “Do these things have needles?”

Sam scratched his neck. “Well… it’s just a little pinprick.”

Makoto came and grabbed one of the boosters while I tossed another down to Morgana. “Ah-hm…” Ann continued, “Maybe I’ll pass on this one.”

“Hah, hear that?” Ryuji chided, “Panther’s afraid of needles.” He stuck out his finger and made a mock stabbing motion.

“I-it’s not that!” Ann insisted, “They just… make me nervous.”

I pulled out another of the injectors as Yusuke said, “Hmm, I didn’t take you for one to be bothered by such trivial things, Panther.”

“Hey!” Panther responded, “I just- Ow!” Ann glanced down at her arm where I was stabbing her with an injector.

“Take your medicine,” I said, “It’s good for you.”

Ann smacked my arm away with the emptied capsule. She glared bitterly at me as her irritation grew into defeated resentment. “Fine!” She snagged one of the injectors from the satchel before plugging it into my own arm.

“Ouch…”

Samuel frowned. “Uh, those are not toys…”

Snickering quietly at our antics, Haru said, “Oh, don’t worry, Squire. We may not look like it, but we’ve had a lot of practice with these situations.”

“Yeah, Squire,” Futaba condescendingly added. She openly poked at his jacket. “No need to get all panicky cause we took a few hits. This team’s so over-leveled we’re on the fast track straight to the boss’ keep.”
Sam’s eyes narrowed as he sluggishly nodded. “Uhuh…”

“I wouldn’t feel bad if you have trouble understanding Oracle,” Yusuke interjected, “Sometimes I still can’t comprehend her bizarre speech patterns.”

“Mhm,” Futaba merrily continued, “That’s just so weirdos like Inari don’t interfere with my business.”

Sam raised his brow, glancing from Oracle to Fox. “But you’re both weird.”

“Gah!” Futaba cried out suddenly and clutched her chest. “A direct hit!” She crouched low and bent backward. “Could it be that this novice has gleaned my secret weakness?”

Yusuke sighed deeply. “And people say I’m overly dramatic…”

Seeing that Futaba was making a fool of herself, Makoto stepped in before the drama could progress further. “Um, Oracle? Did you detect anything during our fight that might guide us to our target?”

Futaba looked back at Makoto from her upturned position. “Eh, sorry, Queen. I don’t have any of my fancy Phantom Thief gear. I’m just hacking it with my laptop out here.”

A flash of surprise crossed Makoto’s face. “Ah, right…” She turned to me and mumbled, “Maybe we should try that tower after all.”

Another voice echoed in my ear before I could reply. “Ahem, perhaps I might be of assistance.”

Following a moment of confusion, we all realized that the sound was emanating from our own ears. Naturally, Sam was the first to answer. He tapped his earpiece and said, “Go ahead, Akechi.”

“I picked up some radio signals during your battle that seem to be originating somewhere inside the cognition. You may be able to use these to find what you’re looking for.”

“Ooh,” Futaba cooed, “That’ll make this easy. Patch ‘em through, Robo-Detecti.”

“It’s already done,” Akechi replied, “The signals should be on your laptop now.”

Futaba pulled out her computer and positioned it on her lap perpendicular to the ground. “Woah, that was fast! How’d you do that?”

“Well, being a robot has its advantages,” Akechi modestly replied.

Ryuji turned to Futaba. “So, is that gonna tell us where we need to go?”

“Aw, yeah,” Futaba answered, “I’m tracking the signal now.” She sprung to her feet and held her laptop in front of herself. “It’s this way! C’mon Mona, we need your wheels!” Abruptly she began running down the road in another direction.

A bewildered expression crossed Mona’s face before he darted after her. “Hey, wait!” he called, “At least let me get out of this rubble first!”

Ryuji glanced after them. “Wait up guys!” Then he ran off too.

“Uh, I guess we’re going,” Haru quizzically stated.

Makoto agreed, saying, “We should follow before we get left behind.”
Sam shook his head and sighed. “That’ll be all, Akechi.”

“Good luck,” Akechi said, “I’ll continue monitoring things from my end.”

As we ventured away from the desolate town, my nervous anticipation gradually transformed into anxious curiosity. We traveled by car for what Ryuji described as “ages”, but the white fields did not seem to end. Nevertheless, my eyes remained affixed to the horizon where the dark hills appeared less and less distant. Eventually, the others joined in my curiousness and began remarking on the slowly encroaching wall before us. The dim mountains I had identified earlier looked more like jagged mounds of glistening metal from our current position.

With black, shimmering cliffs looming overhead, we inevitably ran out of road. The team disembarked from the van halfheartedly as our interest changed from the destination to the monoliths blocking the path. We stared at the obsidian wall in wordless admiration for a minute, but questions naturally sprang to our inquisitive minds.

“Ever see something this bizarre in a Palace before?” Samuel asked in disconcerted unease.

“Not very often,” I calmly replied.

“The imagery present in an individual’s Palace…” Yusuke absently remarked, “…is a reflection of that person’s cognition. But this?” He posed a free question. “This couldn’t possibly relate to Nikolai’s cognition. It’s just meaningless lumps of darkened metal.”

“I doubt the signals would have originated from a spot like this,” Makoto postulated, “There doesn’t seem to be anything here.”

Haru asked a question as we numbly stared at the tall cliffs. “Oracle, what does your laptop say? Are the signals leading farther on?” Receiving no response, Haru swiftly looked down. “Oracle?”

I lowered my gaze and watched Futaba cautiously approach the black wall. Mesmerized by the shimmering surface, she pressed her face close to the massive formation and gently held her hand over its surface.

“What are these symbols?” she asked.

Glancing again at the sprawling wall, I noticed the light bent unusually at numerous junctures. Indeed, line carvings were imprinted into the surface of the structure although I could not make any of them out.

Futaba ran her hand through the depressions. “I feel like…”

Suddenly, a bright glow emanated from Futaba’s palm and rippled throughout the carving she had just touched. The others recoiled in surprise as the light spread across the wall’s entire surface, lighting abstract lines that had little logical meaning.

Futaba jumped in astonishment. “I didn’t touch anything! I swear it wasn’t me!”

Ann cringed as the structure hummed with energy. “Oracle! Quick, get back!”

The ground rumbled faintly, and Futaba walked backward straight into Ann’s bosom. Neither had time to mind the incident, however, because the patterned wall was beginning to morph geometrically. Rectangular pieces of obsidian compressed and folded into the structure, and a
triangular gap appeared at the base of the cliff. We watched in trembling amazement as that gap grew and expanded to welcome our entire team into the breach.

The receding shapes pulled away to reveal a bright field on the opposite side of the wall. My eyes blinked in bewilderment at the stretches of green that rolled into the distance. Clean, thriving grass waved with the wind, and no snow could be seen anywhere on the other side. Yet as the triangular gateway completed its transformation and settled quietly into place, my gaze was drawn to prominent figures standing in the shadow of the wall.

My friends gripped their weapons apprehensively as the shrouded characters passed through the gateway and approached us. The clopping of hooves echoed through the obsidian hollow, betraying the presence of the mountable beasts. One such equestrian promptly emerged from the shadows and an armored rider immediately followed. I eased back from the mouth of the gate as more riders trod into view, surrounding our company. The front rider rode toward me calmly. His armor was light, but he had a bright plume atop his visor-bearing helm, and I could clearly see his plain face.

The rider paused in front of me and showed me the rifle strapped across his lap. His fellow dragoons wrapped around my team before words could even be traded, but my friends stood ready to defend themselves. I turned my stern gaze on the head rider, and he spoke.

“Welcome, Phantom Thieves,” said the rider, “You are now in the territory of Master Nikolai Androvsky, and we have come to take you away.”

