# Ace In The Hole

**by** eirannerys

## Summary

A hidden advantage or resource kept in reserve until needed.

Masayoshi Shido has barred the Shadow Operatives from action for two years, since the death of Wakaba Isshiki. But when the Phantom Thieves appear, Mitsuru decides that they can't keep just watching from the sidelines. Luckily, there is a certain former member Shido doesn't seem to be aware of: Ken Amada. But when Ken meets the Phantom Thieves in person, he can't help but agree with their goals. He can't help but befriend them. Maybe it only had been a matter of time before he actually joined them. Now has a [TV Tropes page](https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php?n=Fanfiction.TV%20Tropes).
A few of the Shadow Operatives meet to discuss the recently unveiled Phantom Thieves. One of them proposes a mission for one of their retired members.

**Sunday, November 20th, 2016**

How long had it been since Sae had been interrogating this boy, Ren Amamiya? And yet, Sae had so many questions. He had concocted such a tall tale, speaking of a talking cat that transformed into a bus, claiming that he and his friends were essentially like magical girls, forcing criminals to confess their crimes...

And what he had just told her—that her little sister, Makoto, was one of the Phantom Thieves that she had been hunting for months now. Sae inhaled deeply. She had to stay focused.

"There's something that... puzzles me," she stated. "You claim to have fought these creatures through the areas you call Palaces. And yet, I doubt that you would have prevailed so easily, if you did not have someone with previous battle experience." She narrowed her eyes. "Tell me. Who is it?"

Amamiya looked at her with blurry eyes, but remained silent. Sae silently cursed to herself, before she dragged her fingers through her hair. Of course. He refused to speak of his collaborators, when she pressed him on it.

But then something struck Sae.

Hmm. Maybe *this* would get him to talk.

Sae plucked out a file, showing it to the boy. She felt a pang of guilt as she looked at him. He was young. Younger than Makoto. Sae quickly stamped that thought. He was a criminal. She couldn't pity a crook.

She cleared her throat, before tapping a fingernail against the photo. The photo showed an image of a light brown haired teenager, slightly older than Amamiya. "Shujin Academy is of high prestige. Yet, they accepted another transfer student just a couple months after your own transfer. June, to be exact. Digging into his record, he appears to have ties with the Kirijo Group somehow. Tell me... what do you know of Ken Amada?"

**Monday, May 2nd, 2016**

Minako was unsurprised that Mitsuru had suddenly summoned her to the Kirijo labs. The news was abuzz with the Phantom Thieves of Hearts and Kamoshida's confession earlier this morning.
According to the news, Kamoshida had done a complete 180, personality wise. Not to mention how he had confessed to his crimes—crimes that he was getting away with.

It was too strange. It had to be... supernatural.

Minako slowly opened the door, peering inside.

Machinery quietly beeped, the only sound in the room. Fuuka had her hands clasped in front of her, her face screwed up as she concentrated. She sat in the glass orb that made up Juno's lower body. Mitsuru was messing with the knobs of a machine.

Fuuka's eyes then shot open. "Mitsuru-senpai," she said, her voice sounding like it was traveling through water. "Minako-chan is here."

Mitsuru turned around, her lips forming a thin line. "Hello, Minako."

Minako entered the room, shutting the door behind her. She didn't bother with formalities—though she doubted that Mitsuru minded. "...Do you think he's connected to this?"

Masayoshi Shido had been a thorn in Mitsuru's side for a couple years now. It had started with Wakaba Isshiki's "suicide". Wakaba-san had been a former Kirijo Group scientist and had left before the fiasco with Death for unstated reasons. But Wakaba-san had reconnected with Mitsuru, right around when the Shadow Operatives had formed. She had helped connect the dots about the missing Kirijo research that Ikutsuki had destroyed. But what Wakaba-san had been researching before her death... cognitive pscience... it was dangerous. Mitsuru had repeatedly tried to dissuade her from continuing but Wakaba-san had been pigheaded about it. She refused. She claimed it was too important to abandon.

But despite her stubbornness (or maybe because of it), Minako had liked the dark haired woman. A lot. She was bold, bright, had a great sense of humor... She definitely marched to the beat of her own drum. Her daughter, Futaba, was absolutely adorable too, though on the shy side. She had been sad when the news came that she had died. She hoped that Futaba was okay too...

But when Mitsuru heard of Wakaba-san's death... she became suspicious and began to dig into things. But Shido's men halted the investigation before they could make much headway. Sadly, the investigation was stopped before they could find out what happened to Futaba...

She really hoped that someone who cared for Futaba was looking after her. She knew all too well what it was like when under the care of someone who just thought of you as a burden.

Mitsuru grimaced, before rubbing her temple with one hand. "I don't see how it can't be him. His rise in power... it has to be connected to the mental shutdowns, as the media calls them."

Fuuka dismissed Juno with a flash, Mitsuru quickly extending a hand to help her stand up. "My scans are very fuzzy," she confessed, smiling sheepishly. "I can't get a clear picture."

Minako grabbed Fuuka's hands, giving them a light squeeze. "Don't be so hard on yourself," she chided lightly. "Tokyo isn't exactly close to here."

Mitsuru nodded. "Minako is right, Yamagishi," she said. "But... can you determine anything?"

"Mm." Fuuka nodded as well, before biting her lower lip. "Tokyo has a Shadow nest. Perhaps even larger than Tartarus."

Minako's eyes widened. "Are you serious, Fuuka-chan?!"
"It's strange…" Fuuka frowned, resting her fingers on her chin. "The structure of it is very similar to Tartarus."

"Similar but not?" Minako asked.

"It's… hard to say," Fuuka said slowly, before she winced. "I'm sorry… this is really vague."

"You're working with what you have, Yamagishi," Mitsuru said gently, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Even just a little bit of information is something."

Fuuka smiled at her. "Thank you, Senpai. But… what can we do? This has to be serious if a Shadow nest has formed…"

"The Phantom Thieves… concern me." Mitsuru frowned, her forehead creasing as she mulled it over. "We have no idea what their methods are or what their goal is… Furthermore, there's the question if they're connected to the mental shutdowns."

Minako sighed deeply. This was just… a mess…

Fuuka just frowned, before clasping her hands behind her back. "I don't think what happened to Kamoshida is the same as the mental shutdowns. They're similar, but… what happened to Kamoshida was more positive. He confessed to his crimes. Furthermore, the victims of the mental shutdowns just… hurt people."

Minako winced. The news of the subway just… hit close to home. Especially since their first full moon operation probably would have killed all four of them if it wasn't for Minato taking a chance and pulling on the brakes.

"Well, yes, but…" Mitsuru grimaced, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Imagine what would happen, if someone with that knowledge, held a grudge against someone? Furthermore, the calling card specifically states that they will steal their 'desires'. What if that includes the desire to live?"

"Is… Is it possible for that to happen?" Minako asked slowly, her eyes widening.

That was essentially killing someone…

Mitsuru spread her hands, a wry smile on her lips. "Minako, we've witnessed many things that defy the impossible. What's one more?"

"…Good point," she sighed. "We don't need another Strega on our hands."

"But…" Fuuka said slowly, "what can we do? This happened in Tokyo… and you know about Shido's threat."

Mitsuru sighed deeply, pressing a hand to her temple. "I know that, Yamagishi, but…" She began to twist one of her curls with a hand. "I cannot stand aside. Doing nothing is not an option."

"He could use your family's dirty laundry against you, Mitsuru," Minako warned. "The government still are convinced you have some evil intention with the Shadow Operatives. He could take away Aigis and Labrys for his own use."

Two years ago, the government had forcibly dismantled the Shadow Operatives in the greater areas of Tokyo. There was a bs'd reason for it, but Minako couldn't remember what it was exactly. Fuuka had to hack into the systems to discover the man who was responsible for this. Masayoshi Shido, who was aiming to become Prime Minister this year. Minako shuddered at the idea of the man...
being in charge of the whole nation. She wasn't particularly religious, but she prayed that Shido would lose the election come this December.

And the idea of Shido getting his hands on Aigis and Labrys just made Minako shudder. Especially since both of them were forced to bend under the will of someone before.

"I know, Minako," Mitsuru rubbed her eyes. "But there has to be something…"

"Maybe we could ask Naoto-kun?" Fuuka suggested tentatively. "She's rather famous. Her cover could be that she's investigating the mental shutdowns."

Mitsuru grimaced, before shaking her head. "A sound idea, but we can't go through with it. Shirogane is registered as a part time Shadow Operatives under our files. Shido would most likely know it. And her fame would just make her more easily recognized."

Not to mention that Naoto has been struggling to find work lately… People were more interested in the supposedly second Detective Prince, Goro Akechi. Minako didn't particularly like him, if she was being honest. He just… treated detective work like a joke. In her opinion, he seemed more interested in giving a show. Not there was nothing wrong with people in showbiz, of course. Yukari was one of her best friends, after all. And she had always got on with Rise, too.

Minako looked at her two friends, both deep in thought. There has to be someway for them to get a feel of the situation. Shido didn't want the Shadow Operatives interfering with his plans…

But… what if they sent someone who wasn't an operative?

"…There's Ken-kun," Minako said quietly.

That was when Fuuka's head shot up. "What?!" she gasped, her teal eyes wide with shock. "You can't be serious, Minako-chan!"

Mitsuru frowned. "Minako… Yamagishi is right. Amada hasn't been out in the field since the Minazuki incident."

"Isn't that why Ken-kun is a good candidate?" Minako pointed out. "He left the Shadow Operatives before we were on Shido's radar." She folded her arms over her chest. "Furthermore… how do you think the Phantom Thieves identified Kamoshida's crimes?"

Fuuka's expression grew pensive and she begin to play with her braid. "You're saying that they're students who were Kamoshida's victims?"

"Yep." Minako nodded firmly. "Nothing else makes sense. How else would they know? Especially since Kamoshida was only targeting his students."

Minako shuddered at the thought. And she thought that Ekoda was awful, for brushing aside Fuuka's disappearance for ten days straight. Why did they allow people like that to become teachers?

"You prove a good point…" Mitsuru said slowly, but then she grimaced. "…But Shinjiro would not agree to it easily."

…Dammit, that was right. Shinji was Ken's guardian now—has been since after the whole fiasco with Sho (who was still AWOL after four years). And he hadn't exactly been thrilled that Mitsuru had let Ken join the Shadow Operatives in the first place—albeit a backup member.
"I think you would have to get Ken-kun to agree to it first, if you were to convince Shinji," Fuuka finally said. "He doesn't want Ken-kun to feel forced into it."

Minako glanced at her friend. "Can't you talk to him, Fuuka-chan?"

Fuuka winced, before she continued to fuss with her braid. "I'm just his girlfriend... I don't have that much sway over him."

Minako snorted. "You've saved Junpei how many times because he pissed off Shinji?"

"That's different, Minako-chan," Fuuka said, with a light giggle, only for her expression to grow somber. "But still... I think we may be jumping the gun right now. Maybe the Phantom Thieves are a one time thing... If they were personal victims of Kamoshida, they might not have a reason to repeat their actions."

Mitsuru let out a thoughtful hum, as she stroked her chin. "Yamagishi poses a good point." Her eyes flickered to Minako, wine red meeting scarlet. "I'm not rejecting your idea, Minako. But we don't want to act rashly. We've been watching Shido for nearly two years... we can wait a little longer."

Ken was pretty sure that his teachers hated the phrase "Phantom Thieves" after today.

The news had dropped right before the period preceding lunch and it had spread like wildfire. And every single teacher after lunch had to lecture at least one student to stop talking about the Phantom Thieves.

But his classmates just could not stop talking about them. Whether it was how they were amazing for busting Kamoshida's crimes or people arguing that it was just a hoax… the Phantom Thieves was the only thing his classmates wanted to discuss.

Though Ken had to admit it was pretty amazing—that the Phantom Thieves were pretty amazing. Kamoshida was getting away with his crimes, all because the school cared more about the good reputation he brought. But the Phantom Thieves somehow had managed to get him to become contrite and confess to his crimes.

Ken hadn't taken part of the conversations at school but… he couldn't help but think the Phantom Thieves were right in their actions. And he had seen too many things for it to not be a hoax.

Ken sighed, staring at his notebook which had a grand total of two sentences written on the page. This has been the least productive afternoon he's spent in a while.

He might as well head home if he can't focus…

The walk back to the apartment was fairly uneventful. He unlocked the door, only to be greeted by barking. Koromaru, as usual, jumped onto Ken the moment he stepped inside.

Ken bent down, scratching Koromaru behind the ear. "You're in a good mood today," he commented.

"You're home early." Shinjiro-san stepped from the kitchen into the living room.

Ken shrugged. "I was distracted from studying, so I figured I might as well come home."

Shinjiro-san just craned an eyebrow. "Guessing you heard about the Phantom Thieves, huh?"
"Mmhm." Ken shrugged off his school bag and then his blazer, tossing both on the couch as he walked further in the living room. He glanced at his guardian. "What do you think of all of this?"

Shinjiro-san shrugged. "It was all good that they busted Kamoshida, but the way they pulled it sounds a bit fishy. It should die down in a few days. It always does."

Shinjiro-san seemed more neutral than anything… Though his comment about their methods nagged at Ken. It did seem odd now that he pointed it out…

"I'm home!" Ken heard Fuuka-san announce. Koromaru quickly scrambled to her side to greet her. Fuuka-san giggled. "Hey, Koro-chan."

Fuuka-san came into view, looking rather tired for some reason.

Shinjiro-san eyed her. "What did Mitsuru even have you do?"

Fuuka-san just giggled, standing on her tiptoes and pecking Shinjiro-san on the cheek, brushing away some flour smeared on his face with her thumb. "I didn't spend the whole day helping Mitsuru-senpai. Minako-chan came too and we decided to catch up."

"Uh huh." Shinjiro-san rolled his eyes. "And I'm sure that Mitsuru was in a mood to socialize."

Fuuka-san winced, before tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Well… she is a bit stressed… because of the whole thing with Shido…"

Shinjiro-san then scowled, his expression growing dark. "What did he pull now?"

"Nothing in particular…" Fuuka-san shrugged. "It just… frustrates Mitsuru-senpai that she can't do anything to handle Shido."

"Shido would be a popsicle if Mitsuru could actually go to Tokyo," Shinjiro-san said dryly.

Fuuka just laughed softly. "That would solve all of our problems, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, if only," Shinjiro-san grumbled.

Fuuka then glanced in the direction of the kitchen. "So, um…" she began, obviously looking to change the subject. "How's dinner coming along? Do you need help?"

"Nah, I was nearly done when I heard Koro greet Ken." Shinjiro-san shook his head, before dropping a quick kiss to Fuuka-san's head. "You should rest a bit. Dinner should be done in a few minutes."

"Mm, if you say so," Fuuka-san watched Shinjiro-san disappear into the kitchen, before falling onto the couch and letting out a light sigh.

Ken took a seat next to her as Koromaru darted over to them, climbing the sofa to drape himself on their laps. "Are you okay, Fuuka-san?" he asked quietly.

Fuuka-san just smiled. "I'm okay, really… It's just been a while since Mitsuru-san has asked me to summon Juno and you know how tiring it is to summon a Persona without being in a Shadow nest. And Tokyo's rather far away."

"It's like… four, five hours away by train, right?"

"Mm, something like that." Fuuka stroked the top of Koromaru's head, the shiba inu snuggling
closer to her in response. Her eyes then flickered to Ken, unusually serious. "…Tell me, Ken-kun. What do you think of the Phantom Thieves?"

"Me?" Ken blinked, before rubbing the back of his neck. "Uh… well… it was pretty amazing what they did." He looked to his lap, his voice quiet as he continued. "I know that their methods seem strange… almost supernatural… given how Kamoshida was getting away with the crimes, but… I can't help but admire them for not allowing his abuse to continue."

He looked up to see Fuuka-san biting her lower lip. He frowned.

"Fuuka-san? What's the matter?"

"Huh?" Fuuka-san blinked several times at him, as if she was trying to get her bearings. "Um, nothing! Nothing!" She then smiled, a painfully forced smile. "That is quite… thoughtful of you, Ken-kun." She then bit her lip again. "I… I think I'm going to take a shower. It's been a long day."

She nudged Koromaru off her lap, before quickly escaping for the bedroom she shared with Shinjiro-san. Ken just stared after her.

What was that about?

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Tuesday, May 31st, 2016

Another calling card had appeared. It had shown up at the gallery where the famous artist, Ichiryusai Madarame, was hosting a showcase. It was composed similarly to the first calling card… just not so poorly cobbled together this time.

It accused Madarame of his crimes of abusing his students and that he was guilty of the sin of Vanity. And it then declared that the Phantom Thieves would steal his desires. Just like Kamoshida.

Though Mitsuru had to wonder how the Phantom Thieves discovered these crimes in the first place. If Minako’s hypothesis was correct… how exactly did high school students discover the truth?

Mitsuru sighed deeply, rubbing her temple with one hand. She hated feeling so helpless.

This went against the entire reason why she formed the Shadow Operatives in the first place. She didn't want teenagers to have to go through what she had. But Shido had to throw a wrench into her plans, by manipulating the law. And she was still unsure if the Phantom Thieves were affiliated with him or not.

But what Minako proposed… sending Amada undercover…

Amada had wanted to wait until after he graduated from high school before deciding if he wanted to join the Shadow Operatives again. He had never said it directly to her, but she had understood his intent.

But what was nine or ten months? Amada was only a few weeks away from turning eighteen… In the eyes of some countries, that made him a near adult.

And well… she would never force him if he didn't wish to do this. She would make that perfectly clear that it was a request and he could refuse if he wanted to. She would not repeat what she had
done in high school, urging her classmates to join SEES in a way that they felt they couldn't say no.

And as for Shinjiro… well, Minako was excellent at persuading him into doing things that he wasn't exactly enthusiastic about. The biggest example was how she persuaded him to cook for the dorm. (She still had no idea how Minako had managed that.) Not to mention Yamagishi's talent of calming him down and seeing the other's perspective.

As for provisions… that would be the easiest. Her family owned many properties in Tokyo, so Amada could stay there. There was also the matter of arranging Amada's transfer to Shujin Academy, but she could handle that if Amada agreed.

Her mind made up, Mitsuru reached for her phone. It took exactly three rings before the person on the other side answered.

"Hello?"

Mitsuru inhaled deeply before speaking. "Minako, you're right in that we need to take action…" she began cautiously.

Minako was silent for several moments. "Then, you want…?"

Mitsuru nodded, even though she knew Minako wouldn't be able to see. "Yes. We must speak to Amada about going to Tokyo."

Wednesday, June 1st, 2016

"We must speak to Amada about going to Tokyo," Minako mimicked under her breath as she trudged towards the apartment Shinji, Fuuka, and Ken lived. "So why am I the one stuck asking Shinji?"

But noooo, Mitsuru was all: you're far superior at persuading Shinjiro. You have to do it, Minako. Furthermore, it was your idea.

Minako just sighed, folding her arms over her chest as she eyed the door. She wished that she had a better reading on how Ken felt about the Phantom Thieves, but Ken kept his thoughts on them to himself. The few times she was able to visit with Shinji and Fuuka, Ken was out of the house—usually locking himself in the library to study. It wasn't too surprising, given that Ken was a third-year now and he had lofty goals considering his top university choice.

Maybe she should have brought Aki with her… Maybe Aki could've helped her with Shinji… She had discussed the topic of the Phantom Thieves many times with her husband and he agreed that it would be best if Ken went to Tokyo.

…Then again, Aki and Shinji probably would've gotten into one of their stupid arguments.

Minako shook her head. She was just here to ask if Ken would go to Tokyo. Nothing would be finalized unless he said yes. She was jumping ahead of herself…

She drew a deep breath before reaching to ring the doorbell. She could hear Koromaru's excited barking, quickly followed by Fuuka calling, "Coming!"

A moment later, the door swung open and Koromaru lunged at Minako, knocking her to the ground. She just giggled, letting Koromaru lick her face.
"Koro-chan!" she heard Fuuka chide. "You could've hurt Minako-chan!"

Minako sat up and waved her friend off. "It's fine, Fuuka-chan." She petted Koromaru on top of her head. "It's been a while, huh, Koro-chan?"

Koromaru looked well. Even though he was on the older side now, he was as spry as he was in the days of SEES. Though she had to admit that Ken's old hoodie had seen better days.

"But… But…" Fuuka protested. "You're pregnant, Minako-chan."

"Pfft, it's fine." Minako flapped her hand at Fuuka. "Besides, I'm barely three months along yet."

"I don't think that's the right attitude, Minako-chan…" There was an almost wistfulness to Fuuka's expression.

"It's just a one time thing, y'know?" Minako said hastily, feeling a pang of guilt.

Shinji and Fuuka's relationship had been mostly long distance since Fuuka had left Port Island for a few years so she could study at Tokyo University, but… they had been living together ever since Fuuka had graduated and came back home. Shinji was saving up for an engagement ring, but add him trying to save up enough money so he could open the restaurant he wanted and Ken's expenses… it was going slow. But of course, Fuuka had no idea about this.

Koromaru let out a yip, before licking Minako's face once more. He then climbed off of Minako, trotting back to Fuuka.

Fuuka just sighed, shaking her head before extending a hand to Minako so she could pull Minako up. "That's what you always say, Minako-chan…"

Minako just smiled sheepishly. "Guilty as charged."

Fuuka laughed, before her expression grew sad. "…Are you really here to ask Ken-kun…?" she asked softly.

Minako sighed, before running her hand through her hair. "Yeah…" she said quietly. "It was the second calling card that convinced Mitsuru… We don't want this to get out of control."

"I see…" Fuuka bit her lip. "But… Ken-kun is out of the house."

"Whaaaaat?" Minako put her hands on her hips. "But it's nearly six!"

Fuuka just shrugged. "That's normal actually. He usually studies at the school library. And besides," she tilted her head at Minako, "I seem to recall a certain somebody not coming back to the dorm until the evening as well."

Minako let out an awkward laugh. Fuuka got her there, she had to admit.

"Okay, okay, I get your point," she said. "I'll just talk to Shinji first."

Fuuka stared. For several moments, without saying anything.

"…Are you sure that's a good idea, Minako-chan?" she asked hesitantly.

"It'll be fine," Minako said, injecting more confidence in her voice than she felt.

Fuuka pursed her lips, before nodding. "If you think so…" She took a few steps back, letting
Minako to come inside. She removed her shoes, leaving them by the door before following Fuuka to the living room.

Shinji was sitting on the couch, reading a cooking magazine from the looks of it. He looked up when he heard Minako enter. He set his magazine aside, raising an eyebrow.

"…What are you craving now?"

"Uh… what?" was her brilliant response. (But hey, it was kinda out of the blue!)

"Shinji," Fuuka chastised, frowning at him.

Shinji huffed, folding his arms over his chest. "I still remember Takeba's weird ass cravings."

"It's still rude," Fuuka chided.

"Yeah, Shinji, no congratulations?" Minako put her hands on her hips, flashing him a teasing smile. "I mean, it is Aki's baby too. You know, your best friend?"

Shinji just rolled his eyes. "Should I really celebrate Aki possibly getting a mini of him?"

"Now, now, Shinji…" Minako smirked, folding her arms over her chest. "Shouldn't you be more worried if the baby turns out to be like me?"

Shinji just sighed deeply, eyeing her warily. "…What do you want, Minako?"

Minako clasped her hands behind her back. "Well… she began, dragging out the word, "you know about the situation in Tokyo?"

"How can I not know?" Shinji scowled, looking completely unimpressed with her. "Get to the point already."

"Uh… it's just…" Minako smiled sheepishly. "I thought it'd be a good idea to send Kentou investigate the Phantom Thieves," she blurted out in a rush.

Shinji stared. And stared. Then something in him seem to snap, his steel gray eyes darkening with anger. "You. Did. What?!" he ground out, glaring daggers at her.

Unwillingly, Minako took a step back. Holy crap, sometimes she forgot how scary Shinji can be.

"And Mitsuru agreed?!" Shinji demanded, still looking rather pissed. "What happened to her 'I can't endanger you all' mindset?"

Minako quickly ducked behind Fuuka, despite her being half a head shorter. He hopefully wouldn't come after her if she used Fuuka as a shield. "C-Come on, you have to admit it's concerning!"

"But why Ken?" Shinji continued to scowl at her.

Fuuka quickly sat next to Shinji, resting a hand on his arm. "Calm down, Shinji," she said gently. "You know that Mitsuru-senpai wouldn't resort to this unless she felt there was no other way."

Shinji jerked his head in Fuuka's direction, but his gaze softened from steel to rock. "…What do you know?"

"Minako-chan broached the idea the day Mitsuru-senpai asked me to come to the labs last month," Fuuka said quietly. (How could she be so freaking calm?) "I didn't say anything because she
technically said no."

"And this mission is supposed to be reconnaissance..." Minako said. "We're not asking for Ken to actually fight the Phantom Thieves. We just want to know if they will go rogue. Their identities. Their goals."

Shinji narrowed his eyes. "You still didn't answer my question."

Fuuka said, "Ken-kun is an ideal candidate because he left the Shadow Operatives years before Shido knew about us. Furthermore... Minako-chan suggested that the Phantom Thieves are high school students, with how they knew about Kamoshida's crimes."

Shinji was silent for several moments. "Does it really have to be him?" he said finally, meeting Minako's gaze. "Can't you ask Shirogane? She's always running off from city to city with her cases anyways."

Minako shook her head. "Nope. Shido will definitely go after her, since she's registered as a part time Shadow Operative. Shido threatened the Shadow Operatives specifically."

"Tch..." Shinji dragged his fingers through his hair. "Fine!" he finally relented. "You can ask Ken, but you better not pressure him or I swear to god I'll-"

"Ask me what?"

Ken probably wouldn't have expected something was up if it wasn't for the fact that he had nearly tripped over Minako-san's shoes when he had entered the apartment.

Minako-san and Shinjiro-san had been both so absorbed with their conversation that they hadn't noticed him coming in. Fuuka-san just gave him a small smile.

Ken fought the urge to sigh or roll his eyes. Adults.

"Heyyy, Ken-kun." Minako-san's voice was unusually bright. She was energetic and everything, but she sounded too cheerful right now. "You look so tall! Have you grown a couple centimeters since the last time I saw you? I hope you're not studying too hard...!"

...And she was rambling.

"Minako-san." Ken craned an eyebrow at her.

Minako-san just smiled sheepishly at him, clasping her hands behind her back. "Well... it's just... I'm here to see you!"

Ken blinked. "Because...?"

Minako-san rolled on the balls of her feet, before she stopped. She drew in a deep breath, which seemed to steel her. "...Ken-kun," she said quietly. "I know that you withdrew the Shadow Operatives but... we need you to come back."

Wait... she was seriously asking him...?

"Is this about the Phantom Thieves?"

Minako-san nodded. "We don't know what the Phantom Thieves want... and how they go about stealing desires is... concerning."
"There's already a site that takes requests," Fuuka-san said softly. "I've seen some… disturbing requests on the site."

Ken just looked away. The Phantom Thieves… He couldn't deny that he was fascinated with them… that he admired them for stepping up to the plate, when nobody else would. But he couldn't deny the truth… It was strange in how they were able to change Kamoshida's heart so drastically.

How could he say no? Especially with what Mitsuru-san has done for him over the years…

"I… I know that you didn't want to return to the Shadow Operatives until after you graduated from high school," Minako said. It was so rare for her to look hesitant, but she did in that moment. "But we can't allow this to escalate. We need to find out if the Phantom Thieves are dangerous while we still can. How they change hearts... it has to be connected to Personas and Shadows."

…She had a point.

"…Okay."

Minako-san blinked. "Wait, you'll do it?"

Ken nodded. "The only reason why I left the Shadow Operatives is because all I could focus on was how I wanted to fight Shadows. But it's different now." He then looked to Minako-san. "…So, what do I have to do?"

"Well-"

"Back up, Ken," Shinjiro-san cut in, his voice sharp. "I'm letting you do this because of the situation… but I'm coming with you."

"Ah…" Fuuka-san just smiled, looking rather amused. "I was wondering why you relented so easily."

"What do you mean easily?!" Minako-san demanded.

"You know how stubborn Shinji can be, Minako-chan," Fuuka answered calmly.

"…I'm right here, you know."

"Excuse me?!” Ken sputtered, finally managing to find his voice. Irritation spiked sharply inside of him, as he glowered at Shinjiro-san. "I'm not a child anymore, Shinjiro-san. I'm almost eighteen!"

"Uh huh." Shinjiro-san just gave him a flat-eyed stare, looking rather unimpressed. "And that's why you're pouting, right?"

"I am not pouting!" Ken continued to glare at his guardian.

Minako-san just giggled, pressing a hand to her cheek. "Aw, you're just so cute, Ken-kun!"

"Stop treating me like a child," he grumbled, folding his arms over his chest.

Shinjiro-san just rolled his eyes. "You're really not helping your case here, Ken."

He then looked at Shinjiro-san. "What about Fuuka-san?" he demanded. "You can't just leave her!"

"Ken-kun, don't worry about me," Fuuka said quickly before Shinjiro-san could even open his mouth. "I'll be fine, I promise. And besides… we've dealt with having a long distance relationship
before." She smiled sadly. "I'm going to miss you but it's nothing I can't handle."

Minako-san just grinned, folding her arms over her chest. "Hey, Shinji, maybe you'll have a better selection in Tokyo…!" Then Shinjiro-san glared at her, so she immediately covered her mouth with one hand. She then lowered it, smiling sheepishly at Shinjiro-san. "Hehe. Oops…"

…Really smooth, Minako-san. Sometimes he wondered how Fuuka-san had no clue, what with the engagement ring catalogues and the fact that Minako-san was a bit of a gossip. She was nothing compared to Yukari-san but still.

"A better selection…?" Fuuka-san frowned. "What's wrong with the pots and pans you have right now, Shinji?"

"You know how Shinji gets with his cooking tools, Fuuka-chan!" Minako-san said hastily. "He's gotta have the very best!"

"I… suppose?" Fuuka-san blinked at her.

Minako-san just let out a nervous chuckle, before continuing. "But anyways… Mitsuru and I talked about some details yesterday… Like she said that she'd work on transferring you to Shujin Academy, if you agreed… Mitsuru has a few properties in Tokyo, so she just needs to pick which one-"

Shinjiro-san just groaned. "Is Mitsuru seriously expecting us to accept charity?"

"Why are you always like this, Shinji?" Minako-san's hands flew to her hips, giving Shinjiro-san her *are you kidding me* look. "It's not charity, okay? Ken-kun is doing Shadow Operative work, so the least she could do is offer a place for you guys to live! Living space in Tokyo is not cheap!"

"And she'll probably give us a penthouse to live in," Shinjiro-san retorted with a scowl.

Fuuka-san just laughed. "Well… to be fair, the properties have probably been in her family's name for a while."

"I don't care, it's still ridiculous."

Minako-san just rolled her eyes at him. "Fine, whatever, you can bring it up to Mitsuru."

"Now, now..." Fuuka said placatingly. "Maybe you could talk to her about paying her if you don't like it *that* much, Shinji."

Shinjiro-san scoffed, "Like Mitsuru will *agree.*"

"Again, why do you have to be so stubborn about this?!"

As Minako-san and Shinjiro-san continued to bicker, Ken just felt his mind wander.

Tokyo, huh…? Well, he was studying to try to get into Tokyo University… He was just going there sooner than expected. He just… hoped that the Phantom Thieves didn't have ill intentions like his senpai thought they did.
This is basically… a mix of a bunch of AU's I have. This essentially takes place in a universe where the P3 protagonists were twin siblings and both have the Wild Card ability, but Minato became the Great Seal while Minako survived. Minako managed to save Shinji due to her Social Link with him, and Shinji now is Ken's guardian. And lastly, this will be an exploration of what would happen if Ken went to Tokyo while the events of Persona 5 were going down. But anyways, enjoy!
Mission Start

Chapter Summary

Ken and Shinji move to Tokyo and Ken starts his first day at Shujin Academy. He happens to meet a certain student council president.

Chapter Notes

I'm really glad to see that people are liking this! And thank you again for those of you who have reviewed and have left kudos!

Saturday, June 11th, 2016

"Are you sure you have everything?"

Shinjiro-san sighed, but his lips twitched into a smile. "Fuuka, stop worrying. Besides, even if we did forget anything, you could just mail it to us."

"I know, I know!" Fuuka-san sighed, before smiling sheepishly at him. "I just can't help but worry."

Shinjiro-san's eyes softened and he gave her that fond smile that he reserved only for her. "Shouldn't I be worried about you? I'm not gonna come back with the kitchen burned down, right?"

"Shinji!" Fuuka-san's face turned pink. "That hasn't happened in years…"

Koromaru trotted over to Ken, letting out a bark. Ken smiled at him, before kneeling to pet him. He was going to miss Koromaru while they were in Tokyo... He knew that he had surprised everyone by deciding not to take Koromaru with him but he felt guilty enough about Shinjiro-san... Fuuka-san needed some company.

"You'll be good for Fuuka-san, won't you?" he murmured as he scratched behind Koromaru's ears. Koromaru let out an affirmative bark before licking Ken's hand. "Hopefully Fuuka-san can bring you up for a visit for the summer..."

Koromaru let out a happy bark, before lunging at Ken, knocking him down in the process. He began to furiously lick at Ken's face.

"Koromaru!" he groaned, holding up a warding hand but Koromaru wasn't to be deterred. He continued to happily give Ken a bath with his tongue.

"Koro-chan, what are you doing?" Fuuka-san scolded, as Shinjiro-san grabbed Koromaru by the collar and hauled him off Ken.

"Thanks," he muttered as he sat up. Fuuka-san knelt to offer him a handkerchief to wipe off his
"Jeez, we look away for two minutes and Ken's on the ground," Shinjiro-san muttered, shaking his head. Koromaru just sat on his haunches and let out a yip. "And Koro isn't even sorry about it."

"When is he ever?" Ken grumbled, before climbing to his feet. He then folded the handkerchief and handing it back to Fuuka-san. "Thanks Fuuka-san."

The intercom above their heads suddenly crackled. "The train headed for Tokyo is now boarding at station 3," the announcer stated. "I repeat, the train headed for Tokyo is now boarding at station 3."

"That's our train," Shinjiro-san sighed, turning to face Fuuka-san, a frown on his face. "We should get going."

Fuuka-san smiled sadly, her lips trembling slightly. But after taking a deep breath, she nodded. "You don't want to miss it." She stood on her tiptoes, kissing Shinjiro-san on the cheek. "Text me when you get to Tokyo, okay?"

"'Course." Shinjiro-san dipped his head to quickly kiss her.

Even though it was just a peck, Ken couldn't help but make a face. He couldn't help but feel a bit self conscious whenever any of his senpai did PDA in front of him. It was just... embarrassing to watch.

"Don't give me that face, Ken," Shinjiro-san said, turning to level an unimpressed stare at Ken. "We could do worse and you know it. Like-"

Ken immediately clapped his hands over his ears. "I am not listening!"

Shinjiro-san glowered at him. "Really, Ken?"

"Shinji, don't pick on him," Fuuka-san gently chastised. "And Ken-kun, don't egg him on like that."

Shinjiro-san huffed. "Ugh, whatever." He reached down to pick up his duffel bag, before glancing back at Ken. "Come on, we really should get going."

"Give me one second with Ken-kun, first?" Fuuka-san asked.

Shinjiro-san raised an eyebrow, but nodded. He kissed her on the top of her head. "See you, Fuuka."

"Bye Shinji."

Shinjiro-san scooped up their bags, before heading for station three.

Ken turned to her. "Fuuka-san, what's the m-"

"Please be careful, Ken-kun," Fuuka-san suddenly blurted out. She bit her lip. "You'll be the one looking for the Phantom Thieves. You'll be the one to find the Shadow nest. Please... promise me you won't do anything reckless." She looked up at him pleadingly.

Ken swallowed hard. She was more worried than she let on... He should have expected this. They were essentially treading on unknown territory.

"I will," he said quietly.
Fuuka-san smiled at him, before squeezing his hand. "Call home often, okay?"
"I'll try..." Ken said sheepishly.

Fuuka-san frowned at him. "If I can call at least twice a week during university-"
"Why do you always pull that card on everyone?" Ken grumbled.

Fuuka-san giggled. "Because it's effective." Her eyes softened. "Bye, Ken-kun."

"Goodbye, Fuuka-san."

"You don't need to worry about the cost, Shinjiro'," Shinjiro-san said in a mocking voice, poorly imitating Mitsuru-san. He scowled up at the building in front of them. "It's nothing.'" He scoffed, folding his arms over his chest. "Yeah right."

"It's... not the Yakushima mansion, at least?" Ken offered.

"It's still too much," Shinjiro-san grumbled, still scowling. "It's still a fuckin' penthouse."

Kikuno-san cleared her throat, but she looked rather amused at Shinjiro-san's griping. "Now, if you're done complaining, Shinjiro-san..."

"Shinjiro-san never stops complaining."

Ken quickly sidestepped to dodge the swipe Shinjiro-san aimed at him.

"Smartass," he grumbled.

"...Please follow me." Kikuno-san smiled politely.

But it was nice for Mitsuru-san to send Kikuno-san to escort them from the train station. He was pretty sure that they probably would have gotten lost. In all honesty, Ken wasn't expecting Tokyo to be so huge. It was the capital and everything, but it made Port Island look positively tiny.

Kikuno-san unlocked the door when they reached the top. Ken's eyebrow rose when he took in the living room. While it was well furnished, it wasn't in that obscenely opulent fashion that Mitsuru-san's residences usually were decorated in.

"Mitsuru-san ordered for new furniture when she decided this will be where you're staying," Kikuno-san offered as an explanation, before walking inside.

Ken removed his shoes, leaving them outside by the door. Shinjiro-san quickly followed suit.

"The kitchen has been fitted with state of the art appliances," Kikuno-san continued, before reaching into her pocket and laying down two card keys. "These are the keys to the suite, please don't lose them. And your bedrooms will be in the very back..."

The suite included a washing room, two bathrooms—both having a bathtub larger than any Ken had ever seen—and even an entertainment room.

"...And that's everything," Kikuno-san finished. She then reached into her pocket again. "And this is for you, Ken-san."

Ken raised an eyebrow, examining the card. It looked like... some kind of ticket.
"It's a train pass," Kikuno-san informed him. "You'll have to pay a couple hundred yen every time you use the train station, but it gives a discount."

"For crying out loud..." Shinjiro-san grumbled. "I could have paid for that. I don't give a shit on what Mitsuru says, I'm paying her something."

Kikuno-san just tilted her head, an amused smile coming to her lips. "Mm, I believe you'll have to bring that up with Lady Mitsuru, Shinjiro-san."

"Believe me, I will," he muttered darkly.

Kikuno-san just smiled, before curtsying. "If that is all... I must take your leave." Her eyes flickered to Ken. "...And good luck, Ken-san."

"...Thank you," Ken mumbled.

Kikuno-san then left the suite, firmly shutting the door behind her.

Shinjiro-san flopped onto the longer sofa, belly first, with a groan. "Ken, go find a place to order something for dinner," he said, burying his face into a pillow. "I'm too tired to cook tonight."

"You're willingly ordering takeout?" Ken raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, yeah, yuck it up," Shinjiro-san said coolly, before rolling onto his back. "We're going grocery shopping tomorrow after we go see the principal."

Sunday, June 12th, 2016

Shujin Academy just looked... plain, in comparison to Gekkoukan.

Though Ken supposed that most schools would. Gekkoukan was all steel and glass, fitted with the top technology. Mitsuru-san had commissioned for a fountain to be placed in the courtyard as well, in honor of her late father. And during Minako-san's third year, she pushed for a garden on the roof soon after she was elected class president. She said that the roof didn't have to be just a place of death... it could be a place for life too.

It didn't take them long to find the principal's office. He rose when they entered, a genial smile on his face.

"Ah, Amada-kun, correct?" he greeted. "We've been expecting you!"

His smile just oozed insincerity. Ken chanced a glance at Shinjiro-san. He remained silent, but he looked utterly unimpressed with the principal. He just... couldn't be bothered to hide how he felt.

"It's an honor to meet you," Ken said, before bowing his head. He didn't know how, but he managed a polite smile.

He couldn't give the principal a reason to suspect him.

"It's wonderful to meet you as well. I am Principal Kobayakawa," He nodded. "From your records, you seem to be a marvelous addition to our school. An honor student who constantly made it to the top ten, if not the very top rank, an athlete, and a member of the student council..."

...He was really laying it thick, wasn't he? Just... Was that really all he was concerned about?
Though… the school did let Kamoshida get away with his crimes… He supposed he shouldn't be surprised.

Shinjiro-san looked completely unimpressed with Kobayakawa. "I'm glad that you know of Ken's accomplishments, but Ken isn't too interested in joining any clubs now," he said flatly. "He's been focusing on studying for entrance exams."

He immediately looked crestfallen. "Oh… Of course!" He swallowed hard. "Of course, entrance exams to university are very important…"

…He was just too easy to read.

"Is there anything else…?" Ken spoke up.

"Well… there's your school uniform…" He said, picking up a white box. "And your classroom is 3-D. The student council president is in your class… so if you have any questions, you should ask her. And please come to the office early tomorrow so you can meet with your teacher."

"Thank you, sir." Ken accepted the box, before bowing his head. "I hope I'll do well at Shujin."

"I'm sure you will." He nodded.

Shinjiro-san didn't take long to speak once they had left the office. "And I thought Ekoda was obsessed with reputations." He didn't bother to hide the scorn from his voice. "He was such a brown noser."

"At least he's not my teacher," Ken muttered. "And it's not surprising."

"I guess." Shinjiro-san just stuffed his hands in his pockets, scowling at the horizon. "Come on. We still need to go grocery shopping."

Oh yes, nothing like trying—key word was try—to stop his guardian from picking a fight with the butcher over just how fresh the meat was.

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**Monday, June 13th, 2016**

Ken tugged at the collar of his dress shirt, trying not to squirm under his classmates' gaze. It was... difficult, considering that they were blatantly gawking at him.

"Class, we have a new student," the teacher announced. "Ken Amada, hailing from Tatsumi Port Island."

"Port Island?" one student repeated. "Hey, isn't that where the Kirijo Group is?"

"Forget that! He's so cute!"

"Look at how soft his hair is!"

"He's much better than the first transfer we got!"

"Isn't it kinda a weird time to transfer though?"

Ken fought the urge to hang his head. Of course he couldn't escape it. He didn't even know what about him attracted girls like bees to flowers. Though what was this about another transfer student?
"Hey, wouldn't you say he kinda looks like Akechi-kun?"

...Ugh. Ken tried not to grimace at the last part.

Then there was the sound of a throat being cleared. "Shouldn't we find a seat for him?"

The speaker was a girl with short dark brown hair and piercing red eyes. She was pretty in that prim, bookish kind of way.

"Yes, of course." The teacher nodded, resting her chin in the palm of her hand. She looked thoughtful. "In fact… the seat next to you is open, isn't it, Nijima-san? Amada-kun can have that seat then."

"What?!" one girl whined. "But my seat is closer to the front!"

"That's enough," the teacher snapped. "My decision is final." She then smiled encouragingly at Ken. "Go ahead, Amada-kun."

Ken nodded, before shifting his school bag on his shoulder and walking down the aisle. Everyone's eyes remained plastered on him, making him feel incredibly self-conscious. Was this how Gekkoukan treated Minato-san and Minako-san?

It felt like an eternity before he reached his seat, setting his bag on the ground and then sliding into his seat.

His neighbor offered him a hesitant smile. "Never mind them," she murmured. "They just… gossip too much."

"That describes most of the teenage population," Ken replied, keeping his voice low as well.

This earned him a quiet giggle.

"Now then!" The teacher clasped her hands in front of her. "Open your book to page 101. We'll start by translating the entire page."

This earned a collective groan. Ken reached for his bag, drawing out his English textbook and then flipping it open. It didn't look that much more difficult than Gekkoukan's curriculum from the looks of it…

Ken sighed as his classmates continued to gossip in loud whispers. This was going to be a long day…

The first few classes just dragged on, so it was a relief when the lunch bell rang. But before he could even blink, he found himself surrounded by girls.

"What school did you used to go to?"

"Have you ever met Mitsuru Kirijo?!"

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Are you interested in joining any clubs? We have some openings!"

Ken inched his chair back, even though it wasn't much help. Did he have the words please try to flirt with me plastered on his forehead?
He managed a polite smile, before speaking. "I used to attend to Gekkoukan, and yes, I know her. We used to live in the same dorm, because of special circumstances. And no, I don't have a girlfriend, but I'm not interested in one right now. And I'm sorry, but I don't want to join a club right now."

"Hey, what do you think of the Phantom Thieves?" one of the girls demanded.

"That's enough, all of you." A stern voice, so similar to Mitsuru-san's, cut through the air. "You need to give him some breathing air."

The girls grumbled but backed away. They parted to reveal that it was his seatmate.

"Why do you have to hog him?" another girl huffed.

…What?

She just raised an eyebrow at the girls, looking at the speaker sternly. "I am not 'hogging' him. You're invading his personal space, so I'm telling you to leave him alone."

The girls began muttering to themselves but began to disperse. Ken couldn't help but sigh in relief.

"…Niijima-san, was it?" Ken asked.

She smiled at him. "That's right. I'm Makoto Niijima, the student council president. It's nice to meet you, Amada-kun."

"Likewise." Ken nodded. "And… thank you for getting the girls to back off."

"It was nothing." She waved a dismissive hand, "You looked overwhelmed… I'm not sure how none of them picked up on it."

"Because they just don't care," Ken muttered under his breath.

"What was that?" Niijima-san frowned.

"Oh, nothing…" Ken waved her off.

"How are you holding up?" she inquired. "It has to be overwhelming to start at a new school…"

Hmm… if she was the student council president… maybe she had an idea who the Phantom Thieves were.

"Niijima-san?" he began, before he could chicken out and stay silent.

"What is it?" she asked, frowning slightly.

Looking closer at her made Ken realize that she looked tired. Dark rings were under her eyes. Her skin was unusually pale.

"Ah… I was wondering what you knew about the Phantom Thieves," Ken said slowly. "Since well… Kamoshida was their first target."

Niijima-san's face became ashen. "It's… not something the faculty is proud of," she mumbled, her gaze lowering to the ground. "Kamoshida had hurt the entire volleyball team. Not to mention Amamiya-kun, Sakamoto-kun, and Takamaki-san…"
Huh… those three names… That could be a clue.

"I didn't realize his targets weren't just the club he coached," Ken said.

He remembered when Kamoshida had confessed… The newspapers had been all over that. But they had only focused on the abuse he had heaped on the volleyball team...

Then Niijima-san looked up, narrowing her eyes at him. "…Why are you so interested in them, anyways?"

"Ah..." Ken scrambled for a quick excuse because that stare was rather frightening. "It's just… the Phantom Thieves are like real life superheroes, aren't they?"

"I suppose you could think that..." Niijima-san said, relaxing her entire stance.

Ken released the breath he didn't realize he was holding. That was... a close one. He needed to be more... subtle than that from now on. He couldn't be broadcasting that he was interested in the Phantom Thieves like that.

"But if you're okay now, Amada-kun..." Niijima-san straightened her posture, before brushing her skirt with one hand. "I should probably get going... I have a lot of work to handle."

She turned to leave, but Ken found himself blurting out, "Wait!"

Niijima-san turned, eyebrow raised. "...Yes?"

"It's just... ah... you looked tired." Ken felt like facepalming. Why couldn't he be more eloquent with his thoughts? "Have you even eaten lunch yet?"

"I... didn't bring one today," she admitted with a wince. "I woke up late, so I didn't have time to make lunch."

"Well... you could always share mine," Ken offered. "My guardian always makes me too much..."

Niijima-san's eyes widened. "Oh, I don't know... That may create more rumors."

"Was what you said this morning again?" Ken raised an eyebrow. Niijima-san opened her mouth to protest, so he added, "Please. It's not healthy for you."

...Shinjiro-san was rubbing off on him.

"Well..." Niijima-san tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, before smiling shyly at him. "...If you insist."

The latter half of the day went by fast. Before he knew it, the bell was ringing shrilly, signaling the end of the day.

"Amada-kun." Niijima-san caught his sleeve, holding him in place. "I know that you're not particularly interested in joining clubs right now but... I thought I let you know about the clubs that are accepting new members right now, since you transferred later in the year."

Ken raised an eyebrow. "I'm listening."

Niijima-san began to recite. "There's newspaper club, the track team, and well... the student council could always use more help. I heard from the principal that you've been pretty active in
student council since middle school."

"It was nothing, really..." Ken rubbed the back of his neck. "I only was elected in my last year at middle school and the past two years."

Though wasn't the track team disbanded? Maybe it got reinstated because of Kamoshida's confession.

But there was a newspaper club, huh? Maybe someone there could tell him just who Amamiya, Takamaki, and Sakamoto were.

"You don't have to be so modest, you know. But um... you shouldn't really talk to me..." Her voice was whisper-soft, her eyes lowering to the ground.

Ken frowned. He had noticed that people had steered clear of Niijima-san for no reason, how people had been whispering about her throughout the day. He had no idea why, since she seemed nice enough. "Why?"

"Um... it's just..." Niijima-san winced. "I have a certain reputation..."

"And...?"

"And what?" She blinked at him.

Ken sighed, before zipping shut his pencil case. "Niijima-san, believe me when I say that I know about bad reputations... My guardian was viewed as a delinquent, but he's not. Rough on the edges, yes, but not a delinquent."

Ken couldn't help but grimace. He remembered his teachers muttering about Shinjiro-san. Several times. It was... upsetting at first, but he eventually learned to ignore it. Shinjiro-san didn't really care about the rumors anyways.

"A delinquent look-a-like... who cooks delicious food," Niijima-san said slowly. She laughed, a smile tugging at her lips. "That's... an interesting image."

Ken laughed as well, nodding. "Yeah, he gets that a lot."

Niijima-san opened her mouth to reply, only for her eyes to grow wide. "Ah...! I'm sorry, Amada-kun, but I have to speak to Miss Kawakami about something urgent..."

"Of course." Ken nodded, even though he had no clue who this Miss Kawakami was. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He watched her leave the classroom, before he looked back down at his desk. The newspaper club... It could be a good lead. If not, maybe he could visit the volleyball club.

It took him a few minutes to find out where the newspaper club met, but he soon found himself face to face with a dark haired girl wearing a pair of glasses.

"Can I help you?" She frowned uncertainly, tilting her head slightly only for her eyes to widen. "Oh... you're the new transfer student, aren't you?"

"Yes, that's right." Ken bowed his head. "My name is Ken Amada."

She giggled. "You don't have to be so polite. We're the same age." She then pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "Is there something you needed...?"
"Oh, I was just wondering…” Ken began.

…Crap, what should he say? Why didn't he think of what to ask first…

"…Who's this other transfer student? I was just curious, since… people keep comparing me to them."

"Yikes, that's a complicated question…” she sighed, adjusting her glasses again. "His name is Ren Amamiya, a year below us. He assaulted some bigwig and he got put onto probation. He was sent here and Kamoshida took an instant disliking to him." Her expression darkened. "He tried to expel Amamiya and Sakamoto—who was the former track star—for trying to assault him."

Was she serious? Kamoshida thought he could've gotten away with it?

…He probably would've, if it wasn't for the Phantom Thieves.

But hmm… Amamiya and Sakamoto would have a grudge against Kamoshida. Maybe they were possible Phantom Thieves.

"Amamiya is one scary looking guy though," the girl continued. "He's not super tall but he's got that aura, y'know?"

Ken's mind immediately veered to Shinjiro-san. He was on the taller side, but still. "…Yeah, I know what you mean," he muttered.

"You know… we're accepting new members," she began. "For the newspaper club. Are you interested?"

Ken offered a sheepish smile, rubbing the back of his neck. "Sorry… but I'm not particularly talented in writing."

"Oh…” She looked disappointed. "Maybe I'll see around then."

"Yeah-"

The girl suddenly grabbed his sleeve. "That's him actually—with the student council president!"

Wait, what? Ken followed her gaze to see that Niijima-san was following a boy who was probably slightly shorter than him. Though he didn't know what about him was intimidating… He had dark hair that was wavy, bordering being frizzy. His huge glasses just seemed to magnify his dark eyes. He was even carrying a cat in his bag. It was a cute cat too, its black fur sleek and its blue eyes bright and intelligent.

He looked… harmless. He didn't look too happy to be around Niijima-san though…

"I wonder why…?" the girl mused. "I thought Amamiya and Takamaki had a thing for each other."

Oh, right… that was one of the other people Niijima-san mentioned. Though he probably should follow them at a safe distance… Maybe he could discover some kind of hint.

He bid the girl farewell, before following Niijima-san and Amamiya-san. They led him to a populated walkway. Leaning against the railing were three teenagers. The tallest looked like… a beanpole. He had dark blue hair and gray eyes. The second tallest was a boy with bleached hair and brown eyes. The shortest was a girl with blonde hair that had to be natural and bright blue-green eyes. The two blondes wore the Shujin uniform, while the taller boy was wearing some kind of
other uniform.

"Is that a friend of yours…?" he heard the blue-haired boy ask, only to be swiftly interrupted.

"What are you doing here?!" the blonde female demanded. She was all tensed up, her hands clenched tightly into fists. Her eyes narrowed at Niijima-san. "Ren, what happened?"

While they were distracted, Ken ducked behind a pillar. He wasn't exactly close, but whatever works… And they were talking just loud enough to hear. Though he had to wonder why the girl was being so hostile.

"She was… talking to me when I got the call from Ryuji," Amamiya-san said.

The girl immediately rounded on her male counterpart, glaring daggers at him.

…He was getting Yukari-san and Junpei-san vibes.

"Hey, how was I supposed to know that Miss President was around?!" he defended. "Why are you getting mad at me?!"

"That's why I told you to wait, Ryuji!" she snapped, smacking his arm.

…Yep, they definitely were like Yukari-san and Junpei-san. The only thing missing was a foot stomp.

Niijima-san cleared her throat. "Ren Amamiya. Ryuji Sakamoto. Anne Takamaki… All three of you were victims of Mr. Kamoshida… And you're constantly seen in each other's company. Isn't that a bit strange?"

"What's it to you?" Sakamoto-san scowled, crossing his arms over his chest.

"And Yusuke Kitagawa…" Niijima-san turned to look at Kitagawa-san. "…The former apprentice of Madarame."

Kamoshida and Madarame… Wait, she wasn't saying…

Kitagawa-san's mouth tightened at her statement, before looking away.

"Seriously, what is your problem?" Takamaki-san demanded, her stance still tense. She looked just about ready to pounce on Niijima-san.

"Anne." Amamiya-san put a hand on her shoulder. "You need to calm down..."

Takamaki-san scowled, but nodded, before dropping her arms to her sides.

"You're the Phantom Thieves, are you not?" Niijima-san calmly made her accusation.

"You sling accusations without any proof," Kitagawa-san bit out, but he looked nervous.

"Oh really?" Niijima-san smiled sweetly, before pulling out her phone. She played a recording. The voices were tinny, but obviously belonged to Sakamoto-san and Takamaki-san.

Did they really... talk about this... in public?

The other three all slowly turned to Sakamoto-san.
…So, he had a good idea who had the big mouth out of the group.

And Niijima-san was investigating the Phantom Thieves… But the question was… why?

"What?" He scowled at them, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "I'm not the only one talkin' in the recording!"

"Now, I want you to listen to me carefully," Niijima-san said flatly. "This doesn't have to be released to the public."

Amamiya-san's expression was wary. "What do you want, then?"

"I want you to prove your justice," she said, folding her arms over her chest. "And we have a little problem plaguing the students of our school. Steal the heart of this criminal and I will delete everything. I will leave you alone. It is a good deal, isn't it?"

She was… blackmailing them. But why? Why was it so important for this criminal to go down?

"So who do you want us to target?" Kitagawa-san asked slowly.

Niijima-san clasped her hands behind her back. "A mafia boss."

…Well, that answered his question.

He was going to have an interesting first report to give Mitsuru-san...
The Mafia

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves start their search of the mafia boss. But they find a unlikely source during so...
"Are you okay?" A voice interrupted, before Morgana could continue.

Ren blinked, looking up. Oh… He had bumped into a someone.

"More or less," he said, pulling off his glasses to rub his face. Sometimes he wondered if he should just toss his glasses away. The unassuming look they gave him didn't even help. "It gave me a wake-up call at least."

The speaker's lips twitched into a half-smile at his quip, before extending a hand to help Ren up. Ren took it and they pulled him up with ease. He was… surprisingly strong, given that he had a more slender build. His hands were calloused too.

They were nearly eye level, with the stranger being slightly taller than him. He seemed to follow the school uniform to a T, with the white collared dress shirt, the slacks, and even the dress shoes. He had light brown hair styled in that messy-neat fashion, but his bangs curled in a ridiculous flyaway style that had to use gel.

And he… kinda looked like Akechi. It was probably the pretty boy look to him.

"I'm Ken Amada," he introduced himself after a moment of silence.

Wait, wasn't that the new transfer student? He had already heard some gossip about him, since he had apparently confirmed knowing Mitsuru Kirijo during his time on Port Island. Though that had been drowned out by Niijima busting him…

"I'm Ren Amamiya," he said, bracing himself for the usual reaction all while sliding his glasses onto his face. "Transferred here in April."

But curiosity, not fear, flickered in his eyes. "It's nice to meet you."

Ren blinked. That was a first. The only person who had greeted him kindly had been Anne, but that had been thrown out of the window when he had to lie why he was late on his first day. Luckily they had become friends afterwards but still…

Amada raised an eyebrow. "Do people hate you that much?"

Ren grimaced. "You have no idea."

Though he had heard a few rumors during lunch yesterday… More positive than what Ren had to put up with, but still.

Amada's face suddenly clouded over with confusion. "Ah…"

Ren followed his line of sight and… Shit. Shit.

*Please don't ask please don't ask-
"Is there a reason why you're carrying a cat in your schoolbag?"

DAMMIT. What was even a good excuse for that?

"He's… er…" Ren combed through his mind for a good excuse. (He really had nothing.) "He's my therapy cat," he managed to spit out. "You know, for emotional support."

Morgana yowled, "I'm your what?!"
Amada looked at Morgana quizzically. "He doesn't exactly sound calm."

"He's just grumpy that I had to feed him kibble this morning," Ren said. "He's kinda spoiled."

"I'M WHAT?!" Morgana glared daggers at him. "Why are you feeding him this drivel?!"

That was when Amada laughed. "Mm, I can understand spoiled pets. My guardian always feeds the best cuts to our dog." His expression turned wistful for some reason. Maybe the dog was dead?

Out of the corner of Ren's eye, he could see other students staring. They were whispering, pointing at the two of them. Ren fought the urge to sigh.

Amada followed his line of sight, his expression immediately souring. "Seems like people just can't keep to themselves," he muttered.

Ren winced, before adjusting his glasses. "It's nothing I'm not used to."

Okay, so Mishima had spread the rumors, but Ren couldn't blame his friend. He was just another victim of Kamoshida's.

Though he had no idea why Amada was taking him so calmly. Most people gave him a wide berth or they barely dared to look at him in the eye. Yeah, he was a transfer but… He had to have heard of the rumors already.

But still… Amada looked studious. A bit of a prep. So why was he actually talking to Ren?

"Is there something wrong?"

Ren rubbed the back of the neck. "I was just thinking… you do know about my rep, don't you? The Shujin rumor mill is always running."

That was when Amada laughed again. "I think most of the student population needs to get their eyes checked if they find you intimidating," he said dryly. "The glasses make you very… unassuming."

Ren raised an eyebrow. "Thanks?"

…At least it worked on someone. But noooo, Kamoshida had to decide he hated Ren's guts for talking to Anne.

The warning bell suddenly rang, causing the two of them to look up. "Well… that's my cue to pick up the pace," Amada muttered. "It was nice meeting you, Amamiya-san."

Morgana popped out of Ren's bag, his blue eyes filled with curiosity as he stared after Amada. "There's something about him…"

"What do you mean?"

Morgana scrunched up his nose. "I don't know."

"Well, that's very helpful." Ren rolled his eyes. "Thanks, Morgana."

"I'm saying that so you can keep an eye on him!"

"If you say so, Morgana."
During their preparations for the move to Tokyo, Mitsuru-san had taken Ken's old spear. She returned it to him the day before the move. She had tripped it out so it had a portable mode. As much of a marvel it was, Ken had found that it was too light for him. Minato-san and Minako-san had always been careful to select lighter spears so that it was more manageable for him.

But when Ken had started to practice a few of his katas last night, he found his old spear nearly slipping out of his hands. Several times.

So, hunting down a new spear was necessary. Very necessary.

Especially since he was rusty with using his Persona. He couldn't control that, until he finally found the Shadow nest. But he could control using his weapon.

When he had mentioned this to Shinjiro-san this morning, his guardian had suggested looking for a weapons shop in Shibuya. After all, Shibuya was the central point of Tokyo.

So here he was, exploring Central Street.

Maybe he should try to find medicine here too… There had to be a pharmacy somewhere…

But huh… an airsoft shop… Maybe they sold weapons here too?

His eyes swept through the shop. The guns… looked oddly realistic.

A grizzled older man was lounging on a seat, reading a newspaper rather intently. He looked up when the bell attached to the door rang. He raised an eyebrow.

"What's a kid like you doin' here? You get lost?"

Ken frowned. "I know where I'm going. And I know what this kind of shop this is."

The man let out a bark of laughter. "Kid, you just look too clean. Are you seriously looking to buy a gun?"

If only he knew about the Evoker in Ken's schoolbag.

"Not a gun," Ken said, folding his arms over his chest. "I was wondering if you carry other weapons."

The man frowned. "This isn't a convenience store."

"Then perhaps you could point me to one that carries weapons," Ken deadpanned.

The man laughed again, before he smirked. "Sorry, kid, but I don't think I know of such a place."

"No surprise there," Ken muttered, before his eyes swept over the stock.

Maybe he could buy a gun…? It was better than nothing. But Shinjiro-san would kill him if he brought home a gun. Even if it was just a model gun. He better not…

"But sorry for bothering you," Ken said. "You obviously don't have what I'm looking for."

Ken bowed his head, before leaving the airsoft shop.

Well, that was a dud… Maybe he could try to look in another district…
"Hey, kid." Ken nearly jumped out of his skin at the sudden voice.

Ken immediately backed up, reaching into his satchel. His fingers immediately wrapped around his Evoker. It may not be a gun, but maybe pointing it at him would cause this man to panic and run off. What kind of student would be randomly carrying a gun, after all?

"Whoa!" He held his hands up. "Take it easy… I just noticed you coming out of the airsoft shop. Iwai's got the goods, but it's not cheap. I just thought… I'd offer you a proposition."

"Not interested," Ken said flatly.

Warning bells were ringing clearly in his ears. The man just screamed bad vibes. There was no way that he had good intentions.

"Hear me out," the man pressed, taking a step closer to Ken. Ken immediately took a step back, not relaxing his stance at all. "Do you need a job? It's really easy and the pay is good." He took out an envelope. It was small, rather innocuous looking. "We just need you to deliver this to a place. And we'll pay you fifty thousand for the job. Sounds like a great deal, right?"

Ken narrowed his eyes. This was just too suspicious… Just what was in that envelope?

"So who do you want us to target?"

"A mafia boss."

What was this what Niijima-san was talking about? She had talked about this criminal plaguing Shujin students…

"What's in the envelope?"

"Excuse me?"

"What's in the envelope?" Ken repeated. When the man wouldn't respond, his face growing pale, Ken crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah, that's what I thought. That's a definite no. I'm not an idiot."

But when he moved to walk past him, the man suddenly grabbed Ken's upper arm, squeezing hard. "Can't have you running to the police. Gotta shut you up."

Ken scowled, clenching his left hand into a fist. He may not have Akihiko-san's boxing abilities or Shinjiro-san's upper body strength, but Akihiko-san did say that he had a good left hook.

But a tanned hand suddenly grasped the man's shoulder, yanking him away from Ken. He heard a sickening crunch and then the man yowling in pain.

"You keep your hands off of him," Shinjiro-san growled, his gray eyes like steel.

"You mind your own business!" The man scowled, staggering to his feet. He could already see a shiner forming. "I'm not leaving until I shut that kid's mouth!"

"Fine," Shinjiro-san snapped, cracking his knuckles. "We'll do this the hard way."

He lunged at Shinjiro-san, but Shinjiro-san quickly sidestepped. He grabbed the man's wrist, yanking him forward before slamming his head into the man's face in a headbutt. The man stumbled back with a yelp, blood dripping from his nose down his face.
"And I can do much worse," Shinjiro-san threatened with a glare, all while casually wiping off the blood. "So, what's it gonna be?"

"You're crazy!" he shouted, but he fled from them.

"Tch. Stupid bastard," Shinjiro-san muttered, before looking at Ken. "Okay, Ken. What the fuck are you even doing here?"

"I was just looking around for a weapon shop," Ken quickly defended. "When I walked out, he came up to me, offering me this job."

"Sounds like he's with the mafia," Shinjiro-san said, before frowning. "But you came out of that?"

He pointed at the airsoft shop. "And you didn't buy anything?"

"No…?" Ken said slowly. "He was only selling guns."

Shinjiro-san huffed. "I've been askin' around… and this shop apparently sells a shit ton of weapons."

"The store owner lied to me then," Ken grumbled.

"Probably because you're still underage," Shinjiro-san said. "Wait here." Then after a pause, he added, "…Actually, wait right in front of the shop window."

"Yeah, yeah…" he grumbled as Shinjiro-san opened the door to the shop.

Several minutes later, Shinjiro-san was carrying a long, slender box. "Why do you have to use spears?" he grumbled. "They're heavy."

"How much do I owe you?" Ken asked, before raising an eyebrow. "And besides, it's not like axes are lightweight."

"Nothing," Shinjiro-san said, ignoring Ken's second comment. "It's fine."

Ken made a mental note to sneak some money into Shinjiro-san's wallet when he wasn't looking. He didn't care what Shinjiro-san said… It wasn't cheap. He remembered overhearing Minako-san complaining to Minato-san once that weapons were a huge drain on their funds…

"How come you complain when Mitsuru-san pays for everything but I'm not allowed to pay for this?" he complained. "It's not cheap."

"Shut up and help me carry this damn thing," Shinjiro-san retorted. "I can't fucking believe you just went and looked for trouble like that..."

"That wasn't the case," Ken grumbled.

It's not his fault that trouble went looking for him.

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**Wednesday, June 15th, 2016**

"Come on, Iida…." Anne looked up at him pleadingly, twirling one of her pigtails with a finger.

"Won't you tell me about that awesome job you got? I really need a job that brings in money fast."

Iida winced, rubbing the back of his neck. "Don't you model, Takamaki-san?"
Morgana poked his head out of Ren's bag. "She's doing a little better than she was with Yusuke," he commented.

"Shh, Morgana," Ren hushed. "And she's been practicing."

She wasn't stellar by any means, but Anne was improving. At least it wasn't embarrassing to watch, like how she apparently was from what Morgana had relayed to him.

"Yeah, but I don't get paid as much as most people do!" Anne said hastily. She then stuck out her bottom lip in a pout, before batting her eyes at him. "Come on, pleaseeeee?"

Iida shook his head. "Sorry, but I… I can't." He then exhaled sharply, before speaking in a huge rush. "Sorry but I gotta go!"

He then turned on his heel, fleeing from the classroom.

"Darn!" Anne stamped her foot, pouting at her failure.

Ren laughed, before walking over to her. Some would think of it just as immature, but he found it adorable. He tugged at one of Anne's pigtails. "Hey, at least you put up a decent act?"

"That's not the point, Ren." Anne scowled at him, before lightly swatting at his hand. "We don't have any leads now. Maybe we should check with Ryuji. He may have found something…"

Ren cradled his hand, quirking an eyebrow at her. "Your Panther is showing," he teased.

Anne's face flushed pink. "Oh, shut up. I didn't even hit you hard."

"Amamiya!" Ren turned at the sound of Mishima's voice. Mishima was standing at the doorway. "Amamiya, I think I may have something you'd like to hear."

Anne's eyes lit up. "Really?!!"

"Shh!" Mishima's eyes were wide. "Come on, let's talk somewhere more private."

Mishima managed to lead them to a somewhat secluded corridor. It wasn't completely abandoned, but it was only twenty minutes after school ended.

"You know the new transfer student, Ken Amada?" Mishima asked.

"I've heard of him…" Anne said slowly, only for her to frown. "But it's kinda unfair how the students have such a positive reaction to him, and then treat Ren like dirt." At that last part, Anne looked sorrowfully at him.

Ren smiled at her. Her capacity of caring was just… amazing. It was one of the things he most admired about Anne.

"It's okay, Anne," he said, reaching out to squeeze her hand for a moment. "I've learned to deal with it. But as for Amada… I met him yesterday morning actually. He was pretty nice to me."

Mishima nodded firmly. "Okay, good, you know of him at the very least. But anyways, I heard that Amada-senpai had a run in with a member of the mafia. He had called them out specifically, apparently. I heard the mafia tried to attack him, but Amada-senpai managed to hold him off."

Anne's eyes went as wide as saucers. "Are you serious?" she squeaked out. "From what I've heard… Amada-senpai doesn't sound like he'd do that. He's like, an honor student. I heard that he
was on partial scholarship while attending Gekkoukan and Gekkoukan is a pretty highly ranked school."

He had heard something similar. The Kirijo Group only chose to help people who had the potential. Though he had heard that Mitsuru Kirijo was pushing for that to be changed. So that more poorer students could receive the education Gekkoukan offered.

Though he couldn't help but feel a little bad for Amada… It sucked to have rumors surrounding you, negative or positive.

Mishima tilted his head. "Well… it's not like you can really judge a book by its cover."

Anne eyed Ren. "…Yeah, that's a good thing to keep in mind."

Ren tugged on her pigtail, unable to stifle a smirk. "Are you trying to tell me something, Anne?"

Anne rolled her eyes at him, but this time she just shifted out of Ren's grasp instead of smacking him. "Don't ask a question when you know the answer already." She turned to Mishima. "Do you know if he's still on campus?"

"Yeah, I saw him enter the library earlier."

Anne's eyes lit up, before an excited giggle bubbled from her lips. "Awesome! Come on, Ren, we need to talk to him!"

Without waiting for Ren to respond, she grabbed his hand and began to drag him off. "Thanks, Mishima!" he managed to shout even as Anne dragged him up the stairs.

Anne didn't release him until they reached the library, sliding the door open.

"Welcome to the—oh it's you."

Ren fought the urge to roll his eyes. The library receptionist was just so… passive aggressive to him. She always took on the tone of surprise when he returned a book to her.

"Hello to you too," Anne muttered, scowling for a moment. She then scanned the library. "Hey." Anne turned to look at him. "Is that him?"

She nodded in the direction of the tables. Bent over one of the desks was Amada, scribbling away in a notebook.

"Yeah, that's him." Ren nodded. "Come on."

Amada looked up when he heard them approach. Huh, he was wearing glasses now. Reading glasses, maybe? "Oh, Amamiya-san." Then he blinked. "And…?"

"This is my friend, Anne Takamaki," Ren introduced. "But I was wondering if we could talk to you about something…"

Amada sighed. "If this is about the mafia, I did not beat him up."

Ren raised an eyebrow. "You're not going to deny it?"

Amada shrugged. "Why lie about it?" Then he sighed deeply, looking down at his desk. "Give me a second. We can talk outside."
They waited for him to pack up, before taking him up to the roof. Niijima had told them it was off limits to students, but somehow Ren doubted that she'd object to this.

"What do you want to know?" Amada broke the silence.

"Well," Anne began, "we were wondering what exactly happened… Like what did the mafia try to talk to you about before attacking you…"

Amada scrutinized Anne's face, looking quite suspicious. "…Why do you want to know?"

"Um, well…!" Anne looked at Ren in a panic, with her HELP ME face.

"We just want to know what to avoid," Ren cut in smoothly. "I've heard some terrifying things about the victims. We just want to be safe, you know?"

"I see." He didn't look fully convinced, but then he spoke again. "Well, I was looking through the airsoft shop. I was… looking for a gift for a friend. She collects gun models. But the stock wasn't what I was looking for. So I left and a man approached me. He offered a job to me. Claimed that it was very easy and the pay was excellent. He held out an envelope to me, and claimed that all I had to do was deliver it to a specific place."

"Sounds like smuggling drugs to me," Morgana piped up.

"And you said no?" Anne said in disbelief.

Amada shrugged. "It seemed off to me from the very beginning." He pressed his fingers against his chin, looking thoughtful. "If you want my opinion… I think they specifically target students who look like they need money. Like they can't afford something? They swoop in with this offer, so it's irresistible to the victims."

That… made a lot of sense. High school students didn't exactly have a good selection of jobs. And said jobs didn't exactly pay well. That's why he was grateful that Shadows dropped money… They were probably be in trouble if that wasn't the case.

"That's despicable!" Anne hissed, her hands clenching into fists. Without a doubt, if they were in the Metaverse, Anne would have set something on fire.

"Lady Anne's right!" Morgana exclaimed. "We can't let this go unpunished."

"Thanks, Amada-senpai," Ren said. "We really appreciate you telling us this."

"…Right," Amada said, all while studying Ren's face. "Try to keep out of trouble."

"Bye!" Anne chirped, before snagging Ren's wrist and dragging him off. "It was nice meeting you, Senpai!"

Once they were pretty much alone, Anne let out a happy giggle. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement. "I'm glad we found a lead! Mishima got us a good one!"

"Yeah… that's great," Ren said slowly.

Then Anne frowned, tilting her head at him. "Wait… what's wrong?"

"Yeah, Ren!" Morgana frowned at him as well. "This is great news! This puts us one step closer to discovering the palace!"
"It's nothing," Ren lied, before forcing a smile on his face. "I'm just… tired. And worried about the deadline."

He couldn't explain it but… something nagged at him about Amada. He was perfectly nice. He actually treated Ren like he wasn't a violent delinquent, which was a rarity at this school. But… why did he get the feeling that Amada knew more than he was letting on?

"I'm home," Ken announced as he stepped through the door, only to pause when he saw that Shinjiro-san had his laptop set up on the table. He was video chatting with Akihiko-san.

"Hey." Shinjiro-san turned slightly to look at him.

Akihiko-san grinned at him, giving him a small wave. "Hey, Ken! How's everything?"

Ken shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

Akihiko-san frowned. "Have you even asked about joining any clubs?"

"I can't get distracted," Ken said, walking over to the fridge and opening it. He pulled one of the chilled water bottles and shut the door.

He was glad that Shinjiro-san had kept that habit ever since he had gotten custody of Ken. He had done it especially when he attended soccer club almost every meeting back in junior high. Tokyo was just so… hot. He was honestly glad that he had transferred when it was time for summer uniforms. He'd probably die of heatstroke wearing a turtleneck in May.

"Mitsuru's not looking for this to be done in a month, you know," Shinjiro-san said. "She knows it'll take time."

"Yeah, I really don't know why you decided not to run for student council president," Akihiko-san said.

"It's not any different from me deciding to concentrate on my studies for entrance exams," Ken defended as he twisted the bottle cap off. "Besides, it's a weird time to join clubs…"

"I guess that's true," Akihiko-san said with a nod. "But still, you shouldn't just focus all of your time on your mission… You'll just run yourself to the ground." Then he glanced back at Shinjiro-san. "Oh yeah… Shinji, didn't you say you found a job?"

"You did?" Ken turned to look at his guardian, before taking a drink of water.

Shinjiro-san shrugged. "It's just being a bartender at this place in Shinjuku. Called Crossroads."

"Shinjuku?" Ken repeated, before lowering the water bottle from his mouth. "Isn't that… the entertainment district?"

"Er, well, it's not just like Shirakawa Boulevard…" Akihiko-san said slowly. "It's like clubs and bars. Party life."

"But it also has a lot of adult stores," Shinjiro-san added helpfully.

…Of course it did. He really didn't get the obsession with sex, even now.

"Shinji!" Akihiko-san exclaimed, looking vaguely horrified.
"What?" Shinjiro-san scowled at him. "Ken ain't a kid anymore. Besides, don't you remember the crap boys said in the locker room?"

…He really wished Shinjiro-san hadn't reminded him. He was scarred for life from those conversations.

Akihiko-san just huffed, before rolling his eyes at his best friend. "You don't have to be so blunt about it."

"How's Minako-san, by the way?" Ken inquired. "I hope she's not having it so rough…"

After Yukari-san had discovered her pregnancy shortly after the whole fiasco with the Abyss of Time… Mitsuru-san had decided to reopen the dorm, so everyone could help her through it. And Yukari-san was… a bit of a monster while expecting. She had mood swings like crazy, had really strange cravings, and she had morning sickness for the first four months.

Akihiko-san groaned, before hanging his head. "She's worse than Yukari, if you ask me. At least in the food department. She's been waking me up for the past two nights at like one in the morning, begging me for weird stuff like fried grasshoppers. And just this morning, I found her trying to make cheese ice cream."

Shinjiro-san grimaced. "Have fun with that, Aki."

Akihiko-san dragged his fingers through his hair. "Yeah, well, I'm hoping that it passes soon…"

He then huffed. "At least she's not too moody… Though it probably helps that Mina's excited that Yukari's coming to visit with the twins soon."

Shinjiro-san just grimaced. "Have fun with the Terror Twins."

"They're not that bad," Akihiko-san defended.

"You keep telling yourself that, Aki."

"Do they even know that they're getting a new cousin in like… six months?" Ken asked.

"No idea." Akihiko-san shrugged. "I think they're more excited about Mina spoiling them…"

Shinjiro-san just snorted. "No surprise there. Minako always showers them with toys and sweets."

Akihiko-san made a face. "Well, I guess we could get in some practice while we can. Babysitting them and all."

"'We'?" Ken raised an eyebrow. "Minako-san has always been pretty good with kids."

"Meanwhile you'll clam up and give one word answers when they try and talk to you." Shinjiro-san smirked, folding his arms over his chest.

"Oh, shut up, Shinji!"

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Thursday, June 16th, 2016

Makoto had counted a total of eight students who have approached her today, pleading for help with the mafia. And Makoto didn't doubt that it would increase before the end of the day.
She hated it. That she was powerless to do anything. And that principal wouldn't raise a finger to help.

Makoto sighed deeply, her eyes lingering on her pencil case. It had been a gift from her father, dating over ten years ago.

Her father would have been able to chase down the criminals. Have them brought to justice. The gang of criminals had to murder him to stop him chasing after him.

And what was she doing? Blackmailing the Phantom Thieves so the mafia would get off of everyone's backs.

Her father would be so ashamed to see her do this…

But what else could she do? The mafia were eluding the police. She needed to do something, to help her classmates. Especially since Principal Kobakawaya wouldn't do a thing to help them.

But… was she any better? She had her suspicions about Kamoshida, which were only proven correct. Why didn't she follow her instincts and looked more into that? She could have gathered information and gone to the police… But she remained silent, afraid to speak out.

How could she just remain silent? How could she allow for Kamoshida to torture the volleyball team? Allow for Kamoshida to harass Takamaki-san? For him to ruin Sakamoto-kun's future by breaking his leg? And have Suzui-san feel that the only way for her to escape was to commit suicide?

All because she was afraid of the consequences.

Was it worth it? To gain the principal's approval, so that he'll write a glowing letter of recommendation for her? Shouldn't she be trying her best to get into her school of choice by her own merit?

"What am I doing?" she whispered to herself.

"Staring off into space."

Makoto nearly fell out of her chair at the sudden voice. She whipped her head to stare at her neighbor. "D-Don't do that!" she sputtered out, clutching a hand to her chest. "You nearly gave me a heart attack…"

Amada-kun just studied her carefully. "Niijima-san…" he said slowly, "have you been getting enough sleep?"

"That's not important," she said defensively.

Amada-kun just sighed. "You really shouldn't run yourself to the ground, Niijima-san…"

"I'm not," Makoto grumbled. "I just have a lot of duties to take care of."

Something flickered in Amada-kun's eyes. He wasn't… easily readable. She supposed that's why some of the girls were so interested in him. Because he held himself aloof.

"You look like you were a thousand kilometers away."

Makoto sighed. "I'm sorry… I have a lot on my mind. People are just… scared with the mafia extorting everyone."
"I don't blame them," he said quietly. "People extorting teenagers like that… is just despicable."

That was rather… odd to say. Though Makoto had noticed that Amada-kun carried himself differently than compared to his peers. Like… he had seen more than he should have. And well… he had a thousand meter stare.

"Amada-kun…" Makoto began, "what is justice to you?"

He raised an eyebrow. "That's an… interesting question, Nijima-san." He closed his eyes. "To me… Justice is standing up for the right thing no matter what. Even if your senses tell you that it's safer to look away… pretend that it never happened."

His face just clouded over at that last part. Just what had he experienced…?

*Keep your head low… and focus on your studies,* was what Sae had told her… But was she wrong in that matter?

"…I see," she murmured.

"You know, Nijima-san…" he said quietly. "You should form your own opinions. You can listen to others' stances, but you shouldn't let them define it for you."

Her own opinion…

If only she knew what that was.

Saturday, June 18th, 2016

"Lala-chan, another drink!"

Shinjiro eyed the dark haired woman warily. "…Shouldn't you cut her off?"

And he thought Amagi was loud when she was drunk. But Ichiko Ohya could give her a run for her money.

"Ichiko only gets louder when I cut her off this early." His boss let out an exasperated sigh.

He didn't expect to be working for a drag queen, but he liked her. She didn't put up with any crap.

"Or better yet, have your new bartender join me!" she continued, winking at him. "There aren't too many handsome faces around here."

"I'm taken," Shinjiro said flatly, shooting Ohya an unamused look.

Though he really should call Fuuka on his nights off… He had started working on Friday, but it kept slipping his mind.

"Bah." She scowled. "The good ones always are. Or they're gay." She took a swig of her drink.

Shinjiro rolled his eyes before grabbing a clean rag to start wiping down the glasses.

"Didn't you say you had a lead, Ichiko?" Lala asked, with a frown.

"Oh yeah, it was some kid I met like a month ago?" She waved a hand. "Ran into him skulking
around Madarame's place. I think he'd be a good source about the Phantom Thieves.

Shinjiro frowned, his motions slowing down. A kid, who seemed to know the Phantom Thieves?

"Why did you tell him to meet you at a bar?" Shinjiro demanded. "He's underage."

"Well, where else would I meet him?" she asked in an isn't it obvious? tone.

Shinjiro groaned. There was no arguing with her.

Lala just laughed. "Just make sure she doesn't give him any booze, alright, Aragaki?"

"Why do I have to babysit her?" Shinjiro complained with a huff.

He did enough babysitting with Aki.

The door suddenly opened, revealing a kid with messy dark hair. And was that… a cat in his bag?

"Hey!" Ohya's eyes lit up with excitement. "Amamiya, right?"

Shinjiro sucked in a breath. Damn… That was the name Ken had given him… for the leader of the Phantom Thieves. They were up to some skeevy shit, weren't they?

"That's me." Amamiya nodded.

"Come on, take a seat!" She patted the seat next to her.

"Uh… can we sit at a table?" The kid's eyes flickered to Lala and then Shinjiro. He looked wary.

"I'd prefer some privacy."

The cat started to meow. Like crazy. It had been fairly quiet, so why the hell did it suddenly start to meow?

…I at least it was cute.

"Kid, is there a reason why you're carting around a cat?"

Amamiya just gave him a sardonic smile. "He's my therapy cat."

The cat started to hiss loudly.

"Hush, Morgana. You know it's true," Amamiya teased, with that little shit grin Minako often sported.

…If it was male, why was his name Morgana? Last time he checked, Morgana was a female name…

Ohya stood up, ushering the kid to one of the back tables, promising him to buy him a drink. After a quick glare from Lala, she corrected it to being a soda.

"Aragaki, clean the tables after you bring Ichiko her drinks," Lala muttered. "I don't know if Ichiko will slip him some booze or not."

"Got it." Lala poured him the drinks and he carried them to the pair.

"Hey, thanks!" Ohya grinned at him, before grabbing her drink. She quickly turned to Amamiya. "But anyways…"
Up close, Amamiya didn't look anything special. Dark hair, dark gray eyes hidden by a big pair of glasses… But there was something about his gaze… Shinjiro couldn't help but notice that the cat was surprisingly alert.

Gah… what was he doing? He couldn't be obvious about how he was listening in on them. Shinjiro focused on mopping up the spills on the table next to them, all while listening to them with one ear.

He could hear snips of their conversation.

"I want some intel on Kamoshida's case before I give you any info."

"Fine. I'll… get you an interview of a personal victim of his."

"Perfect! But if I'm right about the man you're looking for… his name is Junya Kaneshiro."

Junya Kaneshiro… The mafia boss that the Phantom Thieves were pursuing. So they were really gonna go after him?

Shinjiro's lips formed a thin line. He knew that Ken would be following the Phantom Thieves, but he really hoped that Ken wouldn't dragged into the mess. They were playing with fire, trying to take down a mafia. Especially given how good they were at hiding their tracks...

"Hey, Aragaki! I need a refill!"

Shinjiro couldn't hold back a groan. This was going to be a long night. He could feel it already.
Shinjiro-san had wasted no time in telling Ken about what he had overheard last time. It was a bit… strange, to say the least.

"Why do you think they needed the name?" Ken frowned, all while poking at his breakfast, shifting it around with his fork.

Shinjiro-san shrugged. "So they don't have call him Asshole Mafia Boss? I have no clue." Then his eyes flicked to Ken's food, disapproval filling his face. "And stop playing with your food."