I drew my dagger and pointed it at the placid rider. “We won’t allow you to capture us.”

The rider scoffed. “Capture you? By the command of the master, no harm shall come to his esteemed guests inside his country. My orders are to escort you directly to his manor house unharmed, so please, do not resist his invitation.”

“Invitation?” Morgana repeated, “Is this really the warlord we’ve heard so much about?”

“This doesn’t make sense…” Sam muttered.

“What do you think, Joker?” Ryuji added, “We can take these guys…”

Futaba chattered nervously as the horses snorted around her. “Uh, either way, the signals lead through that wall.”

Tentatively considering the rider’s offer, I had little to gain or lose from my decision. Still, a willing escort could simplify the initial infiltration, so I gradually lowered my blade. “Very well, I accept.”

“Excellent,” replied the horseman as he rotated his mount, “You’ll ride with us then. The master is eager to have you in his court.”
Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves have infiltrated the Palace of infamous warlord and cognitive researcher Nikolai Adrovsky. Following a heated battle in the wastes of Nikolai's cognition, the Thieves received an escort directly into the heart of the Palace bizarrely ordered by Nikolai himself. While the deceits and distortions of the heart multiply, the Thieves must remain composed to uncover the truth behind the disappearance of Sae Nijima and their nemeses.

We left the obsidian gateway and the mangled asphalt roads behind us and traveled the grassy knolls deeper into the estate. Displaying an unprecedented amount of chivalry, our rider escorts offered their steeds for our own transport, so we galloped swiftly across the open fields. The journey was somewhat unremarkable—though the grass was trimmed and well-tended, the sprawling land had no impressive features. I was riding on horseback beside a shadow, yet I found myself entirely bored until we approached the manor house.

A multi-storied, castle-esque mansion lorded over the property. It’s rustic, brown bricks and wide, shiny windows contrasted beautifully with the vibrant, encompassing gardens below. Short hedges girded the path to the manor, and elaborate, stone sculptures divided the myriad flower beds. As we entered the main courtyard, the company slowed and trotted along the chiseled cobblestone path. Our informal dirt trail vanished under the layered stones approaching a central walkway.

A shadowy figure stood at the foot of the mansion in the middle of the walkway. He wore a finely pressed suit and distinct white gloves, yet he had two glowing eyes and an ethereal, featureless face. The lead rider, which I was riding behind, stopped in front of the ominous figure and nodded to his cohort.

The suited figure rolled his gloved hand and greeted us with a bow. “Welcome, esteemed guests.”

As the figure extended his hand to me, I glanced briefly around the courtyard. Trusting Metaverse entities was not beyond my capacity, but ones that peaceably communicated with the Phantom Thieves were certainly unnerving. I descended from my mount with a sobering look on my face and steadily approached the shadow being.

Gradually, my teammates abandoned the horses and joined me in the center of the lot. The armored riders seemed disinterested in us now that their goal was completed, and they soon trod quietly out the garden path.

The suited shadow took stock of our team before continuing. “This is the estate of Master Nikolai Androvsky. You are all welcome here—safeguarded by his protection. I am the overseer of this property, and as such, I will ensure that all of your needs are met while you are here.”

I absently tucked away my hands while I observed the looming mansion. “Why were we invited here?”

“Why?” the overseer repeated, curiously leaning forward, “Well, that should be obvious. You’re the Phantom Thieves—a true inspiration to the master! Of course, he values all those who are willing to
accept his peaceful ways but more so those who embody his ideal justice.”

Haru cocked her head at the overseer. “His ideal justice?”

Regardless, Ryuji stepped forward, brushing past me. “Cut the bullshit, man. We just got attacked out there by one of your master’s goons.”

“Ah, yes,” said the overseer, “My humblest apologies.” The figure slowly bowed before Ryuji. “Unfortunately, those who dwell outside the estate walls are marked for destruction. Denizens of the chaotic outer world must be eliminated for the safety of those who thrive within. However, if it is any consolation, we are most pleased that you survived to make it here.”

“Pleased my ass…” Ryuji grumbled.

Makoto then cleared her throat and politely addressed the overseer. “Excuse me, but if we are actually the master’s guests, might we speak with him directly?”

The overseer stood upright as he replied, “Perhaps. The master is a private man and very busy, but you are his esteemed visitors. I’m sure he would allot some time to speak with you privately once the celebrations have subsided.”

“Celebrations?” Mona said, perking up, “What, is there some kind of party?”

The overseer looked down at Mona and shook his head energetically. “Oh, certainly!” he replied, “The master is hosting an extravagant masquerade ball, and he would be most honored to see you take part in the festivities!”

“A masquerade ball?” Ann repeated, her interest piqued, “You mean like, one where people dance and dress up in disguises?”

The overseer nodded. “Yes, you should feel right at home in your dazzling attire.”

“The hell…” Ryuji mumbled, “How is this guy so calm?”

Yusuke quietly mulled over his reserved thoughts. “If this Nikolai is deluded enough to consider us his inspiration, then perhaps he does not think we are a threat.”

Haru expressed her agreement as she added, “I’m curious to see what this ball is like for myself.”

Sam appeared beside me, and I felt his firm hand on my shoulder. “This is making me very uncomfortable. It’s too suspicious.”

The overseer immediately turned to greet our auxiliary member. “Ah, Mr. Zimmerman.” The shadow’s eyes seemed to give a slight smile. “You are welcome here too, of course! The master is glad you could join us even if it is a little late.”

“He’s late?” Futaba remarked, “Wait a sec…”

Samuel sighed heavily. “Leave it. I’ll explain later.”

“Well,” continued the overseer, “I don’t want to hold you outside in the chilly air. If you’ll all follow me, I’ll take you into the main hall.”

Makoto sighed. “Seems we don’t have much of a choice if we want to get more information.”

Begrudgingly, I nodded to the shadow steward, and he happily led us onward. A broad but short
staircase preceded the main entrance, carved smooth from grey stone. We followed the overseer by the wrought iron railings, and he gently ushered us through the large, wooden doors at the front of the manor. I stepped inside the foyer and was greeted by a massive room with doors on either side and two marble staircases leading to the second floor. The room’s pearl white walls sparkled in the light of an opulent chandelier hanging above me, yet my attention was drawn directly to the central doors at the back of the hall. Golden light streamed through the inset windows, clearly indicating a hive of activity beyond.

The overseer gradually moved in front of us as we gawked at the elaborate hall. Stepping underneath one of the broad staircases, he motioned to an ornamental, wood table.

“Please set your firearms here,” said the shadow, “Fighting is not permitted inside the master’s home.”

“Pfft,” Ryuji scowled as he heard the overseer’s request, “Sure there’s no fighting now, but wait until our backs are turned—that rule’s gonna change real fast.”

“He only wants our guns though,” Yusuke discretely added, “It shouldn’t have a significant effect on our combat readiness.”

Haru nodded. “I’m still a bit drained from earlier, but if everyone feels prepared, I’m confident we could escape in an emergency.”

Makoto had her arms crossed as she scanned the group thoughtfully. “I think we should do what he wants for now. I’d like to gather as much intel as we can peacefully before using force.”

Having heard my team’s vote of confidence or lack thereof, I approached the bench and set down my handgun. Ann and Morgana were quick to follow—Ann set her submachine gun beside mine, and Mona had to jump and toss his launcher onto the table. Makoto set her pistol with the others, displaying no reservations. Yusuke then laid down his rifle, and Futaba placed her wrist blaster alongside his. Haru took out her grenade launcher and dropped it onto the pile with a thump while Sam pulled a dinky revolver from his backside and laid it gently with the others. Finally, Ryuji stamped up to the table, slamming his shotgun down in obstinance.

The overseer nodded to us as he drew closer to the rear doors. “You needn’t worry about your melee weapons. You won’t be able to draw them here.”

Ryuji tucked his hands away, and his body sagged. “Ah, this day just keeps gettin’ better and better.”

Sam awkwardly scratched the back of his neck as he asked, “Say, I’m almost afraid to ask, but where do you even keep those weapons anyway? You guys always just seem to pull them out of thin air when you need them.”

Feeling particularly bullish, Ryuji replied, “Up my ass.”

Ann screeched amid a chorus of stifled groans. “Skull! Don’t give him the wrong idea!”

Ryuji turned and gave the lady a coy look. “What? You don’t keep yours there?” he said, chuckling, “Ah, don’t tell me you keep your whip between your…” He moved a hand down his chest as if to lessen the crass implication.

“Oh dear…” Yusuke palmed his face.

Futaba breathed heavily. “I wish I could record this right now!”
Her face glowing a brilliant red, Ann had to gather every mote of her will to keep herself from flying at Ryuji. I turned on my heel to address the sudden commotion, and added, “You sound jealous, Skull.”

“Mhmm, he does,” Morgana said, standing at my side, “Probably because he’ll never get the chance to experience the real thing for himself.”

“H-hey!” Ryuji wailed and then lowered his head, “That cuts deep, man…”

Puzzled, Sam blinked at us. “I’m still amazed that these people are supposedly the legendary Phantom Thieves…” he said to Makoto, “You set the bar kinda high.”

Makoto sighed before abashedly stating, “This is our team…”

Haru tepidly approached Ann. “Ah, are you alright, Panther?”

Ann took a beat to relax and release her energy. “I’m fine,” she huffed, “Everything’s fine. I just need to remember it’s just Skull being a moron as usual.”

Haru mustered a nervous laugh. “Well, I don’t know. Sometimes he’s funny.”

Ann crossed her arms as she brushed her hair back. “Yeah,” she begrudgingly replied, “I guess.”

The overseer—who had been standing beside us all the while—finally addressed us. “Ahem!” he began, “I’m pleased to see you’re all so at ease, but I would like to properly welcome you to our event.”

Ryuji turned back to the shadow with an improved attitude. “Yeah, yeah, my b,” he said, “Show us your party or whatever.”

The overseer pressed on the waiting door behind him. “This way.”

Passing into the golden light, I was struck by an electrifying sensation that crawled across my skin. The ballroom was larger than the typical gymnasium and more crowded. Various, masked guests covered the floor as some danced and others mingled. Finely dressed men and women indulged themselves at round tables dotting the perimeter. Although I didn’t recognize any of the guests, their distinct faces indicated that these represented real people. On the other hand, nary a foot of the room was without a faceless servant nearly identical to the self-proclaimed overseer. A classical band played on a stage at the far end of the room, and looking upward, a glass viewing box provided a watchful eye on the whole ordeal. Nevertheless, these exciting faculties were not the source of my agitation.

Up further still, my gaze settled on a series of massive, illuminating crystal balls hanging from the ceiling and centered across the room. Ignoring the elaborate mural painted on the roof, I received some notion that these spherical chandeliers were interfering with my brain activity.

“Yo,” Ryuji said, “My skin’s feelin’ all numb and tingly…” He idly poked at his arms with juvenile curiosity.

“Yes,” Yusuke agreed, “I am overcome with a most peculiar sensation.”

Makoto glanced around tensely. “Something’s off…”

Still vacantly observing the light fixtures, I heard Akechi’s voice radiate through my earpiece. “Joker, I’m detecting significant energy fluctuations near you. Something appears to be sampling that area…"
and carefully monitoring its frequency.”

I heard Futaba utter an intrigued noise from behind me. She had crouched down to fiddle with her computer. “Hmm, these wavelength patterns are super clean even with the power spike going through those chandeliers…”

“Yes,” Akechi added, “They seem to be emitting an oscillating cancelation frequency to suppress that entire room if not that building.”

“Woah, these wave patterns are matching perfectly,” Futaba continued, “I’m going to have to carefully monitor this to see what kind of backend processing these things are doing.”

“Uh…” Ryuji winced as his brain crashed, “It’s like they’re blasting off to space, and I’m still on the ground.”

“Of course you wouldn’t understand it,” Ann bitterly remarked.


Makoto somberly shook her head without saying a word. Thankfully, Akechi was apt to explain the situation. “If I were to put it into conventional terms, there is a system in place to ensure that nothing supernatural occurs within that cognitive space, or at least that is my guess.”

Samuel glanced suspiciously at the chandeliers. “A Metaverse inhibitor…”

“Succinctly put,” Akechi concurred.

“Great,” Ryuji replied before glancing down, “Mona, what’s he mean?”

Morgana held a serious expression as he responded. “He means we can’t summon our Personas.”

“Well shit…” Ryuji groaned, flailing his arms, “We might as well surrender to one of these waiters already.”

“I wouldn’t do that just yet,” Akechi reassured, “It is likely that the system would prevent any shadows from manifesting violently as well.”

“So, in other words,” Makoto surmised, “For all intents and purposes, this is just a normal ballroom full of a bunch of normal people.”

“Bingo-bango-bongo!” Futaba exclaimed, pointing at Queen, “She’s got it.”

“Interesting,” Yusuke remarked, holding his chin with one hand, “Perhaps we might work this to our advantage.”

“Ahem!” Abruptly the overseer stepped in front of the group and raised his voice once more. “My apologies, but before I allow you to intermingle with the other guests, I would like to direct your attention to a few things.” My friends and I unenthusiastically watched the shadow as he continued. “If you look at the back of the room there, you will see the master’s office…”

The shadow pointed deliberately to the glass overlook at the far end of the ballroom. Though the overseer droned on, my eyes caught a flicker of light sustained in the dark panes. A dimly lit figure approached the balcony’s edge with a fur-trimmed cape draping from his shoulders. The man wore a
dark olive colored suit with golden chains hanging from one padded shoulder to the buttons, and underneath, he wore a white shirt and grey tie complemented by his face’s sharp stubble. Longer, black hair covered his head, but it didn’t obscure his features. The hard and grizzled look he carried was reinforced by his luminescent, yellow eyes.

When I returned my attention to the overseer, he had nearly finished his spiel. “…and if you ever find yourself craving refreshment, do not hesitate to ask one of the many servants.”

“Ooh!” Ryuji joyously interjected, the lingering taste of an MRE long since dissipated on his tongue, “What kinda meats do you guys have?”

“We have a wide range of savory dishes cooked to your liking,” replied the shadow, “Shall I fetch a menu for you?” The overseer waved a hand at one of his fellow servants without prompt.

“Skull,” Makoto glared at him as she chastised, “Now’s not the time to be thinking of your stomach.”

An approaching shadow with a towel draped over one arm quickly handed Ryuji a multi-paged menu. Ryuji began perusing the dishes as he replied, “Chill out. I’m just gonna do a bit of recon from the tables. You want me to blend in, dontcha?”

Makoto shook her head with a sigh. “I suppose that works…”

“Great!” Ryuji absently responded. He then turned to the waiter and spouted, “I’ll have the rib-rack with lamb sauce, and one quarter-pound steak, medium-well, please. Oh, and for the side…”

“He does realize that eating Metaverse food won’t actually sustain him, right?” Mona disdainfully commented.

Yusuke then added, “Let’s opt to ignore him, shall we?”

“Motion’s got my vote,” Futaba happily chirped.

“Stop it,” Makoto whined, “We’re not voting to ignore anyone.”

“I’ll second the motion to ignore,” Ann said as she patronizingly raised her hand.

“I’ll third,” Samuel said, skimming a finger along his nose.

Makoto again sighed while her shoulders drooped. “Why do I waste my breath?”