"Sorry," he muttered before taking a bite. He wasn't too hungry, but he was going to be out and about today… He needed the energy. He probably should hurry up too…

Shinjiro-san took a sip of his coffee, before he looked at Ken again. "…So what are you gonna be doing today?"

"Follow the Phantom Thieves. From what you've told me, finding out Kaneshiro's name was some sort of milestone… They may be making a move today."

Shinjiro-san just huffed. "You better not run into those punks again."

"I doubt that they will strike in broad daylight." Ken took a sip of his own coffee.

Shinjiro-san frowned. "It wasn't exactly dark last time."

"I was in an alley," Ken countered. "I'll be careful, okay?"

"You better, or else I'm kicking your ass," he retorted.

Ken rolled his eyes before standing up. "Yes, Mom," he deadpanned, before picking up his plate. He hadn't finished his breakfast, but he really didn't feel like eating anymore. He wrapped it up, sticking it in the fridge. After shutting the fridge door, he looked over to his guardian. "I'll try to be back before dark, but no promises. Bye."

He grabbed his bag on the way. While it was a Sunday, he needed to carry a few items. His Evoker, the holster to carry it around, his old spear—just in case he managed to find the Shadow nest today—and etc. And he couldn't exactly carry those out in the open… so school bag it was.

Honestly… he really wished that Shinjiro-san wouldn't hover as much as he did. He knew that
Shinjiro-san just worried but… He could take care of himself. It just made him feel like he was still a helpless child.

Ken sighed, gazing out of the glass side of the elevator. It offered a wide view of Tokyo. Well… Shibuya. Shibuya itself was just so… huge.

The elevator finally reached the bottom floor, so the doors slid open. He stepped out and exited the building. He scanned the people outside, looking for a flash of blond hair. Not too many people had blond hair, dyed or not, after all.

Fortunately, he did not have to search for long. He then pulled out his phone, pretending to be reading something intently before walking right by them. He stopped behind one of those large maps that were set up so people didn't get lost.

"I've entered Kaneshiro's name into the app… and as we suspected, he has a Palace," Kitagawa-san announced. "It's not surprising, with how he's been manipulating the youth…"

He still… didn't know what a Palace was. The term had come up from time to time, but he hadn't been able to figure out what exactly it was from the conversations.

"Any ideas on what the other two keywords are?" Amamiya-san asked.

The cat in his bag began to meow. He still found it… strange that Amamiya-san carried his cat everywhere. And how did people not notice?

It wasn't exactly a quiet cat either.

And it was even stranger that everyone would just look at it, like they understood it.

"I dunno, you figured it out last time, Ren," Sakamoto-san said.

"You're the one who activated the app for the first time, though," Amamiya-san replied.

"Yeah, by accident!"

"Enough bickering!" Takamaki-san sighed. "We're not getting anywhere, you know."

"Perhaps if we figure out what exactly his Palace is based off of… we can figure out what it is," Kitagawa-san suggested.

"There's so many buildings in Shibuya though!" Sakamoto-san protested.

"Come on, we've gotta try!" Takamaki-san said.

"Uh… a garden? Since he likes controlling everything."

"No candidate found," a mechanical voice announced.

"That… doesn't make much sense, Ryuji."

"Then you think of somethin'!" Sakamoto-san retorted. "I don't see any of you guys offering any ideas!"

Ken peeked from behind. Amamiya-san was quiet, but he looked thoughtful, as he toyed with his bangs. Maybe he had an idea?

"A money bath?" Takamaki-san offered. "I've seen an old cartoon about that!"
"No candidate found."

"Rats!" He could hear the pout in Takamaki-san's voice.

"What about you, Ren?" Kitagawa-san inquired. "Surely you have an idea?"

"I think Anne was on the right track," Amamiya-san said. "It has to be connected to money. So… I think it'd be a bank."

"Candidate found."

The atmosphere suddenly felt heavy. Ken blinked. What was that about?

"All right!" Takamaki-san cheered. "Okay, so now we just need the area…"

The area? Just what was she talking about?

"What would Kaneshiro consider his bank…?" Kitagawa-san mused. "Perhaps the school? His victims have been mainly the Shujin students, after all…"

"I don't think so…" Amamiya-san said. "Kamoshida's Palace was the school."

"Maybe his hideout? That's gotta be where he keeps all of his money."

"A real bank?" Takamaki-san offered.

The cat seemed to shake its head, before meowing again.

"Perhaps we're thinking too inside the box…" Kitagawa-san said. "Palaces emanate a passionate madness. I don't think what we're suggesting captures that."

…What was that supposed to mean?

Though, artists did tend to be a bit strange. Chidori-san did say some strange things about her art from time to time, even though she didn't fit the typical artist stereotype.

"His palace is a bank. He extorts many people for criminal acts for the sake of greed. It must be something more."

"Many people…" Amamiya-san repeated, a thoughtful cadence to his voice. "Just where does he get all of his targets?"

"His targets…?" Sakamoto-san repeated.

"That is his source of income…" Takamaki-san said slowly. Then a quiet gasp. "Wait, are you saying that all of Shibuya is his Palace?!!"

"Result found."

"I have a hit!" Kitagawa-san exclaimed, excitement brimming from his voice. "So all of Shibuya is truly his Palace…"

"All right!" Sakamoto-san cheered. "We're in business! Come on, let's go!"

"W-Wait, shouldn't we find somewhere more private to go inside the Palace?" Takamaki-san interjected. "It might look weird if we just… you know… disappear. And this is all of Shibuya…"
we could find an alley or something to go in."

…Glad to know that someone had some common sense.

"Eh, there's so many people," Sakamoto-san dismissed with a wave of his hand. He then grinned widely. "We should be fine!"

…Annnnd Sakamoto-san just shot it. Seriously… How could they act like this was a secret when they went and pulled stuff like this? It honestly made him glad that Tartarus was only available during the Dark Hour… Who knew what Junpei-san would have done… Though he had blabbed to Chidori-san, as an attempt to impress her…

"In that case… let's go," Kitagawa-san stated. He then seemed to press a button on his phone.

"Beginning navigation."

Wait… navigation to where? But then the same wave of heavy energy permeated the air.

A black hole, rimmed with red, was pulsating in front of the group. He took a careful look around. It looked like… nobody was noticing it. Or… did they just not care? Were they really that oblivious to everything?

The portal remained open, even as Amamiya-san jumped in. Ken slowly walked up to it, before he did a quick look again. Nobody… was paying attention. They were just bustling around. Tourists were snapping pictures. Others were in a hurry to wherever they were headed to.

They were just… oblivious.

Ken shook his head. At least it was working in his favor. He took a deep breath, facing the portal. Then he stepped inside.

Fortunately, there was no falling, like how Akihiko-san had described jumping into the TV world. It was more like he had just stepped into an entirely different world...

It was Shibuya… but at the same time, it wasn't. A sickly green tinge permeated the air, something that reminded Ken of the Dark Hour. But that wasn't the odd part.

It was the ATMs walking around in the city.

In the distance, he could see figures darting around. Were those the Phantom Thieves?

But in that case… he probably should hide until they leave. Then he could explore.

…Though he had gotten here because the Phantom Thieves had used the app… That may not be a good idea, after all.

But he couldn't get caught…

That was when his phone started to vibrate intensely. With a frown, Ken fished it out of his pocket and unlocked it. A glowing red eye stared back at him.

What the…?

"I've entered Kaneshiro's name in the app…"
Was this the app Kitagawa-san was talking about?

After a moment of hesitation, Ken pressed the app. Glowing red letters appeared on his screen, surrounded by a black background.

"Would you like to leave the Metaverse?"

Underneath was a yes and no button.

The Metaverse…? Was this what the Shadow nest was called?

Well… at least he could leave whenever he wanted now. Good to know.

Ken stored his phone away before crouching lower in his hiding spot.

It took a long time for the Phantom Thieves to finish their investigation. For some reason… they had a cat with them? It looked like it had stepped right out of a Saturday cartoon. Though he had to wonder why they were dressed differently… He had to force himself to avert his eyes so he wouldn't stare at Takamaki-san. He knew that she was rather stunning, but… He hadn't expected her to be wearing a skin tight catsuit.

But once they were gone, Ken carefully stood up. He reached into his bag, pulling out his holster. He looped it around his waist, before he drew out his Evoker and slid it into the slot. Lastly, he brought out his spear, which currently resembled a short cylinder.

He needed to figure out a hiding place for his new spear…

He pressed the button in the center and the cylinder in his hand extended, reaching the length of roughly two and a half meters. And lastly… the ring of darkness, gifted to him by Minato-san. It would protect him from his weakness. When he was eleven, the ring was rather large on him, more often sliding off his thumb than not. But now… it fit tightly on his pinky finger. So Ken had taken a silver chain, sliding it on like it was a pendant. He slipped it around his neck, tucking the ring underneath his shirt. He was more or less ready to explore the Palace now.

The further he went in, the more disturbed he felt. He had first followed the sound of quiet sobbing. The source had been broken ATMs lying on the floor.

"I was conned…"

"He's completely ruined me…"

Conned… ruined…

An ATM was a source of money. And Kaneshiro's victims were the people of Shibuya, anyone his men could get their hands on. Were the victims just ATMs to Kaneshiro?

It was disgusting… but he wasn't surprised. Not in the least.

But… why had they left? They were looking to get into here for a while, weren't they? Unless this wasn't the Palace properly… But then what was?

It was a bank… But banks didn't look all that impressive… But Kaneshiro wouldn't just have any ordinary building…

And then… he spotted it. It was like a floating island, with an opulent looking building on top.
"...If only Kikuno-san could just fly me up there," he muttered.

A bullet suddenly struck the ground, making Ken jump.

A dark figure dropped down. "Enjoying the view?"

Warning bells immediately blared in Ken's mind. Ken immediately backed up, his hand curling tightly around his spear.

The person clad in black and blue wore a rather odd mask. It was black and almost resembled a sentai villain's mask. It covered most of his features, but Ken could clearly see the reddish brown eyes locked onto him. In one hand, he carried a pistol. He hadn't even heard it fire... So it must have a muffler. At his waist, he wore a sheathed sword.

Ken narrowed his eyes. "Who are you?" he demanded.

A dark chuckle. "Me? I suppose..." he let out a thoughtful hum, "...you could call me Black Mask."

Ken raised an eyebrow, despite everything. "Are you trying to be a sentai villain?"

"A sentai villain?" He let out an amused laugh, but it just made Ken's skin crawl. "No... I intend to be far worse."

Then he unsheathed his blade and lunged.

Ken quickly intercepted it with his spear's shaft. They were roughly the same height... but Ken slowly was being pushed back, centimeter by centimeter. Ken gritted his teeth before giving a hard shove, forcing his opponent back.

"Heh... not bad," he chuckled. "Though I have to wonder, why are you in the Metaverse, hmm? Did you just wander in here, like a lost child?"

"None of your business," Ken shot back, shifting into a defensive stance.

Black Mask attacked again, switching between using his blade and his gun. Ken was able to parry the sword attacks, occasionally managing to get a hit in, but he was forced to run when he fired his gun. Before long, Ken was sweating. This was worse than any drill he was forced to do in soccer club.

But then he unexpectedly sheathed his weapons, pressing a hand to his mask. "Let's see if you can withstand this..." Blue flames swept over his mask. "Come, Loki!"

Lovely. His first venture into the Metaverse and he was dragged into a fight with an obviously powerful Persona-user. Of course.

Loki flung fire at him, but Ken managed to dodge. Loki had a wide spread of attacks... Fire, darkness, and some kind of physical attack... He would be screwed if he didn't have the ring of darkness...

But he couldn't keep on dodging... He had to fight back. Ken reached for his Evoker, but his fingers were clumsy. By the time he had his Evoker pressed to his forehead, Black Mask had closed the distance between them. He lunged forward, knocking Ken hard against the ground. His gloved fingers then curled tightly around his neck.
"Maybe you were good before," Black Mask said mockingly, loosening his grip on Ken, only to press his serrated blade against Ken's neck, "but you've really become rusty, haven't you? Your movements are all sluggish."

Ken gritted his teeth. Black Mask's mockeries… were starting to really piss him off. Not even when his senpai were unsure of letting him fight… had they been condescending towards him. They hovered—they asked him if he was feeling tired or needed to go back to the bottom floor—but they did not act like he was stupid or slow.

"Why are you even here? Because of an inflated sense of heroism? Because you think you can take down Kaneshiro, like the oh-so heroic Phantom Thieves? Ha! You should keep your head down and avoid trouble…" His voice just oozed smugness. "But then again… you wouldn't be in this situation if you had done that in the first place."

Something in Ken snapped. He lashed out with a kick, his foot connecting with Black Mask's stomach. Ken then jerked his arm, knocking away the blade from Black Mask's hand. Now that he was free of that threat… Ken shoved Black Mask away.

Ken climbed to his feet. "Has anyone told you that you never shut the hell up?" Ken snarled out. "You don't deny it." Black Mask was obviously smirking. "Admit it… people like you latch onto the Phantom Thieves because they just offer a solution. People just sit on their asses, waiting to be rescued. There is no such thing as justice. People sometimes just get away with their crimes and you just have to deal with it."

"You're wrong!" Ken retorted. "You have one of those the world just sucks attitudes, don't you?"

He swiped at the air, glaring at Black Mask. "Justice does exist. The Phantom Thieves are pursuing their sense of justice. They're working to punish criminals who abuse their authority."

He had been pretending for so long that he was neutral to the Phantom Thieves. He didn't want his senpai to give him strange looks for supporting the Phantom Thieves, not when they doubted the Phantom Thieves' intentions so much. He had put aside his Persona for years, because he was trying to rush into things. But he couldn't afford to just stand aside anymore. Not when people like Shido were abusing their power. And on a smaller scale, Kaneshiro taking advantage of youth to satiate his own greed. It was wrong to just 'accept' things.

"You're so naïve," Black Mask retorted. "The law is justice. The Phantom Thieves are just twisting the law to suit their own purposes."

Did he actually believe what he was spouting? Black Mask couldn't be innocent. He… He could be the one causing the mental shutdowns. He was nothing but a hypocrite if that was true.

"Laws have been changed throughout history," Ken shot back. "Your kind of justice is flawed. It's definitely not any justice I want anything to do with!"

"It's been a while, hasn't it?" Ken gasped as a sharp pain pierced through his skull. He sank to his knees as the pain intensified. "You've kept me dormant for quite some time…"

Kala-Nemi…?

"Did you forget why you awakened to me in the first place?"

Kala-Nemi had been born out of his resolve to live for both his mother and Shinjiro-san, who they had thought would eventually die… But Nemesis… his first Persona, had been born out of his desire for justice for his mother. It had been misguided, because he didn't understand what exactly
had happened. But he knew better now.

"Let us form a contract... a symbol of us working together once again. Shall we?"

"Yes," Ken breathed out.

Blue flames flickered across his face, but Ken felt nothing. His face suddenly felt heavier... like he was wearing a mask.

Before he realized what happened, he raised a hand and ripped off the mask from his face. Blood dripped down his face, as a blast of blue power flared around him. Blue flames covered his clothes, but like before, Ken felt no heat. The fire ebbed away, leaving behind some kind of study black clothing and he felt something around his neck. He could feel something drape over his back.

Ken felt the familiar surge of power as Kala-Nemi appeared behind him.

"Tch... you want to play that way?" Black Mask just placed a hand on his face, concentrating. "Come, Loki!"

Ken immediately thought to use Ziodyne, but instead another spell popped into his mind. **Kouga.**

Golden light slammed into Loki, sending both Persona and host staggering back.

...That was new. That would've been useful back in his days in SEES, seeing how his light spells missed so many times.

Black Mask just growled, before calling back his Persona. He pulled out another sword, before lunging forward. Ken quickly dodged, scanning the ground for his spear and Evoker. He grabbed his spear first, before pivoting around to whap Black Mask right in the face. He couldn't deny it felt good to hit Black Mask hard enough to cause him to stagger back. He located his Evoker, which he quickly shoved it back into his holster.

His body felt lighter... probably because he was using his Persona again. He and his teammates had managed to pull off stunts that they normally wouldn't have been able to during the Dark Hour. Like how Minako-san was able to pull off a back flip. And he was able to swing around on his spear and kick Shadows in the face. (Though honestly he probably _would not_ be able to do that now.)

Ken scanned the area. It was clear that Black Mask's power level was higher than his right now... so what he really needed... was a _distraction_. That way he could activate the app to get out of here.

"Take him down, Loki!"

Ken ducked out of the way, but the Persona flew over his head, slamming into the pavement. He tripped over the upheaved cement, barely managing to drop his spear so he could catch his fall with his hands. His hands scraped hard against the gravel, but he rather his hands be the ones to suffer than his face.

Black Mask caught up to him, stabbing downwards. Ken grabbed his spear from the ground, quickly blocking the attack with his spear, before rolling to the side. He used his spear as a crutch, staggering to his feet, before spinning the spear in his hand. He slammed the butt of his spear against Black Mask's chest, knocking him back a couple meters.

Gah... he needed Black Mask to slow down a bit. A spell sprung to his mind.
"Snap!" he shouted, before ripping off his mask.

A whirring sound made Ken look up. The circular markings on the top of Kala-Nemi’s arms were opening, bullets shooting forward at Black Mask. He heard Black Mask hiss out a profanity, but Ken just spun around and ran like hell. He needed a distraction, so he could use the app to escape. Black Mask was obviously above his level. He concentrated for a moment, allowing Diarama to sweep over him. It was a relief, especially for his hands throbbing with pain.

Ken swung around to dart into an alley. He looked around frantically. The bricks… It was risky due to this essentially being a dead end but…

"Assault Dive!"

The force slammed into Ken like a bulldozer, sending him flying against the wall. Ken gritted his teeth as his head slammed especially hard against the wall. He could feel blood trickling down the back of his head.

"You like to run, don't you?" Black Mask hissed, stalking towards him. Underneath the mask, he could see a smile curling at his lips. "Loki, Megidola!"

Crapcrapcrap-

Ken just braced himself as the almighty spell exploded. If he wasn't against the wall, he probably would've been thrown back. Dammit, he forgot just how much it hurt to be on the receiving end of an almighty spell.

"Not so tough now, are we?" he drawled, all while kicking Ken in the ribs. He then grasped the front of Ken's shirt, yanking him close. "It was a good attempt, though."

But Megidola had also worked against Black Mask. The bricks began to crumble, cascading down. Ken pushed through the pain, shoving Black Mask against the wall. The bricks fell on top of Black Mask, forming a huge pile of rubble. Of course, Ken wasn't spared from getting hit but at least he wasn't buried.

A breath of air whooshed out of him as Ken slumped to the ground. God, that had been awful. Black Mask had been clearly stronger than him. Much stronger… He needed to get back into training again… He was regretting ignoring Akihiko-san's urging him to continue training even if he didn't want to stay with the soccer club. And now he was paying for it now.

Sure, summoning Kala-Nemi had given him some boosted abilities… but it wasn't enough. He couldn't just rely on that.

Ken slowly climbed to his feet, warily watching the pile of rubble. He did a quick healing, before picking up his spear and heading for the entrance. It took him a couple minutes to find where he had left his bag. He then pulled out his phone. The red eyeball app was pulsing. He quickly pressed it.

Do you want to return the real world?

He pressed yes and another portal appeared before him. After shrinking his spear to its portal form, he stepped through.

Ken managed to stagger over to a bench, all but collapsing into it. God, he felt like shit. Like with the Dark Hour, he felt completely drained of energy. His hands were slightly bleeding from when he had scraped them… He carefully felt the back of his head. The bleeding there had stopped at
least, but the area was slightly throbbing.

Shinjiro-san was really going to give him hell about this...

"...What was that about being careful?"

"Next time I'll make sure a crazy violent person isn't there to kill me," Ken said tonelessly.

Shinjiro-san scowled, before snapping shut the first aid kit. Shinjiro-san had taken one look at him, before sitting him down on the couch and insisting on tending to his injuries. He didn't hesitate on hiding his displeasure, but at least he wasn't lecturing Ken. "You looked like shit when you walked through that door," he said bluntly, his eyes narrowed. "What the hell happened?"

"One, I found the Shadow nest," Ken began, ticking off his fingers. "Two, I used Kala-Nemi for the first time in like four years. Three, this app showed up on my phone."

He reached for his phone, showing Shinjiro-san the glowing red eye app now on the device.

Shinjiro-san squinted. "What the hell is that?"

"Some kind of app that transports you to the Shadow nest, which is called the Meta-verse," Ken said. "It showed up after I got dragged into there, with Amamiya and his friends using it."

"So… it's kinda like a virus," Shinjiro-san said. He then sighed, rubbing his temple with one of his hands. "Just… be more careful, Ken. You're the one usually patching up injuries, not the one who has them."

"It wasn't intentional," Ken grumbled. "I don't go around and pick fights."

Shinjiro-san eyed him. "…Is there something you wanna say?"

"Nothing at all."

Shinjiro-san rolled his eyes. "Right." He then took out his pocket watch, checking the time. "…It's not six yet, you know. Maybe you can talk to Mitsuru before she leaves work." He nodded at the coffee table, where Ken had left his laptop last night.

Shinjiro-san was being… surprisingly mild about the whole thing. But he wasn't going to complain…

He sat down, booting up his laptop. He pulled up the video call app, before calling Mitsuru-san. He had to try three times, before someone picked up.

"Hello?"

Ken blinked. "Aigis-san?"

Aigis-san looked surprised that it was him who was calling, but she offered him a smile. "Hello, Ken-san. Are you here to report?" She then looked at him curiously. "…I'd say you look well, but you do not. May I ask what happened?"

…Blunt as always, Aigis-san.

"Aigis, who are you talking to?" Mitsuru-san then appeared. Her eyes went wide for a moment. "Oh, Amada. I didn't know you were calling today. How are you?" Then she let out a short gasp,
her face growing pale. "Goodness, what on earth happened to you?"

"I'm fine, Mitsuru-san." Ken rubbed the back of his neck. "I just wanted to let you know that I found the Shadow nest today."

"That is indeed good news." Aigis-san looked at him quizzically though. "...But did you get into a fight with a Shadow? You look rather... worn out," she said delicately.

"Er... not a Shadow..." Ken said slowly.

Mitsuru-san narrowed her eyes. "...Did the Phantom Thieves see you?"

"N-No, it's not like that!" Ken raised his hands. "Someone else... did."

"Someone else...?" Aigis-san inquired, looking thoughtful. "Perhaps... it could be the one behind the mental shutdowns. After all, they started occurring roughly a year and a half before the Phantom Thieves appeared."

"And you engaged in battle with them?" Mitsuru-san demanded, giving him what Minako-san called the Kirijo Glare of Doom.

"He attacked me!" Ken protested. "I didn't mean to get into a fight right away. I'm not Akihiko-san."

"That is very true," Aigis-san droned. "Though sometimes I fear about your role models, Ken-san."

"But honestly, Amada, first the mafia and now this?" Mitsuru-san chastised, frowning in disapproval. "You really need to be more careful."

Ken winced. He shouldn't be surprised that Shinjiro-san had told Mitsuru-san about the mafia...

"You could have been grievously injured," Aigis-san added, frowning at him as well. "Not to mention overpowered by whoever attacked you."

Ken groaned. So this was why Shinjiro-san prodded him into reporting to Mitsuru-san. Women were just... better at scolding. They had that guilt inducing I'm disappointed in you look.

"But anyhow..." Mitsuru-san looked at him curiously. "Did you observe anything else?"

"I'm not sure why Fuuka-san compared the Shadow nest to Tartarus," Ken said. "I think it's more comparable to the TV world. You know, how they told us that people who ended up in the TV world created worlds from their heart. It seemed very similar to that."

"But surely there must be a central part of this nest..." Aigis-san said thoughtfully. "You may have only found just one section."

"Maybe..." Ken frowned. "I don't know. I will have to take a better look."

"Were you able to summon your Persona?" Aigis-san inquired.

"Ah, yes!" Mitsuru-san's eyes lit up. "You were fine with summoning your Persona, weren't you?"

"Well..." Ken said slowly. "Not with my Evoker."

Mitsuru-san raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean? Were you able to summon without one then?"
"Yes… but not in the way you're thinking."

It took a great amount of skill and concentration to be able to summon your Persona in the real world without a medium. He knew that Mitsuru-san, Akihiko-san, and Minako-san were all capable of this feat four years ago, but he wouldn't be surprised if the others had mastered the ability.

"Can you please elaborate then?" Aigis-san requested, curiosity filling her eyes.

"A mask formed on my face and I ripped it off," Ken responded. "Kala-Nemi seems to have changed though."

"Changed?" Mitsuru-san craned an eyebrow at him. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I apparently have light spells that don't instantly kill Shadows, and Kala-Nemi can fire bullets now," he said dryly.

"Bullets?" Aigis-san asked. "How curious. Though I have to wonder why your Persona's abilities have changed…"

Mitsuru-san sighed deeply. "Good work, Amada. But please, be more careful. Your mission is more reconnaissance based. Your goal is to gather information. Shinjiro would have my head if you got hurt due to this."

Ken sighed. "Okay, okay…" he muttered. "It wasn't on purpose though…"

"I know." Mitsuru-san smiled gently. "I'm pleased with your work, but I don't want you to get hurt." She then looked at him sternly. "And take care so that the Phantom Thieves don't spot you. You don't know how they'll react to you."

And yet… he had met two of them already.

He fully believed that the rumors circulating Amamiya-san were just slander. He seemed perfectly nice. A bit quiet, though he couldn't help but wonder if that was just a front. And Takamaki-san… she was nice as well.

…Even though she was a terrible liar.

"Ken-san?" Aigis-san's voice yanked him back to reality.

Ken snapped back to attention, looking at the two women. "I understand," he said quietly. "I'll do my best to avoid detection."

"Good." Mitsuru-san nodded, before offering him a pleased smile. "Rest up, Amada."

She then cut off the connection and the screen went black.

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**Kala-Nemi**

Level: 30

Affinity: Bless, Healing, Gun

Skills: Makouha, Kouga, Hama, Mahama, Diarama, Media, Snap, Recarm
So, Ken has made it to the Metaverse! (Though it's not hard with how the Phantom Thieves don't seem to know the meaning of discretion.) And I will be describing Ken's costume fully in the next chapter.

But with Kala-Nemi… I had to revamp Kala-Nemi's skills to suit the P5 battle changes, as shown above. Bless and Healing were a given, since those were his main attributes in P3. I threw in gun abilities for Kala-Nemi, to refer to Evokers. I took away the Zio class spells, since well… there's Ryuji.

As usual, I would love to hear your thoughts!
Awakening

Chapter Summary

Ken follows the Phantom Thieves into the Metaverse, but gets to see them in action this time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Monday, June 20th, 2016

"Ken, get up!" Shinjiro-san's sharp voice unwillingly dragged Ken out of the sweet oblivion that was sleep. "It's nearly 7:30!"

Ken just groaned, burying his face into his pillow. Every muscle in his body ached. He had completely forgotten just how tiring it was to fight in a Shadow nest.

"...Ken? Are you feeling okay?" He heard the door open and then Shinjiro-san's footsteps. He felt Shinjiro-san's hand press against his cheek. "No fever..." Shinjiro-san muttered.

"Just tired," Ken mumbled, before rolling over onto his back to sit up. He rubbed his eyes.

Shinjiro-san's mouth formed a thin line, before pulling back his hand. "...Maybe you should stay home today," he suggested. "You look like shit."

"Thanks, Shinjiro-san," he deadpanned, before gesturing to Ken's hands. "...Maybe you should stay home today," he suggested. "You look like shit."

"Thanks, Shinjiro-san," he muttered, as he threw back the covers before sitting up. "I'll just have to push through it. Mitsuru-san never let us skip school when we weren't feeling well due to the Tartarus explorations."

And he'd know. Because Junpei-san tried pulling that card. Many times. They all failed, of course.

"Mitsuru isn't here now," he deadpanned, before gesturing to Ken's hands. "And besides that, your injuries haven't completely healed."

"It's mostly just my hands," Ken defended. "Besides that, the Phantom Thieves are probably going to go back to the Metaverse today... They're trying to steal Kaneshiro's heart and they have a tight deadline."

Shinjiro-san sighed deeply, pressing a hand to his temple. "...Fine," he relented, before narrowing his eyes at Ken. "But you better call me if you feel nauseous or close to passing out. If the school has to call me 'cause you fainted, I'm hauling your ass back here and not letting you go anywhere until you're feeling one hundred percent back to your usual self."

"Okay..." Ken muttered.

Shinjiro-san studied him closely one last time, before he left and shut the door behind him.

Ken just sighed again, before dragging himself out of bed. Maybe if he was lucky, the Phantom
The day just dragged on and on. Ken found it difficult to focus. Thank god none of the teachers called on him to answer a question today… But now that it was after school… it was time to follow the Phantom Thieves' to their 'hideout'. Honestly, he just couldn't get over how they thought meeting up in public was a good idea.

"We need to find Kaneshiro," Amamiya-san was saying. "I think that's why the Palace is out of reach."

…That would really not be a good idea. They handled things rather recklessly…

"And how do you propose we do that?" Kitagawa-san sighed. "You had the most luck with finding his men… and that wasn't even enough. They fled before you could properly ask them anything…"

"For real…" Sakamoto-san muttered, before stuffing his hands into his pockets. "But we've gotta do it. Or else Miss Prez is gonna leak our info to the police. And then we'd be royally screwed."

"Seriously…" Takamaki-san grumbled. "She seriously expects us to take Kaneshiro down in like—a week?! She's insane!" She then huffed out a sigh, sounding rather irritated. "Are we out of luck…? Were we in over our heads?"

"No way!" Sakamoto-san said adamantly. "There's gotta be a way! We can't give up!"

"Perhaps Morgana could launch us into the air with his wind spells?" Kitagawa-san offered.

…Who was Morgana?

The cat then began to meow. The Phantom Thieves looked to it, as if… they actually understood it. Did they…? Or maybe they just had a dictionary.

"We would be splats on the ground…" Takamaki-san muttered, before she shook her head. "It's just… too high. We would need a helicopter, like Ryuji said. But that's… impossible."

That was when Niijima-san approached them and as usual, tense words were exchanged. Though he had to wonder why exactly they were so hostile with Niijima-san… Though the entire school seemed to hate her… But the Phantom Thieves had a particular grudge against her. Though he supposed with them being personal victims of Kamoshida, they'd resent her a bit. Not to mention the blackmail…

"All you do is eavesdrop on us," Sakamoto-san accused. "What's the matter—think we're gonna chicken out?"

Ken winced. If only they knew…

"We're not cowards like you," Kitagawa-san said coolly. "We will fulfill your demand. We won't back out."

"I'm not…" Niijima-san tensed up, placing a hand on her chest. "That's not why I—"

"Then what is it?" Amamiya-san said, his every word dripping with sarcasm. "Are you here to congratulate us on our work so far?"
"You're here to just check up on us, aren't you?" Takamaki-san demanded, before brushing her hair behind her back. She glared at Niijima-san venomously. "You may be the student council president and a top student… but when it comes down to what we do, you're just useless."

The word useless seemed to be a trigger. Niijima-san's eyes went as wide as saucers and she seemed to tremble faintly. "U-Useless?" she repeated softly, taking a step backwards.

"I would have to agree with Anne," Kitagawa-san said flatly. "What do you know of our work?"

Then Niijima-san's expression seemed to steel. "…You want to get into contact with Kaneshiro, don't you? You were discussing that just now…"

…Uh oh. He recognized that look. He had seen that look on Akihiko-san many, many times. The cat started to meow. It almost sounded… concerned.

"Very well." She nodded firmly. "I'll get you into contact with Kaneshiro."

…What. Just… what. What was she planning…? She wasn't seriously going to purposefully seek out the mafia, was she?! She wouldn't… not after she's heard all of the stories from their classmates about what happened… Right…?

Ken sighed quietly to himself, pressing a hand to his temple. He hoped that she wasn't going to do anything too reckless...

…Annnnd of course she just had to make him eat his words. He didn't hear all of what she had done but… he got the gist of what Niijima-san was trying to do. Though the Phantom Thieves weren't much better. Sakamoto-san had nearly given him a heart attack, with how he had just leaped in front of the taxi...

But with them going after Niijima-san, Ken knew that this would most likely get them into contact with Kaneshiro… This meant that they would gain access to the palace… which meant that he needed to be ready to follow after them.

He hurried back to the penthouse, before retrieving his spear from his room. He checked his supplies one last time, before pulling out his phone. The palace was All of Shibuya, since it should work from here, right? He pulled up the app on his phone. There was a search function now… And there was an image of the Palace. It was labelled… the Bank of Gluttony. That was… strange, to say the least.

He pressed the image and moments later, there was a portal pulsing in front of him. It was nice to see that his hypothesis was right. Ken stepped inside.

He felt flames sweep over his clothes, a mask forming to cover his face. Wait… just what was he wearing?

He was too busy focusing on Black Mask attacking him to really notice his clothes. But this… was just bizarre.

…Okay, so it wasn't that strange. He was wearing a tuxedo or a suit—he really didn't know the difference, if he was being honest—so he had on a black blazer, a white dress shirt and orange vest underneath, topped off with an orange bowtie. He was wearing black slacks. It wasn't all that different to what he wore for the Gekkoukan uniform in the winter. Though the black cape draped over his shoulders was definitely… new.
…He was really glad that Junpei-san wasn't here to see this… Junpei-san would probably laugh so hard that he fell onto the floor.

Ken then reached up to remove his mask. It was a domino mask, but unlike most he had seen… it wasn't just one color. The left side was white, with black outlining the eyehole. Silver ran from the top, curving diagonally down. The right side had reverse colors: mainly black with white outlining the eyehole.

Ken shook his head, before slipping it back onto his face. He needed to find a hiding place, before the Phantom Thieves arrived. He decided to hide out in one of the alleys this time. It was the alley that led to the airsoft shop, actually. He just… hoped that Black Mask wouldn't show up again. His fight with Black Mask was a close one. If more of his attacks had landed, Ken would've been dead meat.

"W-Where are we?" The sudden voice yanked Ken out of his musings.

…Wait a minute. Was that Niijima-san? They brought her here?!

Ken decided to risk it and peered out. And sure enough, she was with the Phantom Thieves. She stuck out like a sore thumb in her school uniform, while the Phantom Thieves were all wearing costumes. They were… colorful to say the least. Though at least they seemed more durable than the costumes that the twins insisted the team wear from time to time.

…Then again, he can't really judge them with what he was wearing.

But seriously… what were they thinking? Ken grumbled to himself as he withdrew back to his hiding place. He was fairly sure that Niijima-san did not have a Persona. He hadn't seen them in action, but being in a Shadow nest was dangerous, if you didn't have the potential or a Persona.

"Oh, um…" Takamaki-san began, "just think of it as the world inside Kaneshiro's heart."

The world inside one's heart… That… really sounded like the TV world.

"T-Takamaki-san?" Niijima-san gasped. "Wait… what are you wearing?"

Takamaki-san then let out an awkward laugh. "T-This old thing…? Um…"

"I think she looks fine," Amamiya-san interjected. Ken could hear the smirk in his voice. "More than fine, actually."

Takamaki-san let out a squeak, only for Sakamoto-san to groan. "Ugh, can you two not flirt in front of all of us?"

"W-We're not flirting!" she sputtered out. "Joker's just… j—er, messing around!"

"So the rumors are true?" Niijima-san asked. "You two are together?"

A deep sigh. "We can always discuss Joker and Panther's relationship later," Kitagawa-san stated. "We should focus on the matter at hand."

"There isn't any relationship…!" Takamaki-san began to protest.

"Will you all be quiet?!" snapped a new voice. "You'll attract the Shadows."

Ken peered out again. It was… the cat. The cat was… talking. Why was it talking? How was that even possible? Was this a delayed symptom from hitting his head yesterday? Was he
hallucinating?

Okay, Teddie-san usually walked around as a plush bear, but he had a human form. Somewhat. He was pretty sure that a human would not be popping out of the cat.

…Did this mean if they brought Koromaru to the Metaverse, Koromaru would start talking? Would he take on a cartoonish form? It was… weird, thinking about it.

"A monster cat?" Nijima-san gasped out, her eyes wide as saucers.

"I am nooooot!" Morgana whined, his ears flattening against his head.

"Okay, okay, enough," Amamiya-san laughed. "Come on, let's try out your theory, Morgana."

"Hmph!" Morgana stomped off into the direction of the bank, which only caused Amamiya-san to shake his head.

"This is really too strange…" Nijima-san mumbled as she trailed after the Phantom Thieves. "I just can't get my head wrapped around this…"

She wasn't the only one.

"Duuuude… what even happened here?" he heard Sakamoto-san say. "It looks like someone wrecked this entire alley…"

…Dammit, that's right. It didn't look like the Palace changed from day to day basis, like Tartarus had.

"You don't think…" Kitagawa-san said slowly, "…that the black masked figure that Madarame spoke of… was here?"

…Well, he's not wrong.

"But why the hell would he wreck an alley?" Sakamoto-san demanded. "That makes no sense, dude!"

"D-Do you think that he watched us yesterday?" Takamaki-san asked anxiously.

"What black mask?" Nijima-san asked.


Ken frowned, watching them approach the bank. While their backs were turned, Ken darted into another alley, closer to the bank. A flight of stairs materialized as Nijima-san came closer.

"Yes!" Morgana cheered, bouncing up and down with excitement. "I was right! Since she's a special customer, Kaneshiro will allow her access!

…Special customer? To Kaneshiro? What did Nijima-san even do? He really hoped that she wasn't actually hurt because of this…

Ken waited for them to finish ascending the stairs, before making a mad sprint for the stairs. The stairs were starting to dematerialize, so Ken had to jump and pull himself up. Once he got to his feet, it was just a matter of outracing the stairs disappearing. It was a good thing that the Phantom Thieves had gone inside already…
Though they had just… walked right through the front door. That wasn't very… sneaky. Maybe they thought they could do it since they had Nijima-san with them?

Ken couldn't stop himself from gawking. Tartarus was more of a seemingly endless maze, with hundreds of floors. But this… was so ornate. Though this was supposed to be a bank…

Ken shook his head to shake off his thoughts. He had to focus. Especially since Shadows would be lurking about…

"Hey, who's there?!"

…Crap.

Something that resembled a security guard was rushing at him. Ken beat him to the punch, stabbing him in the shoulder with his spear. The security guard seemed to explode, three piles of black goo landing on the floor. The black goo reformed into… Personas?

They… had to be. Two of them resembled the angel Personas Minato-san and Minako-san used from time to time. One of them looked like an oni, his skin bright red.

If the angels had a similar affinity to the ones the twins had used, he probably should avoid light spells… So that left…

Ken ripped off his mask. "Kala-Nemi!"

A bullet tore through the air, sending the angel tumbling to the ground. Wait… she was weak to gun attacks, then.

Ken didn't hesitate on attacking the other angel, who joined her ally on the ground. He summoned Kala-Nemi again, firing a flare of bright light that struck all of the Shadow-Personas.

The attack killed both of the angels, leaving just the oni standing. The oni let out a growl, before lunging forward. He only managed to clip Ken in the shoulder, due to an ill timed dodge, but it didn't hurt that much. Was he at a higher level then?

Well… he wasn't going to complain.

It took another light spell to kill the oni, leaving him alone in the room.

"DON'T LET THEM ESCAPE!"

…What did they do now?

Ken quickly ran for the bench area, ducking down to hide underneath. Not the… best hiding spot, but he didn't really have a choice.

The doors slammed open and he could hear footsteps pounding on the floor.

"Come on, the exit's this way!" Morgana shouted.

…Okay, what did they do now?

He heard the Phantom Thieves suddenly skid to a stop. "There's just no end to them…” Takamaki-san groaned.

Them…?
Ken carefully peeked up. A couple of Shadows were blocking the Phantom Thieves' means of escape…

"I told you there's no way to escape. Not when I have my eye on you."

Kaneshiro?! He was here? No… that wasn't right… Takamaki-san had described the Palace as the world inside Kaneshiro's heart… so that was the Shadow self?

Wait… that was Kaneshiro? He just looked… bizarre. He was purple, of all things. But… he had the same golden eyes as the Shadow selves he had seen in Inaba.

He let out a dark chuckle. "Though I suppose I should thank you… for bringing me such marvelous goods."

Goods… That's what he viewed people as…?

"But… it's time you disappear." He clapped twice, summoning a couple more Shadows. The now four Shadows formed a loose circle, surrounding the Phantom Thieves. He lazily waved his hand, his voice flippant as he spoke. "Kill them. I have no use for them."

"I-Is this really it?" Sakamoto-san muttered.

Ken pursed his lips together, fingering the edge of his mask. Should he… do something? He couldn't just let Kaneshiro kill them.

Niijima-san stepped forward. "P-Please stop!" she blurted out.

Ughhh… Niijima-san, why? At least the Phantom Thieves had their Personas. She was defenseless.

"Oh, don't worry… You're one of my goods… I can't afford to let you become damaged."

…What the hell did Kaneshiro do to her? Niijima-san didn't seem hurt, but he knew that outward appearances weren't everything…

"But Niijima…" Kaneshiro said thoughtfully, "sounds awfully familiar." His face broke out in a wide, smarmy grin. "Oh, I know. It was that dumbass cop who wouldn't stop poking his nose in other people's business."

"Dad…?" Niijima-san said faintly. "Wait, how did you…? How do you know my father?!

"I was just protecting my business." He spoke so flippantly that Ken could hear the shrug in his voice. Ken felt his stomach churn. How could he be so… dismissive about killing someone. "He was in the way."

"How could you?!" she demanded.

"How could you?" he mocked. "God, you're so stupid. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, it seems." He then sighed. "Your sister probably could have made something of herself… if you weren't so dumb."

Kaneshiro then began to taunt her, calling her useless, a burden to her older sister. And then… something about working until she died…? Did… Kaneshiro manage to blackmail her somehow?

"Endure it…" Niijima-san repeated faintly. "Do as I'm told…"

Even though she spoke softly… Ken noticed that Niijima-san had stiffened, her fingernails digging
into her palms. But Kaneshiro didn't notice—he just continued to gloat.

"Shut up," Niijima-san said softly, but steel underlining her voice.

"...What?" He narrowed his eyes.

"I've been listening to you go on and on..." she hissed out, her hands forming tight fists. She then glared at Kaneshiro fiercely, a fire lighting up in her eyes. "Shut your damn mouth, you money-grubbing asshole!"

"Have you decided to walk the path of strife...?" A clear, very feminine voice rang out.

"Yes... come to me."

Niijima-san suddenly let out a pained gasp, her eyes flashing a brilliant gold. She hunched over with pain, clutching her head as the voice continued to speak.

She suddenly jerked upward, a metal mask forming on her face. She gripped at it with both hands, before finally ripping it off with a cry. A blue blast of power surrounded her. Before the light died down, Ken could hearing the revving of a motorcycle.

The light faded away, revealing that Niijima-san was sitting on a motorcycle that glowed a translucent blue. Wait... was that her Persona?!

...Mitsuru-san would be jealous.

"A Persona...?" Kitagawa-san breathed.

"No dude," Sakamoto-san said in an isn't-it-obvious voice, "it's a bike!"

"I can feel it... my 'self'... me..." Niijima-san's voice was filled with wonder. Then she looked up, her gaze fastening onto the Shadows. "Gun it!" she shouted, before charging forward and slamming her Persona into two of the Shadows. They were sent flying past Kaneshiro, smacking hard into the wall before dying.

W-What happened to her...? This was the same person, right? Or maybe... she was just burying this underneath her prim exterior.

...Either way, it was somewhat intimidating.

...Wait... What was she wearing? It was very... figure hugging. Niijima-san was more toned than her school uniform implied...

...Wait, what was he thinking? Why was he looking at her like that? Ken shook his head, but that didn't stop the heat from rising in his cheeks. He wasn't Junpei-san... He did not have his head in the gutter.

"W-What was that?!" Morgana sputtered out. "I've never seen anything like this..."

"Who cares?!" Takamaki-san demanded. "It's so cool!"

Amamiya-san smirked, folding his arms over his chest. "Who knew that she had it in her."

"I am right here!" Niijima-san snapped, twisting around to glare at him.

After a threat from Kaneshiro, the Shadows lunged forward to attack.
"Panther and Skull, you're with me!" Amamiya-san barked. "Let's do this!"

"Right!" they exclaimed in unison, before leaping into action.

Two of the Shadows were the same as the oni Ken had fought previously, and the third was a similar demon—but this one was purple.

Ken watched Kaneshiro flee, further inside the Palace. Huh… so he was just using his lackeys as a meat shield. No surprise there…

Unsurprisingly, Niijima-san made the first move. She revved up her engine, slamming into the purple oni before blasting a bright blue energy that exploded. It struck all three of the enemies, but only caused the purple oni to stagger back.

Ken frowned. Just what was that? It resembled almighty magic, but… Almighty magic was powerful, but the drawback was that it couldn't target a weakness.

Amamiya-san was next to move, summoning a red plumed bird. It blasted the same spell Niijima-san's Persona Johanna had used, though it only targeted one of the enemies.

Takamaki-san and Sakamoto-san then attacked. Takamaki-san's Persona producing powerful flames and Sakamoto-san's Persona knocking the Shadows aside like they were nothing more than bowling pins.

Ken lowered himself back down. He was pushing it—he didn't want to be seen by any of the Phantom Thieves. Their attention was focused on other things, but still. And there was still Kitagawa-san and Morgana, who were sitting out the battle. They could easily notice him. Though Morgana seemed to be the mission control for the Phantom Thieves, so he was focused on the battle.

The Shadows all seemed to be more physical based, so they went after Takamaki-san who seemed to be like Mitsuru-san and Yukari-san—having a heavy focus on magic spells.

With them ganging up on her, she was soon knocked unconscious.

"You son of a bitch!" Sakamoto-san growled.

"Skull, catch!" Amamiya-san exclaimed. "Skull, revive Panther! I'll distract the Shadows. Niijima-senpai, follow my lead!"

"Got it!" was their mutual answer.

"Matador!" Amamiya-san shouted. "Swift Strike!"

Ken suddenly found it hard to breathe. Amamiya-san had summoned a different Persona before, which meant… He was… a Wild Card.

It… It made sense. Their Shadow incident had triggered the awakening of Minato-san and Minako-san. The Investigation Team had their own Wild Card in Yu Narukami. With Tokyo apparently being a hotbed of Shadow activity…

But… what did this mean? The Wild Cards he knew were all good, virtuous people. And Amamiya-san was nice enough to him…

…And yet, he couldn't let his bias cloud his judgment… Ken sighed to himself. He supposed it
was just too early to decide. Though there was the matter of Shido… He had to discover if they even knew of him.

It took several minutes for the Shadows to finally fall, but there was a collective sigh of relief once they had.

"I never thought they'd go down…" Takamaki-san said shakily.

"Come on, let's get out of here!" Morgana urged. "We have a way in… so our objective has been reached today."

"But how are we going to get out?" Amamiya-san asked.

"We'll just make an exit then," Nijima-san said coolly.

Wait, what-

A loud crash cut through his thoughts. Did she just… bust a hole in the wall?

"Daaaaaamn…" Sakamoto-san let out a low whistle. "Who knew that she was a total biker babe?"

"Skull!" Takamaki-san reprimanded.

"Whaaatat?" he protested. "Just look at her! She looked like she'd run you over with that bike of hers if you pissed her off enough…"

…He wasn't exactly lying with that.

"You're unbelievable…" she grumbled.

"That power… that fire exuding from her…" Kitagawa-san sighed deeply. "If only I had my notepad…"

"Only you would think of that at a time like this, Fox," Amamiya-san teased. "Though… I suppose it's probably a good thing she was fighting with us."

"Hey, enough chit-chat!" Morgana snapped. "Let's get out of here!"

…This cat was really bossy, wasn't he?

Then there was a loud thud… strong enough to shake the ground. What was going on?

Ken cautiously peeked up again… to see the Phantom Thieves loading onto a bus. Not just any bus. A… cat bus.

Ken just sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead as he watched the bus speed away. A talking cat, Shadow selves, a Wild Card, and apparently the talking cat can turn to a bus. Would Mitsuru-san even believe his story?

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*Tuesday, June 21st, 2016*

Even though Makoto felt exhausted… she also felt like she was rejuvenated. The memory of her summoning Johanna was burned into her mind. It felt like… she had been sleeping this whole time, and Johanna was what pulled her out of her slumber.
And… in a way, she had been. She was just so… passive about everything. She just did what she had been told to do.

But now she knew… she knew that she couldn't live that way anymore. And the first step… was Kaneshiro's downfall. She would make Kaneshiro pay… not just for her father's death, but because of all the suffering he was inflicting on people now.

Makoto entered the classroom. As it was still early, not too many of her classmates were inside yet. But Amada-kun was, sitting at his desk reading something from his notebook.

"Good morning, Amada-kun."

He smiled politely at her when he looked up, but something flickered in his eyes. It disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. "Good morning, Niijima-san. You seem to be in a good mood today."

…Was it that obvious?

Makoto flushed a bit, before tucking her hair behind her ear. "W-Well, the weather is starting to become really nice. It's the first day of summer, isn't it?"

Ugh… couldn't she come up with a better reason?

Amada-kun just tilted his head slightly, as his eyes swept over her. Makoto couldn't help but fidget a bit under his gaze. There was just… something about his eyes. Sometimes Makoto felt that his eyes looked too old to belong to someone her age.

"It is nice," he said finally, before his eyes flickered to her face. "But Niijima-san, I was wondering..."

"AHA! I knew it! She was after Amada-kun!"

"And it worked? He's seriously asking her out?"

…What? He was what?

"...if I could help out in the student council," he deadpanned, even as pink rose to his cheeks.

…Oh.

Makoto felt her face warm up. Of course. She should have known that Amada-kun wouldn't jump to that. She shouldn't have let their peers' comments get to her. They had only met each other like what—two weeks ago?

But still, it was a nice surprise…

"We'd be glad to have you," she said sincerely. "I've heard from the principal that you've been student council since junior high."

"It's not that impressive..." He rubbed the back of his neck, looking rather sheepish.

"But, I thought you weren't interested in extracurriculars," Makoto said with a frown. "What changed your mind?"

He lowered his hand, resting it on his desk for several moments, before finally speaking again. "My guardian's best friend was calling the other day and he was asking me if I had looked into any clubs. He told me that I shouldn't limit myself to just studying for university. I've had experience
with student council and frankly… you need the help."

Makoto sighed. "Is it that obvious?"

Amada-kun just scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. "I'm pretty sure it wasn't you who put up that notice about information regarding the Phantom Thieves or the mafia."

Makoto bit her lip. She still couldn't believe the principal had done that…

But… now that the Phantom Thieves had their eyes on Kaneshiro… they would be able to stop him from manipulating their classmates and any other poor soul that Kaneshiro had swindled.

She met Amada-kun's gaze. "Well… I'm sure that the mafia boss will be punished soon enough. He can't run away from the law forever."

Amada-kun just raised an eyebrow. "You've… become awfully optimistic lately, Niijima-san."

Makoto could only shrug at him. She couldn't exactly tell him the truth.

"I just… had a perspective change, that's all."

She quickly turned away, doing her best not to smile in a way that would cause people to stare. Yes… she knew what she had to do now. And she was going to go through it.

Minako knew that she shouldn't be focusing on this. She couldn't exactly do anything about it. But still. A Wild Card in Tokyo… And they had no idea about the Phantom Thieves' motives.

So, to put it shortly. Minako was worried. Somewhat. Vaguely.

Oh, who was she kidding? What if she had put Ken in danger, because of her idea?

"Earth to Mina-tan!" Minako flinched as the sound of fingers snapping dragged her out of her thoughts.

"Junpei!"

The familiar sound of Yukari smacking Junpei just made Minako laugh. The former juniors—barring Aigis since she had volunteered to watch the twins—were having lunch together at Fuuka and Shinji's place.

"Making up for how you can't smack Junpei in front of Kaito-kun and Miyuki-chan, huh, Yukari-chan?" she teased.

Her best friend considerably flushed, before grumbling out, "He deserved it!"

Fuuka just laughed softly, before resting her hand over Minako's. "Is there something on your mind, Minako-chan?" she asked quietly.

"It's just…" Minako sighed, before rubbing her forehead. "Ken-kun reported in again last night…"

"Seriously?" Junpei frowned. "What did he find out this time? And how many times has he even called in since he and Shinjiro-san had moved, anyways?"

Minako took in a shaky breath, which only caused her friends to look more concerned. She was supposed to be the cheerful one, after all. "There's another Wild Card. Ken-kun saw the Phantom Thieves fight for the first time."
Yukari stiffened, Junpei's eyes went wide, and all blood drained from Fuuka's face.

"A-Are you serious?" Yukari was the first to speak. "It's been what—the fourth?" She pressed her knuckles to her cheek. "Fifth, if you count Aigis."

Minako just sighed, absentmindedly rubbing her stomach. What kind of world was she bringing her child into? A world where Shido very well might become Prime Minister?

Fuuka frowned. "I suppose it makes sense..." she said shakily. "Tokyo is having a lot of Shadow activity..."

"That's not entirely true, though," Yukari protested. "The Persona-users from Sumaru and Mikage-cho don't have a Wild Card."

"Their circumstances are different." Minako waved a hand. "But yeah, Fuuka's right. Ever since our incident... every big Shadow incident has involved a Wild Card." She shrugged. "Even smaller incidents have had at least one Wild Card present."

Junpei snickered. "I don't know, I just think the Investigation Team are Shadow magnets."

Fuuka giggled weakly. "I think Junpei-kun may have a point."

"For once," Yukari quipped with a light laugh.

"HEY!"

Minako laughed, but it quickly faded to a frown. "I'm just... worried. If the Phantom Thieves are abusing their powers... that would mean a Wild Card has gone rogue."

And Shinji and Ken were definitely not strong enough to handle a whole team of Persona-users... It was... worrying. And it had been her idea in the first place...

Fuuka sucked in a breath. "We may be jumping to conclusions, though..."

Of course, Fuuka would want to look on the bright side.

"Maybe," Minako sighed, her hand stroking her belly still. "I just hate not knowing."

"Well, that's what landed Ken-kun this mission," Fuuka sighed as well.

"Now that I wish that fan event was sooner than August," Yukari muttered, tucking her hair behind her ear. "It'd be nice to check up on Ken-kun and Shinjiro-senpai. Maybe meet this Wild Card. What was his name, Minako?"

"Ren Amamiya," Minako repeated the name Mitsuru had given her. "He's a year younger than Ken-kun."

No surprise there... she and Minato had awakened as second-years, and likewise for Yu...

Junpei lounged against the chair. "Maaaaa, it's weird thinking how Ken's a third year," he said, clearly looking to change the subject. "He's older than us when the shit with Tartarus was going down."

"He's been a third year for nearly three months, Junpei." Yukari rolled her eyes at him, which only caused him to make a face at her.
"You know what I mean, Yuka-tan!" he grumbled. "But ain't it a bit weird? What made the Phantom Thieves show up after what—nearly two years with the mental shutdowns?"

"You just want the Phantom Thieves to be heroes," Yukari said dryly.

"I mean, they are pretty cool if you think about it, Yuka-tan!" Junpei protested.

"You're such a little kid sometimes, Junpei," Yukari sighed.

"The littlest," Minako added, her grin only widening at the chagrined expression on Junpei's face.

"Fuuka, they're picking on me!" he whined, turning to their friend for comfort.

Fuuka just patted his hand consolingly. "Now, now… You know they're just teasing, Junpei-kun."

"You didn't disagree with them," Junpei said flatly.

"Well…" Fuuka could only offer him a sheepish smile, which only made Yukari and Minako burst into laughter.

"I'm always ganged up on," Junpei sighed, clutching a hand to his chest. "Will the torment ever end?"

"Now you're just being a drama queen," Minako giggled.

Junpei just flashed a grin at her, before winking. "Hey, I learned from the best."

Though she had missed this… She understood that Yukari's job took her everywhere, but she just… missed spending time with her friends as a large group. It was too bad that Yukari couldn't take time off before Shinji and Ken left for Tokyo…

"But anyways! Enough serious talk." His eyes flickered to Fuuka. "Soo, Fuuka," he drawled. "Have you told Shinjiro-senpai about the new occupant in the house?"

"I'm… uh…" Fuuka smiled sheepishly, "…not really?"

"Fuuka!" Yukari sighed. "Come on, Shinjiro-senpai's going to flip if he comes to visit during the summer and there are suddenly puppies in the house."

"I still can't believe Koro-chan had a girlfriend this whole time," Minako said. "Good thing that Ken-kun decided not to take Koro-chan with him, huh?"

"Shinji's been busy," Fuuka quickly defended, twisting the hem of her top. "He's looking for a day job, since he has that bartending job…" She then winced. "I don't just want to drop this kind of bomb on him…"

And fretting over Ken, if she had to guess. Shinji had a bad tendency to mother hen, but he was the worst with Ken—him being the youngest and all.

"Guessing that he's been trying to get everything settled," Minako said, before sternly frowning at her friend. "But still, you should tell him!" Then she smiled slyly as a wicked thought came to her mind. "Or should I just tell him that he can expect a new addition to the household soon enough?"

Fuuka slapped both hands on her cheeks, which were burning bright red. "Minako-chan!" she squeaked.
"I'll pay you five thousand yen to do that." Junpei's face broke into a wide grin. "And take a picture of Shinjiro-san's face when you do it."

Minako grinned back at him. "Ten thousand and you're on."

"Seriously, guys?" Yukari crossed her arms over her chest, looking rather unimpressed with the two of them.

"Seven thousand," Junpei haggled.

"C-Can you please not?" Fuuka pleaded, her face still red.

"Better get to it, then, Fuuka-chan!" Minako laughed.

Yukari just looked up to the ceiling. "Sometimes I really wonder about my choices in friends," she said idly.

"Aw, c'mon, Yukari-chan, you know you love us!"

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Wednesday, June 22nd, 2016

There was a pattern to how Ren did things. He never immediately jumped into exploring the Palace, taking his time to get better equipment, medicine, and etc. But when he did, he pushed everyone to their limits to cover as much of the Palace as possible.

Though sometimes he did stop and train with Ryuji during the preparations, today wasn't one of those days. But Ryuji figured that he might as well train at the gym today. The Shadows were getting pretty tough.

But as he walked up to the gym, he could see someone just… staring at the gym sign, with his eyebrows knitted together like he wasn't sure if he should be here.

Ryuji stopped right next to him. "Uh, you lost or somethin'?"

Ryuji wasn't the best at sneaking around. Ren was always grabbing his sleeve so he wouldn't jump the gun during Palace runs. But he had apparently snuck up on this guy. He jumped at Ryuji's voice, before straightening up. He was wearing the Shujin uniform, but Ryuji had never seen him once in his life.

"No, it's not that I'm lost…" he said slowly, a weird look in his eyes. "I'm just not sure if I use this gym. The reviews I read were somewhat… mixed."

"No, this place is good," Ryuji insisted. "I'll show you the good stuff, yeah?"

"Wait, what-" he began, but Ryuji just grabbed him by the arm and hauled him inside.

"I'm Ryuji, by the way," Ryuji said before releasing him. "I don't think I've seen you 'round school, though."

"Oh, er, that's because I just moved here about two weeks ago…" he said, before looking at Ryuji. "That, and I'm a third-year."

"Ohh, you're the new transfer. Ken Amada, right?" Ryuji's eyes widened, before looking at him up and down. "My buddy Ren's mentioned you."
Though he had to admit, he was kinda expecting the new transfer to look like a total nerd. One of those bookworm types, sorta like Makoto. And while he did have that preppy, almost goody two shoes look to him, he was surprisingly built in that lean, wiry way Ryuji could never manage.

Okay, so he didn't have to know that Ren mentioned him because he was basically intel. Though there were a few rumors 'bout him anyways… Maybe he'd just brush it off.

"Oh, you're friends with Amamiya-san?" Amada looked at him, raising an eyebrow. "I hope he didn't say anything negative."

"Nah, nothing like that." Ryuji waved his hand, before he shot Amada a look. "And dude, really? Amamiya-san? You do know that Ren's younger than you, right?"

His mouth twisted at that—wait, was he pouting?

"Excuse me for wanting to be polite," he muttered.

"Eh, Ren doesn't really care for formalities," Ryuji said, with a wave of his hand. "I don't either, just you know. So just Ryuji's fine, a'ight?"

Though someone being polite to him was… new. His rep at Shujin was enough to scare away most of his classmates and the bleached hair took care of the rest. But the older boy didn't seem bothered, even meeting his gaze.

"…Okay," he said after a moment, a slight smile curving at his lips.

Ryuji just grinned at him. "So, what do you wanna do first?"

His eyes then widened. "You don't have to bother."

"Bother?" Ryuji repeated. "Dude, training with other people is fun. The more the merrier, yeah?"

He just gave Ryuji a sheepish smile. "I just don't want to impose…"

"And I'm saying you're not," Ryuji said, rolling his eyes. "Sheesh, do I have to repeat myself?"

Then he rolled his eyes, a deadpan expression on his face. "Duly noted, Ryuji-san."

Ryuji made a face. Okay, it was better than being called Sakamoto-san. Being called that just reminded him of his old man.

Training with Amada was fun though. Not that training with Ren wasn't fun, but Amada had a bit of a competitive streak. He pushed Ryuji to work harder. And holy crap, he was fast. At least Ryuji had more stamina than him.

"Were you really not part of any sport team at your old school?" Ryuji asked when they took their break.

He passed Ryuji a can of soda, before opening the lid of his own drink. "I never said that."

"But I've heard…" Ryuji began.

He snorted. "And do you really think all rumors are true?" He looked straight at Ryuji. "…And just so we're clear, I am not dating Mitsuru Kirijo."

"That one was really out there," Ryuji laughed, before taking a swig of his drink. He wiped the droplets on his mouth with his arm. "Then why are you just… not interested?"
"Well, the principal dropping huge hints that he wanted me to join a sport team killed my motivation," he said dryly. He sounded completely unimpressed when he spoke again. "Guessing he wants a reputation boost after Kamoshida's arrest."

Ryuji just pulled a face. God, that sounded just like him… But then he happened to get a good look on Amada's face, and laughed.

"Not a fan, huh?"

"What, are you?" he responded, before taking a sip of his drink.

"I don't think anyone is," Ryuji said with a snicker, before looking over to him. "Though, what did you even play?"

"Soccer," he answered. "It was pretty fun… but I just slowly dropped it." He shrugged. "I prioritized my studies and my duties at student council over soccer."

"You were student council?" Ryuji looked at him up and down. "Yeah, I can see that."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" He quirked an eyebrow at Ryuji.

"Uh, dude, have you looked in the mirror?" Ryuji retorted. "You totally look like a goody two shoes. A prep." He smirked. "Betcha you wear something dorky like sweater vests in the winter."

"What's wrong with wearing sweater vests?" he grumbled.

"Nailed it," Ryuji snickered.

He opened his mouth to retort, but then his phone pinged. He pulled it out of his pocket with a frown, studying the screen. He then looked back at Ryuji.

"Er… I have to go…" he said slowly. "My guardian… is being very insistent, after he found out about how the mafia approached me before…"

"Overprotective, much?" Ryuji laughed.

He just closed his eyes, smiling fondly. "You have no idea." He opened his eyes. "Maybe I'll see you around school? Today was… fun. I forgot how fun it was to exercise with a partner."

"Yeah, yeah!" Ryuji nodded. "I'll see you around, Amada-senpai!"

Unsurprisingly, Shido had ordered Goro to discover the identity of the Persona-user wandering Kaneshiro's Palace. Shido only seemed to regard him as a nuisance as of right now, as he demanded that Goro keep a tab on the Phantom Thieves—viewing them as a huge threat to his plans.

But… there was a reason why Shido had forcibly dismantled the Shadow Operatives in Tokyo. He didn't want any other Persona-user messing up his plans.

And unfortunately, the only lead he had was that he seemed to be Goro's age. So Goro was stuck combing through school records to see if he could find a match. He could rule out his high school, at least.

Goro grumbled to himself, as he continued to flick through the files on the computer. Why couldn't it have been any other day but a Sunday? This would have made things so much easier…
Goro's fingers brushed against his mouth as he thought. Perhaps… he should search the Shujin records next. A few taps on his keyboard pulled up the files for the Shujin student database.

His breath caught when he finally found the record.

Ken Amada…

Goro frowned at the picture. As he had transferred quite recently, the picture was of him wearing his old school uniform… the Gekkoukan uniform. Which was… mildly alarming.

Mitsuru Kirijo was an alumni of Gekkoukan High. The valedictorian, in fact, as well as being the president of the student council.

Shido despised her. Shortly after Wakaba Isshiki's death, Mitsuru Kirijo had ordered an investigation. Shido was quick to halt that investigation, and was even swifter to disable the Shadow Operatives.

Goro frowned. But still… according to this, he was literally on the cusp of turning eighteen, his birthday being on the twenty-fourth. And the Shadow Operatives' predecessor, the group SEES, had been founded in 2009. Amada would have been ten or eleven at the time. To have a Persona so young… it was impossible. Maybe he wasn't even connected to the Shadow Operatives.

But still… there was the question why Amada was wandering the Metaverse. How had he gained access to it? Was he going to be a threat? More importantly, a threat to Goro's plans?

Goro scowled to himself. He still couldn't believe that he had let his guard down so much while fighting him. Fighting a Persona-user was very different from fighting a Shadow. Shadows were dangerous, of course, but they acted on pure instinct. And there was Amada's strange resistance to Loki's curse spells, when his element seemed to be bless. If anything, he should have resisted bless magic.

He would… have to keep tabs on Amada. And not just because Shido had demanded it…

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the wait, but my adaption of Makoto's awakening was a bit… tricky for me to figure out how to write. I swear I didn't mean to make it that long.

And while I know it's not canon that Kaneshiro had something to do with Makoto's father's death, but I tweaked it since it made things… more personal for Makoto. One of the biggest criticisms I've seen about Makoto's arc (which I agree with) is that it's just… impersonal for Makoto, while everyone else has a personal tie to a villain.

And for Ken's thief costume, I think that a gentleman thief outfit suits him. Plus the bonus of it resembling the Gekkoukan school uniform, which is what Ken fought in before. I also commissioned an art of Ken in his PT outfit and you can see it here.

As always, I'd love to hear what you guys think!
The Bank Of Gluttony

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves continue their exploration of Kaneshiro's Palace, but they run into an unexpected person while doing so.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Friday, June 24th, 2016

Ken groaned as the repeated notification sounds dragged him out of his sleep. It took him several attempts to retrieve his phone just to see who would spam him with texts at barely past six in the morning, but he eventually found himself holding his phone. It took him several upward swipes just to see what had triggered this.

Group Chat: Former SEES (Minako Sanada, Akihiko Sanada, +7 others)

[Minako Sanada]: HAPPY BIRTHDAY KEN-KUN!
Minako-san had added some birthday popper emojis in her message. Ken rubbed his temples. He'd be inclined to thank her if it wasn't so early.

[Akihiko Sanada]: Mina, it's not even six yet

[Minako Sanada]: you're one to talk Aki :c

[Shinjiro Aragaki]: you're gonna wake him up, idiots

[Mitsuru Kirijo]: It's not *that* early, Shinjiro. But regardless of that, happy birthday, Amada.

[Junpei Iori]: HEY HEY HAPPY BIRTHDAY KEN! Chidorita says hbd too!

[Junpei Iori]: y'know

[Junpei Iori]: if we were in Europe, we could take you out for a drink

[Yukari Takeba]: THAT'S what you say?!

[Junpei Iori]: Hey it's true!

[Aigis]: I always assumed that Shinjiro-san and Fuuka-san allowed Ken-san to indulge in alcohol during special occasions

[Mitsuru Kirijo]: ...Shinjiro, Yamagishi, is this true?

[Minako Sanada]: they're reading the messages

[Junpei Iori]: HAVE YOU SEEN KEN DRUNK?!
[Fuuka Yamagishi]: …No?

[Fuuka Yamagishi]: Junpei-kun, the fact that you *want* Ken-kun to be drunk at some point is concerning…

[Shinjiro Aragaki]: what the fuck, Iori

[Shinjiro Aragaki]: 1) we give Ken one glass on New Year's and other holidays

[Shinjiro Aragaki]: 2) Ken has never been drunk because of how little we give him

[Shinjiro Aragaki]: 3) Fuuka's right why the fuck do you want to see Ken drunk

[Mitsuru Kirijo]: It's still against the law

[Shinjiro Aragaki]: You're telling me that you never broke the law?

[Shinjiro Aragaki]: never mind the reason we're even in Tokyo is because you're basically giving Shido the middle finger

[Mitsuru Kirijo]: …Shinjiro, feel fortunate that you're hundreds of kilometers away from me

[Yukari Takeba]: I think he would've gotten executed if he said that in person…

[Minako Sanada]: YOU THINK?!

[Akihiko Sanada]: You have more guts than me, Shinji…

[Shinjiro Aragaki]: like I didn't know that already

[Akihiko Sanada]: YOU WANNA GO?!

[Shinjiro Aragaki]: You can't even come to Tokyo, you moron

[Fuuka Yamagishi]: Shinji, don't pick a fight with Akihiko-senpai!

[Aigis]: When are they not fighting, though, Fuuka-san?

[Junpei Iori]: oh hey Ken's reading our messages

[Junpei Iori]: BUT HE HASN'T THANKED US

[Yukari Takeba]: YOU'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT GETTING HIM DRUNK

[Yukari Takeba]: And now Shinjiro-senpai and Akihiko-senpai are fighting over the chat

[Minako Sanada]: It's entertaining at least

[Mitsuru Kirijo]: Minako, don't encourage this

[Mitsuru Kirijo]: But furthermore, happy birthday, Amada. I arranged for all of our gifts to be sent to where you are staying

[Shinjiro Aragaki]: oh yeah, Mitsuru

[Yukari Takeba]: Yeah, happy birthday Ken-kun!
[Shinjiro Aragaki]: was that about the place we're staying at being modest?

[Mitsuru Kirijo]: …Aigis, please remind me to execute Shinjiro whenever I see him next

[Aigis]: Duly noted, Mitsuru-san.

[Shinjiro Aragaki]: And you don't even deny it

[Akihiko Sanada]: you really do have a death wish, Shinji...

[Shinjiro Aragaki]: At least I've never been stupid enough to try and peep at Mitsuru

[Akihiko Sanada]: THAT WAS JUNPEI'S FAULT

[Junpei Iori]: H E Y

[Yukari Takeba]: how did this even escalate to this point?

[Fuuka Yamagishi]: I have... no idea

[Aigis]: I do not understand why you are surprised, Fuuka-san.

[Fuuka Yamagishi]: But happy birthday Ken-kun! Koro-chan and I both miss you

[Ken Amada]: Thanks guys... though I'd appreciate it if you did it later in the day...

[Shinjiro Aragaki]: I told you that you'd wake him up

[Minako Sanada]: eh, he needed to get up for school anyways all's good

[Junpei Iori]: god I do not miss school

[Aigis]: We're all aware, Junpei-san

A light knock sounding on the door caused Ken to look up. Shinjiro-san opened the door, looking rather unamused. "Did you read the whole chat?"

"Morning," Ken greeted, before yawning. "And it was hard not to… It woke me up."

"Figures." Shinjiro-san rolled his eyes. "I really wanna know why Iori was up before you." But then he looked at Ken. "…But happy birthday, Ken."

"Thanks, Shinjiro-san." He smiled at his guardian.

"So, where do you want to go to dinner tonight?" he asked casually, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

Ken frowned. "I... honestly don't know."

Shinjiro-san's birthday present to Ken every year was basically dinner at whatever restaurant he wanted. And Shinjiro-san wouldn't critique the food served, unlike most times they went out for dinner—not that happened much, with Shinjiro-san's preference to cook.

"Well, you have time," Shinjiro-san said. "Maybe ask around to see if you can get any recommendations." Then he scrutinized Ken's face. "…How have you been doing in Shujin?"

"Fine." Ken covered his mouth to stifle a yawn. "Some of the students are the worst gossips I've
seen, though…"

He still couldn't believe that some people took No, I'm not interested in finding a girlfriend and Mitsuru Kirijo is my senpai and turned it to that he was dating Mitsuru-san. Mitsuru-san was a stunning woman but just… no.

"No surprise there," Shinjiro-san snorted. "Teenagers just latch onto anything to talk about."

"Still annoying though," Ken grumbled.

"You don't have to tell me," Shinjiro-san retorted. "Look, do me a favor and take a break, for once."

Ken made a face. "You know that's out of my control, Shinjiro-san..."

And knowing his luck... the Phantom Thieves would pick today to go back to the Palace.

Annnd he just had to be proven right. Just what he wanted to do for his birthday. Fight Shadows and follow the Phantom Thieves through the Palace. The more he explored the Palace, the more he was certain that it wasn't like Tartarus. Tartarus was more like a never ending maze. How had Fuuka-san been so... off? Her scanning capabilities were a rare ability, but Fuuka-san was good at it. He had heard from Akihiko-san that Fuuka-san was able to reach them inside the TV world while she was outside. Maybe... it was the distance.

The Palace seemed to have a structured design. And he had done things he never even thought about. Like crawling through vents (he had really thought it was just something that happened in media, not real life), climbing countless ledges, and etc.

At least the palace was in Shibuya, so he could slip over to the penthouse and enter the Metaverse that way. He didn't have to worry about hiding his spear.

Though it was fortunate that the Shadows seemed to be weaker than him. It didn't particularly help him getting stronger, but it was probably better for now with how many times he had gotten caught…

"Hey, is it me or is the security level higher than usual…?"

"You're not wrong, Panther," Mona said. "It's strange... maybe Kaneshiro just gets more on guard every time we're spotted...?"

"I wouldn't be surprised, with how he taught his goons..." Amamiya-san said slowly. "Let's just be more careful. I don't have any more smokescreens on me."

"Roger that, Joker."

Ken sighed to himself, before glancing around him. Call him paranoid, but he couldn't help but feel the mysterious black masked Persona-user wouldn't give up after that one visit... He hadn't seen him since then, but... Strega had been monitoring them from a distance. It could be the same thing...

"Show me your true form!"

Ken managed to look back in time to see Amamiya-san finish ripping off the mask of the Shadow stalking the hallway, jumping backwards. Nijijima-san, Kitagawa-san, and Takamaki-san leapt
forward to join him. The Shadow split into three, forming into two pixie-like creatures and the red oni.

…Amamiya-san really had a flair for the dramatics. It wasn't enough to just attack the Shadow from behind apparently. And furthermore… he had no idea why the Shadows were so… different.

"Two High Pixies and an Oni!" Morgana exclaimed. "Let's get them!"

Amamiya-san then smirked, before he ripped off his mask. "Suzaku!"

Ken pursed his lips. He still... didn't know what to think with Amamiya-san being a Wild Card.

Though it was interesting to watch the Phantom Thieves in action, to contrast them with how SEES had operated as a unit.

Minato-san was considerably more cautious than Amamiya-san. He was quite talented with coming up with strategies, and Minako-san had an uncanny ability to pick up on what he was planning without him saying a word. And it looked like that Amamiya-san didn't have the ability to summon two Personas at a time. Though he supposed it wasn't too surprising, considering that only the twins had exhibited that ability.

…Though the use of the guns was a bit unsettling. Just where had they gotten those…? What kind of person would sell guns to underage high school students?

…But he probably shouldn't say that, considering his old method of summoning involved him shooting himself in the head.

"Panther, it's yours!" Amamiya-san called, holding out his hand for Takamaki-san to high-five.

"Carmen!" she cried out, ripping off her mask.

Thin tendrils of flames whipped through the air, burning their enemies.

He… didn't really understand what this Baton Pass was exactly… except that it seemed to power them somehow.

Though… it was interesting to see how differently the Thieves carried themselves in the Metaverse.

There was no other way to put it. Amamiya-san was cocky as Joker. The quiet, almost bookish boy was gone. He had that aura that all Wild Cards seemed to have, the aura that drew in people. Confidence just radiated from him, whether it was from him solving a puzzle or getting the drop from a Shadow.

Sakamoto-san was friendly, but Skull was reckless. He threw himself into danger without a second thought for his friends. He seemed to enjoy fighting Shadows—probably for the stress relief. And well… with the rumors circulating around him… Ken really didn't blame him.

Takamaki-san was nice and friendly, but Panther was fierce and passionate. It was no wonder that her element was fire. She seemed to relish sending Shadows on their metaphorical knees. She seemed more confident as Panther.

Kitagawa-san… he wasn't as sure, as he had spoke to him literally once. But Kitagawa-san was quiet, unless he was inspired by art. Fox moved gracefully but he was surprisingly fierce when fighting Shadows.
And Niijima-san... It was so odd to see his classmate carry herself as prim, polite, and very straight-laced, when he saw Queen. She didn't hold back when fighting Shadows, whether it was unleashing her almighty magic—though she called them different—or punching them into submission.

The thieves carried themselves in a way that differed so much from his first impressions of them. But... what was the truth? The civilian or the thief?

They were making good progress. Makoto's analysis of the Shadows was helping speed up the fights, so they weren't as tired. Though Ren could have gone without the cameras. Even with the Third Eye, Ren had messed up a lot and triggered the alarms.

At least smashing the electric boxes was fun.

"Hmm..." Morgana looked thoughtful, tilting his head. "I'd say one more box and we'll be good, Joker."

"Finally," Ryuji grumbled.

But the familiar alarm suddenly blared, blasting their ears.

"What was that?" Yusuke looked bewildered.

"Let's find out," Ren said, adjusting the glove on his right hand. "Come on."

They ran down back the hallway, only to see a lone figure standing in the center.

The only feature Ren could make out was their light brown hair. The way it was styled—and how that they looked to be about his height—made Ren assume it was a guy.

He looked like a deer in headlights. He stared for several moments—giving them a clear view of his masked face—before grasping the railing and jumping.

And of course, Ryuji was first to react. "HEY! STOP!" he yelled, rushing down the stairs.

"Skull, stop!" Anne snapped, running after him. "You'll trigger the alarm!"

"CAPTAIN KIDD!"

"What are you doing?!" Anne screeched at him. "What part of stop don't you understand?!"

"Slowing him down!" Ryuji retorted.

Makoto just looked at Ren, confusion in her eyes. "Why is Skull running after him?"

"One sec," Ren said, holding up a hand before turning to look at Morgana. "Mona, go after Skull and Panther. Maybe jump after him?"

God, why hadn't they thought of that, instead of running around to disable the cameras? Though it was kinda risky... Jump high enough and they would be splats on the ground.

Morgana nodded, before scampering after Ryuji and Anne.

"When we had defeated Madarame's Shadow... he spoke up of someone with a black mask," Yusuke spoke up before Ren could even open his mouth. "We assume that this person is the one
behind the mental shutdowns."

Makoto frowned still. "But… the mask was black and white."

"It's a bit suspicious that he bolted though," Ren said thoughtfully. "And he was carrying a spear, wasn't he? Obviously equipped to fight Shadows. And he had a thief outfit."

"But on the other hand…" Yusuke began, "it could have been just a flight or fight response. He merely chose flight."

…Well, to be fair, Ryuji probably looked a bit terrifying. He looked a complete delinquent, and his weapon of choice didn't exactly help…

"Well," Makoto folded her arms over her chest, "this explains the security level, doesn't it? You were saying how it was rising at an abnormally high rate…"

"It does." Ren nodded. "Looks like he doesn't know much about the Metaverse…"

"Well, Mona did have to teach you," Yusuke mused. "And you passed on his knowledge to us. So perhaps you shouldn't blame him as much."

It was then Anne, Ryuji, and Morgana returned, Anne forcibly dragging Ryuji along with her. "Seriously, why did you jump the gun like that?!" Anne scolded.

"I apologized already, didn't I?!" Ryuji grumbled. "God, you're such a nag."

Yusuke tilted his head. "...Isn't that Queen?"

"H-Hey, don't drag me into this!" Makoto protested, her cheeks growing red. "And I'm not a nag!"

"...Hm."

"What was that?!" she demanded.

Morgana sighed. "He got away though... He threw something to the ground and smoke surrounded him..."

"Must be something like Goho-M, since only you know about making those..." Ren mused. "But thanks for trying, guys."

"I would have liked to talk to him, though," Anne said with a frown.

"He's got a black mask!" Ryuji protested.

"It's only half black, Ryuji," Anne retorted. "And it looked he was more wandering the place. Maybe he got sucked in somehow."

"But you require the app to reach the Metaverse, Panther," Yusuke pointed out.

"Yeah, but how did Joker and Skull get it in the first place?" Anne asked, before brushing one of her pigtails over her shoulder. "I'm just saying... he might not be a threat."

"It doesn't mean he's not though," Makoto sighed.

The fact that Ren didn't know which of the stances he agreed with was… unsettling. Both had good points. Ren sighed to himself. He just hoped this wasn't going to negatively affect the Palace
Ken appeared without any warning. He looked like shit, like he was just about ready to pass out.

Shinjiro raised an eyebrow. "Rough day?"

"Tired," he mumbled, before stumbling over to the couch and falling face first with a groan.

Fuuka just giggled. "This is why you should take things easy, Ken-kun."

"Let me sleep, Fuuka-san," he grumbled.

"Sleep in your own bed, then," Shinjiro said flatly.

Ken grumbled to himself before picking himself up and trudging towards the direction of his bedroom.

"He's really working himself too hard," Shinjiro huffed once he heard the door close. "Mitsuru told him not to push himself so hard. Just a few days, he was so tired I was surprised that he didn't fall face first into his food. And you should've seen him when he found the Metaverse..."

Fuuka immediately went pale, her eyes going wide. "I didn't realize it was that bad."

"It makes me wish that Ken was only studying for his entrance exam." Shinjiro rubbed his forehead.

Ken was dedicated to his studies. Smart enough to get a scholarship, all while juggling his other extracurricular activities. Though it would've been nice if Ken hadn't wrecked his eyesight while doing so.

"Well..." Fuuka said slowly, "if Ken-kun is this dedicated to this mission..." Her expression became longing. "...Maybe you'll get to come home sooner."

Shinjiro frowned. He had talked to his girlfriend in private, and Fuuka was quick to reassure him that she understood his reasonings and that she completely agreed with him. If it wasn't pushing it already with the two of them, Fuuka would've gone with them. But... he couldn't help but feel bad. They had to do long distance for four years, which had just sucked.

"Maybe, but it really depends if the Phantom Thieves are abusing their abilities," Shinjiro muttered. He then scoffed quietly. "I know which one Ken would prefer."

Fuuka froze at that, her eyes growing wide. "Shinji...?"

"I'm not as smart as you-"

"You are smart," Fuuka quickly cut him off with a frown.

"Fine," Shinjiro rolled his eyes, "I'm not as studious as you, but I ain't blind. Ken thinks that he hides it well, but I know that he likes the idea of them."

Fuuka began to fidget. Her voice was small when she spoke again. "Um... would you be mad if I told you if I knew?"

Shinjiro sighed. "No. It's expected, with how much Ken loves superheroes." He crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm surprised Mitsuru hasn't caught on."
"Mitsuru-senpai doesn't live with Ken-kun, Shinji," Fuuka said. "And I'm sure that Ken-kun is very aware of why we're wary of the Phantom Thieves."

"Yeah..." Shinji muttered, before closely studying Fuuka's face. "You've been takin' care of yourself, right? Cooking, not just getting takeout? Not staying up too long 'cause of work?"

Whenever Fuuka had visited, he usually ended up dragging her to bed. And he had to hide the coffee beans from her. She had really relied too much on coffee to keep her going.

But Fuuka just laughed softly, her lips curving into a gentle smile. "Don't worry. Koro-chan is very insistent of me going to bed on time."

"How is he?"

"Um..." Fuuka fidgeted for a moment. "Well. Really well."

Shinjiro raised an eyebrow. "Why am I hearing a but in that?"

"Well..." Fuuka took a deep breath. "He... um... is kinda... going to be a father in a couple weeks?"

...What.

"And itokin themother," she blurted in a rush.

"Fuuka!"

"She was a stray, but she's really sweet and Mitsuru-senpai arranged it so a vet examined her and gave her all of the shots!" Fuuka added.

Shinjiro just groaned, pressing a hand to his forehead. "We can't take care of all of these dogs," he grumbled.

"Um, well... Minako-chan has already claimed one of the puppies," Fuuka said sheepishly. "Junpei-kun said that he wants one, but he'll have to talk to Chidori-chan to see if it's really okay. And... Kanji-kun also wants one."

...Of course Tatsumi did. Every time he saw Koromaru, all he wanted to do was pet Koromaru. Though he was so aggressive while petting him, Koromaru didn't really... like it when Tatsumi tried to pet him.

Shinji sighed. "There's nothing I can really do 'bout this now, huh?"

Fuuka giggled. "You'd spoil them rotten if you could."

"...Shut up."

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**Sunday, June 26th, 2016**

Shinjiro-san had put his foot down, deeming that Ken was working himself too hard. He then proceeded to kick Ken out of the penthouse with the demand that Ken go enjoy himself today. No studying. Nothing regarding the mission.
So Ken ended up wandering Shibuya, since he hasn't properly explored the ward yet. Ken couldn't help but smile at the sight of the Buchiko statue. Koromaru really was a real life Buchiko... Maybe he should take Koromaru to see it, if Fuuka-san could come and visit... Hopefully she could visit for Shinjiro-san's birthday in August...

...Though speaking of Koromaru, Ken couldn't believe he went and sired a litter of puppies. Though Mitsuru-san had talked about breeding Koromaru before, as she was curious if the potential was hereditary. And as the oldest child of a Persona-user (that they knew well), was only five right now...

"Yen for your thoughts?"

Ken jumped at the sudden voice, turning around to see that it was Amamiya-san. Kitagawa-san was standing next to him, looking at him curiously.

"Oh, hello, Amamiya-san," he said. He let his eyes linger on Kitagawa-san. "And...?"

"This is my friend, Yusuke Kitagawa." Amamiya-san gestured to Kitagawa-san as he made his introduction. "Yusuke, this is Ken Amada. He just transferred to Shujin a couple weeks ago. He's the same year as Makoto."

"It's nice to meet you, Kitagawa-san," Ken said with a bow of his head.

"Likewise, Amada-san." Kitagawa-san inclined his head. "Though, I have to ask... Just where are you from? I can't place your accent."

...He had an accent? Though he supposed it made sense. Tokyo and Port Island were in two completely different regions.

"I'm from Tatsumi Port Island, on the outskirts of the Kansai region."

Kitagawa-san sharply inhaled, his eyes growing wide. "Tatsumi... Port Island? As in where Chidori Yoshino lives?!"

...Well, nowadays Chidori-san was Chidori Iori. She and Junpei-san had gotten married shortly before he had started his third year of high school.

"Who's Chidori Yoshino?" Amamiya-san asked, raising an eyebrow. "I've never heard of her."

Kitagawa-san sighed deeply, closing his eyes. "An artist that I admire. An artist who is woefully underappreciated. I will have to show you some of her pieces some time, Ren." He opened his eyes. "She puts in such emotion with every stroke. You should see her drawings of her husband. You can tell that she loves him very much with how she draws him."

Amamiya-san just laughed, shaking his head. Behind his glasses, his eyes twinkled with humor. "You really set him off, didn't you, Senpai?"

"It wasn't on purpose..." Ken said sheepishly.

"But nonetheless... artists like Yoshino-san are what motivate me!" Kitagawa-san continued, his hand clenching into a fist. "I must find inspiration now...!"

He would have to mention this the next time he talked to Junpei-san. He always did think that Chidori-san didn't get nearly enough attention as she should.
"Whoa there, Yusuke," Amamiya-san said, his voice suddenly stern as he grasped the taller boy's shoulder. "We were going to get lunch, remember?"

"But Ren, I must feed this fire before it goes out!" he protested.

…He was really passionate about this, wasn't he? But still, Amamiya-san's comment was rather concerning.

"Yeah, but if you pass out from lack of food, you may be out for hours," Amamiya-san pointed out. "I think getting lunch first would be better for you."

"Very well…" Kitagawa-san sighed. "Alas, if only I didn't have to rely on sustenance to fuel me…"

…Shinjiro-san would have an aneurysm if he ever heard Kitagawa-san talking about this, wouldn't he? And then he'd probably tie Kitagawa-san to a chair and forcefeed him some food…

"Would you like to come with us, Senpai?" Amamiya-san asked. "We can show you around Tokyo too after lunch."

Ken smiled sheepishly. "That obvious?"

Amamiya-san just smirked. "Yeah, just a little."

"But I don't mean to intrude…"

"If you can train with Ryuji for a couple hours, then I don't see why you can't eat lunch with us." Amamiya-san shrugged.

This caught Kitagawa-san's attention, and he turned to look at Ken, his gaze scrutinizing. "Hmm… you'd probably make an excellent model. Your facial proportions are excellent."

"Er…" Ken caught sight of Amamiya-san frantically shake his head behind Kitagawa-san, all while mouthing no. "…I'm flattered, but I'm afraid I'll have to say no."

"Why is the search for a model so difficult?" he lamented.

"You'll find one someday, Yusuke." Amamiya-san patted his shoulder. "But come on, there's this pretty good diner that I know of."

"Lead the way, then."

Maybe he could find a way to sneak some money to Kitagawa-san during lunch. He really defined the "poor artist" stereotype…

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**Tuesday, June 28th, 2016**

Makoto had to admit, it was nice to have some company while she worked.

"So, what's the story behind the track team being disbanded in the first place?" Amada-kun asked, studying the sheet of paper.

Makoto sighed. "It was unfairly disbanded, since Kamoshida claimed that the track star attacking him was a good reason to dismantle the team. There's just some… trouble reviving it, since two of the teachers wanted to be the advisor… They seem to have it settled now, though."
Amada-kun frowned. "Just why did Kamoshida think it was okay to all of this? Physically abusing his male students, assaulting the female students..." His lip curled with disgust, and then he shook his head. "He more than deserves his sentence."

"Well, I'm just glad it's over and done with," Makoto sighed. "Everything seems to be in order..." She then reached for the manila folder, flipping it open. "Let's see... What else is there... Oh." Makoto made a face. "Right... the school trip..."


"Yes, but it happens about... one, two weeks after we come back from summer break. And Shujin does this thing where it allows the student to submit suggestions for where we go. The submissions don't always get accepted, but last year's did. Last year... we visited San Francisco, I believe?"

"San Francisco?" Amada-kun repeated, looking surprised. "That's more exciting than the trip my school went on last year..."

"Where did you go?" Makoto inquired, looking at him.

"Kyoto. The temples were beautiful, but once you've seen a temple, you've seen them all, right?" Amada-kun smiled wryly. "Though I'll admit that the snacks were good."

"But some of these places..." Makoto shook her head, as she skimmed some of the submissions. "Hawaii, New York, Los Angeles—are people even interested in seeing some place in Japan?" she asked incredulously.

"Well, to be fair, this is Tokyo," Amada-kun pointed out. "A lot of the exciting landmarks in Japan are in Tokyo."

"You'd think that someone would be interested in visiting Osaka, with all of the street food," Makoto mused, as she ran her fingernail along the edge of the paper. "Or Nara, with the deer park." She shrugged. "Well, I'll submit this to the faculty office and see if they'll approve any of them as an option... And before July's exams, we'll vote on it."

Makoto sighed, before sliding it in the folder she used to keep the paperwork she would give the faculty office to review. "At least we're done for today..."

Amada-kun grimaced. "At least it's not as bad as the paperwork for the school festival..."

Makoto sighed wearily, rubbing her temple with one hand. "Do not remind me," she muttered. "Shujin always has a special guest too, so I'll have to sort through that when the time comes. Not that the guest usually agrees to come..."

"Well, I've seen some creative booths at least," Amada-kun commented. "My class did a jazz bar last year." When Makoto looked up in surprise, he just smiled wryly. "With non-alcoholic drinks, of course."

That... sounded really nice. She was always fond of jazz music.

"Better than ours..." she murmured with a shake of her head. "We had done the typical maid cafe."

At least she wasn't the one forced to dress up as a maid... God, she probably would have died of embarrassment if that costume was forced onto her.

The door then slid open and Takamaki-san poked inside. "Niijima-senpai, do you-" Her eyes
widened, and then her expression became sheepish. "Oh, sorry, I didn't realize you were working still."

"No, we were just wrapping up," Amada-kun said, before standing up and looking in Makoto's direction. "I'll see you tomorrow, Nijim-san."

Takamaki-san pulled the door more open, allowing Amada-kun to leave before finally stepping inside. She clasped her hands together behind her back.

Makoto looked at her curiously. "Is something the matter, Takamaki-san?"

She took a deep breath, before bowing low. "I am so, so sorry!" she blurted after she stood up straight. "I've been meaning to apologize to you for a while but... I kept wussing out..." She bit her lip. "I was so mad when I found out that you knew about Kamoshida... I didn't think about how you were a kid, just like us... You were being used, too..." She hung her head. "I'm such a hypocrite... I hated how people would judge me because of how I looked, but I judged you so wrongly... And Shiho... she was asking—no, begging—me for help. But I didn't answer her call..."

"Takamaki-san, stop," Makoto said gently. "I may not have been as guilty as you originally thought but I... I could have done more. When I saw Suzui-san on the roof... I was paralyzed with fear. All I could think of is that I could have something to prevent this. All of that pain and suffering she went through... What you, Sakamoto-kun, and Amamiya-kun went through... I could have done something to help." She pressed a hand against her chest. "I'm sorry. All I did was reflect the blame onto you, when you were a personal victim... I shouldn't have done that..."

Takamaki-san's eyes were wide, but then she smiled. "I meant what I said before..." she said quietly. "You aren't scum. This has been weighing on you for a while, hasn't it?"

Makoto sighed. "The what ifs have been running in my head for so long," she said quietly. "I didn't want to admit my guilt. I was just... running away. I just... hate feeling worthless. Especially since that would only make me a burden to my sister..."

"Oh, right... you mentioned your sister before," Takamaki-san commented, her eyes lighting up with recognition. "She's that famous prodigy prosecutor, isn't she?"

Makoto nodded. "Mmhm. She passed the bar exam right after graduating from law school... and she sped through her courses in law school, graduating a year early. I feel... woefully inadequate compared to her."

"Hey." Takamaki-san looked at her straight in the eye. "You're you. Nobody else can be you, okay? Nobody should insult you because you don't 'measure up', and if they do? Screw them!"

Makoto laughed. That was an... interesting way to put things.

"So, um..." She shifted uneasily on her feet. "I'll see you tomorrow then, Nijim-san?"

She turned to go, but Makoto blurted out, "Wait!" When she turned to look back at Makoto, a quizzical expression on her face, she added, "Um... I was wondering... You visit Suzui-san frequently, don't you?"

She... She needed to apologize to Suzui-san as well...

She blinked. "Um... yeah, I do."
"Well…" Makoto shifted in her seat, "I was thinking… do you think I can come with you next time you visit?"

The surprise was clear on her face, but then she nodded. "Yeah! Of course… Shiho's recovery is going well but she always could use a couple of friendly faces. I've taken both Ren and Ryuji to visit her before."

"Thank you." Makoto rose to her feet, picking up the folder that she would have to deliver to the office. "Um… I'll see you around then."

"Yeah, of course!" She nodded, her pigtails bouncing a bit. She then hesitated for a moment, before speaking again. "And one more thing..." Her lips curved into a warm smile as Makoto looked at her. "Call me Anne."

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**Thursday, June 30th, 2016**

The first thing Ken saw at school was a girl struggling with a bag of fertilizer. Other students just walked by, completely ignoring her. Ken sighed to himself. Of *course*.

He walked up to the girl, lightly tapping her on the shoulder. She jumped at his touch, but Ken just offered her a small smile.

"Do you need help with that?"

"Oh!" Her eyes lit up and she smiled at him. "Yes, thank you."

"Okay… where do you need this?"

"The roof," she answered. "There's a vegetable garden up there and they're due a new layer of fertilizer."

T-The roof? Ken gulped to himself, eyeing the bag. It had to weigh at least thirty kilograms… What had he gotten into?

But he couldn't back out… Ken sighed to himself. That's what he got for judging everyone else for not bothering to help her…

It took several minutes for them to get the bag up the three floors, but the girl barely broke a sweat. Meanwhile, Ken was all too happy to drop the bag of fertilizer to the ground, massaging his aching fingers.

At least the view on the roof was nice. Ken walked over to the edge, admiring the skyline. He could even see the Skytree in the distance.

And the roof itself was nice. Flowers were neatly organized in beds, in a large array of colors. Irises, poppies, and lilies were just a few of the flowers. There were a couple of beds dedicated to growing vegetables as well.

"You're the transfer student, aren't you?" the girl asked, looking rather curious.

Ken smiled sheepishly. "Yes, that's me. I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself sooner."

"No, no, it's fine," she was quick to reassure him. "My name is Haru. We're in the same year."
"Haru…?" Ken trailed off, not knowing her by face.

"Just Haru," she said firmly. "I'm… not one for formalities."

…That was odd. Why was she sensitive about her family? But it's not like he could force her to reveal her surname.

"…If that's what you want, Haru-san," Ken relented.

"I do," she said with a firm nod.

A silence fell between them and Ken shifted uneasily on his feet. "So, um… does your club tend to the garden often? It looks really nice."

He was an amazing conversationalist. Ugh. It was one of the things he hated most about himself, but he didn't know how to fix it…

"Club?" Haru-san's face clouded over with confusion. "Oh, you mean like a gardening club? Shujin used to have a gardening club but… it… disbanded about two years ago. I tend to the garden, because… I find it relaxing."

"You do this by all yourself?" Ken looked around. "There are so many flowers here though."

And how was weeding and lugging around heavy bags of fertilizer fun?

"Oh, it's not that many," she said with a light laugh, waving a dismissing hand. "Flowers can be… finicky, but I enjoy the work." Then she smiled, her fingers gently stroking a flower's petal. "And seeing the results is reward enough."

"It's very pretty," Ken said.

"So… um…" she began, "how are you settling in Tokyo, Amada-kun? You're from Port Island, aren't you?"

"I am." Ken nodded, before he shrugged. "Honestly, I haven't even properly explored the city. Or Shibuya, even."

Her eyes grew wide. "…Really? I thought that would be one of the first things you'd do…"

"Things have been… hectic," Ken said slowly.

Akihiko-san was right… but he just didn't know how exactly to balance things. He had no idea how Minato-san and Minako-san did it…

She nodded understandably, before she frowned. "It's… quite frightening," she admitted quietly. "With the talk about the mafia so much…" She smiled sadly. "I'm sorry that you moved at such a bad time…"

"Don't apologize," Ken said, turning to look at her. "I mean, there's always something going on. It was under the surface, but there was Kamoshida just a couple months, wasn't it?"

Haru-san just shuddered. "I'm glad he's gone."

"I would be too," Ken sighed.

"But, um…" Haru-san began tentatively, "I-I know this sounds a bit out of the blue but…" She
trailed off, opening her mouth to continue, only to stop short.

"What is it?" Ken cut in, after her second attempt.

"I was just wondering…" She began to fuss with her hair. "Have you met Mitsuru Kirijo?" she finally blurted out. "I know she lives on Port Island, running the Kirijo Group, and she went to your old school…"

Ken blinked.

Okay, he wasn't expecting that… He surprisingly hadn't been bothered much about Mitsuru-san, seeing that she was a celebrity in her own right. Not in the public's eye as much as say—Yukari-san or Rise-san—but she was well known, as she was one of the few female CEOs.

"A fan, are you?"

Haru-san blushed, looking down at the ground for a moment. "Y-Yes… She's so young but… she's done so much. She took over the Kirijo Group when she was around our age… and she's shaping the Kirijo Group in what she wants, not letting anyone tell her what to do…" She sighed longingly. "And the fact that she's accomplished everything without being married… She's just so strong… it's admirable."

Ken smiled. Maybe he should mention this to Mitsuru-san some time.

"I'm sure that she would be flattered that you think of her so highly."

She squeaked, her face turning pink. "I didn't mean…" she stammered out. "You don't have to bother her about this! I was just… I just wanted to know if that rumor was true…"

"The press likes to exaggerate Mitsuru-san's inapproachability," Ken said dryly. "It's not really a bother, Haru-san… If anything, she'll probably be pleased."

"If you say so, Amada-kun…" She smiled shyly at him. She opened her mouth to say something else, but was cut off by the bell ringing. She sighed. "Oh… We should get to class…" She bowed. "It was nice meeting you," she said sincerely. "And thank you again for your help."

Ken smiled at her. "It was no problem, really."

"I'll see you around then, Amada-kun!" She waved at him before disappearing down the stairs.

Haru-san was a bit… strange, but she was nice. Though he had to wonder why she was so keen on keeping her family name a secret…

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Friday, July 1st, 2016

Niijima-san was tense today. She wasn't paying much attention during class and she seemed… distracted when spoken to. Maybe… the Phantom Thieves were planning on striking today. They had cleared the Palace completely, after all…

Though he didn't completely understand what the Treasure was, exactly…

Niijima-san breathed a sigh of relief when the final bell rang, signaling the end of school. She hastily gathered her supplies, before standing up.
The sound of the door sliding open made him look up.

"Hey, Makoto, you ready to go?" Takamaki-san cheerfully waved at her.

…Huh. Were they on first name status now?

"Y-Yeah!" Niijima-san nodded, all while smiling nervously. "Let's go, Anne."

…Well, that answered his question. Though this just cemented his suspicions…

Ken hastily finished packing away his belongings, before making a beeline for the train. The flash of blonde hair made it very easy to locate the Phantom Thieves.

"Are you sure that Kaneshiro got the calling card?" Amamiya-san asked.

"Positive," Niijima-san said with a firm nod of her head. "Ryuji and I plastered calling cards everywhere. There's just no way that his henchmen missed it. And with the reputation the calling cards have… they're bound to bring it to him."

"It took forever for her to be satisfied," Sakamoto-san lamented.

…He had heard enough. Time to go back to the penthouse.

He hurried back to the penthouse. He paused at picking up his weapon. Would he… really need it? He was only going to observe, after all… Ken decided to leave it behind, before activating the app.

The atmosphere… felt incredibly heavy. It felt hard to breathe. What had changed?

…At least he didn't have to count on the Phantom Thieves to summon the stairs, once he had stepped foot inside the Palace. He hurried up the steps, heading for the heart of the Palace.

The Phantom Thieves were already fighting what he assumed to be Shadow Kaneshiro's monstrous form. It was… outlandish, to put it lightly. He was basically… a human fly.

…Though he supposed the Full Moon Shadows were rather strange, as well.

There wasn't much of a place to hide, though… This place resembled a vault…

Hmm… There was the entrance. He could go through and watch the fight. He didn't have the best view, but he wasn't here to watch the fight… He was here to discover just how desires were stolen.

The Phantom Thieves were vicious as they attacked Kaneshiro. They were giving all they had in this fight.

But Kaneshiro was far from done. Even though the Phantom Thieves had been relentless, he was only panting a bit. "Heh… not bad," he gasped out. "Guess I'll have to bring out my big guns, then!"

"Big guns…?" Kitagawa-san asked.

But what Ken had thought was just a metal door began to spin—no, it was unscrewing. It was a… metal pig.

…He had seen stranger things.

"Hehe, meet my guardian robot!"
'Is that really a pig?!' Sakamoto-san demanded.

"Well, if it looks like a pig, and probably acts like one..." Amamiya-san said dryly.

"Joker!" Nijima-san sounded absolutely exasperated, and frankly he didn't blame her.

"It's not a pig!" Kaneshiro growled. "It's my Piggytron! And it's time for you to die!"

...And that wasn't a strange name.

"Not a chance in hell, asshat!" Sakamoto-san hollered back at him.

"Fine... Eat this!"

Missiles shot from Piggytron's snout, striking all of the Phantom Thieves. It even knocked Nijima-san off of her Persona, but Kitagawa-san took heavier damage than everyone else, letting out a pained cry as he skidded backwards.

"Fox is down!" Morgana shouted. "Somebody cover for him!"

But then Kaneshiro took the opportunity to move again, firing right at Takamaki-san, knocking her down as well. Ken's eyes widened as he watched her fly backwards. Her costume being red did nothing to hide the blood spreading from her shoulder.

"Hehehe! Time for VIP form! Goooo, Piggytron!"

Piggytron began to spin, speeding towards directly at Takamaki-san.

"Yaksini!" A purple female demon wielding two slender swords dove at Piggytron, striking hard, somehow managing to halt the attack. Amamiya-san was nothing but a black blur as he raced to Takamaki-san's side, scooping her up in his arms, and carrying her to the back of the room. Nijima-san darted over to Kitagawa-san's side, helping him up. "Mona, I need some healing now!" he barked, carefully setting her down on the ground. "Panther, hang in there..." He gingerly touched her shoulder, which only made Takamaki-san wince.

"On it!" Morgana shouted before sprinting over to their side.

Ken ripped off his mask, summoning Kala-Nemi. He cast Diarama as the same time as Morgana, which seemed to completely heal Takamaki-san's injuries.

"Wow, Morgana's powers have really gotten stronger!" she exclaimed as Amamiya-san helped her up. But then she clenched a hand into a fist. "But he's gonna pay for that!"

"But how are we going to stop it?" Sakamoto-san darted to their side. "That pig is out of control! He has us on the rocks 'cause of it!"

"I'll show you," Takamaki-san declared, before ripping her mask off with one hand. "Carmen!"

Her Persona appeared, flames exploding around her.

"Dude, a little warning next time?!" Sakamoto-san cried, jumping backwards. "What was that?!!"

"Money's everything to him," Takamaki-san said, pointing to the burning yen bills. "The best way to get his attention is to destroy it."

"My money!" Kaneshiro cried out, before growling. "You're gonna pay for that!"
"Uh oh," Takamaki-san gulped. "I didn't think about this…"

"Yeah, I can see that!" Sakamoto-san retorted.

"Shut up, Skull!" she snapped back.

"Scatter!" Amamiya-san shouted. They didn't hesitate on listening to him, fleeing in different directions.

Kitagawa-san dove to the side as Piggytron rolled in his direction, before ripping off his mask. "Goemon!"

Ice crystallized on the floor, but Piggytron just steamrolled over it. It looked like Kitagawa-san's ice magic wasn't that powerful…

"Rakshasa!" Amamiya-san ripped off his mask, and a Persona clad in red armor appeared. It leapt into the air, somersaulting, before slashing with the two swords it carried. But it barely made a dent into Piggytron.

"Johanna!" Niijima-san cried out.

Johanna's engine roared as she flung an almighty spell at Kaneshiro, but Piggytron was undeterred.

"Dammit, we need a distraction!" Sakamoto-san snapped.

"Joker, perhaps you should tempt Kaneshiro with something!" Kitagawa-san shouted. "Take this! Rising Slash!"

"Eat this!" Kaneshiro fired back, before Piggytron fired missiles from his snout.

"I don't think so!" Morgana shouted, using Kitagawa-san's shoulder as a stepping stone. Blue flared around him. "Come forth, Zorro!"

Wind whipped through the air, deflecting some of the missiles, striking Piggytron instead. But some of the missiles managed to push past the wind spell.

"Fox, get down!" Sakamoto-san shouted, before he ripped off his mask. "Captain Kidd!"

Kitagawa-san dropped to the ground, and a second later, there was a crackle in the air. Captain Kidd fired an electric bolt, destroying the rest of the missiles. The electric bolt surged forward, slamming right into Piggytron.

"But we can't throw our supplies!" Takamaki-san sputtered. "But we need them!"

"Throw money at 'im!" Sakamoto-san shouted his suggestion.

"Skull, we need that too!" Niijima-san snapped.

Kaneshiro was interested in gold… Gold…

Wait. Couldn't he distract Kaneshiro? With a light spell? Kaneshiro could think it was light glinting over gold…

Ken ripped off his mask, the still foreign word coming to mind. Kouga.

A bright light flared to life, Kaneshiro screeching to a halt as he looked around wildly. "I see gold!"
he cried. "Where is it?"

"Gold…?" Amamiya-san repeated, sounding baffled. "…Ugh, never mind. Everyone, wallop it with everything you've got! Mona, try to knock him off!"

"Understood, Joker!" Morgana exclaimed.

"Wreck 'im, Captain Kidd!"

"Dance, Carmen!"

"Show your might, Zorro!"

"Goemon, strike!"

"Come, Johanna!"

Piggytron was struck with a dazzling display of elements, fire intertwining with electricity. Goemon's strike was hard enough that Piggytron shook violently, and Goemon followed up with an ice spell. Johanna's spell exploded, leaving Kaneshiro precariously wobbling. A blast of wind was the last nail in the coffin, sending Kaneshiro tumbling from the ground.

"We've got him!" Morgana shouted, as the Phantom Thieves jumped in a circle, pointing their guns at Kaneshiro.

"No… please…" Kaneshiro begged.

"Yes, please," Amamiya-san hissed. "Everyone, go in for an All Out Attack!"

Brandishing their weapons, the Phantom Thieves lunged forward and walloped Kaneshiro with all their might.

"No, stop!" Kaneshiro cried, staggering backwards. He tripped, falling backwards and landing flat on his bottom. "I… I yield!"

"This is how your victims felt," Amamiya-san growled out as he stalked forward. "Alone… helpless. Doesn't feel so good when you're on the receiving end, doesn't it?"

"Stop!" he cried, crawling away from the advancing Phantom Thieves. "I'm a victim too, okay!? I grew up poor. Nobody wanted me around."

"That doesn't give you a free pass to do what you did," Takamaki-san spat. "Not to mention how completely disgusting you are with women! You threatened to strip Queen naked and take pictures of her to sell to perverts!"

He… did… what? He knew that Kaneshiro was a disgusting man but this was an entirely different level…

"Panther's right," Kitagawa-san said flatly. "You're nothing but despicable. Just because you had humble beginnings doesn't mean you should turn to crime, taking advantage of youth… ruining countless lives."

"All right… all right," he whimpered out. "What do you want from me?"

"Feel remorse for the lives you've ruined," Nijima-san said, before shaking her head. "The lives you snuffed out to 'protect' yours-" She cut herself off. "Um… Mona…? Are you feeling okay?"

"TREASUREEEEE!" Morgana was on the top of the giant gold bar and there… was no other word to describe it. He was nuzzling it.

"Um… what's he doing…?"

That was a good question…

"Uh… he does that," Amamiya-san said with a wince. "Have no idea why, though."

Kitagawa-san peeled Morgana away from the gold bar. "Skull, if you don't mind?" He nodded at the Treasure.

"Yeah, of course," Sakamoto-san nodded, before picking up the gold bar with a grunt.

"That's the treasure?" Nijima-san frowned. "The source of Kaneshiro's warped desires?"

Ken frowned. The treasure… was Kaneshiro's desires…?

"It'll take on a different form in the real world," Takamaki-san said. "But we have to get out of here now."

"What? Why?"

"The treasure is the source of Kaneshiro's desires. The palace is Kaneshiro's warped heart. Take that away and…" Amamiya-san prompted.

"The Palace is going to self-destruct," Kitagawa-san finished. "So we must hasten to leave."

…What.

The Palace was going to blow up?!

"Mona, hurry up and transform!" Sakamoto-san snapped.

"Okay, okay!"

"But you know… you're using the Metaverse completely wrong," Kaneshiro began.

"What…?" Nijima-san breathed.

"There's a criminal using other people's Palaces to accomplish whatever they damn well please. They don't care about consequences… psychotic breakdowns, mental shutdowns… anything goes."

Weren't they… the same?

"Is that the same person Madarame was talking about?"

"Spill it!" Sakamoto-san stormed up to Kaneshiro, grabbing him by the lapels of his jacket. "Who are you talking about?!

"Skull, there's no time!" Amamiya-san snapped. "We have to go now!"

"But…!"
"The place is going to blow up! That's an order!"

Why did the whole thing have to blow up? Why did the Palaces have to be so intricate? Tartarus was no walk in the park, but at least they didn't have to worry about running away after beating the guardian Shadows.

The Thieves scrambled to get inside the cat-bus. Ken sprinted after them, taking a running leap. He was barely able to keep a grip on the edge as the engine roared to life.

"Wait, there's no road!" Nijima-san said in a panic.

"It's kinda too late to turn back!" Amamiya-san snapped back.

Landing on the pavement was fun. Dammit, and his hands had just finished healing. Ah well, better his hands than his face.

…Wait a minute.

Pavement?

Dammit, so he didn't get transported back to his place… But where had he landed? Ken slowly opened his eyes… and the first thing he saw was a startled pair of crimson eyes.

"A-AMADA-KUN?!!" she sputtered out. "What—how…?"

Fuck. FUCK.

He had landed right in the middle of Central Street.

The other Phantom Thieves were gaping at him. It was clear as day that they all recognized him.

"He fell from the sky with us…"

"He was in the Palace?!!"

"Wait—last week when we were exploring the Palace…"

Ken didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say. He had revealed his identity in the worst way possible.

So he just ran.

Chapter End Notes

Some notes on the battle—I decided that for palace explorations, Ren leads a team of four, just like in the Persona main games. However, during boss battles, everyone will participate.

But anyways… Ken messed up, hasn't he? Had to happen eventually.

Though honestly I'm just glad to be wrapping up Kaneshiro's arc. It's not one of my favorites, and Futaba's arc is. I've got a lot of plans for Futaba's arc, hehe.
Feedback as usual is always appreciated~
Chapter Summary

While waiting to see if Kaneshiro's heart will be changed, the Phantom Thieves confront Ken about why exactly he was in the Metaverse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Friday, July 1st, 2016

"Amada-kun, wait!" Makoto scrambled to her feet, but he was too fast, melting into the crowd all too easily.

"Are you serious?! Amada-senpai is really that guy Kaneshiro and Madarame were talkin' about?"

"No," Makoto said fiercely, whirling around to glare at Ryuji. "It's not possible, okay? Amada-kun would not be the black masked Persona-user, not with what Kaneshiro said about him."

Ryuji squinted at her, looking rather suspicious. "Why are you defending him?"

"Because there's no way that could be Amada-kun!" Makoto snapped.

"And besides, aren't you jumping the gun a bit?" Anne interrupted. "We just know that Amada-senpai can enter the Metaverse and was there when the Palace was destroyed. That doesn't mean that he's that black masked Persona-user!"

"Why the hell would he be spying on us then?!"

"Yeah, but you can't just go up to him and call him a criminal!" Anne retorted. "There has to be a good explanation. Haven't you heard about what he was like at his old school? He's like… a model student."

"That would give him the perfect cover!"

"That's enough, both of you," Yusuke snapped. "We shouldn't be arguing over this." He gestured to the people staring at them, hissing out the last part, "Especially not here."

"We… probably should help Morgana," Ren said, gesturing to Morgana laid out on the street—crushed by a golden briefcase.

After rescuing Morgana, they had decided to go where Ren was living at in order to open the briefcase, which turned out to be the attic of a coffee shop, which was called LeBlanc. The coffee shop itself was small and quaint, but something about it was very… homey.

But after Makoto opened the briefcase and they discovered that the money inside the briefcase was
fake, the conversation quickly turned back to Amada-kun.

"You didn't mention him to me," Yusuke said with a frown. "I met him that one time but how do you all know him?"

"Well, Ren and I met with him once for intel on Kaneshiro…" Anne began. "He seemed nice. Smart and studious. Someone who would just keep his head down during all of this trouble, you know?"

"Trained with him at the gym," Ryuji threw in his input. "He's like… super polite, but it was fun once he loosened up." Then he frowned. "But man... it's really him?"

"You're jumping to conclusions," Makoto snapped, irritation surging through her.

"Oh yeah, what's your argument, then?" Ryuji challenged.

"Well, for one, Amada-kun transferred to Shujin the day I…" She looked away. "…The day I confronted you all about being the Phantom Thieves."

Anne sat up. "Oh yeah, that's right! Madarame mentioned the black masked Persona-user even before Amada-senpai transferred."

And… she just couldn't believe that of Amada-kun. He was nice to her when everyone else had been hostile. He insisted on sharing his lunch with her when he found out that she hadn't brought one. There wasn't a motive for that… She hadn't even been part of the Phantom Thieves at that part. They hadn't even been friendly.

…Though there was how he asked about the Phantom Thieves… but that could've been just curiosity. Everyone talked about the Phantom Thieves these days.

"...Where is Amada-senpai even from?" Ryuji asked.

"Port Island," Yusuke said automatically.

"How the eff do you know that?"

"He mentioned it to Yusuke, when we ran into him last Sunday," Ren said. "Yusuke picked up on his accent, and asked him where he was from."

"Port Island…" Anne frowned, curling a strand of hair around her finger. "That sounds familiar for some reason."

"It's best known for being a man-made island and for being the headquarters of the Kirijo Group," Makoto explained. "Apparently he knows the CEO personally," she added, recalling what he had rattled off to those girls bombarding him with questions.

"So… we're back to square one," Morgana concluded with a sigh. "Though, I want to know how exactly he got into the Metaverse in the first place…"

"He could have gotten dragged along with us?" Yusuke offered. "Much like when Anne used the app to escape Madarame, but she brought me along for the ride." But then he looked down at the table, letting out a quiet sigh. "…Though there's also why he was present while we fought Kaneshiro."

"I think… he was helping us during the fight."
Morgana frowned, his tail swishing back and forth. "What do you mean, Ren?"

Ren lounged against his chair. "The flash of light," he stated, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"The light…?" Realization then made Yusuke's eyes light up with understanding. "That's right… what distracted Kaneshiro!"

"And there was something else that bothered me…" Ren stated, now fiddling with a lock of his hair. "When Morgana healed Anne… it completely healed her injuries. Morgana's no slouch in healing, but his healing abilities aren't that good. So I think Amada-senpai had healed Anne just right when Morgana cast his healing spell."

That would make sense… Makoto hadn't been that close when Anne was knocked down, but she knew that the gun attack had hit Anne hard. Not to mention that Kaneshiro had tried to flatten her like a pancake. If Ren hadn't been so fast… Makoto couldn't help but shudder at the thought.

Makoto frowned. "But if he was aiding us in battle… then why did he run away?"

"Well, considering that Ryuji tried to electrocute him last time we encountered him…" Ren said dryly, shooting his best friend a rather sardonic look.

Ryuji grumbled. "I'll apologize to him, okay?"

"We'll need to confront him at school." Makoto tapped a finger against her chin. "I can clear the student council room during lunch and we can talk to him there. Not tomorrow though—we have a meeting. But Monday will probably work."

Yusuke frowned. "I wish I could be present."

"We could put you on speaker phone," Ren said lightly.

"Oh, that's a good solution. I approve."

"Dude," Ryuji said, shaking his head, "Ren was joking."

"A good idea," Morgana said, nodding firmly as he ignored the banter amongst the boys. "Be sure to get to him quickly, because I'm sure that he'll try to run away from you, Makoto."

Makoto nodded firmly. "I will."

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Ken had ran all the way back to the penthouse. And all the while, he had run the options in his head.

Dammit, why didn't he just use the app to leave the Metaverse? He was so stupid!

…Mitsuru-san was going to be furious with him too. He couldn't be more obvious unless he had plastered his intentions on a billboard.

As he was alone in the elevator, Ken just let out a groan. How could he mess up this badly? If it was anyone else… they wouldn't have made the same mistake… They would have stayed calm and figured out a different route to escape.

The elevator doors slid open and Ken took the few steps it took to reach the door before unlocking it. He could hear Akihiko-san and Minako-san's familiar laughter, and it took only one glance to
see Shinjiro-san was video calling with them.

"Hey, Ken-kun!" Minako-san greeted him cheerfully with a wave.

But Akihiko-san frowned, his eyes filling with concern. "...You look beat. What happened, Ken?"

"Did that Persona-user show up again?" Shinjiro-san scrutinized him closely.

"No... not that..." Ken slumped in his seat. "I... kinda... slipped up," he mumbled out. "And the Phantom Thieves saw me today..."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, back up, Ken-kun," Minako-san said sternly, holding up a hand. "What happened exactly?"

"Well..." Ken took in a deep breath. "I followed the Phantom Thieves into Kaneshiro's Palace and they fought him because he was trying to defend his Treasure-"

"-So he's a western dragon?" Akihiko-san quipped.

"Shush, Aki," Minako-san scolded impatiently, smacking her husband's shoulder lightly. "Let Ken-kun talk."

"-which is apparently the form of his distorted desires, which is what they mean in the calling card. They beat him and took the treasure and because of that, the Palace started to collapse. And how the hell was I supposed to know that the Palaces blow up?!" Ken glared down at the table. "They should really include in the job description—must be able to run like hell and because of that I—"

Ken wavered when he realized that Minako-san was laughing.

"Must be able to run like hell!" Minako-san choked out, before she howled with laughter. "Good one, Ken-kun!"

"It's not that funny, Minako," Shinjiro-san deadpanned.

Akihiko-san just shrugged helplessly, even as his lips twitched into a smile. "I rather have this than Minako-san's... other mood swings."

"It looks like Amagi has possessed her."

"Shinji!" Akihiko-san exclaimed, shooting him a look.

"What?" Shinjiro-san snorted. "It's true. She laughs like a crazed hyena."

"But anyways..." Akihiko-san looked at Ken. "...What were you going to say?"

"There's not much else to say," Ken said with a shrug. "I had to climb onto their cat-bus-"

"—I still won't believe that until I see it," Shinjiro-san said dryly.

"We've seen weirder stuff, Shinji," Akihiko-san pointed out. "Like Teddie-Teddie's human form. Or some of the Shadow selves we ran into at Inaba."

"...Are you done?" Ken asked dryly.

Akihiko-san just offered him a sheepish look. "...Sorry."

Minako-san just giggled, having finally calmed down. "It takes forever to tell a story with us, huh?"
Ken just sighed, looking down at his lap. "And the Phantom Thieves escaped the Palace and… I came with them. So… they saw me."

"And what they did say?" Akihiko-san asked.

"…I don't know. I ran the moment I realized what had happened."

Shinjiro-san just groaned, rubbing his forehead. "Greaaaaat. Mitsuru's gonna flip shit…"

"You don't have to remind me…" Ken muttered with a shudder.

It was bad enough that the Phantom Thieves had seen him before… Mitsuru-san would have forgiven that, considering how fast he had gotten away from them. But this? This may warrant an execution.

"She won't," Minako-san said sternly, shaking her head firmly. "She cares more about your safety, Ken-kun. I know that Mitsuru would rather you compromise your identity than let yourself remain in the Palace. She'll be glad that you're more or less okay." Her eyes softened. "I'm glad that you're okay. So… don't be so hard on yourself, okay?"

"Okay," Ken grumbled. "I still don't know what to say… because I really doubt that the Phantom Thieves will just brush this aside."

"Hmm…" Minako-san tapped her chin. "Well… I'd say stick to the truth as much as possible."

"Yeah, that'll go well," Shinjiro-san deadpanned. "I moved here just so I can spy on you because my upperclassman thinks that you could go AWOL and abuse your powers. Nothing personal, though."

Minako-san glared at him. "Haha, you're hilarious, Shinji," she said flatly. "I meant use half-truths. Like… that you're a Persona-user, you got sucked into the Metaverse once because you were around when they used the app—that kind of idea."

"And maybe something about you being curious how they operated?" Akihiko-san suggested. "I mean, they're the talk of the nation… I mean," he quirked an eyebrow at Ken, "weren't you, before you moved to Tokyo?"

…Wait. Did they know…?

Minako-san nudged him in the side. "You're pretty good at this cover story," she teased. "You sure you really should be a cop?"

"That's only because I had to make up some stories to get that guy out of trouble." Akihiko-san pointed at Shinjiro-san.

"Me?" Shinjiro-san scowled at him. "That's real rich, coming from you, Aki. You were always beating up boys for picking on Miki!"

"Yeah, but how about the time you tried to bring in that stray cat?" he retorted. "About why it took so long to drag you to the barbershop?"

"Why was that?" Ken wanted to know.

Akihiko-san just smirked. "He kept trying to run away and I had to chase after him."

Shinjiro-san crossed his arms over his chest, looking away with a scowl. "It wasn't even that long,"
he grumbled.

Minako-san and Ken just laughed. "Somehow, this doesn't surprise me," Minako-san teased lightly, before she looked at Ken. "Oh, and Ken-kun?"

"What is it?" Ken frowned.

"Get some rest tonight," Minako-san demanded. "Fuuka-chan mentioned something about you nearly falling asleep at dinner? You shouldn't be doing that, Ken-kun."

…Shinjiro-san told her, didn't he?

"Jeez, your kid will be well prepared when it comes, if you're nagging Ken like that," Shinjiro-san muttered.

Akihiko-san coughed something into his fist that sounded suspiciously close to "Hypocrite!"

Shinjiro-san narrowed his eyes dangerously at the screen. "What was that, Aki?"

Akihiko-san just blinked innocently at him. "Don't know what you're talking about, Shinji."

"Like hell you do," he retorted.

"Now, now, boys, do I have to separate you?" Minako-san teased.

"They're hundreds of kilometers apart already, Minako-san," Ken pointed out.

Minako-san scowled at him. "Don't be so technical, Ken-kun."

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**Monday, July 4, 2016**

Ken had talked to Mitsuru-san on Saturday, and as Minako-san had predicted, she was more relieved that Ken hadn't been hurt. (She really knew them so well, didn't she?) Mitsuru-san had been intrigued about what he had reported what he had seen, even though Ken didn't have the full picture. Though Ken couldn't help but feel that he had let her down… Mitsuru-san had stressed to him so much that he was to keep himself out of sight. And what did he do? He let the Phantom Thieves clearly see him. Stupid exploding Palace…

And he couldn't help but feel on edge throughout the school day. On Saturday, Niijima-san would sneak glances at him—but that was it, really. Call him paranoid but… he couldn't help but think that the Phantom Thieves were going to ambush him at some point.

The bell finally rang for lunch, but before Ken could even move, Niijima-san's hand shot out, wrapping around his wrist. "I apologize, Amada-kun, but I really need to talk to you," she said, all while smiling politely. "You don't mind, do you?"

…Speak of the devil.

Ken gritted his teeth. *Yes, Niijima-san, I do mind,* was what he wanted to say. He wanted to come up with some excuse for why he couldn't talk to her in private but everyone was *staring* and *whispering* and had he mentioned that he hated his life right now? No? Well, he did.

"As you wish," he muttered.
Niijima-san released him long enough so that they could get up but then she took his wrist again, pulling him in the direction of the student council room.

Ugh, what did Minako-san and Akihiko-san say about his cover story again? He needed to sell this well, if he didn't want the Phantom Thieves to figure out the truth. Granted, almost nobody knew that the Shadow Operatives even existed, but they didn't exactly hide their hatred for the police.

The door sliding open pulled Ken out of his thoughts. Amamiya-san was leaning against the wall, his hands stuffed into his pockets. He straightened up when they entered the room. Sakamoto-san and Takamaki-san sat at one side of the table, both messing with their phones.

"Hey, Senpai." Amamiya-san offered him a smile, but it only made Ken even more wary.

"SPILL IT!" Sakamoto-san jumped to his feet, slamming his hands palm first onto the table. It was loud enough to make Ken flinch. "Just why were you spying on us?!"

"Ryuji," Niijima-san chided, giving him a look.

Ryuji grumbled, but let Takamaki-san pull him back into his seat.

"Why don't you sit down, Amada-kun?" Niijima-san asked. She phrased it as a request, but Ken knew better.

He slowly sat down, choosing the seat across from Takamaki-san.

"Ryuji does pose a good question though…" Amamiya-san took a step forward, his glasses glinting. "Why were you there? How long have you known about the Metaverse?"

"Two weeks," Ken said, silently grateful that was the actual truth.

"Two weeks?" Niijima-san frowned. "But… that was the same time when I…"

"It was June 19th," Ken corrected. "I was walking through Shibuya when I suddenly found myself inside an entirely different world."

"June 19th…" Takamaki-san repeated, her brow furrowed. "That was when we found Kaneshiro's Palace."

Ken showed his phone's screen to them, so they could see the glowing red eye. "The app appeared on my phone and I… kinda panicked," he said quietly. "When it asked me if I wanted to leave, I pressed yes and I was back in the real world."

Takamaki-san slowly turned to look at Ryuji, her aquamarine eyes narrowed dangerously. "Nobody will see us, huh?" she asked acidly.

"How was I supposed to know?!

"Hey, hey, not so loud." Morgana hopped out of Amamiya-san's bag. "We'll get attention if you keep this up!"

…And a cat at school wasn't attention grabbing.

"Did… that cat just talk?" He hoped that he sounded shocked enough. But he had to put up an act…

"Excuse me, but I'm not a cat!" Morgana fired back, puffing up with anger. "I'm a noble human,
trapped in this feline body!"

"Uh huh..." Ken drew out, before looking over to Amamiya-san. "...So, a therapy cat, huh?"

Morgana yowled. "Do not repeat that! It was bad enough that Ren repeated it to that bartender at Crossroads..." he grumbled.

...Bartender? Wait, was he talking about Shinjiro-san?

Amamiya-san just shrugged. "It was the best I could think of at the moment." Then he smirked that cocky smirk Joker often donned. "And hey, it worked on you. Don't fix what's not broken."

"Are you really a Persona-user?" Sakamoto-san demanded. "Ren seems to think that you helped heal Anne when we fought Kaneshiro. And you're the reason why Kaneshiro got distracted."

...Wait, he caught onto that? Amamiya-san was sharp... He really had thought he had been subtle. Well... with healing Takamaki-san. He knew that he was running a risk with his light spell.

"Did you awaken in the Metaverse then?" Niijima-san asked. "I had to confront Kaneshiro before my Persona emerged."

"No," Ken said, shaking his head. "It's... complicated, but I awakened to my Persona before I moved out here."

"There are other Persona-users around?!" Sakamoto-san blurted out, his brown eyes wide with shock. "How?!!"

"How did you even gain your Persona?" Morgana quizzed.

"I... rather not get into it," Ken said, looking away. "It's a long story. A really long story."

...What else could he say? Some story about Black Mask attacking him and that caused him to awaken to his Persona? Well... he supposed in a way that had happened, but they'd probably think he was insane.

"But then why did you come back?" Niijima-san asked.

"...Curiosity," Ken said. "I couldn't stop thinking about it once I left... so I tried it one more time. And... that was when I saw you entering... the Palace, was it?"

"Yeah, that's right." Amamiya-san nodded.

"I heard you guys talking... and it made me realize you were the Phantom Thieves of Hearts. And I... I wanted to know how you did it." He then pursed his lips. "And your goal... resounded with me," Ken confessed. "A long time ago... the police wronged me as well. They accepted a lie that a powerful group manufactured to protect themselves... a lie about how my mother had died. Officially, she died because of a car accident. Nobody knew the truth... I was so angry at them... that they wouldn't punish the true culprit, that they just swallowed a convenient lie."

"Amada-kun..." Niijima-san breathed. "I... I had no idea..."

Ken just shrugged. "It's... something I don't really like to talk about," he said quietly.

As much as he loved SEES, and he wouldn't trade them for anything... Ken couldn't help but wish that his mother didn't have to die. He hated it but... his memories of her were becoming vaguer and vaguer as he grew older. Sometimes he wondered if he didn't have pictures of her... he'd
eventually forget her face.

"That's... That's effed up!" Sakamoto-san slammed a hand on the table again. "They just let it go?!" He looked at Ken fiercely. "You've gotta tell me that her killer was punished!"

Ha... if only he knew... Somehow he didn't think that they would take just who Shinjiro-san was too lightly.

"Two years after my mother's death... the one responsible was shot. But... it didn't make me feel better." Ken shrugged. "But because of that... I forced myself to move on. My mother would've wanted me to live, not be hung over her death."

"That's very mature of you, Senpai," Takamaki-san complimented. "Though," she frowned, "I don't think I would be able to do that, if Kamoshida went through something similar..."

"Kamoshida was terrorizing you personally," Ren said quietly, taking a few steps forward to place a hand on her shoulder. "I don't think you can compare the situations, Anne."

"He's right, Takamaki-san," Ken said. "Besides, we've all had our own kinds of suffering... I don't think it's beneficial to argue who has suffered more."

"Dude, what did I tell ya about being so formal..." Sakamoto-san groused, shooting him a look.

Niijima-san just arched an eyebrow at him. "I don't know about you, Ryuji, but I can't help but think that you could take a page out of Amada-kun's book."

"I'm fine just the way I am!" he grumbled.

"I'm glad that you feel that way, Senpai," Ren broke in, quickly rolling his eyes (though it was more fond than anything) before gesturing to his friends, "about us. That's one of our goals... to inspire people to fight back."

"Well, it is pretty noble."

"But dude," Sakamoto-san blurted out, "why use a spear? Are you c-"

"I am not compensating for anything," Ken cut him off, fighting the urge to roll his eyes. "I've been practicing soujutsu since I was in middle school."

That was nothing new. Junpei-san had made that kind of joke a million times. Of course, Junpei-san had been referring to his diminutive height when he was younger, but he wasn't stupid. And besides that, he was taller than Sakamoto-san.

"Ryuji!" Niijima-san scolded, a slight blush on her face. "You shouldn't joke about that."

"You can't blame me for being curious!" he grumbled.

"That was really an uncouth remark, Ryuji," Morgana added. "Though, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised."

"Shuddup Morgana!"

...They really didn't get along, did they?

"That's enough, you two," Niijima-san chided, frowning at them. "Morgana, don't antagonize Ryuji so much. If you claim to be such a gentleman, then you have to be polite to everyone."
Morgana grumbled. "Fiiiine…"

"But… Senpai…" Takamaki-san said hesitantly. "You won't say anything to anyone, will you?"

Ken shook his head, offering her a small smile to reassure her. She was normally such a bubbly girl… but she looked so anxious right now, her lips pursed together and a glimmer of fear in her eyes.

"You have nothing to worry about, Takamaki-san. I won't be going to the police about this, I promise."

Just Mitsuru-san, really… But what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

"Okay…" All tension seemed to leave Takamaki-san. "That's a relief…"

"Duuuude…" Sakamoto-san gaped at the clock. "Is lunch really almost over?!"

Takamaki-san squeaked. "A-Are you serious?"

"Relax, we still have over ten minutes," Amamiya-san said, looking rather unfazed. (Ken couldn't help but wonder if that was a Wild Card trait.)

The second-years all made their farewells, before scurrying out of the door. Niijima-san just sighed fondly, shaking her head. "Those three…"

"They seem pretty close," Ken mused.

"Well… they went through a lot in April," Niijima-san said quietly, brushing some dust from her skirt. She then looked at him hesitantly. "...Amada-kun?" She was biting her lower lip, looking guilty for some reason.

"What's the matter?" Ken frowned at her as he rose to his feet.

"It's just…" Niijima-san sighed. "I'm sorry that you had to disclose that about your mother…" she said quietly.

"Don't be," Ken was quick to reassure her. "You didn't force me to talk about my mom… And besides…" He pursed his lips together. "...I heard what happened to your father."

Niijima-san bit her lip. "Well, Kaneshiro will be rotting in jail for the rest of his life," she stated, lifting her chin. "It's nothing more than he deserves. And Dad... I like to think that he's pleased with my choice."

"I'm sure he is," Ken said quietly. "And... don't feel bad about my mom, really. I just wanted to let you know how I felt."

"...I was the same too, you know," Niijima-san said quietly. "I thought the Phantom Thieves were people to be admired… Especially with how they handled Kamoshida…"

She must feel terribly guilty about that. He didn't know the full story, but from the news coverage… Kamoshida really made Ekoda look like child's play.

"More people should stand up to those kinds of injustice…" Ken mused.

He couldn't help but wonder… if people weren't so complacent… would Minato-san even need to die? Would people have called out to Nyx? He knew that Minato-san had died happy, knowing
that he had saved the world—no, that he had protected his friends—but the what ifs came to his mind from time to time…

"Amada-kun… it… it's not up to me, but…" Nijima-san looked at him carefully. "I think you wouldn't make a bad Phantom Thief."

...What?

Ken looked around, before pointing at himself. "...Me? You're referring to me?" he asked dumbly, even though he knew perfectly well that he was the only other person in the room.

"Yes, you," Nijima-san laughed gently. "You helped heal Anne and you're the one to turn the tides against Kaneshiro. And well… I was sorta impressed with you when you jumped over the railing."

Ken tried not to groan, and he felt his face warm up with embarrassment. He just remembered his instincts screaming at him to run, to get as far away as possible. And it hurt like hell when he had jumped.

"I'm going to try to forget that ever happened," he grumbled, stepping closer to the door. "Hopefully before lunch ends."

Though he doubted it, seeing that there were less than ten minutes left…

"You should call me by my first name."

Ken blinked at her, pausing at the door. "...I beg your pardon?"

"Ren, Anne, Ryuji, and Yusuke all call me Makoto," she explained, tucking her hair behind her ear. "And they should call me Senpai, as they do with you. But I told early on that I would rather them just call me Makoto. I'd… like for you to call me Makoto as well."

"Well… if that's what you really want," Ken said. "And… you can do the same for me, if you want."

While he always was polite when it came addressing people (annoyingly so, according to Minako-san), he never minded being called by his first name. Out of everyone in SEES, only Mitsuru-san and Aigis-san would address him formally. The others all just called him by his first name, although the other girls did attach a honorific to his name. The Investigation Team seemed to follow his senpai in how they addressed him, as well.

Makoto just smiled at him. "I'd like that."

Shinjiro could count a total of six puppies curled up against a black shiba inu.

The screen then jostled as Fuuka moved her laptop back to the desk.

"I'm surprised about their fur colors," Shinjiro remarked.

Most of the puppies had tan and black fur, though there was one puppy with cream fur.

Fuuka let out a hum. "Well, Koro-chan is albino. It's probably recessive genes."

Shinjiro just shrugged. "You're the scientist, not me."

God, he really needed to get moving. Aki and Minako were having their first kid, and he wouldn't
be surprised if Yoshino got pregnant soon. Takeba's twins were growing like weeds. Koromaru had his own litter of puppies now. Watch Ken get a girlfriend before he got the chance to propose.

...Nah, that wouldn't happen. Ken was even more uninterested than Aki, even though he actually acknowledged the fangirls.

Minako had joked about having a better selection of engagement rings in Tokyo, but they were also more expensive. But none of the rings he had seen jumped out at him. None of them seemed to fit Fuuka. He didn't want to half-ass it either and just pick out a cheap ring. Fuuka deserved better than that.

Fuuka just giggled. "Well, biology isn't exactly my specialty," she said lightly, before looking at him curiously.

Shinjiro frowned. "...What is it?"

"It's just..." Fuuka trailed off with a sigh. "I asked for a few days off this month," she said quietly, "and I was told no. I thought it would've been nice to visit, since Ken-kun will be off for the summer soon."

Tch. Figures. Shinjiro hated Fuuka's boss. On the couple occasions that he was able to visit Fuuka during work, her boss would always give him that judgmental look. He always micromanaged everything too. But he knew that Fuuka was fortunate to have found a good job fresh out of university, even with her talent, so Shinjiro kept his mouth shut around him even when he was being a bastard to Fuuka.

"Well, there's no stopping us from going to visit Port Island," Shinjiro said. "We probably should, anyways, with Obon coming up."

And besides that, it would be nice to just go back to Port Island. And to actually sleep in his bed with Fuuka. Mitsuru had (of course) fitted his bedroom with a nice bed, but it wasn't the same. He missed the feeling of Fuuka curled up to him. Tokyo was just... so big. He didn't know how anyone could see Tokyo as home.

Fuuka raised an eyebrow. "Why not make it your birthday, then? Obon is only a couple days after that."

"Yeah, I should celebrate me getting old," Shinjiro deadpanned.

"Shinji." Fuuka shot him an exasperated look. "You're turning twenty-five. You're hardly old."

"Aki is gonna rub it in my face," he grumbled.

"Akihiko-senpai is only a month younger than you."

Shinjiro rolled his eyes. "You think he cares?"

Fuuka just shook her head. "You're impossible," she said, but her voice was warm with affection.

"Love you too," Shinjiro-san said dryly, before glancing at the clock on his laptop. Damn, it was nearly six already? He really lost track of time. "I've gotta go, though. I should start cooking dinner."

"Love you." Fuuka blew him a kiss, before smiling sweetly at him. Shinjiro felt his face warm. He didn't know what he did to deserve her, but he sure as hell wasn't complaining. "Bye Shinji."
The screen then went black as Fuuka hung up the call. Shinjiro was on his feet, pushing the chair in, just as the door leading outside opened.

"I'm home," Ken announced, shutting the door behind him.

Shinjiro turned to look at him. "...Hey. How was school today?"

Ken just threw himself onto the couch with a long suffering groan. "The Phantom Thieves confronted me today," he muttered. "Managed to come up with a cover story."

Shinjiro crossed his arms over his chest. "Then why do you look so bummed out?"

Ken rolled onto his back. "One of them suggested that I could make a decent Phantom Thief," he said flatly. "I still don't know how to take that."

Ken, a *Phantom Thief?* Was he serious?

Shinjiro just stared. "Please tell me you're joking."

"Yeah, because I'm known for being a jokester," Ken deadpanned as he sat up.

God, Mitsuru would actually throw a fit if they actually asked Ken that. Probably freak people out too by creating a goddamn blizzard in July.

"Did they buy the story at least?"

"I think so. I took Minako-san and Akihiko-san's suggestions and managed to come up with something..." Ken shrugged. "Maybe if I'm lucky they'll just forget about me so I can continue with keeping tabs on them."

...Somehow he really doubted that, but there was no way he was gonna say that to Ken. He was being hard enough on himself, even without Shinjiro adding anything.

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*Saturday, July 9th, 2016*

The next few days flew by quickly. Ren had busied himself with hanging out with his friends and working jobs as a way to distract himself from the approaching deadline. He had started to hang out with Makoto now that they didn't have to worry about Kaneshiro, and it was funny to see how she reacted to certain things.

But it was a relief to see the news spam about Kaneshiro turning himself in. With his disgusting, often disturbing, comments about women, Ren was more than happy to see that man behind bars.

And to see their approval jump was nice too.

If only exams weren't so close. He hadn't done too well during the last exam...

But now they had gathered in Leblanc, enjoying the day together.

"Hey, hey, what should we do to celebrate?" Ryuji asked. "We did a buffet for Kamoshida, a hotpot party for Madarame... we should do something *big!"

"Hold it," Makoto interrupted, affixing him with a stern stare. "Exams are coming up in less than a week. Have you been studying?"
…You could have heard crickets chirping, if you were in the countryside.

Makoto looked from Ryuji to Anne to Yusuke to Ren, looking unimpressed. "...Are you serious? I literally asked you this a few days ago, Ren..."

"Hey, I convinced you to take a break," Ren said with a shrug. "But I'm doing okay. Ish."

"Okay-ish isn't enough," Makoto said flatly. "You should really keep up your grades." She shook her head. "We shouldn't celebrate until exams are over. You need to focus on studying."

"Whaaaaat?" Anne groaned. "But I'm no good at school, unless it's English..."

"I have a scholarship because of my art," Yusuke volunteered.

"You still need to keep up your grades," Makoto said sternly. "We can have all the fun you want afterwards." She then paused, thinking for a moment. "...Within reason."

Anne sat up. "Ooh, maybe we can catch the fireworks festival! It's the Monday after exams, so it'd be perfect!"

"Did you not hear what I said?" Makoto sighed.

"No, no, I hear you!" Anne waved her off. "Though... it'd be a biiiig help if you helped us study! You're like the top of your grade, right?"

Makoto's face flushed. "It's... It's not a big deal... But all right, I'll help you." Then she looked to Ren. "...Though, what's our next move? Regarding the Phantom Thieves."

"We'll have to show you Mementos," Ren said thoughtfully.

"Mementos...?"

"It's basically a place that acts as everyone's Palace," Morgana explained. "It's how we change the smaller scale targets' hearts."

Makoto's eyes widened. "I was wondering how you were handling those requests..."

Ryuji sighed, slumping in his seat. "But man, I bet the targets are getting tougher and tougher..."

"Naturally," Yusuke remarked. "But in turn, we are getting stronger."

Morgana then walked across the table, leaping into Ren's lap. "But hey. What are we gonna do about Amada?"

"About...?" Yusuke frowned. "I thought you had spoken to Amada-san already."

"We did," Anne said. "And he promised to not tell anyone."

"Yeah, but how can we know we can trust him to keep his promise?" Morgana argued. "We don't know anything about him!"

"Well..." Ren said slowly, "we could always ask him to join us."

Five heads whipped to stare at him.

"Hear me out," Ren said, holding up a hand. "He's experienced. He helped save our butts when we
fought Kaneshiro. And you have to agree that from what you've seen… he's nice enough, isn't he? Plus he does agree for what we fight for."

Makoto chuckled. "I honestly had the same thought about Ken."

So he was Ken now, huh? Just a few days ago, Makoto was calling him Amada-kun.

"I think you're just bitter about the lie Ren fed him to explain why Ren was carrying you with him." Ryuji caught Ren's eye, quirking his eyebrow at Ren, which only made Ren snicker along with him.

"That is not true!" Morgana quickly denied. "He's suspicious!"

"Or maybe you don't like that Amada-senpai seems to be a dog person." Ren was unable to resist teasing Morgana.

"T-That is not true! And why should I care about that?!"

"Hmm… it appears you're quite eager to deny that…" Yusuke mused.

"S-Shut up!" Morgana began to sulk, so Anne just stroked him on the top of his head.

"But I dunno, Ren..." Ryuji shrugged. "I think we should hold on that a bit. I mean, Morgana sorta does have a point. Wait and get to know 'im more before considering letting him in on us, y'know?"

Ren nodded. "Fair enough."

The one named Ryuji had been talking about a fireworks festival, but that wasn't what had caught Futaba's attention.

It was this other they had apparently encountered in their… thievery. The one named Ken Amada. It probably wouldn't have caught Futaba's attention, if she hadn't tried to hack into the archives of the Shadow Operatives repeatedly over the years.

Mom had always been super vague about why she was helping them or just who exactly they were, but Futaba couldn't help but wonder if they knew something about her research. But they had good security, so all Futaba managed to dig up recently was a folder of files. It was like… a profile on a person each.

Futaba didn't really know the connection the people in the folder had. It would've been age, since most of them listed were born either in 1991 or 1992, but Ken Amada stuck out like a sore thumb. He was only a few years older than Futaba, born in 1998. Though she didn't get what exactly sees was supposed to be. Were they spies?

It was… It was the least she could do… Find her mom's research…

"Futaba..." a voice hissed. "Have you forgotten what you've done?!

Futaba looked up fearfully to see a pair of wild, bloodshot eyes.

"You killed me! You stopped me from completing my research!"

"No..." Futaba whimpered, shaking her head hard. "It's not real..." She gripped the edge of the table. "You're not real!"
"Futaba?" There was a rapping sound on her door. "Are you okay?"

Futaba bit her lip, raising her head. "Y-Yeah, I'm okay, Sojiro!" she said shakily.

"…Are you sure?" Sojiro asked slowly. "Er… are you hungry? I made curry for you…"

Futaba's stomach growled at just the mention, but Futaba ignored it. "Maybe later."

"Okay… I'll just leave it here for you. Don't let it get cold."

She heard his footsteps fade away, and Futaba turned back to the computer screen. Maybe… it was time for her to reach out to the Phantom Thieves. Futaba bit her lip. No… She couldn't… it was just so embarrassing to reach out to them.

But Ken Amada… he may have an answer about her mom's research. Maybe… if she managed to find her mom's research, her mom would stop haunting her.

Now to find out this guy's phone number…

Chapter End Notes

Pretty much a bridge between the Kaneshiro and Futaba arcs, since the Thieves had roughly a week of downtime with the date I set for them to steal Kaneshiro's heart. I hope the Thieves confronting Ken was satisfactory, though. But they're far from done with Ken~
Medjed's Declaration

Chapter Summary

Ken receives an unexpected message from someone calling themselves Alibaba, as summer vacation approaches. Medjed declares war on the Phantom Thieves, and somehow Ken gets dragged into Alibaba's ploy to get the Phantom Thieves to choose their next target.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday, July 16th, 2016

It was rather sad that exams was a break for him. Fortunately, Gekkoukan prided itself on its excellent curriculum, so Ken found the exams not being so bad. But still, Ken's hand had cramped a bit because he was rushing to write during the essay portion of the exam.

And summer vacation was on the horizon. They would have one more week, and then that one assembly on the twenty-fifth, but after that… he would be free for a month.

…Well, sorta. He still had to keep tabs on the Phantom Thieves, after all.

Though checking their website, it seemed that they were focusing on targeting smaller criminals right now. Of course, Makoto might tell him if he asked, but he didn't want to broadcast that he was still following them around.

A buzzing sound broke through Ken's thoughts, and he retrieved his phone from his bag. Shinjirosan was probably asking him to pick up something that he missed during the last grocery store trip…

Message from: Unknown User

Ken made a face. Ugh. Spam. But then he read the messages. A pit began to form in his stomach.

[Unknown User]: Ken Amada, correct?

[Unknown User]: Tell me… just what is your connection to the Shadow Operatives?

Wait. What?! Ken's hands began to tremble. How did they get that information…?

No… he had to calm down. He had to handle this rationally… Pursing his lips, Ken began to tap out a response.

[Ken]: Who is this? I don't know what you're talking about.

[Unknown User]: Heh… don't play stupid. I have my sources, you know.

[Unknown User]: I also know about that group… SEES. You're some kind of spy, huh?
[Unknown User]: And... you may call me Alibaba.

Crap… this was bad. No, that was an understatement. A major understatement. This was a disaster. Just how did they get information about SEES?

"Ken?" He felt a hand on his shoulder. "What's the matter? You suddenly got all pale..."

Ken snapped to attention, turning to see that Makoto was looking at him in concern.

"I-I'm fine..." he lied. "I guess I've been pushing myself too hard with studying and I kinda... crashed." He somehow managed to muster a weak smile that wasn't completely faked. He had to cram a bit for exams, after all. "I probably should get home... I'll see you at school next week."

"Um, okay..." Makoto still looked puzzled, but she waved goodbye at him. "See you."

Ken ran all the way back to Shibuya. He fell onto his bed with a groan. Great. Once he cleared up one thing, this had to happen.

The question was... how did this happen? There was a reason why he never corresponded with Mitsuru-san outside of the penthouse...

There was... Black Mask, but... How would he know about the Shadow Operatives? He would have to be working for Shido—which Aigis-san did speculate—but Shido probably kept that information to himself...

Ken pressed his hand to his now aching temple. This was just... a pain...

He sighed, before forcing himself to sit up. He then reached for his laptop. Well, time to get this over with...

"Lady Mitsuru?" There was a light knock on the door, before it opened. Kikuno stuck her head out and she was holding Mitsuru's laptop. "Lady Mitsuru, Ken-san video called. He claims it's rather urgent that you speak to him right away."

...Well. Anything to take a break from this headache inducing paperwork. Mitsuru rose to her feet, smiling at her maid in thanks before taking the laptop from her.

Kikuno closed the door just as Mitsuru seated herself again. "Hello, Amada."

"Mitsuru-san, I..." He looked nervous. "I received a message."

"From?"

She didn't know why exactly this was relevant or why this was making Amada look so anxious.

"That's it, I just don't know!" Amada burst out, his eyes wide with panic.

Mitsuru blinked. This kind of outburst would have fit Yukari or Akihiko, but not Amada. He was quite... distraught over... something.

"I... I received a message shortly after school ended," Amada got out. "And the message asked me how I was involved with the Shadow Operatives."

...Oh. Now she understood.
"Are you sure?" Mitsuru asked with a frown. "Perhaps you misinterpreted things."

Amada shook his head firmly. "Mitsuru-san, I'm positive that's not the case," he said. He pulled out his phone. "I don't know clearly you can see this but..."

Mitsuru squinted at the screen, her eyes then widening as she read the few messages. This... This was not good.

"I didn't say anything about the Shadow Operatives!" Amada continued. "I don't know how this happened!"

"Calm down, Amada," Mitsuru said, trying not to frown at how distressed he was. Amada would probably take it as her being displeased with him. "I believe you, I promise. And... I know you're not the vocal type." She tapped her fingers against her desk, as she thought to phrase her next words. "There have been several attempts to hack into our archive," she mused. "Luckily, Yamagishi is very skilled in what she does and is able to protect our data. However, they must have slipped through the firewall and retrieved something regarding you."

"You've... You've been hacked?" Amada looked horrified.

"Mm." Mitsuru nodded. "But don't worry, Amada, I'll arrange for someone to look into this. We'll figure this out." Then she looked at him sternly. "And you are to take some leisure time today. I know from Shinjiro that today was your last exam today. You shouldn't stress yourself so much, Amada."

"I know, I know..." he grumbled, but then his expression softened. "Um... thanks, Mitsuru-san."


After Amada said his own goodbye, he cut off the connection. Mitsuru lounged against her seat, glancing at the clock for a moment. It was past 4:30... Maybe if she headed out now, she would be able to catch Yamagishi before she left for work.

After quickly organizing her paperwork, she set off. Since she needed to get there faster, Mitsuru was able to ride her motorcycle. She had an image to preserve, after all, so she couldn't ride her motorcycle as much.

The ride was shorter than Mitsuru would've liked, but she caught Yamagishi at the right time. Yamagishi looked rather tired, but she perked up as Mitsuru approached her.

"Mitsuru-senpai? What are you doing here?"

"Hello, Yamagishi." Mitsuru smiled at her in greeting. "Do you have time to talk?"

Yamagishi just blinked. "Um... sure? I was going to meet up with Junpei-kun, Akihiko-senpai, and Minako-chan for dinner, but I have some time..."

"Wonderful. But do you think we could talk at your apartment? I would rather have some privacy."

"Oh, sure." She nodded.

Mitsuru took Yamagishi back to the apartment, where she was greeted by Koromaru. He then whined, rubbing against Yamagishi's leg, blinking up at her imploringly.

"You're so spoiled," Yamagishi sighed, shaking her head. "Shinji really pampered you."
Mitsuru just laughed. "He's always had a soft spot for Koromaru."

Yamagishi put on a pot of tea, feeding Koromaru and his mate while waiting for the kettle to finish boiling water. She poured two cups and they settled on the couch.

"What's this about, Mitsuru-senpai?" Yamagishi broke the silence.

Mitsuru blew on her tea, before taking a careful sip so not to scald her tongue. "I need you to go to Tokyo." Confusion clouded Yamagishi's face, so Mitsuru continued. "Amada's phone was hacked or something similar. Someone by the name of Alibaba questioned him on his involvement with the Shadow Operatives. I was hoping that you would be able to discern something."

"Are… Are you sure that's a good idea?" Yamagishi asked.

"I highly doubt that we need to worry about this being connected to Shido," Mitsuru stated. "However… I am still concerned. Not to mention, it'll set Amada's mind to order. He was rather… distressed when he called me. And besides," Mitsuru added, arching an eyebrow at her, "I thought you would have been pleased with the excuse to see Shinjiro and Amada."

"Well…" Yamagishi just gave her an embarrassed smile. "…It is nice," she admitted shyly. "So… when should I go?"

"I'll book you the next train ride available," Mitsuru said. "So… probably tomorrow… or Monday."

"Oh, but…" Yamagishi frowned, as if something occurred to her. "My work…"

Mitsuru waved a dismissive hand. "Don't worry about it. I will clear it with your superiors."

Mitsuru let out a thoughtful hum. "You should probably stay for about… half a week."

"T-Three days?!!" Yamagishi sputtered out, her eyes wide with shock. "What—but…"

"You deserve it, Yamagishi," Mitsuru insisted. "You should get a chance to enjoy some time with Shinjiro as well. I'll handle it, I promise."

For more reasons than one… Even though she understood Shinjiro's reasonings, she couldn't help but feel guilty. They had spent most of their relationship in a long distance relationship, after all.

Yamagishi just sighed, shaking her head. "Sometimes your influence is just scary, Senpai…" Then a soft smile formed on her face. "…But thank you. I'll do my best to figure out who had hacked Ken-kun's phone."

"Any time, Yamagishi."

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Monday, July 18th, 2016

Tokyo was packed as always. Fuuka had honestly not missed how crowded Tokyo was. She personally found it… stifling.

Though as she passed, she saw several posters plastered on the walls, advertising some kind of firework festival. Maybe she could talk the boys into coming out to see it. It sounded like it could be fun.

Fuuka compared the building to the address that Mitsuru-senpai had given her. And then again.
Okay, she could understand Shinji's misgivings about this.

But it wasn't like they could really do anything about it… Fuuka rode the elevator to the top floor, showing a deceitfully plain door in a small hallway. She knocked on the door.

"Who's at the door?" she heard Shinji say.

"I didn't invite anyone over if that's what you're asking," Ken responded.

"Probably some salesman," Shinji groused, and Fuuka couldn't help but giggle at the memory of Shinji scaring away a particularly persistent salesman. She heard his footsteps approach, and the door opened. "Look, we're not—" Then Shinji's eyes bugged out, gaping at her. "Fuuka?"

"Shinji!" Fuuka exclaimed, throwing her arms around him before standing on her tiptoes to kiss him. Shinji moved his hands to rest on her shoulders, all while leaning down so Fuuka didn't stand on her tiptoes so much.

It felt so nice… to be in his arms again…

Then Shinji suddenly pulled away, confusion swimming in his eyes. "Fuuka, it's great to see you, but why are you here?"

"Mitsuru-senpai arranged it, so that I could see if I could trace the identity of whoever hacked Ken-kun's phone," Fuuka explained, before peeking behind her boyfriend, completely expecting Ken to be sitting at the table or the couch. "Um… speaking of that, where is Ken-kun? I heard him talking to you before…"

"What are you talking about?" Shinji turned around, only to groan. "Where the hell did he run off to?"

"Cleaning up the magazines you left all over the living room." Ken entered her field of vision, giving Shinji a dry look. "Wouldn't want Fuuka-san to see how many you have around the house, right?" He gave Shinji a pointed look, before shrugging. "Besides, I figured it'd give you a little alone time."

"Why do you always have to be a smartass?" Shinji grumbled, before stepping aside to let Fuuka come inside.

Well… honestly, Shinji had himself to blame for that.

Fuuka just put a hand on Shinji's arm, before looking to Ken. "Ken-kun, I need to see your phone. Let's see if I can figure out just who hacked your phone."

Ken dug it out of his pocket, holding it out to Fuuka, but Shinji snatched it out of his hand. "Not so fast," he said briskly. "First things first…" He looked at her. "…Did you even eat anything yet?"

"Um…"

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Shinji rolled his eyes. "Come on, I'll whip you up something first."

"Can we cook together, then?" Fuuka asked. "I… I missed that."

"Just don't let the food burn," Ken muttered.

"What was that?" Shinji narrowed his eyes dangerously at Ken, but Ken was unfazed after four years of being raised by him.
"Oh, nothing," he said lightly, waving a hand. "Have fun, you two."

After Fuuka had eaten her fill, she set to work. It took a few hours, but Fuuka was able to get a vague idea of who exactly hacked Ken's phone.

She entered Ken's bedroom. He was sprawled on his bed, reading some book, but he looked up when Fuuka stepped inside. He marked his place before setting the book on top of his nightstand.

"Well… I think it isn't Shido," Fuuka began, sitting on the edge of the bed. "I… actually recognize the signature."

Ken frowned. "Signature?"

"All hackers have little quirks…" Fuuka explained, "if you know what to look for, you'll be able to pick up the hints to just who hacked it. But I recognize this hacker's signature… and it is the same as Medjed."

"Medjed,..?" Ken repeated with a small frown. "But… I thought Medjed was that group of hackers."

Fuuka shook her head. "You weren't really in the know, with that. But Medjed was originally one person. He or she had made their appearance about… two years ago? They pulled off Robin Hood stunts, so others took on the mantle when they followed suit. They... actually helped us out once. Shido's men tried to hack into our accounts right around Mitsuru-senpai had came into contact with Shido. But... someone had counterhacked them, identifying themselves as Medjed."

"Wow…" Ken breathed, before he frowned. "What would this Alibaba want with me? Wouldn't it make more sense to go after Mitsuru-san or Minako-san? And why ask these questions if they had helped us before?"

"I don't know," Fuuka admitted. "But I really don't think that this is connected to Shido or his network, so you don't have to worry about that."

"I see…" Ken murmured, before exhaling deeply. "I guess I freaked out about nothing after all."

Fuuka placed a hand over Ken's, gently rubbing her thumb over the top of Ken's hand. "It's nothing. You had good reasons to be worried. And besides, it gives me a good excuse to see you."

"Are you going to come up for Shinjiro-san's birthday then?"

"I… I don't know," Fuuka admitted. "I'd like to, but I don't know how much we should push things. Though Shinji was talking about coming back to Port Island last time we video called… We'll have to see, Ken-kun." Then she squeezed his hand. "Now… how about we have some fun tonight, hmm?"

"Huh?"

"I saw some advertising about a firework festival," Fuuka explained. "I thought it'd be fun. What do you say?"

Ken looked at her blankly. "I guess… but good luck convincing Shinjiro-san."

"Oh, that shouldn't be too hard to do." Fuuka shrugged. "Shinji's been dragged to festivals before by Minako-chan."
"That and you have him whipped," Ken mumbled.

"I-I do not!"

"Just a little more… and done!" Anne showed Makoto the mirror with a flourish. "What do you think?"

Makoto just smiled, admiring her reflection—showing her wearing a yukata. "You did a great job. I don't think I could have dressed up without your help, Anne."

"It's no prob!" she said cheerfully. "But come on, we've gotta get a move on. The boys are probably getting impatient."

"You mean Ryuji," Makoto quipped.

"You know him so well already," Anne laughed as they stepped out of her apartment. "Ryuji said he wanted to eat some food and play some games before the actual fireworks too."

It really was a good thing she lived in Shibuya…

While it was hard to hurry with their yukatas, they did their best. And then she tripped over a crack.

"Anne!"

"Ow…" Anne moaned, before she pushed herself up. Nothing seemed to be torn at least.

"Takamaki-san?"

Makoto helped her up, and Anne turned to see it was Amada-senpai who had called out to her. He wasn't alone either. They looked like a couple who were in their mid-twenties.

Amada-senpai frowned in concern. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine!" Anne waved a hand, before smiling sheepishly. "Guess that wasn't the most graceful move…"

"Yeah, it was kinda hard to miss that," the older man said dryly.

"Shinji, don't be rude," the older woman scolded, before digging out a handkerchief and holding it out to Anne. "You should wipe your face," she said kindly. "You have quite a bit dirt on your face."

"Is my yukata okay still?" Anne asked anxiously.

This was a gift from her parents… and she would hate for it to get ruined…

"Miraculously," Makoto reassured, before she looked curiously at the older man and woman.

"This is my guardian, Shinjiro Aragaki," Amada-senpai introduced, catching onto Makoto's silent question. "And this is his girlfriend, Fuuka Yamagishi."

"It's nice to meet you," Fuuka-san said with a warm smile. "You must be Ken-kun's classmates, right?"

She was pretty in a delicate kind of way. Her light turquoise hair was smoothed back into a single long braid. But despite her almost fragile appearance, there was an intelligence in her teal eyes that
reminded her of Makoto, for some reason. She was dressed modestly, wearing a white blouse paired with a long skirt and a pair of sandals.

"We are," Makoto confirmed with a smile. "I'm in Ken's class, but Anne is a year younger than us."

"But Niijima, huh…?" Shinjiro-san turned his gaze on Makoto.

Shinjiro-san was basically the anti-thesis of his girlfriend. Fuuka-san was fair-skinned, but Shinjiro-san was pretty tan. His thick, dark brown hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, and honestly… there was something intimidating about his gaze. He was dressed rather casually, only wearing a black t-shirt and a pair of jeans. For some reason, he was carrying an umbrella.

Though… was he really Amada-senpai’s guardian? He was so… young, in his mid twenties. With the way Amada-senpai had talked, it seemed like his mom died a while ago.

"Yes…?" Makoto looked taken aback by his question.

"It's nothing," he said quickly, glancing away. "Ken just mentioned that you were the student council president."

"…Oh."

Hmm… Anne couldn't help but get the feeling there was something more to that.

"Is it just the two of you?" Fuuka-san asked.

"Oh no, we were going to meet up with a couple friends before… Anne tripped," Makoto said with a wince.

"Sorry about that…" Anne said sheepishly. "Oh, but would you like to come with us, Senpai? I'm sure the boys won't mind."

"Er… well…" Ken turned to look at the older couple.

"That's a good idea actually!" Fuuka-san interjected. "You really should spend more time with people your age, Ken-kun."

"Fuuka-san!" he complained, a whine ever so slightly present in his voice, as his cheeks reddened. Anne couldn't help but giggle. He was just… so composed most of the time. So it was kinda funny to see him get embarrassed like this.

"She's not wrong," Shinjiro-san deadpanned.

"Like you can talk, Shinjiro-san," Amada-senpai fired back. "Sometimes I wonder how you and Mitsuru-san didn't kill each other when you started to live at the dorm."

"Now, now, that's enough," Fuuka-san scolded, even though her voice remained mild. "Come on, Shinji, I think I saw a takoyaki stand. Let's get one and share!"

Without warning, she pulled on her boyfriend's arm and dragged him away—quite a feat, seeing that he towered over her.

"Well, I guess she… took the choice out of your hands…" Makoto said slowly.

"That's… fairly tame actually," Amada-senpai said with a sigh, before offering them a sheepish
smile. "Uh… should we get going then?"

Anne nodded. "Yeah!"

They led him to the agreed meeting spot and Ryuji was the first to see them.

"Finally!" he grumbled. "What took you so long?!"

"Why do you have to be so impatient?!

"Hey, it was worth it, in my opinion." Ren approached them, and as per their suggestion… he wasn't wearing his glasses. He looked… really handsome without them. "You girls look beautiful," he added, but he was looking straight at Anne.

Anne quickly looked away, managing a laugh. "Haha! You're such a charmer, Ren."

"Why is Amada-san with you?" Yusuke asked.

"Oh, well…" Makoto shifted nervously. "We ran into him earlier and invited him to spend some time with us. That, and his guardian kinda left him to his own devices, so…"

…Whups. She never gave back Fuuka-san her handkerchief…

"That's not a problem to me," Ren said with a smile. "So… what do you wanna do first?"

"FOOD!" Ryuji exclaimed. "Come on, man, I'm starving!"

Nobody objected, so they went to hunt for the food stalls. Anne wasn't super hungry but… festival food. It was just the best.

"There's so much food!" Morgana gasped, only for his ears to press against his skull. "And… And I can't eat any of it," he grumbled out.

Yusuke looked mournfully at the okonomiyaki stand. "Alas, if only I had more than a hundred yen…"

"You… what?" Amada-senpai looked startled. "You only have a hundred yen on you?!"

"Well, I did have to pay for the train ticket…"

"Uh… never mind…" Amada-senpai grabbed his arm. "Come on, I'll pay."

"Oh, that's not necessary, Amada-san…" Yusuke began.

"I'm making it necessary," came the retort. "Seriously, you have to take care of yourself…" He then suddenly blinked. "…Good grief, I'm really turning into Shinjiro-san…" he muttered.

Anne just giggled before happily taking a bite of her cotton candy. Mmm… it was so good.

"God, how can you eat that crap?" Ryuji asked. "It's literally just sugar on a stick."

Anne stuck her tongue at him. "So? It tastes good." She pointedly took another bite.

"Ryuji does have a point, Anne," Makoto said. "Every time I see you eating, you're eating some kind of sweet. It can't be healthy."

Anne pouted. "I'm at a healthy weight! I should know—I'm weighed a lot at my job."
“Some people just have a lot of metabolism,” Ren said. “I guess Anne is just one of them. Though…” he nudged her in the side, “maybe I could help by eating some of it?”

Anne rolled her eyes at him. “Sheesh, you don't have to ask me like that.” She held out the stick to him and Ren gratefully took a bite. His tongue darted out to lick the stray strands on his lips. “Mm… it’s really sweet.”

“What’s really sweet?” Amada-senpai and Yusuke had returned, Yusuke happily eating an okonomiyaki.

“That sugar on a stick Anne’s been chomping on,” Ryuji snorted.

“Just how many calories is in that?” Makoto wondered, her eyes on the cotton candy. “Maybe the vendor will have a nutrition menu…”

“Makoto, not again!” Anne laughed.

“What do you mean, again?” Amada-senpai asked, looking confused.

“I took her to get crepes once,” Anne explained. “She kept pestering the crepe shop for the nutrition menu and got all offended when they couldn’t offer her one.”

“It’s protocol to have one!” Makoto protested, as her cheeks reddened in embarrassment.

Amada-senpai shot her an amused glance. “I never thought you’d be someone like that.”

“Is it so wrong to be concerned about my health?” Makoto grumbled. “Besides, you were the one pestering me to not skip lunch the day we met.”

“There’s a difference from telling you to eat when you’re obviously drained to you demanding the nutrition values of a crepe.”

“You… You…” Makoto huffed. “...Shut up.”

“Amada-san does have a good point, though,” Yusuke said.

“Guess it’s pick on Makoto day,” Ryuji snickered.

“We have to give you a break every now and then, Ryuji,” Morgana quipped.

“Aw, shuddup!”

After they finished eating, they went to scope out the games. They were missing some of the typical games, like the water balloons and the goldfish scooping game, but they had most of them.

“Hey, check out the masks!” Ryuji exclaimed.

“Hmm… the quality is horrible,” Yusuke decided. “Mine is far superior.”

“Kitagawa-san, that’s rude,” Amada-senpai whispered to him, before shooting an apologetic glance at the vendor.

“They have so many different ones though,” Ren noted. “Guess that fits us in a way, huh?”

Morgana then stuck his head out of Ren's bag. “…Hey, where did Makoto go?”
Anne looked around, scanning for Makoto's yukata. "Oh, I see her!" She pointed at the shooting game booth.

And she was looking at...

"Got your eye on the Bunchimaru plushie?" Ren teased as they approached.

"Dude, you like Bunchimaru?" Ryuji asked incredulously.

"S-So, what if I do?!" Makoto stammered out, her face turning red. "Maybe I was just testing my shooting skills a-and this is a notoriously difficult game-"

"I'll give it a shot."

Anne stared at Amada-senpai calmly sliding a five hundred yen coin across the table.

"You sure you just want one try?" the vendor asked. "Another five hundred and you'll get two more."

"I'll be fine," Amada-senpai dismissed, picking up the rifle. He then narrowed his eyes, before firing. The bullet shot out, knocking down the huge Bunchimaru plushie with no effort.

"Damn, he's a good shot," Ryuji muttered to Ren. "I never would've pegged him for that."

"My idea isn't so bad, huh?" Ren whispered back.

"You shouldn't discuss this when he's right there," Morgana scolded, though he looked rather uneasy.

The vendor grumbled to himself, before fetching the toy and handing Amada-senpai his prize.

"Marvelous!" Yusuke crowed, somehow having whipped out his sketchpad from... somewhere. He held it up, showing a quick sketch of Amada-senpai firing the rifle. "That determination... that focus! It'll be a wonderful drawing!"

"Uh..." Amada-senpai blinked at him, looking rather bewildered even as he handed the plushie to Makoto. "...Thanks?"

"You get used to Yusuke after a while," Ren chuckled, patting the older boy's shoulder.

"Though I'm surprised you're such a good marksman," Morgana said.