Taking the position of the devil’s advocate, I interspliced myself into the discussion. “You all are severely underestimating Skull’s luck.”

“That’s right!” Mona added, “He may be a monkey, but even a monkey can do great things when trained under my tutelage.” He smirked proudly.

Haru giggled at Morgana’s brash declaration. “Stop,” she smiled at the cat, “You’re just making him look worse.”

“Ahem!” the overseer interrupted us one last time.

“What now?” Sam asked with a scowl.

“That is all,” said the shadow, “I just wanted to say that if you have any questions, I will remain by the main entryway.” The overseer bowed. “Thank you all for coming and enjoy your time with us.” Finally, the shadow turned aside and walked back to his post.
Having finished with our idle banter, I returned my mind to the mission. “Did you see that man in the viewing box?” I asked, pointing to the figure in the dark glass.

Makoto turned her head back. “Oh, could that be Nikolai?”

“Well, it could be,” Sam remarked, “But what’s with that gaudy outfit? Eugh…”

“That would be Nikolai’s inner representation of himself,” Mona quickly explained, “How he views himself through his most repressed desires.”

“Oh,” Sam said, lowering his brow. He nodded as if any of that made sense.

“Ugh, seriously?” Mona retorted and frowned, “Didn’t Akechi and Makoto teach you this stuff?”

Sam averted his gaze. “Well, yes, but actually…”

“He knows enough,” Makoto swiftly interjected, “Now, can we focus on the mission at hand? We need to find out everything we can about Nikolai’s cognition, so we can figure out what happened to my sister and the others abducted.” She glanced around the group to ensure that everyone was listening. “I think we should split up for now to maximize our efficiency.”

“Great idea, Queen!” Ryuji chimed in, “I’m just gonna head over to my table now and start blending in.”

Ann abruptly plugged her ears. “Lalalala! I’m ignoring you!”

Ryuji turned away with a smug look on his face. “Oh, well… Guess I’ll just have to enjoy all that cake I ordered by myself.” He started walking in a very slow and clunky manner.

“C-cake?” Ann stammered, “Dammit, Panther, be strong.” She clenched her eyes shut and grimaced horribly.

“Hoo boy…” Makoto almost seemed to wilt with anxiety, “Joker, do you have anything to add?”

Mulling over the breadth of our task, I added, “We should see if we can talk to Nikolai face to face.”

Makoto straightened as her focus returned. “Right. The overseer made it seem like it might be difficult though.” She rubbed her chin.

A moment passed before anyone else spoke. “This place is filled with people who have some connection to Nikolai, yes?” Sam stated, “We should see if any of them can help us.”

“Ah, good idea,” Haru applauded.

“Well then,” Makoto continued, “The strategy should remain much the same. We’ll split up and search for any clues or guests with connections to Nikolai that might talk to us.”

We all nodded, and then Yusuke asked, “How shall we split up?”

Makoto glanced downward as she began to consider the options. “Hmm… Alright, Panther, you’ll come with me. We’ll walk the floor and see if anyone will give us information about Nikolai.”

As Queen glanced at her, Ann broke from her stupor. “Oh, are we trying to persuade some people?” she asked.

Makoto nodded. “That’s the gist of it, yes.”
Ann returned a confident wink and smiled. “Ha, with your tongue and my body, there’s no one who won’t be convinced.”

My mind went to other places. “Why does that sound strangely erotic?”

Ann’s smile immediately lost its luster and turned to a muddled frown. She hit me on the arm, hissing, “Don’t start something!”

Futaba offered her own directive before we could proceed with the banter. “Well, you guys can play your spy games while I hang out here. I don’t have my disguise anyway, so I’m just gonna do some scanning.”

“That would be helpful,” Makoto said affirmingly, “We’ll need intel on the building’s layout before we can do anything else.”

Yusuke then added, “In that case, I’ll investigate the rest of the manor and see how far I can go before running into resistance.”

Makoto nodded amicably as the discussion increased its pace. “Great, and Noir?”

“I’m going to watch the dancefloor,” Haru stated, “And see if anyone there knows about Nikolai.”

“Ohay,” Makoto acknowledged her and then cocked her head at our auxiliary member. “And what about you, Squire?”

“Me? Uh…” The businessman scratched his head.

“He’s not going anywhere,” Morgana interjected giving Samuel a hard stare, “He’s staying here with me, so I can give him a crash course in the Metaverse.”

“Wait, what?” Sam objected.

Makoto closed her eyes. “Uh, is that really necessary?”

“It is absolutely necessary!” Morgana jumped enthusiastically, “I will not allow the Phantom Thieves to be thwarted by incompetence.”

Sighing, Makoto continued, “I’m guessing you’re not going to take no for an answer.”

“No way,” Mona replied, “Someone needs to teach him the basics.”

“Hey, I’m not that dumb,” Samuel refuted. He rubbed the back of his head as he sighed in defeat. “But, yeah, I guess that’s fine. It is my job to communicate with freaky Metaverse creatures after all.”

Morgana held Sam in his stern gaze. “That’s the first thing I want to adjust—your casual language. I’m your tutor from now on or your senior at the very least, so address me as “Senpai”, okay?”

“You don’t even get away with that pompous nonsense with your actual teammates,” Sam whined.

Makoto turned away from the pair with a dead stare. “Ahum… Joker, you can check in with everyone and keep us all informed on our progress.”

Returning her wayward gaze, I tilted my head. “You alright?” I asked.

She offered herself a moment to decompress. “I just was expecting everyone to be taking this a little more seriously.” Makoto shook her head and permitted a tiny smile. “I shouldn’t worry about it.
Everyone’s warming up to being Phantom Thieves again, and here we’ve been welcomed into Nikolai’s mansion.”

“That’s the spirit!” Ann cried as she wrapped an arm around her friend, “Now, c’mon! I think I see some unsuspecting guests over there just waiting to spill all of Nikolai’s secrets!”

As the bubbly Miss Takamaki led Makoto away, the others dispersed to their assigned stations. Haru wandered out to the middle of the ballroom; Yusuke went to speak with the overseer; and Futaba stayed put, fiddling with her laptop. Mona drove Samuel along while the cat bombarded him with minutiae, but my mind continued to churn as I stood idly.

This Palace was strange, being simultaneously hostile and accommodating. I had to wonder if this was a ploy to cover up Nikolai’s misdeeds or a genuine reaction to our presence. Although my own head was swirling with charged emotions, I endeavored to stay focused on the mission. We needed to uncover the location of the missing persons for Sae, for Makoto, and for everyone whom we had ever helped. I desperately wanted to interrogate Nikolai myself and find out what he was hiding, but first, I required a lead.

I turned myself around as the gentle music of the ballroom swelled. The dazzling dresses of the dancing ladies twirled and sparkled in the brilliant, golden light, and the noblemen complemented their elegant partners with precise, choreographed movements. Altogether, the dance floor was like a bed of flowers displaying its vibrant colors in the wind. I stepped forward out of my own subconscious and spotted Haru standing timidly at the fringe of the dancing space.

Approaching silently, I manifest at Haru’s side like a shadow without more than a flicker of light to indicate my presence. I took the moment of tranquility to see how she was faring. Haru appeared mesmerized as she gazed over the jubilant couples, her hands folded tensely in front of herself. Even in the shade of her hat and mask, I could clearly see the fluttering anticipation on her face—a cute shade of red obscured by her buoyant hair.

I returned my gaze to the bustling floor and thought I’d ease into the discussion of information gathering. “So,” I asked, “Do you know how to dance?”

Haru turned to me naturally as if her mind had been awaiting my immediate arrival. She untangled her hands while she explained, “I do, actually. My father had me learn so that I could participate in social gatherings.” She tilted her head down and laughed, slipping her hands behind her back. “Do you know how to dance, Joker?”