"Well... I was taught by a friend. She likes shooting games and she gave me a few tips."

"T-Thank you, Ken," Makoto said, before squeezing the toy tightly to her chest. "It's so soft..."

Ren glanced up at the darkening sky. "...Hey, we probably should try and get good spots. I think it's almost time for it to start."

So they headed off, but they had barely got to see any fireworks before the downpour ruined it. They quickly scrambled to find a place to find a shelter, but of course, everyone else had the same idea. Anne was wringing out her yukata, when she suddenly felt eyes on her.

Ren, Ryuji, and Yusuke were all playing the innocent, but she wasn't fooled.

"Jeez..." Anne sighed, rolling her eyes. "I guess I should be glad that someone wasn't trying to get
"Honestly..." Makoto sighed as well, shaking her head.

Amada-senpai opened his mouth to say something, only to do a double take. "Haru-san?"

A petite girl—though not as small as Fuuka-san—turned at his voice. "Oh, Amada-kun!" She waved at him, before stepping closer to them and shutting her umbrella. "I didn't know you were going to the festival."

"It was... a last minute thing," he admitted. "Are you with your family?"

"Well, my father couldn't make it, so I just went on my own..." the girl admitted. "But um... who are your friends?"

"Oh, well, most of them go to Shujin actually..."

They quickly introduced themselves, and she, in turn, introduced herself as Haru. She was rather polite, but in the demure kind of way? Though the fact that she wouldn't give her surname struck Anne as rather odd. But hey, it took all kinds of people, right?

But then her phone rang. She pulled it out from the small bag she carried. "Hello, Father."

Though she couldn't quite make out what he was saying... the voice sounded angry for some reason.

"F-Father, I was just speaking to some schoolmates..." she protested weakly. Then she paused to hear what he had to say, and then she sighed. "Yes, Father..." Her voice was barely audible. "Thank Sugimura-san for me..."

...What? Either her father was extremely strict or...

No... she was jumping to conclusions. Besides, Haru was essentially a stranger, even if they did go to school together...

"I... I have to go," Haru said quietly. "My father thinks it's best I get out of the rain."

"Hold on a minute!" Ryuji burst out. "Just what the hell did your old man say to you!?"

"Ryuji," Yusuke said quietly, "you shouldn't-"

"Like hell I don't!" he retorted. "Listen, if your dad is being a shitty asshole to you, you should really report him to the Phan-site. Maybe they could change his heart."

"Ryuji-" Makoto began sternly, but Haru interrupted.

"It's okay. I know that he means well, Niijima-san." Haru bowed at Ryuji. "I appreciate your concern, Sakamoto-kun. Thank you."

She then walked off, entering the black car that pulled up to the curb for several minutes.

"Seriously, what the hell?!!" Ryuji snapped. "Her old man seemed awful from that one conversation! Oi, Senpai, you know her last name? Maybe we can find something!"

Amada-senpai just shrugged. "Your guess is just good as mine," he said. "She only gave me her first name."
"Holy shit what if her dad is mafia too-"

"Ryuji, don't jump conclusions," Yusuke said sternly. "You have such a hyperactive imagination…"

"Well, I have to admit that Ryuji's right," Morgana piped up. "It's a bit worrying…"

"Ken!" Shinjiro-san and Fuuka-san came into view, both protected by the rain with the umbrella Shinjiro-san carried.

"Oh, you're soaked!" Fuuka-san immediately began to fuss over Amada-senpai, standing on her toes to run her fingers through his dripping hair.

"Fuuka-san, stop fussing," Amada-senpai sighed. "It's just a little water."

"Yeah, but that 'little water' can get you sick," Shinjiro-san deadpanned. "Here, you and Fuuka share the umbrella. Good thing our place isn't that far."

"Actually…" Amada-senpai began, before he glanced at everyone else, "I was thinking… maybe we could let them take shelter for a little bit? Until the rain dies down."

"Well, in that case, you should share the umbrella with someone else," Fuuka-san said. "You are all so soaked…"

"Mm… in that case…" Amada-senpai looked at Makoto. "Do you want to share the umbrella with me, Makoto?"

Shinjiro-san glanced at Amada-senpai, eyebrow raised. "…Is there something you're not telling me?"

"W-What's that supposed to mean?!" Amada-senpai demanded. "Her yukata is white. She shouldn't be getting wetter than she is already."

He just smirked, looking away. "Nothing."

"Ugh, forget it," Amada-senpai huffed, before handing the umbrella to Makoto. "You share with Takamaki-san. I'm going on ahead."

"H-Hey, wait up, Ken-kun!"

"This is seriously where you live?!" Ryuji was unabashedly gaping at well—everything.

"Ryuji, don't stare," Makoto whispered, nudging him. "It's rude."

"But have you seen-"

"Ryuji, I have eyes too."

They went up in the elevator, riding up to the top. Shinjiro-san then unlocked the lone door, revealing an airy room, that seemed to blend a living room, dining room, and a kitchen all in one.

"Ken, go change out of your clothes," Shinjiro-san said absently. "You'll get sick."

Ugh… lucky. Makoto rubbed her arms, shivering a little, watching Ken disappear down the hallway. Her yukata was sticking to her skin rather uncomfortably. Fuuka-san pursed her lips...
“Shinji, where do you keep the towels?” she inquired.

“Cabinet right by the bathroom.”

After thanking him, she went down the hallway. A few moments later, she returned, carrying a pile of neatly folded towels. “Here. We can't really offer a change of clothes, but… You should at least be able to dry yourself a little.”

“We'll just have to withstand it for a while,” Anne said, accepting a towel, rubbing it through her hair. “Thank you.”

The others gave her their own thanks, before gratefully taking a towel. Fuuka-san smiled at Makoto when she took a towel, and unwittingly, Makoto smiled back. She couldn't explain it but… she felt a draw to the woman. Like they had some kind of connection.

“So… what do you two do as a living?” Yusuke asked.

“Hm?” Fuuka-san turned to look at Yusuke. “Oh, well…” She paused, before letting out an embarrassed laugh. “…I just realized that I never got your names.”

“Oh, my name is Yusuke Kitagawa,” Yusuke introduced himself with a low bow.

The boys introduced themselves as Ken returned to the living room. For some reason, he was carrying a pile of clothes. “I noticed that you guys were really soaked, so I figured that I'd lend you a change of clothes while you're here.”

Though… what he was wearing… was a bit of a surprise. He was wearing a simple tee shirt and a pair of sweats. A hand towel was draped around his shoulders to catch the water droplets that occasionally dripped from his hair. They were very normal pajamas but… Ken seemed so… put together.

“Sweet!” Ryuji cheered. “Thanks, Senpai!”

“It's still so weird to hear people call Ken that,” she heard Shinjiro-san murmur to his girlfriend.

“Oh, wait, not that one. That's for Kitagawa-san, since he's a bit taller than me.”

“Dude, enough with the formalities!” Ryuji complained.

Shinjiro-san snorted. “You're barking up the wrong tree. One of our friends has been after Ken to drop the honorifics for ages, but he always refuses.”

“Well, excuse me for wanting to be polite,” Ken said dryly.

“He still uses your first name though!” Ryuji continued to complain.

“Well, not entirely,” Anne commented, glancing at her. “He calls Makoto by her first name.”

Fuuka-san just giggled, reaching to ruffle Ken's hair. “He's always been a polite boy. Even when he was only eleven years old.”

“Fuuka-san, you know I hate that!” Ken complained, quickly darting out of her reach.

He was… pouting. It was rather adorable, with that moody frown of his. It was just… endearing.

“Aw, but you have such soft hair...”
"You do?" Anne asked. "Let me feel!"

"What did I just say?" Ken huffed, even as his cheeks turned pink. "I'm not a dog!"

"My fur is velvety soft, Lady Anne!" Morgana chimed in.

"Jeez, you brought your cat?" Shinjiro-san demanded. "Did you even feed him yet?"

"I was planning on it?" Ren offered.

"Tsk… excuses," Shinjiro-san grumbled with a click of his tongue. "Give me a sec."

He then moved to the kitchen, grumbling to himself.

"You should really get changed though," Fuuka-san said to the boys. "The bathroom is the second room down the hallways."

"Oh yeah…"

"My thanks again, Amada-san," Yusuke added.

Then Fuuka-san frowned. "Hey, Ken-kun, why did you grab so many?"

"Oh, well… I was thinking…" For some reason, Ken's face reddened a bit. "I think the girls have to be more uncomfortable since their… yukatas have to be sticking to their skin, and since you're a lot shorter than both of them, I thought…" He looked away, unable to finish the sentence.

When Makoto picked up one set of clothes, a pleasant scent drifted from it. Now that she thought about it, Ken did wear cologne. "Thank you, Ken," she said. "It was very thoughtful of you."

"Thanks, Senpai!" Anne chirped, happily picking up the other set of clothes. She saw Fuuka-san pick up a towel and begin to rub down Morgana, earning some happy purrs from the feline.

They waited for the boys to return from changing before heading for the bathroom. It was a relief to strip out of her soaked yukata and to properly dry herself. The tee shirt hung on her frame loosely, so Makoto ended up tying it at the end to fit her a little better. The sweats had an elastic band, so she just pulled on the drawstrings to fit her. The clothes were very comfortable, though.

By the time they got back, the table was covered with food.

"Uh… what is this?" Anne blinked owlishly at the table.

"It's called food," Shinjiro-san deadpanned. "You eat it."

"Shinji, don't be rude!" Fuuka-san admonished. "Honestly, and you complain when Ken-kun sasses you." She folded her arms over her chest. "You only have yourself to blame."

"Tch," was all he had to offer as a comeback.

Ryuji leaned over to Ren, whispering, "Wow, she's got him whipped."

"Yamagishi-san uses a whip on Aragaki-san?" Yusuke frowned, looking puzzled. "Why would she do that?"

"Dude, it's an expression."
"What is it referring to, then?"

"That's enough, you three!" Anne scolded in a whisper. "Jeez, don't talk about that kind of stuff when they're in *earshot*!"

"Um… but we did eat a bit at the festival," Makoto said slowly, as a way to distract herself.

"Yeah, and since when do festivals offer you healthy food?" he scoffed. "…Besides, I'm guessing the fireworks festival was a way to celebrate the end of exams, yeah? But the storm ruined it."

"You're a good person, huh?" Anne noted.

Shinjiro-san looked rather taken aback. "I-It's nothing," he mumbled out. "Just… Just eat as much as you want, a'right?"

"Hey, why do you have this tiny plate?" Ryuji asked.

"It's for the cat. Morgana, right?"

Morgana bristled at being called a cat, but then he perked up as he jumped onto the table, getting a good eyeball of what exactly Shinjiro-san had prepared. "Is that shrimp tempura?!"

"Uh… he likes to eat at the table," Ren said sheepishly. "That won't be a problem, right?"

"Well, considering that our dog always gets Shinji to give him the best cuts…" Ken gave his guardian a dry look. "…Not really."

"You try and say no to that face," Shinjiro-san retorted.

"Did you all not move out here?" Makoto inquired.

Their various comments made it seem that Fuuka-san didn't normally live here…

"Oh no, I live on Port Island," Fuuka-san explained. "I'm just visiting for a few days. Shinji and Ken-kun living here is… temporary. Shouldn't be more than a year."

"So… you'll be moving back eventually?" Makoto asked hesitantly, feeling her heart sink for some reason.

"No, we'll probably stick it out here until Ken graduates," Shinjiro-san answered. "There's no reason to go through another transfer. It's just a pain in the ass."

"A long distance relationship, huh?" Anne winced. "That must suck."

"It's not so bad," Fuuka-san laughed. "We video call a lot, at least twice a week. And we did this before, actually. I studied at Tokyo U after I graduated from Gekkoukan. My major was computer science."

"Is that so?" Yusuke blinked at her. "Forgive me, Yamagishi-san, but you don't seem like the type…"

Fuuka-san giggled. "No, it's okay. I get that a lot."

"You must be really smart if you got into Tokyo U though," Makoto said in awe.

That was her first choice in university, actually. Probably for most people, but…
"What do you like to do, though?" she asked.

"Oh, a lot of just about everything," Ren said with a shrug. "And hanging out with my friends."

"Reminds me of a certain someone I know," Shinjiro-san muttered.

Hm? Someone like Ren…?

"I model," Anne piped up. "It started as a casual thing, but I realized recently that it's something I really should take more seriously!"

"One of our friends is a model, actually," Fuuka-san said. "Though you'll probably recognize her more from her acting career."

"Who is it?" Ren asked.

"Yukari Takeba." Ken casually dropped the bomb.

"Dude…" Ryuji gaped at Ken. "You know Yukari Takeba?!"

"Yes…?"

"She's so hot."

Ken wrinkled his nose. "…Can you not talk about her like that?"

"Dude, do you have eyes?!"

"She's also like an older sister to me," he deadpanned.

"Any other famous senpai you have?" Makoto raised an eyebrow at him.

He hesitated for a moment. "…No."

"Not unless you count the time Aki bodyguarded for Mitsuru for an event and he sarcastically said his credentials included him wrestling a bear," Shinjiro-san said dryly. "The media really had fun with that…"

"I don't think Minako-san is ever going to let that go…" Ken said with a sigh.

Fuuka-san began to laugh, until her eyes drifted to the living room. Then her eyes turned as wide as saucers and she hastily stood up.

"Fuuka?" Shinjiro-san looked confused as she rushed into the living room. "What's wrong?"

The TV had been playing, though the volume had been turned down so they could talk.

"To the Phantom Thieves causing an uproar in Japan: do not talk about your false justice."

W-What?

"That's… Medjed's symbol…" Makoto said slowly.

"Was that… Was that what Mishima was talking about?" Morgana breathed.

"What about Mishima?" Ryuji asked.
"What the hell are you talking about?" Shinjiro-san demanded.

"I… n-never mind, it's nothing." Ryuji ducked his head.

They watched the rest of the report with horror, as Medjed essentially challenged the Phantom Thieves, demanding that they stop.

"…It's getting late though," Yusuke said slowly. "I believe we should go now, before the trains stop running."

"Are you sure?" Fuuka-san looked bewildered.

"Yeah, I agree with Yusuke," Ren spoke up. "We should head back. My guardian will give me hell if I'm late…"

"Anne and I live in Shibuya, so we'll just head home together," Makoto spoke up. "But thank you for the meal, Shinjiro-san. It was delicious."

"And thank you for opening your home to us," Anne said politely. "We really appreciate it."

Makoto reluctantly changed back into her still wet yukata and after Anne had finished dressing, they headed back to Anne's apartment first. It was quiet on the way back, as they couldn't find it in themselves to make small talk, and Makoto barely registered Anne's goodbye.

Medjed had… declared war on them.

Just how were they supposed to tackle this?

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Thursday, July 21st, 2016

Despite Fuuka-san's reassurances that Alibaba had nothing to do with Shido, Ken couldn't help but be worried…. The messages would still occasionally trickle in.

What do you know about Wakaba Isshiki? The Shadow Operatives knew about her research about cognitive psience… I need to know!

You know how the Phantom Thieves steal hearts, right? I need someone to be targeted. Can you do it? They don't seem willing to fulfill my little request.

Ken sighed to himself, staring at the most recent messages. Just what was Alibaba after? Wakaba Isshiki… pricked at his memory for some reason. He couldn't help but feel it was important. And cognitive psience… that sounded familiar too.

Wouldn't that be connected to the Metaverse? They talked about cognition during their jaunts in Kaneshiro's Palace…

Maybe he needed to talk to Makoto about this… Besides that, it was a bit… worrisome, with the statement Medjed had released a couple days ago…

And as if his thoughts had summoned her, Makoto had appeared in his sight… talking to some boy in a tan peacoat. She didn't look very happy to see him though.

Then he came closer… and saw just who he was. Chin length, almost shaggy brown hair, bangs curling down near his right eye… reddish brown eyes…
...Oh. Ugh. Ken tried not to grimace.

He had nothing against Goro Akechi, even though he couldn't help but wonder why exactly he was so happy to give frequent interviews instead of actually looking into the mental shutdowns, like he was supposedly doing. But it was annoying when people told you repeatedly that you look like Goro Akechi or asked if you're related to him in some way.

"I hear your sister has been going around, investigating into cognitive psience," Akechi was saying.

...What? Makoto's sister was a prodigy prosecutor... why would she be looking into that?

Makoto narrowed her eyes, noticeably stiffening. "Sis doesn't really like discussing cases with me."

"Hmm, I suppose that makes sense." He cupped his chin in his hand, in deep thought. "She probably should consulting experts, after all."

Ken pointedly cleared his throat, before smiling slightly at Makoto. "Good morning, Makoto."

"Oh, Ken!" Makoto's eyes lit up, her lips curving into a smile. "Good morning."

"Oh?" Akechi turned to look at him. "Who is this, Niijima-san? A friend?"

"Yes," Makoto said coolly, her voice clipped when she looked at Akechi. "This is Ken Amada. He's recently moved to Tokyo."

"Really..." For some reason... Ken felt uncomfortable with Akechi's eyes on him.

Why did they look familiar...?

"I could have sworn we've met before!" he laughed. "Have you been to Tokyo before you moved out here?"

"Not that I know of," Ken said with a frown. "I think you're mistaking me for someone else."

What kind of question was that?

"I must be, if you're have no recollection of me." He then pressed a hand to his mouth, stifling a chuckle. "Aside from seeing me on television, I suppose. More and more people have been asking me for interviews, after all."

...Okay, he was a bit aggravating. And a bit of a braggart. Ugh. And this was the guy they were comparing Naoto-san to?

"Are you done, Akechi-kun?" Makoto looked rather annoyed herself, with her lips pursed together as if she was stopping herself from making a comment. "Don't you have an interview to catch?"

"As a matter of fact, Niijima-san," he laughed, "I do. People are curious what I have to say about the whole Medjed incident, with the challenge they made to the Phantom Thieves." He then shrugged, before spreading his hands. "Though, I suppose Medjed does have a point... The Phantom Thieves are making a mockery of justice, after all."

Ken narrowed his eyes. "You've made it perfectly clearly that you think that the Phantom Thieves are nothing more than criminals themselves on your various interviews," he said dryly. "You don't have to repeat it."

"Oh?" He tilted his head at Ken. "And I suppose you believe that the Phantom Thieves are better
"They get things done at least," Ken retorted. "While you've been running off giving who knows how many interviews."

Makoto's jaw dropped, and he swore he saw her eyes bug out.

"My, you're a blunt one, aren't you?" Akechi laughed again. "The Phantom Thieves are vigilantes at best. Arrogant ones, at that." Makoto noticeably stiffened at his statement.

Ken had to fight to not roll his eyes. Did he really say that? Really? He could not talk about arrogance, not with how he acted like he was the high authority. Though the public's opinions of him didn't exactly help.

"For what? Stating that they'll make their targets confess—something that they do end up doing." Ken shrugged. "They're just fulfilling their promises."

"And we're really late for school now!" Makoto suddenly interjected, grabbing his arm. "Come on, Ken, we don't wanna be late."

Without waiting for either him or Akechi to respond, Makoto proceeded to drag him away and into the train that would take them to Shujin. Once they arrived, she pulled him aside, before she smacked his shoulder.

"What were you thinking?" she scolded. "Do you want people to talk about you? You have to be socially inept to not know how popular Akechi-kun is, right now!"

"He rubbed me the wrong way," Ken muttered.

Makoto just let out an exasperated sigh, before pressing a hand to her forehead. "Honestly…" she muttered. "L-Look, I appreciate you defending the Phantom Thieves, but… you didn't have to."

"I did it because I wanted to. Besides, he was being rude to you, wasn't he?"

Makoto sighed. "It's just… in his nature," she muttered. "For as long as I've known him."

"Have you known him for long?"

Makoto's forehead wrinkled as she thought. "Not as long as you think," she said. "Akechi-kun only started becoming really popular in this last year and he was paired with my older sister for investigations. I became acquainted with him when I would bring lunch to my sister. She…"

Makoto winced, "has a tendency to forget lunch when she's deep into a case."

Ah, right… Since Makoto's older sister was a prosecutor, she would need a detective partner. Though he had to wonder just how old Makoto's sister was…

But still… this was a good chance to talk to Makoto, right? It was early in the morning, so they didn't have to worry about the annoying gossips rampant in Shujin. (Seriously, why were they so obsessed with gossiping…)

"Makoto?"

"Hm?"

"There's something I want to talk to you about," Ken mumbled out before he could get cold feet. When she looked at him, questions in her eyes, he spoke again. "I… I think I have a clue for the
target you've been looking into. The one Alibaba has offered you."

Makoto's eyes turned as wide as saucers. "Wait… how do you know that?"

"For some reason… Alibaba reached out to me," Ken said. "Last Saturday, to be exact, but they have been sending messages to me every now and then…"

Makoto pursed her lips together. "…What kind of messages?"

"Well… the most recent one asked me if I… I knew how to steal desires," he said softly. "They seem unsure if you'll fulfill the request."

"It's just so… vague," Makoto confessed. "So we don't know if we should." Makoto sighed. "I'll talk to Ren during school and organize a meeting with everyone… We should talk about this in private."

"Are you for real?!" Sakamoto-san was gaping at Ken. "You can't be serious, man!"

"The question is…" Kitagawa-san tapped his index finger against the table. "How did Alibaba discover all of our identities? Why would go to Amada-san first? It came as a shock when Ren received the first message, but it makes sense as he's our leader."

"Maybe Alibaba had a reason to go to Amada-senpai first…” Takamaki-san gazed at Ken, her eyes filled with curiosity. "Maybe Alibaba didn't want to reach out to us at first. Look at how they seem to be holding their cards tightly to their chest."

"I guess that makes sense," Amamiya-san mused. "People are always speculating about what we do is right or wrong…"

"What troubles me is how Alibaba was able to contact you both…” Morgana said, before sitting down, curling his tail around himself. "They must be a master hacker."

"Dude, did you not see the stunt that Alibaba pulled?" Sakamoto-san grumbled. "Alibaba hit the entire school while trying to show off to Ren his abilities."

"Though, it seems like Alibaba thinks of you an honorary Phantom Thief." Makoto looked thoughtful, before looking over to Amamiya-san. "You did bring up the idea before…"

…Wait, what? What idea?

"I did…" Amamiya-san said with a laugh, before his eyes swept over to his friends. "Well? What do you guys think?"

"Well, Amada-senpai seems like he's being dragged into things no matter what…” Takamaki-san shrugged. "I think you were right, Ren."

"I agree," Kitagawa-san pronounced.

What was going on?

"You know what I think," Makoto said with a smile.

Think about what?! Will someone tell him what exactly was going on?

Morgana sighed. "He's capable," he said grudgingly.
…Wait a minute.

"Well, he did save our asses with Kaneshiro…" Sakamoto-san grinned. "I say yeah!"

"Amada-senpai," Ren began, "will you join the Phantom Thieves?"

Chapter End Notes

I know that the fireworks festival in P5 didn't include food and games, but after researching a bit, food and game stalls are usually set up during these kind of events. So I changed it, because I really did wish that the Phantom Thieves got to actually have some fun, instead of just having the rain ruining the show.

So… Akechi. I know there are a lot of headcanons floating around that Ken and Akechi will become good friends in PQ2, but they won't be in this. Why? Because while their backgrounds and motivations to become a Persona-user are very similar… their actual personalities are very different. Akechi gives off a front of being a people's person, even though he has a tendency to rub some people the wrong way sometimes with his attitude. Ken is more serious and tends to be drawn towards down to earth characters as friends (Akihiko, Shinji in the movies, Naoto and Kanji in PQ/Ultimax, and etc.) So it's really a personality clash (in the beginning). However, their relationship is rather complicated and I'm looking forward to delving into it.

But thank you again to everyone else who has been showing support for this story! It sometimes really blows my mind to see that people really like this.
A New Member

Chapter Summary

Ken gives his answer to the Phantom Thieves, and Medjed officially declares war on the Phantom Thieves. This leads to the Phantom Thieves meeting Alibaba for the first time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thursday, July 21st, 2016

In the seven years Ken has known Mitsuru-san, he could count the times he had seen her shocked on one hand. This… was one of these rare moments.

Unsurprisingly, Shinjiro-san was the one to break the silence.

"You have got to be shitting me." He stared down at Ken. "They seriously asked you to join them?"

"You think I would joke about this?" Ken returned, looking at his guardian incredulously.

Mitsuru-san suddenly looked weary, as she pressed two fingers against her temple. "Is there anything else I need to know?" she ground out.

"Ken…" Shinjiro-san began, in that dangerously quiet voice of his. "Please tell me that you're not considering actually joining them."

Ken hesitated for a moment, before he averted his eyes. "…Okay, I won't tell you."

"Amada!" Mitsuru-san exclaimed, just as Shinjiro-san growled out, "That is not funny."

Ken held up both of his hands, saying hurriedly, "I have a good reason, I promise."

Shinjiro-san scoffed. "And I was thinking that you decided to catch up and become a rebellious teenager."

"Shinjiro." Mitsuru-san frowned disapprovingly at him, before nodding at Ken. "Amada, if you will."

Ken tried not to gulp. She had that neutral tone to her voice, like when she really wanted to hide what she thought… Ken shook his head. He just had to explain his reasonings.

"Well… I was thinking about what you wanted me to do…" Ken said slowly. "And I thought it would be easier to keep track of their activity if I worked on the inside. And… I still don't know everything about them. Like… how do they clear those requests on the Phan-site. And furthermore, what is the root of the Shadow nest? The Palaces just seem to be offshoots."

And besides that, maybe if he witnessed everything they did… maybe he could convince Mitsuru-san that they had truly good intentions. From what he had seen, they truly wanted to help people
suffering under people in power.

"Hmm…"

"Mitsuru, don't tell me that you actually approve!" Shinjiro-san snapped, glaring at her through the screen.

"Amada has some good points," Mitsuru-san said calmly. "Though, Amada… what *did* you tell them? Regarding your answer?"

"They're giving me until Sunday for an answer…" Ken said. "But… that's not everything…"

"Hm?"

"Alibaba hasn't stopped messaging me…" Ken sighed. "Their last message was asking me if *I* knew how to steal desires but… that's not what bothered me. The message before… was asking me about cognitive psience. Is that something the Kirijo Group… researched…" Ken trailed off, noticing how all the blood drained from Mitsuru-san's face. "W-What's wrong?"

"Cognitive psience?" Mitsuru-san repeated faintly, her voice barely above a whisper. "Amada… are you *positive* that's what it is?"

"Did Alibaba ask you about Isshiki?" Shinjiro-san had gone completely tense as well.

"…Okay, what do I not know?" Ken grumbled.

As he pulled out of the Shadow Operatives, he was kept in the dark with a lot of things. Ken understood why, but it was a bit annoying that they didn't enlighten him about this.

Mitsuru-san exhaled deeply. "Isshiki… Wakaba Isshiki… was a former Kirijo scientist, but not long after I founded the Shadow Operatives, she sought me out. She was able to enlighten me on some of the research that Ikutsuki destroyed… I got to know her quite well…"

Mitsuru-san continued to tell him the story of Wakaba Isshiki, her continued interest in Shadows… how she was fascinated if it could alter a person's mindset… How she apparently committed suicide, claiming that she killed herself because she couldn't handle raising her young daughter Futaba alone, but not before destroying her research… But Mitsuru-san had seen past that, and crossed paths with Masayoshi Shido due to the investigation.

"W-What happened to her daughter though?" Ken asked.

He couldn't help but be shaken up… after how Mitsuru-san said that she had watched her mother die, right in front of her eyes. Nobody… should have to see that.

"That… I don't know, Amada." Mitsuru-san pursed her lips together, her eyes now downcast. "I never was able to discover that, aside from the fact that she was put with family, apparently. But…" She then sighed deeply, her eyes flickering to Ken. "I'll let you go for the night, Amada," she said quietly. "You have a lot to think about…" Then she looked to Shinjiro-san. "Good night, Shinjiro."

Ken nodded. "Bye, Mitsuru-san."

The call then disconnected, and Ken sat in silence for several moments trying to digest the story Mitsuru-san had just told him. He was then jolted out of his thoughts by the sound of a mug being set on the table.
"Drink," Shinjiro-san ordered. "Mitsuru shouldn't have dumped the entire story on you." He dragged his hand through his hair. "Not after the shit you've seen."

Ken lifted the mug to his lips and took a careful sip so not to scald his tongue. "I'm glad she did," he said quietly, lowering the mug slightly. "It's something I need to know."

Shinjiro-san looked at him carefully, his gray eyes narrowed on him. "Why didn't you say anything more about Alibaba, Ken? I thought the messages had stopped."

"Didn't want to worry you," Ken mumbled before taking another sip, this time bigger. "You have a lot on your plate."

Sometimes… he wondered if it would have better for Shinjiro-san if he hadn't chosen to take on the burden of becoming his guardian. Shinjiro-san had already made up for accidentally killing Ken's mother ages ago, when he had protected Ken from being murdered by Takaya. But for some reason… that hadn't been enough. But Shinjiro-san had to worry about footing his bills… If he didn't… maybe he would have opened a restaurant by now… Or have enough money to propose to Fuuka-san.

He was grateful that Shinjiro-san took care of him… but he couldn't help but feel like a burden sometimes…

Shinjiro-san just sighed, before rubbing his face. "Didn't wanna worry me, huh…?" he muttered, shaking his head. "Bit too late for that…" Then he looked at Ken, his lips pressed into a thin line. "Ken… Be straight with me. Are you really thinking about joining them?"

"I… I think so." Ken took another careful sip. "You heard my reasons…"

"…Right," Shinjiro-san muttered, a dark look crossing his face.

Ken frowned at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's nothing," he dismissed, shaking his head. He then sighed. "Look, Ken, you're not a kid anymore. I can't really tell you what to do anymore. But…"

"But…?"

"…It's nothing." Shinjiro-san looked away—much to Ken's irritation. He wanted to say something, but he wasn't for some reason… "Look, just be careful if you do say yes. This is different than just following them around."

"I know…" Ken looked down at his mug. "I'll be careful, I promise." He looked up at his guardian. "You don't have to keep repeating yourself, you know…" he said quietly.

"Uh huh..." Shinjiro-san looked and sounded utterly unconvincing. "So says the one who nearly got caught up in an explosion. And outed himself because of that."

"You know that wasn't my fault," he ground out, all while glowering at his guardian. "Seriously, who just expects the place to fall apart?!"

"So you've told me," Shinjiro-san droned, before he straightened up. "But come on, let's get dinner started."

"In a second," Ken mumbled. He was vaguely aware of Shinjiro-san acknowledging that and heading inside for the kitchen.
Somehow… the invitation had just sunk in. The Phantom Thieves really wanted him to join. It was unanimous. He just… never expected anything like to happen when he had come to Tokyo…

 Saturday, July 23rd, 2016

The Phantom Thieves had kept their distance these past couple days. And he appreciated it but… Ken couldn't help but feel the pressure. Tomorrow… he would have to give them an answer.

And while the Phantom Thieves were nice enough to give him a little space, he could not say the same about his former teammates. Junpei-san especially wanted to know. Though Ken wasn't surprised that everyone had managed to find out. Shinjiro-san probably told Akihiko-san, who couldn't hide anything from Minako-san even to save his life… and Minako-san wouldn't hesitate to tell everyone else.

Though he supposed it was nice that they weren't trying to sway him against this…

But what the Phantom Thieves were up against… Medjed… this was an entirely different level. And furthermore… there was the mystery of Alibaba. Just who were they? Given that they knew about Isshiki-san and the Shadow Operatives—to a degree… was Alibaba Futaba?

The fact that they were keen on requesting a change of heart… was serious. Was Futaba being abused somehow…? Maybe her guardian was awful to her… Mitsuru-san was worried about that, too…

And… what Mitsuru-san had told him about how Futaba had seen her mother die… continued to linger in his mind. Did Futaba feel scared and alone…? He remembered feeling completely alone, that nobody really cared, when his mother died… And the fact that Isshiki-san had supposedly committed suicide over not being able to care for Futaba…

It had to be worse for Futaba.

He… wanted to help her. The Phantom Thieves were dedicated to helping people like her… and Alibaba was contacting them as well.

…He had made up his mind.

Ken reached for his phone. Amamiya-san had given him his chat ID last Thursday.

Message Sent To: Ren Amamiya

[Ken]: Hello? Amamiya-san?

Ken couldn't help but fidget during the wait. It took several minutes for him to reply.

[Ren Amamiya]: Hey, Senpai. What's up?

[Ken]: I know we agreed to talk tomorrow but… I've made my decision.

[Ken]: I want to join the Phantom Thieves.

[Ren Amamiya]: Welcome aboard, then.

[Ren Amamiya]: Hm… I guess we'll just stick to the old meeting place, then.
Ken made a face. Uh, no. If he was going to be a part of this, they couldn't risk detection.

[Ken]: Actually… I'd like to offer my place as a meeting spot. It'd be safer to hold meetings in private.

[Ren Amamiya]: I guess that'll make sense.

[Ren Amamiya]: Text me your address and I'll pass it onto everyone.

[Ken]: Of course.

Ken sent his address, and Amamiya-san wished him good night. He had officially joined the Phantom Thieves…

Though a ping alerted him being added to a group chat labelled *The Phantom Thieves of Hearts.*

But when he checked the chat, the latest conversation was them debating whether or not he'd join.

[Ken]: …Was my joining really that important for you to discuss like this…?

[Ryuji]: cRAP

[Anne]: ummm

[Yusuke]: You cannot blame us for being curious

[Anne]: W-We plead the fifth?

[Makoto]: …Anne, that pertains to American law, not Japanese law

[Anne]: MAKOTO SHHH

[Anne]: HE DIDN'T HAVE TO KNOW THAT

[Ren]: Senpai, what color do you want to be?

[Ren]: Red, dark blue, light blue, pink, and yellow are taken

[Ryuji]: dude

[Ryuji]: how are you taking it this so calmly?

[Ren]: Eh

[Ryuji]: DON'T "EH" ME

[Ren]: Too bad

[Ren]: I do what I want

[Ryuji]: Ugh, eff you

[Yusuke]: …Forgive us, Amada-san.

[Yusuke]: We are a rather colorful group.

[Makoto]: That's… an understatement.
[Ken]: It's okay, I'm used to arguing in group chats. He couldn't help but some of the arguments Yukari-san and Junpei-san have had…

[Ken]: And Amamiya-san, I like orange.

[Anne]: …You know, I pegged you as someone who likes darker colors

[Ken]: …Why?

[Ryuji]: Uh, maybe because you stick to the dress code like

[Ryuji]: perfectly?

[Makoto]: That's enough, all of you.

[Makoto]: Welcome to the team, Ken

[Anne]: Yeah!

[Anne]: …wait do we still stick to Senpai?

[Anne]: I don't wanna take liberties, y'know?

[Ken]: Um… just do whatever makes you comfortable? I don't mind either way…

[Yusuke]: Though, since now you're part of the team… won't you consider being my model now?

[Ryuji]: wait what

[Ryuji]: WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY NOW?

[Anne]: DON'T SAY YES KEN

[Ken]: Er… do I want to know…?

[Ren]: Anne was a past victim, so she'd know.

[Yusuke]: Why are you making such vile postulations about me?

[Anne]: YOU WANTED TO DRAW ME IN A WAY I WAS NOT COMFORTABLE IN

[Makoto]: …Wait, what?

[Makoto]: You did what?!

…Oh. He now understood why Amamiya-san had cued him to say no.

[Yusuke]: …Yes. I apologize about that, Anne… I took too many liberties with you.

[Anne]: I forgive you, Yusuke, but do me a favor and

[Anne]: DON'T ASK ANYONE ELSE WHAT YOU ASKED ME

…Well, this was going to be interesting, to say the least…

Sunday, July 24th, 2016
"...So you're kicking me out for the rest of the day?"

"I'm sorry, Shinjiro-san," Ken said, as he dried the plate Shinjiro-san had just handed to him. "But do you want them to continue to be out in the open?"

"I guess not," he relented, before reaching for a towel and drying his hands. "Especially with you joining them… Though next time, run it by me first."

"Sorry," Ken apologized again. "I will."

Shinjiro-san just sighed, dragging a hand through his hair. "Just 'reconnaissance', huh?" he mused, before he snorted. "Should've known it wouldn't be that simple."

Ken winced, but before he could say anything, Shinjiro-san spoke again.

"Don't apologize for it, Ken. You have good intentions for it. And I meant what I told you before…” He just exhaled deeply. "Just… don't drop your guard, now that you're working with a team now."

Ken nodded. "I will."

"All right… I'll get out of your hair now then. Text me whenever you're done, so I know when I can come back."

Ken promised he would, and then he bade Shinjiro-san farewell. But not ten minutes after Shinjiro-san left, he heard a knock on the door.

"Heya, Ken!" Takamaki-san chirped, waving cheerily at him.

"Still can't get over this place..." Sakamoto-san muttered under his breath.

"Good morning," Kitagawa-san greeted. "Though, your apartment has a lot to work on, aesthetic wise."

"Yusuke, be nice." Takamaki-san turned to chastise him.


"It's no problem," Ken said, with a wave of his hand. "A better hideout was necessary."

He still couldn't get over how they used a walkway as their hideout. He would have expected that someone would have pointed out the flaws in that, especially after Makoto managed to figure out their identities.

"Though, it may be a bit inconvenient…" Makoto pursed her lips together. "The target we're looking into… we think they live in Yongen-jaya."

"Yongen-jaya?" Ken frowned. "I don't think I've heard of it."

"Well, that's 'cause it's more of a ward for people to live in, instead of businesses and things to do," Sakamoto-san interjected. "RenRen lives there, actually."

"Oh I see—" Then Ken blinked. "...RenRen?"
"A nickname he came up with the day we met." Amamiya-san nudged Sakamoto-san in the side, before he smiled mischievously. "Which just so happens to work with your name too-"

"Rejected," Ken said flatly, which only caused Takamaki-san and Sakamoto-san to crack up in laughter.

"Aw, don't you wanna be special though, Ren?" Takamaki-san teased.

"I happen to be incredible and here I thought that you were aware of that," Amamiya-san said in a faux haughty voice. He then shook his head, letting out a long suffering sigh. "I'm disappointed, Anne. Very disappointed."

Takamaki-san bumped his shoulder with hers. "God, you can be such a dork!" she giggled.

Ken leaned towards Makoto. "Are they always like this?" he murmured to her.

"Take a look at Ryuji," Makoto said with a wry smile, her eyes flickering to Sakamoto-san, who was shooting his friends annoyed looks.

"Though shouldn't we discuss weaponry for Ken?" Kitagawa-san inquired. "If I recall right, you used a spear…"

"Yeah, that's right." Ken nodded, before his gaze moved to Amamiya-san. "I assume that you're in charge of weapons, right?"

"Ren is in charge with supplies in general," Makoto explained.

"That's what I thought," Ken said. "Give me a second."

Ken slipped into the hallway that included his and Shinjiro-san's bedrooms and the bathrooms. His bedroom was the first room to the left. He opened the door, kneeling down to reach under his bed. He drew out the box that held his spear. He then went to his desk, opening one of the drawers, rummaging through his equipment.

The glint of black caught his eye first. The ring of darkness… was incredibly useful. He didn't have to worry about his weakness being exploited… But… that would only cast suspicion on him. He would have to leave it behind now… At least he could give the medicine (barring the soma)… The two traesto gems he had left… He dumped them in the drawstring bag he used to carry his supplies, slid the band over his wrist before picking up the box lying on the floor.

"Catch." Ken dropped the box onto the floor, before tossing Amamiya-san the bag.

Amamiya-san opened the bag. "Medicine? And snuff souls… what are these gems?"

"It's what I used to escape the Palace," Ken answered, undoing the clasps of the box.

"Is that a real spear?" Kitagawa-san knelt by Ken. "The craftsmanship is beautiful."

"…What else would it be?" Ken said with a frown.

"You've seriously been running around the Palace with a real weapon?" Sakamoto-san demanded. "All of our weapons are imitations."

…Well, that explained the guns.

"But thanks, I really needed some more items that'll restore our energy for spell casting,"
Amamiya-san said. "I can brew so much coffee."

…Coffee? What was that supposed to mean?

"Don't ask," Makoto said. "You'll see… eventually."

"But anyways, we should get Ken up to speed!" Morgana hopped onto the table. "We've found some interesting information since we've last spoken."

"And what would that be?" Ken asked, taking a seat onto the smaller couch.

"Alibaba is… Futaba Sakura, the requested target," Morgana said.

…Wait, what?

"Who's Futaba?" He had to feign ignorance though, since as far as they knew, he had never heard the name Futaba before.

"Oh, sorry…" Takamaki-san said, "we think she's connected to Sojiro Sakura somehow. He's Ren's guardian."

"He reacted pretty badly when we asked… so we think that he's abusing her or something," Amamiya-san explained.

Sakamoto-san nodded. "Yeah, that's why we're gonna confront him today!"

"Hmm…" Ken stroked his chin. "Well, if you want my opinion… I think you need to corner Sakura-san with this information you gathered. Somewhere he can't run away. And… And I think I have something to add to that."

"You do…?" Makoto frowned as she sat down beside him.

"Yes… because you see, Alibaba contacted me about Wakaba Isshiki… a friend of my senpai. I asked her about it, and she told me more about Isshiki-san. She committed suicide about two years ago, and she had a young daughter… named Futaba."

"S-Suicide?" Takamaki-san repeated numbly.

"Anne…" Amamiya-san put a hand on her shoulder, his eyes filled with concern.

"That's… awful…" Kitagawa-san said. "And that is rather suspicious. We should confront Boss over this as well."

"So, it's settled!" Morgana nodded firmly. "We'll confront Boss at his house this time, not LeBlanc."

"Wait, what?!" Makoto's eyes were wide with panic, as she gaped at Morgana. "We're breaking into his house?! C-Can't we just corner him at LeBlanc again?"

"Didn't work last time, so why would it this time? Besides, I'm pretty sure that he's closing up right now," Amamiya-san said. "Morgana's right, we have to go to his house. Hopefully we'll be able to talk to Futaba too."

…Good grief. Just what has he gotten himself into?
And that wasn't all. Apparently the Treasure manifested differently in the real world, and they took the money from selling the Treasure to go treat themselves for high class sushi. For some reason, he got invited too. They claimed he was a Phantom Thief too now, and that he had contributed to defeating Kaneshiro… so it made sense for him to join in.

Though… he couldn't really complain with sushi. It was delicious as always, even though Sakamoto-san almost blew their cover… He hadn't had high quality sushi in a while. The last time was… when he graduated from middle school, he believed? Mitsuru-san had ordered it for the party, and had insisted that he deserved it since he graduated top of the class.

So they had collected the leftovers and complied it in one box. Makoto had the idea of pretending to come over to give the sushi to Sakura-san (much to Morgana's dismay).

They were heading to the train station, when a voice suddenly called out to Makoto.

"Niijima-san?"

"Akechi-kun." Makoto's voice was cordial as she greeted him. "This is a surprise. What are you doing here?"

"I was passing through…" Akechi's eyes swept through the group. "Though I have to say… you have collected quite a group of friends…"

…Yeah, he was obviously lying. Ken couldn't help but frown. Just what did he want?

"Yusuke Kitagawa, correct?" Akechi asked, his eyes flickering to Kitagawa-san. "The former pupil of Madarame, if I recall correctly."

"Yes, that's correct," Kitagawa-san murmured. "Though I'm surprised you were aware of this."

He just tilted his head, smiling politely. "Well, I'd be a rather poor detective if I didn't know that at least." He then chuckled. "Fortunately, that isn't the case."

…Ugh. He was such a braggart.

"Though you could work on your modesty," Ken muttered under his breath.

"Oh?" Akechi turned to look at him. "What was that, Amada-kun?"

"Nothing. You must have imagined things." Ken smiled politely. "Though, I hear you've been officially added to the team investigating the Phantom Thieves. I'm surprised you have time to waste talking to us."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Sakamoto-san gape at him before he whispered something to Amamiya-san. Amamiya-san quickly nudged him back. Well, it was true. He couldn't explain it but… something about Akechi rubbed him in the wrong way.

"Oh, I didn't hear about that," Takamaki-san said shakily. "About you investigating the Phantom Thieves."

"Yes, they argued quite a bit over it due to my age," Akechi said. "Though, speaking of which… you're all fans of the Phantom Thieves, wouldn't you say? Have you seen the latest message Medjed posted on their website?"

"This can't be good," Makoto sighed, pulling out her phone.
"English again…" Kitagawa-san sighed. "Anne, could you…?"

"Yeah, of course…" Takamaki-san nodded, her eyes moving back and forth to read the message.

Oh, that's right… Takamaki-san looked like she had some Caucasian blood in her, though he wasn't sure to what degree. It would make sense that she would know English better than most.

"We've warned you… and you will pay the consequences," she recited. "On August 21st, we will commit the Cleanse. If you do not surrender to us, Japan will fall. Our attack will be relentless."

"W-WHAT?!" Sakamoto-san burst out, loud enough to get the attention of some passing people. "ARE YOU FOR REAL?!!"

"Ryuji!" Takamaki-san hissed. "Indoor voice!"

"We're outside," he retorted.

"I believe Anne is saying that we should not garner attention with your shouting, Ryuji," Kitagawa-san said blandly.

"Oh?" Akechi tilted his head, scrutinizing Sakamoto-san.

His gaze… was really unsettling. It was almost… calculating. Akechi was… testing them, wasn't he? He at least suspected their identities. Was he searching for solid proof then? This was bad… especially since he was officially investigating the Phantom Thieves now. He had to divert Akechi's attention somehow…

"You seem rather calm about the threat, wouldn't you say?" Ken asked. "Wouldn't this be breaking news?"

"Well, Amada-kun… it could be just a meaningless threat," Akechi said. "Though I have to say—your reactions are rather interesting. And most of you attend Shujin, don't you? The same place where Kamoshida was employed…"

"Yeah, what of it?" Sakamoto-san challenged.

"Is it not odd that your group seems to gain a new member every time the Phantom Thieves take down a new criminal?" Akechi inquired.

"So, we're not allowed to make friends?" Makoto said icily. "Is that why we're under suspicion, Akechi-kun?"

He smiled thinly. "Defensive as always, Nijima-san."

Makoto scowled at him, but Sakamoto-san beat her to the punch. "What do you want, Akechi?" he demanded. "I know you didn't come over here for no reason."

"I was just curious… especially since Nijima-san has always had trouble befriending people. And now you welcome her into your group? It's a bit suspicious, wouldn't you say?"


"Say what?!" Sakamoto-san gaped at him. "What the hell, dude?!"
"Ren, just what are you…?" Kitagawa-san's eyes were as wide as saucers.

"Yep." Amamiya-san nodded, breezing past Kitagawa-san's question without batting an eye. "He'd be the perfect Phantom Thief, wouldn't you say, Akechi?"

…Oh. So that was Amamiya-san's ploy. It was actually rather clever.

Akechi just laughed. "You always manage to surprise me, Amamiya-kun." He quirked an eyebrow. "I suppose you'll continue to do so."

"I try," Amamiya-san said with a casual shrug, all while a smirk tugged at his lips.

"Though, I must get going. I am needed at the station."

It was silent for several moments.

"…You know, I'm surprised that you have taken a disliking to Akechi, Ken," Kitagawa-san said after a moment.

"Why wouldn't I?" Ken scoffed. "He's aggravating. I prefer the original Detective Prince."

"Wait, there's an original?" Sakamoto-san asked.

"Well, he's called the second coming of the Detective Prince," Takamaki-san pointed out. "I've heard the original was seriously a prodigy."

"Yes, Naoto Shirogane," Makoto answered. "She's the fifth Shirogane to become a detective. And Anne's right, Shirogane-san became a detective when she was thirteen or fourteen. I believe their family have been detectives for nearly two hundred years. She helped solve the Hanged Man case that took place in Inaba."

"Wait, the original was a girl?" Sakamoto-san asked, his eyes wide with shock. "Why is she a 'Prince' then?"

"I heard it was because she didn't want to be treated differently," Amamiya-san said. "So she pretended to be a boy. She made a pretty convincing boy. I remember the press freaking out when she came out as a girl."

"The criminal justice community is not… kind to women," Makoto said with a grimace. "So she had a good reason to masquerade as male. My sister… has had a hard time being taken seriously as a female prosecutor."

"Though, Ren," Kitagawa-san began, shooting Amamiya-san a stern look, "was what you said to Akechi really necessary?"

"Hey, it kinda worked." He shrugged, spreading out his hands. "I needed to do something to get Akechi to stop his little interrogation."

"And this is why you need to be more careful," Ken said flatly. "I personally think he's suspicious of all of you…"

Though… he had to wonder… why did Akechi even alert them to Medjed's announcement? What was his motive…?

Yongen-jaya was a tiny ward, mainly for residential homes from the looks of it. Though Ken had
noticed there were a few small businesses. Amamiya-san had led them down an alley, stopping at the last house.

But Amamiya-san was now fiddling with the door lock with this lockpick he was carrying in his bag for some reason. Morgana was sitting on the door step, sulking at the loss of his sushi. Ken couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for him, honestly…

"Jeez, it looks it's gonna rain again," Sakamoto-san grumbled, glancing up at the darkening sky. "Looks like we may get a thunderstorm tonight."

"A-Are you serious?" Makoto said.

"Do you have astraphobia, Makoto?" Kitagawa-san inquired.

Makoto glowered at him. "No. I just don't want to get soaked again."

…Someone was being defensive.

"I think we all just lucked out, not getting sick from the fireworks festival," Takamaki-san sighed.

"Annnnd here we go!" Amamiya-san pronounced, grinning proudly as he tossed away his lockpick. It landed in one of the bushes.

"What are you doing?" Ken frowned.

"Eh, I'll just make another." Amamiya-san waved him off. "I'm due to a tool crafting session soon anyways."

…What. Tool crafting…?

They entered the house, which was cloaked in darkness. Ken couldn't help but shudder. He wasn't... fond of the dark, even before he had awakened to his Persona. He couldn't sleep in absolute darkness. It was nothing crippling but… he'd rather avoid it if possible.

"Can someone find the lights?" Makoto asked, her voice unusually unsteady.

"Hang on a sec..." Sakamoto-san's voice sounded far away. "Think I've found it." He then groaned, grumbling under his breath. "I think... the lights are busted."

"Of course they are," Ken said dryly, only to pause when he saw Makoto in the dim lighting. Ken had to squint a bit to make out her features, but he could see that she had become deathly pale. "...Makoto? What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" she repeated. "Of course not! I'm fine!" Her voice was uncharacteristically high-pitched, which didn't exactly help to sell her performance. "Perfect, in fact!"

Ken stared at her blankly.

Makoto's shoulders slumped. "I may... not do so well in the dark," she admitted in a small voice.

Oh, well… he could sympathize with that. Though Makoto looked far more… affected than he was. But… what could he do to help her?

"Er... if you want... you could hold onto my arm?" he said lamely. "Only if you want to, though," he added hastily.
Didn't want her to think that he was hitting on her or anything weird…

Makoto blinked at him, before she slowly took his arm. "Um… thanks, Ken," she murmured, but he could hear the smile in her voice.

"A-" Ken stopped short, before correcting himself. "N-No problem."

Ugh, why was he so awkward? Was it because this was a classic "subtle" move guys pulled on girls all the time? Whatever… he had to focus.

"Ren, are you positive you have the right place?" Kitagawa-san was asking. "Boss doesn't appear to be here…"

"The plaque read Sakura though," Takamaki-san pointed out. "I don't think there are many Sakura families here, let alone in Yongen-jaya."

"Hey, Futaba, you here?!" Sakamoto-san called out. "We just wanna talk!"

"Sakamoto-san-" Ken began.

"Dude."

Fighting the urge to roll his eyes, he corrected himself. "Ryuji-san, I don't think that's a good idea."

"Yeah, we probably should investigate the rooms separately…" Takamaki-san said. "Like half of us could take the rooms down here, while the other half take upstairs-"

They all froze as the familiar sound of wood creaking began to echo throughout the house. Someone was definitely here…

"W-What was that?" Makoto squeaked out, gripping his arm tightly. Ken couldn't help but wince as her fingernails dug into his arm.

"U-Um, actually…" Takamaki-san said shakily, "I-I'll check the back porch!"

"Wuss," Sakamoto-san scoffed. "I didn't know you were a scaredy-cat."

"Gr…" Takamaki-san growled, imitating her Metaverse codename. "Shut up, Ryuji!"

"Ryuji, don't pick on Anne," Amamiya-san sighed. "And Anne, calm down, okay? This isn't a horror movie… You could always do what Makoto is doing." It was hard to not hear the smirk in his voice.

"Don't tease me like that, Ren!" she huffed.

"Dude, seriously?" Sakamoto-san whined.

"Horror has such a horrible aesthetic anyways," Kitagawa-san said absently. "So much gore and they usually have horrible special effects."

The girls were rather freaked out, though. Takamaki-san looked ready to bolt, and there was how Makoto clung to his arm like it was like a lifeline. Though he supposed the thunder rumbling in the background didn't exactly help. Ken knew better than to comment on it, though. The girls would just get mad at him, and knowing that Makoto had a secretly volatile temper… it would be best to just keep his mouth shut on that subject. Especially since he would be in the perfect position to be smacked.
Ken's gaze fell onto the very wooden flight of stairs. He could see a small figure, cloaked in darkness, slowly descending the stairs.

…Oh. So that was the source.

"Hm?" Kitagawa-san turned his head. "Do you see something?"

"On the stairs," Ken said.

"D-Don't point it out!" Makoto all but whined out. "C-Can we just go?" She was all but hyperventilating. "Boss isn't here and we're trespassing and… and… Let's just go, okay?!"

Ken could feel a pair of eyes boring into him. (He was very familiar with the sensation, sadly.) Makoto must have felt it too because he felt her stiffen. She slowly turned.

And in that moment, lightning flashed, illuminating the figure. Ken could only make out long orange hair and a large pair of glasses. But Makoto didn't exactly… take it so calmly.

She shrieked loudly, the loudest sound Ken had heard her make. This only caused the girl to scream back, blasting all of their eardrums. She fled back up the stairs, but Makoto didn't seem to notice. Her fingernails dug painfully into Ken's bare skin, before she suddenly yanked him closer to her. She then buried her face against his shoulder. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry!" she blurted out in a rush, all while still clinging onto him.

Ken just… froze, as his face burned with embarrassment. This... This was not what he had expected. It wasn't inappropriate but... it was more... intimate than what he was used to?

He had been hugged before, by Minako-san, Fuuka-san, and Yukari-san. But this was... different. Probably because Makoto was his age.

Ugh, what was he thinking? Makoto was freaking out and he was more concerned about himself?!

"M-Makoto, you need to calm down…" Ken said shakily, moving to touch her shoulder with his free hand. But this only made Makoto panic.

"Nonono, don't leave me!" she begged.

He just… wanted to comfort her… But apparently she thought he was pulling away.

"Getting cozy?" Amamiya-san asked teasingly.

"Amamiya-san," Ken said through gritted teeth, feeling a strong urge to hit the younger boy, "you are not helping."

The girl disappeared out of view, escaping down the hallway.

"Wait!" Sakamoto-san groaned. "Dammit! We were so close…"

"Do you think Futaba-chan will be okay?" Takamaki-san's voice trembled. "I hope we didn't scare her too badly…"

"Uh, what's this 'we'?" Sakamoto-san demanded. "I think she would've been fine if Makoto hadn't screamed at her!"

"Will you knock it off?" Ken hissed, his eyes flickering to Makoto. She had calmed down… for the most part though she still hadn't let go of his arm… which was starting to get numb.
"That's quite enough," Kitagawa-san admonished. "We'll just have to try again another d-

"Futaba?!!" Loud footsteps thumped against the floor, and a moment later, the door slammed open. "Futaba, are you okay?!!"

"B-Boss!" Takamaki-san squeaked.

"I promise we can explain!" Kitagawa-san said hurriedly.

"Who are you?!!" the newcomer demanded, groping around for a flashlight before shining the light right in their eyes. "Wait… Ren?!!"

"Uh… hey, Sojiro?" Amamiya-san said weakly.

This wasn't awkward. At all.

Ken's head was spinning. Some of the information Sakura-san had offered him wasn't new to him but… the stuff he didn't know was just… overwhelming.

And the fact that Futaba was indeed Wakaba Isshiki's daughter… and that she had been suffering the whole time since her mother died…

"We were totally off the mark." Sakamoto-san shook his head. "You heard Boss… he only cares 'bout Futaba's wellbeing. There's no way that he's abusing her."

"I-I mean, that's a relief, isn't it?" Takamaki-san asked, obviously looking to look on the bright side. "Especially since Ren is under his care…" She then bit her lip. "But… poor Futaba-chan… Isn't there something we can do?"

He didn't blame her for being worried. For Futaba to have auditory and visual hallucinations… something horrible must have happened for her to be that traumatized. And he was concerned about what exactly she saw and heard…

But the question was… what had happened? And just why did Futaba think that she was responsible for her mother's death?

"Is it… possible for her to still have a Palace?" Ken said slowly. "What are the requirements to have a Palace?"

"Well, it just requires to have your desires to be heavily distorted, according to Morgana," Amamiya-san said. He then paused, his eyebrows furrowing. "…Speaking of which, where did he even go?"

"You lost him?" Kitagawa-san frowned.

"He's pretty smart," Sakamoto-san said. "And Yongen-jaya ain't that big. I'm sure that he'll find his way back here, no problem."

"But shall we test it?" Kitagawa-san inquired, already pulling out his phone. "Hm… how should we input it?"

"Let's see…" Sakamoto-san said, pulling out his phone. His voice was uncertain as he spoke again. "How 'bout… the Futaba Sakura who lives in Sojiro Sakura's house?"

"Candidate found."
"So it's a hit..." Makoto said slowly. "But the location... I think the only place would be Boss's house."

"Okay..." Sakamoto-san mumbled, before speaking into the phone. "Sojiro Sakura's house?" he said uncertainly.

"Now we just need the distortion..." Makoto mused.

"Distortion?" Ken asked.

"It's how the host views their palace as," Takamaki-san explained, brushing her pigtail behind her back. "For Kamoshida, he viewed himself as a king and our school as his castle."

"Maybe... prison?" Amamiya-san suggested.

"Candidate not found."

"Damn, of course," Sakamoto-san sighed, scrunching up his face. "I've got no other ideas..."

"We probably should speak to Futaba tomorrow," Ken said. "And probably prepare to enter the Palace...",

"Oh, that reminds me." Amamiya-san turned to Ken. "What kind of gun do you think you want to use?"

In hindsight, he should have seen this coming. But still...

"A kind of what?" Ken repeated.

"We use that to hold up Shadows," Sakamoto-san explained. "You've gotta have one!"

"They're only model guns," Makoto said hurriedly, shooting the two younger boys an exasperated look. "Don't worry. Ren just goes to an airsoft shop and buys everything there."

While he did have his Evoker... force of habit would probably have him try to shoot himself. And that would not turn out well.

"I guess... a handgun?" Ken shrugged. "I don't exactly have much knowledge on guns."

"Ren has those," Takamaki-san said. "You have to pick something else."

"Well, how was I supposed to know that?" Ken grumbled, even though he knew perfectly well that Amamiya-san used a pistol during the fights.

"Eh, it's fine." Amamiya-san waved a hand. "There are so many types of guns. What do you want him to use? A grenade launcher?"

"Okay, I guess you have a good point," she conceded with a firm nod.

"So, we're settled then?" Makoto asked. "We'll meet in front of Boss's house tomorrow morning... to talk to Futaba-chan."

"Eleven good for everyone?" Amamiya-san asked.

"Yes, I believe so..." Kitagawa-san said, closing his eyes. "I probably should bring bean sprouts to munch on the train then," he mumbled to himself.
Bean sprouts...? Yeah, Shinjiro-san would really not be happy with Kitagawa-san's eating habits. Ken made a mental note to make a lunch for Kitagawa-san. Someone had to feed him...

After that, everyone dispersed, heading for their respective homes. Well, except for Amamiya-san...

"Aren't you going to where you're staying at?" Ken asked with a frown.

Amamiya-san just offered him a wry smile. "Already at it."

"You live here?" Ken asked, unable to stop himself from staring. He then pressed a hand to his temple. ". I'm sorry if I unintentionally rubbed where I'm staying at in your face."

"Nah, it's cool." He waved Ken off with an easygoing smile. "I mean, anywhere is nicer than here... And it really was nice of you to offer shelter from the rain."

"If you say so..." Ken then paused at the door, looking at Amamiya-san. "And um, thank you for welcoming me onto the team."

Amamiya-san just grinned at him. "I'm sure you'll make a great addition." Then he paused. "Though..."

"Hm?" Ken frowned quizzically at him. "What is it?"

"You've had experience in combat, right?" he asked. "I was wondering... can you teach me anything?"

Teach him?

Ken pursed his lips together. "Well... I suppose I could teach you how to... fight in tandem?" he said tentatively. "I used to fight with a partner, so I have some experience in that. Though in return... I would like to hear more about your exploits in the past."

Amamiya-san nodded, before flashing him a grin. "You've got yourself a deal." Then he looked straight at Ken. "But you know... Ryuji is right. It wouldn't kill you to be less formal with us. We're teammates now, right?" He then wrinkled his nose. ". And besides, Amamiya-san just makes me think of my dad."

"Fair enough," Ken said. "I'll try to remember that... Ren."

---

_Thou art I... and I am thou._

_Thou hast acquired a new vow._

_It shall become the wings of rebellion_  
_that breakth thy chains of captivity._

_With the birth of the Adjustment Persona,_

_I have obtained the winds of blessing that_  
_shall lead to freedom and new power..._
**ADJUSTMENT CONFIDANT**

**Rank 1 (Shadow Elimination):** Ken may suggest two elements when Ren targets a Shadow for analysis, if the weakness is unknown. One of these elements will be the Shadow's weakness.

**Rank 3 (Fusion Raid):** Two party members may perform a special co-op attack when all Shadows are all knocked down (essentially the P4G special co-op attacks)

**Rank 5 (Unison Attack):** Two or more party members may step in and perform a special attack, with various effects, after Ren knocks down a Shadow. (inspired by the Unison Attacks in PQ2)

**Rank 7 (Co-op Attack):** Chance for Ren and a party member to have a special co-op attack to knock down all Shadows, after Ren knocks down one Shadow

**Personas:** Ammit (level 31), Astraea (level 40), Jeanne d'Arc (level 48), Janus (level 54), Forseti (level 63), Shamash (level 72)

Chapter End Notes

So, Ken has officially joined the Phantom Thieves! And Ren has initiated his confidant with Ken.

Though for anyone who is confused about Ken's confidant arcana, the Adjustment arcana is an alternate reading of the Justice arcana from the Thoth deck.

Adjustment seeks balance and growth around core principles, but never forgets that understanding the past brings insight to the future. Finding harmony with the higher self brings stability to both the internal and external landscapes.

Credit to Death_Prince_3 for inspiring the confidant bonuses.
Monday, July 25th, 2016

"God, why couldn't they just send us a friggin' email or something," Ryuji complained, before dropping down on a seat. "That was a complete waste of time."

"Don't complain," Makoto sighed, before sitting down herself. She crossed her legs. "At least it's over now… And now we can focus on how to help Futaba…"

"Oh yeah, Morgana, where did you go last night?" Ren asked. "You had me worried…"

"Sorry, but I found it the perfect opportunity to do some snooping," Morgana said. "I discovered something important…" He took a deep breath. "Futaba was listening in on us in LeBlanc."

"How so?" Yusuke paused in eating the lunch Ken had prepared for him.

"A bug?" Ken guessed.

If they had discussed him in the aftermath of Kaneshiro's defeat… that would explain how Futaba knew about him being in Tokyo. Not that he could mention that…

"More or less," Morgana said with a nod. "She seems to be quite a technological genius."

"But… why listen in on the café?" Anne asked with a frown.

"Ren has never met her before…" Makoto mused with a tilt of her head. "Perhaps Futaba had the bug even before Ren even moved out here. Perhaps it was a way for her to keep an eye on Boss."

"Who knows?" Ryuji sighed. "She's a tough nut to crack, like Boss said."

"But either way, we will need her help…" Makoto continued, "if we are to stand up to Medjed. Her hacking abilities seem to be unparalleled, if she can so easily hack into Ren and Ken's phones."

That's true… and he thought Fuuka-san was good. Especially with how she managed to piece together the video Yukari-san's dad had made… which Ikutsuki had attempted to destroy.

Anne bit her lip. "I wonder what Futaba's Palace will be like…" she mused. "Since she's not like the other Palaces we've seen. If she has a Palace… her mindset must be a bit… warped."

"That doesn't necessarily means she's bad," Ken interjected. "Everyone has a Shadow… insecurities that they don't want to admit. I assume that people with Palaces have lost control of their Shadow, and have allowed it to rule their mindset."
Everyone else stared at him.

"Um… how do you know that?" Makoto asked.

"I… ah… studied a little bit of Jung during my spare time," Ken said, quickly averting his eyes. "You'd be surprised how much it applies to Personas and Shadows."

"She's so young though…" Anne sighed, closing her eyes. "Just what happened to her for the distortions to occur…?"

Ken bit his lip, looking down at his lap. "…She watched her mother die. I think that would be enough to traumatize anyone," he said quietly.

"…Yes." Yusuke's expression became troubled, before pursing his lips. "And… I'm concerned about the hallucinations Boss has mentioned…"

"Maybe… the shit she's been hearing and seeing… is connected to some memories that Futaba's been pushin' away?" Ryuji suggested. "I mean, Boss said she saw some creepy shit… like her mom watching her."

Anne opened her eyes, before she shuddered. "D-Do you have to put it that way?" she asked with a wince.

"Sorry, Lady Anne, but it's true," Morgana sighed. "I… I think Ryuji is right… Futaba is most likely repressing some kind of memory. The memory may have become warped due to the trauma."

"So… we have to go after her Treasure," Ren concluded. "As usual."

"So, do we have an agreement?" Anne asked, her expression now determined. "Futaba's Palace… is our next target."

They all nodded.

"Though… I'm a bit worried," Morgana said.

"Whataya mean?" Ryuji frowned.

"Well, it's just…" Morgana sighed. "The irregularity of the case. Someone asking for their heart to be stolen is not something that usually occurs. We have no idea what the Palace will be like…"

"You didn't know how the Palace set-up would be for Kaneshiro, right?" Ken asked. "Just assume that the Palace is just another obstacle you have to tackle… and be prepared for anything."

"It's not that…!" Morgana shook his head. "I just… I don't know what we'll face. This is nothing like what we faced before…"

"We still have to, Morgana," Ren said quietly, before pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Even without Medjed… Futaba has been suffering for quite some time. Especially since she's so young… We can't leave this be."

"Okay. I… I just wanted to make sure."

"But the last keyword…" Ken mused. "Just what could it be?"

"I think… we should ask Futaba herself," Yusuke said. "It should provide an important clue…"
"That sounds good to me." Ren nodded. "We should get going, then."

Then Yusuke handed him the bento box with a grateful smile. "My thanks, though. The meal was quite delicious. Not on par to Shinjiro-san's cooking, but still, very delicious."

"Yusuke!" Anne scolded. "And after he cooked for you-!"

"I called his cooking delicious." Yusuke blinked at her. "I do not understand."

"No, it's okay," Ken dismissed with a wave of his hand. "Shinjiro-san is an excellent cook. I know I'm not quite at his level."

"Still," Anne sighed, before she glanced over at him. "But it's impressive that you know how to cook… A lot of girls find that attractive in a guy."

"Ah…" Ken felt his face flush. "T-Thank you?"

"You know," Ren said casually, leaning closer to Anne, "Sojiro promised to teach me how to cook curry… You should taste test for me, Anne."

Anne giggled. "Sure, I'd love to."

"Enough chitchat," Makoto chided. "We should get to Boss's house now…"

Hmm… what to do about the bento box? It was a high probability that they would enter the Palace…

"Ken, you can just leave it here for now," Ren said. "Sojiro's house isn't too far away, so you can just swing by and pick up after we're wrapped up for the day."

"Thanks." Ken nodded with a smile, leaving it on the table they had been gathered around just a few minutes ago. Then he noticed that Ren was still seated. "Um, aren't you coming…?"

"We'll catch up in a minute," Ren said, stroking the top of Morgana's head. "Go ahead."

Hmm… Morgana looked awfully down about… something. The question was… what exactly?

But he doubted that he would get Ren to say it. It was clear as day that Morgana didn't want it broadcasted so… all he could was respect Ren's request and catch up with the others.

"A labyrinth, maybe?"

Candidate not found.

"Um…" Anne clasped her hands before her back. "Maybe oasis?"

"Another dud…" Ryuji sighed.

"How about hell?" Yusuke suggested.

…Well, that was a rather morbid suggestion.

Ken shook his head. "I don't think this will work," he sighed. "We need to talk to Futaba directly or something…"

"But… how?" Yusuke asked. "Surely, the door will be locked after last night…"
"Uh, the same way as last time?" Ren said. "We'd have to use another lockpick but…"

"I've got you covered this time." Morgana, perched on the brick wall, jumped on the opposite side. "And besides, I know where Futaba's room is. We'll be able to speak with her for sure."

"But… there's Boss…" Makoto said with a wince. Her eyes flickered to meet Ken's, before her face flushed and she quickly looked away. "He won't buy any excuse…"

"He's at work, though," Anne pointed out. "It should be fine."

"I don't think… that's what she's talking about," Ken said with a wince. "There's nothing stopping Futaba from telling him that we came into the house."

"Well, an apology is in order anyways," Ren said. "And like Yusuke said… we have to talk to Futaba if we wanna crack the code."

"…True," Ken conceded. "Well, let's just hope this will turn out well…"

Ryuji suddenly slapped his back, causing him to stumble forward a bit. "Come on, don't be such a downer! You've gotta think more positive, man!"

Ryuji… really liked to look on the positive side, didn't he? Though Ryuji did remind him a bit of Junpei-san… so he supposed it shouldn't come off as that much of a surprise.

"And she did get into contact with Ren… repeatedly…" Makoto looked thoughtful as she stroked her chin. "Hopefully, this means she'll willingly talk to him…"

"I don't see why not," Yusuke said. "Besides, Ren is a person you can easily talk to."

Ren swept a low bow. "I try," he drawled.

And just then there was a click. "And done!" Morgana said proudly.

"Hey, good timing, Morgana!" Anne said brightly. "Let's go!"

The juniors went in first, but Ken felt a tug on his sleeve. Makoto was gripping his sleeve, a light blush dusting her cheeks. "Um… can we talk really quickly?" she asked, looking rather anxious.

Ken frowned. "What's wrong?"

"I just…" She bowed her head. "I wanted to apologize for last night," she mumbled. "I behaved inappropriately… I scared Futaba and I… um…" She ducked her head. "D-Don't make me say it."

"It's okay, Makoto," Ken said, offering her a smile to reassure her. "You were just… scared. I admit it was a bit… unexpected, but you didn't do anything wrong."

"But I-"

Ken put a hand on her shoulder. "It's nothing different than you grabbing onto my arm if you were scared by a horror movie," he said. "And…" his eyes flickered to meet Makoto's, "…I'll let you in on a secret. I'm not great in the dark either."

"Y-You aren't?" Makoto's eyes were filled with disbelief. "But you seemed so… composed last night."

"It's not… as debilitating as with you," Ken admitted. "And I've had to deal with the dark a fair
amount... I can handle it to a degree, but I can't sleep in complete darkness. There's nothing wrong with being afraid of the dark. It's a common fear."

"So... we're okay? Really?" Makoto's voice was hopeful.

"We're more than fine," Ken said with a smile. "But come on, we should really get g-"

"Oi, Makoto, are you getting cold feet or somethin'?!!"

"Should have known someone would have picked up on it," Makoto sighed, shaking her head. "But... you're right, Ken. Come on."

The Palace was scorching hot, but... that wasn't what Ken was focused on. The keyword had been tomb...

This will be the place where I will die.

Futaba was... suicidal. She was scared and alone and... felt helpless... Ken's fingers gripped the top of the seat where Ryuji and Ren sat. Just what would be in the depths in her Palace? He doubted it'd be pretty...

"FINALLY!" Ryuji suddenly shouted, snapping Ken out of his thoughts. "That's it, isn't it?"

"A pyramid..." Makoto said slowly. "Yes, that must be it."

"And it fits the Golden Ratio... perfectly," Yusuke said dreamily. "How marvelous. I never thought a pyramid would be this stunning..."

"I'm... surprised you can tell," Ren said with a chuckle.

"Nonsense! Anyone with a good eye can tell."

...Well, considering he needed reading glasses, he was out in that regard.

They all piled out of the Morgana-bus, and a moment later, Morgana was back to his normal self. But Ken found himself staring up at the pyramid. Yusuke was right, actually. The pyramid was rather stunning. But Ken couldn't just think about why it had taken on this form.

"Are you okay?" He felt a hand on his shoulder, and he turned to see Makoto looking at him in concern.

"Just... wasn't handling the heat well," Ken lied—though it was the truth. He tolerated the cold better than the heat. "I'll be okay... Relatively."

"Joker prepares coffee to keep our energy up. I'm sure it's iced because of that," Makoto said, pressing her hand against her mouth as she studied him closely. "Oh, but if you're sweating so much, you probably are a bit dehydrated. Hmm..."

"Makoto, it's okay-"

"Hey hey, none of that!" Morgana cut in, leveling a surprisingly potent disapproving stare at Ken. "She's Queen here. You have to stick to the code names!"

...Oh. Right. He forgot that was a thing. They really took the whole Phantom Thief thing seriously.
"Oooh, we've gotta give him a code name!" Anne chimed in. "Any ideas?"

"We should probably wait to see his outfit completely," Ren mused. "It's a bit weird that we haven't transformed yet, though…"

"What triggers it then?" Ken asked.

He had immediately transformed in Kaneshiro's Palace. He thought it was automatic.

"The owner of the Palace has to view you as a threat," Morgana explained, before crossing his little arms over his chest with a frown. "But hmm… it may be troublesome if we have to fight Shadows…"

"We'll just deal with it when the time comes, then… We have our weapons, at least," Ren said. "Come on, let's go."

…Ren was the impulsive type, wasn't he?

They then entered the Palace, which was surprisingly cool. Ken had no idea why, but he wasn't going to complain.

"It feels like… air conditioning," Yusuke observed. "Why is that?"

Morgana cocked his head, before letting out a thoughtful hum. "Well, this is Futaba's Palace. And she always stays in her room, doesn't she? So her cognition is influencing the Palace."

Cognition… seriously influenced this Shadow nest. That was… interesting. It really showed that Shadow nests varied from place to place. He would have to tell Mitsuru-san this tonight.

"A bit odd… but I can't say I have any complaints."

Looking more closely at him, Ken could see that Yusuke was sweating profusely. If he recalled correctly… his weakness was fire. So it made sense that the heat would get to Yusuke more.

Ren led them up the stairs, and they leaped over a chasm, only with small pillars keeping them from falling to their deaths. They then ascended many, many stairs. Everyone was panting by the time they reached the top.

"Hey, there's someone there…" Morgana said slowly.

Futaba clad in an Egyptian style dress, an ornate gold headdress on the top of her head, stared at them with her brilliant gold eyes. No… it wasn't Futaba. It was her Shadow.

It was… unnerving how much she resembled the Investigation Team's Shadows… and his Shadow. That had been a fake but… that Shadow had hit a nerve in him. Hard. It had been… eerie how it seemed to know his insecurities at the time. But at the same time, that encounter was what caused him to… wake up. It had helped him realize that he was trying to live in the past.

"Is this really Futaba?" Ryuji asked, cocking his head.

"No, it's Futaba's Shadow," Ken corrected. "Look at her eyes."

"Yes, that's right…" Though Morgana seemed to be curious at Ken's statement. "Her eyes were purple, I think? It was hard to tell in the light."
Shadow Futaba just stared at them blankly though.
"Er… hello?" Yusuke said hesitantly. "You're the ruler of this Palace, aren't you?"
"Hey, where's the Treasure?" Ryuji stepped close to her. "You want us to steal it, don't ya?"
"Um, Skull, I don't think that's a good idea…" Makoto warned.
…She was right. Ken couldn't help but sense that something was wrong…
"But she wants us to take her treasure!" he protested, whirling to look at Makoto. "Shouldn't she lead us to it?"

He had a point but… Ken couldn't help but notice the Shadow's body language. She stood rigidly. Her eyes were impassive. Nothing in her body language implied that she was happy to see them.

"Hey, don't just stare at us!" Ryuji huffed. "Come on, just tell us!"
"Skull…" Ren began, but was cut off by Anne marching up to him and smacking his shoulder.

"Don't yell at her!" she hissed. "Don't you remember what Boss said?" She then moved closer to Futaba, holding out her hand. "I-I'm sorry, Futaba-chan… But there's nothing to be scared of, okay?" Her voice had turned warm and welcoming, but she didn't touch Futaba. Probably so not to overwhelm her.

But despite Anne's gentleness with Futaba's Shadow… she was unmoved. She just blinked at Anne.

"Won't you tell us where your most treasured possession is?" Anne continued to coax Futaba.
"Panther," Ren said quietly, "I don't think she wants to talk…"

"Indeed… This is going nowhere, unfortunately. It appears she does not wish to tell us." Yusuke then paused, pursing his lips. "Or even deign to speak to us at all."

"Let's just go," Ryuji sighed, shaking his head. "This was a bust."

"Those who plunder my tomb… why have you come here?" Her voice came out as a hiss. It was… distorted, much like the Shadow selves he had encountered in Inaba.

"Wait… you wanted us to steal your treasure though," Ren said with a frown. "Isn't that right?"

She just blinked at him, her eyes clouding over. "If you believe you can steal it… you can go ahead and try."

"That's rather defiant sounding," Morgana said with a huff. "Just you watch."

"Your actions are rather… baffling," Yusuke stated with a frown. "You wish for us to steal your Treasure… but now you're saying… not to?"

She gave a shrug. "My palace is a large fortress, meant to protect my Treasure. There is simply no way for you to steal it."

No… that wasn't it. Ken looked into her eyes. Even though she was rather bold with her words, Ken could see her trembling slightly. She was… scared. Sakura-san had mentioned how she constantly pushed people away. Was this affecting her Shadow?
Then… disembodied voices began to echo through the chamber.

_Creepy child…_

_You killed her!_

_Plague!_

Were these words… spoken to Futaba? From a memory? Anger quickly surged through him. They told this… to a thirteen year old girl?! What kind of monsters would do that?

"These voices…" Yusuke breathed. "Where are they coming from?"

_Murderer!_

_Say something!_

Shadow Futaba then crumpled to her knees, her dress billowing around her as she clutched her head. Anne took a step forward, only to hesitate and draw back. The look on her face was just… pure devastation. And… she looked guilty, for some reason?

But just… what the _hell_. Those voices… had those people spoken to her during her mother's funeral? Accusing her of such awful things? How could they say this to a young girl, who had to be devastated from losing her mother? Calling her a _murderer_?!

"Murderer?" Makoto repeated. "What in the world…?"

_You're the one who killed her!_

_This is all your fault!_

"How could they?" Ken said numbly. "Why would they say such awful things to her? She was… She was a child."

His own thoughts… the fact that he had felt that nobody had cared for him had driven him to feel suicidal. But this? People were directly attacking her, after being traumatized from watching her mother die with her own eyes. With this… it was no wonder that Futaba thought she deserved to die in Sakura-san's house. How long… had she suffered through this? Alone?

"Seriously… what the hell?" Ryuji choked out. "This is… This is effed up."

That was an… understatement. Ken just felt… sick to his stomach.

As the voices continued to echo throughout the Palace, Ken noticed that Shadow Futaba rose to her feet. "That's right…" she said hollowly. "I did it. I am the one who killed my mother."

Suddenly there was a screeching sound, and the whole Palace seemed to shake. Dust fell through the cracks. Anne let out a yelp, hastily stepping back.

"What was that?" Anne gasped.

Shadow Futaba shrugged elegantly, before spreading her hands in front of her. "My mother exists here. It's a… reminder of what I have done."

"What…?" Ren frowned. "But… she's _dead_. How is that possible?"
Her mother... was it Futaba's cognition of her?

"I will remain here. I will do so... until I die."

"Don't give up!" Ken blurted out. "Your mother loved you... do you think she would want you to die?" He shook his head. "No... she would have wanted you to live."

Shinjiro-san's words to him, seven years ago, echoed in his mind.

You have your whole life ahead of you, Ken... don't waste it.

Futaba had to realize the same thing. He hadn't met Isshiki-san himself but... Mitsuru-san was convinced that she loved Futaba dearly. There had to be some kind of disparity.

"He's right!" Anne cried. "Your mother would have wanted you to be happy! She wouldn't want you to...!" Anne's voice broke then, biting her lip. "She would have wanted you to live a happy life. Any mother would..."

"There's no fighting it..." Shadow Futaba's voice was numb.

Then blue flames flared up around all of them, transforming their civilian clothing into their Phantom Thief attire.

"She sees us as a threat now..." Yusuke said. "What now?!"

Then a huge boulder dropped down, as Shadow Futaba disappeared.

"We run!" Ren shouted, before he grabbed Morgana and bolted.

They ran after Ren, as the boulder continued to roll after them. (Honestly, Ken was just grateful that they didn't fall flat on their faces.) They finally managed to find some cover as the boulder continued to roll down the stairs.

"God, that was too close," Ryuji moaned, leaning down and clutching his knees. "I thought the rock was gonna flatten us into pancakes..."

"Don't joke about that, Skull," Anne groaned, clutching her chest. "I thought my heart was going to explode out of my chest." She then all but collapsed onto the floor.

"But... now what?" Yusuke asked. "It appears that Futaba does not want us to go further in."

Ken approached the door, sliding his hand over it. That symbol... It was probably the key to opening the door.

"I think we'll just have to do it the hard way," Ken said. "I think the symbol is how we'll unlock the door..."

"She... literally slammed the door in our faces," Yusuke sighed.

"So we'll have to explore the Palace to do so," Makoto said. "And unlock the mystery of that symbol..."

"But I think we should retreat for now," Morgana interjected. "I think this will be even rougher than Kaneshiro's Palace. We probably need time to prepare."

"Futaba-chan..." Anne bit her lip. "Will she... really be okay if we stop for the day...?"
"Futaba seems to be hanging on," Makoto said. "But we probably should aim to clear the Palace as soon as we can."

"But anyways…" Ren interjected, "we have one more thing to do." He gestured to Ken. "His code name, remember?"

Ryuji suddenly approached him, staring hard at him. Ken was a bit… unnerved by the staring. "Tuxedo Mask!" Ryuji snapped his fingers. "That's what you've been reminding me of!"

…What. N-No, that was because the outfit resembled the Gekkoukan uniform…

"Oh my god, you're right!" Anne gasped, her eyes growing wide. "He even has a domino mask!"

"Um… I think you're stretching it a bit," Makoto said slowly.

"Nuh uh!" Anne contradicted, shaking her head. "Come on, he totally looks like a gentleman thief! Kinda princely with the tuxedo get-up, if you ask me."

He really did not want to have this conversation. Ken fiddled with his gloves to try and distract himself from this conversation. Though he supposed he should be grateful that Junpei-san was nowhere near close enough to hear this. He'd never hear the end of it.

"Let's do… Tux Boy!" Ryuji suggested.

"Uh, no," Ken deadpanned. "Not in a billion years and not even if you paid me ten million yen."

"Kamen?" Yusuke suggested. "Your costume does inspire it."

Kamen… that was like Kamen Rider… Wait, what was he thinking?! Yusuke was thinking about Tuxedo Mask and… that was just embarrassing to think about.

"No."

"Jeez, you're a picky one," Morgana complained.

"I'm not going to be called something ridiculous," Ken said flatly.

"The sad thing is that it's not even the most ridiculous names," Makoto sighed. "Skull wanted to name me Shoulder Pads…"

"Hey, your name was hard, okay?!"

"Hmm…" Anne mused, pressing her index finger against her lips as she thought. "Well, we did name Queen based off of… how she held herself." Maybe we should do something similar. Not just looking at the outfit for inspiration, you know?"

"Hmm…" Ren looked at him up and down, a considering light in his eyes.

"Joker, do you have an idea?" Yusuke asked, tilting his head slightly. "You do come up with good code names. You came up with mine and Queen's."

"You weren't here when we were brainstorming for mine," Anne said flatly.

"I still think Sexy Kitty was a good name," Ren said, flashing her a smirk.

…What. Now he was a bit nervous…
"But I was thinking… Ace," Ren said simply. "You're an experienced Persona-user, after all."

Ken felt his face grow warm. No pressure there… "I, er… well… if you think so…” he mumbled out.

"Damn, and I thought you were one of those cool and collected senpai types," Ryuji snickered.

"Skull!" Anne smacked his arm. "He's still our senpai—don't be rude!"

"Ace good for you?" Morgana turned to face him, and Ken nodded. "Okay, it's settled then." He gave a little hop. "Your code name will be Ace."

"Shall we head back then?" Yusuke asked.

"I'm… perfectly okay with that," Makoto said with a wince.

"Yeah." Ren nodded. "Good work, everyone."

"On what, not getting smushed?" Anne grumbled. "It was like we were in an Indiana Jones movie or something…"

But… despite her joking, Ken couldn't help but notice the look in her eye…

"It never boggles my mind to see how time passes so quickly while we're in the Metaverse."

The sun was setting, the sky streaked with hues of pinks and purples. Ren could feel the exhaustion setting in already.

"I know," Anne sighed before she stretched. "I think… I think I'll head home now…"

"Actually…” Ren put a hand on her shoulder, which caused her to look up in surprise. "Do you think… you could spare some time to talk? Ken, too."

"Me?" The older boy frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Can you?" Ren pressed.

He didn't want to say it in front of everyone. Both of them deserved a little privacy. But… It was his job as the leader to make sure everyone was holding up okay. And… Anne and Ken's reactions worried him the most.

He knew why Anne was affected so badly, because of what happened with Shiho… but Ken? He had no idea. In all honesty, the older boy was a bit of a mystery to Ren still… He seemed guarded for some reason. But his outburst? Something was obviously up. What? He wasn't exactly sure… But still, he needed to check if he'd be okay, going further into Futaba's Palace. He wouldn't pry if Ken didn't want to talk, but Ren didn't want to push him into continuing if this reminded him of something painful.

"I… all right," he conceded with a sigh.

"Anne?" Ren asked, giving her a pleading look.

He wanted to make sure she'd be okay… Anne has always been so empathetic. She saw past the rumors about him. She was so pained when she watched Shiho struggle through her therapy. And Futaba was obviously going through a lot of pain… It didn't take a genius to realize that she was
thinking about how Shiho had felt after Kamoshida pulled his shit. It was… one of the things he loved about her, but he still was worried about her. She had looked so pained when Futaba's Shadow drew away.

"Okay, okay, you don't have to give me that look," she sighed, shaking her head. "Jeez, and I thought boys couldn't pull off the puppy dog look that well…"

"We should get out of here, though," Ryuji said. "Before Boss comes home and realizes we're hanging 'round here."

"Especially me," Yusuke announced. "I will have to walk home. I'm afraid that I do not have enough for the train fare."

"You what?!" Makoto gaped at him. "Yusuke, why didn't you speak up?" she demanded. "We could have given you money-"

"I thought it was not important…"

Ken sighed. "Of course you did," he muttered, before digging out his wallet and drawing out a two thousand yen bill.

Yusuke frowned. "You don't have to-"

"Yes, I do," Ken cut in, leveling an unimpressed stare at Yusuke. "Look, just take the money. It's going to be dark soon. I don't want you to get mugged or anything."

Yusuke sighed, before finally accepting the money. "My thanks."

"Come on, let's get going then." Ryuji tugged on Yusuke's sleeve. "See ya later. Hit us up when you're ready to go back!"

They left the alley together, but Ryuji, Yusuke, and Makoto headed for the train station, while Ren led Anne and Ken to LeBlanc. Sojiro was wiping down the counter when Ren opened the door, but he looked up when they entered.

"Oh hey," he said, straightening up. "About time you got back."

Ren just flashed a grin at him. "What's wrong? Ready to go home?"

"Haha, very funny," he said dryly, before he picked up the rag he was using to clean the counter and smacking Ren on the head with it. "A bit late to be hanging out with friends, though, isn't it?"

"Well, we just-" Anne began, only for her to pause.

"I promised them some coffee as a pick-me-up," Ren cut in smoothly. "It's been a long day."

Sojiro frowned, before adjusting his glasses. "Well… okay. Don't use too many of my good beans, though."

"Will do." Ren saluted him, offering him a grin.


"Good night," Anne and Ken chorused.

"At least some kids have manners still," he muttered before opening the door. "Don't forget to-"
"-Flip the sign," Ren finished. "You've told me a hundred times already."

Sojiro rolled his eyes. "Good night, Ren."

He then stepped out and let the door slam behind him.

Anne just quirked an eyebrow at him, before perching herself onto one of the bar seats. "You know… you should be more polite to him. Boss is actually really nice."

"He reminds me a little of Shinjiro-san," Ken noted. "The gruffness to him. But I'm sure he's a lot nicer than he lets on."

"He was an ass to me when I first moved here," Ren grumbled. "Telling me not to stick my nose into trouble and everything."

"How's that working out for you?" Ken said dryly before sitting down next to Anne.

"Hey, trouble comes looking for me," Ren quipped, sliding into the free seat next to Anne. He had swung his bag into his lap, but Morgana just jumped out of his bag, settling right in front of Anne. "I didn't go and ask for it."

Anne scratched Morgana right under his chin, before glancing up at Ren. "Ren… why did you ask us to come with you?"

"Well…" Ren took the moment to take Anne's hand and squeeze it lightly. She looked at him in surprise, pink lightly dusting her cheeks. Pink suited her beautifully. "Anne… are you okay? I know Futaba reminded you of Shiho…"

Anne's eyes softened. "Oh…" But then she offered him one of her genuine smiles, her eyes sparkling. "Thank you, Ren… but I'm okay. I just… want to help Futaba-chan. I don't want her to feel that kind of pain," she said softly. "And… I just think… would we have known if it wasn't for Medjed…?"

"It's not good to dwell on what ifs," Ken said quietly. "Futaba reached out to you, and that's good enough."

"What about you, though?" Morgana asked. "What you said…"

Ken pursed his lips together, before he looked away. "A long time ago," he said quietly, "I had felt the way Futaba had felt."

Anne's eyes went wide. "Ken…"

"But… I feel the same way as you, Anne." Ken turned, looking at them. "Futaba doesn't deserve to live like this. It's more of a half-life, locking herself away from everyone. No one… can be an island." He closed his eyes. "It just makes me want to help her… like how I was helped." He then opened his eyes and looked past Anne, meeting Ren's eyes. "I'll be okay, really. It definitely won't be easy, but I want to do this."

"If you think so. I just… don't want to push you into something if it brings back painful memories," Ren said.

Anne smiled at him. "Thank you, Ren," she said sincerely, "but it'll be okay." Then her expression became determined, and her hand resting in her lap curled into a fist. "I'm going to help Futaba-chan… it won't be like Shiho. Never again."
He… loved seeing Panther in Anne. He loved how *fierce* she could be, and yet she was loving and caring. Even to a practically stranger, like Futaba.

Ken then gave him a funny look. He almost looked… annoyed. What did he do…?

"I think you'll be the best one to reach out to Futaba, Lady Anne!" Morgana exclaimed. "After all… who wouldn't want to talk to you? You're beautiful and kind…"

Ren just sighed to himself. Sometimes he wondered how Anne didn't notice Morgana laying it on so thick.

Anne just giggled. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Morgana." She then glanced at the clock, her eyes widening. "God, it's getting late…" She slipped out of her seat. "I probably should get going. My caretaker is here today, and I don't want her to worry…" She waved at them. "Bye, guys! I'll see you around!"

They said bye to her, and with one last wave, she exited LeBlanc.

"I really need to regain my memories…" Morgana muttered. "I can't let her be swept off by someone else…" He then shook his head. "Ren, what do you say to a tool crafting session tonight?"

"Um, later," Ren said. "I need to talk to Ken about something else…"

"Suit yourself," Morgana jumped down into Ren's lap and then to the floor. "I'll see you in your room, then."

Ren then turned to Ken but he beat Ren to the punch. "*Really?*"

Ren frowned. "Um… what? What did I do?"

Ken let out an aggravated sigh. "Do I have to take a picture? The way you look at Anne…" He shook his head. "Absolutely besotted," he said flatly. "And I thought Kanji-san had it bad," he muttered under his breath.

Must be another senpai…

"L-look-

"Anne likes you back too. You're obviously really close," Ken continued. "How are you two not dating?"

He did not expect the older boy to start complaining about this. Ryuji had asked him how he felt about Anne once, but Ken seemed completely uninterested in romance from what he had seen.

"I have… a couple of reasons," Ren said slowly. "Well, for one… Morgana. He… really likes Anne."

"If Morgana really likes Anne, he'd accept it if Anne has genuine feelings for someone else," Ken said flatly, sounding rather unimpressed. "What else do you have?"

"Well… a second reason is that… I want to leave it in Anne's hands," Ren said. "Anne was hurt by Kamoshida in a different way than Ryuji and me…" Ren sighed. "…You know what Kamoshida's reputation is like."

"…Ah." Ken's expression softened. "Look, Ren, I know we haven't known each other for that long, but you're not like Kamoshida. You would treat Anne like gold." He then sighed. "I just… don't
want you to wait on her, when you could be with her now."

Ren blinked.

"I learned a long time ago that you should take what happiness you can," Ken continued. "You never know when it'll be cut off suddenly." He then slid out of his seat as well. "I… should get going too. Shinjiro-san will be worried. Good night, Ren."

"Good night…"

Ren watched him go up the attic to retrieve the bento box he had brought, but Ren couldn't find in himself to move even after he left. Just what exactly had Ken gone through? That kind of advice… sounded like it belonged to someone much older…

Just who was Ken Amada?

Chapter End Notes

I hope this quicker update makes up for how I took nearly two weeks for last chapter. A good chunk of this chapter was actually written when I updated last time, because I had originally intended for the first intro to Futaba's Palace to be in Chapter 8.

As usual, I'd love to hear your thoughts!
“This is the shop you wanted to take me?”

Ren gave him a confused look. “Yeah?” he said slowly. “Is there something wrong with it?”

“No, it’s just…” he trailed off, an odd look crossing his face. “…This alley is where I encountered Kaneshiro’s henchman.”

Oh, right… He had nearly forgotten about that. Though he could now ask Ken something…

“What did you even do to the guy? Mishima mentioned something about you ‘holding him off’…”

Ken looked at him blankly. “Nothing at all.”

Morgana popped out of his bag. “You don’t have to lie,” he said indignantly.

“You didn’t let me finish,” Ken said, raising an eyebrow at Morgana. “I didn’t do anything. Shinjiro-san was… passing through the area and he heard the exchange.”

“So Shinjiro-san beat him up?” Ren couldn’t help but help a slight twinge of pity for the guy. But just a slight one. But still. Shinjiro-san was kinda (okay, really) intimidating. And looked like he could easily snap the bones in your body.

“He gave the guy a black eye,” Ken admitted, before he winced. “And… may have broken his nose…”

“Jeez.” Ren winced as well. “Remind me to never get on his bad side.”

“Duly noted,” he said dryly, before smiling wryly. Then he rubbed the back of his neck. “Though to be fair… he was threatening me. I doubt you will have the same issue.”

“I think you have more muscle on you, though,” Morgana piped up. “I don’t think Ren would be a threat to you. Besides, you have an advantage with your spear, if you got into a fight.”

“Hey!” Ren glared at Morgana. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, Morgana!”

Morgana just blinked at him. “Just saying how it is.”

“Traitor,” Ren grumbled, drawing a quiet laugh from Ken before he pushed the door open. “Speaking of Shinjiro-san, does he happen to work at Crossroads? I never got to ask you about that.”

“Yeah, he works a few nights there,” Ken answered. “Not sure why he hasn’t quit, since that was meant to be a temporary job…”
Iwai lowered the newspaper, quirking an eyebrow when his eyes settled on them. “Welcome back,” he greeted. “What do you need today, kid?”

“A new gun purchase, Iwai,” Ren answered, letting the door go after Ken stepped inside and striding towards the older man. “And weapon upgrades.”

He couldn’t afford armor upgrades yet, so he’d have to work at the flower shop for a few shifts…

Iwai’s eyes took on a shrewd light, as they flicked towards Ken. “You know the type you want, or do you want me to show all I have right now?”

“We’ll just browse,” Ren answered.

Despite what Ken had said… he had drifted away from the handguns for some reason. It was a bit odd, but maybe he had just changed his mind. Then he paused at a… hybrid handgun/pistol.

“Got your eye on the machine pistol?” Iwai got up. “Wanna hold it?”

“Sure,” Ken answered, and Iwai unlocked the glass door and handed it to Ken. Ken ran his hand over the gun, a considering look in his eyes.

Ren leaned in close, taking care to keep his voice low so Iwai couldn’t overhear. “Your weapon of choice is longer than most. Why not go for it?”

“Yeah, I agree.” Ken nodded.

Ren waved Iwai over. “Iwai, I’ll take this.” And when Iwai nodded, taking the gun from Ken, Ren continued with, “And can I take a look at the weapons you’ve got? The usual.”

“Yeah, sure, kid.”

“How does he not question this?” Ken whispered to him.

“Luck?” Ren offered.

Though he probably not mention that Iwai was former yazuka… Ken didn’t exactly have a naïve streak like Makoto but he doubted that Ken would be thrilled to find that out.

Ken gave him a flat look, looking rather unimpressed. “…You have no idea, do you?”

Ren could only shrug at him. “Yeah, pretty much.”

Ken just rolled his eyes at him, but watched him make the purchases. Ren frowned as he riffled through his yen bills in his wallet. Damn, if only he didn’t have to worry about buying Personas for better fusions. If the people in the Velvet Room were supposed to help him, you’d think they wouldn’t try to drain every last yen from him.

Ren sighed to himself, before handing over the money to Iwai. He needed to stock up on medicine too… He’d just have to demand money from the Shadows a lot during their next visit. Handling the money was… rough. Though sad to say, he was the most responsible with the money.

They left the shop before Ken pulled out his wallet, pulling out a few thousand yen bills. “Here… It’s not much but the bill was rather… steep.”

Ren blinked, before slowly accepting the bills from him. “You could’ve given one of these to Yusuke last night,” he noted. “Instead of two thousand.”
Ken just smiled wryly, raising an eyebrow. “Yes, but… he’s not exactly swimming in money, is he? Speaking of him… have you ever tried making up a budget for him? I can’t help but be worried with some of the comments he has made.”

“Oh, Makoto tried.” Ren grinned. “Key word being tried. I think Yusuke tossed it away after one day.”

Makoto had been thrilled when she found out about that…

“Good grief,” he sighed, shaking his head.

“Are you free for the afternoon, though?” Ren asked, as they walked to the train station. “Maybe we could hang out for today?”

Ken frowned. “I thought you needed time to prepare to gather everything?”

“Yeah, but I think after yesterday…” Ren glanced at Ken. “We need to have a little fun, don’t you think?”

Ken’s expression turned thoughtful. “Well… I guess you’re right,” he relented. “What do you have in mind?”

“Are you hungry? We could get lunch,” Ren suggested. “We can go after I drop everything off at LeBlanc.”

“So…” Ren began, “clarify some rumors for me?”

Maybe he'd be able to figure out something about Ken while doing so...

“Here we go…” Ken grumbled, but he nodded.

Ren had to smother a smirk. Well, there was no reason why he couldn't have some fun while he was at it, right?

“Are you dating-”

“No,” Ken cut him off. “The answer's no.” He took a bite of his food. “I've never dated anyone. And especially not someone who's been like an older sister figure to me for as long as I've known her.”

“Never?” Ren echoed, raising an eyebrow.

“Never,” Ken repeated, only for his expression to become bitter. “Why would I date someone who's only interested in me for shallow reasons?”

...Someone was salty. Though Ken did have a good reason...

“What about your school record?” Ren asked. “Anne mentioned something about you being pretty much of a model student...”

“I worked for the scholarship so it'd be easier on Shinjiro-san,” Ken dismissed. “Gekkoukan isn’t exactly cheap.”

That did make sense... since Shinjiro-san was only in his mid twenties. Though he had to wonder just how long ago did Shinjiro-san get custody of Ken...
“Anything else?” Ken asked dryly, raising an eyebrow.

“Nah, I’m good.” Ren shook his head. “Though I think it’s bound to happen. People are curious when a new kid comes.”

Something flashed in Ken’s eyes, and then he looked guilty. “I’m sorry, Ren... I didn’t mean-”

Ren held up a hand. “I’m gonna stop you right there,” he said. “It’s not your fault. Kamoshida leaked my record. You were just... lucky that you got to come here after we took down Kamoshida.”

He had heard rumors that Ken was a member of the soccer team, and that he was apparently good. And considering what Kamoshida had done to Ryuji because he made the volleyball team look bad...

“What... exactly happened? Why did you come to Tokyo?”

Ren sighed. He should’ve seen this coming. He had to tell Ryuji his story, and he was there when he had transferred to Shujin.

“It was several months ago, in my old town...” Ren began.

It never got easier to tell it. He still felt so betrayed by the whole damn system. He was just trying to help that woman, but that asshole decided to rig the whole system. And even now, Ren couldn’t remember his face.

And his parents... didn’t exactly help. They grew cold and distant with him. They didn’t want a son who had a criminal record. It... still hurt to remember how that they could barely muster a goodbye to him.

“That’s... awful...” Ken’s voice was hollow. “That man... is nothing but scum for doing that to you...”

“In a way, it was good for me,” Ren said, before he took a bite of food. “Sure, I could do without people judging me, but me moving here... meeting Ryuji, Anne, and the others... it’s something I wouldn’t trade for anything in the world.”

And well... that little incident had been part of the trigger to him awakening to Arsene. And he loved being a Phantom Thief. It was so freeing, to not have to hide behind that timid facade.

“Isn’t there anything we can do about this, though?” Ken asked, looking thoughtful now.

“I don’t think so...” Ren shook his head. “Ryuji did suggest stealing his heart, but... he was really powerful. He was able to sue me without giving out his name. And you need the full name for the app to work.”

And the cop was able to recognize him with just one glance...

“And the cop was able to recognize him with just one glance...”

“Is that... even possible?” Ken’s eyes went wide.

Ren just shrugged. “But anyways, don’t apologize, Ken,” Ren said. “If I didn’t come to Tokyo... who knows how long Kamoshida would have been terrorizing the school... and Yusuke would still be under Madarame’s thumb. I’m glad I came to Tokyo... for multiple reasons.”

All of his friends would be suffering in some way. No... this was the best way.
Ken looked surprised for a moment and then... he smiled. Ren frowned.

“Why are you smiling like that?”

“Oh, it’s just...” Ken rubbed the back of his neck. “...You remind me of someone I know.”

“A good thing or a bad thing?” Ren quirked an eyebrow at him.

Ken just laughed. “A very good thing, I promise.”

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**RANK UP! Adjustment Confidant has reached Rank 2.**

**Ken can now use Baton Pass!**

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*Wednesday, July 27th, 2016*

“Dude, Anne, why are you just eating rabbit food?”

Anne reached for her water, taking a sip. “Can’t eat much,” she mumbled, before making a face at the salad in front of her. But her face then grew determined as she took a bite. “Not if I wanna take modeling seriously...”

“Starving yourself isn’t the way, though,” Ken said with a frown. “There are healthy options without just relying on salads. Salads can be pretty boring to eat.”

The two juniors had invited him out to hang out, since there was no word about going back to the Palace. Though, that did make sense, since Ren did mention that he was going to prepare for their next venture into Futaba’s Palace. And if he had the same mindset as Minato-san and Minako-san... they were in for the long haul when they did go back.

“Ugh, I know,” she whined. “Why are all of the good foods so bad for you?!”

“I can talk to Shinjiro-san to see if he can come up with a diet for you,” Ken offered. “He hated it when Yukari-san dieted when she first started modeling, so he made her follow a diet he devised.”

Anne perked up at that. “Would Shinjiro-san cook any of those dishes?” she asked, doing her best to keep her voice casual.

Ken snorted. “If you want him to. Shinjiro-san loves to cook, in case you can’t tell.”

“Yeah, ‘cause anyone will cook up food for a bunch of kids he just met,” Ryuji scoffed, rolling his eyes. “But anyways, let’s do something fun today after lunch! What do ya guys wanna do?”

Anne opened her mouth to respond, but then her phone let out a ping. She reached for her phone, quickly reading the message. “Actually...” she said hesitantly, “can we do a rain check?” She set her phone down. “…Shiho’s wrapping her therapy sessions today, and she asked if I could come...”

Despite that being good news—whoever this Shiho person was, she had to be important to Anne—Anne didn’t look too happy. There was some kind of emotion in her eyes that Ken couldn’t quite identify...

“...So the move’s been confirmed?” Ryuji asked, frowning.
“Yeah…” Anne sighed, biting her lip. “Her dad went and asked for a transfer at his job.” Her lips trembled for a moment. “They thought a more suburban area would be better for Shiho… Getting away from Tokyo completely…”

“Anne… I’m sorry,” Ryuji said quietly.

“I-It’s for the best,” Anne mumbled, before she forced a halfhearted smile on her face. “But yeah, sorry guys…” She looked down at the table, letting out a sigh. “I don’t mean to be a downer.”

…Guilt. That was it. But the name Shiho… Ren had mentioned it before.

Ken froze as it suddenly clicked in his mind. Shiho went through something similar as Futaba, which was why Anne was so pained looking at Shadow Futaba. Ren had mentioned Kamoshida… Shiho… she was the victim that Kamoshida had assaulted. The girl who had attempted suicide out of pure shame. And if he had to guess… she was the last straw for the original Phantom Thieves.

“Do you want us to come with you?” Ryuji asked, frowning. Then he looked at Ken sheepishly. “…If that’s cool with you, man.”

“Well, I-“

“Oh nonono,” Anne began to shake her head, “I don’t want today to be a downer! Especially since we’re basically playing the waiting game ‘till we have to go back to Futaba’s Palace…” She then glanced at Ken. “…And Ken’s never even met Shiho. I can just go on my own, really!”

“I wouldn’t mind meeting your friend,” Ken said. “It’s important to you and we both don’t have anything planned so…”

“Yeah, come on, Anne!” Ryuji exclaimed. “The more the merrier, right?”

“I…” Anne’s eyes softened, and she gave them a smile. “…Okay. We’ll go after we finish up with lunch.”

“Anne, you made it!”

“Well of course I did!” Anne said, before embracing her. She then pulled away, examining her closely as she kept her hands on Suzui-san’s shoulders. “…How are you feeling?”

Suzui-san just giggled. “I’m fine, really. I feel a lot stronger than before… I still get a bit tired while exerting myself but…” Her expression grew determined. “…I have to go back, as soon as possible. I’m not going to let him dictate how I live my life anymore… I don’t want to hesitate anymore.”

So… he was right. This explained… a lot about Anne’s behavior with Futaba. But he… felt the same way. Nobody should feel so trapped that they feel that suicide was the only escape.

“Shiho…” Anne sighed, before finally releasing her.

“You really are looking a lot better, Suzui,” Ryuji finally said.

“Sakamoto-kun…” Suzui-san smiled at him. “Thank you for coming. I didn’t mean to pull Anne away from whenever you were doing…” Then she raised an eyebrow at Anne. “Though I’m
surprised you haven’t brought Amamiya-san with you.”

“Ren?” Anne said. “W-Well, he had plans with Makoto today...”

“And it’s cool, Suzui.” He waved a hand. “I mean, this is a pretty big milestone.” He grinned at her, before flashing a thumbs up. “‘Sides, we didn’t really know what to do after lunch. You didn’t really interrupt anything.”

Suzui-san giggled. “If you say so, Sakamoto-kun.” Then her eyes flickered to Ken, and then she turned back to Anne. “...Should I be jealous? It seems every time I turn around, you’ve made a new friend.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Suzui-san,” Ken said, before bowing. “My name is Ken Amada.”

Ryuji slapped him on the back. “Come on, man, you’ve really gotta loosen up. Suzui’s in our year, so technically you’re her senpai still.”

Anne poked him in the side. “Makoto’s right, you know. You really could learn a thing or two from Ken. Girls like polite guys, y’know!”

“Well, not everyone is into the gentlemanly type like you, Anne,” Suzui-san lightly teased, nudging her in the side. “Though I assume he and Nijima-senpai have their hands full watching all of you.”

“Hey!” Anne protested, puffing out her cheeks briefly in a pout. “They do not!”

...He begged to differ.

“You brought Makoto here before, Anne?”

“Yeah... she... ah...” Anne winced. “...She really felt the need to apologize to Shiho.”

“There was nothing for her to say, really,” Suzui-san said. “Kamoshida... had everyone under his thumb. She wasn’t really able to do anything...” She then smiled. “But I’m just grateful that the Phantom Thieves took care of him.”

“So you support the Phantom Thieves?” Ken raised an eyebrow.

“Of course.” She nodded firmly. “They got rid of Kamoshida...” She reached for Anne’s hand, squeezing it. “And there’s Madarame... Kaneshiro... I know that people are still unsure of them, but I’ll stand with them no matter what.”

Ryuji just grinned. “Heh, they prolly appreciate that, Suzui.”

“Shiho?” A dark haired woman suddenly approached them. “Come on, it’s time for your last session.”

“Okay, Mom.” Suzui-san nodded, before looking at them. “I’ll see you around.”

Anne sighed as the door closed behind Suzui-san, before she folded her arms over her chest. “…Shiho’s so strong.”

“Hey, don’t count yourself out.” Ryuji put a hand on her shoulder. “I mean, you’re pretty tough. You pretty much wrecked shit when you awakened to Carmen.”

Anne cracked a smile. “…Thanks, Ryuji.”
“You shouldn’t really discount yourself,” Ken said. “You’re emotionally strong, too.”

“Thanks… but sometimes I just don’t feel that way…” Anne looked down with a sigh, her hands clenching into fists. “I shouldn’t have gotten so upset with Futaba-chan and I-!”

“For what?” Ken asked. “For feeling for her? For wanting to help her?” Anne looked at him, her eyes wide. “Anne… there’s nothing wrong with being so empathetic that you literally feel for Futaba… It just gives you more of a motivation to heal her heart…”

And seeing Suzui-san… slowly healing from what she had gone through gave him hope for Futaba. Suzui-san wasn’t completely healed yet, and that was okay. It would be the same for Futaba. He really doubted that even with stealing her heart, Futaba wouldn’t be completely cured. She would still have anxiety. She would have trouble socializing… But that would be okay. They’d help her through that.

“That shit she was put through…” Ryuji grimaced, “…it was really screwed up. No kid should go through that kind of crap, ‘specially after losing their mom so suddenly.”

“Y-Yeah…” Anne slowly nodded, before she raised her head. Her eyes were filled with determination, the fire Ken was already familiar with. “…You’re right. We helped Shiho and everyone messed up by Kamoshida…” Her hands clenched, gripping her knees. “There’s no reason why we can’t help Futaba-chan!”

“That’s the spirit.” Ken smiled at her.

“If only Ren would take us into the Palace,” Ryuji grumbled.

“Do you want us to get killed?” Anne retorted, shooting him a look that just reminded him of Yukari-san. “Ren’s got a good reason, okay? We need the proper equipment before going back in or we’ll be in big trouble.”

Though that was hardly a surprise. The twins operated in a similar way…

“Then why is he hanging out with Makoto today?” he demanded with a huff. “I’d get it if he was working that job with the yakuza…”

“A job with what?” Ken choked out.

“Uhhh…” Ryuji clamped his mouth shut as Anne glared at him, her arms folded over her chest. “N-Nothing.”

…Right. What was next, Ren getting free medicine by agreeing to be some doctor’s guinea pig?

Most couples unwinded with a glass of wine, talk about how their day went. And sometimes Minako did relax with her husband in that way—but not lately, since alcohol was strictly off limits until she had the baby. But tonight?

“Did you really expect Ken to accept the offer?” Aki was absentmindedly running his fingers through her hair.

Minako let out a satisfied hum, before settling against his shoulder. “Not one hundred percent,” she admitted. “But when Mitsuru told me, she said that he did lean towards it.”

Aki just laughed. “Junpei was so sure he’d say no.”
Minako stifled a laugh. Junpei was so annoyed when the news started to spread amongst their group of friends. “He should know better than to bet against me.”

Though… the reaction that stood out to her the most was… Fuuka. Aigis took it logically, as she always did. Yukari was surprised, but expressed the wish that Ken be careful while doing so… And Shinji… well, he was keeping how he felt about it to himself. But Fuuka? She was completely unsurprised. Now, she knew that Fuuka had grown closer to Ken over the years. But she couldn’t help but feel a bit unsettled. Did Fuuka know something she didn’t?

“…Fuuka-chan met them, you know,” Minako said. Aki looked at her in surprise. “The Phantom Thieves,” she quickly clarified. “She said… they were a nice group of people…”

Fuuka had described them as quite lively, comparing them to the Investigation Team in that aspect. But kids Ken’s age… kids that knew how Ken had felt years ago…

“Mina?” Aki’s silver eyes were filled with confusion. “Where are you going with this?”

“You know that Ken-kun hasn’t had that many friends in his life,” Minako said quietly. “He drifted away from his soccer club friends when he gave up soccer… And the apparent reason for why the Phantom Thieves were founded…” She let out a sigh. “I know that Ken-kun would never dream of turning his back on us…”

Aki met her gaze, looking rather solemn. “…But you think his judgment might become clouded. That he might become biased.”

“Pretty much,” Minako sighed. “And… I’m scared for him, Aki… We still don’t know if Shido knows about the Phantom Thieves.” Minako’s eyes began to sting with tears. “What if… What if we let Ken-kun just paint a huge target on his back?”

And it’d be her fault. She convinced Mitsuru to send Ken to Tokyo. She couldn’t lose someone close to her again… not this way. Ken… was like a little brother to her. She’d never forgive herself if she was the reason if he…

“Hey.” Aki began to wipe away her tears. “No what ifs, Mina,” he said. “Ken’s not alone. You know that Shinji’s watching out for him. And he’ll notice if Ken’s off about his judgments.”

Oh, Aki… He could be so levelheaded. Their friends—herself included—often ribbed him for being somewhat impulsive, especially when it came to a fight. But… when it came down to it, he was thoughtful. And… she needed to hear that kind of reassurance.

Minako managed a weak smile. “I’m sorry, Aki…”

“Don’t apologize, Mina,” Aki sighed. “You’re just worried… especially after this whole thing with Medjed.”

Minako nodded slowly. “I wish… there was some way to deal with Shido,” she mumbled.

Aki was quiet for a moment. “Maybe… Ken can bring up Shido as the next target, after this Medjed situation blows over.”

“That would solve a lot of our problems, wouldn’t it?” Minako sighed.

“Well, there’s the whole the government still really hates Mitsuru,” Aki said dryly.

“They really know how to hold a grudge, don’t they?”
It just… sucked that they had to play the waiting game. Minako reached down to stroke her stomach. She’d be five months along soon. She just… prayed that the world her child would be born into would be a safe one…

\[\text{Saturday, July 30th, 2016}\]

Ken woke up to a text from the Phantom Thieves group chat, with Ren announcing that they’d be going back to the Palace today. Though it was a bit odd, dressing in his casual outfit to go into a Shadow nest. He was… too used to fighting in his school uniform. Even during the P-1 Grand Prix… he had fought in his school uniform. Though granted, his outfit would be changed into his thief outfit…

“…Ken, is the Metaverse making you hungrier than usual or somethin’?” Ken paused in eating breakfast, looking at his guardian in surprise. “It’s like you’ve been making two lunches for yourself,” he added.

“Er… no,” Ken said slowly. “Yusuke has been making these… comments. Like… eating bean sprouts for a meal. So I made him lunch a few days ago.” He winced. “Sorry, I should have mentioned it to you.”


…Was it his imagination or did Shinjiro-san’s eye twitch?

Shinjiro-san just grumbled to himself, muttering something under his breath. “It’s fine,” he said shortly. “I was just wondering.”

…Yeah, Shinjiro-san was definitely planning on making lunches for Yusuke from now on. He recognized that look in Shinjiro-san’s eyes.

Ken finished up breakfast and said goodbye to Shinjiro-san, before heading for the train station to go to Yongen-jaya. Ren had told them to meet directly in front of Sakura-san’s house.

“Heyyy!” Ryuji waved at him, before turning to Ren. “Hey, RenRen! Ken’s here now!”

“I can see that, Ryuji,” Ren laughed. “Is everyone ready, then?”

“Let’s do this!” Anne exclaimed, pumping a fist.

“Let’s go, then.” Morgana ducked into Ren’s bag, clutching Ren’s phone with his little paws. Ren accepted it with a thanks before activating the app.

Unlike before, where they had been transported to a sand dune, they were standing at the base of the pyramid. Well, at least they didn’t have to put up with the sweltering heat as much… Ken could already feel sweat beading at his brow, with how he was wearing mostly black in this heat.

“Okay…” Ren let out a thoughtful hum as he tapped his chin. “Ace’s up for sure.” His eyes then swept to the rest of the group. “Let’s go with Panther and Skull for now.”

Ren passed out the weapons, quirking an eyebrow at Ken when he handed him a new spear. “You’re lucky that Iwai has collapsible spears,” he said teasingly. “I wasn’t sure how I’d be able to manage it otherwise.”
“It’s what I’m used to,” Ken grumbled.

“At least it gives you a distance advantage,” Makoto mused.

Ren finished passing out the guns, before leading them into the Palace. The door was still there… blocking the way forward.

“Ugh, still,” Ryuji groaned, before thumping his fist against the door.

“I don’t know why you expected it to change, Skull,” Yusuke said dryly. “Obstacles were never removed before.”

“It’d be nice if that happened,” Ryuji sighed.

“…Do you still wish to pass?"

They all jumped at the sudden voice, whirling around to face Shadow Futaba. Shadow Futaba looked at them calmly.

“W-What?” Makoto’s eyes were wide.

“I need you to do something for me,” Shadow Futaba continued. “A bandit… in the nearby town has stolen something from me. Retrieve it, and I will help you.”

…Yeah, he was kinda missing Tartarus. Tartarus just felt… more simple.

“Oh, now you’re helping us…” Ryuji grumbled. “Make up your mind already!”

“Skull!” Anne hissed, smacking his shoulder.

“Well… I suppose we’ll have to do this ‘favor’,” Morgana grumbled, folding his arms over his chest. “Joker, let’s head outside and look for this town.”

Ren nodded before leading them outside. Ren looked back and forth, before running onto a platform that Ken hadn’t noticed before. He pointed at the distance. “You think this is it?”

“It has to be…” Makoto said, walking up to stand next to him. “Morgana, could you…?”

Morgana nodded firmly, before jumping in the air and transforming into his bus form. They loaded onto the bus and headed for the town.

The town… was like a ghost town. There was nobody there. They ended up in a town square sort of area.

“Isn’t it strange that we can’t seem to find anyone here?” Morgana asked. “Not even a Shadow…”

“…Hey, are you guys looking for something? I thought I heard someone rustling ‘round here.”

They all jumped at the unfamiliar voice.

…He didn’t think he’d ever get used to normal Shadows talking. Though the whole Shadow self was still hard to wrap his mind around sometimes…

“Joker, you think…” Morgana said lowly.

“…Yeah,” Ren agreed quietly.
“What are you whispering about?” He cocked his head. “Awfully suspicious, wouldn’t you say?”

“Aw, shuddup asshat!” Ryuji growled out. “You can’t talk ‘bout suspicious… You’re that bandit, aren’t ya?!”

“Return what you stole,” Ken said, narrowing his eyes.

“Heh… sure. If you can catch me!”

Without warning, he turned on his heel and bolted.

“Wait!” Anne shouted. “Ugh…” She dragged a hand down her face, before letting out a growl. “Of course!”

“There’s no time to gripe about it,” Makoto said sternly. “Come on, we have to chase after him!”

They found him in an alley, but he just taunted them before running off in the other direction.

They tried several times, but he was just too fast. But… Ken couldn’t help but notice something.

“…Joker, wait.” He grabbed Ren by the sleeve, and the younger boy looked at him in surprise. “We’ll have to corner him at the square.”

“Corner him?” Ren echoed, before his eyes widened. “Of course!” He turned to the members who weren’t part of the active team. “Mona, Fox, and Queen. I want you to loop around and push him towards the square. We’ll be waiting for him there.”

“A pincer movement…” Makoto’s eyes went wide. “That just might work!”

Ren led them back to the square, edging around the corners. It was just in time too, because they heard pounding footsteps approaching.

Ryuji reached for his shotgun, quickly firing a warning shot. The Shadow jumped backwards.

“Heh… you’re that desperate to fight me, huh? Fine!” The Shadow then trembled once, before transforming into a great golden bird. Which… looked awfully familiar.

Wait… wasn’t that one of the Personas used in that one fusion spell? And if he remembered right, its element was…

“Joker,” Ken whispered. “What are Panther and Skull’s weaknesses?”

Ren looked at him in confusion. “Er… Panther is weak to ice and Skull is weak to wind.”

…Great. Of course.

“Take this!” The Shadow growled.

“Skull, block!” Ken yelled. “I think its element is wind!”

“Ugh, are you serious?!” he groaned, but he crossed his arms over his chest to brace himself.

The Shadow then flapped its wings violently, whipping up a powerful gust. Yeah… that was definitely a Magarudyne. Though if he remembered right… the Persona had been fairly high leveled… He hoped they weren’t in over their heads…
“Any idea on a weakness?” Ren shouted at him.

“Electricity… or gun?” Ken suggested tentatively.

“Okay, let’s try gun.” Ren pulled out his pistol, aiming right at the Shadow. The Shadow responded by launching another Magarudyne. The gust was strong enough to send the gun flying right out of Ren’s hand.

And this time Ryuji wasn’t fast enough to block, so he was sent flying. He hit the wall with a sickening crack.

“Skull!” Anne shrieked.

“Skull, why didn’t you block?!” Morgana demanded.

The Shadow cackled, before soaring higher in the sky. Ken quickly ripped off his mask, and Kala-Nemi launched a Kouga spell. This sent the Shadow reeling, allowing Anne to dart forward, brandishing her whip. It coiled around one of the Shadow’s legs, and Anne yanked hard, both hands on the grip. The Shadow yanked back, but Anne gritted her teeth, dug in her heels, and tugged harder.

Ren slid in next to her, ripping off his mask. “Orthus!” he shouted, summoning a brown canine, which then blasted fire at the Shadow.

Ken ran over to Ryuji, helping him up in a sitting position. Blood dripped from a shallow cut on the back of his head, staining his bleached hair. He supported the back of Ryuji’s head with one arm, and he ripped his mask off with his free hand. Kala-Nemi appeared and Ken concentrated on healing him.

“Ugh…” Ryuji groaned, as Ken helped him up. Ken checked his injury, and to his relief, it seemed to have closed up. “Thanks, man…” He then growled. “Ugh, that asshole is gonna pay!” He then reached up to rip his mask off. “Let’s do this, Captain!”

His Persona appeared, firing an electric bolt at the Shadow. The Shadow hissed in pain as the attack struck, but unfortunately, electricity wasn’t its weakness.

This Shadow… was more intelligent than the others, if it knew to knock the gun out of Ren’s hand. But then again, it was guarding something…

Ren and Anne came running up to them. “Any ideas?” he asked.

“I think if we try to shoot him, he’ll just try to knock the gun out of our hands…” Anne said.

“Joker, do you have a Persona that can use gun attacks…?”

Ren just grimaced, shaking his head. “Nope. Those are kinda rare.”

“My Persona has it,” Ken said.

“Joker!” Makoto called out to them. “I think everyone but Ace should distract the Shadow. Then Ace can nab it from behind.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Ryuji nodded firmly. “Let’s do this!”

“Skull, you should stay back though,” Morgana warned. “We don’t want you to have a repeat.”

“Yeah, yeah!” he grumbled.
“Okay, Panther, you’re with me, then!” Ren exclaimed.

“Always, Joker!” Anne cried, before sprinting after him.

Anne moved first, summoning Carmen to unleash a dazzling display of flames. Ren followed up with summoning Rakshasa, which slashed repeatedly at the Shadow, forcing it stay on the defensive. Rakshasa then sprung backwards, allowing Ryuji’s Persona to fire lightning at the Shadow.

And Ken crept closer as the Shadow divebombed at Ren. Anne tackled him out of the way, causing him to crash into the ground. Just as the Shadow began to rise, Ken ripped off his mask.

“Kala-Nemi!”

The bullet clipped the Shadow in the wing, sending him crashing to the ground.

“Gotcha!” Ryuji crowed as they surrounded him, aiming their guns at the Shadow.

“Joker, let’s do it!” Ken called to him.

Ren just cracked a grin. “Of course.”

They lunged forward, attacking the Shadow with all of their might. The Shadow fell under their assault, leaving behind only a papyrus scroll.

“So this is what she seeks?” Yusuke frowned quizzically. “Interesting… I wonder what it is exactly.”

“Phew!” Ryuji sighed as Ren picked up the papyrus. “God, that was just a pain in the ass…”

Anne giggled. “We should’ve brought Fox with us this time…”

“Let’s swap him in…” Ren said. “It’s not your fault, Skull, but you deserve a break.”

Ryuji shrugged. “You’re the boss.”

“I thought that was Sojiro,” he quipped, which only caused the boys to crack up.

“That’s enough messing around,” Makoto chided, folding her arms over her chest.

“Yeah, we should get back to the Palace now though… to deliver… whatever this is to Shadow Futaba,” Ken said.

Anne grimaced. “This isn’t the weirdest thing,” she grumbled. “Kamoshida’s Palace made us collect eyeballs to stop a trap.”

…Lovely.

Ryuji then slung an arm around Ken’s shoulders. “But thanks, man. You kinda saved my ass back there.”

“It was nothing,” Ken dismissed. “Joker and Panther distracted the Shadow more so that I could heal you.”

“Though I’m surprised how versatile your Persona is…” Makoto mused. “You have bless magic, healing magic, and gun attacks…”
“And you did know the Shadow’s weakness...” Morgana said, though there was a funny look on his face.

“But anyways, enough comments from the peanut gallery,” Ren laughed. “Let’s get going.”

They exited the town and Morgana transformed into the bus so they could get back to the Palace. They reentered the pyramid and spoke to Shadow Futaba, so they could return the papyrus to her.

This wasn’t… too bad, honestly. Hopefully they’d be able to clear a lot today-

…And then Shadow Futaba caused the floor to drop them into a pit of quicksand.

He hated Mot. He really hated Mot.

It turned him into a mouse.

“Aww!” Anne cooed, scooping him up. “He’s so cute!”

Cute?! He was not cute! He was a mouse, for crying out loud. But the only thing that came out of his mouth were squeaks.

“Don’t you think he’s cute, Queen?” Anne asked, turning to them.

“Uh… Panther…?” Ren asked. “Why don’t you give him to Queen until this… wears off?”

“Ugh, fiiiiine.” Anne pouted for a moment, before handing him over to Makoto.

Makoto held him for a moment in her cupped hands, looking like she was trying hard not to laugh. “You don’t have to pout. Panther’s right, you know. You make a very cute mouse.”

He was not pouting. But Ken didn’t bother to open his mouth, since Makoto wouldn’t be able to understand a word he’s saying.

Makoto just rubbed the top of his head with the tip of her index finger, all while smiling. Just… ugh… Why?!

“Uh, Queen?” Morgana said. “I think you should put him down. He could turn back any minute now.”

“I guess you’re right…” Makoto sighed, before setting him down on the floor.

“So… you like cute things, huh?” Ryuji asked.

“I-I was curious, that’s all!”

Ken suddenly felt his body shooting up, and he was suddenly human again. He snatched up his spear, glaring at the Shadow. Yusuke was focusing on the Shadow Mot had summoned, since it was weak to ice, while Ren and Anne were fighting Mot. He ripped off his mask.

The blast of light sent Mot sprawling, allowing them to go for an All Out Attack.

When the Shadows fell, Ken stared at Ren. “This is never going to be brought up again,” he ground out.
Ren cracked a grin. “Aw, c’mon, you were kinda cute—“

“What did I just say?!“

Ken rubbed his temples as he watched Ren fiddle with the puzzle in front of them. He just felt… exhausted… and drained. Not to mention some of the close calls they had, especially with Shadow Futaba nearly getting them with that arrow trap of hers…

“Here we go.” The puzzle glowed white for a moment, showing an image of Shadow Futaba sitting on a throne, holding a scepter, while three men in black suits stood before her. It probably would’ve been fairly normal if it wasn’t for the men have falcon heads. Though, didn’t most Egyptian murals have something similar?

“My mom...?” A childish voice echoed throughout the chamber. “She wrote a note before she...”

“Yes, that’s right. It says... I should have never birthed Futaba... she was nothing but a burden to me.”

“Mom... hated me?” The voice trembled. “B-Because I was a bad kid?”

“You must have been quite a nuisance to her... though it’s not your fault entirely. I assume that part of the blame lies at your mother’s feet. She had a mental breakdown of sorts... She destroyed her life’s work because of it, however.”

“She what? No! She always talked about how important it was for her to finish it...”

“Yes... it’s quite a pity, isn’t it?”

“Mom...” the last part came out as a whimper, and it only made Ken’s stomach twist into knots.

Futaba... Why did they do this to her...? She did nothing to deserve this... She should’ve gotten comfort, for losing her mother... not this. Though... there was something bothering him...

“That guy...” Ryuji hissed, his hands clenching into fists. “He’s pissing me off!”

“But... it looks like he just read the note out to her,” Ken said with a frown. “That sounds a bit... suspicious to me.”

“Hmm...” Makoto stroked her chin. “You think that they lied to her about the contents of the note?”

“It strikes me as just... odd,” Ken said, folding his arms over his chest.

“But why lie to her?” Yusuke asked, tilting his head slightly. “What gain would they have to lie to a young girl like that?”

“Well, some people are just that messed up...” Anne bit her lip, only for her to suddenly scowl. “UGH! This is pissing me off! Where are these guys?!“

“But we have an answer now,” Ren said, all while grimacing. “About why Futaba believes that she’s the reason her mother’s dead...” He then let out a sigh. “...This is so screwed up though. And those voices... was she alone when they read the note out to her?”

“No...” Ken shook his head. “I don’t think so. Isshiki-san’s death is officially a suicide... It wouldn’t make sense for people to accuse Futaba unless they were present to hear the man in black reading the note aloud.”
Anne wrapped her arms around herself. “Then... the reason why she hears the voices...”

“The guilt and the trauma must have caused her hallucinations,” Yusuke sighed. “The people who did this to her... are despicable...” His hands moved to grip the hilt of his katana at his hip. “They’re nothing but scum.”

“She lost her mother already...” Makoto closed her eyes. “Why would they pour salt into the wound like that?”

“Though the question is...” Morgana tilted his head, “…why kill Futaba’s mother? Just what was so important about her research?”

He... wished that he could say.

“Maybe we’ll find out when we go into deeper...” Makoto mused. “But... the important part is that we help Futaba-chan.”

“Yeah!” Ryuji cheered, pumping his fist. “Should we get going then?”

“Let’s find the next safe room and we’ll head home,” Ren said. “All of us are pretty drained, and I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to continue.”

“But...!”

“Relax, Ryuji, we made good progress today!” Morgana exclaimed. “I’m guessing we’re about halfway through!”

That was a relief... The sooner they helped Futaba... the better.

Chapter End Notes

I really meant to get this chapter out sooner, but I just... wasn’t satisfied with how I wrote the Adjustment rank 2 scene, so I ended up rewriting it a few times.

Also tweaked Mot’s weakness to light, since Ken’s the new party member of the team, and the team member usually has the element that the miniboss is weak to.

And happy late birthday, Anne!
Down Time

Chapter Summary

While Ren starts to gather supplies for another Palace run, the Phantom Thieves take a breather.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sunday, July 31st, 2016

Ren hadn't meant to sleep in, really. But he was just so tired after the Palace exploration. And by the time he had gotten up (nearly eleven), Sojiro was already serving a couple of his regulars. Which only meant that Ren had to find breakfast (or lunch) somewhere else… Too bad though, since Sojiro's curry really was something else.

"Ren?"

Ren turned at the sudden voice, seeing that it was Ken.

"Hey, Ken." Ren grinned at him, waving at him as Ken came closer. "What are you up to?"

"Just running a couple errands…" Ken said, before shrugging. "What about you?"

"Well, I woke up late so I've gotta go buy lunch somewhere." Ren sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck. "I was thinking the diner actually."

"You… woke up late?" Ken repeated, raising an eyebrow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that Boss feeds him most of the time, but since he had customers, Ren had to look somewhere else," Morgana piped up. "This is why I tell you to get some sleep at an early time!"

As if he could forget. Most of the time, Morgana was dragging him to bed by 10:30, a bedtime he hadn't had since junior high.

"You've told me… repeatedly, Morgana," Ren said dryly.

"Well, maybe if it'd stick in your head already-"

"Why don't we go back to my place so I can cook you some food, then?" Ken cut off their bickering, shooting them an amused look. "My errands can wait another day."

Ren stared at him for a moment. "No, it's okay, Ken," he began. "It's different with Yusuke, since he barely has any money…"

"And you're in charge of our funds," Ken retorted, giving him an unimpressed look. "Shinjiro-san does the shopping on Saturday evenings, so we have plenty of food."

He had a stubborn look in his eye… He probably wouldn't take no as an answer.
"...Okay," Ren sighed. "Thanks, Ken."

It was quiet for the first few minutes, but Ken suddenly broke the silence. "...Hey," he said lowly. "Why do you operate during the day, anyways?"

Ren stopped walking, and gave him a confused look. "...What do you mean?"

Ken just crossed his arms over his chest. "...Ren, tell me. What do phantom thieves have in common?"

"Well, they leave a calling card, announcing that they're going to take something," Ren said, continuing to walk again. "Something of value..."

Ken just raised an eyebrow at him, before walking again as well. "And when do they usually strike?"

...Oh.

"Uh..." Ren rubbed the back of his neck. "...It was Morgana's idea?"

"HEY!" Morgana protested, popping out of Ren's bag. "You can really ruin your health by staying up too late!" he continued to lecture, glaring at Ken. "Don't tell me that you stay up late to study or something!"

"Okay, I won't tell you then," Ken deadpanned.

Ren just stifled a laugh as Morgana started to sputter. The people in the lobby started to stare so Morgana just slunk back into his bag. "Ren, can you let me stay at Ken's place tonight?" he grumbled. "I'm going to make him go to bed on time."

"You'll be competing with Shinjiro-san, then," Ken deadpanned, before pressing the elevator button.

"Or maybe he's just after Shinjiro-san spoiling him with good food," Ren snickered. "He kept talking about the shrimp tempura that Shinjiro-san made him the night of the festival."

"Hey! I'm right here!" Morgana snapped, just as the doors slid open, letting them step inside. "And that is not true!"

"Too bad," Ken said, his eyes sliding to Ren, somehow managing to keep a straight face. "I think we have a little tuna left from last night, but I guess if you're not that fond of Shinjiro-san's cooking, you probably don't want it..."

"That's...!" Morgana's eyes became huge, and Ren had to bite down on his lip hard so that he wouldn't burst out laughing. Oh man, Ken already had Morgana pegged. "He... may... be a good cook..." he muttered.

"That wasn't so hard, now was it, Morgana?" Ren teased.

Morgana's retort was cut off by the doors opening. Ken unlocked the door and let them in. Ren slipped off his shoes, leaving them by the door, just as Morgana jumped out of his bag, before jumping onto one of the seats.

Though he had to wonder just how they could afford this kind of place, with Shinjiro-san working for Crossroads. And some other job, but still.
Ken was already pulling out ingredients from the fridge and a cupboard near the stove. The appliances were all really nice.

"What are you making?" Morgana asked, hopping into Ren's lap now.

"Omurice," Ken answered, before he began to chop up an onion.

Omurice, huh? Well, he wouldn't turn it down for a couple reasons. One, Ken had offered to cook for him and two, omurice was always a classic. He hadn't have it in a while, actually.

"So… what were your errands?"

Ken hesitated for a moment, before turning back to chopping up the ingredients. "Well… I was going to the bookstore today," he admitted. "It's not a big deal, I can always go tomorrow. What about you?"

"I, uh… haven't really figured that out," Ren admitted. "Maybe work at the flower shop today. They pay me pretty well, especially if I impress the customer with the floral arrangement I put together for them."

"The flower shop?" Ken looked up for a moment, raising an eyebrow, before turning his attention back to cooking. He dropped the onion into the pan, which sizzled loudly when it hit the hot oil. "I have a hard time picturing that."

"Hey, sometimes you can't be picky," Ren said. "And it's a lot better than the beef bowl shop job I took a couple months ago…"

That job was just… insane. Not to mention if the customers bitched you out for making one little mistake. The nights he worked there… Morgana didn't have to tell him to go to bed. He would all but fall onto his bed once he got home. He swore the only good thing that came out of that was how he had met Yoshida there.

"That's true," Ken said with a nod, before stirring the onions. After a while, he dropped the diced chicken into the pan, before adding some rice. While that finished cooking, he started to beat eggs in a bowl. "Though… Ryuji tells me that you work for a former yakuza?"

"Uhhh…" Ren gulped as Ken shut off the stove, staring at him expectantly. "It was to get discounts on guns and other things," he said quickly. "And he offered it to me, not the other way around!"

Ken just sighed, shaking his head. "If you say so," he muttered. "Though I suppose if you've been working for him for a while, there's nothing I can really say."

…He better not mention that he started working with Iwai just a couple weeks ago…

Ken then turned his attention back to the stove, turning it back on to cook the eggs. A few minutes later, Ken set a plate in front of Ren, and a smaller plate for Morgana.

"Mm, it smells so good!" Morgana practically inhaled the scent, before he dove in.

"Thanks again, Ken," Ren said, before taking a bite.

Flavor immediately flooded his mouth. And it just… tasted so home-y. Like… comfort food. And the egg itself was so… fluffy. Honestly… it was probably the best omurice he's ever had.
"This tastes amazing," Ren said, setting down his fork.

"Thanks." Ken's cheeks took a slightly pink tint as he sat across of Ren. "It's one of my favorite recipes that Shinjiro-san has taught me, actually…"

"Omurice a favorite meal, then?"

"There's that," Ken said, looking up with a slight smile. "…But I love it because Shinjiro-san somehow managed to replicate how my mom would make it for me."

…So it had some sentimental value…

"…You loved your mom a lot, didn't you?"

Ken nodded. "She… was always there for me, even though it was tough without my dad… They separated when I was pretty young, so my mom was the only parent I really knew. Well… at least before Shinjiro-san."

Ren just quirked an eyebrow at him. "How much older is he?"

"He's seven years older," Ken answered. "But a couple of my senpai call him Dad as a joke, so it's not just me."

Wow… seven years older, and he was willing to take care of Ken like that…

"That's pretty impressive," Ren commented. "I mean… with Shinjiro-san being your guardian."

"Yeah…" Ken sighed, his expression suddenly becoming sad for some reason. "…Shinjiro-san has always looked after me."

Though he had to wonder just how young he was when he met Shinjiro-san. From Ken's last statement, it must have been for a while.

"But anyways," Ken stood up and stretched, "when you're done, you want to check out the entertainment room?"

"An entertainment room?" Ren repeated, staring at him. "How can you even afford this?"

"It's on loan from a friend of Shinjiro-san's," Ken said with a wave of his hand. "You like DDR? You seem like the type."

Ren grinned. "I can dance while doing that. You are so on."

"I should've known that your virtues don't include modesty," Ken sighed, though his eyes were glinting with amusement.

Ren just smirked. "Hey, it's not bragging if it's true."

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**RANK UP! Adjustment Confidant has reached Rank 3.**

**Fusion Raid:** Two party members may perform a special co-op attack when all Shadows are all knocked down.

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*Monday, August 1st, 2016*
Since his plans for gift hunting were rather... derailed yesterday, Ken was going to be doing that today. Not that he minded too much. Hanging out with Ren yesterday was fun. Though with Ren and Yusuke... he had to wonder about the eating habits about the others. Anne mentioned dieting for her job, and there were the others' comments about her sweet tooth...

Not to mention that Miyuki and Kaito were begging him for presents from the Pokemon Center... But he'd worry about that later... Shinjiro-san's birthday was closer. A lot closer...

"Ugh, why didn't I go shopping earlier?" Ken grumbled to himself, even though he already knew the answer.

A combination of worrying about the mission, finals, and then Alibaba/Futaba and Medjed completely distracted him.

Shinjiro-san wasn't a hard person to please, when it came to birthday presents. He was usually happy with Ken giving him something like a cookbook filled with foreign recipes. But... twenty-five was a milestone. He couldn't help but feel that he should do something more this year... Not to mention how Shinjiro-san had decided that he needed to keep an eye on Ken because he wanted to do the mission. He... needed to make up for that. Not to mention that he was starting to suspect that they may still be handling Futaba's Palace when Shinjiro-san's birthday came along... and Shinjiro-san was asking for time off at work so they could visit Port Island.

The thing... was that he had no idea where to begin...

Ken sighed, before rubbing his temples. Well, if he got really desperate, he could always look at engagement rings, in case Shinjiro-san had missed something-

"HEEEEEEY, KEN!"

Ken jumped at the sudden voice. Of course, it was Ryuji. It was never not Ryuji. But he wasn't alone. Yusuke was staring sternly at Ryuji for his yelling.

"Ryuji, I do not think it is prudent to destroy Ken's eardrums like that," he said flatly.

"Sorry, man..." Ryuji rubbed the back of his neck, offering Ken a sheepish smile. "But you really looked out of it! Like you were overthinking something."

...Well, that wasn't a lie. Ryuji could be pretty perceptive.

"Well, I was thinking about something," Ken sighed. "But I wasn't sure how to continue..."

Ryuji just cocked his head. "You prolly need some food. Y'know, brainpower!" He tapped his temple with a grin. "And maybe you could talk to us 'bout it? It seems like it's a problem."

"Well, not exactly a problem..." Ken said, before letting out a huff of air, ruffling his bangs. "Honestly, I should've started a while ago... It's nothing but my fault."

"Hey, hey, none of that!" Ryuji scolded, looking uncharacteristically stern. "I mean, shit's been crazy, yeah?"

"And you shouldn't really put yourself down like that." Yusuke joined in the chastisement as well. "You've been busy, have you not? We all have been. Not to mention that we were concerned with exams not too long ago."
"So… lunch?" Ryuji nudged him. "Promised Yusuke a while ago that I'd take him out for beef bowls. Wanna come with?"

The mention of beef bowls just made him smile. It reminded him of Akihiko-san…

"Okay," he said with a nod.

And maybe Ryuji was right. Maybe he needed some advice for a starting point.

"Sweet!" Ryuji grinned at him. "Come on, it's not too far!"

Ryuji then led the two of them to a modestly sized beef bowl shop. It was pandemonium, employees trading shouts while customers impatiently waited for their orders.

"Rush hour," Ken sighed, with a shake of his head.

"How uncouth," Yusuke said with disdain. "How could anyone enjoy an establishment such as this?"

…Guess he shouldn't mention that he really liked Wild-Duck, back on Port Island. Though part of his positive feelings had to do with the races he had with his soccer teammates after practice. Those had been really fun, especially when Koromaru joined in. But Wild-Duck had been falling on hard times, since Big Bang Burger was growing in popularity so fast. It was too bad though… he didn't really like Big Bang all that much.

"Hey, man, they all can't be five star restaurants," Ryuji huffed. "And it's really good, I promise."

Yusuke sniffed, looking rather unconvinced. "If you say so, Ryuji."

"Just wait until I can take you to Ogikubo, Yusuke!" Ryuji waved his arms. "The ramen is simply the best!"

At least he knew that somebody else was concerned about Yusuke's diet. Or more specifically, his lack of one.

"I'll be the judge of that, not you," Yusuke stated, looking rather unimpressed.

They waited in line to order, though they had to stop Yusuke from ordering something that wasn't even on the menu. (He felt so bad for the cashier, who looked like she was a first-year high schooler.) Soon enough, they received their food, and managed to find three free seats.

"Hey, man, you've gotta eat more!" Ryuji scolded, before reaching for the ginger and piling it in Yusuke's bowl.

"Hmm, it seems you remember my technique."

"Dude, that was for sushi," Ryuji sighed, before turning to Ken.

Ken jerked his bowl away before Ryuji could add any to his. "I already have Shinjiro-san nagging me in that department," he said, raising an eyebrow. "I don't need you to do that too."

Ryuji just smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, man. Guess my mom's rubbed off of me."

So… Ryuji's mother was alive. And judging from that statement, he seemed fond of his mother. Ken knew better to pry, but he couldn't help but wonder why she hadn't pulled Ryuji from Shujin after Kamoshida broke his leg. Just… who would let their child be in the same school where their
"So, Ken…" Yusuke began, "what ails you? Ryuji is correct in that you looked rather… perplexed out on the street." He then picked up a piece of meat, popping it in his mouth.

"Well…" Ken took a bite of food as well, taking the time to gather his thoughts together. "… Shinjiro-san's birthday is coming up in about a week and a half. I meant to go looking for presents yesterday, but Ren's unhealthy eating habits interrupted that."

"Ren's what?" Ryuji repeated, looking rather baffled.

"He apparently relies on Sakura-san a lot for breakfast," he said. "So I took back to my place and made him something. We ended up hanging out, so my plans kinda got shot."

Yusuke let out a thoughtful hum, all while chewing. He then swallowed. "Just what are Aragaki-san's interests?"

"Cooking," Ken said automatically. "And animals."

Ryuji let out a guffaw. "Animals?! Didn't peg Shinjiro-san as an animal lover."

"I always thought it was 'cause he felt bad for Morgana getting soaked like that…" Ryuji scratched the back of his head with his free hand. He popped some food in his mouth. "I mean, ain't that why he cooked for us?"

"Some of it was leftovers from when Fuuka-san surprised us that morning," Ken said. "Though Shinjiro-san really does love to cook. It wasn't really a problem for him."

"I can taste his passion," Yusuke mused, before opening his eyes. "You are truly fortunate to taste that on a daily basis."

"Dude, why you gotta be so dramatic?" Ryuji groused.

Ken just laughed. "I'll be sure to pass on the compliment to Shinjiro-san."

"Though seriously… why are you stressing 'bout this?" Ryuji's forehead wrinkled. "Shinjiro-san doesn't seem the type of guy to make a huge deal outta a birthday."

"Speaking of birthdays, when is yours?" Yusuke inquired. "Ren is quite determined to not miss another birthday, after discovering too late that Ryuji's birthday had passed."

"Sorry." Ken winced. "My birthday is June twenty-fourth."

"Whaaaat?" Ryuji stared at him. "How come you never said anything?"

Ken shrugged. "It's… not a big deal to me," he said. "I'm more than happy to get well wishes from the people I care about."

Honestly, it was nice to have a quiet birthday (well, during the school day, at least) for once.

"Nah, man, we've gotta catch up after we deal with—" Ken stared exasperatedly at Ryuji, who winced before continuing. "—our little problem. Ren took me video game bingeing when he found out 'bout my birthday. We should do something special!" He poked Yusuke in the shoulder with one of his chopsticks. "Yusuke's birthday won't be 'till January, so a birthday celebration should be
"fun!"

"When are the girls' birthdays then?"

"Uhh, I dunno 'bout Makoto, but Anne's birthday is November twelfth," Ryuji said. "Ren told me that his birthday is May twenty-second." He shook his head. "Dunno why he didn't say anything."

"Could say the same thing about you, Ryuji," Ken said.

"Hey, it was around the time we were gonna steal Kaneshiro's treasure," Ryuji defended. "Felt off to just announce it like that."

"That's fair," Yusuke said with a chuckle. "And shows a dedication to what we do."

"Well… what we do is special to me. It makes me feel like I actually belong, y'know?" Ryuji rubbed the back of his neck. "That's why… I get so excited sometimes. I don't mean to yell, but sometimes it comes out…"

"Ryuji…"

…Now he felt bad for giving him grief about that.

"…I'm sorry."

"Nah, man, don't say that!" Ryuji waved his chopsticks. "I mean, you're right, I need to be more careful." He then shook his head. "But anyways, about Shinjiro-san… Why is it such a big deal to you?"

"Well…" Ken sighed. "…I guess I just want to thank him? For what he's done for me… He wasn't even twenty-one yet when he gained custody of me. I didn't ask him of this… but he did it anyways."

"Just why did he then?" Yusuke looked a bit sad at that.

"…He was there when my mother died," Ken said. "He… felt horrible that he couldn't do anything to stop it… And he felt awful that I was orphaned… because he lost his parents when he was young as well."

Ryuji's eyes went wide. "Damn… he shouldn't blame himself, though! I mean, it's not like he killed your mom!"

Ha… Ha… Right… If only he knew… But he could never say. After piecing together some of the stories of the Phantom Thieves… he knew that they'd have a hard time coming to terms of the truth of his mother's death.

"It was quite altruistic of him to do so, though," Yusuke said, before he sighed deeply. "…If only there were more people like him."

"Yusuke..." Ryuji looked at him sadly.

"However… I believe that Shinjiro-san will be happy to receive any gift from you," he stated, pressing a hand to his chest. "As long as it's heartfelt. It matters not what the gift is… but the feelings that come from the gift giver."

The feelings…
"So there's gotta be something, man!" Ryuji exclaimed.

"I…" Ken looked down at the table.

There was… Mom's old engagement ring.

"…Shinjiro-san wants to propose to Fuuka-san."

"Whoa, really?" Ryuji gasped, before he scrunchied up his nose. "…Ain't they on the young side, though?"

"Not particularly," Yusuke stated. "There is the belief that a woman should be married by the age of twenty-five."

"That's so dumb," Ryuji scoffed. "A woman doesn't magically turn into a hideous hag once she turns twenty-six!"

"…Regardless, they have been together for quite some time," Ken said. "They've been dating since their last year of high school. And Shinjiro-san's best friend has been married for a year already. And another friend got married last March."

"So they're high school sweethearts." Yusuke reached for his drink. "If they've survived this far, I'm sure they'll make the distance. I only wish them the best."

"But you seriously aren't going to go out and buy an engagement ring, though?" Ryuji asked. "That shit's gotta be expensive!"

"Not exactly," Ken said, shaking his head. "I was bequeathed part of my inheritance when I turned eighteen… And my mother left me her old engagement ring."

Possibly to sell, possibly to give the woman he wanted to marry. But… Shinjiro-san wanted to propose now. He could always get a new ring, if he ever found someone he wanted to marry.

"Ah…" Yusuke's eyes lit up. "So you'll give it to him, and he could always customize it a bit to suit Yamagishi-san better. That would be cheaper than buying a new ring all together."

"And you were thinking 'bout something he really wants." Ryuji flashed him a grin. "He'll appreciate it for sure, Ken."

"Thank you for helping me though," Ken said sincerely. "I really appreciate it."

"Hey, no prob, man!" Ryuji slung an arm around Ken's shoulders, all while grinning. "But now that's settled, wanna hang out with me and Yusuke for the rest of the day?"

Ken just smiled. "Well, if you don't mind."

"Nonsense." Yusuke smiled. "Someone will have to help me rein in Ryuji, regardless."

"Hey, don't talk like I'm not here!"

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*Tuesday, August 2nd, 2016*

The bookstore on Central Street was a lot more organized than Bookworms. But still… they didn't seem to have what he was looking for…
"Ken?"

Ken whirled around to see that it was Makoto. "Oh, hello, Makoto," he greeted, before his eyes flickered to the book that Makoto was holding. "What are you buying?"

"Oh, this?" Makoto adjusted her grip. "It's just a bestseller from America. I buy books in English to practice reading English." She winced. "...English isn't my strong suit."

"Well, English isn't exactly an easy language," he sighed. "Gekkoukan started us out pretty early."

He remembered... someone who was tutoring him commenting on this, but he was pretty grateful. He really needed the practice. He wasn't stellar at English either.

"I don't even know why we even need to study it, unless you plan on studying English as a major," Makoto mused, before her eyes slid over to Ken. "...Though, what are you looking for today?"

"Well... I was looking for books... about helping someone with depression," Ken admitted quietly. "I know that you've pulled off miracles, but I think... it won't be enough. It'll be a good first step, but... I want to see if there's anything else we can do to help with Futaba..."

"Ken..." Makoto's eyes softened, and she touched his shoulder for a moment. "That was thoughtful of you. Honestly, it never occurred to me," she confessed. "But what you're saying makes sense... Futaba will still retain her personality. We probably will have to take steps to help her afterwards."

Ken nodded firmly. "That's what I was thinking." He then sighed. "...Though I haven't really found anything on the subject..."

Makoto pursed her lips. "Hmm... maybe they'll be due a shipment soon," she said thoughtfully. "You should check again another day. Though, have you looked around for books that you'd want to read for fun?"

"Nah." Ken shook his head. "I have a few books that I still need to finish reading, so I'm good in that regard."

"Oh, I see." Makoto nodded. "Do you want to get lunch then?" she offered. "Just let me pay and we could go find a place." She pressed her index finger against her lips as she thought. "Have you eaten at LeBlanc yet? The curry is quite delicious. You would think that coffee and curry is an odd combination, but they go surprisingly well together. The coffee Boss brews is excellent, as well. Unless you're a tea person..."

"I like both," Ken answered. "Shinjiro-san wouldn't let me drink coffee until my first year of high school, so he'd brew me low caffeinated tea for the mornings."

Makoto just laughed, before heading for the counter. "He sounds a bit like Sis. She'd chide me when I was younger for drinking soda... saying that there are so many preservatives in it."

Shinjiro-san probably had her beat though... He'd remember how Shinjiro-san would give him The Look if he bought too much festival food.

Makoto paid for her book, which she then put away in her bag, before they headed for the train station. Since it was somewhat early for lunch, they managed to get seats instead of being sandwiched between people.

"...Hey, Ken?"
"Hm?" Ken turned to look at her. "What's wrong?"

"Have you seen Anne lately?" she asked tentatively. "I think… I did something to upset her…"

…Well, considering the last time Anne was upset at Makoto… he didn't blame her for being a bit concerned.

"I haven't seen her since we entered Futaba's Palace last," Ken stated. "What happened?"

"I don't know, it's just… strange." Makoto frowned, before halting in her steps. "…She texted me out of the blue last night… saying that we were friends… and that I could tell her anything…" Makoto pressed a finger against her lips. "It was really strange, suffice to say."

…That was strange. And somewhat unlike Anne…

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"Ah… two days ago, I believe?" Makoto said finally, after thinking it over. "We went out for crepes… Anne was really happy, since the crepes with extra crème were regular price…" She shrugged. "I don't know. I just thought you'd have more insight than me."

"You've known her longer than me," Ken pointed out.

"Yeah, but-" Makoto sighed, shaking her head. "…Never mind. Maybe I should just ask Anne straight out…"

"That may be the best solution." Ken offered her a smile that he hoped was encouraging.

Ken pushed the door open, allowing Makoto to step inside. Though she stopped short. "…Sis?"

The woman looked up at Makoto's voice. "…Makoto?"

She was rather beautiful. She had the same elegant, yet stern air that Mitsuru-san often carried herself with. Ken could tell that she was tall, rivalling Shinjiro-san in height, even though she remained seated. She had long steel gray hair, her bangs swept aside, and her eyes were reddish brown.

Though when Makoto walked up to her, Ken could see the resemblance between the two sisters, especially in their facial features.

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh, um, I ran into a friend earlier and I invited him out to lunch…"

"A friend?" Makoto's sister's eyes widened when they fell on Ken. Then she coughed. "…Forgive me, I didn't mean to stare. You just… resemble Akechi-kun somewhat. I don't know if Makoto has told you this, but he's my partner."

"I've… met Akechi-san, Niijima-san."

"Sis, this is Ken Amada," Makoto introduced. "He moved out here in June." Then she turned to Ken. "Ken, this is my older sister, Sae Niijima."

For some reason… her eyes narrowed on him the moment Makoto addressed him. But still, he had to be polite…
"It's nice to meet you, Niijima-san."

"Likewise, Amada-kun," she said coolly. "Tell me, where do you come from?"

"Tatsumi Port Island," he answered.

"Port Island…" she repeated, her expression thoughtful. "That's quite far from here. Though isn't that where the Apathy Syndrome phenomenon occurred back in 2009?"

"Apathy Syndrome?" Makoto echoed, sounding rather puzzled.

How… How did she know about that? Most people had forgotten that it even existed, a result of how the Dark Hour disappeared. It blurred out people's memories, despite how prevalent it had been.

"I… I don't remember," Ken quickly lied.

"Is that so?" She folded her arms over her chest, her eyes scrutinizing.

Ken suddenly felt very small, like she was examining him with a microscope. She was a prosecutor, wasn't she? She would probably be very good at sniffing out lies then…

"Are you done grilling my customers now?" Sakura-san groused, leveling a stern glare at Niijima-san. "It's bad enough that you've been tryin' to interrogate me for days now-"

"Days?" Makoto repeated, though her expression was more… resigned.

Niijima-san scowled at him. "If you would just tell me what I need to know-"

"I told you all I know already!" he hissed out, his face starting to redden with anger.

Though… he could only think of one thing that she could be after… Akechi had mentioned that she was looking into cognitive psience for some reason. And if they were partners… maybe they were both looking into the mental shutdowns. That would also explain her interest in Apathy Syndrome as well.

Niijima-san's scowl deepened, but then she glanced at Makoto before sighing. "...Fine." She stood up, setting down a one thousand yen bill on the counter. "I have work to do anyhow…" She brushed off her suit. "Keep the change."

"Sis, wait-!" Makoto bit her lip. "...What have you been asking Boss? He just runs a coffee shop…"

"It's just something pertaining to my work…" Niijima-san sighed, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Don't worry about it, Makoto. It's… complicated."

"But-" Makoto then cut herself off, her shoulders slumping. "...Okay." She then looked up at her sister. "...Are you staying at work overnight again?"

But then Niijima-san's expression softened ever so slightly. "I'm sorry… but yes. I have too much on my plate right now…" She then stroked the top of Makoto's head for a moment. "Don't stay out too late today, okay?"

"All right," Makoto relented with a sigh.

Niijima-san nodded, pleased at Makoto's answer, before opening the door and stepping outside.
Ken frowned at the look of Makoto's face. It was a mix of concerned, upset, and just... resignation. He put a hand on her shoulder, which seemed to jolt her back to reality.

"I'm sorry, Ken... I just-"

"There's no need to apologize," Ken cut her off. "Your sister... her actions are pretty-"

Brazen, in all honesty. The fact that Sakura-san seemed angry with her was rather telling.

"...Bold," he finally said, not wanting to upset Makoto. She looked up to her sister, if he recalled correctly. "And I'd be worried too if Shinjiro-san was overworking himself like your sister is."

Makoto smiled softly. "...Thank you."

"Though, kid..." Sakura-san began, "I didn't know you were from Port Island." There was an... odd look on Sakura-san's face now.

"Oh, well... I thought it wasn't relevant." Ken shrugged.

Though... did Sakura-san know about the Shadow Operatives then? He made a mental note to ask Mitsuru-san if the name Sojiro Sakura sounded familiar to her...

"Hm." Sakura-san looked at him carefully for a moment, before he shook his head. "...But anyways, what can I get you today?"

"It's kinda hot..." Makoto said, "so can we get iced coffee with your curry today?"

"Coming right up." Sakura-san nodded, before heading for the kitchen to prepare their curry.

They then sat at the closest booth, though Ken noticed that Makoto still looked somewhat down.

"...Do you want to talk about it?" Ken asked carefully.

Makoto was silent for a long time, long enough for Sakura-san to come out and serve them their drinks. "My sister... she was always rather... brilliant, if not a prodigy," she said finally. "She became a prosecutor at the young age of twenty-two. But... Dad died not long after."

"That's... rather impressive," Ken said. "Though... I didn't realize that you lost your father a few years back..."

Especially since he was considering pursuing being a defense attorney...

Makoto smiled sadly. "Sis... she handled it the best she could. She started chasing after promotions so she could support us both. But..."

"...You don't approve of what she's become," Ken guessed.

"...I don't," she confirmed, before reaching for the sugar and cream, mixing in a little of both, before taking a sip. "She's become so... aggressive during her investigations lately. She's been working herself so hard to get promotions."

He had... heard of bad things about the court system. It was greatly skewed towards the prosecution. Though he hadn't realized just how strained their relationship was. He had thought... it was more Makoto not wanting Nijima-san to worry about her.

"...In all honesty... I was a little jealous when I got to see what exactly Shinjiro-san was like."
Ken's head shot up at that, and Makoto just let out a self-depreciative laugh.

"It's silly but..." She looked down. "...I wish that Sis was a little more like him. It's pretty obvious that he cares about you."

"That's not true." Makoto looked at him in shock, so he hastily added, "...Not about Shinjiro-san. But your sister. I think she does care... but she doesn't show it like how you'd expect a woman to express affection. If she didn't really care... why would she tell you to not stay out too long?"

Not to mention that she had all but patted her head earlier. He just... didn't think that a sister who viewed taking care of her younger sister as nothing more than a duty would do things like that. Then again, he was all too used to subtle gestures of affection. A hand on a shoulder, a ruffle of his hair (even though Shinjiro-san knew perfectly well that he detested having his hair mussed up), his favorite meal when exam results came out and he had scored well.

Makoto was quiet for a moment. "...I didn't think of it in that way," she admitted. "I just..." She sighed. "I just wish there was a way for us to become close again. She was a lot older than me, but she'd always indulge me when I wanted to play 'police officer' when I was a little girl."

Ken couldn't help but smile at the mental image of a little Makoto barging into Niijima-san's bedroom and begging her to play. She must have been a cute little girl. Though Makoto had wanted to be a police officer like her father when she was young, huh... He wondered if she still wanted to.

"You'll find a way." Ken gave her an encouraging smile.

"Thanks, Ken." Makoto gave him a smile of her own. She really had a nice smile... "Though first... we have other matters to deal with."

"Like maybe actually eating your meal?" Sakura-san's irritated voice cut through the air. "Sheesh... at this rate, it's gonna get cold."

They looked down, and sure enough there were two plates of curry in front of them.

Though Ken couldn't help but smile a bit at that. Yeah, he was definitely cut from the same cloth as Shinjiro-san.

"S-Sorry!" Makoto stammered out. "We just... got caught up in our conversation."

"Yeah, I can see that," Sakura-san said dryly.

But Makoto was right... They had Futaba to worry about first. Not to mention Medjed, considering that it took time for stealing the target's desires to set in...

Chapter End Notes

The mention of Shinji making omurice like Ken's mom had made it comes from the Weird Masquerade. I know it's not quite canon, but there were some cute moments, especially with Shinji and Ken. I thought that moment in particular was really cute, so I thought I'd include it.

Though I think it's kinda fanon that Sae is 25 (with the comments about how Sae should be looking for a husband, and there's a concept that a woman becomes
undesirable after the age of 25), but it's not really mentioned when she became a prosecutor. But I decided it was shortly before Sae and Makoto's father died, since I think Sae's need to provide for Makoto pushed her to work harder so that she could gain promotions faster.
"You got the time off?!!" Fuuka's eyes began to sparkle with excitement, as she beamed at him. "Shinji, that's wonderful!"

Shinjiro rubbed the back of his neck. "Was nothin' really," he muttered. "Though it was a pain in the ass to get it for my day job…"

"What days did you ask off?" Fuuka asked.

"From the tenth to the seventeenth. I'd come back on the sixteenth, though. Figured I could use one day in Tokyo so I don't jump right back to work."

Fuuka nodded. "You could use it." Then she frowned. "…Though why are you keeping the night job still? Isn't it tiring?"

"It's not that bad," he said. "I'm fine, Fuuka. I could always use some more cash."

"If you say so…” Fuuka didn't sound convinced though. "But anyways, have you told Ken-kun about this yet?"

"Haven't gotten the chance to really talk to him 'bout it," Shinjiro admitted. "He's been out a lot lately. I know that he went into the Palace last Saturday."

Then Fuuka looked at him oddly, before doing that head tilt she did when she observed something. "…What is it, Shinji?"

Shinjiro let out the breath he was holding. "They've only made it 'bout halfway through the Palace, according to Ken," he muttered. "And this is pretty important to Ken… with what he found out about Isshiki's daughter."

Though he couldn't blame Ken. Futaba's thoughts weren't exactly pretty.

Fuuka's expression then grew worried. "And there's only a week left…"

"So yeah. Can't exactly ask Ken to drop this-"

"I'm home," Ken announced, cutting Shinjiro off. "Hi, Shinjiro-san, Fuuka-san."

"Hi, Ken-kun." Fuuka smiled at him. "How was your day?"
"Okay," he said with a shrug. "Went to the bookstore and ran into Makoto. We got lunch… and I ended up meeting her older sister."

"Moving fast, huh?" Shinjiro couldn't resist the joke.

"Wha…?" Then Ken flushed bright red, before glaring at him. "Shinjiro-san, we're just friends!"

"Come on, Ken-kun, you know that Shinji is just joking," Fuuka said.

"I hate his jokes," Ken grumbled, before he started to pout.

"You know, I could always tell Minako about her," Shinjiro deadpanned, before he smirked at Ken stiffening.

"Shinji, that's enough," Fuuka scolded, frowning at him. "Stop picking on him."

"Thank you, Fuuka-san," he muttered, only for him to look up. "I just remembered something… Futaba's adoptive father is Sojiro Sakura… Do you know if he knew about the Shadow Operative?"

"Hmm…" Fuuka tapped her chin. "…Not that I know of. But I'll ask Minako-chan after I get off for tonight."

"Really?" Ken frowned. "Because Makoto's older sister… I think she was asking him about cognitive psience."

Shinjiro narrowed his eyes. That was kinda… suspicious.

"Asking him?" Shinjiro repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"Er…" Ken began to fidget. "…More interrogating him about it," he admitted.

"Jeez, she sounds like a piece of work…" Shinjiro muttered.

"But anyways!" Fuuka said abruptly, clapping her hands together. "Um, Ken-kun, Shinji was telling me that he was able to get about a week off…"

"Oh…" Guilt immediately filled Ken's face, before he suddenly looked down to the floor. "I'm sorry, Fuuka-san, but… we still have a lot of ground to cover with Futaba's Palace and-" He sighed, raising his head. "…I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it." Ken looked at him in surprise. "There will be other times when we can go back."

"Shinjiro-san…" Ken shook his head firmly. "You should still go. It'll be your birthday, and you deserve to be with everyone. And… you should visit Mom too while you're at it. During Obon. I'll be okay for just a week. I won't blow up the kitchen or anything."

Shinjiro examined him closely. This would be the first time Ken would miss visiting his mom's grave during Obon. But there could be other times where Ken would be able to visit… and the situation with Isshiki's daughter was pretty serious… But he could use a break from Tokyo. He wasn't a huge fan of the place. He didn't know how the hell Fuuka lived here for four years while attending Tokyo U. And it was only a week…

"Fine," he said finally, before nodding. "But I'm calling you every day, since we've still got Shido to think about."
Ken huffed, the puff of air ruffling his bangs. "Why am I not surprised," he deadpanned, which only made Fuuka giggle.

"You should have seen it coming, Ken-kun," Fuuka teased. "Think about what happened last time."

"How could I forget?" he grumbled, folding his arms over his chest.

"And I probably should get to freezing you some meals…” Shinjiro muttered. "Can't have you eating like Aki…"

"You're never going to let that go, are you, Shinji?" Fuuka laughed.

"I let that idiot out of my sight for two years and he comes back half naked and looks like he's been downing protein drinks every single day since he left."

And of course that idiot didn't know why the fuck it was weird to waltz around wearing nothing but a cape. God, Aki could be so clueless sometimes.

"Should I be offended that you're comparing me to Akihiko-san in that manner?" Ken looked at Fuuka, looking unamused. "I think I should be."

"Well, you did idolize Akihiko-senpai when you were younger," Fuuka teased, her eyes twinkling. "Can you blame Shinji for being a little worried?"

"So yeah." Shinjiro looked at Ken sternly. "Making you meals ahead of time."

"Oh joy," Ken sighed. "I can't wait to see the fridge absolutely stuffed…"

"Most people wouldn't find that a problem, Ken-kun."

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**Thursday, August 4th, 2016**

"So what's the plan for today?" Morgana asked, sounding almost cheerful. He was in a good mood because Sojiro gave him some cream today. "Another test with Takemi?"

"Nah.." Ren shook his head. "Takemi's wrapped them up, remember?"

"Hmm, and Iwai only has you work at night..." Morgana mused. "Or maybe you want to spend time with someone today?"

"Maybe-" Ren stopped short.

Ken was staring intently at the ward map, his lips pursed together.

"What are you looking at, Ken?" Morgana piped up, only for Ken to jump and let out a surprised yelp.

Ren just grinned at him. "So, what are you looking for?"

"Don't do that," he grumbled, looking straight at Morgana.

Morgana just sniffed. "It's not my fault you weren't paying attention."

Ken sighed, before straightening up. "But to answer your question… I was looking to see if there
was a nearby shrine…"

"A shrine?" Ren repeated. "Why do you want to go to a shrine?"

"Oh, well..." Ken ducked his head. ".I haven't really prayed to my mother lately. And we don't exactly have a family altar so..."

Oh...

"Well..." Ren said slowly, "can't say I'm really familiar with shrines, but there is Meiji Shrine. It's near Shinjuku, I think?" He scratched the back of his head. "Not really sure."

"Meiji Shrine?" Ken repeated, blinking owlishly at him. "...Isn't that more of a tourist attraction?"

"I mean, yeah, but..." Ren shrugged. "That's the only one I really know about, sorry, Ken. Shrines aren't exactly on my list of places to go."

He always associated shrines with old people, if he was being honest. Like, yeah, some girls were superstitious and bought love charms but they were probably in the minority. But... he supposed it fit Ken, since his mother's death affected him so badly...

Ken just pursed his lips together. "Well... I suppose a more populated area would be better," he sighed, shaking his head. "Shinjiro-san still harps on that..."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Ren offered. "I haven't really figured out what I wanted to do today."

Ken just raised an eyebrow. "You really do keep yourself busy, huh?" His expression became wistful. No... more nostalgic? Why? No clue whatsoever.

"I... guess?" Ren tilted his head. "I mean, it's Tokyo."

"Fair enough," he laughed. "But anyways... if you don't mind going to a shrine..." He smiled wryly. "I'd love the company."

The ride to Meiji Shrine was cramped, but it was nothing Ren wasn't used to. Ken seemed to be a different story, as he stumbled out.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to the feeling," he muttered, all while stretching his muscles. "Back on Port Island, we never had this problem."

"At least you had a subway system," Ren said. "It was completely new to me."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Ren nodded. "My hometown is more of a quiet area."

Ken frowned. "Then why did a politician go there?"

"Who knows?" Ren scowled at the mention of him. "To terrorize the female citizens? Didn't the culprit of the Adachi case try to assault his first two victims? Y'know, from Inaba?"