I rubbed my chin as I considered the question. “I’m not properly trained,” I said, “But I feel like I learned in a dream once.”

Haru giggled. “That’s interesting,” she replied, “I’ve dreamt of dancing several times.” Her smile lessened as she pushed her hair back. “I got to dance often at father’s parties but never for proper recreation.”

Nodding, my mind conjured a thought, and I had to verbalize it. “Speaking of dreams…” I began, “I should apologize for taking you away from your café.”

“Oh, no,” Haru swiftly responded, “Don’t worry about that.” She lowered her gaze, becoming lost in thought. “The café—it’s… it’s wonderful! Watching all my efforts pay off in the smiling faces of happy customers is great. I love that feeling of accomplishment. But my duty to those customers is nothing compared to the purpose I have serving justice as a Phantom Thief.”

“Hopefully we can resolve this quickly,” I said, “I know the café is what you’ve always wanted.”
“It is my dream,” Haru admitted, “But it isn’t very fulfilling when I could be out here helping people with you.”

I smiled at her dedication. “Seems you haven’t lost your drive.”

Haru laughed bashfully. “Of course.”

“Ah!” a stranger’s voice abruptly invaded our space, “Excuse me…” I glanced at the tall, skinny man approaching us. He had pointy black shoes and a lanky frame, and he wore a grey, feathery mask. The man stopped just short of us, his coattails falling on his legs as he tucked one hand behind his back. “Could you two be a couple?”

A moment passed before my sluggish brain had processed the question, but Haru maintained her composure. She eagerly replied, “Do we look the part?”

“Well, certainly,” the tall man answered, “The subtly of your outfits is something I do not see very often. You would make a strong impression if you joined the floor.”

Haru smiled politely. “Oh, you’re flattering us.”

“Nonsense!” bellowed the strange man, “Master Nikolai has a keen eye for unique styles, and as the director of dance, it is my imperative to display the best of our patronage.”

“Ah, you must be close with Master Nikolai then…” Haru surmised.

The proud director puffed himself up. “Indeed, I am, Miss…” He gestured graciously to Haru as he inquired her name.

“Okumura,” Haru stated.

“O-ku-mura…” the director repeated, “Okumura? Hmm, it seems familiar to me.” He shook his head. “Ah, no matter. Listen, Miss Okumura, if you and your handsome fellow ever feel like joining in on the celebrations, you come talk to me. I’d be more than happy to put in a word with the director of music for you.”

Haru made a slight bow of her head. “I’ll be sure to do that.”

“Excellent!” cried the director of dancing, “I won’t take any more of your time then. But please, enjoy yourselves! Wasting youth is such a tragedy.”

The thin man strode back into the crowds of clamoring guests as I pondered the discussion that had just unfolded. While I was still in contemplation, Haru turned to me with an amused expression. “That man was quite an interesting character. I’m surprised he was so forward with us,” Haru said, “Although I suppose this would be an easy opportunity to impress Nikolai.”

“We should be careful,” I replied, “Everyone’s being too receptive of us.”

“Oh,” Haru touched her lips contemplatively, “Would you have preferred that I suggest we were not a couple?”

My eyes widened. “Hmm? Uh… er…”

Haru covered her mouth as she laughed. “I’m just teasing you,” she said dismissively, “But since he pointed it out…” Haru reached for the hem of my jacket and tugged to pull my attention. “You’ll have to be my dancing partner when I do take that offer.”
A tepid smile broke through my face. “I’ll start practicing.”

“Good.” Haru smiled as she released my coat. “Well, you should check in with me later. I’m going to see if anyone else around here knows Nikolai.”

I said, “I will,” and nodded.

Smiling delightfully, Haru’s cheeks perked. “Let’s do our very best for Niijima-san’s sake.” Then she turned with her smile and left me.

Once Haru had melded with the varied guests, I shook the tingling sensation from my head and started in a different direction. Next, I thought I should visit Yusuke and see how much of the manor’s layout he had uncovered. He and the overseer had long since vanished from the post by the ballroom’s main entrance, so I stepped outside of the grand chamber and began searching.

Following my basic intuition, I decided to wander from room to room rather than contact Yusuke directly. This way I could see the mansion for myself while sifting through my temperamental thoughts. I had been unprepared for Haru’s sudden wit, and my inaction still lingered doubtfully in the corner of my mind. As I passed from library to hall to kitchen, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I had just done something horrible. I was dating Ann after all. Well, “dating” might be a strong word. Actually, I wasn’t certain what kind of relationship Ann and I shared, but it was a special, secretive one that I had initiated. I should have given Haru a firmer response, and yet I hadn’t. Suppressed emotions were influencing my subconscious. I was conflicted, and my inner turmoil was beginning to seep onto the surface.

I left the dusty parlor room I was in, and then something began to click in my head. In fact, I was not conflicted; I was merely acting to protect Haru’s feelings. I needed to keep my relationship with Ann a secret as she had requested, and so I could not say anything outright without exposing the relationship or needlessly hurting Haru. Yes, that was the true reasoning behind my stuttering outburst. I was completely faithful to Ann while fully exercising my capacity for empathy. My character was thankfully intact, and my passion for Ann had only been further stoked.

As my thoughts continued along, I bumbled into Yusuke in a living space near the rear of the manor. An odorous smog blanketed the room, and it immediately brought my attention to the present situation. Yusuke and the overseer quietly observed a group of men playing a game of cards at a round table. The stench of their cigars was overwhelming, but Yusuke seemed unphased.

“Ah, Joker,” Yusuke nodded at me as he looked up from the table.

“Have we found something interesting?” I asked, almost gagging on the smoke.

“This is a high-stakes game of poker,” the overseer informed me, “Elite members of the master’s entourage occasionally like to participate in gambling matches for currency and other trinkets.”

“This game seems like a highly engaging pastime,” Yusuke remarked, “Though I’m still figuring out exactly how it’s played.”

Just then I heard the slap of cards against the wooden table. The voice of one man rose up while the others grumbled in despair. “That’s it, boys. If you’re comfortable opening payment plans, we can discuss going for another round.”

Another man slammed his fist onto the card table. “What the hell!” the other gentleman shouted, “You didn’t have that set two minutes ago! Just what kind of bullshit are you trying to pull?”

The first players leaned back in his seat and strummed his fingers on the wood. “Calm down, Bill.
Games wouldn’t be very fun if they didn’t offer surprises.”

Bill—the larger, brawny man—thrust up from his chair, jostling the table. “You bloody cheater, you!” The man reached for his hip and pointed a hefty revolver at the first with a metallic click.

The disheartened swearing of the other players was quickly lost in a surge of shocked cries. I pulled away abruptly alongside Yusuke, but the overseer stood firmly in place. Two shadow-faced servants emerged from the darkness amid the ruckus and swiftly placed Bill in a headlock. The bulky man growled at the faceless aggressors as he struggled, but the shadows were immovably sturdy.

“Gh, what the hell!” Bill shouted, “Get the fuck off me, you ingrates!”

“Mr. Slant,” the overseer calmly addressed him, “You know that weapons are not permitted inside the manor.”

As the man’s face turned a seething red, he lashed out at the overseer. “Oh, piss off, you cognitive peasant! You’re nothing more than a dirty roach stain in that buffoon’s brain!”

The shadows holding Bill looked to their administrator, and he nodded to them. “Drop Mr. Slant into the well for a little while,” said the overseer, “That should help him to cool down.”

I watched restlessly while the guard dragged Bill away, kicking and hurling insults. The other men hesitantly returned to their dealings once Mr. Slant had been removed from the premises, but Yusuke pressed the overseer for information.

“You’re taking that man to the well?” Yusuke reiterated earnestly, “Is that a euphemism for something? I’m bad at interpreting non-literals.”