"...Yeah, he did." Ken got a funny look on his face for some reason. Though, then again, that case had been... creepy. The way the victims had been hung on telephone poles had to be disturbing to see. "But anyways, let's get going."
The walk to Meiji Shrine was short, though as Ken predicted, it had more tourists than actual
people. Tourists, both Japanese and foreign, chattered away excitedly as they milled around the
area. Some of them, mostly younger people, were examining the charms.

"This really is a busy place," Ken sighed. "It's beautiful, at least."

"What was the shrine like back at home, then?"

"Oh..." Ken looked back at him. "It was fairly small, but it felt more familiar, if that makes sense?
I spent a lot of time there when I was younger."

Ken... just how lonely was he during his childhood, if a shrine was 'familiar' to him? Didn't he
have any friends...?

They went through the motions of cleansing their body for the shrine, before Ken approached the
main area to pray. His lips moved faintly as he prayed, but Ren wasn't able to read his lips.

"...You know, I think I would have idolized the Phantom Thieves when I was younger."

"Huh?" was his brilliant response.

"I've... just been thinking about it lately," he confessed. "As I told you before... my mother's death
was declared an accident but I knew the truth. It was covered up. I guess... I've been thinking
about it, with Isshiki-san..."

Oh... He was an idiot.

"That would have been a prime target for us," Ren said quietly.

"I've made my peace with my mother's death but..." Ken's expression was... mournful. "...I can't
help but think that there are other kids who probably went through the same thing... The
authorities cover up the crime... and only the victims really know what truly happened."

Well, ain't that the truth... People didn't believe he was innocent. Kamoshida never really admitted
breaking Ryuji's leg was nothing but an act of spite. Madarame's crimes had claimed too many
people... And the men who terrorized Futaba... They were probably behind Wakaba's death.

Though he couldn't help but be curious...

"Hey, Ken... if you don't mind me asking..." Ren took a deep breath. "...When did you lose your
mom?"

Ken was quiet for a moment, and Ren was about to apologize and take back his question, when he
spoke. "...It'll be a decade next year."

Ren's eyes widened as his brain quickly processed the math. This year would be nine years so that
meant...

"You were nine when you lost your mom?"

Ren felt sick to his stomach. He was nine... a literal child. He was a child when he wanted
to die... How... How could he have overcome that? No wonder he was so upset when he saw that
Futaba was suicidal.

"And nobody really cared enough...?" Ren asked numbly.
"Well, my mom only had distant relatives around," Ken stated. "My dad… he and my mom separated when I was pretty young. The neighbors… had their own take on the reason why, but Mom always hated hearing it. He died when I was young. My mom's parents died in a car crash when I was five. My mom had a twin sister but… she became estranged from the family for some reason. My mom would never tell me why, so I guess I'll never know."

Jeez. He had no idea that Ken's family history was... sorta convoluted. Though he was curious about Ken's aunt. Just what had she done?

"...But that doesn't matter anymore." Ken shook his head. "I have more than enough family now… My senpai became my family."

"Maybe that's why you've taken to looking out for people so much," Ren joked lightly. Ken looked startled at his statement, so he continued. "I mean, come on. You cook for Yusuke and ask after his financial status. You let Makoto hang onto you back when we met Futaba. You worry about Futaba…"

Ken's cheeks went pink. "I guess… Shinjiro-san has rubbed off on me," he mumbled out.

Ren just grinned. "Come on, it's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"I find that hard to believe when you're grinning at me like that," Ken said flatly, before shaking his head. "But still... thank you for coming with me today, Ren." He smiled wryly. "I know it's not exactly your first choice to visit."

"Eh, it's no biggie." Ren shrugged. "Seeing Meiji Shrine was pretty cool. And I'm pretty sure that Yusuke would love to come here some time, so I'll show him the way."

He was starting to understand more about what Ken had gone through but… Ren couldn't help but feel that Ken was holding back… about something.

Ren shook his head. Nah, he was just imagining it. Ken was just a reserved person. And he doubted that Ken told many people the things he just told Ren…

**RANK UP! Adjustment Confidant has reached Rank 4.**

**Follow-Up Attack: Chance to perform a follow-up attack if Ren fails to down an enemy.**

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**Saturday, August 6th, 2016**

*Ren, how could you not tell me...?*

Nope, too confrontational.

*So... you and Makoto have become pretty close lately, huh?*

Another nope. That would just be kinda… out of the blue.

Anne just groaned, falling back onto her bed. She had spent the last fifteen minutes trying to come up with a way to bring up what she… saw… a few days ago to Ren.

Anne had been returning from a shoot, which did not feature Mika, so she had done great, when she suddenly found herself craving a Frui-Tea. Since it was a bit healthier than the other sweet
drinks, she had decided that she should indulge herself especially since she had been a good girl, exercising and dieting and all that.

But then… she saw Ren and Makoto at the diner. She knew that they had been hanging out more, ever since they beat Kaneshiro. Ren had even relayed some of the more entertaining things that had happened to her, like how Makoto took to playing video games. But the fact that they were with another couple… made it all too clear. Their hands were clasped together, and Ren only gripped her hand tighter when the guy leaned towards Makoto. Makoto seemed awfully nervous for some reason. And seeing them together… had just twisted her insides. She couldn't help but feel hurt. Wasn't Ren one of her best friends? She thought that she and Makoto had become relatively good friends. Why did they feel the need to keep this from her?

No… she was just lying to herself. Anne sat up, hugging her legs. She was hurt because… she liked Ren. There had always been something about him. His kindness to her, especially when he didn't know her, but he listened to her about her problems with Kamoshida. He inspired her to stop putting up with Kamoshida's crap, for Shiho and for herself. He helped her become mentally stronger. He helped her slowly realize that modeling wasn't just a side hobby for her anymore. It was something that she wanted to pursue seriously.

But Makoto liked him, and she wouldn't get between that. And it made all too much sense. Opposites attract, don't they? And they were the leaders of the group, it was only natural that they would grow close. And Makoto had a lot going for her. She was older (guys liked older girls, didn't they?), composed (she was all over the place), and smart (Makoto was the top of her class).

She would be supportive… even if it hurt to think of them in that way. Though the biggest thought rattling in Anne's mind was… why hide it? If they were double dating (though, Anne had to admit the black haired girl looked vaguely familiar), why not tell everyone else? Ryuji was Ren's best friend, and Makoto was getting pretty close to Ken…

Her phone, which she had dropped onto the bed, suddenly went off. After unlocking her phone, she saw it was a message from Shiho.

[Shiho]: Hey, Anne…

[Shiho]: Can you come up to the school roof with me today?

[Shiho]: We'll be moving tomorrow so… this is my last chance.

Anne's heart gave a little squeeze. Shiho… She didn't understand why her best friend wanted to go back, but… this was basically her last request before she moved. She couldn't say no.

[Anne]: Of course. I'll be there asap!

And yet… She didn't want to do this alone… Before she knew it, her fingers were moving.

"Anne?" Ren sounded confused. "What's up?"

"…Hey, Ren," Anne began. "…Are you free today? Shiho wants to go to the school roof and I…"
"...Do you want me to come with you?" Ren asked quietly. "I can go if you need me to."

Anne slowly nodded, even though Ren couldn't see. "...Please," she murmured.

"I'll be there," Ren promised, and she could hear the smile in his voice. "I'll meet you in front of the school gates."

Anne smiled. "Thanks, Ren. You're the best!"

"Oh, I know," he drawled.

Anne huffed out a laugh despite everything (Futaba's Palace, Shiho moving away, and her stupid heart), before rolling her eyes. "Ego, Ren."

"Bye," Ren laughed, and she could practically see his eyes dancing with laughter.

Anne left her apartment, heading over to Shiho's to come pick her up. Shiho was reassuring her mom that she'd be fine, and should be back within two hours. And Anne helped her get to Aoyama-Itchome, which was all but deserted.

"Hey, Shiho..." she began. "How are we even going to get inside? It's closed because of summer..."

"I... contacted Niijima-senpai," Shiho admitted, toying with her ponytail. "She said it was okay, when I explained my reasons..."

"What are they?" Anne asked.

Shiho shook her head. "I'll tell you on the roof, okay? I'm sure Amamiya-san is thinking the same thing... and I'd prefer to explain it just once to the both of you."

Anne agreed with a nod. Before long the train pulled into the station. They walked to the school gate, where both Ren and Makoto were standing, all while talking quietly about something. Makoto noticed them, so she nudged Ren in the side.

"You know this is just a one time thing, right?" Makoto asked, all while holding a ring of keys out to Shiho.

Shiho just smiled, while accepting the keys before bowing. "Of course, Senpai. Thank you for understanding."

"Any time, Suzui-san," she said sincerely. "I just... wish-

"Senpai, you've apologized several times already," Shiho cut her off. "And my answer is always the same."

"You really should forgive yourself already, Makoto," Ren said quietly. "We all forgive you."

"Ren..." Makoto smiled for a moment. "...You're right. I'm sorry..."

"And there you go again," Anne sighed.

Makoto just shook her head. "Don't take too long up there, okay?"

Ren and Anne helped Shiho up to the roof, though Anne noticed that Shiho was doing fairly well. They had to help support her once they got to the third floor, though.
"How are you feeling, Shiho?" Anne asked, after helping her best friend sit down.

"I'm... okay." Shiho sighed. "I just wish that I had made it all the way..."

"Don't be so hard on yourself." Ren put a hand on her shoulder. "You're doing pretty well."

Shiho smiled slightly. "...Thank you. Especially since I know that Anne asked you to come here at the last minute."

Anne just smiled at Ren. "Isn't he super reliable?"

"-and kind and helpful and supportive," Shiho added, quirking an eyebrow at Anne. "You've told me... several times."

"S-Shiho!" Anne felt her cheeks begin to burn.

"Gossiping about me, huh?" Ren nudged her in the side, flashing her a grin. "I guess I'll let it slide... since you were saying such nice things about me."

Shiho suddenly became somber, wordlessly rising to her feet. She walked to the edge, staring out at the courtyard. She gripped the fencing. "We're so high up..." she said faintly. "I... I forgot just how tall Shujin is."

The one thing that Anne was grateful that Kobayakawa had done was replace the fencing. Make it so high that it was near impossible to climb over...

But... the image of Shiho standing there made Anne's blood run cold, panic squeezing her heart tightly. She knew that they'd be able to stop Shiho, but...

"Shiho..." Ren frowned. "Shouldn't you stay back...?"

"No..." Shiho shook her head. "I'm fine. I just..." She looked down. "...I needed to reenact the moment. The feelings... the same place I stood..." Shiho bit her lip.

"And... how do you feel?" Anne asked slowly.

"...I didn't want to die," Shiho said softly. "But... there was this voice screaming at me. I want this pain to go away. I need a way to escape... I want to forget what Kamoshida had done to me. It... It told me to come up here. It told me to jump. Just one moment of pain... and it'll be all gone."

Anne wrapped her arms around herself. Shiho... She was in so much pain... Why didn't she...?

"Anne. Don't blame yourself." Anne looked up to see that Ren was staring at her with serious eyes. "Shiho's here. She's alive and well. Kamoshida's rotting in prison, like how he deserves. But you can't blame yourself."

"Amamiya-san's right, Anne." Shiho turned to look at her. "It's nobody's fault but Kamoshida's. But..." She looked down. "...That person is part of me too. My weakness... I needed to see if she would come back."

"And she's gone?" Ren asked, raising an eyebrow.

Shiho nodded, a happy smile on her face. "She doesn't exist anymore."

"Shiho... you're so strong," Anne breathed out. "I've watched your progress... and it's just amazing."
"Maybe…" Shiho said, "but it's only because you've supported me this whole time. Visiting me…
cheering me on… I don't think I would have had the motivation if I didn't have that support."

"Shiho… I…" Anne shook her head. "That was nothing…"

"No, that's not true." Shiho met her eyes. "I've seen you trying to make yourself strong. Striving to
be a model, dreaming of becoming an action star… Hearing about how you deal with Mika. Your
dreams… they motivated you so much. The way your eyes would sparkle with passion… how fired
you got when telling me about them. With you working so hard, I couldn't stay in my hospital bed
moping. It made me realize… I wanted to chase my dreams too."

Anne found herself blushing. All of that praise, and she hadn't really *done* anything. Except come to
realize that she wanted to be a legit model. She wanted to show the world just who she was.

"And what would that be?" Ren asked.

Shiho was quiet for a moment. "To become… a volleyball Olympic star." She clenched her fist. "I
want to prove to Kamoshida. That I'm just as good as—no. I'm *better* than him. I'll destroy his
record. But you… being able to change others. That's true strength." She suddenly stepped
forward, and hugged Anne. "Thank you. Thank you for showing me the way."

"Shiho!" Anne's eyes began to fill with tears. "I'm not strong… I'm not strong at all," she choked
out. "If Ren and Ryuji hadn't stood with me for Kamoshida… if I had lost you, I don't know what
I'd do…"

She'd never forget what Shiho had done for her… by befriending her.

"I'm sorry," Shiho murmured. "For having to move away. I wish that the memory wasn't so
strong…"

"Shiho…" Anne pulled away slightly, to look at her best friend straight in the eye. "I'm going to be
the top model, you hear me?! That way, you'll be able to see me still…" The tears began to fall.
"I'll… I'll be in so many magazines… and I'll say tons of good stuff in the interviews! S-So…" She
pulled away completely to start wiping at her eyes. "Stay healthy… Work hard, but not too much!
And keep in touch… please…"

She didn't want her to leave. But she had to. It was the best for Shiho…

"Always, Anne," Shiho promised, before hugging her again. "And I'll come to visit… once I can
smile from the bottom of my heart."

"Y-You better," Anne choked out.

Shiho gently wiped at the last of her tears, before going to embrace Ren as well. "Thank you as
well, Amamiya-san," she said softly. "It was always nice when you visited with Anne." Then she
leaned in close, whispering something to Ren.

Ren just smiled at her, before nodding. "Always."

There was a soft knock, and Makoto peered inside. "Ah… Suzui-san's parents are here," she said.
"They… got a bit worried."

"Of course they did…" Shiho sighed. "But I suppose they shouldn't be kept waiting."

They saw Shiho downstairs, before Anne hurried back up to the roof to watch the car leave. It just
felt so… final. Shiho was really leaving…

But no… she can't cry. She promised herself that she wouldn't cry before, but she broke that promise.

"I… I'm going to be the number one model," she swore, pressing a hand to her chest. "Not just a good model, but the best!"

"Anne…" Ren put a hand on her shoulder. "You'll do it," he said gently. "You can do anything you set your mind to…"

"I'll follow the diet Shinjiro-san made up for me… I'll come up with a regiment that'll tone up my body… I'll exercise every day." Anne knew she was rambling, but she knew Ren didn't mind. He never did. "I'll study different languages too so I can do international events! I'm going to help Shiho… in the only way I can. By showing her how hard I'm working."

"Make her proud," Ren said. "Make yourself proud…" His eyes softened. "I'm already so proud of you."

"Yeah!" Anne nodded firmly. "Shiho will definitely…" Her eyes began to tear up again. No! Dammit, why… "She'll definitely…" The floodgates seem to burst and the tears came pouring out. "Dammit… why… I know this is the best for her, but I… I feel so alone and I…!"

She gasped as she felt Ren's arms wrap tightly around her. He rubbed circles into her back with one hand, stroking her hair with the other, all while holding her tight. "That's not true, Anne. You have me, Anne, I swear to you. Hell will have to freeze over before I leave you. And it's not just me… There's Ryuji, Morgana, Yusuke, Makoto, and Ken… They all care about you." His thumb tenderly brushed a tear right by her eye. "I don't want to hear that from you ever again, Anne. You're never alone."

Despite herself, Anne burrowed against Ren. He felt so warm and wonderful… The scent of coffee tickled her nose.

"Ren, I…" It was on the tip of her tongue.

I love you. I've loved you longer than I've realized.

…But she couldn't. She didn't want to destroy their friendship. Ren was happy dating Makoto.

"Anne…?"

Anne forced a smile. "I just wanted to thank you," she said softly. "For always being there for me."

Ren still looked confused, but then his arms tightened around her. "Always, Anne."

Monday, August 8th, 2016

"Everyone, let's move out!" Ren broke into a run… only to trip over his coattails and land right on his face.

"Damn, haven't seen that in a while," Ryuji commented with a snicker. "Smooth, Joker."

That… made him a bit nervous, with his cape.
Ren mumbled something, something that Ken strongly suspected was *Shut up, Skull*. Makoto let out an exasperated sigh, before helping Ren up.

"Though you didn't tell us the party set-up for this time," Makoto stated.

"Oh, right." Ren tapped his chin. "Let's do… Queen, Fox, and Ace."

They went up to the area they had just cleared, and Ren opened the door just across from the safe room. A stone slab near the entrance read *the Chamber of Guilt*.

"…Honestly, I'm surprised that there's no Chamber of Secrets," Anne murmured.

"Is this some kind of American joke?" Ryuji scratched the back of his head.

"It's the title of a book from a popular English series," Makoto explained. "I read it in junior high."

"But look at this…" Ren ran his hand across another stone slab. "When red and blue align, an illusion arises. Only proper guidance shall form a path."

"Maybe… there's some kind of light we've gotta shine?" Ryuji suggested.

"Perhaps." Yusuke absently ran his hand on the hilt of his blade. "We will probably have to go in further and see."

Ren led the way, fighting Shadows all the while. He unveiled a couple new Personas, such as Ame-no-Uzume and Pisaca, both being Personas he had never seen before.

They eventually came face to face with Shadow Futaba.

"You're late. What took you so long?" Despite her words, she sounded… almost nonplussed.

To add to that, she all but waltzed away, walking to the left.

"Joker, I don't think-" Ken began.

"What choice do we have, Ace?" Ren swept his hand, gesturing to the bottomless pit to the right. "It's a dead end."

Ken sighed. "I guess you're right," he muttered, before following Ren down the path. But then something began to rumble, shaking the entire area.

"Um… that sound…" Makoto took a couple steps back, as a boulder appeared.

"Not again!" Anne moaned before they booked it out of there before they could get crushed.

"Do I have to say it?" Ken said flatly.

"No," Ren grumbled, before his eyes turned bright red.

Ren's ability… the Third Eye, as he called it, unnerved Ken a bit. Though Ren mumbling *Focus*… did take away some of the creepiness. He didn't know how Ren attained that ability. Was he born with it? He was pretty sure that it wasn't a Wild Card ability.

But then Ren ran forward, suddenly kneeling down. "Check it out." He gestured to the hole.

"It's… rather on the small side," Yusuke said. "This will be pleasant…"
But they all managed to squeeze through, finding themselves in a large room with several sarcophagi. Morgana stepped forward, probably to scout the area, when the ground suddenly fell away.

"Mona!" Ryuji snatched him up before he could fall to his death. "Jeez… this place really is a death trap," he grumbled, before setting Morgana down.

"Y-Yeah…” Morgana said shakily, before looking up at Ryuji. "…Thanks, Skull."

"We'll just have to be careful about where we step…” Ken said.

A flight of stairs led them to both a button and a stone slab. But when Ren tried pressing it, it didn't budge. Ren frowned, before trying to whack at it harder. Yusuke grabbed his wrist before he could try again.

"Joker, I don't think that will work," he said flatly.

"Maybe we need to activate it somehow?" Makoto suggested. "The stone slab isn't lit up like the others we've seen."

"Ugh, this area's a huge pain in the ass already," Ryuji grumbled.

"Oh, stop complaining," Anne chided. "We'll just have to keep exploring!"

Ren turned to the right, ambushing the Shadow lurking by the door, before they continued forward. They eventually came across a plank blocking the area. But Ren just kicked it down, and opened the door at the end of the path. This eventually led them to a slab. When Ren touched it, the writing suddenly glowed blue.

"Something showed up…” Anne commented. "It's kinda gibberish though… B01010…"

"Let's head back," Ken suggested. "They must be connected, like the stone slab with the mural we saw."

"But what does that thing mean…” Morgana frowned. "It sounds almost like a code…”

A code… Now that Morgana mentioned it, he was right. It was like… binary, wasn't it? But it's not like there was a computer floating around where they could enter this code in…

But when they stepped outside, the ground started to shake. (Futaba really liked making earthquakes, didn't she?) But on one side of the room, holographic orbs appeared, floating above what he had assumed were sarcophagi. And they were all… blue.

"Holy crap…” Ryuji breathed. "What is that?!"

"Maybe we have to apply that B01010 to it somehow…” Yusuke suggested. "Shall we take a closer look?"

Ren led them back to the main area. Though Ken noticed that one of the holograms was more blue than the rest.

"Hmm…” Morgana tilted his head. "Maybe… 0 means we have to shut down the image."

"Let's try that." Ren nodded.

He approached the second sarcophagus and pressed the control panel. He ignored the third and
fifth images, but shut down the rest.

"What do we do now then?" Ryuji asked.

"Let's try checking the button," Ken suggested. "I saw the stone slab all lit up when we went past it earlier."

And this time it worked, unlocking the glowing blue door that they couldn't get to open earlier. (And Ren had tried. Several times. Morgana had to nudge him into exploring a different area.)

They entered inside. This area was more of a maze, but they managed to find another stone slab. But when Ren touched it, it glowed red, not blue.

"R01100 and B10011 this time," Anne noted. "So we'll have to change the holograms again?"

"Looks like it," Makoto said. "Come on, let's go back and check."

When they came back out, the other side activated its holograms. Ren deactivated the holograms needed, before going back to the button. But when he pressed the button, the area shook violently, hard enough for Morgana to lose his balance.

"Oof…" Morgana groaned. "That was definitely the strongest reaction so far…"

But then Ken looked up. "Er… guys?" he said slowly. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

Boulders were… rolling down the path.

"Um…" Anne gulped. "…That's not good."

"Yeah, that's kinda an understatement!" Ryuji yelped. "They ain't stopping… What are we gonna do!?"

"Joker, you must do something!" Yusuke's eyes were wide with panic.

"Okay, okay!" he exclaimed, holding up his hands. "Let's see…" He muttered, before punching the button again. And again.

"Joker, you're making it worse!" Anne shouted, as the boulders seemed to pick up their speed.

"I know, I know!" Ren yelled. "I'm trying to fix it, okay?!"

…Yes, try to fix the problem. By repeatedly pressing the button causing the problem.

Ren's leg suddenly lashed out and he kicked the button. (He really liked kicking things, didn't he…?) But the boulders slowed, before finally stopping.

"…Who knew you had to break the button to fix this," Ken deadpanned.

"Whatever works, right?"

Ren led them to climb up the boulders (this was seriously what the stone slab meant?), and eventually led them to a room that held another mural.

This time, it was an image of… Futaba on the ground, weeping, as a dark haired woman threw herself in front of an incoming car.
"Mom, no!" The sound of sobbing echoed through the chamber. "Mom, wake up! Please! You were just tired, from your work… that's why you fell into the street, right…?"

"Huh…?" Makoto frowned. "What is Futaba talking about?"

"That's… that's not the important part." Anne looked shaken up. "Futaba… she…"

"...She was in the state of denial," Yusuke stated, closing his eyes. "No wonder, with how she suddenly lost her mother…"

"I'm sorry, Miss, but we have to take your mother-

"NO! Mom, WAKE UP!" Futaba's voice had turned hysterical, before breaking off into sobs. "She's not… she can't be…"

He remembered what happened when his mother died. Shinjiro-san's Persona had destroyed the wall of his house, and his mom had gotten him up. They had meant to escape the house together, but then Castor had destroyed the wall. The shrapnel would have pierced him, if his mother hadn't run forward and embraced him.

He remembered her blood soaking his clothes. Castor continued going berserk, and pierced her from behind. But she just held onto him tighter, as the blood drained out of her. He remembered how Mom had collapsed to the ground. He remembered shaking her and begging her to wake up already. He remembered the police and the paramedics coming, how he had to be dragged away from her so the paramedics could examine her-

"Ace? Ace!" Makoto was shaking him hard, her hands gripping his shoulders tightly. He was shaking. He couldn't stop shaking. "Ace, just breathe!"

Ken suddenly inhaled sharply, before he stared wide-eyed at Makoto. He then took in a shaky breath. "I…"

"Shh, it's okay," she shushed him. "Joker, just go find the safe room up ahead… we'll catch up."

Ren looked at him carefully, before nodding. He led the rest of them forward.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Makoto asked gently, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"No," Ken said hoarsely, his throat constricting painfully. "I can't… I just…"

He couldn't begin to think about making a version about how his mother died, to fit the story he gave the Phantom Thieves. He didn't want to think about it.

"Okay," Makoto said. And without warning, she suddenly embraced him. "I'm sorry this reminded you of your mom." Her voice shook as her grip on him tightened. "Futaba-chan didn't deserve this… and neither did you."

But… didn't Makoto's father die because of a traffic "accident"?

"Queen, your dad…" Ken pulled away, before looking away.

"Dad… he knew that his job was an occupational hazard. And…" Makoto looked down. "…Sis refused to let me see the body for a day. At the time, I was angry but… it probably was for the best." She reached out, squeezing his hand. "…But are you feeling better now?"

"A little." Ken nodded. "But come on, we've kept the others waiting long enough."
"Show me your true form!"

After Ken's… episode, Ren had swapped him out with Morgana. But that was fine. He had been keeping Ken in the main party for the last stretch and most of their last run… He could use a break.

The canine Shadow wasn't that strange black dog that carried a scale. It was… weird, if he was being honest.

It had the head of a crocodile, but with a lion's mane. Its body was more like a hippo, but ridges ran down its spine, before forming a crocodile's tail. And it had paws more like a lion. Then again, he's seen some pretty weird Shadows. Like how Angel had this weird bondage look going on.

"Nice!" Morgana cheered. "You've got the first move, Joker!"

"Any idea on this one's weakness, Ace?" Ren asked.

"Sorry…" Ken shook his head. "I've never seen this one before."

Gah, of course. Might as well experiment then…

"Ame-no-Uzume!"

One of his new Personas appeared with a flash. She had been kinda a pain to fuse, since Caroline and Justine had demanded a special one as one of their requests. She made a sweeping motion with her arm, before bright pink energy formed, striking the Shadow.

It seemed to do normal damage, damn…

"Zorro, show your might!" Morgana exclaimed, before his Persona appeared and slashed with his rapier, whipping up a Garula spell.

Ame-no-Uzume had electricity and ice, so he could try those too…

Makoto then made her move, summoning a Freila spell. But it seemed to resist her spell…

Ryuji then ran forward, swinging with his club, but it also seemed to resist that… Damn, this was gonna be an annoying one, wasn't it?

"My turn!" the Shadow growled, its voice surprisingly feminine. It swiped forward, before blasting a Maeiga spell. (It was really a good thing that none of them were weak to curse.)

"Joker, try Bless since it's using Curse attacks!" Morgana exclaimed.

It was running a risk but… This Shadow was a tough one. He rifled through his Personas, before finally picking out Principality. She raised her staff, a bright light flaring from it. The Shadow toppled over, earning a cheer from Ryuji.

"Wait!" the Shadow growled. "You're just going to shoot me?"

"You could always join me," Ren suggested, praying that Yoshida's newest technique worked.

"Join you…" the Shadow repeated. "Oh! That's right… I'm not a Shadow. I live in the sea of souls. My name is Ammit… and starting now, I am you… and you are me…"

Ammit then transformed into blue flames, flying towards Ren's mask. He felt Ammit's presence
inside of him now.

"Oooh, nice, Joker!" Morgana cheered. "That's a new one, isn't it?"

"It's almost as annoying as that black dog one," Ryuji grumbled.

"Yeah, pretty much," Ren sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "But anyways… let's get going!"

"Yet another puzzle…" Yusuke sighed. "I wonder what this one will show us…"

"Well, there's Futaba…" Anne pointed at the part with bright orange painted onto it. "And I think that's Futaba's mom?"

"We'll just have to see," Morgana said, as Ren started to fiddle with the controls.

It wasn't too bad. Harder than the other puzzles, but a lot easier than some of the other puzzles he's had to solve. When he was finished, it showed an image of Futaba, tugging onto her mom's clothes. Wakaba was holding a stack of papers, while a computer desk sat to the right.

"Mom… I'm so bored…" Futaba's voice, high-pitched and whining, echoed throughout the room.

"Can't we take a vacation?"

"Futaba, I told you," a stern voice sighed. "My work has reached a critical stage. It's far too important for me to stop now."

"Jeez…" Ryuji frowned. "Would it kill her to pay a little more attention?"

"You have to remember that she was raising Futaba alone, Ryuji…" Makoto said quietly. "It's not easy raising a child on one income…" Her expression grew melancholy at that. She was probably thinking about both her dad and Sae…

"Yeah, but…" Ryuji sighed.

"…You can't help but feel a little bad for Futaba," Anne added. "I always hated it when my parents had to delay returning home because of something coming up with work…"

"Not even for the weekend?! Your work is stupid!" Futaba huffed out. "I hate your work!"

"Futaba!" Wakaba sounded aggravated now. "Don't you dare say that! My work will be revolutionary!" Then a sigh. "Futaba, look… I'm sorry that I haven't been able to pay attention as I should, but I promise my research will be done soon. We'll take a nice long vacation during winter break, okay? I'll make you all of the homecooked meals you want, until you're sick of it. Just a little longer, okay?"

"Promise?"

"Of course, Futaba."

"Do you think… Futaba knows what her mother was researching?" Yusuke asked. "Just what made it 'revolutionary'?"

"That's the real question, isn't it?" Morgana sighed, folding his arms over his chest. "I have a feeling that Boss knows something, with how that woman has been interrogating him…"

"Not that we can really make him talk," Ren muttered. "It was like pulling teeth to get him to talk
"That's not important," Ken said quietly. "Isshiki-san's research… has been lost. Even if Futaba knew what exactly her mother was researching… she was thirteen. I don't think she would've disclosed everything to Futaba."

"I would really like to know what it was exactly," Makoto mused. "…But I think Ace is right."

"But come on, the way is open… Let's push forward!" Anne urged.

They walked forward, finding themselves in the main hall. The door blocking the way slid down, allowing them to climb the rest of the stairs. But… another large door was blocking the way.

"Hey, doesn't this look familiar?" Anne cocked her head. "I feel that I've seen this before."

"That's… Futaba's bedroom door!" Morgana exclaimed. "This is it… I think we've finished the Palace completely!"

"But… we need to open the door," Makoto said, rubbing her chin.

"So, Futaba's cognition needs to change," Yusuke stated. "I assume that we must have her open the way for us."

"Open the way…?" Ken asked, frowning.

"Since Palaces are ruled by their hosts' cognitions… if we can change their mindsets, we can get rid of obstacles such as these," Morgana explained. "We've had to do it with Madarame before. But this means, we'll have to be prepared when we ask Futaba to open the door. We will have to present the calling card to her."

"Okay," Ren nodded. "Just give me a few days to gather supplies, and I'll figure out the best time to strike."

"Sounds good to me!" Ryuji cheered, pumping his fist.

"Futaba… we'll save you," Anne vowed, pressing a hand against her chest. Her eyes burned with resolution. "No matter what!"

"You want to live…" Ken said. "Just hang in there a little longer…"

"So, we're clear, right?" Morgana said firmly. "We'll prepare the calling card and Joker will decide when we strike."

Ren looked back at the door. The murals were painting a different picture, of Futaba's perception. She knew, deep down, what was the truth. She just had to realize it.

---

**AMMIT**

**History:** The Egyptian goddess of divine retribution. She sat by the scales of Ma'at, ready for when Anubis tested souls against the feather of truth. If they were judged to be impure, Ammit would devour the soul, inflicting a second death on the soul and causing the soul to become lost.

**Level:** 31

**Affinity:** Curse
**Blocks:** Curse

**Resists:** Physical, Nuclear

**Weakness:** Bless

**Spells:** Eiga, Maeiga, Vicious Strike, Oni Kagura (level 32), Ominous Words (level 34)

Chapter End Notes

Like how Ryuji unlocks the area Ogikubo in his rank 4 event, Ken's rank 4 would unlock Meiji Shrine, instead of Ren having to unlock it by either accepting Anne's invite on August 6th (if you've cleared the Palace beforehand) or reading about it in a book.

In the artbook, Ken's parents are stated to have divorced shortly after he was born. The stuff about Ken's mother's family is something I came up with, just for this story, though.

I've seen people give Anne's rank 9 crap for the friendship route, but the original choices were "You have me" and "You have us". So I adjusted it a bit here. I like the scene where you romance Anne, but I have a fun scene planned for how they get together next chapter hehe.

Ken states that his mother died protecting him when he confronts Shinji about her death. I do think that Ken's relatively recovered, even in Ultimax, but I think hearing Futaba getting traumatized from Wakaba dying would have triggered him.

And for the chapters where I introduce Personas that fall under Adjustment, I will do a little blurb, describing their skills and affinities. Ammit isn't the best fit for the arcana, but I had to stick to the theme Futaba's Palace's Shadows have.

Though I have a question. Would anyone like to see how Ren's confidants have progressed so far? I've thought of making up a list for it anyways, but I don't mind sharing if anyone wants to see it! I think it'd be a tad confusing to keep track, since I make side mentions of the confidants for the most part.

But anyways, we're approaching Futaba's Treasure being stolen at last! Until next time!
Resolution

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves prepare to steal Futaba's Treasure, and deliver the calling card to her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Monday, August 8th, 2016

"I'm home-" Ken paused as a familiar scent hit his nostrils.

"We had too much leftover rice." Shinjiro-san was as nonchalant as he could be, turning to glance at him before turning his attention back to the stove.

But he knew better. Shinjiro-san must have remembered what he had talked about the last time they went into Futaba's Palace. Though Mitsuru-san had been far from… happy, hearing about what exactly had happened to Futaba…

While Shinjiro-san finished cooking the omurice, Ken just ended up brewing some tea. It was… a good distraction, as the scent of the omurice just made him think of Mom…

And despite the omurice being as delicious as always, Ken found himself barely being able to eat it. He only could think of how he had a literal flashback to how Mom died…

Why did it affect him so badly? He thought he had moved on from his mother's death.

"Ken." He lifted his head at Shinjiro-san's voice. "Don't force yourself to eat like that."

"Sorry," Ken mumbled out, before pushing away the plate. Omurice was one of his favorite meals, but it just tasted like ash to him right now. The bites he managed to get down felt heavy in his stomach. "I just…"

"Don't apologize," Shinjiro-san said, all while scrutinizing his face. "…What exactly happened at the Palace today?"

Ken didn't know what to say for a long time. Seeing what Futaba had gone through… was just horrifying. But hearing how Futaba had reacted to her mother's death had been the worst for him. It had just… hit too close to home.

"We… finished the Palace today," Ken finally said. "We'll be going after the Treasure soon…"

But Shinjiro-san didn't say anything. He just waited.

"You know… how I told you about how we saw a mural during our last visit? And how we heard voices, connected to the scene depicted in the mural?" Ken said slowly. "We… saw two more today. And the first…” Ken bit his lip. "…We heard Futaba's reaction to her mother's death."
Shinjiro-san sucked in a breath. "What happened?"

"She was… hysterical," Ken said quietly, his hands curling to grip his knees. "She was begging her mom to wake up…"

"Ken, are you—" Shinjiro-san stopped short, before he spoke again. "I'm sorry you had to hear that kind of shit." He heaved out a sigh, before rubbing his face. "…Look, Ken, I know I'm kinda shit at talking 'bout stuff with feelings, but you can always talk to me 'bout this." His expression darkened. "…I know hearing that had to hit you personally."

…That's right. He always had Shinjiro-san… And Makoto's concerned face flashed in his mind. He had people who cared about him. It wasn't shameful for him to still remember his mother…

And… this only meant it was more important for them to save Futaba. They had to save her.

"…And if you're not hungry, you should just rest," Shinjiro-san continued. "You look beat."

Ken managed a smile. "…Thank you, Shinjiro-san."

After he wrapped up what was left of his meal, Ken headed for his room. He fell onto his bed with a sigh. Going into the Metaverse was exhausting… He felt like he could sleep now, actually…

But a buzzing sound caught his attention. He dug out his phone, and winced when he saw he had several messages.

Message From: Makoto Niijima

[Makoto Niijima]: Ken, I just… wanted to check up on you.

[Makoto Niijima]: I know that you seemed fine after we caught up with the others, but…

[Makoto Niijima]: I can't help but worry.

[Makoto Niijima]: I understand if you need space but… I'd be more than happy to listen to you if you need someone

[Makoto Niijima]: Am I assuming too much…?

[Makoto Niijima]: Sorry…

Despite himself, Ken found himself smiling. He honestly hadn't expected this.

[Ken Amada]: Thank you for checking up on me.

[Ken Amada]: I'm… okay. Not great, but I can handle it.

[Ken Amada]: Sorry for not responding earlier, I was talking to Shinjiro-san…

[Makoto Niijima]: Oh!

[Makoto Niijima]: I'm glad…

[Makoto Niijima]: But if you do need to talk, I'll listen…

[Makoto Niijima]: I… already failed once in not listening to people.

[Makoto Niijima]: I don't want to do it again…
Ken frowned at the last part. This… was about the whole thing with Kamoshida, wasn't it? He supposed that this would be weighing on Makoto for a long time.

[Ken Amada]: Makoto, you really shouldn't blame yourself like that...

[Ken Amada]: But thank you… I appreciate your concern.

[Ken Amada]: And I'll keep that in mind.

[Ken Amada]: But… I'm honestly really tired. I think I'm going to bed soon.

[Makoto Nijima]: Okay. Sleep well, Ken.

[Ken Amada]: Thanks. You too, Makoto.

But before he started his usual routine before bed, he checked his other messages, which happened to be in the group chat. Everyone had sent him some kind of message, asking after him. Their concern was… touching.

And yet… he felt a pang of guilt. Was it… really okay to be lying to them about this…? Shouldn't he be more honest about the reason why he even came to Tokyo?

Ha… yeah, right. They would take that so well…

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Wednesday, August 10th, 2016

Shinjiro stifled a yawn, before zipping up his duffel bag. That was everything. He swung it over his shoulder, before leaving his bedroom. He went to the living room, dropping it by the door, before making a quick breakfast. He finished eating, before his eyes moved back to the hallway. It was still kinda early (eight), so Ken was probably still sleeping-

"Shinjiro-san, wait!" Ken all but stumbled into the living room, clutching a box tightly. He was dressed in his usual street clothes, but his hair was sticking up everywhere.

"Ken?" Shinjiro frowned at him. "Jeez, you look like a mess."

"I'm going to ignore that," he retorted. "Did you really think I would sleep in when you were leaving today?"

Shinjiro rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, it's kinda early…"

"I've gotten up earlier," Ken said, shaking his head. "Come on, let's get going."

"Go brush your hair first, Ken," Shinjiro said dryly. "I'm not late, so I can wait for you to make sure your hair doesn't look like a bird's nest."

Ken grumbled for a moment, before trotting back to his bathroom. He came back a few minutes later, his hair a lot neater now.

The walk to the station was brisk. That was one thing he didn't like about Tokyo. Everyone was in a rush. Port Island wasn't exactly sleepy like Inaba was, but he didn't feel like someone would knock him over because they were late for work.

"Be careful, okay?" Shinjiro said lowly as they approached the train station. "Don't go to bed too
late. You don't have schoolwork to worry about, so you don't have to stay up. And eat everything I prepare for you. And-"

"Shinjiro-san," Ken cut him off, shooting him a look. "I know, okay? I won't get into any trouble while you're gone…"

"You can't blame me for worrying," Shinjiro grumbled. "Especially since you're preparing to help Isshiki's daughter soon."

And this will be Ken's first major fight in a long time. Would they even fight Isshiki's daughter's Shadow? Didn't the Investigation Team's Shadows go berserk because they were denied? But Isshiki's daughter wouldn't be there? Ugh, this was just too confusing.

"I know, I know," Ken grumbled. "But um…" He suddenly held out the box he was carrying since this morning to Shinjiro. "…Happy early birthday." He looked away for a moment. "…You can open it today, but… wait until you're on the train, okay?"

"Thanks…" Shinjiro said slowly, before taking it from Ken. He gave it a little rattle, but it didn't give him any hint of just what it was. Guess he'd find out on the train. "But anyways… bye, Ken. I'll see you in a week."

Ken gave a little wave, before Shinjiro headed for the station that would take him back to Port Island.

"So, you know Amada-kun pretty well."

The unfamiliar voice made Shinjiro turn around. It was feminine, so he started to look down. And then he realized the speaker was tall. Really fucking tall. Taller than him. By only a couple centimeters, but still.

"What of it?" Shinjiro asked. "How do you even know about Ken?"

The woman just folded her arms over her chest, slinging out her hip. "He was with my little sister once," she stated. "I take it that you come from Port Island as well?"

Little sister…? He squinted at the woman, until it hit him. She resembled Niijima, even though they didn't share a hair or eye color. They definitely resembled each other more than Minato and Minako did. Though what the hell was that question about?

"What of it?" Shinjiro asked. "That's none of your business."

The woman clicked her tongue, looking irritated with Shinjiro now, which was nothing new. "There's no need to be rude. Though I'd like to know… just what are Amada-kun's intentions to my sister?"

"Intentions?" Shinjiro repeated, staring at the woman. "They're friends. You've heard of that, right?"

He knew that, even though it was too fun to heckle Ken about the possibility, after all of the teasing Ken's done to him and Fuuka. He was entitled to a little payback.

"My sister never calls a boy by his first name," Niijima deadpanned.

Ken rarely called anyone by their first name either, but that didn't mean they were secretly making out. Ugh. Niijima was making him remember Mitsuru's prissy princess act when he had first met
her.

"Look, I'm not here to be harassed about who your sister befriends," Shinjiro said flatly. "I have a train to catch."

Without another word, he walked away, ignoring the woman's brief sputtering. Once he was settled on the train, he opened the box Ken had given him. On top was a piece of paper, folded into two. Shinjiro picked that up, unfolding it. He had to squint a bit to make out Ken's handwriting. He really didn't know why Ken wasn't looking to become a doctor. He had the practice with him being one of the team's dedicated healers. And he definitely had the handwriting for it sometimes.

Dear Shinjiro-san,

First of all, happy early birthday. Or happy birthday, depending on when you open this. But anyways… I wanted to give you something special this year. Especially… after the move and everything. I know you prefer simple presents. Presents that you'll use on more of a every day basis. But I wanted to give you something special this year, to thank you for everything you've done for me over the years…

So, I'm giving you my mother's old engagement ring. I don't know why my parents divorced, but I still think that Mom still loved Dad in her own way. She always hated to hear him being bad mouthed. She continued to wear the ring. And I know… how much you want a ring special for Fuuka-san.

He… what?!! Shinjiro looked back into the box, and sure enough, there was a dark blue velvet box. He picked it up, popping it open. Nestled inside the white lining was a platinum ring. The setting were two flowers, the petals being pearls and the centers being sapphires. It had a vintage look to it, the band twisted into almost resembling vines.

And I know what you're gonna say. 'You should use this when you wanna propose' or 'This is too much, what the fuck Ken'. But it's not. It's really not. You've changed my life in so many ways. You literally yanked me onto the right path, by saving my life. You took me in when most people your age are worried about university or having fun… This is my thank you for the past seven years.

(Also if you try to give the ring back to me, I'm just going to toss it into the trash bin. So don't even think about it.)

Ken

Shinjiro just sighed, shaking his head. This kid…

He didn't even do anything special. It was only the right thing to do, after what happened with Ken's mom, accident or no. He started looking after Ken as a way for atonement… but that stopped being the case a long time ago.

But if Ken really did mean what he said… he would absolutely refuse to take it back. And that kid could be stubborn as hell when he wanted to.

Shinjiro examined the ring again. This ring… it would suit Fuuka well.

So… he might as well use Ken's present well…

Today, she would get Ren and Makoto to stop hiding about their relationship. There was nothing to be ashamed of. She didn't even know why they were keeping it on the downlow in the first place…
After greeting Boss with a smile and wave, Anne scaled the stairs leading up to Ren's room. Ryuji was the only one in the room, surprisingly.

"'Sup, Anne!" he greeted her cheerfully, giving a little wave. "You're here early!"

Anne stuck her tongue at him. "You're one to talk, Ryuji!" she huffed. "You've gotten how many tardies over the years?!"

"Hey, I've gotten better lately." He scowled at her. "But do you think we'll be going in today? I mean, Ren called us here for a reason, right?"

"Where is Ren?" Anne asked.

"Went to run an errand with Makoto," Ryuji answered with a shrug. "He'll be back soon."

Riiight. An 'errand'. Ugh. Why did they feel like they had to sneak away and hide it from everyone? She really would not want to see Ren kiss Makoto, but they didn't have to make up excuses like that…

Ryuji squinted at her. "…What's with that look on your face?"

"Whaaaaat?" Anne did her best to blink innocently at Ryuji. (She wasn't sure if she succeeded.) "Me? This is just my face."

"…Right." Ryuji eyed her. "Seriously, Anne, Ren's been tellin' me you've been kinda weird lately. Something on your mind?"

Anne sucked in a breath. Ryuji had no idea what he had just asked. But… Ryuji was Ren's best friend. They had been attached to the hip since the first day of school. If Ren had told anyone… it would be Ryuji, right?

"Hey… Ryuji…" Anne began, "Ren would tell you anything… right?"

"Uhh… what?" Ryuji frowned. "Okay, seriously, what's up, Anne? I know that you were down 'bout Suzui leaving but…"

"Does he talk girls with you?" Anne blurted out. "Because… I saw him on a date with Makoto several days ago."

"Him… and Makoto," Ryuji repeated, his eyes wide. "Dude, are you sure 'bout that? Because he told me-" He then shut his mouth, panic filling his eyes. "Uhhh… never mind."

"Never mind what?" Anne demanded, closing the distance between them and grabbing Ryuji by the shirt. She shook him a little. "What did he tell you?!!"

"I can't tell you!" he yelped, all while squirming in her grip. "The bro code! Have mercy on me, Anne!"

"…Am I interrupting something?"

They both turned their heads to see that Ken had arrived. He was carrying one of those tiered bento lunches.

Ryuji then broke free of Anne's grasp, all but sprinting to Ken. "Ken! How are you doing today?!" He then leaned in, whispering something to Ken. Ken just raised an eyebrow at Ryuji, before giving him one of those sorta sarcastic smiles Ken seemed fond of using.
Gr… Ryuji so knew something. Whatever. He couldn't run forever. She would get it out of him, one way or another!

"What's with the huge lunch though, dude?"

"You need to help me finish this," Ken groaned. "Shinjiro-san's cooked so much for me because he apparently doesn't trust me to order all takeout while he's on Port Island."

"Port Island?" Anne parroted, looking at him curiously. "What's he doing there?"

"Just visiting for a week," Ken said quickly.

"Wait a minute…" Ryuji squinted at Ken. "…Isn't his birthday coming up? Like reallyyyy soon?"

"It is?!" Anne gasped. "Is that why he's visiting Port Island?"

…Though, she had to wonder how Ryuji knew that. Ken would have had to tell him that.

"…Yeah, that's the reason," Ken said slowly, looking at her warily.

Ryuji sighed, before rubbing at his face. "Dude, why didn't you say somethin' to Ren. He would've understood. You must miss Port Island. And everyone back there."

"It's… It's okay." Ken's voice was quiet. "Futaba is more important. I couldn't ask Ren to delay things just so I can visit home… That would be just selfish. There will be other times I can visit, like during winter break… But Futaba's situation is a lot more urgent."

Anne huffed. "God, you're stubborn."

"Oh, I'm the stubborn one?" Ken quickly glanced at Ryuji, before looking back at Anne with a raised eyebrow.

…Okay, he had a point.

"HEY!" Ryuji protested. "Don't drag me into this!"

"Oh, hey, almost everyone's here." Ren and Makoto came up, and Morgana jumped out of Ren's bag.

"What took you guys so long?" Ryuji asked.

"Picking up some new upgrades on guns from Iwai," Ren explained. "And some new powerful medicine, courtesy of Takemi."

"Takemi?" Ken repeated.

"Oh, she's a doctor who works here in Yongen-jaya," Ren answered. "Been doing her some favors in return of some really good medicine. She gives me some nice discounts too."

"Though, honestly I don't really approve of the 'favors' you do for her…" Makoto sighed. "She calls you a guinea pig of all things…"

"She… what?" Ken gave Ren one of those flat eyes stares of his. "Ren…" he ground out, drawing out Ren's name, "what exactly have you been doing?"

"Hey, gotta do whatcha gotta do," Ren said with a shrug. "But anyways, we're just waiting on
"Yusuke, from the looks of it…" Then his eyes focused on the box Ken was carrying. "…Bringing lunch again?"

"Courtesy of Shinjiro-san," he answered, though he didn't look too happy that Ren had sorta dodged his question. "It's way too much… so I thought I'd share."

Ren just grinned. "Nice. Shinjiro-san is an awesome cook. Gimme a sec, and I'll grab everyone some utensils."

After setting down his bag, he disappeared down the stairs again, and Anne took the time to look over Makoto. She seemed a bit flushed, though it could be from the heat more than anything. (She was so glad that she had gained a higher tolerance of heat ever since she awakened to Carmen.) Any hickeys? Her lips didn't seem swollen.

"Is… there something on my face?" Makoto asked hesitantly.

"O-Oh, it's nothing!" Anne did her best to laugh, but she didn't think it worked, judging from the face Ryuji made. "But sooo… any reason why you went with Ren today?"

"Because… there were a lot of things to carry…?" Makoto said slowly, raising an eyebrow. "Sorry for making you wait…"

"Nonono, it's okay!" Anne said hastily. She couldn't make Makoto feel bad. "We didn't wait too long, you know! I was just surprised that you went with Ren! Though, you have gotten closer lately."

"Um… yes?" Makoto still looked confused. "We have been spending more time together lately…"

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me." Ken was staring at Anne now, looking rather annoyed. "Really, Anne?"

"Kidding me?" Makoto repeated. "About what…?"

"Come on, Makoto, you really should stop trying to hide it!" Anne exclaimed, starting to feel frustrated now.

Why did she feel so ashamed? Ren had to be an amazing boyfriend. Didn't she want to hold his hand in public? Or maybe even give him a kiss on the cheek?

"Hide what?" Ren asked, having returned upstairs, apparently oblivious to their conversation. He had grabbed napkins, plates, knives, and forks, and he set it down on the table.

"Ren, we're your friends, right?" Anne demanded, hands on her hips as she stepped closer to him.

"Oh, dear god," Ken sighed. She glanced at him to see that he was pressing a hand to his forehead. "This is just a mess."

"You don't hafta tell me," Ryuji muttered.

"Uh… yeah?" Ren said slowly all while raising an eyebrow at her, before looking over to the other boys. "Mind telling me what's going on?"

"You'll find out soon enough," Ken said flatly, folding his arms over his chest. "You brought this on yourself. You should've just listened to my advice."

Ken knew about this too, huh? Ugh, figures. Well, that only gave her a bigger reason to get them to
admit it!

"And friends don't hide things from each other!" Anne continued, pressing on. "There's no need to be ashamed, okay?! It's something to be embraced! We're all friends! Why did you have to hide it from us?!"

"A-Anne, you're really not making any sense…" Makoto said, her eyes wide. "Just what are you talking about…?"

Anne slammed her hands on the table, making it rattle for a moment. Makoto jumped at the sudden sound. Ugh! Screw being subtle. "Look, I know you guys are dating, okay?!"

A moment of silence. That stretched… on and on…

"…What?" Makoto said weakly, as the blood drained from her face. "Wait, Anne, we're not… this is just a misunderstanding!"

"Don't lie to me, Makoto! I saw you two at the diner!" Anne retorted, pointing an accusing finger at her. "I don't know why you're trying to deny it! You're so, so lucky, okay?! Ren will treat you like a queen. He's so kind and thoughtful and he'll probably come up with the best dates and-"

Anne bit her lip. Did Makoto know how lucky she was…?

"This… is why I told you to ask Anne out already," Ken interrupted. "Do you need any more proof now?!"

…Huh? Ken told Ren what now?

"Wha?" Anne said dumbly. She literally could not think of anything else to say.

"You told Ren to do what?!" Morgana cried. "Why would you-"

"EFF THIS I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE!"

Ryuji suddenly shoved Anne, causing her to stumble forward. She would have fallen flat onto her face, if Ren hadn't caught her.

"Ryuji!" Makoto gasped. "Anne could've been hurt-"

But Ryuji just ignored her. "Come on, man! You've liked her since freakin' June, prolly longer-"

He what? He liked her back? For that long?!

"JUST KISS HER ALREADY DAMMIT!"

"Ren, I-I…" Anne's face began to burn with embarrassment.

And Ren… he had the laziest smirk on his face. It caused butterflies to flutter in her stomach, her heart pound, and honestly if Ren wasn't holding onto her, she would be all swooned out on the floor.

"So…" he drawled out, "you thought that I was dating Makoto?"

"B-But… the diner… and you're the leaders…" Anne blurted out. "You've been spending a lot of time with her ever since we beat Kaneshiro and… and…"
"Anne, Ren and I are just friends," Makoto sighed. "He was just… helping me with a favor."

"But I saw you holding hands!" Anne cried out. "And you guys were obviously nervous! That was like your first date, right?! That's why you were double dating with that weird older guy and the other girl! To put less pressure on you guys!"

Her head was spinning. That look he was giving her. He was holding her. What Ryuji and Ken had said-

Ren just leaned in close, and her eyes went wide. Their faces were four, five centimeters apart. Her face felt so hot that you could probably fry an egg on it. "Oh, Anne…” The low timbre of his voice sent shivers down her spine. "You really don't have to worry about Makoto… or any other girl… you've had me captivated since the day I met you."

He… what? Back on the very first day?

"Though… I'm just glad the feeling's mutual." Ren's smirk just grew wider. "You've really fallen for me, huh?"

"Dude, really?" Ryuji whined. "Why you gotta do this here?"

"And using that awful pun," Ken grumbled.

"Um… should we give you some privacy?" Makoto asked. "Wait, Morgana, where are you going?!"

"Anywhere but here!"

"Jeez…” Ken muttered, "this just… kinda exploded." He sighed. "I'll go talk to Morgana."

Ren frowned, before releasing Anne. "Ken, I don't know… maybe I should be the one to talk to him-"

"You…” Ken ground out, "are going to do what I told you to do two weeks ago." He looked at Ren sternly. "I'll talk to Morgana. I know how it feels when you like someone, but they like another friend."

And without another word, he disappeared down the flight of stairs. Anne fiddled with her pigtails, her face still burning.

"We'll just… er…” Makoto stammered out. "We'll just get some coffee from Boss!"

"But I hate coffee!" Ryuji protested.

"Just come on!" Makoto hissed, before grabbing his wrist and dragging him toward the stairs.

"Ow ow ow!" Ryuji yelped out. "Holy shit, you need to trim your nails, Makoto!"

"Then take the hint next time!" Makoto retorted, her voice fading away as they descended the stairs.

And this… left them completely alone.

"Anne-" Ren began, but Anne cut him off.

"You really… You really like me?"
Shock was clear in Ren's dark eyes. "Anne… why are you so surprised?"

"It's just..." Anne bit her lip, before looking at him in the eyes. "...I'm really surprised," she confessed. "I... I only have my looks going for me. Makoto's a genius, she helps you lead the Phantom Thieves, she's pretty elegant, and I..."

"Hey." Ren tilted her chin up, cutting her off. "That is not true, Anne," he said earnestly. "Yeah, you're beautiful. I'll admit you left me breathless when we had first met. But most importantly, you're kind. You care so much for the people you love. You gave me a chance, when you didn't know a thing about me except for the rumors. Ryuji only gave me a chance after I saved his life from Kamoshida's goons. He was actually kinda an ass to me when we first met." Ren rubbed the back of his head. "I love how passionate you can get. Anyone would have been pissed at the shit Mika pulled... but not you. You just wanted to outdo her by your own merits."

Anne felt her eyes filling with tears. Growing up, all of the compliments given to her were always about her looks.

_Oh, look how beautiful your hair is!_

_Your eyes are just so lovely..._

_Your skin is flawless... just like a porcelain doll._

But Ren... he saw past that. He saw her. Just like how he had seen past the rumors about her, when he had comforted her at the diner...

"Anne... please don't cry." Ren's quiet plea snapped her out of her thoughts.

"...Dummy." Anne wiped at her eyes, before offering him a watery smile. "I'm crying because I'm happy."

Ren's eyes softened, and he reached out to cup her cheek. "...I'm glad," he said, as his thumb brushed away the last of her tears. "I want nothing more to see you smile. You have a beautiful smile."

"Then kiss me."

"As my lady commands," Ren breathed, before leaning in.

Unsurprisingly, Ren tasted of coffee. He had really developed a taste for it ever since he started living in LeBlanc's attic. But he kissed her again and again, leaving her breathless.

Lack of oxygen eventually forced them to come up for air. Anne's cheeks were warm as she looked at Ren.

"So... I'm your lady now?"

"Do you want to be?" Ren asked, reaching to take her hand.

"Of course I do!" Anne slid her arms around his neck, and his hands went to rest at her hips. "A million times yes."

"Good." Ren's lips curved into a smile. "Shall we celebrate it then?"

"What do you have in mind?" Anne raised an eyebrow, but she couldn't stifle the smile tugging at her lips.
"Oh, I think you know what I mean," Ren said airily, before leaning to close the distance between them.

Ken was glad that Morgana was a cat in this instance. It made it all too easy to find him pawing at the door. Ken quickly scooped him up, ignoring Morgana's protests.

"Put me down this instant!" he hissed out. "I don't want to talk to you, especially after what you told Ren… and Ren! He knew that I love Lady Ann! How could he do this to me?!!"

"Uh, kid, is everything okay?" Sakura-san said with a frown.

"It's fine," Ken said to the older man, all while holding onto the squirming feline. "Morgana is just feeling… antsy. I'm going to take him out for a bit."

Once he stepped outside, Ken exhaled deeply. Oh boy… He really did not sign up for this crap, but he had to do damage control. He took Morgana to just outside the train station. He was thankful that Yongen-jaya was a quiet area. Less of a chance for people to come out of the station and see him talk to a cat. While Ren seemed fine with talking to Morgana in public on a daily basis, he rather not be seen as a crazy cat whisperer.

Though Morgana didn't make it easy. He tried to claw and bite at Ken.

Ken sat on the bench, and glared down at Morgana. "Stop it. You're acting like a little child."

"So says Mister Perfect!" Morgana snarled. "I'm so sorry that you don't like my behavior!"

…What.

"I'm not perfect," Ken said with a frown. "Where did you get that from?"

"Like you don't know," Morgana hissed out, glowering at him.

…He really didn't. But whatever. He'd deal with that later. But he had to handle the whole love-triangle-but-not-really now.

"Morgana," he sighed, "look, I know that you like Anne. A lot. But-"

Morgana glared at him. "How could you tell Ren to go after Lady Anne?" he demanded. "There's no other girl for me! Ren… he hangs out with so many girls. Surely, there has to be someone else that's interested in him…"

"Are you listening to yourself?" Ken demanded, feeling irritation surge through him.

He knew it sucked when you liked someone and they couldn't see you in that kind of light. He remembered being so jealous when Akihiko-san and Minako-san started dating. At the time he had hated that he was like a brother to Minako-san. He understood the feeling. But Morgana was really acting like a little child. Ren liked Anne. Anne liked Ren. Morgana had to accept it, or a rift would form in the group. And he really didn't want that to happen.

"Do Anne's feelings not matter?" Ken asked coolly, gazing sternly down at Morgana. Gentleness would not work here. He would have to be blunt. "Or Ren's? Isn't he your friend?!"

God, Morgana was so stubborn that it was aggravating. And he needed to nip this in the bud.

"I—" Morgana's eyes went huge, before he lowered his head. "O-Of course… Ren… he's my best
friend…”

"It is not fair to think Ren has a duty to not act on his feelings just because you like Anne and you're friends," Ken said. "And Anne likes Ren. If you really love someone, you need to put their happiness first." He took a deep breath so that he could calm down. Because Morgana did get his hopes up for nothing. "…I'm sorry that Anne doesn't see you in that kind of light, but it's not fair for you to expect Ren to take a step back just because you like Anne too. And besides… don't you agree that both Ren and Anne deserve some happiness? After Kamoshida? And how Ren's reputation has been dragged through the mud because of his record?"

Morgana was silent for a long time. "Does… Ren really like Lady Anne?" he asked softly. "Would he treat her well?"

…Morgana must be really infatuated with Anne, if he didn't notice the way Ren looked at her.

"I really think he would," he said. "And you know that Ren and Anne deserve this. I know right now you feel that Anne is the only girl for you but… there will be others, I promise."

Morgana sighed, before his ears lowered, all but folding against his skull. "You're right," he muttered. "I'm sorry for blaming you…"

Ken sighed for the umpteenth time today. He really hated drama. "I'm not the one you have to apologize to, Morgana."

"I know, I know…” Morgana ducked his head. "Let's go back so I can get this over with…”

So Ken took Morgana back to LeBlanc, and Yusuke had apparently arrived during their absence.

"Morgana!" Ren rushed up to them, looking at Morgana and then to Ken and then at Morgana again.

"Ren… I…” Morgana raised his head to look at Ren straight in the eyes. "…I'm sorry for reacting the way I have been. It was uncouth and ungentlemanly and I…” He sighed, before he tensed up in Ken's arms. "Treat Lady Anne like she's royalty!" he said firmly. "You better make her the happiest girl in the world! Or else I'll… I'll claw your eyes out in your sleep! And I'll scratch up your face good!"

"You've got it, buddy," Ren laughed, before patting Morgana on the head. Since Morgana couldn't see, Ken just rolled his eyes. "And no need to worry about that. Anne means a lot to me."

"Congrats, man!" Ryuji suddenly slung an arm around Ren. "Seriously, you guys deserve this."

"Ryuji..." Anne's cheeks turned pink. "Thanks."

"Take care of each other," Ryuji added with a wink. "Though save the making out for here, yeah? I don't want you smacking lips in the Metaverse."

Anne immediately reddened, before glaring at Ryuji. "Ugh! What kind of people do you think we are?!"

"I wouldn't mind it…"

"REN!"

"A truly beautiful couple," Yusuke mused. "Oh! Do you suppose I could paint you, like Adam and
"Eve?"

"Yusuke, I think we're going to have a little chat about you asking for models," Ken sighed.

"But congratulations, you two, really," Makoto interjected, before she smiled. "I'm happy for you both."

"Makoto..." Anne looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions like that..."

"It's all right, Anne," Makoto reassured, putting a hand on the younger girl's shoulder. "Though this was why we kept it a secret from the rest of you. We didn't want you to worry."

"Though, why did you keep it a secret?" Ken asked.

"Oh, um... I'll explain later," Makoto said quickly, before clearing her throat. "Now that's taken care of..." She looked to Ren. "...Just what did you call us all here today?"

Just... what was Makoto hiding? Didn't Anne call the other guy weird? Why was that...? He hoped that Makoto wasn't doing anything dangerous... Though she did have Ren watching her back. But still. He couldn't help but be a little worried.

"Our preparations are complete," Ren stated. "Yusuke, do you have the calling card?"

"What do you take me for?" Yusuke scoffed, before producing a bright red card. "I had this finished the night after we finished Futaba's Palace." The familiar emblem of the Phantom Thieves was emblazoned on the back.

"Yusuke, can I see?" Ken asked, before setting Morgana down.

Yusuke nodded, before holding it out to him.

Hmm... it was like Kamoshida and Madarame's calling cards. Accusing of the host of the palace of a sin. In Futaba's case, her sin would be "sloth". Though wasn't her Palace called the Pyramid of Wrath? Though wrath didn't really suit Futaba, so he supposed that's why Yusuke chose sloth. Too bad he can't really take a picture without looking suspicious...

"So we're doing it today?" Anne asked, her eyes growing bright. "We'll be saving Futaba-chan?"

"What do you think we'll be facing?" Ryuji asked. "Futaba's Shadow is so... weird. Like she helps us sometimes but then she tries to kill us other times!"

"I think that's because of her fear of people," Ken said. "She wants help, but she's also terrified of getting hurt. That's why she seems to be flipflopping from two different attitudes."

Morgana nodded. "Yeah, that makes a lot of sense." Then he narrowed his eyes. "...Though we have to be prepared. Futaba's Shadow will be prepared to defend the Treasure. And the Shadows we've faced in her Palace were stronger than any we've seen. We can't let our guard down."

Yusuke frowned. "Though... isn't it strange that we haven't encountered to what Futaba's Shadow referred to her as her mother?"

That's right... Shadow Futaba had mentioned her when they first managed to visit the Palace. It seemed almost... monstrous, if it was strong enough to make the Palace shake. Though the question was... why haven't they seen it?

"Maybe we'll be fighting them both," Ren suggested. "Though... it may be tricky convincing
Futaba to open the door to us…”

"We have to!" Anne exclaimed, her hands clenching into fists. "Futaba-chan is counting on us… we can't stop now!"

Yusuke let out a thoughtful hum. "Perhaps… we should be just straight with her. Explain why we need her to open the door to us, so we can steal her heart."

"It may work…” Ken said slowly, before he grimaced, "…or Futaba could panic and call Sakura-san on us."

"Oi, stop being so negative, Ken!" Ryuji swatted his shoulder. "I mean, it's worth a try, ain't it?"

"As of now… it's our best bet," Makoto said.

…They had a point, he had to admit.

Ren stood up. "Agreed. Come on. Let's pay Futaba a little visit."

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It's been sixteen days since the Phantom Thieves had last spoken to her. If they were planning on taking her desires… wouldn't they have done it by now?

What was the point? They can't fix her… She was a hopeless case. She killed her mom. Matricide… she was guilty of matricide. And she could never forget it, with how Mom would show up from time to time. And the voices… they never stopped. Futaba squeezed her eyes shut, wrapping her arms around her legs.

Maybe it'd be easier if she just gave up. Sojiro wouldn't have to worry about her… She was slowly dying anyways… What was the point in dragging it out…?

Futaba blinked. There was… another her? She was wearing Egyptian clothing for some reason.

"W-Who are you?"

"I am the other you." Her gaze was stern. Just like Mom's.

Was this just another hallucination? But… this felt… different.

"How long are you going to keep blaming yourself?" the other Futaba demanded, staring at her with those strange golden eyes. "How long are you going to shut yourself from the world?"

Blaming… herself… for Mom dying… But it was the truth. If she had never been born, Mom probably would have been happier. She could throw herself completely into her work.

"You need to wake up!" she said sharply. "You need to realize the truth already. What happened to your mother…"

But… she already knew the truth.

"Why rely on the Phantom Thieves? Do you really think you're that incapable of doing anything? Are you just going to simply give up and hide away from the world forever? Are you going to avert your eyes from the truth?"

But she felt so powerless. There was a voice hissing in her ear. That she made her mom's life miserable. She did nothing but drained money from Sojiro's pocket.
"…Fine. I guess I'll kill them in the other world…"

Without another word, the other Futaba disappeared. Futaba blinked once. And then twice.

W-What was that about…?

The sound of knocking jolted Futaba out of her thoughts. But she remained silent. Maybe if she ignored them, they would just go away-

"Futaba?" It was Ren. "Futaba… Alibaba… it's me."

Panic spiked through her. It was them?! They were here?! And then there was the sound of meowing. Ugh… it was that cat again.

"Alibaba, we have to talk to you!" It was Makoto now. "Please… even if it's through text, it's urgent that we talk to you!"

Futaba grabbed her phone and started tapping out an answer.

Message Sent To: Ren Amamiya

[Alibaba]: You should've warned me.

"Allow us to explain," Yusuke began. "We need you to open the door, if you desire for us to steal your heart. You must let us in! I know you're frightened, but we only have your best wishes at heart."

Futaba gulped. T-They weren't serious, were they? How could they just drop a level twenty encounter on her when she was just a measly level five?!

[Alibaba]: I'm not mentally prepared!

[Ren]: You have to. You can do it.

Easy for him to say! Futaba huffed to herself, glaring at the door.

"You want to open the door, don't you?" Futaba's breath hitched. It was him. Ken Amada. "You know, deep down, this is what you want. You want to change… that's why you contacted the Phantom Thieves in the first place."

"Stop tryin' to resist!" Futaba jumped as a loud thump sounded against the door. "We wouldn't do this if we didn't have to! We wouldn't make you do this if you didn't want to."

"Ryuji!" Anne hissed, and then there was a smacking sound. "God, don't you have any sense of tact?!"

Futaba made a face, before typing out a response, asking for some more time. Futaba frantically looked around for the head replica of one of her favorite tv show characters. She could face them if she wore it, right?!

"You have ten seconds," Makoto announced.

Ugh! Where did she put it?!

"Five-"
She didn't have time for this! Wait! There was the closet! Of course. You had to have a strategy outfitted for every encounter. Futaba scrambled to the closet, opening the door before pushing the door to her room ever so slightly. She then dashed for the closet door, shutting it close.

"Holy craaaap…" Ryuji breathed.

Futaba could hear the frown in Ren's voice. "Just what is this?"

"How old is Futaba again?" Makoto asked. "Look at some of the books she has!"

"Medical science, information technology, biology, psychology…" Ken said thoughtfully. "…She is only fifteen, right?"

Futaba puffed out her cheeks. It's not her fault she was born in February! They weren't *that* much older than her!

"But hey…" Anne began, "…where did Futaba-chan run off to?"

"Uh… underneath the desk?" Ryuji suggested. "I mean, she's prolly little, if you look at her Shadow…"

She was not little! She was just a slow grower! Hmph, this Ryuji really had no tact.

Then Yusuke spoke. "Oh, perhaps the closet…" Futaba's eyes went wide as she heard footsteps approach. The closet slid only a couple centimeters, before Futaba's hands shot out, grabbing the handle and yanking it shut.

"I let you in!" Futaba shouted. "Now steal my heart already!"

"Ugh… this probably added another barrier to the Treasure," Ren muttered.

And only a few seconds later, she heard meowing again.

"Explain yourselves!" she demanded. "What are you even talking about?!"

"We need to change your cognition to steal your heart," Makoto said calmly. "It won't help if you hide away from us."

"That's right, Futaba-chan," Anne added, her voice gentle. "Please… won't you come out? We won't hurt you, I promise!"

Futaba just burrowed deeper, all while scowling. Ugh… Why did this have to be so complicated?!

"Would she even understand if we explained…?" Makoto wondered aloud. "Honestly, sometimes I have a hard time wrapping my mind around it and I've witnessed it firsthand."

They mentioned her cognition…

"So basically…" Futaba said slowly, "my cognition is a hindrance, keeping you from the core of my cognitive world?"

"Damn… she got it?" Ryuji's voice filled with disbelief. "Color me impressed."

Despite herself, Futaba smiled proudly. Well, of course. Mom had talked about her research so much that she had absorbed the information. Just like a sponge.
"J-Just who are you?" Makoto asked. "And how do you know about that?"

"Futaba… Alibaba… why didn't you just ask us for help?" Anne said gently. "We're dedicated to helping people who can't help themselves… We would've listened to your request."

Futaba bit her lip as her cheeks started to burn. "…Was… embarrassed…" she mumbled out.

"I get it, Futaba." Futaba heard some lighter footsteps approach. She heard a hand being dragged along the door. "Asking for help isn't easy. I completely understand where you're coming from…"

"But… how do you know about the cognitive world?" Makoto asked. "Honestly, I never would've thought such a thing existed had I not stumbled into it…"

"…Makoto, is this really the time to ask?" Ken sighed. "We're wasting time…"

"We have to get her to trust us…"

"Wait a sec…" Anne said slowly. "Ren, didn't you mention Boss getting grilled by that one lady…?"

"Yeah, that's right," Ren confirmed, and Futaba winced at the memory of hearing the woman harass Sojiro. "Sojiro was pretty agitated about that…"

"Are you saying… your mother was researching into cognitive science?" Yusuke asked. Despite herself, Futaba found herself correcting them. Ugh. Noobs. "Cognitive psience, with a psi in front! Less science, more supernatural. That's the important part."

"I'm… surprised that you know so much about it," Ken said. "You were fairly young when your mother was researching into it."

"Please, I wasn't a baby!" Futaba scoffed. "Mom liked it when I asked about what she was looking into."

"But hey… Futaba-chan," Anne began, "…did you really kill your mother?"

Futaba stiffened, before she wrapped her arms around herself. Why… Why did she have to bring that up…?

"Anne, what are you-"

"Shush!" Anne snapped. "It was an accident. The people who came and read her suicide note claimed otherwise. Maternity neurosis? That can't be true! Your mother… your mother that your cognitive world showed us is completely different from the mother Boss told us about! What's the difference? Please… tell us."

"My… mom…" Futaba choked out, as her head throbbed painfully. Ugh… why did it hurt so much…? "T-The one… who killed her…" Futaba felt a tear trickle down her cheek and she wrapped her arms around her torso even tighter.

It was her… right…?

"She can't remember… because her heart has become distorted."

"…I'm sorry, Futaba-chan. I shouldn't have pushed you…"
Futaba's hands clenched into fists. She… She needed to know. The distortions in her mind… they could remove it. She would just have to do her part in it. This was a co-op attack!

She shoved the door open and jumped out. "Steal it already!" she shouted.

"Uh… is she serious?" Ken said slowly.

"Don't make fun of me!" Futaba exclaimed, keeping her eyes screwed shut. "Hurry it up! I revealed myself, so steal my heart already!"

"Well… I'm not surprised that she doesn't fully get it," Ren said. "It's not exactly a straight and cut process. It took me a couple of times to understand when Morgana explained it to me…"

"How do we explain this…" Ken muttered.

"Ah, Futaba-chan…" She felt a hand on her shoulder. "W-We can't steal it here. You just really had to open the closet door…"

Whaaaaat?! Why weren't they clear about this?!

"Um, look, Futaba." Ren sighed. "Sorry we weren't clear about the process. But we don't steal your heart here."

Wait… they managed to travel to her cognitive world then?

"I-I see…" Futaba said shakily, feeling her cheeks burn with embarrassment.

Time to find a hole to crawl into and never come out… Eh, her closet worked. She walked backwards, and slammed the closet door shut.

"F-Futaba-chan, wait!" Anne cried, before she rapped lightly on the door. "Don't go back inside!"

"Futaba-chan, please come back out," Makoto pleaded.

"Why did you trick me?!" she demanded.

"Okay, that's enough!" Ken snapped, sounding rather aggravated now. "Listen, Futaba, we have a perfectly good reason for this. It's like how you put it. Your cognition is blocking our way to the core." He sighed. "…Just how much do you know about the cognitive world?"

"I-I know there's a world of cognition. I don't know how to get to it though…"

"We can go there," Ryuji said. "That's how we'll change your heart. But you've gotta keep the door open or else it'll block our way!"

"How do you do it then?" Futaba asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"Oh, um…" Makoto said, "we use a smartphone app. I-I know it sounds crazy, but it's true!"

"An… app?" Futaba echoed.

What kind of person could even create such a thing?

"Yes, we need to enter the right information and it'll take us to the cognitive world," Makoto answered.
"A name, a place, and a distortion… that's what we need to use the app," Ryuji said.

"I-I don't think it's wise to share this information..." Ken said slowly.

"She doesn't have the app," Yusuke pointed out. "What would she do with this information?"

"...I suppose so. But I think we should really get going..."

"Wait!" Futaba blurted out. "Can... Can I come?"

"Is that... even possible?" Ren asked. "I mean, a host in their cognitive world... It seems like a contradiction to me. I'm sorry, Futaba... but no. We don't know if it's safe for you."

"Never mind that she doesn't have a way to defend herself," Ken muttered.

D-Defend herself? What was he talking about?

Futaba grumbled to herself. But if she couldn't come, that was that... "...I'll leave it to you, then."

"Good!" Ryuji said cheerfully. "And don't forget your promise!"

She heard the door open and fading footsteps.

"Ken, don't forget to give her the calling card!"

"...Don't worry. I will." Futaba's breath hitched as she heard Ken's footsteps approach. "...Futaba. I know deep down you know what you want. You wouldn't have reached out to the Phantom Thieves if you didn't have the desire to help yourself. You don't really want to die. Not like this."

She... She didn't know what to say. The way he talked... it was like he understood how it felt.

"...I can understand what it's like. I know you're scared. We'll help you as much as we can, but you have to take the final step. You want to live... truly live, don't you?"

They were alone. She could ask him just who were the Shadow Operatives. But he sounded so earnest. He was here to help her... There were be other times to ask him...

"...You can't stay in here forever. You have your whole life ahead of you... I can tell you have a brilliant mind... You can't waste it like this, Futaba."

"I..."

"...It's okay. I know... we kinda dumped a lot of information on you. But I promise that we'll do everything in our power to help you."

Suddenly a paper was poked through the crack.

"We need you to read this, so your core will manifest. I'll leave you to read it, okay?"

Futaba didn't move for several moments. She slowly opened the door, and true to his word, Ken was gone. Futaba stepped out, and looked down at the red card.

You want to live... truly live, don't you?

You have your whole life ahead of you...

Futaba took a deep breath, before she slowly began to read the card.
Okay, so the boss fight and Futaba's awakening ended up being a lot longer than I had expected. I had only written up to the awakening and it's already close to 3k. So! I ended up splitting the chapter because I didn't want the chapter to be an absolute monster. The next chapter will probably be shorter than my usual average but ehhh.

But I hope my fellow Ren/Anne shippers enjoyed seeing how they get together!

Until next time! I'm hoping to get the next chapter out soon, since it's more of a reinterpretation of a canon scene, but we'll see.
"Is everyone ready?" Ren surveyed them all, only for them to nod furiously.

This was it. Though honestly, it was a bit strange for him. There was no full moon looming in the sky. They were standing in a pyramid, not in the old dorm. Ken's hands tightened around his spear. He was honestly a bit nervous. This would be his first operation in a long time. And... there was the question of Shadow Futaba. Would she attack? She just... confused Ken. Shadow Futaba went from being helpful to trying to kill them with those stupid boulders of hers...

Ken felt a hand on his shoulder, which made him start. Makoto gave him an apologetic smile.

"Sorry… it looked like you were a bit… nervous," Makoto said gently. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah… I'm fine." Ken forced himself to smile at her. He didn't want her to worry… especially since she was fretting over him especially just a couple days ago. "I'm just… thinking."

Makoto gave his shoulder a light squeeze. "Everything will be fine… We'll save Futaba-chan," she said confidently.

She suited confidence very well. There was a sparkle in her eyes, as she held herself proudly.

Ken just offered her a small smile. "…I hope you're right."

"Let's do this, guys!" Ren called out to them, before sprinting up the stairs.

They raced up the several flights of stairs, only to stop before the great door… that was slowly disappearing, revealing a lift.

"Yes, it worked!" Ryuji cheered, pumping his fist.

"Heh, what did you expect?!" Morgana demanded, grinning widely. "Come on, the Treasure awaits us!"

The lift took them higher up, taking them to a chamber where holograms of computer screens flickered in and out. Ken actually recognized some of the symbols from Fuuka-san's work.

"Wow… this is incredible," Anne breathed, as she twisted around to look at the entire area, "This is really the core of Futaba-chan's Palace?"

"Indeed…" Yusuke nodded sagely, as he surveyed the area as well, "it suits a hacker's aesthetic
very well."

"But where's the Treasure?" Makoto asked, looking back and forth. "...And where's Futaba's Shadow?"

Morgana directed them upwards, claiming that the Treasure was somewhere up. They climbed several stairs, dodging Shadows for the most part, before they eventually entered a room that was lit up with an odd green light.

In fact... the only thing inside was a sarcophagus.

"Is this really it?" Ryuji grumbled, folding his arms over his chest. "Dude, talk about a letdown..."

"Come on, don't talk like that, Skull," Anne scolded, hands on her hips. "It doesn't matter what Futaba-chan's Treasure is..."

"We should take a look so we can take the Treasure," Makoto said.

"Isn't it... a bit strange though?" Ken asked. "Wouldn't the host be defending it? Like with Kaneshiro..."

"Don't jinx us, Ace," Ren warned, before quirking an eyebrow at Ken. "I wouldn't mind an easier heist..."

"TREASURE!"

Annnnd Morgana has been set off. You could practically see the hearts in his eyes. Though he had to wonder why Morgana did get that way...

But as Morgana ran to join Ryuji, who was standing right at the sarcophagus... the room began to shake.

"Um..." Anne inched closer to Ren. "What was that?"

"But Ace is right... Where is Futaba's Shadow...?" Yusuke asked. "The treasure is here..."

"D-Dude, there are more important stuff to worry 'bout now!" Ryuji yelped as a few bricks were torn away from the top. A single bloodshot eye appeared.

"FUTABA!" Ken winced as the roar blasted his eardrums.

Just... what was that?

"D-Don't tell me..." Morgana whimpered out. He had apparently come to some kind of realization.

"Everyone, look out!" Ren shouted, as the rest of the bricks began to crumble away.

Ken used his arm to shield his face as a wild wind began to tear through the air, ripping away the bricks. A especially powerful gust sent Ryuji and Morgana flying. He whipped his head back, and to his relief, they had just skidded back several feet. If they had fallen off the pyramid, at this height...

"Seriously, what is this?!" Anne got out, her arm thrown up to shield her face as well. "This is just... insane!"

"It's... It's a cognition!" Morgana said through gritted teeth. "A cognition formed by Futaba!"
A cognition…? Wait…

It hit him like a ton of bricks. It resembled a Sphinx… but the woman's face… It was like the woman in the murals…

"It's Futaba's cognition of her mother!" Ken gasped.

"Then why is she tryin' to kill us?!" Ryuji demanded.

"We shouldn't speculate on that!" Yusuke shouted. "We need to avoid—ack!"

Rocks were falling everywhere, with how the cognition of Isshiki-san was tearing apart the chamber so she could attack them. Somehow, miraculously, they managed to escape that unscathed.

The cognition had completely torn away the walls of the chamber, leaving them on top of the pyramid. The cognition then launched itself in the air, flying high above their heads. But the way it was flying about… It reminded him of how they weren't able to hit the Hanged Man Shadow while it floated in the air. Not even Yukari-san's arrows could strike it. But… it had to have a weakness, didn't it? The Hanged Man Shadow had those statues… But what? What was it…?

"Do not approach the pharaoh's tomb!" she hissed out. "Misfortune will befall you now!"

But since… they had wanted to take Futaba's Treasure… Her cognition of her mother wanted to kill them for it? Just what was Futaba's Treasure?

But ugh… this was bad. If Yukari-san was here, she might be able to shoot it down, but she wasn't. Most of the weapons here were close range…

"Mona, do you have any ideas on how to tackle this?" Ren shouted.

"We… We have no choice, Joker…" Uncertainty made Morgana's voice waver. "We'll have to use our spells and guns to take it down! I'll try to figure out some kind of weakness while we're at it!"

"Got it!"

They opened fire, but it barely did any damage to Isshiki-san's cognition. It didn't exactly help that the distance caused their spells to peter out. This had just… gone from bad to worse. They would get too tired out if they kept using spells recklessly.

But what could they do? Aim for her wings? But the distance would allow her to dodge it all too easily…

"Ace, look out!"

Huh? Ken looked up, only for the cognition to slam her paw down on him. Ken yelped, dropping his spear as pain exploded everywhere. Sharp rocks dug into his back, as the cognition piled on more pressure.

"Johanna!" Makoto shouted, before he heard an explosion.

The cognition growled, but finally let him up, taking to the skies again.

"Ace!" Makoto was kneeling in front of him, helping him sit up. Ken winced, gingerly touching his sides. Nothing seemed broken. Makoto then put a hand on his shoulder, before closing her eyes in concentration. A warm feeling swept through his body, healing most of his injuries. "Ace, you need
to focus," she chided. "You really looked like you were zoning out."

"I'm sorry… I was just thinking about how to handle this…" Ken looked back up at the cognition, which was still soaring high in the air, with a frown. "I've faced a similar Shadow before… but… that Shadow had a weakness to target. I don't know if this one does. I was thinking we could target her wings, but I think we're just too far away."

"We'll just have to buy some time, until Mona can figure out something…" Makoto sighed, before she pulled him up. "I'm glad that my attack made it let up though…"

Ken winced. "…Thanks, Queen."

The cognition then drew in close, flapping her wings hard. The force knocked them all several meters backwards. He heard Ryuji let out a pained cry as he skidded backwards.

That attack was definitely wind based… And the cognition was taking advantage of that.

Ken gritted his teeth, before tearing off his mask. Kala-Nemi appeared with a flash, firing at the cognition.

"Goemon!" Yusuke summoned his Persona, before pointing at the cognition. "Take this!"

Ice formed around her paw, and the cognition growled, shaking it violently to shake off the ice. But Ren and Makoto took advantage of the brief distraction to fire attacks at her.

Anne darted over to Ryuji, helping him up. But even at a distance, Ken could see that his eyes were unfocused and he swayed back and forth. Morgana quickly summoned Zorro, allowing Anne to summon Carmen and use Agilao. Ren tossed some kind of medicine at Morgana, who then used it on Ryuji.

But the cognition didn't like that. She let out a roar, before ascending the sky, higher than before.

"Everyone, brace yourselves!" Morgana shouted. "She's rearing up for a powerful attack! It looks like she wants to divebomb at us!"

Ugh, he wished that Fuuka-san was here. Morgana was decent enough during the Palace explorations (though admittedly, he only could compare Fuuka-san to Rise-san, and he hadn't exactly seen much of Rise-san in action), but they really needed someone who focused on analyzing. Especially for a fight where a weakness was unclear…

The cognition flew in the air, for several moments. Ken couldn't help but feel antsy, even as he guarded. It was like the whole thing with the Hermit Shadow again… The Hermit Shadow took a long time to charge up that attack, but it had really packed a punch.

But then it struck, divebombing at them all. A section of the ground was destroyed, even. But thankfully nobody was standing there. But the force was strong enough to send Ken to his knees.

"Mona, have you figured anything out?!" Ryuji demanded, all while pushing himself up in a sitting position.

"I'm sorry… I don't… I don't know!" Morgana cried out. He sounded utterly miserable as he continued. "There's no pattern… I… I…" He sounded so helpless. "I'm sorry," he finally whispered out.

"What are we going to do, then?!" Yusuke asked. "If Mona can't figure out a weakness… we
can't..."

Ken gritted his teeth. There had to be a weakness! There just had to be... But what?

"M-Mom?"

Ken snapped to attention, and his head whipped to the sound of the voice. It was... Futaba. She had followed them inside? But... how?

"Futaba-chan?!” Anne cried, before voicing his thoughts. "What are you doing here... How did you?!”

"When we used the Nav to go inside the Palace...” Ren groaned, dragging a hand down his face. "She must've received it too!"

Dammit... And she remembered what they had told her about the app.

"What is this going to do to her Palace...?” Yusuke asked.

"Are you seriously asking that now?!” Ken snapped, irritation flaring inside of him, before he looked back to Futaba. "Futaba, you have to go back! It's too dangerous for you to be here!"

"I can't leave now that I'm—” But Futaba suddenly stiffened, her eyes growing wide with fear. "No... no...” she whimpered out, before falling to her knees. She pressed her headphones hard against her ears. "It's my fault..."

Her headphones... were they meant to block out her auditory hallucinations? She must be hearing the accusations again...

"Futaba!” Ken staggered to his feet and rushed over to her, grabbing her by the shoulders. He shook her lightly. "Futaba, you have to snap out of it! Those men... they said those things just to hurt you! You have to fight through it!"

"I...” Uncertainty shone in her eyes. "I... no... they're right..."

"Ace is right!” Anne had joined him, kneeling beside him. "You know the truth, don't you? Your mother loved you! She never hated you! She didn't regret giving birth to you!"

"No... It's my fault...” Futaba's voice cracked, and Ken felt his heart break, hearing the pain in her voice. "It's my fault that Mom...” She squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't stop shaking.

"That's right...” the cognition spat, "you killed me! You were such a nuisance! I should have never had you! I would have been able to focus on my research... if it wasn't for you!"

"Hng..."

The hurt in her eyes were as clear as day. Just looking at her made his heart ache. Just what could they say to get to her? Ken released her, but didn't move away from her.

"Futaba-chan...” Anne whispered, her voice cracking ever so slightly.

Anne didn't know what to say either. They couldn't reach her. What could they do?

"Your life is pointless!” the cognition hissed out, venom dripping from her voice. "Nobody cares about you!”
"Nobody… cares about me…" Futaba repeated faintly, sounding like she was on the verge of tears. "It's true… I'm just a burden to Sojiro… And people are on his case because they think he's a bad parent… It would be better if I just…"

Ken swallowed hard. He… understood the feeling. But it had to be even worse for Futaba, because of the supposed abuse Sojiro was laying on Futaba. She had to feel helpless… because she couldn't step out of her room, because she was a shut-in.

"No!" Ken raised his head to see that Ren was the one who spoke. "Futaba, that is not true!" Ren's voice was fierce as he stared at Futaba. "Sojiro… he loves you. He only cares that you're happy. That's why he brought the doctors to you… but he backed off when you wouldn't see them, because he knew that it made you uncomfortable."

Futaba whispered, "He… He does?" Her voice was filled with shock. Futaba then suddenly clutched her head with a pained cry. "W-What's the truth…" she whimpered out, squeezing her eyes shut. "I… I don't know!"

"Futaba…" Ken murmured.

What could he do to help her? Why couldn't he reach out to her like Akihiko-san had to him…?

"Because she thinks she killed her mother…" Makoto said slowly, "and because she thinks she should be dead… Futaba gave birth to a Palace where her mother wants her dead…?"

"Futaba-chan, you need to look!" Anne cried, her voice growing desperate. "Really look at her! This is not your mom!"

"She loved you…" Yusuke said, a sad smile on his face, "Boss told us everything. She was a single mother… but did her best to raise you. This is just a false memory foisted upon you by the men in black!"

"A false memory…?" Futaba repeated. "What—"

And then… Shadow Futaba materialized.

"Ugh, not now!" Ryuji moaned out. "We can't fight them both!"

He then reached up for his mask, but a hand shot out and grabbed his wrist.

"Wait, Skull!" Ren said sharply, shaking his head. "Look at her face."

He was right. There was no malevolence coming from Shadow Futaba… If anything… she looked determined.

"Futaba Sakura! You have to remember!"

Ken's eyes widened. Futaba's Shadow… it really was a Shadow of positive repressed feelings. Or maybe… to be more accurate, Futaba's repressed memories.

Futaba's eyes suddenly glazed over. She was silent for several moments, until she lifted her head. She slowly climbed to her feet.

"She's up!" Ryuji exclaimed.

But then she suddenly clutched her head… before a feminine voice spoke.
"What denies you is an illusion... A curse put upon you by the heartless. You knew from the very beginning. And yet... you cowered from fear."

"Ugh... I knew but I..." Futaba's expression suddenly steeled.

"Will you die as you're told?" the voice continued. "Just who will you obey? Cursed words spat out by an illusion? Or the truth burning in your very soul?"

"Don't tell me..." Ren breathed out, his eyes wide. "But this is completely different from the rest of us!"

No... that wasn't true. Futaba would be fueled by her anger at the people who hurt her.

"I won't... let anyone tell me what they see..." Futaba laid a hand over her heart. "I'm going to trust my own eyes and my heart to distinguish the truth from the lies." She lifted her face towards the cognition, glaring up at it. Determination burned in her eyes. "You are not my mom! You're just a lie created by those horrid adults... I... I..." Her hands clenched into fists. "I will never, ever forgive them!"

At her declaration, blue flames exploded around her, cloaking her body for a moment. When it faded, Shadow Futaba floated above her host, becoming translucent. Shadow Futaba's form began to shift, transforming into a... UFO?

Wait a minute... wasn't this how the Investigation Team awakened to their Personas? Their Shadow-self became their Persona...

Tentacles then extended from the Persona, lifting Futaba into the air before she disappeared into it.

"Futaba?!" Anne cried out.

"Don't worry! I'm okay!"

Ken's eyes widened as a similar sensation hit him. Futaba wasn't talking aloud. She was speaking to them... telepathically. This was how Fuuka-san spoke to them when they were in Tartarus!

And just right when he was thinking that they needed someone who focused on support...

"Dude, what is that?!" Ryuji demanded.

"It's okay!" Ken said, turning to face everyone. "Mona, let her take your place! You can focus on attacking now! Her Persona... I think it specializes in support! She should be able to help us find a weakness!"

"Personas can do that?!" Makoto sounded bewildered.

"I've gone through countless Personas, and none of them can do that..." Ren shook his head. "... Are you sure about this, Ace?"

"Positive!" Ken nodded firmly. "Just watch her in action!"

"Yeah!" Futaba sounded completely different now. Her voice was filled with energy... and determination. This... This was Futaba's true self, wasn't it? "Necronomicon and I will lead you to victory!" she exclaimed. You could hear the grin in her voice. "We'll help you take that thing down!"

"Don't let us down!" Ren said, flashing a grin at Necronomicon. "But let's do this!"
"But just how are we going to take down this thing?" Yusuke asked. "She's impossible to deal with!"

"This will be no prob!" Necronomicon zoomed into view, before a bright green light extended from it. A ballista appeared, out of nowhere. "This is my cognitive world! So that just means I can hack into this, no problem!"

"This is too… overwhelming," Yusuke groaned, shaking his head.

"Shoot her with this!" Futaba continued, ignoring Yusuke's complaint. "And then you can beat the crap out of her!"

"Someone needs to man the ballista!" Ren said.

"I'll do it!" Anne interjected, before sprinting over to the ballista. "I'll shoot her down, no problem! I won't… I won't let Futaba-chan talk about dying ever again!"

Ren flashed a proud smile at her for a moment, before he snapped back into leader mode. "Everyone, distract her!" Ren commanded. "We can do this!"

"Right!" they exclaimed.

Ken summoned Kala-Nemi to heal up everyone. Ren summoned Ame-no-Uzume, which fired a Zionga spell at the cognition.

Goemon summoned a flurry of ice, and Zorro sent it hurtling wicked fast with a Garula spell. But before Makoto could move, the cognition pounced, swiping with her paw. Ken and Morgana managed to dodge, but the others weren't so lucky.

But since she was so close… Ken ripped off his mask, summoning Kala-Nemi. Golden light flared, making the cognition hiss with pain.

"Zorro, show your might!" Morgana followed suit, blue flaring around him for a moment. Zorro slashed with his rapier, summoning a flurry of wind.

The cognition countered with blasting a powerful gale at them, but they managed to hold their ground. The cognition let out an annoyed growl before launching into the air.

"Fireee!" Futaba suddenly crowed out.

Ken whipped his head to see that Anne had the ballista aimed at the cognition. The arrow tore through the air, striking the cognition right in the chest. She let out a screech of pain, before she started to tumble through the air. She crashed down hard enough to make the ground shake violently. She clung to the edge, swaying back and forth from dizziness.

"Yes!" Anne cheered, before running back to join them.

"Everyone, go all out while we can!" Ren ordered.

"Hey, Ace!" Ryuji called out to him. "Wanna a lift?"

"A… lift?" Ken said slowly.

"You know, I'll get you close and personal to Futaba's mom! Double attack it while you're at it!"

Ken nodded. "Let's do it."
Ryuji crouched down, cupping his hands so Ken could step onto it. With a grunt, Ryuji threw him in the air. Ken narrowed his eyes as he made his descent, before stabbing the cognition right in the face. He moved his spear to his right hand, ripping his mask with his left. Kala-Nemi opened fire, causing the cognition to howl.

He dropped to the ground, just as Makoto summoned a Freila spell.

"Nice!" Ryuji cheered, flashing him a thumbs up.

He had to admit… that was pretty fun.

"Hey, stop messing around!" Morgana scolded. "Focus!"

"Aw, Mona, let us have some fun!" Ryuji huffed.

"Hmm… it looks like she's weaker to physical attacks!" Futaba said. "Go get 'em!"

"That's my specialty!" Ryuji said with a grin. "Let's do this, Captain!"

Captain Kidd appeared, before quickly lunging forward, striking the cognition several times.

Morgana used a Garula spell to send Goemon speeding towards the cognition, slashing at the cognition right in the face. Goemon then leapt out of the way before the cognition could counter, allowing Zorro to dart forward and strike with his own attack. Makoto then followed up with a physical attack she rarely used, speeding up to ram into the cognition, the impact exploding like a bomb.

It was in that moment that the cognition finally recovered, attempting to swipe at them again. Ken threw himself to the ground, managing to dodge it but most of the others weren't so lucky. She then pushed off (making the ground shake), and ascending the sky once again. Though Ken noticed that she was considerably tired out, her movements slower than before.

"Halfway through!" Futaba shouted, her voice filled with glee. "Someone will have to man the ballista again!"

"Ace, you wanna give it a go?" Ren asked.

Ken nodded. "Yeah. Leave it to me!"

Ken ran to the ballista, grabbing the handles. His teammates continued to distract the cognition as he leveled the arrow at her. Futaba coached him through it, something he appreciated. He had barely noticed Futaba talking to Anne, since he was more occupied with the fight. His hands were aching from handling such a heavy device but he pushed through. But it was a relief when he finally managed to fire the arrow, nailing his target perfectly.

The cognition collapsed again, allowing them to open fire. They showed no mercy… They were determined to defeat the monster that Futaba's mind had given birth to… due to her belief that her mother committed suicide because of her. It was like… facing Futaba's inner demon.

Ken fired another attack, which made the cognition slump against the pyramid.

"Yes!" Ryuji crowed, pumping a fist.

They formed a half circle, aiming their guns at the cognition. Ren stood in the center, his pistol leveled right at her chest.
"Futaba… if only I had never birthed you…" the cognition said weakly, "then I…"

"No matter what you say to me…” Futaba said slowly, before her voice grew determined. "I will live!"

Ken couldn't help but smile proudly at that. Futaba… she had realized the truth she had been burying this whole time. And she had done it all by herself.

"FIRE!" Futaba shouted.

Ren pulled the trigger, the bullet hurtling towards the cognition. Red spurted from the cognition as the cognition shrieked with pain. She lost her grip on the pyramid, plummeting to the ground.

"We… We did it," Makoto gasped out. She then sank to her knees. "That was… that was too close…”

"Agreed," Ken sighed, leaning against his spear for support.

He then looked up to the sky, where Necronomicon was hovering. The tentacles reemerged, wrapped around Futaba, slowly depositing her back to the ground.

"Whoa…” Futaba breathed, twisting around to look at what she was wearing. "This is new!"

Like the other girls, her suit was skin tight. It was mostly black, with green glowing lines outlining it. But her mask caught his eye more. They were more goggles than an actual mask, actually.

"Dude, you were amazing!" Ryuji ran up to her, grinning at her. "Seriously, we would've been screwed if you hadn't saved us!"

"Skull put it rather bluntly, but… I have to agree." And then Yusuke smiled. "You truly have overcome your inner demons."

"Uh… thanks?" Futaba tilted her head. "I guess…"

A bright light suddenly appeared, blinding them all for a moment. Then Futaba gasped, her eyes growing wide.

"Mom?!"

It was Isshiki-san… But the image of her was translucent. Was this… her spirit?

"Futaba…” Isshiki-san's voice was soft. "...Thank you for choosing to remember the real me."

"I'm… I'm so sorry, Mom…” Futaba said. "I'm sorry for being so selfish, Mom…”

She suddenly made a movement to approach Isshiki-san, but the dark haired woman shook her head firmly. "Futaba, you can't come here," she said gently.

"But I finally got to see you again…!" Futaba protested, clutching her hands to her chest. "After so long!"

He… He understood the feeling. He would love to talk to his mother again, even for a minute. But he could also see why Futaba's mother was stopping her. It wasn't healthy to dwell on the dead…

"Futaba, you can't," Ken said quietly. "Your mom's right…"
"But…" Futaba's bottom lip trembled.

Oh no… She was going to start crying, wasn't she? He was not good with crying girls.

"Futaba…” Isshiki-san's voice was firm now. "You're being selfish again."

Futaba made a little sound in her throat. "Mom, I…” Futaba's voice suddenly broke. "I love you… I-I'm sorry I didn't say it enough to you before you…”

Isshiki-san's expression was loving as she looked at Futaba. Her image flickered. "Futaba, I love you too. Take care of yourself." And then her eyes flickered to Ken. "...Watch out for her, won't you?"

Wait... she... she recognized him...?

Then Isshiki-san disappeared. Futaba was silent for a moment, her lips parted.

Futaba... she needed this closure. But even then, Ken couldn't help but feel a bit jealous of her…

"…Right. Medjed…” She then turned on her heel.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" Ren raised an eyebrow.

"Home, duh," Futaba said with a shrug. "I can do that since I have the Nav."

"She… really marches to the beat of her own drum, doesn't she?" Ken said slowly.

"Yeah, no kidding!" Ryuji huffed. "Not even a thanks."

"Well, you said it yourself," Makoto pointed out. "She saved us…"

"She really is a strange one," Yusuke sighed, shaking his head.

Anne rolled her eyes, putting her hands on her hips. "…You're one to talk, Fox."

"She… She really did a great job," Morgana said faintly. "Far better than me."

Ken knelt so that he was closer to Morgana's level. "…Hey. Don't say that. You've guided everyone through the Palaces well. You taught everyone how to be a Phantom Thief. That's not a small feat."

Despite his attitude, Morgana did have some insecurities… And he understood what it felt like when you think you're not contributing enough…

"But I couldn't…” Morgana mumbled out, "not with the cognition…”

"Honestly, I think only Futaba could have helped us with this…” Ren knelt beside Morgana, putting a hand on his head. "You saw how the cognition was… And Ace is right. You've guided us well, Morgana. And we still need you."

"...Really?" Morgana said slowly.

Ren offered him a playful smile. "We're partners, remember? Or did you forget that?"

"Uhh, guys?" Anne suddenly called out to them. "The Treasure is gone…"

"What?!" Morgana yelped, before running over to the sarcophagus. "How is this possible?!” Then
he gasped. "Wait, I get it… Futaba is the Treasure! But she left so… now that she's gone…"

"Oh no," Ken groaned. "Here we go…"

"Not only did Futaba enter her own Palace…" Makoto said slowly, "but her Shadow transformed into a Persona! This place…"

"It's going to self-destruct, isn't it?" Ren deadpanned.

"Come on, let's go!" Morgana ran over to the edge.

"We're going to run down here?" Ken said in disbelief.

"We don't have a choice!" Morgana fired back at him. "Come on, before the Palace collapses completely!"

They ran down the edge of the pyramid, and Anne eventually tossed Morgana in the air so he could transform into his bus form. They all but fell into the bus, and Makoto floored the gas pedal, speeding out of the Metaverse and into the real world.

For some reason… they found themselves in front of LeBlanc, instead of Sakura-san's house.

"Hey…" Ryuji said, "you guys okay?"

"Define… okay…" Ken groaned, pushing himself up into a sitting position. "I hate the getaways…"

"You don't really have a good history with them, do you?" Makoto laughed softly.

"Hmph." Ken glowered at the ground. "I'm not going to dignify that with an answer."

"In Ken-ese…" Ren said in a sagely voice, pointing an index finger to the sky, "…that means yes."

"I didn't ask you, Ren," Ken grumbled, fighting the urge to roll his eyes. "…But where did Futaba go?"

"Oh, that's right…" Yusuke looked around. "Though, I suppose she could've just walked home…"

"Hey, what's going on out here?" The door swung open, revealing Sakura-san. He stepped outside, blinking at them. "…What are you guys doing here?"

"Um…" Anne winced. "We… We… came here for some coffee!" Anne bobbed her head. "Yeah! Your coffee really hits the spot, Boss!"

…Okay, that wasn't the most terrible acting but… It still made him cringe a bit.

"Yes!" Makoto said, nodding as well. "We might as well, since we came all this way to visit with Ren."

"I'm not thirsty though," Yusuke said, apparently oblivious to what Anne and Makoto were trying to do. "Though, doesn't coffee make you even thirstier? I suppose that'll work-

Ken quickly elbowed his side, making him yelp. "Yeah, iced coffee sounds great," he said smoothly. "Especially in this heat."
"Don't I know it," Sakura-san sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Though with this many customers…” He looked at Ren. "Come in, and help me."

"W-What?" Ren stared at Sakura-san blankly.

"Did I stutter?" Sakura-san retorted, folding his arms over his chest. He looked at Ren sternly. "Come on, especially after how I'm serving your friends."

"Oh, um, actually… I have a quick errand I have to do… So I'll catch up later!" Makoto said quickly.

Anne caught her eye, and nodded. "Okay, Makoto. See you soon!"

The others went inside LeBlanc, before Makoto sighed. "I was hoping that Ren could come to check up on Futaba… but you were pretty worried about her… Come on, let's go."

Ken nodded, before following her out of the alley. Though Ken noticed as she walked, she would wince a bit ever so often. Ken couldn't help but frown at the sight of her pained expression.

"…What's wrong?" Ken finally managed to ask her when they stepped into the alley that led to the Sakura residence.

"Oh…” Makoto halted in her walking, before speaking again. "It's just… I got knocked into a pillar when you were working on firing the ballista," Makoto explained, resting a hand on her lower back. "I'll… I'll be okay. I just need to rest…"

Ken frowned, before reaching out to her. He… didn't like seeing her in pain. "…Could I?"

"Huh?" Makoto blinked at him, before lowering her hand, moving it to her side once more. "What are you talking about?"

"Just trust me." Ken rested a hand on her back, careful not to touch anywhere… inappropriate. He closed his eyes, focusing on Kala-Nemi. Kala-Nemi's presence in his mind was fainter, as they weren't in a Shadow nest, but he could still feel it. "Diarama," he murmured.

Makoto stiffened for a moment, all while her cheeks turned pink (because well, he was touching her in a place where she wasn't usually touched), but then relaxed as the spell swept through her. "That's… incredible," she breathed. "I didn't know that you could… in the real world…"

"I've been practicing," Ken admitted, pulling back his hand. "It's been so long since I've done it in the real world that I forgot how…"

"Could you… teach me?" Makoto asked hesitantly. "Sis has asked me a couple of times if I've taken a fall…" She then sighed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "It's nice to know that she's concerned but… I've had a hard time explaining the bruises."

"Hmm…" Ken clicked his tongue, as he thought about how to explain it to her. "It's just really focus. You have to focus on your Persona's presence in your mind, and think about the healing spell. There's not really anything I can teach you."

"I see…” Makoto's expression turned thoughtful, before she shook her head. "But anyhow! Let's check up on Futaba." Then she froze. "Oh no…"

Futaba was slumped against the wall.
"F-Futaba?" Makoto's voice was filled with panic, as she knelt right in front of Futaba. She shook the smaller girl lightly, but her head just lolled forward. If anything, Makoto just knocked her glasses askew. "Please say something!" she begged.

Ken knelt down and slid on the glasses back on her face. He then took Futaba's wrist, checking for a pulse. To his relief, he could feel one... albeit a slow one, since she seemed to be unconscious.

"It's okay," Ken said, "she's just sleeping."

"O-Oh... thank goodness..." Makoto let go of Futaba before she dropped down to her knees. "I thought... because her awakening is so different than ours, that we did something wrong..."

"Futaba's case is very different," Ken said. "But you know that Personas and Shadows are two sides of one coin, right? That's probably why Ren gains new Personas with the Shadows."

...Or something like that. But he could still remember Kanji-san's surprise when his Shadow hadn't turned into a Persona back during the crisis with Sho Minazuki. A Persona manifested due to strength of heart... due to self-awareness. It was no surprise that people could gain Personas in many kinds of ways.

If they had killed Futaba's Shadow... it'd be a different story. But this wasn't the case. It had transformed into Necronomicon. Futaba was safe... in that matter.

"Yeah... it really was a different case with Futaba-chan..." Makoto bit her lip. "...I'm glad that she got to get closure with her mother..."

Ken met her gaze. "...But it makes you wish that you had the same chance."

Makoto nodded furiously. "I know that Dad's death wasn't as entwined with Kaneshiro as it was with Futaba-chan and her mother... but I wish that I could talk to him just for a moment..."

He had to wonder... was her father a single parent for a long time? Makoto had never mentioned her mother...

"I'm sure that he's still watching over you," Ken said, putting a hand on her shoulder. Makoto smiled softly. "...Thanks, Ken." But then she turned her attention back to Futaba. "But..." Makoto seemed to shake as she gazed at Futaba's unconscious form, "...what should we do...? What's wrong with her?"

"Didn't Ren mention something about knowing a doctor in Yongen-jaya?" Ken asked, turning to look at her. "I'll take Futaba back into her room, and you go get her. It'd be better to have a professional opinion."

"Okay." Makoto nodded. "That's a good plan."

Ken lifted Futaba with surprisingly ease. She didn't even shift as he adjusted his grip on her so he wouldn't drop her. Should he be concerned that Futaba felt so light? She was a tiny girl, but still... He carried her into the house, laying her on top of her bed. Her room... was rather messy. Maybe he could tidy up a little while he waited for Makoto...

Ken had managed to toss out all of the bowls of ramen and clear up some of the manga volumes on the floor, stacking them on Futaba's desk, when he heard a knock on the door.

"Ken?" Makoto cautiously opened the door, peeking inside. "Oh, you managed to clean up a bit."
"Yeah… it was bothering me," Ken said with a wince.

"So this is the girl, huh?"

The doctor… was not what he had expected. She looked like she was in her late twenties or early thirties. (He knew better than to ask her age, though.) And she was dressed in a punk fashion.

…Ren had weird associates.

They stood back as they let Takemi, as Makoto told him the doctor's name in a whisper, examine Futaba.

"You know," Takemi said casually, "this is going to cost you. House calls aren't cheap."

"O-Oh… I see…" Makoto winced. "How much will that be?"

"…Makoto, she's joking," Ken said, having caught the look on her face. It was all too familiar to how Minato-san would make jokes.

"Oh…" Makoto shook her head. "…But how is she?"

"She's fine. Her pulse, temperature, blood pressure, and breathing… they're all normal. No ocular abnormalities either. She just appears to be in a stupor. Furthermore, she lacks muscle for her age, and I don't think she has much stamina."

"A stupor?" Ken repeated, before it hit him. "Oh… I think I get it."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it. Futaba probably only eats what she likes," Ken pointed out. "She's probably not eating healthily… which contributed to her body to being… unbalanced. She must get tired out easily if she hasn't been eating properly."

"Hmm, not bad." Takemi looked at him curiously. "It appears that's not the case with you."

Ken just rubbed the back of his neck. Shinjiro-san was very… insistent on him eating healthily. He remembered that his old friends on soccer club would rib him about that…

"This really is an abnormal case…" Makoto mumbled to herself, only to jump when Ken nudged her in the side. "B-But anyways!" Makoto bowed. "Thank you for helping us out here."

"No problem." Takemi shrugged. "I'll just expect my little guinea pig to buy a bit more than he usually does next time he visits me."

…Guinea pig? And Ren let her call him that?

But then Takemi left, leaving them alone with Futaba. Futaba slept through it all, smiling gently in her sleep.

Ken sighed. "…We'll have to tell Sakura-san. He'll find out eventually anyways."

"Yes…" Makoto nodded firmly. "I agree…"

They returned to LeBlanc and told Sakura-san about how they found Futaba passed out in front of the house and helped her inside. He hurried back, and the others followed suit.
Sakura-san gently prodded his adoptive daughter. "Hey, Futaba?" He shook her shoulder gently. "Heyyy?"

Futaba just let out a soft moan, before rolling onto her side.

"Jeez… not again," Sakura-san sighed, shaking his head.

"Again?" Yusuke echoed. "What do you mean by that?"

"It happens every so often," Sakura-san began.

"F-For real?!” Ryuji demanded.

"She just used up all of her energy," Sakura-san explained. "Like batteries running out of juice."

"I-I think you should be more concerned about this, if this is a common thing…” Ken said shakily.

…He'd know that Shinjiro-san would be. Maybe it was because Sakura-san spoiled Futaba in that way, judging from how many ramen bowls he had collected… And she hadn't exactly been getting exercise…

"I can't force her to exercise," Sakura-san said, before he shrugged. But then he smiled. "But she'll stay this way for a few days and she'll be up to her usual self."

"A few days?!” Anne exclaimed. "Shouldn't you take her to a doctor? There's one right here in Yongen-jaya…"

"I would, if she'd let me…” Sakura-san sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "But I'll make sure that she'll get plenty of rest. Let me close the store and you kids can go home."

"H-He can't be serious," Morgana said shakily. "A few days… We don't have time! Medjed is going through with its threat in like ten days…!"

"Morgana…” Ken said warningly, shooting the cat a look. "I know that the situation with Medjed is serious, but Futaba's wellbeing was our priority."

"I know but…” Morgana sighed, lowering his head. "…I'm sorry. You're right…"

Then Futaba let out a contented sigh, and Ken looked to see that Futaba was staring up at the ceiling.

"That's right… Medjed…” She sighed again. "Mm… So tired… gonna sleep some more…”

"Wait, can't you—" Ryuji hung his head as Futaba rolled over and began to sleep again. "Ugh…"

"We'll just have to wait," Makoto sighed, folding her arms over her chest. "It's a bit worrisome, though… But it's not like we know any other hackers…"

Well, they didn't know any… Though he didn't know if Fuuka-san was that good. It couldn't hurt to ask though… But then again… Fuuka-san probably wouldn't react too positively about that…

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Thursday, August 11th, 2016

"The girl seriously just passed out?"
"Yeah, pretty much." Ken stifled a yawn with his hand.

Shinjiro frowned, before glancing at the clock on his laptop. It was past ten. Ken didn't have bags under his eyes but... "Ken, have you been getting enough sleep? You look like you haven't gotten any sleep."

"I'm fine, Shinjiro-san..." he sighed, before yawning again. "I'm just tired after the fight we had. We got put through the wringer."

"What exactly happened?"

"A Sphinx tried to kill us."

"Ken," Shinjiro ground out.

He really hated it when Ken tried masking things by dodging the question.

"We just... struggled with her cognition of Isshiki-san until Futaba entered her Palace and awakened to her Persona. Her Shadow changed into her Persona and everything."

"...It did?" Fuuka came up, peering over Shinjiro's shoulder. She then rested her chin on his shoulder. "That sounds awfully like how the Investigation Team gained their Personas."

"But their Shadows went all berserk," Shinjiro said. "From what you've told us, looks like her Shadow was more like Teddie." His lips formed a thin line. "...Or Metis."

Despite everything, he couldn't forget about how Metis had attacked Ken when she first showed up.

"But anyways, I'm glad that Futaba-chan will be okay," Fuuka cut in. "You'll be checking up on her, won't you?"

"Yeah, we will." Ken rubbed his face. "Sakura-san claims she's always out for a few days at the very least... but with Medjed's threat..." He then sighed. "...Everyone's pretty worried."

Shinjiro made a face. "Sheesh... what the hell has he been feeding her?"

"Uh..." Ken fidgeted for a moment. "I don't know the extent of it but... I found a lot of ramen bowls in her room..."

Ugh. What wasn't he surprised? The Phantom Thieves in general seemed to have shitty eating habits. Kitagawa seemed to starve himself so he could buy art supplies. Takamaki had an even bigger sweet tooth than Takeba. And given that Amamiya lived in the attic of a café, he highly doubted the kid was getting to eat half decent food. Niijima and Sakamoto seemed to be the only ones getting decent meals.

Maybe he should just start sending Ken off with meals when he went to see the group. Somebody had to give them proper nutrition. Why did teenagers have to have crappy eating habits?

"...What's with that face?" Ken narrowed his eyes at Shinjiro.

"Nothing," Shinjiro dismissed. "You're imagining it."

"Uh huh." Ken sounded completely unconvinced. "Sure, Shinjiro-san."

"What are you planning, Shinji?" Shinjiro turned his head to see Fuuka raise an eyebrow at him.
"You're making that face."

"Tch, did you two decide that you just have to pick on me today?" Shinjiro grumbled.

Fuuka just giggled before leaning forward to kiss his cheek. "Well, I suppose we should be nice today. It is your birthday."

"Yeah, happy birthday, Shinjiro-san." Ken fidgeted again, before looking at Shinjiro hesitantly. "Um… did you like…?"

"Yeah. It was great, Ken," Shinjiro said quickly.

"Oh, what did you get him?" Fuuka asked, apparently oblivious to the brief panic that appeared on Ken's face.

"Uh… well…"

"Just a cookbook with Korean recipes," Shinjiro said quickly.

Hopefully Fuuka would buy that lie. Because he really didn't want to screw up the actual proposal. Minako and Takeba would both murder him if he screwed it up. They would never let him hear the end of it.

"Oh." Fuuka blinked, before she finally nodded. Ken's shoulders just slumped in relief. He didn't blame him. He was kinda worried that Fuuka wouldn't accept his lie. "That's a nice present, Ken-kun! Maybe we should look through it for dinner tomorrow night, Shinji. Since we're having dinner with everyone tonight for your birthday."

Fuck.

God dammit… where the hell was he supposed to come up with a Korean cookbook? Would Bookworms have anything like that?

"Maybe…" Shinjiro drew out the word, all while desperately trying to come out with an excuse. "But I was thinking about cooking your favorite stuff for tomorrow night. Since you probably haven't had it in a while."

"Oh, that's not necessary, Shinji! It's sweet of you, though."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Ken rolling his eyes. Ugh. He really couldn't wait for the day when Ken got a girlfriend, whenever the hell that was. Then it would be time for payback.

"But since it's summer vacation, I think I'm just gonna go back to bed," Ken said with a yawn. "I'm still pretty tired."

"You'll be okay by yourself, right?" Fuuka asked. "You shouldn't sleep the entire day, though! Maybe you should set an alarm…"

"I know, I know," Ken groaned. "I already have Shinjiro-san nagging at me…"

Fuuka smiled sheepishly. "I know, but can you blame me? It's been a long time since you've been by yourself…"

"So I can live in a dorm when I'm thirteen, but I can't be trusted to take care of myself when I'm eighteen," Ken deadpanned. "Good to know."
Shinjiro rolled his eyes. "Quit being a smartass, Ken. Fuuka's just worried."

"Yeah, like she's the only one," Ken said dryly, before his expression softened. "But… enjoy your birthday, Shinjiro-san."

"Yeah, yeah." Shinjiro waved it off. "Try and get some rest, yeah?"

"Will do."

Ken gave one last wave, before he cut off the connection.

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**KALA-NEMI**

Level: 36

Skills: Makouha, Kouga, Recarm, Diarama, Mediarama, Snap, Hamaon, Mahama

Next Skill: Makouga (Level 38)

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Chapter End Notes

I know that I said I expected the chapter to be on the shorter side but uh… it just didn't happen. Whups. But anyways, Futaba's Palace has finally been completed! It was mostly canon scenes but… I really enjoyed writing my own spin of things. Ryuji and Ken's co-op attack was inspired by their (and Anne and Morgana's) unison attack from PQ2, in case anyone was wondering.

I also will be updating Kala-Nemi's skillset at the conclusion of every Palace. And in this AU, Makoto will only learn Diarama/Diaharan, so there aren't three dedicated healers on the team.

And happy late P3D/P5D release day! I got to play already and I already adore the game. Been thinking of what songs Ken would have in this AU's version of P5D, and I picture him having Road Less Taken and Wait and See (I know it's SEES's battle theme and this is more P5 oriented but shhh). May write an omake about Caroline and Justine's first social scene in this AU, but we'll see.
Waiting Game

Chapter Summary

The days trickle by as the Phantom Thieves wait for Futaba to regain consciousness. Will she wake up in time to help them?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday, August 13th, 2016

"Are the Phantom Thieves really going to do nothing about Medjed?"

"It's kinda scary… I couldn't access my bank account this morning."

"But it's more than a week away from the twenty-first!"

Makoto pursed her lips, trying to tune out the discussion. Everyone… was really counting on the Phantom Thieves, weren't they?

But they couldn't do anything. Not with Futaba fast asleep. But… she was worried. She had been exhausted after awakening to Johanna, but… It had been three days. Ren had promised that he would keep an eye out for her, but there was still no news.

They still had over a week, at least…

Even though her family didn't really observe the holiday Obon, Makoto still liked to visit the shrine and pray to both of her parents during the holiday. Sae had joined her in the past years but… not this year.

Sae… had been staying over at work more and more… Sae had snapped at her a few days ago when she had attempted to suggest that she should slow down, and at least rest at their home.

She had hoped that her sister would be able to change her mindset without her Treasure being stolen, but the odds… weren't looking good. But at the same time, she was hesitant to bring it up to everyone…

Makoto shook her head, trying to push the thoughts out of her mind. She… shouldn't be focusing on that. She should try to keep her mind off of that… and Medjed…

The train finally pulled to a stop. Makoto waited for the way to clear up before stepping outside. As she looked towards the way to the shrine, she noticed Ken stepping out from another compartment.

Makoto picked up the pace so she could catch up to him. "Ken?"

Ken looked surprised as he turned his head. "Makoto? What are you doing here?"
"Oh, I was just… I was going to visit the shrine today," Makoto said. She then glanced at him. "…Are you planning on doing that as well?"

"I was," Ken confirmed. "Had to look it up, though, since the last time I asked, Ren could only tell me about Meiji Shrine."

"Ren has only been here two months longer than you," Makoto said. "You probably should have asked Yusuke or me, since Anne told me that her parents are just… out of the country, and both of Ryuji's parents are alive…"

Ken nodded. "Sometimes I forget that, with how Ren seems to know how to navigate Tokyo so well…"

"I can understand that." Makoto nodded. "He took me around Tokyo a few times, and it still surprises me how well he seems to know the area already. And I've been living in Tokyo all my life."

"I visited Tokyo once, when I was pretty young…" Ken mused. "I was only five at the time. My memories of that visit are pretty blurry, though."

"Wouldn't it be ironic if we had met back then?"

"I doubt it," Ken chuckled. "…but it's a nice thought."

They finally reached the shrine, and took turns to pray.

"If you don't mind me asking…" Ken said slowly, turning to her after he finished, "…what did happen to your mother?"

Makoto bit her lip. "…She got sick, when I was six," she said softly. "There was nothing that could be done…"

It wasn't as dramatic as her father being murdered so Kaneshiro wouldn't be brought to justice. Or Madarame cruelly allowing Yusuke's mother to die so he could steal her work. Or how Ken's mother was murdered.

But you couldn't fight an illness either.

Ken didn't say anything, but Makoto could see the understanding in his eyes. And she was grateful for that. She despised hearing I'm sorry, when she knew that they didn't really mean it.

Sometimes… she struggled to remember how her mother was like before she became ill. She knew that Mom was quite the beauty from photographs—and looking at Sae. She had passed her silver hair to Sae, but she had red eyes like Makoto. But Makoto couldn't remember what her voice sounded like. Or if she wore perfume. Or if she liked to sing.

But the thing she remembered the most vividly was… how her death had affected Dad and Sae.

Though Ken's question had sparked a curiosity in her. About his mother.

"Do you… have a picture?" Makoto asked hesitantly. "Of your mom."

Ken just nodded, before pulling out his phone. It took him about a minute of scrolling, but he handed Makoto his phone. On the screen was a picture of a faded photograph. Despite Ken being… eight or nine, from the looks of it, he was easily recognizable. She didn't realize that his
face used to be so cherubic.

Though looking between the woman in the picture and the boy standing before her, she could really see the family resemblance. Ken seemed to take after his mother, especially with his facial features. Her bangs even swept in the same way as Ken. She had an… unique eye color. Maroon? It was almost… reddish brown. Though something… nagged at Makoto. She couldn't put her finger on it, though…

But looking at the bright smile on Ken's face just… made Makoto sad. She had seen Ken smile, truly smile, and it always made her feel warm when she saw it. But it didn't quite match that smile in this photograph. Though she supposed that was just childhood innocence. Though he didn't deserve to have it stolen away from him so young…

"She's beautiful," Makoto finally said, handing the phone back to him. "And she really looks like you."

"A lot of people say that… I don't really see it," Ken said, shaking his head.

Better than than the disbelief she often got, when people found out that Sae was her older sister. She had gotten, You look nothing alike, all too often.

"Though, Ken…" Makoto began, "…why are you here? Instead of visiting Port Island…"

Ken's smile was sad. "I couldn't," he said. "Not with Medjed, and worrying about Futaba…"

"Ken?"

"Truth be told, Shinjiro-san is out of town right now." Ken looked straight at her. "…He's at Port Island."

Makoto's eyes widened. "Ken… just how long has he been gone?"

"Three days."

Three days ago… That was the tenth. Makoto's heart sank. The tenth. The day they completed Futaba's Palace. If they had been faster, maybe Ken could've visited Port Island. Did he even have homesickness? But he had prioritized Futaba and Medjed over visiting Port Island.

"Makoto, don't blame yourself for this." Ken gently placed a hand over her balled up fist. When had she started doing that…? "Or anyone else. Futaba's wellbeing is more important." He smiled slightly. "…It's okay, really."

His smile didn't reach his eyes. But Makoto didn't push it. She had a feeling that Ken would just… clam up about it, if she pushed things.

"Okay," Makoto said reluctantly. "Would you like to get lunch, then? I don't know if you ate before you left, but I had a pretty light breakfast this morning."

Surprise flashed in his eyes for a moment, only to be replaced by relief. Then Ken nodded. "Sure. What do you have in mind?"

"Oh, let me take a look…"

Even as Makoto pulled up restaurants nearby on her phone, her mind was racing. She felt… that Ken needed to be made up to, somehow.
"There's still no news on Isshiki, is there?"

Shinjiro sighed. Medjed, Medjed, Medjed. He was just sick and tired of hearing people talk about it. You'd think that there would be other news to focus on, but no. When Aki had called him up, asking if he wanted to hang out, he hadn't expected to be brought into Mitsuru's penthouse. Or to be grilled about Isshiki's daughter.

"Far as I know of, no," he said. "But both Minato and Minako got knocked out for a week, didn't they?"

"Yeah, but isn't it different with them?" Aki asked, before he took a sip of his beer. "Because they're Wild Cards."

"There are too many… anomalies with her," Mitsuru admitted. "We hardly know much about Palaces, to begin with. But the fact that her Shadow had become her Persona… perhaps that could be a reason why things are so different here."

"Not really," Shinjiro deadpanned. "Ken told me that she kinda has shitty eating habits from what he saw. And doesn't exercise."

"No wonder that she's still sleeping then," Aki said. "Though they're running out of time… There's a week left."

"It is… rather odd, though," Mitsuru said.

"What do you mean, Mitsuru?" Aki asked, turning to look at her.

"Medjed's threat… feels more like baiting," Mitsuru said slowly, brushing a stray strand of hair out of her face. "Only a week passed after Kaneshiro's downfall, and then they come out with this? Why? Why didn't they speak out earlier?"

"Well, Kaneshiro kinda brought them under the radar," Aki pointed out. "I mean, a school teacher isn't much. And a plagiarizing artist, even one who was abusing his students… it's not extremely impressive."

"I suppose…" Mitsuru sighed, but she still sounded unsure. "…Though I'm more concerned about Isshiki. Perhaps if I had…"

"Oi, Mitsuru, don't pull this again," Shinjiro cut her off. It was better for everyone if he cut her off before she started to really think things over. She really thought of the what ifs and maybes way too much. "You wanted to help her, but Shido was just being a pain in the ass. There wasn't anythin' you could do."

"I suppose…" Mitsuru muttered, before resting her cheek in her hand. "I just wish there was something more I could have done…"

"Though…" Aki's brow suddenly furrowed, all while frowning deeply. "I am a bit worried about when she wakes up."
"Hm?" Mitsuru frowned, curiosity filling her red eyes. She then glanced at him. "What are you talking about, Akihiko?"

"She knows about the Phantom Thieves..." Aki said slowly, "and if she's Alibaba... she knows that Ken's a Shadow Operative."

...Shit. Shinjiro fought the urge to groan. Of all times for Aki to be right...

"I... I didn't think about that, but Akihiko's right." Mitsuru immediately sat up, panic filling her face. "What should we do?"

Dammit... He should've known there would have been consequences to Ken's choice...

"I think... Ken will just have to play dumb." Shinjiro grimaced. "The Shadow Operatives are a secret organization. What would a high school student have to do with that?" He then sighed heavily, before rubbing his face. "I'll have to warn Ken when I get back to Tokyo..."

"If Isshiki doesn't awaken by then," Mitsuru said doubtfully, pursing her lips together. "Granted, there's only two more days, but still..."

"Fine, I'll talk to him about it when I call tonight," Shinjiro grumbled.

They could just hightail it back to Port Island, but it'd look too suspicious. Dammit. And Isshiki's daughter wanted to know about Isshiki's research. They knew of her research, the gist of it. But they didn't know the gritty details. But Isshiki's daughter... she didn't know that. And she was determined as hell. There was no way she'd accept an excuse.

"Though, Shinjiro..." Mitsuru began. "...Have you gotten the chance to visit the Meta-verse?"

"Nope." Shinjiro took the moment to take a drink. "Why would I?"

"Why wouldn't you—Shinjiro!"

"I know what my name is, Mitsuru," Shinjiro deadpanned.

"Stop picking on her." Aki elbowed him on the side. "But seriously, Shinji, you've been there for two months, and you're seriously telling me that you haven't asked Ken to show you the Meta-verse or anything?"

Shinjiro sighed. "I don't like getting involved with Shadows. The last time I got involved was because somebody—" he stared at the other two, "—got their asses kidnapped, and someone had to save them."

"Shinjiro, your Persona... it's stable," Mitsuru argued, after a quick glare. "It's been stable ever since Castor became Aeneas. You don't have to be afraid about losing control again-"

"That ain't it," Shinjiro cut her off. He then sighed. "Look, I ain't like you, Mitsuru."

He had only joined SEES the first time, because Aki seriously didn't know what he was getting into. Somebody had to watch his gung-ho ass. Mitsuru had to twist his arm to agree to being listed on the Shadow Operatives database, when the organization was founded in 2011. After all of the shit with Tartarus, he just wanted to move past that. Sure, he'd step up if his friends got into some deep shit, but he already dodged death once. Going for a second time would be pushing it.

"And if Amada needs you?" Mitsuru countered, raising an eyebrow. "Would you change your mind..."
then?"

Shinjiro just scowled at her. He didn't need to confirm something that Mitsuru already knew. Sometimes he didn't know who was more annoying about being able to read him, Mitsuru or Minako.

"B-But anyways..." Aki cleared his throat. "Um, Mina decided that she wanted to find out the gender after all. At the last visit to the doctor."

...Was an obvious way to change the subject, but whatever.

"Oh?" Mitsuru raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"We're uh... we're having a girl." Aki fidgeted for a moment, before an almost goofy smile spread across his face. "Still haven't picked a name, though."

"Would've thought you'd go for Miki," Shinjiro said.

Aki didn't look surprised, before he shook his head. "Nope... I thought about it, but I've decided that I want my kids to have their own identities. Mina agrees too. We won't name any boys we have after Minato."

"Already planning for more, Aki?"

"Oh, shuddup, Shinji." Aki halfheartedly punched him in the shoulder. "What about you? Have you even gotten your hands on a ring yet?"

"...Sorta." Shinjiro dug out the velvet box, sliding it to Aki.

Aki popped it open, raising an eyebrow. "Hey, this is pretty nice. Where did you get it from?"

"That's... Amada's mother's ring, is it not?" Mitsuru tilted her head, studying it closely. "Yes... I'm sure of it."

He figured that Mitsuru had sorted through Ken's inheritance.

"It was... Ken's birthday present to me this year." Shinjiro let out a frustrated sigh. "He wrote me a note and everything. Threatened to just throw it away if I try to give it back." He shook his head. "That kid can be stubborn as a mule when he wants to be..."

"And who do you think Amada learned it from?" Mitsuru closed her eyes, all while a smile formed on her lips. "You can give Amada a run for his money... by far."

"Tch, you're one to talk," Shinjiro retorted, before he rolled his eyes at her. "Remember your whole 'I must take on my family's burden on my own' shtick?"

Mitsuru opened her eyes to glower at him. "I do not sound like that, Shinjiro," she bit out. "Where on earth did you get that from?"

"I dunno, Mitsuru, I think it's not as far off as you think," Aki said, his face breaking into a grin.

"You really don't remember what you were like, huh?"

"I was fifteen," Mitsuru said through gritted teeth. "I ought to execute you both for that implication..."
"Bring it on, Mitsuru," Shinjiro taunted with a smirk, even as all color drained from Aki's face.

Ken just stared blankly at his friends gathered at the door. "Um… is something the matter?"

"We're gonna do your welcome party now, man!" Ryuji cheered, a bright smile on his face. "Plus we've gotta make up for your birthday too!"

"T-That's not really necessary-" Ken began to protest, only to be cut off.

"Denied!" Anne announced.

"…What?"

"Your protests have been denied," Anne said, hands on her hips. "We welcome every member of the team, so that's what we're doing right now!"

"You're… not going to take no for an answer, are you?" Ken said slowly.

"Nope~!" Anne all but sang out, before she smiled too. "Glad to see that you get the picture!"

…God, she was really channeling Minako-san right now…

Ken just shook his head. But despite himself, a smile tugged at his lips. It was pretty nice of them… And honestly, he's been feeling restless lately… Though he couldn't help but notice that Makoto looked somewhat… nervous. Like she was gauging his reaction.

He opened the door further and stepped aside to let everyone in.

"I still can't get over this place," Ryuji said, flopping onto the sofa.

"Indeed, its aesthetic is rather off," Yusuke said absently.

"Uh, that wasn't what I meant." Ryuji just shook his head. "At all."

"I stopped by the video rental shop, and grabbed a few movies." Ren waved a plastic bag at Ken. "Dunno what your taste is exactly."

"Ooh, did you get Bubbly Hills?" Anne asked, her eyes growing bright. "I loved it the first time we watched it together!"

"Why would Ken want to watch a stupid romcom?" Ryuji scoffed, rolling his eyes at Anne. "Action is where it's at!"

"Just because you don't like romcoms doesn't mean everyone does!" Anne retorted, hands flying to her hips. "And what's so fun about watching buildings blow up?!"

"Pretty sure Ken would side with me!" Ryuji retorted.

"He would not!" Anne shot back. "Right, Ken?"

Ken just sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead. Those two could be just as bad as Junpei-san and Yukari-san… And they just had to drag him into their little argument…

(But for the record, he hated romantic comedies.)

"Come on, don't argue," Makoto chided. "And don't drag Ken into your argument…"
The two juniors just grumbled, before Ren shot his best friend and girlfriend a playful smirk. Anne responded by sticking her tongue out at him.

"But either way…" Ken began, "we could watch a movie… Or…"

"Or what?" Yusuke asked, raising an eyebrow.

"We have an entertainment room," Ken explained. "I thought you'd might enjoy that more-

"Holy shit, are you for real?!" Ryuji gasped, his eyes growing wide. "Where?!

Ren grinned. "Yeah, that was pretty fun." He glanced at Makoto. "We have got to teach Makoto about Mario Kart."

"Mario… Kart…?" Makoto repeated slowly. "It's that racing game, right?"

"You already have tons of experience with knocking people outta your way," Ryuji snickered.

"H-Hey, those are Shadows, not people!" Makoto protested, before her cheeks went pink.

…Teddie-san would be so offended if he heard that. He'd probably say something along the lines of… "Shadows are people, too!" Now that he thought about it… Teddie-san wouldn't take too well to the Shadow negotiations. Or maybe he'd be happy because more cognizant Shadows…

"But the room's the one all the way down this hallway," Ken pointed to the hallway that held the entertainment room and laundry room (as well as a couple of other rooms).

"Sweet!" Ryuji's face broke into a grin. "Come on, let's see what they have!"

"I don't know how to play these video games, though…" Poor Yusuke looked… bewildered at the whole conversation.

"We'll teach you then!" Anne chirped, grabbing his arm and already tugging him down the hallway. "Come on!"

"Not that I can enjoy that," Morgana grumbled. "I really wish I could return to my human form already…"

"Oh, Morgana..." Makoto sighed. "We'll just have to keep exploring Mementos…"

"Mementos?" Ken repeated.

"It's where we clear the smaller requests posted on the Phan-Site," Morgana explained. "Have you met Mishima? He's a friend of Ren's. A second-year at Shujin like Ren, Lady Anne, and Ryuji. He runs the website."

That was pretty impressive. Anything programming related was beyond him. He remembered Fuuka-san attempting to teach him, after he showed some interest in some of her projects. It… hadn't turned out well. It was like Fuuka-san was speaking French to him.

"Can't say I have," Ken admitted.

Mishima… hm. Doesn't ring a bell.

"Though from what I've heard, Ren does tend to let the requests build up," Makoto said. "We may be waiting a little longer…"
Morgana then sighed. "I'll just... watch them play, I guess," he muttered. "I have nothing better to do..."

Ken couldn't help but feel bad. He didn't realize just how alienating it'd be for Morgana. Maybe he shouldn't have suggested it in the first place, but he wanted to break up Ryuji and Anne's arguing.

"Though we do have some fish in the freezer, Morgana," Ken said, "Do you want some later?"

Morgana's face lit up at his suggestion, immediately perking up. "Can I?"

"It's the least I can do." Ken glanced over to Makoto, after Morgana thanked him and darted after the juniors. "Are you planning on joining them?"

"Maybe later..." Makoto chewed on her lip for a moment, before her eyes flicked to Ken. "Um, Ken... I know that we kinda jumped this on you but I couldn't stop thinking about us being the reason why you couldn't visit home... So I thought..." she trailed off after that, but Ken could guess what she was going to say.

"You're not intruding or bothering me, Makoto." Ken gave her a reassuring smile. "It was... thoughtful of you." Ken then sighed. "Things have been... rather monotonous lately."

"They'll do that to you," Makoto mused, a fond smile forming on her face. "Even though they can be so... rambunctious sometimes."

Ken raised an eyebrow, shooting her an amused look. "Uh huh. Like you're one to talk, Miss Fists of Justice."

Makoto blushed, before she smiled sheepishly. "It... It just comes out, okay?"

When Makoto smiled like that, it was... endearing. It was often shy... almost hesitant. But it made her entire face light up. Just looking at it made him feel warm. Sometimes Ken still found it mind-boggling to see Queen and Makoto were one and the same, but it... suited her in a way. He could understand the need of hiding a certain facet of your personality...

"You don't have to be embarrassed about it," Ken said, stifling the urge to smile. "It's... cute."

"Cute?" Makoto repeated. "It's not—it's supposed to be..." Then she narrowed her eyes. "...You're teasing me, aren't you?"

"What was your first hint?" Ken said dryly.

"I miss when you were nice and polite with me," Makoto lamented. "Is this what Shinjiro-san has to put up with?"

Ken snorted. "We met a little over two months ago. You're talking like that was a long time ago."

Makoto blinked. "Wow... has it really only been two months?" Her eyes then met his. "...It feels longer for some reason."

Now that she brought it up... Makoto was right. Minako-san's visit felt so long ago, almost a lifetime ago. Then again, lesser time had passed between him joining SEES and him gaining the resolve to truly live... He supposed fighting Shadows just made time fly...

"Ken?"

Ken looked up, to see Makoto looking at him in concern. "It's nothing." He shook his head. "I was
"Heyyy!" Anne called, walking into the living room. "Jeez, what's taking you guys so long?" she huffed, hands on her hips. "Ren challenged me to a dance-off on the DDR machine, and everyone else is gonna be judging! Come on!"

"Should've known that you and Ren would be insanely good dancers." Ken shook his head.

"Well, yeah, but I'm gonna leave him in the dust!" Anne boasted, pressing a hand against her chest.

"We'll see about that, Anne!" Ren called back, his voice muffled from the distance.

"It's rude to eavesdrop, Ren," Anne shot back. "But come onnn! Let's get started!"

"Honestly…" Makoto sighed. "They're all such a handful."

"Yeah, but would you have it any other way?" Ken asked.

Makoto smiled, before shaking her head. "No."

"So… you really haven't explained what exactly happened between you and Makoto." Anne twirled one of her pigtails, watching her boyfriend rummage through the drinks they brought and selecting one. They had spent nearly an hour competing with each other on the DDR machine. But they were both tired… and very thirsty from all the dancing.

It was just amazing how there was a room completely dedicated to games. It was like… a haven to her. She preferred playing on handhelds, but still.

Ren looked at her, before he nodded. "I haven't," he agreed, before motioning for her to join him at the dinner table.

Anne sat next to him, looking at him expectantly.

"Makoto and I started hanging out, but then she asked me to help her… stake out Shinjuku," he explained. "To follow some rumors. We ended up meeting Eiko Takao, who's a third-year like her and Ken. Makoto found out that she was dating a host, and she tried to warn Eiko about the dangers, but she wouldn't listen. She said that Makoto was inexperienced with romance, so she wouldn't understand."

"Ouch." Anne winced. "That was kinda… mean, though…"

Just… there was nothing wrong with being inexperienced with dating. And Makoto was just trying to look out for this Eiko girl…

"So Makoto asked me to pose as her boyfriend, and asked Eiko to do a double date. That's probably what you saw at the diner…"

Anne looked at him cautiously. "So… you don't see Makoto in that kind of light… at all?" She fiddled with her hair again. "I kinda… find that hard to believe," she admitted. "I mean, you had to pretend that you were her boyfriend…"

"Anne…" Ren shook his head, all while smiling. He took her head, lightly squeezing it. "…No. I don't." He twirled a strand of his hair. "Really, Makoto's more like a nagging older sister to me. Like, when I first asked her if she wanted to hang out… she wanted to know how my grades were first. She thought that if they weren't high enough… I should focus more on studying."
Anne sighed, shaking her head. "That sounds a lot like her," she admitted. "Remember how she was tutoring Ryuji before our summer exams happened?"

"And it just… didn't feel right, either," Ren admitted. "It was weird to just pretend. So you don't have to worry about Makoto, Anne… or any other girl. I promise. You didn't quite have me at love at first sight, but my attention has always been on you."

Anne drew her hand away, feeling her face flush. Even though he had said those incredibly sweet words to her last Thursday, she still… had a hard time wrapping her mind around it.

"How… How can you say those kind of things without even blushing?" she finally grumbled out.

Ren just flashed a smirk at her. "Because it's me."

"So modest." Anne rolled her eyes at him. "But um… how long do you think that we will have to date in secret?"

Ren's expression grew somber. "…I don't know," he admitted. "Makoto's still gathering info on Tsukasa—the guy Eiko's dating. I'm hoping it's not that much longer, but we'll have to see how it goes…" He then sighed, before uncertainty flashed in his eyes. "Not to mention the whole thing with Medjed…"

"I… I hope Futaba-chan can help us…" Anne bit her lip. "Or else we'll have to give up our identities…"

"No."

"No?" Anne looked up at him in confusion.

"You won't," Ren said. "If worse comes to worse… I'll go to the police and turn myself in. Hopefully they'll be satisfied with the leader."

"WHAT?!" Anne clamped her hand over her mouth, even as panic washed over her. That… came out a lot louder than she had wanted.

"Anne…"

"Don't 'Anne' me, Ren Amamiya!" Anne stood up and dropped her hand, poking him hard in the chest. "You can't… You can't just give yourself up like that!"

"My future is pretty bleak, Anne." Ren shrugged, as if it was just a fact of life. "Nobody will want to accept a criminal in a good university, and that means no good job… Anne, I've seen you at your best. You would have a bright future as a model. Yusuke has his talents as an artist. Ryuji could easily become an athlete again. Makoto and Ken, they're both pretty damn smart. You saw that they tied for first at exams, didn't you?"

"That is not true!" Anne said fiercely. "Shujin is a well-known school! You're smart! You're amazing, too, Ren! Any university would be lucky to have you! It's not fair for you to just throw your life away just to protect us!"

"That is not true!" Anne said fiercely. "Shujin is a well-known school! You're smart! You're amazing, too, Ren! Any university would be lucky to have you! It's not fair for you to just throw your life away just to protect us!"

"It is…" Ren said. "You guys are the first real friends I've made… It'll be worth it, if I can protect you guys."

"We're a group, Ren," Anne fired back. "If one goes down, we all go down. We've been hell or high water from the start." Anne looked at him with begging eyes. "Ren… promise me you won't
"turn yourself in just to protect us."

"Anne…"

"Please!" she begged, grabbing one of his hands with both of hers. "I don't… I don't want to lose you," she confessed. "You promised that you wouldn't leave me, remember?"

Ren's eyes softened, before he sighed. "I… all right," he finally relented. "You do have a point…"
He ran his free hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, Anne…"

"It's okay, Ren… Just please don't scare me like that again…"

They still had a week left to go. It would be fine. Futaba would wake up in time… right?

Tuesday, August 16th, 2016

"So... how was the trip?"

Shinjiro-san dropped his duffel bag on the coffee table, before answering. "Nothing too special." He took a seat on the loveseat. "It was pretty tense with people freaking over Medjed. The summer festival was cancelled."

Ken's eyes widened. "They did?" He looked down. "…I didn't think people would be panicking so far away."

"Port Island isn't that far away. It's not like it's in Hokkaido. But yeah," Shinjiro rubbed his face. "People are panicking. It's… weird. Almost… cult-like, with how they're talking about whether or not the Phantom Thieves are gonna take action."

"I think that's a bit of an exaggeration," Ken protested. "I've overheard a little but… it's not like we're doing anything bad. Not… Not like the Cult of Nyx."

Not that Shinjiro-san had the joy of experiencing that… But he was well acquainted with Strega…

"…Right. Sorry." He met Ken's eyes. "Fuuka's been taking care of your mom's grave pretty well. We made some mochi for her as an offering."

"I'm glad to hear that," Ken said, before he pursed his lips. "I hope Mitsuru-san hasn't been stressing so much about everything, though..."

Shinjiro-san scoffed before rolling his eyes. "Have you met Mitsuru? She's still blaming herself with Isshiki's daughter." He then met Ken's eyes. "Is she still asleep?"

"Far as I know... yeah," Ken confirmed. "The group chat has been asking Ren about her every day."

"Figures," Shinjiro-san muttered. "But I know that we talked 'bout this before but..."

Ken exhaled. "...Futaba."

Shinjiro-san reminding him about that little problem hadn't been fun on Sunday night. It was… quite a problem. Even if he made a point to never be alone with Futaba, given with what Sakura-san has told him about her, she may just blurt it out in front of everyone. And that… that would be disastrous. If the truth came out like that, they would be rightly furious, they'd probably hate him
for hiding the truth from him. And just the thought of it made Ken's insides twist.

Shinjiro-san said flatly, "She hacked your phone." Shinjiro-san rested his hands on his knees. "She's probably hellbent on finding out what you know."

"But I didn't even know..." Ken muttered. "Not until you and Mitsuru-san explained things to me."

Shinjiro-san sighed. "She doesn't know that. And she's at least sorta informed 'bout what Isshiki researched, from what you told me. She'll probably assume that you know 'specially since you're nearly three years older."

Ken bit his lip. How much did Futaba even know about the Shadow Operatives? What had Isshiki-san known, if she was a former Kirijo scientist? Had Futaba even met any of them in person?

But... maybe he could use the same tactic as before.

"What if... I gave her some half-truths?" Ken suggested tentatively. "Like SEES was meant to fight Shadows that lived on Port Island... The Shadow Operatives is SEES's successor..."

It was... sad that telling half-truths was the closest he'd get. But he seriously doubted that anyone would take it well if he did tell the truth.

Shinjiro-san folded his arms over his chest, thinking it over. "Mitsuru doesn't want civilians to know about us," Shinjiro-san said. "But I don't know if you really have a choice, like with the Phantom Thieves giving you the third degree after Kaneshiro's Palace blew up." He sighed, rubbing his face. "...That's probably the best way to go."

Now that he had to just think what exactly to say to Futaba...

"You know, I would've been fine with another cookbook." Shinjiro-san's voice snapped him out of his thoughts. He had the velvet box out now. "Seriously, it's a nice present and all, but it was your mom's. Don't you wanna keep it?"

"What am I going to do with a ring now?" Ken looked at him flatly. "Shinjiro-san, I am serious about throwing the ring into the trash if you try to give it back to me."

"Fine, fine, you win," Shinjiro-san finally gave in. "I just thought you'd might want to keep it as a memento, at the very least."

Ken started to shake his head, but one word made him remember his short conversation with Morgana. "That reminds me," Ken said. "I found out where the Phantom Thieves have been fulfilling those small requests, the ones on the Phan-Site."

For some reason, Shinjiro-san suddenly smirked.

Ken then faltered. "...What?"

"Have you checked the website lately?"

"Um... no?" Ken said slowly.

"Someone requested Mitsuru. Claiming that she was abusing her power as CEO. Minako seems to think a business rival or something had submitted her name to eliminate her as a threat."

...What. Were... were they stupid? Mitsuru-san had established herself as an anomaly. She donated several million yen to charities, she pushed for Gekkoukan to accept more scholarships,
targeting students from poor or broken families, she was known to treat her employees well…

"Mitsuru-san must have been thrilled," Ken said dryly.

"She went into the training room and froze all of the dummies before attacking them with her rapier," Shinjiro-san said. "Minako had to go in and calm her down."

"Minako-san really is the best person for that," Ken muttered.

"Pretty much." Shinjiro-san then got to his feet and stretched. "Fuuka's gonna visit again next week," he added nonchalantly.

"…What?" He stared blankly at Shinjiro-san. "Wasn't last time an emergency?"

"It'll be short, like last time." Shinjiro-san shrugged. "Sides, Takeba's got that fan event coming up at the near end of the month, and Fuuka would like to see her. And the twins."

…Oh. Right. He had completely forgotten about that.

This fan event was going to be one of Yukari-san's last. After the new season concluded at the end of the year, she was leaving. She was planning on moving back to Port Island, because her schedule now made her insanely busy, sometimes rivalling Mitsuru-san at times. She said she didn't want to miss more of the twins' childhoods.

It just… had slipped his mind, with him worrying about Futaba.

Shinjiro-san snorted. "I can't believe you forgot. I still remember when Takeba had surprised you with that tour of the area for your birthday. You nearly passed out when the whole group gave you that autographed poster."

"I was fourteen!" Ken protested. "And the poster was a limited edition, meant to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary! And nobody gave me a warning!"

"You do know what the meaning of surprise, right?"

"That's… you…" Ken glowered at him.

Ugh. Why did everyone take such joy from teasing him?

Shinjiro-san just smirked, before mussing up Ken's hair. "Never gets old."

Ken just scowled at him before smacking his hand away. He then began to smooth his hair back to how it was originally. "Shouldn't you be getting some rest?"

"This is pretty relaxing."

"Not to me!"

"That ain't my problem, then."

"I'm going back to my room," Ken grumbled. "Where people aren't teasing me about something that happened years ago."

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Friday, August 19th, 2016
Futaba had been asleep for nine days. Nine. It was officially getting ridiculous.

He had promised Anne that he wouldn't turn himself in, but Ren was afraid of the consequences for everyone if he didn't.

Ren sighed to himself, rubbing his temples. He was the leader. He had to do something. Because hell would freeze over before he let anything bad happen to his friends. Morgana suddenly crawled into his lap, rubbing his head against his arm but Ren barely registered it.

"I wouldn't peg you as the brooding type, but you do have the coloring for it."

Ren jumped at the sudden voice. Standing at the top of the stairs was Ken, all while smiling wryly.

"Ken?" Ren tilted his head. "…What are you doing here?"

"Just thought I'd come by." Ken shrugged. "Sakura-san just gave me the okay to come up here. It's okay if you're not free today, though."

Ren rubbed the back of his head. "I don't mind. What do you want to do?"

"How about… a video game?" Ken offered. "I don't have much experience with retro games, though."

"I'll be your senpai in this field, then," Ren quipped. "Come on."

Ken just rolled his eyes but joined him on the floor. "So what games do you have?"

"Star Forneus and Gambla Goemon," Ren answered, as he connected the console to the TV set and booted both up.

"Goemon?" Ken raised an eyebrow. "Like Yusuke's Persona. And isn't Forneus a Persona too?"

"Is it?" Ren frowned. "Forneus, I mean. Haven't run into that one yet." But then he shrugged. "But anyways, Forneus is more fun. It's one of those starship games. You know, at the arcade?"

"The arcade… at Port Island didn't quite have retro games," Ken commented. He accepted the game controller Ren handed him. "We had a haunted house, a photo booth, a quiz game…"

"Sounds kinda boring to me," Ren said as the game came to life on the screen. "What did you even do on Port Island, if your video games suck like that?"

Ken rolled his eyes at him before starting up the level. "We had a karaoke place. The arcade had more games, I just didn't really go to the arcade. I have a couple of video game consoles, so… why spend money at an arcade? I did both soccer club and student council up until the school year started up this past April."

"You're helping Makoto with student council, aren't you?" Ren asked as he watched Ken play. He fumbled for a few seconds but since this was level one, he didn't die from the delay. "What made you quit?"

"I thought I should focus on my studies," Ken said absently. "I wanted to get the grades so I would be accepted into Tokyo University."

"What are you aiming to be, a doctor?" Ren asked. "You do have the experience, with your healing abilities… And you do have the discipline for studying to become one."
"Nope." Ken's tongue stuck out a little as the mothership came into view. "I want to study to become a defense attorney."

Huh. A defense attorney? And Morgana had commented that Ken's arcana was Justice. Even though their confidant was called *Adjustment*. It was kinda fitting.

"And yet, you're a Phantom Thief now," Ren remarked. "But becoming an attorney… it won't be easy."

"That's why I wanted to become one," Ken said. "One of my senpai—Shinjiro-san's best friend, works as a police officer. And some of the things I've heard over the years… I want to give people wrongfully accused a voice."

Huh. This was kinda a surprise. Ken was rather pragmatic minded. Sometimes Ren thought that he was more levelheaded than Makoto, since Makoto had some… hotheaded moments. But at the same time, he was surprisingly… optimistic.

"What about you, though?" Ken suddenly asked. "Anything in mind?"

"I haven't really thought about it," Ren admitted, watching the animation of the mothership imploding. "Kinda hard, with my future being so unsure."

"Don't talk like that."

"Huh?"

Ken then paused the game, turning to look at him. "I didn't stutter," he deadpanned. "You don't have to demean yourself… I saw your score for the exam. You ranked number five in your year for this exam. You're smart… you're charismatic… Who knows? Maybe you're a politician in the making."

"Me, a politician?" Ren said in disbelief. "You're joking, right? A politician is the reason why I'm here in the first place. He indirectly caused me to awaken to my Persona."

Ken just arched an eyebrow. "It'd be a good way to give him a middle finger, wouldn't it?"

Ren just laughed. "Yeah, good one, Ken. That idea… it's crazy, if you ask me."

"It's just a thought." Ken shrugged. "You're already trying to create change. You're laying a good foundation already."

Just… *him*? A politician? Sure, it'd be great to be in power, to change things so that there wouldn't be a reason for the Phantom Thieves to be created. But nobody would give him the chance. No way in hell.

"Riiight, and Akechi is gonna join the Phantom Thieves." Ren snorted. "I'll be lucky if I make it to the end of the school year and complete my probation."

Ken suddenly leaned over and swatted him at the back of his head. "What did I say earlier?" he scolded, narrowing his eyes. "And you will. Especially since you're like *them*… you'll probably accomplish the impossible, if you set your mind to it."

Them?

"What are you talking about?"
Ken froze for a moment. "Nothing… Nothing!" he blurted out. "Don't mind me."

Hmm. Ken had told him before that he reminded Ken of… someone he knew. And now this person had done the impossible…? Just what was that supposed to mean?

**RANK UP! Adjustment Confidant has reached Rank 5.**

**Veteran Talk: If Ren fails in Shadow negotiation, Ken may step in and allow for another chance.**

Chapter End Notes

Obon has been previously mentioned, during a discussion between Shinji and Fuuka. Obon is a Buddhist holiday, meant to honor deceased ancestors. And given that all of the main cast come from a broken family in some kind of degree, I thought it should have a small focus in this story.

And yes, Shinji has an ultimate Persona in this story. Shinji mentions in PQ that he doesn't want Castor to change, so he doesn't forget Ken's mother's death. But since Shinji and Ken have long made amends and have moved past October fourth for the most part, I think that would merit Shinji gaining a new resolution.

Until next time! And happy holidays, everyone!
Futaba's Training

Chapter Summary

Futaba gets to know the Phantom Thieves, and with their help, slowly adjusts to socializing again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Monday, August 22nd, 2016

The shrill sound of her phone ringing dragged Mitsuru out of the haze of sleep. She rubbed her eyes for a moment, before reaching for the device.

"Hello?" Mitsuru coughed, her voice still hoarse from sleep. She cleared her throat, before repeating, this time clearer, "Hello?"

"Mitsuru-senpai!" Yamagishi's voice was loud and clear. "You… You have to look at Medjed's website. Right now."

The mention of Medjed was like dumping a bucket of ice cold water on top of her head. Mitsuru immediately sat up. Medjed's deadline had been yesterday, the second anniversary of Isshiki's death. They… They went through with it?! Dread made her stomach sink.

Mitsuru slid out of her bed. "Yamagishi, just how bad is the damage?" she demanded.

Medjed had threatened to crash the economy itself, in their letter to the Phantom Thieves. Had they truly gone through that threat?

"Mitsuru-senpai… it's… it's not that…"

"What are you referring to, Yamagishi?" Mitsuru frowned.

She had reached her study, where her laptop was resting on top of her desk. She booted it up, before opening up an internet browser. Her manicured nails tapped out Medjed's website url.

"Medjed… lost, Mitsuru-senpai," Yamagishi said slowly. "Someone from Medjed also got their information leaked…"

The website had loaded. And the webpage was now branded with the now well-known symbol of the Phantom Thieves.

*Medjed* got hacked?! This was just… *unbelievable.*

"And… that's not all," Yamagishi breathed. "Senpai, you have to look at the Phan-Site."

Mitsuru's eyes narrowed at the mention of the website. The site where some *fool* had listed her as a
target. If she ever discovered whoever submitted her as a request… they would be begging for an execution.

Mitsuru only to type a little before the browser's history filled it out for her. She had… checked the website more than she's like to admit.

Then Mitsuru's jaw dropped.

*Are the Phantom Thieves just?*

The poll question had been rather skewed towards *no*. Mitsuru had refrained from answering, however. But… the yes result had jumped to nearly *forty percent*.

It had only been hours… and yet the approval had jumped that much?!

"Yamagishi, have you contacted Amada?" Mitsuru demanded. "What does he have to say about this?"

Yamagishi audibly swallowed. "Well… I *did* try to call Ken-kun…" she said slowly. "But no answer. I think the Phantom Thieves are in a meeting or something."

"Does this mean… Isshiki's daughter had truly done this?" Mitsuru wondered. "She's only fifteen! How is this possible?!"

Yamagishi let out a strained laugh. "Your guess is as good as mine, Senpai."

Everyone *really* needed to learn how to have a better poker face. After Futaba had shown up, Sakura-san had shooed them towards the attic. Ken had been the last to slide out, so he saw the report change to an interview… with Shido.

His words… were concerning. It was like… he wanted to create a utopia.

"…Hm?" Sakura-san looked at him quizzically. "Something the matter?"

"…It's nothing," Ken said quietly, turning away from the television screen. "This Shido person is awfully charismatic, isn't he?"

"Yeah, you could say that again." Sakura-san sighed, before shaking his head. "But anyways, you're a bit young to be focusing on a politician like that. You can't even vote. Go on."

Hmm. Did he know more than he was letting on? Ken quickly pushed it out of his head, before climbing the short flight of stairs leading to the attic.

"What took you so long?" Ren asked, turning to look at him as he entered the attic.

"I got caught up by the news report," Ken said.

Anne wrinkled her nose. "I thought it was just some politician talking… So boring."

"Yeah, like celebrity gossip is much better," Ryuji scoffed, rolling his eyes. "I dunno why everyone's all over Risette dating someone."

…Oh, right. Yu-san and Rise-san were planning on going public soon about their relationship, weren't they?
Anne made a face at him. "Don't pretend you're not a Risette fan. You were so sore when you couldn't get a ticket to the LMB fest, back in middle school."

"But anyways..." Makoto quickly interjected before Ryuji could retaliate, "we were talking about how the cognitive forms are determined by the master of the Palace. Since before, they were always in the background."

Anne's expression darkened. "Not always," she spat out, her hands clenching into fists. "You should've seen Kamoshida's cognitive version of me..."

Ken's eyes wandered to Futaba. He had to wonder, how did Futaba have such a vivid shade of orange for her hair? Her mother had black hair... But then again, Miyuki and Kaito had both inherited Minato-san's blue hair. Not to mention how Minato-san and Minako-san were twin siblings, and had completely different hair and eye colors.

"Meanwhile Yusuke was merely just a painting to Madarame..." Morgana mused, tilting his head. "The range that the Palaces have... is really something."

"I really do wonder how far Futaba's mother had gone with her research," Yusuke added. "If those men in black were so desperate to steal it... And her research must have been fascinating."

"...Do you think she knows?" Ryuji asked. "It was called... cognitive psiience, yeah?"

...She was right there. Then again, she didn't seem too interested in talking to them. Was he right, then?

"Abuse of this... could lead to death, and may be related to the psychotic breakdowns," Makoto said thoughtfully, rubbing her chin. "We still haven't been able to unravel that mystery."

"It's like... they've lost all consciousness... awareness," Ken said slowly. "And given that it's connected to cognition... it's most likely connected to the Metaverse."

"But the question is... how?" Yusuke asked. "How is this all connected? Just who is causing the mental shutdowns?"

"Not to mention that we have to take in account that the research was most likely stolen, by whoever is doing this," Morgana interjected. "But hmm... I'm not sure how we'd be able to track them down."

"What about you, Futaba?" Ryuji looked at her. "Is there anything you know 'bout this?"

Futaba, who had sitting on top of Ren's bed, just stood up and walked right past everyone.

"Um... Futaba-chan?" Makoto said slowly. "Did you hear Ryuji?"

"Oh, she heard him," Ken said dryly. "She's just choosing not to answer."

She then came back with yet another bowl of ramen. Futaba's expression lit up as she dug into the food.

Makoto sighed. "Why don't we... give her some time to eat, then?"

They agreed, so Ren and Anne went down to bring up some cups of coffee and they drank that while waiting for Futaba to finish eating. Even then, she kept her distance.

"Though, I have to wonder..." Yusuke asked. "Futaba may be a genius, but just how could she
crush Medjed so easily? She's so young…"

He had to agree. Fuuka-san was able to piece together part of the original video that Yukari-san's father had made, but this… this was on an entirely different level.

"The one who taunted the Phantom Thieves was in Japan."

"She spoke!" Ren gasped. "It's a miracle!"

"Hey, don't mock me!" She scrunched up her button nose. "And besides, the Medjed members in Japan are nothing special."

"How do you know that…?" Anne asked.

"Simple." He could hear the smirk in Futaba's voice. "I'm the founder."

…What.

She was the original Medjed?! Then the one who had tried to hack the Shadow Operatives' database was Futaba. He was so… stupid. It made perfect sense. Fuuka-san had described it happening two years ago. That fit the timeline…

"It was only me at first… back when I was called the hacker of justice. And then some other guys… basically stole the name, taking it for themselves."

"And those are the ones who pulled off the cybercrimes, I'm guessing," Ryuji said.

"Yep. It was too much effort to expose everyone, so… I just let them be." Futaba shrugged.

"So… you're the true Medjed, and the ones who threatened us were just… copycats?" Makoto asked.

"Why didn't you just inform us of the truth…?" Yusuke asked.

"Because I'm not Medjed anymore." Futaba lifted her chin. "I'm Alibaba now. Or whatever name you want to call me as a Phantom Thief."

"Just inviting yourself in, I see," Ken said dryly.

"I did good, didn't I?" Futaba demanded. "I bet you'll be running around like headless chickens this whole time."

"Hey…!" Morgana bristled at that. "I may not be as good as you, but I have not been leading these guys into danger, okay?!"

"Okay, kitty."

Morgana looked even more wound up at that. Looks like he would have to do damage control…

"Morgana, it's all right," Ken said. "Futaba's just missing a little something."

"She is?" Ryuji scratched the back of his head.

"Yes, it's called tact," Ken deadpanned.

Makoto cleared her throat. "So… how did you find out about us?"
"Secret."

"Okay… Where did you learn how to hack?"

"Private."

"Okayyy, Makoto…" Anne put a hand on her wrist, before Makoto could try again. "I don't think she wants to talk about that."

Makoto made an exasperated sound. "But we have to help her somehow… She's still not fully open to us…"

…Well, they couldn't be seriously expecting Futaba to change so drastically, could they?

"So, let's get to know her," Ren said. "We have school on September first. That gives us… a week and a half?"

"Hmm…" Yusuke stroked his chin. "Perhaps we could start with getting her to open up to us," he suggested. "How is everyone's schedules tomorrow? I happen to be free."

"I am too," Ken answered. "Not the day after, though, Fuuka-san's visiting."

"I can come tomorrow, too," Makoto chimed in. "Anne, Ryuji?"

Futaba stiffened, and she stared at Makoto in horror. Ken sighed to himself. They would really have to ease her into this…

"Not me." Anne shook her head, smiling apologetically. "I have a shoot tomorrow."

"Promised to help my mom out tomorrow with cleaning the house," Ryuji said. "I can the day after, though."

"Okay, we'll split it up in two days, then," Ren decided. "Yusuke, Makoto, and Ken will spend the day with her tomorrow. Anne and Ryuji can on Wednesday. I'll be there both days. We'll slowly work her up."

"Oh, let's end it with the beach!" Ryuji suggested. "It'll be Futaba's final exam!"

"You… You want me to go to the beach?" Futaba adamantly shook her head. "I don't know…"

"Aw, come onnnnn…" Ryuji whined.

"How about we do your first outing with the Feathermen Rangers fan event on the twenty-eighth, then?" Ken suggested. "I saw that you had the limited edition of the Victory rangers action figures."

There was a beat of silence, and Ken realized that everyone was staring at him.

Ren's smirk on his face could only be described as shit-eating. "And just how do you know that?"

Crap.

"U-Uh… well…" Ken stammered out, feeling his face redden. "That's… That's… because…"

Okay, he knew that he had nothing to be embarrassed about. But he was eighteen. Feathermen was geared towards elementary students! Not to mention that everyone seemed to take a joy in teasing
him about it.

"You could always plead the fifth!" Anne suggested.

"Again, that applies to America, not Japan, Anne," Makoto sighed.

"You're acting like I'm being put on trial here," Ken muttered.

"Sooo... do you plead innocent or guilty?" Ryuji interjected with a grin.

Ken glared, before looking to the side. "...I'm not going to dignify that with an answer."

Tuesday, August 23rd, 2016

Ken sneezed as a cloud of dust rose in the air. Okay, maybe keeping the box that contained his Feathermen DVDs under his bed wasn't the best idea. He opened the box, selecting a couple each from the different seasons he had amassed. (Yukari-san liked to joke that she had it so easy when it came to birthday presents from him, ever since she had obtained her job.)

He slipped them in his school satchel, before yawning. It was earlier than he usually got up during the summer. He usually ended up sleeping until ten, but he got up early since they would be spending the entire day with Futaba. He had gotten up early enough to see Shinjiro-san getting ready.

…Speaking of that, Shinjiro-san should be leaving soon. He should say goodbye…

Ken walked out to the kitchen, just in time to see Shinjiro-san finish pushing something from a wok into a bento box. Three bento boxes were stacked beside it, and there was one last one on the table.

"What's this for?"

"The Phantom Thieves' diets are shit," Shinjiro-san said bluntly, turning to face him. "And since you're spending the whole day with 'em, might as well ensure that they're getting a good meal today."

"Is this necessary?" Ken groaned.

"Don't ask questions you know the answer to already." Shinjiro-san then reached for the coffee pot and poured it in a mug filled with ice. He then stirred in milk before he transferred it into a thermos. "Isshiki’s diet is shitty too, but considering how she is, thought I'd leave her diet alone."

For now was left unsaid.

"I guess you're just not happy unless you're nagging at someone for their eating habits," Ken said dryly.

Shinjiro-san rolled his eyes. "It's not my fault teenagers have shitty eating habits. Can't forget how about you used to buy bento boxes from convenience stores."

"I was twelve."

"They don't have an excuse then," Shinjiro-san deadpanned.

Ken huffed. "Fine, fine," he grumbled. "Are you heading out to work now?"
“Yeah.” Shinjiro-san nodded. “Good luck with Isshiki’s daughter.”

After Shinjiro-san left, Ken prepared his own breakfast. He was nearly finished with it when the group chat went off. Apparently Yusuke was there already, asking for Futaba to open up. So, they were meeting up at the Sakura house today…

He quickly finished eating and washed the dishes, before he grabbed his bag and left the apartment. He met Makoto at the train station, so they rode the train together.

Ren answered the door. "Morning, guys," he greeted. "Yusuke's already here, so let's get started."

He stepped aside, and after they removed their shoes, they entered the house. The house was surprisingly neat considering as far as he knew, Sakura-san was a bachelor. They climbed the stairs and entered Futaba's room. Futaba was sitting at her desk… wearing some kind of… mask? He couldn't even begin to describe it.

"…Futaba, you mind taking that off?" Ken sighed.

"What even is that…?" Makoto asked.

"Don't worry about that." Futaba's voice was muffled. "This way I can interact with you with no problem!"

She sounded so proud too…

"Such avant garde design…” Yusuke nodded in appreciation. "You have excellent taste."

…Of course Yusuke would think of the aesthetic.

They eventually convinced Futaba to take off it off, but Futaba still wouldn't look at them.

"L-Let's get started then, shall we?" Makoto said shakily. "Um… let's start with a simple conversation."

"Why is that?" Morgana asked.

"It's the start of true communication," Makoto answered. "We should take small steps first."

"You seem confident," Ren laughed, before he nodded. "But sounds good to me."

All the while, Yusuke wandered over to stand by Futaba. His back was turned to her, for some reason.

"Let's start with… food," Makoto suggested. "Or the weather."

…Somehow, he didn't think Futaba would care too much about the weather.

"Speaking of food, can we eat the food that Ken brought?" Ren asked. "Had to skip breakfast today."

…Of course he did. He knew that he was lucky that Shinjiro-san was so insistent on him eating properly, but still.

"You have got to stop doing that," Ken sighed. "You have to eat something, even if it's just cup ramen."
"Okay, let's start with food," Makoto said, as Ren opened up the bento box. "What do you like to eat, Futaba-chan?"

"Organic ones."

…Organic? That was a surprise, with how many ramen bowls he had collected...

"She means what dishes are your favorites," Ken said, feeling a pang of pity when Makoto's face fell at Futaba's expression growing bored.

"Let's try something else!" Makoto added hastily. "How about the weather? The heat wave doesn't look like it's looking up any time soon…"

"Makoto…" Ren said carefully. "…Futaba spends all day in her room. With air conditioning."

"Oh." Makoto deflated at that. "You're right…"

Hmm. Ken's eyes fell to her computer. "What kind of coding do you know how to do?"

"Hmm?" Futaba looked up at him, confused. "What do you mean?"

"Have you tried making any video games?" Ken asked. Her shirt did have a Tetris design… "My senpai made a couple while she was in university."

"Um… I've made a phone game actually-" Futaba then froze, staring at Yusuke.

…Wait a minute. Wasn't that where Futaba kept her Victory action figures?

"Yusuke… what exactly have you been doing?" Ren asked slowly.

"Come and take a look at the piece of art I've created!" Yusuke announced, taking a step aside. He was smiling proudly.