The overseer turned to my friend and mustered something of a regretful sigh. “No, we have a decorative well on the property.”

Mildly surprised, Yusuke said, “I see… I don’t I’ll ever get the hang of this.”

I added, “Who was that man?”

“That was William Slant,” stated the overseer, “An associate of the master. I’m sorry you had to see that side of him, but he has been getting more irritable as of late.”

“Do other guests have outbursts such as that?” Yusuke inquired.

“No, certainly not,” the overseer huffed, “Most of our guests submit to the master’s rules and coexist harmoniously. However, many were extended invitations as a social courtesy—not because they inherently satisfied the master’s rigorous moral standards.”

“So not all the guests agree with Nikolai’s philosophy…” Yusuke postulated, “Hmm, interesting.”

“I suppose,” said the overseer, “but those who are willing to adopt the master’s ways shall endure under his protection.”

“How sanctimonious…” I replied.

Regardless, the overseer paid no heed to my comment and continued uninterrupted. “Well, we should leave these gentlemen to their games. Shall we continue with the tour?”

Yusuke nodded. “Yes, I’d like to see the upstairs if we could.”
“Of course,” the shadow replied, “Follow me, please.”

With the smoky cardplayers behind us, we retraced my route back to the foyer. I was startled to find how little I recognized from the rooms I had just walked through, but I didn’t want to dwell on that thought. Instead, I turned to Yusuke.

“Have you learned anything?” I asked.

He kept his eyes forward. “Well… Nikolai seems to have a very well-maintained house. Apparently, some of it was modeled after the styles employed by the Russian czars before—”

Exasperated, I gave a nod. “Right, but suspicious things, Yusuke.”

“Oh,” Yusuke chuckled, “Actually, I had not seen anything out of the ordinary until that man pulled out a gun.”

“There must be something here. It’s a Palace.”

“You’re right,” he replied, “The desires are clearly here, but this infiltration is different. We don’t know Nikolai, and we have no method to guess as to his sin.” Yusuke stroked his face as he thought. “Even so, it appears a great deal of precaution has been taken to hide this place’s true meaning.”

I tightened my lips pensively. “Let’s keep our eyes open.”

As we came into the entryway, the overseer directed us toward the stairs. However, Yusuke paused in front of me. “Hold a moment, please,” he addressed the shadow.

The darkened man faced us. “…as you wish.”

Affirming the overseer’s patience, Yusuke turned to me. “Joker, you should proceed and talk to the others. I shall continue the tour and report on my findings when we regroup.” My partner and I nodded to each other, and Yusuke ascended the white stairs with the overseer.

I had learned very little thus far, and my patience was beginning to wear thin, so I trudged in haste to the luminescent, ballroom doors. In the quiet of the outer halls and rooms, one could scarcely tell that a perpetual celebration was occurring inside the central chamber. Still, I had the audacity to challenge that assumption. Celebrations inside cognitive worlds were nothing more than vain indulgences used to mask putrid evils, and the most convincing charades hid the worst offenses.

The noise of pretentious music and hollow flattery was swift to my ears as I pushed through the large doors. Guests roamed about freely doing whatever they pleased to no end, and I found this to be a grating mockery. My hunger for answers rising, I looked for a friend and found one quickly.

“Ah, there you are, Joker,” Mona said, skipping toward me. Samuel plodded stoically behind him like an owner being walked by his pet. “Did you find anything yet?”

“Not much,” I answered.

Morgana smirked with brash positivity. “Well, you can always help me educate-!”

“Oh, actually,” Samuel interjected. “Why don’t we just help Joker? I think I’m getting the gist of it, and we should probably start checking in with everyone anyway.”

Mona glanced back and nodded. “Mmm, right!”

Sam continued, “I think Miss… Er, I mean, I think Queen might have been having some trouble.”
“Let’s go then,” I said.

“Following you,” Sam said, and the two trailed beside me.

We melded with the stagnant clusters of chattering guests and moved toward the far end of the room. Ann’s skintight latex and Makoto’s spiked shoulders were obvious amongst the crowd’s dapper suits and blooming dresses despite the event’s inclination for subterfuge. Makoto skinned the guests attentively while Ann split her attention between her friend and the nearby hors d’oeuvres tray.

“It’s alright, Queen,” Ann said, munching, “I’m sure somebody else has found something…”

Makoto smiled back tenderly. “That’s…” she stopped as she spotted us, “Oh, there’s Joker.”

The two ladies turned to me as I asked, “Have we learned anything new?”

Sighing, Makoto replied, “Not much… We talked to a bunch of people here, but no one seems to know anything of significance about Nikolai. All that work and we still have nothing.”

“Well, not nothing,” Ann swiftly corrected, “We heard that the gardens behind the manor are off limits.”

“Eh, there’s a lot of gardens around this mansion,” Sam stated discouragingly.

“Yeah, apparently there’s a hedge maze in the backyard, but no one’s allowed back there,” Ann said. Then she turned aside and plucked another powder-covered puffball from the adjacent tray supported by a duteous shadow servant. “Oh, and we also learned that these sweet puffs taste amazing.” She took the treat by its skewer and popped it into her mouth with delight.

Makoto looked at Ann with a pitying smile, but Mona frowned in confusion. “What happened to being strong and not eating cake?” asked the cat.

Ann glanced at him without losing an iota of her exuberance. “Oh, this doesn’t count,” she replied, “This isn’t cake.” She picked up another and held it out to me. “Here! Try one.”

Unable to deny Ann’s cheerful smile, I responded, “As long as there aren’t any Russian surprises…” and took the sweet.

Ann watched my face carefully while the others showed only passing curiosity. I stuck the powdered treat into my mouth and pulled the wooden pick through my closed lips. Immediately, the refined layers of sugar-coated my tongue, readying my palette for the crisp dough underneath. Even as a mellow smile came to my face, I couldn’t stop myself from finishing the delightful treat and enjoying its rich flavor.

Ann’s brow rose. “Well?”

“It’s good,” I replied, but as I spoke, a sudden puff of white powder exited my lips. Feeling the sweet powder sticking to my mouth and nose, I fidgeted instinctively.

Ann burst into laughter although the others did not appear as amused. Makoto scratched the bridge of her nose, and Samuel seemed more perturbed by Ann’s outburst than anything. Still, Mona did muster a bemused scoff. I quickly wiped my face while Ann’s joy lessened.

“Ahem, so,” Makoto continued, “We should probably reconvene the group. Who haven’t you checked with yet, Joker?”
I licked my lips obstinately. “I haven’t checked with Skull yet.”

Makoto sighed. “Well, I suppose we should ensure that he isn’t making a fool of himself.”

“Hasn’t he already done that?” Samuel questioned.

“He’ll have a chance to redeem himself,” Makoto stated, “If he’s actually found anything, that is.”

“Let’s see…” Ann said, pausing, “Skull said he was going to blend in at the tables. Alright, let’s go.”

With the group in agreement, we strained to pass through the transient crowds. The dining tables were on the opposing side of the ballroom to the multipurpose, mingling space, so we had to navigate the entire party. Nevertheless, I was eager to hear Ryuji’s findings if for nothing more than his lax demeanor. Our shortage of substantial information had left me in an unstable state, having to question why we had entered this stranger’s Palace.

Fortuitously, the dining area was less congested than its counterparts. Although there were plenty of filled tables, I quickly spotted Ryuji at a lonely one apart from the masses. Only one other person—a masked lady—sat with him, but Ryuji seemed more interested in his meal than conversation.

As soon as we approached, the downpour of berating comments began. “Skull!” Morgana wailed in frustration, “What are you doing? You’re supposed to be gathering intel!”

Ann crossed her arms and sighed. “Looks like he’s eating…”

“Huh?” Ryuji looked up from his plate as the moisture of a juicy steak graced his lips, “What? I am gathering intel!” He turned back to his meal before even finishing his excuse. “Just… from right here…” Ryuji popped another bite of steak into his mouth. “…at this table.”

“Oh, ingenious technique!” Sam mocked, “I wish I had thought of that.”

Ann held her face. “Oh, Skull…”

Having nothing to add to the rebuking of Skull, Makoto seized the opportunity to address the only other person at the table. “We’d like to apologize on behalf of our friend. I hope he didn’t cause you any disturbance.”

The lady sitting opposite Ryuji had long, dark hair, mostly tied in a ponytail. She had a dark red dress to go with her glass of dark red wine, and her mask had pointy ears and a rounded nose like a dog. “Actually, he’s been quite entertaining.” She cast a provoking smile at my friend.

Sam cocked his head at the woman. “Eh?”

“Yo, guys!” Futaba joined the conversation as she skipped to the table, “You should’ve called me if you were ready to meet up.”

I waved my hand at the petite girl. “We were about to.”

“Oh…” She smiled apologetically, adjusting her glasses, “Well, did you guys find any juicy secrets then?”

I just shook my head, and Makoto answered with a resounding, “Nope. What about you?”

Futaba cracked a grin. “I got a bunch of scan data!” she cheered, “It’s gonna take a long time to process though.”
Makoto nodded. “Huh, right…”

“What are we all talking about?” Haru then inserted herself into our midst.

Ann turned to her saying, “We were just discussing how little intel we’ve gathered.”

Haru smiled somberly. “You too, huh?”

“You didn’t find anything either, Noir?” asked Mona.

Haru shook her head. “It really says something that these people are more exhausting to talk to than food industry executives.”

Futaba let out a loud yawn. “Makes me sleepy just hearing about it.”

Stretching her arms over her head, Haru replied, “I know. Between my Persona and now this, I’m definitely going to need a nap once we get home.”

Ann held a hand over her mouth as she also yawned. “Me too…”

“Aren’t you young people supposed to be full of energy?” Sam interjected, “How are you guys tired already?”

“Hey!” Morgana chastised, “I haven’t seen you doing any fighting.”

Sam grunted and shook his head. “I just listened to you monologue for a good twenty minutes, didn’t I?”

As the pair glared derisively at one another, the missing member of our group arrived. “Ah, everyone’s already here,” Yusuke remarked.

I turned to him and asked, “Did you discover anything, Fox?”

“No,” Yusuke said dejectedly, “It seems the upstairs are just as conventional as the downstairs—lots of sleeping quarters and the like. There was an attic I did not get to see, but apparently, that’s where the main ventilation system is.”

Makoto’s face was downcast. “So, we’ve come up completely empty-handed.” She sighed. “This infiltration isn’t going very smoothly.”

Then our discussion was interrupted by the stranger sitting beside us. “You are the Phantom Thieves, correct?” inquired the lady, “If you’re trying to speak with Nikolai, I wouldn’t worry. It shouldn’t be too hard getting him to notice you.”

The group turned in puzzlement to the unfamiliar woman, and Sam made a face like something had flown up his nose. “Ah-em…” he stuttered, “Uh, Amanda, is that you?”

The lady took a long sip from her glass, shifting her irritated gaze away from Samuel. “Yes, hello Sam. I see you there,” she muttered grumpily, “You really should be wearing a mask, you know. This is a masquerade ball.”

Sam looked upon his sister in perplexity. “I… I didn’t bring one.”

“Um, I’m sorry,” Haru apologetically uttered, “Who is this woman?”

Sam heaved a great sigh. “That is my sister.”
“Ah, your sister,” Makoto blankly stated, “Yes, I think I recall meeting her once or twice before. She’s a very demanding person.”

“Wait,” Ann interjected in amazement, “I didn’t even know Squire had a sister!”

Ryuji looked up with a mouth full of steak. “His thither!?”

Futaba immediately followed, saying, “Amanda Zimmerman—owner of the Zimmerman Corporation, or Z-Tech, and currently acting as director for United States Extradimensional Intelligence and liaison to international Metaverse research.”

Mona frowned. “Why am I not surprised you knew that off the top of your head?”

Amanda let out a snide laugh as she glanced at Futaba. “I wish I had someone like you to announce my presence everywhere I went, darling.” She familiarly touched Futaba’s arm before glancing her over again. “Although, you are a bit short… Ah, it’s nothing some heels couldn’t fix.”

“Uh, thank you?” Futaba sputtered.

“So, a close relative of Squire is appearing as a cognitive being in the Palace of our supposed enemy?” Yusuke said, crossing his arms, “I’m sensing this situation is more complicated than I was led to believe.”

Sam proceeded to interrogate his sister. “Why are you here anyway?”

Amanda scoffed. “Are you really that dense? I know Nikki well enough.”

Sam shook his head. “No, I mean, why are you sitting here with this oaf?”

“Hey!” Ryuji hissed.

Rising from her seat, Amanda laughed peculiarly. “Well, he certainly looks cute.” She stepped around the table with her glass of wine in one hand and using the other to feel Ryuji’s shoulders. “Though I haven’t decided if he’s my type yet.”

Ryuji’s jaw hung open as he entered a light stupor. “Uh-uh…” he gawked, “Uhh…”

Sam frowned. “Isn’t he a bit young for you?”

Amanda removed her hands from my friend and strutted toward her brother. “Oh, I was only joking,” she said. The lady glanced back over her shoulder at Ryuji, rubbing her glossy lips together. “But he would make a nice boy-toy.”

Ryuji looked down at his plate and swallowed hard. “Nh…”

Sam frowned. “Amanda…”

His sister faced him with a sharp grimace. “Oh! what, Samuel!?” She stamped her heel. “Did you think I just wouldn’t be here, or that I’d be too stupid to figure out that the real me doesn’t want you infiltrating Nikolai’s cognition!?” Amanda shook her head as she glanced around at the group. “And you brought the damn cosplay kids too!” Her white face becoming red, she glared at Sam. “Haven’t they gone through enough! Do you even know what’s going to happen if anyone finds out about this?”

Sam took a step back from his sister. “They know the risks.”
“No, they don’t!” Amanda cried, “If the UN catches you, they’ll go to prison for the rest of their lives! And that’s if you’re lucky! If the Russians catch you, no one’s even going to know.”

“We were already attacked on the way here…”

“Dammit, Sam,” Amanda said, hitting her head, “I move heaven and earth to keep you out of trouble, but you just can’t sit still. Right when we’re on the precipice of doing some actual good, you’ve got to go and screw everything up with your damn rivalry!”

Suddenly, Sam clenched his teeth and shouted back, “Don’t give me that shit!” Sam flamed, “If you were actually concerned about doing good, we wouldn’t be having this discussion!”

“Oh?” Amanda replied, “Did I finally dig deep enough into that shell of yours to get you to show some backbone?”

“Woah,” Futaba chirped, “Destruction 100.”

Haru eye’s shifted worriedly between party members. “Ah, is Squire really arguing with his cognitive sister?”

With the two siblings sharing heated glares, I took the moment of levity to break the argument. “We’re just looking for our friend.” It wasn’t entirely a lie, just an oversimplification.

Amanda turned her reddened eyes upon me. “Is that supposed to console me?” she asked, “How am I supposed to take the word of a thief?”

“Take your brother’s.”

Distraught, the lady turned back to Sam. Her brother sighed. “He’s right. We’re trying to find a friend of theirs who was kidnapped using the Metaverse.”

“And I just have to believe you chose Nikolai’s cognition as the first place to investigate?” Amanda laughed and then let out a long sigh. “Fine. Whatever. Just don’t cause any trouble.”

Sam’s mouth skewed. “Well, I can’t make any promises about the cat.” He motioned to Morgana.

Glancing down at our smaller companion, Amanda jumped with a start and lightly patted her breast. “Oh… my,” she heaved, “I didn’t even notice that hideous thing.”

“What!” Mona wailed, “Excuse me!”

“Ahem,” Makoto inserted herself into the dialogue, addressing Amanda, “Perhaps you would like to share some information on Nikolai with us since you seem to know him so well.”

Amanda sighed and took another sip of wine. “Why not?” she responded, “I was getting bored anyways. All these drab businessmen and scientists leave a girl feeling so lonely.” She gazed condescendingly over the crowds.

“Lonely?” Ann repeated in confusion, “But it’s a party. No one talks to you?”

“No,” Amanda said with a shrug, “I would talk to Nikki, but he’s preoccupied with his work these days—always keeping to his office, only permitting the occasional visitor by invitation.”

Ann propped her head on one hand as she thought. “Only by invitation, huh?”

“That’s right,” Amanda replied, confidently approaching Panther, “Of course, I doubt you—of all
people—would have any difficulty securing one.” Without flinching, Amanda reached out and placed her free hand directly on Ann’s hip.

Ann let out a wail as her face filled with shock. “Ah!” The remainder of us showed great apprehension to Amanda’s brazen advances.

“Feel that…” Amanda mumbled to herself, “Damn… skintight latex.” She maneuvered behind Ann, allowing her hand to follow to the other hip. Amanda looked up and smiled. “Honestly, I’m kind of jealous. I’d be having a lot of fun if I could fill out a latex suit like you do.”

Ann shivered in burning paralysis. “Umm…”

Sam’s brow furrowed intensely. “Amanda…”

Nevertheless, his sister continued her fascination with Ann. “Oh, you’re that model, right? Seems the pictures don’t quite do you justice.” Amanda stepped back and took in Ann’s figure.

“Eh…” Ann wavered, “That’s me.”

Amanda tapped her lips as she smiled mischievously. “A female model… That’d be a first.”

“Amanda,” Sam interjected, “Would you please leave her alone?”

“Oh, Sam,” Amanda called back, “It’s your own fault for keeping them under surveillance for so long. We had so many magazine issues! What was I supposed to do with all those pretty boys and girls posing on the covers?”

Having heard enough mindless blabbering, I stepped confidently between Amanda and Ann, granting the former a cold stare. “Quit harassing her.”

Amanda glanced at me, widening her eyes. “Oh, I see. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were so territorial.” She smiled while her eyes scanned my body. “Though I guess it’s a small consolation seeing she did so well for herself.”

Then Yusuke put a swift end to the nonsense with a loud rebuke. “Would you kindly stop this indecency!” he shouted, “This is truly repugnant behavior, especially for an adult!”

“Woah, Fox!” Futaba cheered, “Destruction 200!”

Amanda took another sip from her glass as she turned away from the group in frustration. “Hmph…”

Makoto crossed her arms. “Well, this is going nowhere fast.”

Sam scratched his head and sighed. “Maybe we should reconvene elsewhere. It appears my sister has had too much wine for her own good.”

Ryuji nodded earnestly in agreement. “Right,” he began, “Let me just finish my steak, and…”

Ann groaned irritably. “Haven’t you had enough imaginary food!?” she growled, “Now you’re just making the rest of us hungry!”

Shoving another hunk of meat into his cheek, Ryuji gave his retort. “Hey! It ain’t my fault you ran off and ignored the opportunity.”

Mona sighed. “Let’s just go already. Leave him if we have to.”
Makoto nodded. “Agreed. We’ve wasted enough time already.”

The group fell into line as we parted from the tables, but Ryuji jeered after us. “Hey, wait!”

We regrouped in an empty corner of the ballroom far from any prying ears and began to debrief the team on the situation. Compelling details were lacking, but I had some questions on my mind following the appearance of Amanda. While infiltration was our only course of action, my suspicions of Sam had risen considerably. We had no evidence of the missing being inside this Palace, and now Sam’s sister was here. One way or another, I was going to get some answers.

“I must apologize for my sister’s behavior back there,” Sam began, “She was acting like…”

“Like a drunken fool?” Yusuke firmly added, “Yes, we noticed.”

Sam closed his eyes and swallowed. “Well, I guess that’s one way to put it.”

“Why is she here anyway?” Mona asked, “It’s awfully suspicious for her to be in Nikolai’s cognition without any significant alterations.”

“It’s just some weird, fake cognition, right?” Ryuji said, “No way a government employee acts like that in real life.”

Sam’s mouth wrinkled. “Eh…”

Skull recoiled. “What!? She actually does!!?”

“Look,” Sam continued, “It’s just like your…” He glanced at Futaba and paused.

“Oracle,” Haru supplied.

“Oracle,” Sam restated, nodding, “It’s just like your Oracle explained. My sister is the one coordinating Metaverse research across pretty much the entire world. Nikolai and Russia—they’re a part of that initiative though only tenuously at best.”

“Hmm,” Ann considered Sam’s words, “Amanda seemed pretty familiar with him for a “tenuous” relationship.”

“Well…” Sam shifted from foot to foot. “What they do in their personal time is not really something I want to concern myself with.”

Ann’s face drooped. “Oh…”

“Then, is that why you’re considered late?” Yusuke asked, “Because you know Nikolai by association.”

“Something to that effect,” Sam replied.

Having sufficiently vetted Samuel, I directed the conversation to the objective of our mission. “So, what information do we have?”

“Well, not much,” Makoto somberly replied, “If I recall, we didn’t find anything particularly incriminating.”

“At this rate, talking to Nikolai directly might be our best option,” Yusuke stated.
“Yes, but he’s so reclusive,” Makoto went on, “Amanda said we’d need an invitation just to get in to see him.”

“Even if we get inside, then what?” Ryuji inquired, “It’s not like we can just beat the info out of him. There are shadows crawling all over this place! Even if we did rough Nik up, there’s an army of butlers waitin’ to kick our asses. Not to mention those weird inhibitor things…”

“Perhaps we should expand our search area,” Haru offered, “and use more clandestine methods to gather information.”

“That would be best,” Makoto agreed, “But what places are left to investigate?”

“There is the attic,” Yusuke said, crossing his arms, “Although, I doubt there are any secrets hidden up there.”

“Ooh, what about the hedge maze we heard about earlier?” Ann added.

Makoto nodded as she considered the idea. “Yes, the gardens still could be hiding something.”

Sam scratched his chin. “Yes, but like Skull said, this place is swarming with shadows. If we go outside, there will be eyes on us. Whether it be that overseer or some of those patrolling riders, it’ll be really difficult to get around the yard unnoticed.”

“What we need is a better infiltration route,” Mona said, “We’ll never be able to sneak around if we have an escort the moment we step onto the property.”

“Maybe there’s another entrance through that black wall we passed through,” Haru added.

“Hmm, might take a while to find though,” Sam stated, “That thing seemed to go on forever.”

“Well then,” Makoto responded, “Why don’t we return to reality for today? Oracle’s scan data also needs some time to process.”

Hearing her friend’s suggestion, Ann stood on her tiptoes and stretched her arms high into the air. “Mmm, sounds good. I think I’ll catch a nap on the car ride back.”

Yusuke nodded as he adjusted his sleeves. “I can agree with that. We learned a lot today, despite the setbacks.”

Morgana nodded happily. “Yep! Great work today team!”

“Are we all ready then?” I asked.

Makoto smiled at me. “Seems we’re all in agreement.”

Ryuji abruptly yawned. “We sure had a productive run.”

Futaba glared curiously at him. “But… all you did was sit around and eat…”

I sighed. “Let’s go.”

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!