Ken knew he shouldn't be staring—it was rude after all—but what the hell was that?!

Somehow, Yusuke had managed to mix every head with a different colored torso, arms, and legs. It was an… atrocity.

"Yusuke…" Ken ground out, suddenly feeling the need for some coffee, "what the hell is that?"

Yusuke tilted his head. "What's the matter?"

"What's the matter—you completely ruined her figures!" Ken exclaimed. "And what are those poses?!"

"You're taking this rather seriously, Ken," Ren said with a smirk.

"What's the big deal, anyways?" Morgana interrupted, before Ken could think of a retort. "They're just toys."

Futaba pushed Yusuke aside, her mouth agape. "My children…" she whimpered out, her hands reaching out to the mangled action figures. "What did you do to my children?!"

Blunt as always, Yusuke just continued on blithely. "They were shoddily made."

…And the Investigation Team said that Naoto-san couldn't read the mood.
"They are not shoddily made!" Futaba stomped her foot, a fire flaring in her eyes now. "They're limited edition, to commemorate the end of Victory!" She then let out a little growl. "I won't forgive you for this, Inari!"

"Inari?" Yusuke echoed, his eyebrows furrowing together.

"Your thief clothes are like a fox." Futaba pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "According to Japanese folklore, foxes like inarizushi, so thus, you are Inari."

…That was a bit convoluted. Then again, they've established that Futaba's train of thought wasn't exactly… straight.

"Rgh… and they were in the perfect poses too!" Futaba moaned, before she craned her head up to glare at Yusuke. "It was so much work to get them just right!"

"You claim you work so hard, but the aesthetic was horrendous."

Futaba scoffed. "You wouldn't know aesthetic even if it slapped you hard across the face."

"F-Futaba-chan, that's not-" Makoto began.

"Excuse me?!" Yusuke sputtered out, glowering at Futaba. "How dare you say something like that to someone like me!"

"Can you please just calm down-" Makoto tried again, only for Futaba to cut her off with, "Yeah, because it's true!"

Ken pressed a hand to his forehead as an argument broke out. Honestly, it was somewhat of a feat to get such a reaction from Yusuke, but it was… irritating. He was really feeling like he was a babysitter sometimes…

Makoto quickly clapped her hands. "Come on, guys, break it up," she scolded. "Is there anything you'd like to do, Futaba?"

"Um, I did bring some Feathermen DVDs," Ken volunteered, pulling out the top DVD.

Futaba then gasped, her eyes growing wide for a moment before she snatched the DVD from his hands. "How did you get the Yukari Takeba to sign this?" she demanded. "She's my personal hero!"

"SHE'S YOUR SENPAI?!!" Futaba suddenly was up in all his space before he could even blink. Her purple eyes were bright with excitement. "I'll give you five thousand—no, ten thousand—yen for this!"

"It's not for sale," Ken said. "It's my personal DVD and it was a present."

That and he didn't want to give it up…

Futaba pouted. "Meanie. But come on, Victory's the best season! Let's go!"

"I think Neo was the best, actually."

"Uh-uh!" Futaba shook her head. "Victory opened up so many doors! Red Hawk is no longer shoehorned as the leader! And it had been the best action scenes!"
Her voice was so… animated now. It was giving him whiplash, if he was being honest.

"What do you mean shoehorned?"

"Come on, you can't tell me that Pink Argus wasn't awesome!" Futaba argued. "You should know this already, but Yukari Takeba does all of her stunts by herself! No stunt doubles! She's so cool!"

"If you come to the fan event, I can ask if you can meet her."

"Really?!" Futaba's face grew determined. "Okay, I've gotta grind then!"

"Grind for what?" Makoto asked.

"It's referring to video games," Ren answered. "But you want to watch Victory now, then?"

"Yeah!" Futaba cheered, before darting out of the room.

"Futaba-chan, wait!"

Makoto and Yusuke scrambled after her, and out of the room.

"So…" Ren drawled, his face breaking out into a wide grin, "you're a real Feathermen fan, huh?"

"D-Don't laugh," Ken muttered. "I just thought… Futaba could use a common ground…"

Ren snickered. "Aw, don't be like that way. Feathermen's a classic, after all."

"You're still laughing at me," Ken said flatly.

"I mean, it is kinda funny. You of all people, being a Feathermen fan?"

"I'm not the one who has glow in the dark stars plastered on my ceiling," Ken retorted.

"…Touché."

They had accomplished what they had meant to. But Makoto couldn't help but think back about how embarrassing it had all been.

What was she thinking, asking Futaba what she thought about the weather?! Yusuke and Ken had both managed to talk to Futaba, but she had utterly failed. She still didn't know how to talk to people…

Not if it wasn't related to business…

She suddenly felt a light touch on her elbow.

"…Makoto, you've been awfully quiet."

Since they lived in the same district, Ken was walking her home.

"It's… It's nothing…" Makoto mumbled. "It's… silly…"

Ken just tilted his head, studying her. "You don't have to dismiss it," he said.

You can talk to me hung in the air.
Makoto bit her lip, before looking up. "…Can we talk in private?" she asked quietly.

Ken nodded. "Okay. There's the diner nearby, I think…"

They grabbed a table and ordered a cup of coffee each. Makoto stared down at the mug, trying to pull her thoughts together.

"It's ridiculous," she muttered. "But I felt useless today. I couldn't think of anything to talk about with Futaba." She sighed. "I may be the student council president, but I don't know how to talk to people. Not when it counts."

Eiko was right. She was like a robot…

Ken set down his mug. "Makoto, Futaba doesn't exactly know how to talk to people. A conversation is a two-way street. And besides, Futaba and Yusuke got into an argument for the most part. You shouldn't be so hard on yourself."

"I know, I know, it's stupid."

"No, because it's not true," Ken corrected. "You can talk to me fine, can't you?"

Makoto blinked at him. "Well, that's because…"

"We're friends." He sighed. "Look, it was just luck that Futaba happened to be really into something I like. I know what it's like, to not be able to strike up a conversation…" He blew his bangs out of his face. "People used to say I acted cold, like I held myself at a distance. And in a way, it was true. I tried acting older than I was, because I was desperate for people to treat me not like a kid… and that made it harder for me when I realized that I had only one childhood and I shouldn't rush things. I felt like I couldn't connect to people my age. But even after I realized this… it was hard." Ken shrugged.

"But it's better now, isn't it?"

"I guess." Ken looked down at his mug. "…It's been a while since I've really spent time with people my age," he admitted. "I quit soccer club at the beginning of this year, and I guess… I just drifted away from my friends in soccer. I felt odd about trying to strike a conversation with them."

"Ken…"

She had never really thought what Ken was like, back on Port Island. Several of her classmates liked him still, even though Ken never gave them a second glance. But she had always assumed that he had been popular.

"It's okay." Ken looked up, meeting her gaze. "It's just… it's not something you experience, Makoto. It's more common than you think. And…" He then hesitated for a moment. "…You're fine the way you are. I like you just fine."

Makoto smiled softly. "…Thank you, Ken."

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**Wednesday, August 24th, 2016**

Since the end of summer vacation was creeping closer and closer, Ken had closeted himself in his room and worked on his schoolwork. Shinjiro-san had understood and told him that he could pick
up Fuuka-san on his own.

He was so absorbed in his work that he didn't even notice when they came back. Or that his door was slowly being nudged open.

He had definitely noticed Koromaru knocking him down from his chair, though.

Koromaru let him sit up (though he spent a couple of minutes happily licking Ken's face), before he crawled into Ken's lap. Ken stroked the top of his head before giving him a proper hug. Koromaru just barked again, before licking his cheek.

A clicking sound caught his attention, and he whipped his head to see that Fuuka-san was standing at the doorway, her phone in her hand.

"Aw, don't look at me like that, Ken-kun," Fuuka-san said, pressing her free hand against her cheek. "That was just adorable! I couldn't not take a picture of it."

Ken grumbled to himself. Girls and their weird thing for cuteness.

"I'm surprised you brought Koromaru with you," Ken said. "Not that I'm not glad but…"

Koromaru then barked, before tugging at Ken's shirt.

"She didn't just bring Koro," Shinjiro-san said dryly. "She brought the entire family. She thought that you should meet the puppies."

…Sometimes he forgot that Koromaru even had puppies. Koromaru barked again, this time more insistent, so he got up and followed Koromaru out of his room.

A black furred shiba inu lounged on the couch. Two black and tan puppies were passed out on the couch, snuggled close to her. She looked at Ken curiously, but let Ken stroke the top of her head. The remaining four puppies, three of them having black and tan fur, one with cream fur, frolicked in the living room, despite the long train ride.

"What's her name, Fuuka-san?" Ken asked, moving his hand so she could sniff it. She seemed to deem him satisfactory, since she licked his hand.

"Hoshi," Fuuka-san answered. "Since her tail has a white tip."

Ken studied her closely. She was definitely younger than Koromaru, but she wasn't super young. Maybe around Koromaru's age around the time Sho Minazuki had shown up? She just blinked placidly at him.

Sometimes he wondered how they had ended up with shiba inus that had went against the stereotype. Sure, Koromaru was fairly independent and extraordinarily intelligent, but he had lost track of the number of times, Koromaru had come to one of them so he could curl up in one of their laps. And Koromaru was the opposite of a brat.

Someone suddenly knocked on the door, making all three of them look up. Fuuka-san was closest to the door, so she went to answer it.

"Oh, hey there, Fuuka-san!" Ryuji greeted cheerfully. "How are ya?"

Fuuka-san took a step back. "O-Oh… hello, Ryuji-kun," she greeted. "We were just… not expecting visitors."
"Yeah, we were hanging out with Ren, and we didn't have much to do," Anne explained. "Ken mentioned you were visiting, so we thought we'd say hello! We never did thank you properly for that dinner you gave us the day we met."

"That was mostly Shinji, not me," Fuuka-san said. "But you did come all this way, so why don't you come in?"

"Are you… fostering?" Ren asked slowly, stepping inside and looking curiously at the puppies running around. "You didn't mention anything about that, Ken."

"It's because we're not," Shinjiro-san deadpanned. "Someone just went and decided to have a litter of puppies." Koromaru just cocked his head, and gave Shinjiro-san the typical puppy dog eyes. He scoffed. "Don't look at me like that, Koro, you know what you did."

"Aww, he's adorable!" Anne cooed, her eyes growing bright. "Is he really albino?"

"You can pet him," Ken told her. "Koromaru's pretty friendly."

Anne's eyes lit up and she all but ran to Koromaru, kneeling down and rubbing the top of his head. Koromaru shut his eyes, leaning into Anne's hand.

"You've got some competition, RenRen," Ryuji teased, nudging Ren in the side. Ren just scoffed, rolling his eyes at Ryuji. "But damn, I never knew you owned a dog!"

"It never came up," Ken pointed out.

"That's fair," Ren said with a laugh, only to look down at his bag.

Morgana was being awfully quiet, now that he thought about it…

"Not feeling like coming out, Morgana?" Ren asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm good," Morgana grumbled. "It's already chaotic enough with all of these dogs running around."

"Taking a dislike to dogs, huh?" Ryuji asked, smirking now. "Wonder why…"

"I am not a cat!" Morgana hissed out.

Fuuka-san and Shinjiro-san just stared blankly. He honestly forgot that you had to visit the Metaverse and have your cognition changed to understand Morgana.

Ryuji opened his mouth to retort, but then the smallest of the puppies suddenly wandered over and sat at his feet. Ryuji blinked down at him. "Oh, hey, little guy. Want some attention?" He bent down, scooping the puppy up. "Damn, you're a regular fuzzball, aren't ya?" he chuckled.

"So, how has the search for homes been going?" Anne asked.

"Oh, it's going well," Fuuka-san answered. "Three of the puppies have found homes already."

He'd bet good money that Kanji-san and Naoto-san would be getting one of them…

"Y'know, I've always kinda wanted a dog," Ryuji admitted. "My old man hated 'em, though, so my mom always had to say no."

"I mean, I don't really blame you," Anne laughed, before she cooed over the cream furred puppy.
She gently stroked the puppy's fur. "They're all so adorable!"

"They're not that cute," Morgana grumbled.

"Jealous, Morgana?" Ren teased. "Come on, we all love you."

"I'm not jealous…!"

"Seriously, why do you bring that cat of yours everywhere," Shinjiro-san complained. "The dogs aside, doesn't the cat ever get bored?"

"Morgana likes coming with me." Ren shrugged. "He's pretty insistent, actually."

"Are you serious about that, though, Ryuji?" Ken asked. "I know that some of the puppies have been claimed already, but…"

Ryuji blinked. "Uh… yeah. If my mom's up for it. She wouldn't be happy if I just brought home a puppy."

"Hmm…" Fuuka-san tapped her lips with her index finger. "They were born at the beginning of July, so unfortunately, they can't leave their mother yet. There are psychological changes to the puppies if they're taken away too early. However," she added, "I was thinking of visiting during October."

"You are?" Ken asked, frowning.

"Mhmhm." Fuuka-san nodded. "For the fourth. I always felt bad that I could never come to visit, while I was studying at Tokyo U."

"Oh, is that your anniversary?" Anne asked, raising an eyebrow.

"It's a… memorable date, that's for sure," Fuuka-san said slowly, ever so slightly wincing. Anne didn't seem to pick up on it, though. "But if you're interested in taking in the puppy and your mother is open to the idea, I could always bring him down with me."

"Shouldn't we give you somethin'?" Ryuji frowned, looking at Koromaru and then Hoshi. "They're both shiba inus, aren't they? Don't people pay a shit ton of money for purebred dogs?"

"It's more important that they get good homes, not owners only interested in showing off a dog like it's a trophy," Shinjiro-san said darkly. "People have tried to offer us money for Koro, but that sure as hell ain't happening."

"That's really generous of you." Anne sighed longingly. "I wish that I could do the same, but my parents have a strict no pets policy." She made a face. "They hate the idea of dog or cat hair on the furniture."

"You could always play with this little guy," Ren laughed. "Any idea for names, Ryuji?"

"Uh…" Ryuji scratched his nose, his forehead wrinkling as he thought. "How 'bout… Shoyu?"

"Shoyu?" Shinjiro-san said incredulously. "You wanna name him after a ramen?"

"That is a very Ryuji thing to do." Ken shook his head.

"Aw, shuddup, Ken!" Ryuji huffed. "Names are hard, okay?!"
"I'm just saying, it's a very you thing to look to food for inspiration."

"Kinda have to agree with Ken, Ryuji." Ren's eyes were twinkling with barely contained laughter.

"Are you for real, man?!"

Thursday, August 25th, 2016

Futaba let out a loud squeak as she dropped a dish, catching Ren's attention.

"Futaba, are you okay?"

Futaba nodded slowly, biting her lip. "...It just startled me."

Sojiro just laughed. "Be more careful next time, yeah?"

Sometimes it was so... weird, how gentle Sojiro was with Futaba. It was the complete flip of how he had treated Ren when he had first moved out here.

"...What are you staring at?"

Ren tried for an innocent look. "Nothing. But Sojiro's right, Futaba, you need to be more careful. You don't have to rush, especially since there's not exactly a huge pile of dirty dishes."

"Haha, you're hilarious, Ren," Sojiro said dryly, before smacking him with the dish rag he carried. "If you have time to joke around, you can brew coffee then."

Ren just grinned cheekily, before saluting him. "Sir, yes, sir!"

Sojiro looked ready to retort, but then the bell chimed. "Hey, Boss! The usual, extra strong!"

"Coming right up," Sojiro said, slipping into courteous mode. "Ren, watch Futaba, won't you?"

"I don't need to be watched," Futaba said sulkily, all while pouting.

Ren just grinned, patting her head. "Just keep it up, okay? I'll clean this up."

Futaba nodded, apparently determined to finish the dishes. Ren had finished sweeping up, when the customer spoke up.

"Sooo, another part-timer?" He laughed, shaking his head. "Man, smooth as always, huh? What number is she again?"

...First of all, gross. Second of all, Futaba was fifteen. Third of all, Sojiro was really that much of a Casanova?

"It's nothing like that," Sojiro sighed.

The customer started joking about how Sojiro apparently went for older women usually, and then he started rambling about Guatemala coffee. He didn't even know why the guy was going for an analogy using coffee.

"Ren, come on, don't stare," Sojiro scolded. "Bring him his coffee-"

He was cut off by a sudden scream.
"Yo, here's your coffee."

Ren turned to see that Futaba had taken the coffee… while wearing that ridiculous mask of hers. Where did that even come from…? He was pretty sure that Futaba hadn't brought that with her this morning… Did she have a back-up, then…?

"Where in the world did she…" Sojiro sighed, this time more resigned. "Hey, Futaba, how many times have I told you not to show up in front of people wearing that damn thing?"

The door suddenly opened, and in stepped Fuuka-san and Shinjiro-san. Shinjiro-san took one look at Futaba, before saying, "What the fuck is she wearing?"

"Um… I guess we came at a bad time…" Fuuka-san said slowly, all while wincing.

"Oh hey, Shinjiro-san, Fuuka-san," Ren greeted, waving at them. "Didn't figure you'd find us. We're kinda in a bad location."

"Why does it feel like you know half of the city by now?" Sojiro shook his head, before narrowing his eyes at Ren. "And you're not here to give wisecracks. You're here to work."

"Hey, I have a good reason," Ren defended. "Shinjiro-san is Ken's guardian, and he's dating Fuuka-san. She's visiting from Port Island."

For some reason, Sojiro seemed to stiffen at Port Island, before he looked at them. "Well, it's nice to meet you." He then tilted his head, looking at Shinjiro-san specifically. "…Though, aren't you on the young side to be a guardian?"

"And what's your point?" Shinjiro-san deadpanned, though his expression seemed to scream not this shit again.

He must get that a lot. Though Ren had to admit it was kinda weird. Who takes a look at a kid, and decides that they should adopt the kid because their relatives don't give a shit about them?

…Wait a minute.

"Nothing." Sojiro held up his hands. "But anyways, what can I get you?"

"One curry and two coffees?" Fuuka-san requested politely. "Ken-kun has told me that your curry is simply delicious."

"I'll determine that," Shinjiro-san muttered. "And Sakura, I've got a bone to pick with you-

"Shinji…"

"But Fuuka-" Shinjiro-san cut himself off, as Fuuka-san's expression became disappointed. "Ugh! Fine!" he huffed.

Ren fought back a snicker. Ryuji was right… he was whipped.

"Anywayyy…" Sojiro drew out, looking confused at their apparently unspoken conversation. He waved the couple to a booth. "I'll prepare your curry now. Ren will take care of your coffee."

"Any cream or sugar?" Ren asked.

"Black," Shinjiro-san said shortly.
Fuuka-san let out a thoughtful hum, before answering. "Two creams and three sugars, please."

"Ooh, can I try making it?" Futaba asked eagerly, as they seated themselves, sitting on one side.

"We'll… practice first, okay?" Ren said quickly. "My first try wasn't… great."

Sojiro had to walk him through the entire process, all while grumbling about people's reliance on instant coffee.

"Meanie," Futaba grumbled, a pout in her voice.

"You can bring it over to them," Ren reassured. "Though you should be more polite with the customer this time."

"Okay, okay…"

Ren finished brewing the coffees and mixed in the requested amount of cream and sugar for Fuuka-san. He then handed them off to Futaba.

"Thank you, Futaba-chan." Fuuka-san smiled at her, even though Futaba set down the cup roughly, spilling a little bit of coffee.

"Huh?" Futaba tilted her head. "You know my name?"

"Ken-kun's mentioned you," she explained. "He was worried about you for a while…"

Futaba was quiet for a moment. "I see…" she said slowly. "He seems nice. He knows his stuff about Feathermen Rangers."

"…Yeah, he's a good kid." Shinjiro-san then stiffened when he realized that Ren was staring at him, before he narrowed his eyes. "…Don't you dare tell him that I said that."

Someone was defensive. Ren had to bite his lip so he wouldn't start grinning like crazy.

"Aw, it's cute, Shinji." Fuuka-san leaned up to give him a quick peck on the cheek. "You don't have to get all embarrassed."

"I'm not embarrassed," he huffed.

"Jeez, you're crowding," Sojiro scolded, coming up with a plate heaped with curry. "At least go behind the counter."

Fuuka-san picked up the fork and dug in. Her face lit up as she took a bite. "Mm, it's delicious!" She turned to Shinjiro-san. "Shinji, you have to try. It really is delicious!"

Shinjiro-san looked unconvinced, even as he took the fork from her. Maybe he should be working as a food critic, instead of working at Crossroads.

He took a bite, and his face grew thoughtful. "It's… decent," he said grudgingly. He took another bite. "Can taste cinnamon… saffron? There are a bunch of spices I'd never think to use in curry, too…"

"There's a reason why it's the signature dish here," Sojiro said smugly.

Shinjiro-san's stare was flat. "And the only dish."
"It's a coffee shop," Sojiro retorted. "We don't need a huge variety of dishes."

"Shouldn't there be coffee cake or tiramisu?"

"Shinji, you hate sweets," Fuuka-san pointed out.

"No surprise there, you're like a bitter old man," Sojiro scoffed.

"So says the actual old man," Shinjiro-san shot back, and Ren had to bite down on his lip hard so he wouldn't burst out laughing.

"Shinji!"

"Kids these days…" Sojiro grumbled.

"That's not helping your case, you know." Ren grinned at him.

"I didn't ask for your opinion."

Shinjiro-san and Fuuka-san continued their meal, all while taking time to talk to both Ren and Futaba. Ren wasn't sure how it happened, but Fuuka-san even managed to convince Futaba to take off the mask. Futaba seemed to really take a liking to her, for some reason…

"Phew…" Sojiro sighed, shaking his head. "This was an… interesting day."

"I did good, though, didn't I?" Futaba said cheerfully.

"A few… hiccups, but overall, yeah."

Futaba beamed at him, before turning to Ren. "All right!" She pumped her fist. "I leveled up! This is one step closer to finishing the quest!"

Ren just grinned at her. "Great job, Futaba."

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Saturday, August 27th, 2016

Message From: Futaba Sakura

[Futaba Sakura]: We need to talk

[Futaba Sakura]: I need to knowww

[Futaba Sakura]: Just are who the Shadow Operatives?

[Ken Amada]: I'll be at your house at 9:30 tomorrow

[Ken Amada]: We should talk then.

Ken had to take in several deep breaths, before knocking on the door. He could do this. He could do this.

But… would telling her really be such a bad thing? It'd be helpful if he had someone that knew about Shido. Maybe then he could convince everyone that it'd be better if they targeted Shido. But on the other hand, Mitsuru-san would not be happy if he just went and blabbed details to someone
he didn't really know. She probably would get execution mad, with the Shadow Operatives being a secret organization. But on the other hand, the Investigation Team found out about them…

…Maybe he should try to convince Mitsuru-san it'd be a good idea to tell them. They'd understand, wouldn't they? Shido was not who he seemed… He didn't know if he could convince that Shido would be a good target, just by claiming that there was more than met the eye.

The door suddenly swung open, making him jump. Futaba stared at him, her hair a tangled mess, and dark circles under her eyes. "You," she ground out, "are. Evilllll."

"I'm evil for making you get up at 9:30?" Ken frowned.

"Why couldn't it be later?" she whined with a pout.

"Isn't Ren coming over, though?" Ken asked. "And you wanted to talk to me, didn't you?"

"Ugh. Fine." Futaba pouted again before turning on her heel and trudging inside.

Ken removed his shoes and followed her inside, shutting the door behind him. The air conditioning was a relief, if he was being honest. The heat really wasn't letting up. Port Island wasn't cool, but it had the sea breeze at least.

Futaba plopped onto the couch, patting the spot next to her.

"So… do you know what happened to my mom's research?" she blurted. "What it was?! Come on, you've gotta know something!"

"Futaba," Ken said gently, "I never met your mother. I never heard of cognitive psience until you mentioned it."

Futaba's eyes went wide. "Wha…? How can that be? My mom talked to the Shadow Operatives! Constantly!"

Ken fought the urge to sigh. Deeply. Why the hell did Isshiki-san talk to this at a thirteen year old (at the oldest)? Furthermore, why did she bring Futaba with her when she talked with Mitsuru-san…?

"Futaba, who did you meet? Out of the Shadow Operatives?"

"Um…” Futaba scrunched up her nose. "Mitsuru Kirijo. And a lady with auburn hair and red eyes. Minako?"

"Minako," Ken corrected. "But Futaba, look…” He pressed a hand to his forehead. "The Shadow Operatives are… complicated. When I had first awakened to my Persona, I had joined a Shadow fighting team called SEES. That team would move on to become the Shadow Operatives. The Shadow Operatives are meant to fight Shadows at a larger scale."

Futaba tilted her head. "The things you fought in my Palace, right?"

"Mmhm." Ken nodded. "When I first gained my Persona, Shadows lurked on Port Island. The team… SEES… had been dedicated to fight them, to protect people from falling victim to the Shadows."

"So you were kinda like superheroes?" Futaba's eyes went wide. "You saved people from being killed, right?"
"Well… not exactly." Ken pursed his lips together, trying to gather together his thoughts. "You know about the mental shutdowns, right? How people have been causing accidents due to it… it's because their Shadow has been killed."

"Shadow?" Futaba repeated.

"Shadows are… the wild, untamed part of humans," Ken said. "But it's still a part of your psyche. If you destroy your Shadow… you become… soulless. Lifeless."

Futaba's eyes widened. "But my mom's research… I remember her talking about it. If you remove the core of someone's twisted cognition, the twisted cognition will disappear. How… How is that different?"

"Killing a Shadow and defeating it is different, from what I understand," Ken said. "Though, honestly I've only witnessed one change of heart, and that was Kaneshiro. He was defeated and they took his Treasure, what your mother called the 'core'. I think the Shadow is forced to return to Kaneshiro, while his Treasure was taken from him."

"Huh." Futaba tilted her head. "I guess that makes sense. This stuff is prettyyy complicated."

"It is," Ken agreed. "I've been a Persona-user for a long time, and I don't think I'll ever understand the full extent." He bit his lip. "…To be honest, I'm not even sure how the Shadow nest had been eradicated from Port Island."

Futaba scrunched her nose. "…Just how long have you been a Persona-user, anyways?"

"Seven years, but I haven't fought Shadows in years until I came to Tokyo," Ken said.

"Seven years?!!" Futaba's eyes went as wide as saucers. "That's crazy! You were like eleven, weren't you?"

"I was," Ken confirmed. "It… It wasn't easy convincing the others to let me fight, but…"

Though that had been all Ikutsuki. He still could remember everyone's reactions quite vividly. None of them had been thrilled with the idea, due to his age.

"The others…" Futaba repeated, chewing her bottom lip. "Like Mitsuru Kirijo, that Minako lady, and I'm guessing the other people on the list."

"What list?" Ken frowned.

"Oops." Futaba's hand moved to her mouth, before she lowered it. She sheepishly smiled. "Um… I may have hacked into the database?"

Oh. Right. At least he knew how the hell Futaba had found out about him. Seeing that he had been a Shadow Operative for barely a year before he left the organization.

Ken sighed. "Okay, we need to talk about your little habit."

"What do you mean?" She frowned.

"You shouldn't have a bug at LeBlanc." Ken frowned sternly at her. "We talked about it being due to you were keeping an eye on Sakura-san, but either way, it's an invasion of privacy."

"I wouldn't have contacted you otherwise!" Futaba protested. "I wouldn't have found about the Phantom Thieves!"
Ken just raised an eyebrow.

"Ugh. Fiiiine." She huffed. "I'll deactivate the bug…"

And considering how Ren and Anne may… continue forward with their relationship, it'd be better for Futaba in the long run. So she wouldn't get traumatized by overhearing something she shouldn't.

…Then again, didn't Futaba spend a lot of time on the internet…? Either way, it'd be better for Futaba's sanity, even if she wasn't so innocent.

"Good." Ken smiled at her, before he stood up. "I probably should get going, though… Don't want Ren or Sakura-san to ask any weird questions about why I'm here."

Futaba just nodded so he turned towards the door.

"…Have you told anyone about what happened on Port Island?"

Ken slowly turned to her. Futaba was smiling hesitantly.

"You… You should tell us sometime. I-I'd like to know. And I think the others would too." Futaba adjusted her glasses, before her smile turned nervous. "It doesn't have to be today but…"

This… This was wrong. Not telling them the truth. They deserved the full truth. He did trust them… But he was holding back this.

Maybe he could convince Mitsuru-san. Mitsuru-san would understand, wouldn't she? She had been fairly understanding and patient with him. The Shadow Operatives was a secret organization but…

It'd be better in the long run if they worked together… He just had to convince Mitsuru-san that they could be trusted. They weren't going to abuse the Metaverse. He was positive about that… That was why she was so adamant on the secrecy, why his mission was originally intended to be reconnaissance. He could convince Mitsuru-san… right?

"Not today," Ken said quietly. "But… soon."

He just hoped he hadn't lied to Futaba…

Chapter End Notes

P3D shows that Ken buys bento lunches from convenience stores, with Minato wondering if that's healthy for him. And given how Shinji is about eating healthily… suffice to say, he wasn't too happy when he found out.

But next chapter will wrap up summer vacation! The next chapter is going to be fun, since it'll involve the Feathermen fan event and the beach episode.

I also wanted to thank you guys for hitting over 200 kudos!
The First Outing

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves take Futaba out in public for the first time, to meet Yukari Takeba. A certain pair of twins get into mischief, and they end up running into Goro Akechi.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sunday, August 28th, 2016

“Ren. Reeeeeeen.”

He was being poked in the forehead. Repeatedly. He tried to bat away the poker. But they just changed targets, poking his shoulder now. And they were poking harder now. Ren groaned. They weren’t going to relent, were they?

He opened his eyes, revealing that the poker was Futaba.

“Get up, Ren!” she demanded, planting her hands on her hips. “We’re going to meet Yukari Takeba today!”

“This is too early for this…” Morgana groaned, before crawling off of Ren’s chest. “What time is it?”

“It’s 9:30! Not super early! Come onnnn, can we please go?” she wheedled, all but pouting at Ren. “The line’s going to get crazy if we wait too long!”

“Someone’s excited.” Ren smothered a grin, watching Futaba’s expression grow impatient.

“Ren!”

“Ren, stop teasing her and get up already,” Ken’s voice floated up from the coffee shop. “Before Futaba gets the idea of finding a bucket and dump water on you.”

Futaba brightened at that. “Oooh, that’s a great idea!”

“Okay, okay!” Ren groaned, sitting up. “I’m up!”

“I’m telling ya,” Ryuji said, “we should’ve just sent Anne up.”

“We want him to get up, not stay in bed, Ryuji!” Futaba called down.

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean??” Anne demanded.

…Well. Futaba did have a point.
“Hey, this is an establishment!” Sojiro scolded. “Stop yelling up to Ren, already!”

Ren half-heard his friends’ chorused apologies to Sojiro, before he grabbed his clothes. He then shooed Futaba downstairs before getting ready for the day.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” Anne greeted him, smiling playfully at him.

“Morning.” If they weren’t in LeBlanc, he would’ve given her a good morning kiss. “So, what’s the plan, exactly?” he asked, after everyone else greeted him.

“The signing is located on the outskirts of Akihabara,” Ken explained. Ren noticed that he had brought yet another pile of bento boxes today. (Shinjiro-san was really insistent on eating healthy, wasn’t he?) “You’ll know when you’ll see it. It’s actually one of their smaller events, but I assume that they’ll be in costume, at least…”

Kinda surprising, since it was Tokyo…

“In this kind of heat?” Yusuke grimaced, before he shook his head. “I can’t say that I envy them. Especially the black ranger.”

“We should be okay,” Ryuji said, holding up a bag. “Grabbed some drinks I had in the house, since this will prolly be an all day thing. You can have the drink I grabbed from the fridge, Yusuke. I know you can’t stand the heat too much.”

“My thanks, Ryuji.”

“Yeah, good thinking, Ryuji.” Ren grinned at his best friend. “Didn’t even think about that.”

“Well, you were sleeping like a baby just ten, twenty minutes ago,” Anne teased, before she poked his cheek. “I don’t even know how you slept through Futaba texting the group chat.”

“I got the real deal instead,” Ren said dryly. “She’s a very determined poker.”

Futaba stuck her tongue at him, before taking a sip of her orange juice. “Can we go now?”

Ken pushed one of the bento boxes at Ren, a pair of chopsticks on top. “Eat a little before we go. I don’t want you passing out from lack of food.”

Makoto frowned. “You being unable to get decent food is really a problem…”

“Maybe I should just live with Ken and Shinjiro-san, then,” Ren joked, before he opened the box. “That would solve things, wouldn’t it?”

He selected an onigiri, and took a bite. He didn’t know how Shinjiro-san did it… but he took completely normal food and made you feel that you were eating something completely new. The flavors… the freshness… it really was something. Shinjiro-san should really be running a restaurant. He’d definitely be a customer.

“You shouldn’t joke about this, Ren,” Makoto scolded, still frowning. “This is serious…”

“You’re acting like Sojiro’s starving me or something,” Ren said, shaking his head. “I’m fine, really.”

“It’s not just you with Shinjiro-san at least,” Ken said dryly.

“Ehehe…” Anne scratched her cheek. “It’s not my fault that sweets taste so good, okay?”
“But I’ll eat some more later, okay?” Ren said, after finishing a second onigiri. “I think Futaba may run out of the door if we make her wait anymore.”

“We can go now?!” Futaba said eagerly.

Sojiro eyed his daughter warily. “Are you sure about this, Futaba?”

“Absolutely!” Futaba nodded firmly, determination burning in her eyes. “Don’t worry about me, Sojiro! I’ve trained for nearly a week for this!”

“Jeez, do you have to be so dramatic…” Morgana grumbled.

“Shut it, kitty.”

“Futaba, be nice!” Anne chided.

“He should be nice too, then!”

They left LeBlanc soon afterwards, Futaba happily chattering about Feathermen.

“This season was pretty cool! I wish Pink Argus could be the leader again… But they had Yukari Takeba return as a mentor! She totally pulled off the older and wiser vibe! And man, some of the stunts she pulls! It’s like she’s done it in real life!”

“You mentioned that she did her own stunts before…” Makoto said thoughtfully. “She must be quite the athlete, then.”

“Yukari-san has been practicing archery since high school,” Ken answered. “She kept up with that until now.”

“Oh yeah!” Futaba nodded. “She’s got some wicked skill with the bow! You know, they did a showcase of her doing archery a few years back!”

“You really do look up to her, huh?” Ryuji asked.

“Mnhm!” Futaba suddenly cocked her head. “…You know. She’s kinda like the Phantom Thieves. Reinforcing justice and all that.”

“I suppose, in a way,” Ken said. “Though the Phantom Thieves operate in the dark while the Feathermen Rangers are fairly… open about their actions.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Futaba chewed her lip, before she glanced at Ren. “Hey, do you ever change costumes?”

“Of course not,” Morgana huffed. “The costumes represent our ideas of rebellion. We’re not going to dress up as your silly rangers!”

“Take that back, kitty!” Futaba glared at him. Maybe if they weren’t so squished, she would’ve grabbed him and tortured him via cuddling. Or pulling at his face.

“Make me!” Morgana retorted.

“Behave, children,” Ken sighed, just as Makoto said, “Honestly… can’t you two get along?”

Ren’s eyes slid to Anne. “So, Anne. You up for dressing as Pink Argus?”
“Ren!” Anne smacked his shoulder, before drawing closer to him. “Isn’t one skintight suit enough for you?” she whispered to him.

Ren just grinned at her. “Nope. Not even close.”

“Stop flirting,” Ryuji grumbled. “God, I was hoping you would stop flirting in front of us once you got together for real.”

“That’s a naïve thought,” Ken sighed. “Trust me… I know.”

“Shinjiro-san and Fuuka-san?” Makoto asked.

“They, along with my other senpai who’ve been together since high school…” Ken huffed.

Anne blinked. “Wait… seriously? Isn’t it super rare for couples in high school to make it… that far?”

Ken just shrugged. “They’re used to beating the odds.”

“Huh?”

Beating… the odds? That was… weird, to put lightly. Then again, Ren did get a feeling that Ken had seen more than a kid their age should, especially with how he had pushed Ren to go for it with Anne…

…Was this connected to how he had awakened to his Persona years ago?

The train then lurched to a stop, before the conductor announced that it was the Akihabara stop.

“That’s us,” Yusuke stated. “Shall we depart?”

After they left the station, they followed the growing crowd of elementary and middle school students.

“This is… a rather long line.” Yusuke’s eyes were wide with shock. “Is Feathermen truly this popular?”

“Hey, Feathermen’s a classic,” Ryuji said. “It was my favorite when we were in elementary school.”

“You did the poses, didn’t you?” Ren snickered.

“Did you?” Ryuji retorted.

Ren just held up his hands. “Guilty as charged.”

Anne wrinkled her nose. “Can’t say I know much about Feathermen.”

“Ah, that’s right. You grew up in America, did you not?” Yusuke asked. “It’d make sense that you wouldn’t know much of Feathermen. I myself didn’t get to watch the show until Futaba insisted on it, since Sensei… didn’t quite believe in television.”

“No… television…?” Futaba repeated. “You’ve been deprived, Inari!”

“I… I didn’t watch much of Feathermen,” Makoto admitted. “I watched it mostly because Sis wanted to…”
“Your sister watched Feathermen?” Ken said slowly. “I… I find that hard to believe.”

Makoto just raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think you can comment on that, Ken.”

“…Touché.”

“Oh, there she is!” Futaba said gleefully, before she tightly clutched her box set (which she wanted Yukari-san to autograph) to her chest.

Ren turned in the same direction as Futaba, and saw a pretty woman in her mid-twenties with light brown hair pose with a junior high student and elementary student. Their resemblance made Ren assume that they were siblings. She spoke to them after the photo, and the younger of the two shyly held up a DVD. She took the DVD with a smile, before pulling out a pen.

“She’s so pretty…” Morgana purred, almost tipping himself out of Ren’s bag as he peered out. “Almost as lovely as Lady Anne!”

“Indeed…” Yusuke breathed. “She is a model, is she not? Perhaps I could-”

“You ask her to model for your art, and you may get smacked across the face,” Ken deadpanned. “And I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t gawk at her like that.”

This must be pretty awkward for Ken… He treated Shinjiro-san and Fuuka-san like they were his older siblings, so it must be the same for Yukari-san.

Yusuke blanched at that. “I-I see…”

“That’s just uncouth,” Morgana huffed. “A simple no would work.”

“So, how did Anne react when Yusuke asked her to be his model?” Ken raised an eyebrow.

“Well… she very firmly told him no,” Morgana said weakly.

That was putting it lightly-

“Dude, she totally flipped out,” Ryuji said to Ken. “Her face was redder than her suit.”

“Shut up, Ryuji!” Anne snapped, her face flushing.

“Dude, it’s true!”

“That’s what I thought,” Ken said dryly.

“Yusuke, do we need to have a little chat about this…?” Makoto asked, narrowing her eyes on Yusuke.

Yusuke shook his head hard. “No. I-I understand that I shouldn’t ask strangers to model for me now.”

“Jeez, Inari, you have no people skills,” Futaba sighed.

It was Yusuke’s turn to narrow his eyes. “I believe you of all people cannot say that, Futaba.”

Futaba just stuck her tongue at Yusuke. He responded by letting out an exasperated sigh.
“Futaba, come on.” Ken nudged her side. “We’re almost there.”

“Ooh, you’re right!” Futaba’s eyes brightened with excitement. “Hey, Ken, has she ever taken you on tours? Let you meet her co-stars?”

“Yeah, she has.” Ken nodded. “She surprised me a complete tour for my fourteenth birthday. Shortly after all of the paperwork was finalized, with Shinjiro-san taking me in. I thought I was going to pass out with shock… Especially after Yukari-san got the whole main cast to take a group picture with me.”

“Ugh, you’re so lucky!” Futaba huffed. “I wish I knew her back then!”

“You’re meeting her now, at least,” Anne said, before giving her shoulder a light squeeze. “Try not to freak out too hard, okay?”

“Hey…!”

The group in front of them wrapped up with Yukari-san, before they darted to the line for meeting Red Hawk. Futaba let out a little squeak, before all but running to her.

“Ah, Futaba-chan, correct?” Yukari-san said brightly. “It’s nice to meet you!”

“Same!” Futaba then froze. “Um. You’re not Futaba. I’m Futaba. Victory was a comfort to me.” She then cleared her throat. “U-Um… Victory was a huge comfort to me, after my mom died… You were just amazing!”

As they came closer, Ren couldn’t help but gawk a little. She really was pretty, though Anne was definitely prettier. Though something about her… reminded him of Anne. He couldn’t put his finger on what, though.

“Aw, thanks.” She smiled at her, before looking over to Ken. “Hey, Ken-kun. It’s been a while!”

“It’s nice to see you too, Yukari-san.” A smile spread across Ken’s face. “How are you feeling? I hope you’re not too hot in the suit…”

“Nice to meet ya!” Ryuji said. “I’m Ryuji Sakamoto.”

“I know, I know!” Yukari-san nodded. “Ken-kun’s mentioned all of you, actually.”

“Good things, I hope,” Makoto said.

“Ninety percent of it,” Yukari-san laughed. “It’s nice to meet you all.”

“I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.” Yusuke bowed low at the waist. “Ken has some rather accomplished senpai, from the looks of it.”

Now that Yusuke brought it up… he had a good point. Mitsuru Kirijo was a no brainer. Yukari Takeba was a famous actress and model. Shinjiro-san was extremely talented with cooking. Fuuka-san was apparently pretty damn good at programming. What was next, a secret agent?

“It’s nice to meet you!” Anne said cheerfully. “You’re so pretty! Then again, you are a model, right?”

“Oh, you’re Anne Takamaki, right?” Yukari looked at her up and down. “Ken-kun mentioned that you’re thinking of pursuing a job as a model full-time, right? We should talk about that sometime!”
“Huh?” Anne took a step back, shock spreading across her face. “Oh no, no, I don’t want to waste your time—”

“It’s no problem!” Yukari-san waved her off. “Besides, you’re a friend of Ken-kun.” Her voice lowered to a stage whisper. “You know, he used to have a major problem with making friends.”

“Yukari-san!” Ken flushed, and it definitely wasn’t from the heat. “That was in junior high! Not now!”

“Why am I not surprised?” Ren grinned at him, which only made Ken glare.

“Aw, but this was a completely new city… You can’t blame me for being worried…”

Ryuji broke into snickers and wouldn’t stop even as Makoto elbowed him hard.

“Yukari-san!” Ken exclaimed, all but whining, before he glared at her. “Did Minako-san put you up to this?”

Ren couldn’t hold back his laughter. Ken’s poutiness was just… too funny. He was all moody frowns and crossed arms. It was completely different than how he usually was.

Yukari-san just ruffled his hair. “Not this time.”

“U-Um…” Futaba shifted, before she thrust out her boxset of Feathermen DVDs, right into Yukari-san’s face. “C-Could you please sign this?”

“Oh, sorry about that, Futaba-chan,” Yukari-san quickly apologized, before nudging the boxset out of her face and then taking it. She then pulled out her pen and began to scribble out a message, before she signed it with a flourish. “Here you go!”

Futaba slowly took it, hands shaking. It was like she was holding the Holy Grail. “Thank you! Thank you!” She then pounced on Ken, making him stumble back a couple steps. “And thank you for helping me meet her!” she said gleefully.

“Futaba, you could’ve made Ken fall,” Makoto chided.

“It’s fine, Makoto,” Ken said to her, before he awkwardly patted Futaba on her head. “I’m glad to help.”

Futaba just beamed, before hugging the boxset to her chest. "Thank you so much!" She then lovingly stroked the box. "I can’t believe it’s actually autographed now!"

Yusuke just smiled. “Congratulations. Though I do not understand why you would allow her to defile your DVDs like that…”

Futaba’s face scrunched up. “Ugh, you just don’t get it—”

Yukari-san then reached out, an arm around Futaba’s shoulders. She pulled her close. “So, who’s going to take the picture?”

“I’ll do it!” Anne said brightly. “Say… um…” She pursed her lips as she thought. “Oh, I know! Feathermen Victory!”

“Feathermen Victory!” they chorused, striking a pose.

Futaba’s smile could light up a room… It really was nice seeing her so happy. It was almost
unbelievable that she was cooped up in her room just a couple weeks ago.

“God, that’s such a nerdy thing to say though.” Ryuji shook his head.

“Whatever makes them happy,” Makoto chuckled, before she shrugged. “But what should we do now?”

“Yukari-san!” A rather frazzled looking woman scrambled up to her, whispering frantically in her ear.

Ken frowned, looking… concerned. Did he recognize her?

Yukari-san’s eyes went wide. “They’ve what?!”

“Yukari-san, what’s the matter?” Yusuke inquired.

“It’s the twins, isn’t it?” Ken sighed, folding his arms over his chest. “They’ve escaped, haven’t they?”

…The twins? What did Caroline and Justine have to do with this? How did Ken meet them? Or Yukari-san?

“Give him a prize,” Yukari-san sighed. “I’ve got to go find them before-“

“Wait.” Ken grabbed her arm, halting her movement. “Let us look for them. There are more of us anyway, so we can cover more ground.” He then glanced over to them. “…Um, if you guys don’t mind…”

“Of course,” Ren said, before turning to everyone else. “Right, guys?”

“But what’s going on?” Makoto asked. “Who are the twins?”

“They’re Yukari-san’s…” Ken hesitated for a moment, before his expression steeled, “…children. They’re good kids, really, but they’re… mischievous.”

“I didn’t realize you were married, Takeba-san,” Yusuke commented.

Yukari-san and Ken both stiffened, before Yukari-san bit her lip. “…I’m not married,” she said quietly. “Their father died before I even found out I was pregnant.”

…Oh god.

“Oh…” Yusuke’s eyes widened, “I apologize for the-“

“No, no, it’s fine,” Yukari-san cut him off, suddenly looking weary. “I… I get that a lot.”

Ren realized that Ken was… watching them. Staring at them, daring them to make a deal out of it.

“Just… try to find them as soon as you can,” Yukari-san pleaded. “I know that they can only be in Akihabara but…”

“Don’t worry, Yukari-san, we’ll find them.” Ken gave her a reassuring smile, while she weakly returned. “We’ll bring them back as soon as possible.”

“Thank you, Ken-kun…”
They headed for a secluded area, before Ken spoke again.

“Thanks for agreeing to help,” Ken sighed. “But um… the twins… they take more after their dad. Both having blue hair. The female twin, Miyuki, usually wears a hairband with a little navy bow on it. She has grayish blue eyes. Her brother, Kaito, has brown eyes like Yukari-san. They’re little kids, only five.”

They were five?! Just how old was Yukari-san when she had them…? How old was she, anyways? She looked about Shinjiro-san and Fuuka-san’s age…

Ren quickly shook his head. This wasn’t any different than judging Anne for being foreign. Besides that, they were little kids, wandering who knows where… Their main objective was to find them as soon as possible.

“Okay, this is what we’re going to do,” Ren said, turning to address everyone. “We’ll break into pairs and split up. We’ll be able to cover more ground that way.” He then looked at Futaba.

“Futaba, I understand if you don’t want to…”

“No!” Futaba shook her head, determination filling her eyes. “I’ll have to go out in public. I don’t need to sit out.”

“Okay.” Ren looked at his girlfriend. “Anne, you should pair up with Futaba. Ryuji and Yusuke. Ken and Makoto. And Morgana is with me.”

“Let’s go, then!” Ryuji said. “Yukari-san’s prolly having a heart attack, so it’ll be better if we find them as soon as possible.”

“Right!”

This wasn’t how Makoto had expected to spend part of her day doing.

“Is there anything you’d think that would catch their attention?” Makoto asked.

“The only thing I can think of is a video game shop…” Ken said slowly. “They like to watch their aunt play with another school friend… But their real interest is the Pokemon Center. Which is in an entirely different district.”

At least they didn’t have money to buy tickets…

“Honestly…” Makoto sighed. “Why did they run away…?”

“They get bored easily.” Ken shrugged. “You would too, if you had to occupy yourself for hours while your mom did her job… They’re good kids.” His eyes softened, before he shook his head. “…They just like getting into mischief.”

“Like what kind of mischief?”

“Let’s see…” Ken let out a thoughtful hum. “Well, there was the time that we were at their aunt’s house, and it was close to Valentine’s Day. She loves making sweets so she was making chocolate by scratch. They both have quite a sweet tooth so they got the bright idea of climbing the counter and getting into the chocolate. They smeared chocolate everywhere… Their face… their hair… their clothes…”
Oh dear… poor Yukari-san. Twins had to be tiring enough.

“And there was the time they got hungry at night and got into the pantry,” Ken mused. “They found coffee beans on the shelf and thought it was some kind of chocolate candy.”

“You really weren’t kidding when you said they were mischief makers,” Makoto laughed. “They sound… like a handful.”

“Yeah…” Ken’s expression then grew serious. “Come on, we’re wasting time.”

They searched the streets, even asking a few passing people if they had seen a blue haired boy or girl. But no such luck.

Ken sighed. “I wish we had Koromaru with us… He’d be able to sniff them out.”

Oh, right… Anne had texted to her, gushing about the dogs that Fuuka-san had brought with her for this visit.

“Calm down.” Makoto grasped his hand and gave it a light squeeze. “We still have a lot of ground to cover. We’ll find them.”

“I suppose-“ Ken then froze, his eyes growing wide. Without another word, he pulled her towards a police officer… who was talking to a little girl.

“Come on, I want to help you,” the officer coaxed. “Where are your parents?”

The little girl looked at him up and down, looking incredibly unimpressed for a five year old. “… My mommy says not to talk to people I don’t know. And I don’t know you.”

But despite that, she was… well, adorable. She had silky dark blue hair that went down to her shoulders. A black headband with a dark blue checked bow rested on top of her head, pulling back her bangs. She was wearing a lacy white short sleeved shirt under a dark blue jumper dress.

“Miyuki!” Ken called.

She brightened up at his voice, before dashing over to him. “Uncle Ken!” she said cheerfully, switching attitudes within a blink of an eye.

“Young man, do you know this little girl?” The officer frowned.

“Yes, yes, I’m so sorry.” Ken pulled his hand away from Makoto’s, resting it on top of Miyuki’s head, before bowing his head. “Thank you for trying to help her.” Then he lowered to her level. “Miyuki, you should apologize to him,” he whispered.

“Was just listening to what Mommy told me…” she said sulkily.

“It’s all right.” The officer waved him off. “Just make sure that she doesn’t run off again.”

“I’ll do that,” Ken said. He waited for the officer to walk away before looking sternly down at Miyuki. “Miyuki, do you have any idea how worried your mom is right now?”

She shrunk back, biting her lip. She scuffed the ground with her shoe. “S-Sorry, Uncle Ken… but we were just soooo bored! And this is Tokyo! We thought we could explore a little while Mommy met with people…”

Ken sighed. “Where is Kaito?”
“I-I dunno…”

“Great…” Ken muttered.

Makoto rested a hand on his arm, making him look up. “At least we’re halfway done, Ken,” she pointed out. “For all we know, the others may have found him already.”

“Um… who are you?” Miyuki asked uncertainly.

…She was kinda blunt, wasn’t she?

Makoto knelt down so she was eye level with her. “I’m Makoto Niijima. I’m one of Ken’s friends.”

Miyuki blinked. She looked… bewildered as she looked up at Ken. “…You have friends who are girls, Uncle Ken?”

“Miyuki…” Ken groaned.

“Whaaaat?” Miyuki pouted up at him. “It’s true! Uncle Junpei says you could be a ladykiller if you wanted to, which I don’t get since the only thing you kill are like spiders! And you’re always nice to me and Mommy and Auntie Mina and Auntie Fuuka and—”

“Okay, okay, Miyuki, we get it,” Ken cut her rambling off, by holding up a hand, before he muttered something under his breath, all while his expression darkened.

…Just how popular was Ken with girls back on Port Island? And… why did the idea of that bother her…?

“Uncle Junpei says funny stuff sometimes,” Miyuki mumbled before Ken helped Makoto stand up. “But that’s okay! He’s really nice! I hope we get to see Uncle Junpei and Auntie Chidori more when we move to Port Island!”

“Move?” Makoto frowned. “Are you moving there while your mother works?”

“Not… exactly.” Ken shook his head. “Yukari-san is quitting acting entirely, so she can focus on raising the twins. Especially since they’ll be starting school in April. She’s taking the money she’s made to invest into a boutique. She’s always been into fashion, so it seems like a good fit…”

“I see.” Makoto nodded. It did make sense, especially since Yukari-san was a single mother…

“Well… Futaba’s going to be disappointed…”

“Uncle Ken, you have more than one friend who’s a girl?!” Miyuki gasped, wide-eyed. “Maybe Uncle Junpei is right… you’ll find a girl you’ll like-like here!”

Ken just pressed a hand to his forehead, all while sighing. “I really wish Junpei-san and Minako-san would stop speculating on my lack of a love life,” he muttered.

So, Ken has never dated before… In hindsight, it made sense. Makoto still remembered that he had looked extremely uncomfortable with their female classmates crowding him, fishing for details.

“But anyways…” Ken shook his head, before frowning at Miyuki. “…When did you lose Kaito?”

“U-Um…” Miyuki began to fidget, before she bit her lip. “I was looking at something in the store, and then I turned around and he was gone!”

“Oh dear,” Makoto sighed, shaking her head before she turned to Ken. “What should we do then?
Bring her back to Yukari-san or should we look for Kaito-kun first?"

“Well-” Ken’s phone then rang, and he quickly pulled it out. “Hello?”

“Ken, can you talk to Kaito?” Ren’s voice echoed from the device. “He’s being uh…”

“A little snot!” Ryuji burst out. “He doesn’t believe that we’re your friends or that Yukari-san asked us to help find him-“

“Oh jeez,” Ken muttered. “Sorry, Kaito’s picked up some things from Yukari-san… Give Kaito the phone.”

“Hang on,” Ren said.

“I don’t wanna take the phone!”

“Kaito Arisato, I know that Yukari-san has taught you better manners than this,” Ken scolded, frowning even though Kaito couldn’t see. “Honestly! I swear, Yukari-san better take away dessert from you for two weeks at the very least-“

“No dessert for two whole weeks?!“ Miyuki gasped, her eyes filled with horror.

“…But anyways, where are you?” Ken asked. “Makoto and I found Miyuki, so we can bring them back to Yukari-san.”


“Uncle Ken, you don’t mean that, right?” Miyuki asked anxiously, her eyes wide as she wrung her hands. “Two weeks is a long time!”

Makoto couldn’t help but smile. She was just adorable. She wouldn’t be surprised if she and her twin brother were the darlings of Ken’s senpai.

Ken just raised an eyebrow, before huffing out a laugh. “We’ll see. Though if it was up to Shinjiro-san, you’d be deprived of dessert for longer. He thinks you and Kaito eat too many sweets as it is.”

“Uncle Shinji always dumps veggies on our plates,” Miyuki complained with a pout. “They’re yucky.”

“They’re good for you,” Ken said, all while a fond smile formed on his lips.

She… liked seeing Ken like this. It was a completely different side of him, but it was… heartwarming. He’d make a good father someday… wouldn’t he?

“They don’t taste good,” Miyuki said disdainfully. “I don’t like ‘em.”

“Ah, Ken.” Makoto touched his arm. “Don’t you think we should get going?”

Ken turned back to her. “…Sorry. But yeah, you’re right, Makoto.” He then took Miyuki’s hand. "Come on, let's go and save them from Kaito."

Ren wasn’t sure how to get into Kaito’s good graces, so… he had resorted to buying the kid a
sweet. Not even bribing him with Morgana had worked. (The rejection hadn’t exactly pleased Morgana.)

Anne and Futaba had managed to find them before Ken and Makoto, and for some reason, the kid didn’t believe that the two girls were Ken’s friends. Even more so than when Ren had attempted to convince him.

“He looks nothing like Takeba-san,” Yusuke murmured.

“Well, Ken did say that they took after their dad,” Ren pointed out. “Though… Ken called him Kaito Arisato. Isn’t that a bit weird?”

Though Yusuke did have a point. Kaito had dark blue hair, though it was a bluer shade than Yusuke’s. It was rather messy, and he even had a little cowlick. His bangs were due for a cut, falling into his big brown eyes. He was wearing a dark blue graphic tee shirt and a pair of jeans. To put it shortly, his resemblance to his mom was more… subtle, like the shape of his eyes and face.

“Who cares about that?” Futaba complained, before huffing. “He’s like a baby gremlin. I can’t believe he’s Yukari Takeba’s kid!”

That made Kaito look up. “…You like my mommy?”

“Well, yeah!” Futaba nodded. “She’s like a superhero.”

Kaito’s face softened. “She is.” Then a sunny smile broke out on his face. “She’s the best mommy anyone can ask for! She gives the bestest hugs and she makes yummy food and she’s always tellin’ Miyu and me that she loves us a lot! She calls us her treasures.”

Clearly, a way to get on his good side was to compliment his mom. Futaba had that in the bag, at least.

“Aww, that’s just adorable,” Anne cooed, pressing a hand to her cheek. “He’s adorable.”

“Should I be jealous?” Ren quirked an eyebrow at his girlfriend.

“Oh, yeah, I’m going to leave you and run off with a five year old.”

“Isn’t that… one of them? One of Yukari Takeba’s bastards?” A middle aged woman was blatantly staring at Kaito, her lips pursed.

“The boy, yes…” Her companion sniffed. “Honestly, what were they thinking, hiring a woman who became a mother in high school? It sets a horrible example to children!”

“I’m not surprised if she bribed her way to her job…”

“She would never!” Futaba hissed, her hands clenching into fists.

Ren quickly turned to Kaito, who had just… frozen. Those women were badmouthing his mom… and… they were calling him a bastard. Did… Did he even know what a bastard was? He hoped not, but that would lead him to asking questions…

“You…” Ryuji growled, scowling in their direction. “Haven’t you heard of minding your own damn business?!!” he yelled at them.

“Well, I never…” the first woman muttered.
“Never had any manners,” Yusuke sniffed, his eyes full of disdain as he stared at the pair. “Yes, that sounds about right.”

Both women scowled, but stalked away. Anne huffed, before she glared at the two retreating women. “Ugh! I hate those kind of people…”

“Seriously.” Ryuji scowled at them as well. “They have no effin’ business. And saying that cru… ud,” he quickly corrected himself, “to a little kid!”

“What…” Kaito said faintly, “what’s a bastard?”

“Uh oh,” Futaba gulped.

“How do we put this…” Yusuke wondered.

Dammit… Yukari-san wasn’t going to be happy with them, was she? No, scratch that, she’d probably take her bow and show just how talented she was with it and turn them all into skewers.

“Ah, Amamiya-kun!” Ren’s head whipped towards the familiar voice. Goro Akechi came to a stop. “Oh, hello. I didn’t know you were… babysitting?”

“You didn’t answer my question!” Kaito huffed, looking between all of them. “What’s a bastard?”

“You want something else to eat?” Futaba asked, her voice growing high pitched. Ren didn’t blame her for panicking. “Mochi? Takoyaki?”

Akechi glanced in Futaba’s direction. His eyes grew wide for a moment, before he quickly looked away.

“No!” Kaito’s brown eyes snapped in anger. “I wanna know what a bastard is!”

An emotion that Ren couldn’t put his finger on flickered in Akechi’s eyes. He closed his eyes for a minute. “You’re… You’re awfully young to have heard that,” he said quietly, opening his eyes. “But… it was only a matter of time before you heard it.” He inhaled. “A bastard… is someone whose parents aren’t married. Many people, closeminded people, believe that makes you less important than someone who does. Some people… think they’re just a mistake. Sometimes people treat the mother badly for having the child in the first place.”

“But… But that’s not Mommy’s fault…” Kaito mumbled, his eyes wide. “Me and Miyu… shouldn’t have been born…?”

“What’s going on?”

“Kaito?!”

A little girl with Kaito’s hair darted forward, throwing her arms around him. Ken and Makoto followed, though Ken frowned in the direction of Akechi.

“Akechi, what did you say to Kaito?” Ken demanded.

The little girl scowled, looking at Akechi up and down. “I know him. He’s the one that always talks about being a detective but never solves crimes.”

…Damn. That was brutal, from a little girl.

“Miyuki, that was…” Makoto began, before her voice trailed off.
“It’s true,” Miyuki grumbled. “Naoto-san is a lot cooler.”

“I was just…” Akechi began.

“Ken, he was just… explaining what a bastard was,” Ren said quickly. “Two gossipping women were staring and talking about him, and he overheard ‘bastard’.”

“Oh course,” Ken muttered. “Kaito, are you okay?”

Kaito was quiet for a long time. “Uncle Ken, should Mommy have never had us?” He jabbed a finger in Akechi’s direction, even as his eyes began to water. “He said… some people think a bastard is a mistake… and that a bastard’s mommy is treated badly for having ‘em…”

“Kaito-kun…” Anne whispered, and Ren could see the way Anne’s heart was breaking for the little boy.

He glanced over at Ryuji. He could tell that the innocent question hit hard for him… with how his mom had to work doubly as hard after separating from his abusive father.

Ken didn’t say a thing for several moments. He crouched down to Kaito’s level. “Look at me, Kaito,” he said quietly, before beckoning Miyuki closer. “You too, Miyuki.” He waited for the little girl to join her twin, before speaking again. “What does Yukari-san call you two?”

“She always says… we’re our treasures…” Miyuki murmured.

“Because why?” Ken asked.

“Cause Daddy died before she had us…” Kaito mumbled. “And she really, really loved Daddy…”

“There’s your answer,” Ken said simply. “You two are the last gift Minato-san gave Yukari-san. You don’t listen to the people who tell you that you weren’t meant to be born. Or the people who think that Yukari-san is lesser for having you. They don’t matter. They speak cruelly because they’re so miserable that they like to make other people sad.”

“That’s stupid,” Kaito said flatly. “Mommy didn’t do anything to that mean lady and… and…” his eyes began to fill with tears again, trickling down his chubby cheeks, “she said that Mommy shouldn’t have her job!”

“Why would she be mean to Mommy…?” Miyuki whimpered.

“Don’t listen to them,” Ken said, before he pulled out a handkerchief and gently wiped away the tears. “They don’t matter. The people who *do* matter love you, don’t they? They know the truth, right?”

They both nodded, slowly, before they hugged him tightly.

“You’re quite fortunate, you know,” Akechi said, looking down at the twins. “Your mother obviously adores you and you have quite a doting uncle…”

Though Ren couldn’t help but notice that there was a… wistfulness to Akechi’s voice.

“I don’t *dote*…” Ken’s cheeks turned pink, before he stood up.

“It was cute, Ken,” Anne giggled, to which Makoto nodded.

“You were pretty gentle with them, Ken,” Yusuke chuckled. “It was quite heartwarming.”
“Uncle Ken’s not our real uncle,” Miyuki said. “That would be Uncle Aki! He’s married to Daddy’s sister, Auntie Mina!”

“And… I’d like to apologize too.” Akechi knelt down to their level. “I simply thought to explain people’s mindsets. I didn’t want to upset you…” He then smiled wryly. “I have a tendency to offend people.”

Kaito looked at him up and down. “You should talk to people more then,” he said flatly. “’stead of just talking on TV.”

“I dunno why you don’t like the Phantom Thieves either,” Miyuki continued. “They’re cool. Like real heroes!”

“All right, all right, enough.” Ken sighed, shaking his head even as wry amusement filled his eyes. “Speaking of heroes, let’s get you back to Yukari-san.”

“But Kaito has a snack!” Miyuki huffed. “I want a snack!”

Ken turned and stared at Ren. “Why does Kaito have a snack?”

Ren rubbed the back of his neck. “He was still being grumpy with us.”

“Kaito, share your snack with Miyuki,” Ken decided. “That way, you’ll both have an appetite and Shinjiro-san won’t scold you both for ruining your appetite for dinner.”

“Fineee…” Kaito grumbled, before handing off his taiyaki to his twin sister.

“Ah! Miyu, don’t take such a big bite!”

“Amada-kun, I’m really sorry-“ Akechi began, as the twins began to bicker.

“Stop apologizing, Akechi-san,” Ken said wearily. “It… It was bound to happen sooner or later.” He looked down at the twins. “…Would’ve preferred it to be later, but I can’t change things.”

“Bye, Kaito-kun, Miyuki-chan!” Anne quickly cut in, interrupting their argument.

They both smiled cheerfully before waving at them all. Ken took their sticky hands without complaining and pulled them back towards the Feathermen signing.

“That’s such a heartwarming sight…” Yusuke sighed. “Alas, if only I had my sketchpad.”

Akechi sighed, a sad smile on his lips. “They truly are lucky…” he said quietly. “Amada-kun really does treat them like they’re his family. If only I had been that fortunate…”

…Wait a minute.

“Akechi?” Ren turned to him. “You don’t mean…”

“Akechi-kun…” Makoto said slowly, “I had no idea… Not with how you carried yourself…”
“Ah, but isn’t it karma?” Akechi smiled. “The man threw me and my mother away like trash, but I’ve risen above expectations. I’m a celebrity now… He would have never expected that out of me.”

Futaba bit her lip, watching Akechi. She… She was a bastard child too, wasn’t she? Ren couldn’t help but wonder what kind of treatment she received, growing up…

Though he supposed that’s why Akechi liked showing up on interviews, talking about his job. He’d rub it in his accuser’s face if he had the upper hand.

“A lot of men can be dickheads,” Ryuji muttered. “I feel ya, Akechi.”

Makoto then narrowed her eyes at him. “Though I have to ask… why are you here, Akechi-kun?”

Akechi just raised his hands. “It’s not what you think, Niijima-san.” He smiled. “I have to admit, I am a fan of Feathermen. And one of Yukari Takeba’s last appearances… I just wanted to get a glimpse of her. She really is a marvelous actress. Though I have to wonder where she learned all of those stunts…”

…Really? Was this a Justice Arcana thing…?

“She’s just that cool.” Futaba folded her arms over her chest. “She’s like an acting god.”

“Indeed.” Yusuke nodded. “Not to mention, she is rather… down to earth. That’s a trait that I found most celebrities lack.”

“And she’s super nice,” Anne chimed in. “I wonder if she has any advice about acting…”

“You really need it,” Ryuji muttered, only to yelp as Anne jabbed him in the side. “Hey!” Ryuji looked towards him. “Ren!”

Ren raised his hands. “I’m staying out of this, Ryuji. Sorry.”

“A smart boy,” Futaba mumbled.

Ren cracked a grin. “Thanks, I try.”

“Heh. You really are a lively group.” Akechi looked between them. “And rather close, too. I must say, I somewhat… envy it.”

“Jeez, Kaito’s right.” Ryuji shook his head. “Maybe you just need to talk to more people.”

“Perhaps.” Akechi glanced at Ren. “…Perhaps we’ll speak another time, yes?” He then dipped his head. “Until next time, then.”

He was then gone, presumably to check out the Feathermen event. Ren just shook his head. Honestly… Akechi was a bit of a mystery still. Though he did feel like he understood the older boy a little better now…

“Hey, hey, Uncle Ken, have you met the Phantom Thieves?”

“I don’t know, Kaito. Phantom Thieves have to keep their identities a secret.”
“No fair, Uncle Ken! You should say yes or no!”

Despite it being a few hours since the incident, Yukari was still seething. How dare they talk about her children in that kind of way? They were both innocent.

And in a way, she was angry at Akechi too. He had planted the idea that she regretted having the twins in their heads. And she never would. Sometimes it was hard, looking at the twins. They resembled Minato so much… But they were the symbol that Minato loved her.

“Yukari-chan?” Fuuka’s gentle voice snapped her out of her thoughts. She pushed a mug filled with steaming tea towards her. “You should drink.”

“I could use an actual drink,” Yukari lamented, before she took a sip of the tea. “Thanks, Fuuka.”

“Mommy?” Now that Miyuki had her attention, she climbed into Yukari’s lap. She was growing so big now… Soon she wouldn’t be able to hold her or Kaito in her lap comfortably. Miyuki hugged her around the neck, before kissing her cheek. “Love you,” she said quietly, before looking up at her with eyes so much like Minato’s. “Uncle Ken said that people like that mean lady don’t matter.”

Yukari smiled. “You’re right, sweetie.” She kissed her on the top of her head. “I love you, too,” she said, gently stroking her hair.

She caught Fuuka looking at them, a wistful look in her eyes. What she wanted to know was when was Shinjiro-senpai going to finally propose. Akihiko-senpai had told Minako about Ken’s gift to Shinjiro-senpai, and Minako had told her. Though Fuuka’s hand was small. Maybe he was getting it resized.

“Um… Mommy?” Miyuki said slowly. “Auntie Fuuka says that two or three puppies need homes… Can we have one?”

“So that’s what you were after?” Shinjiro-senpai said dryly.

“Wanted to hug Mommy before…” Miyuki mumbled. “Also want a puppy…”

Yukari sighed. “We’ll see, sweetie. We won’t be able to move back to Port Island until January or February. They may have found homes by then.”

Miyuki’s face fell. “That’s so far away,” she whined.

“Should play with the puppies while you can, then.” Shinjiro-senpai nodded at the puppies romping together.

Miyuki grumbled, before slipping off of Yukari’s lap and joining Kaito and Ken. Once she thought that Miyuki wouldn’t hear her, Yukari let out a huge sigh, before rubbing her eyes.

“You don’t have to be so upset,” Fuuka said gently. “It would’ve happened sooner or later…”

“They’re five!” Yukari hissed out, dropping her hand as anger flared inside of her. “They don’t… They shouldn’t have…” She slumped in her seat, staring down at her tea. “Have I… made a mistake?” she asked softly, as her anger began to drain away. “Should I have tried dating again? They do deserve a father…”

Her eyes then drifted to her hand… more specifically the ring on it. Minato had left it amongst his
belongings. It was supposed to be his White Day present to her. It was not the most flashy ring, a simple silver ring with a rose quartz in the shape of a heart set on it. But she had never taken it off.

“They do have one, Takeba,” Shinjiro-senpai said sharply. “Minato’s dead, but he’s still their dad. And you're doing a good enough job, juggling your job and raising 'em. Anyone tells you otherwise? Fuck. Them.”

“Shinji’s right, Yukari-chan.” Fuuka rounded around the table, to sit next to Yukari. She reached out, laying a hand on Yukari’s arm. “The twins will grow up with stories about Minato-kun. They’ll know what their father was like.”

“Okay,” Yukari whispered, before looking between the two of them. “…Thanks. I guess I needed the reminder…”

She still missed Minato so much sometimes…

“It’s no problem, Yukari-chan.” Fuuka smiled warmly at her.

“But you met the Phantom Thieves today, yeah?” Shinjiro-senpai kept his voice low.


Even though watching Ren and Anne… made her a little sad. It was clear that Ren wasn’t Minato. If anything, Ren reminded her more of Minako, with the way he seemed to enjoy teasing people. But still. She was a bit jealous of them…

“I’m more worried that they’re a bad influence on Ken,” Shinjiro-senpai grumbled.

“Oh, don’t be such a worrywart.” Yukari waved a hand. “Ken-kun’s a smart kid. If anything, I think that he would be a good influence on them.”

“You mentioned how they were starting to meet here, before they decided to target Futaba-chan, right?” Fuuka looked at Shinjiro-senpai.

“Yeah.” Shinjiro-senpai nodded. “Won’t be surprised if they move back here as their new hideout.”

Fuuka just winced. “Do we… always have to talk about them?” she asked quietly. “Can’t we talk about something else? At least for tonight…”

“Well-“ Yukari began, only to be cut off by a yelp.

“She bit me!”

Ken just huffed out a laugh. “She’s still a baby, Kaito. She doesn’t know any better.”

“She should,” Kaito grumbled. “I bet I never did anything like that as a baby.”

“Well, you would always try to yank on my hair…”

“I did not!” Kaito protested.

“Kid, we have pictures and videos that say otherwise,” Shinjiro-senpai said dryly, before he stood up. “Oi, Ken, bandage Kaito up. Gotta get dinner started.”

“Of course you say that now,” Ken deadpanned.
Shinjiro-senpai just scowled. “You try cooking for them. They’re picky as hell,” Shinjiro-senpai changed at the last minute, as he caught sight of Yukari’s glare.

“Not our fault veggies are yucky,” Miyuki grumbled.

“S’ides, Uncle Junpei says it’s good to have… um…” Kaito’s face scrunched up, only for it to brighten. “High salads!”

“Standards, Kaito-kun,” Fuuka corrected with a giggle. “Though I think Junpei-kun was talking about something else…”

“What’cha mean, Auntie Fuuka?” Miyuki asked.

“Um…” Fuuka looked desperately at Yukari, but she just shrugged.

“You wanted to talk about something else, Fuuka.”

“T-That’s not what I meant!”

The twins playing with the puppies had worn them out completely, and they passed out not long after dinner. Shinjiro-senpai offered to help her back to the hotel, which Yukari gratefully accepted. It wasn’t easy managing the two of them. But Ken had disappeared right after dinner for some reason… and she wanted to say goodbye.

But when she approached Ken’s bedroom, she could hear: You want to what?!

That was… Mitsuru-senpai’s voice. Yukari pushed open the door, making Ken jump. “So.” She kicked the door shut with her foot, before putting her hands on her hips. “What’s going on?”

“Um… well…” Ken stammered, very much looking like deer in headlights.

Mitsuru-senpai pursed her lips. “Amada wishes to tell the Phantom Thieves the truth,” she said stiffly.

“About what?” Yukari asked, tilting her head. “About us? About why Ken-kun’s here?”

“Mitsuru-san, please,” Ken pleaded. “I don’t want there to be secrets anymore. It’s not fair to everyone. They don’t have bad intentions!”

“We’re meant to be a secret organization, Amada,” Mitsuru-senpai retorted. “We cannot-“

“The Investigation Team knows about us!”

“That’s different.”

“How?!” Ken cried, suddenly looking miserable. “Mitsuru-san, it’s not right. I can’t… I can’t keep telling half-truths. If I explained everything, maybe we could go after Shido. He wouldn’t be able to threaten you anymore! And Futaba deserves the truth. Especially. It’s not fair to her, for me to keep secrets about just who ordered her mother’s death.”

He had a point…

“Mitsuru-senpai,” Yukari said softly, “Ken-kun is right. Secrets destroy trust.”
She remembered all too vividly about how she felt about Mitsuru-senpai originally. A lot of problems could have been resolved if they had been open with each other. And judging by the look on Mitsuru-senpai’s face… she was thinking about it too.

“And I met them today,” Yukari continued. “I didn’t talk to them too long, but they seem like good kids. I think you can trust them. Naoto-kun was investigating us, but you chose to put trust in her. And look at you guys, now.”

Honestly, even to this day… she was unsure why they had trusted the Investigation Team so easily. They had every reason not to. The Investigation Team could’ve been mistrustful, after finding out about what exactly happened to Labrys. But… they didn’t. And they were close friends to this day.

Mitsuru-senpai’s shoulders slumped. “Do you truly believe that they can be trusted?”

“They’ve only gone after people that needed their hearts changed,” Ken said. “They don’t go changing hearts just because. It’s… It’s not for attention…”

“You do understand that you’ll have to explain the entire story to them, don’t you?” Mitsuru-senpai pursed her lips. “In all honesty, I’m not sure if they’ll trust us, Amada.”

“And you’re saying that it’d be better to just hide everything from them?” Ken countered. “That won’t get their trust either.”

Mitsuru-senpai let out a weary sigh. “…Very well, Amada. You… You have my permission to tell the Phantom Thieves everything.”

Ken’s face lit up. Yukari always found it a pity that Ken’s childhood had shaped him in a way that he rarely smiled so openly. When he smiled… it made him look young, closer to his actual age.

God. Sometimes looking at Ken really made it hit home just how young they were during their incident. They were just kids. The Phantom Thieves were so young. They were so broken by the system that they forced themselves to step up and take action. The thought of that was just… sad.

Wasn’t the whole point of creating the Shadow Operatives was so that teenagers wouldn’t have to step up like they had to?

“Thank you, Mitsuru-san.” Ken bowed his head. “I’m sure you won’t regret it.”

“Well, you could always request that Isshiki’s daughter trace whoever requested me as a hit.” Mitsuru-senpai didn’t exactly scowl, but she came pretty close with that deep frown. “Honestly, if I ever get my hands on that fool…”

She almost felt sorry for the moron. Almost.

Mitsuru-senpai then sighed, pressing a hand to her forehead. Then she forced a smile. “Well… I’m afraid I must go. I have a mountain of paperwork to deal with… Good night, Yukari, Amada. Say hello to Miyuki and Kaito for me, as well.”

Mitsuru waved a hand before she shut off the connection.

Ken then turned to Yukari. “Yukari-san… I…” He bowed his head. “…Thank you. I think your reminder of what happened in the past is what convinced Mitsuru-san.”

“No problem, Ken-kun.” Yukari smiled at him. “You really do care about them, don’t you?”
“I…” Ken blushed, before mumbling out, “I do…”

“Aw, Ken-kun, you don’t have to be embarrassed.” Yukari ruffled his hair, making him glower for a moment. “I meant what I said about them, you know. They’re good kids… They’ll listen to you.”

Ken slowly smiled. “…Thanks, Yukari-san. I’ll probably ask to do it the day after tomorrow…”

“Why not tomorrow?” Yukari raised an eyebrow at him.

“Well…” Ken ran a hand through his hair. “…We’re going to the beach tomorrow. The past week we’ve been working with Futaba so that she can handle going outside and being around people.”

Yukari frowned. Just… how traumatized had Futaba been…? Then again, she had been suicidal…

“Give her my best, okay?” Yukari put a hand on his shoulder. “I have to go now, though… I’m surprised Shinjiro-senpai isn’t looking for me.”

Ken just nodded. “Okay. Hopefully we’ll see you soon.”

Yukari just flashed him a smile. “Maybe for Christmas. Minako will have had the baby by then too…”

“Yeah… good night, Yukari.”

“Night, Ken-kun.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I lied. The beach episode is going to be a standalone chapter. This chapter kept stretching longer and longer. Depending on how long the next chapter gets, summer vacation will be wrapped up in one or two more chapters.

I also redid the Justice rank 3 scene, since it’s really shoehorned in the game. One thing I think the anime did right is how they changed the timing of Akechi’s revelation and connecting it to Futaba’s struggles. (That did have the downside of reducing the focus on Futaba and Sojiro, but we can’t have everything.)

Speaking of Akechi, I really thought that Dark Sun dropped the ball with him. All of that buildup and they wrapped up the confrontation with him in less than ten minutes. You’d think with the huge focus on him, Dark Sun would have spent more time on that. Ah well, the anime is gonna wrap up in March and we’ll probably get more news on P5R then…
Final Days Of Summer

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves take Futaba to the beach, completing her training. The day after, Ken has a little story to tell to the Phantom Thieves...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Monday, August 29th, 2016

Ken woke up to Koromaru pouncing on him and licking his face.

“Haven’t had this treatment in a while,” Ken muttered as Koromaru happily lapped at his face. He then gently pushed Koromaru off of him (he was heavy). “Okay, okay, I’m up.”

Koromaru just sat on his haunches before letting out a bark.

“Don’t be too hard on Koro-chan.” Ken turned to see Fuuka-san standing at the door. “We’ll have to go to the station in about an hour.”

“I just would’ve liked to sleep in a little bit,” Ken grumbled before he dragged himself out of bed. “Though I won’t be surprised if the group chat goes off soon…”

Fuuka-san just giggled. “Koro-chan is an effective alarm clock.” She then turned to leave. “Shinji’s cooking breakfast right now, though. I’m going to go back to help him.”

After shooing Koromaru out of his room, Ken got dressed. He also packed a change of clothes, sunblock, and the other things he would need for the beach. Though he wasn’t sure if he should just go with a shirt all day… It was still pretty hot, but he hated the staring…

After he finished packing his duffel bag, he went back out. To nobody’s surprise, Koromaru was happily eating dog food, mixed with steak. Shinjiro-san really did spoil him…

“Morning, Ken,” Shinjiro-san greeted, setting down the last plate. Fuuka-san stood at the counter, pouring out tea. Ken helped her carry the cups to the table and then they sat down to eat.

He was still pretty tired, so he tuned out the conversation until…

“…be there when you talk to them.”

“What?”

Shinjiro-san looked at him flatly. “I want to be there when you talk to the Phantom Thieves.”
“You… You do?”

“I do,” Shinjiro-san affirmed. “You’re going to drop the bombshell that they’ve already met, what, half of the team already? Besides that, you don’t know if things won’t go south.”

“But-” Ken began to protest.

“Ken.” Shinjiro-san’s expression slightly softened. “I know that you trust them, but you have to think about their attitudes toward the police. They may trust you but they may not agree with Mitsuru and what she stands for.”

…He had a point.

“Okay.” Ken slowly nodded. “I’m planning on asking them to come tomorrow… Will that be okay for you, to skip work?”

“I’ll call in sick.” Shinjiro-san shrugged. “I’ll just not get paid that day then.”

“Good luck, you two,” Fuuka-san said softly. “I hope it goes well…”

“Thanks, Fuuka-san.” Ken smiled weakly.

Fuuka-san finished her breakfast first so she got up to herd the puppies and Hoshi into the carrier. Ken then leaned closer to his guardian. “You do realize that Minako-san is going to be mad when she sees no ring on Fuuka-san’s hand, right?”

Shinjiro-san rolled his eyes at Ken. “I’ll just point at the jeweler,” he said lowly. “The ring’s still being resized.”

“Hm? You say something, Shinji?” Luckily, Shinjiro-san was saved from having to answer because someone knocked on the door. Fuuka-san then frowned. “I wonder who that is….”

Ken got up to answer the door, revealing Makoto and Anne.

“Morning!” Anne cheered, already brimming with energy. “Since we all live in Shibuya, we thought we’d all head for the train station together-“ She then broke off, her eyes brightening at the sight of Koromaru. “Morning, Koro-chan!” She then knelt down, opening her arms to Koromaru. Koromaru bounded forward and happily licked her face. “Aw, you remember me!” she cooed, before scratching him behind the ear.

“You didn’t mention he was an albino,” Makoto commented, hesitating for a moment before kneeling down to pet him. She then jerked her hand away as Koromaru nosed it.

“It’s okay,” Ken said. “Koromaru is just trying to get to know you.”

Makoto just smiled sheepishly. “Oh…” A slight blush dusted her cheeks. “Sorry… I don’t have much experience with animals. The apartments we’ve lived in never allowed pets…”

“I’m so ready for the beach though!” Anne exclaimed, as both girls got to her feet. “Haven’t been since summer started and Makoto and I bought new swimsuits when we were getting one for Futaba!”

Makoto began to fidget. “I still don’t know about the swimsuit I got…”

“No, you’ll look great!” Anne contradicted. “It’s a modest one, as bikinis go too. Stop worrying!”
“I’m sure that you’ll look nice, Makoto,” Ken said, looking at her. “You always do, anyways.”

Makoto’s blush deepened, before she smiled hesitantly. “…Thanks, Ken.”

Koromaru then looked up, looked between him and Makoto, before barking.

“Huh?” Makoto blinked down at Koromaru. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Shinjiro-san said dryly. “Koro just has a lot to say.”

“Huh?”

“It’s nothing.” Fuuka-san then clapped her hands. “Come on, Koro-chan. We’ll have to put you in the carrier soon…”

Koromaru let out a soft whine, but he padded over to the carrier at Fuuka-san’s feet.

“Have fun at the beach, though!” Fuuka-san said.

“We will,” Anne chirped. “Thanks, Fuuka-san!”

The sun burned hot, forcing them to take cover under an umbrella. The boys had all changed into their swimsuits, but the wait for the women’s changing area was a lot longer so they were waiting for the girls to come back. Ken ended up taking off his shirt. He would take the cold over the heat any day…

Ren pressed a soda against his neck with a sigh. “Didn’t expect it to be this hot,” he grumbled. “I would’ve thought there’d be more of a breeze, with the ocean being right there.”

“For real,” Ryuji sighed, sucking on the topsicle he had bought earlier. “Dude, aren’t you hot?” he said, looking at Yusuke. “I know it’s a thin shirt but still… You’re making me feel hot just lookin’ at you…”

“It is not preferable, I’ll admit,” Yusuke said, “but I don’t like exposing myself too much.”

Ken shrugged. “It’s not like he can’t take it off later.”

“Yeah, that’s true-“

Ryuji was cut off by someone clearing their throat. “Sorry for the wait!”

Ren dropped his soda can as he laid his eyes on his girlfriend. “I’ve never seen such a stunning sight.”

Ken fought the urge to roll his eyes. At least they didn’t get handsy in front of everyone. Though he did have to pretend that Anne wasn’t checking Ren out too.

“Indeed, your swimsuit matched your bright and colorful personality,” Yusuke declared, framing Anne with his hands. “You look wonderful.”

Morgana purred. “You look stunning, Lady Anne! Absolutely meowvelous!”

Ken had to admit that Anne’s swimsuit did suit her, with the bright flowers splashed on the fabric. It showed off her figure pretty well too; Ken had a feeling that Ren would probably stick close to Anne for the most part.
And then Ken’s eyes were caught by Makoto. As Anne mentioned before, Makoto was wearing a more modest swimsuit, a white bikini top and a matching skirt. Anne made a good choice. Simple and elegant, a perfect fit for Makoto. It showed off her slim and toned figure… well.

…Wait, what was he thinking?

Though… Makoto was staring at him, shock in her eyes. Ken felt heat flush his cheeks as Makoto continued to stare at him. “Um… is something the matter?”

“How?” You would’ve thought that he had dumped a bucket of water on her head, judging how startled she looked. “I’m just… surprised. With how many… scars you have.”

Morgana tilted his head. “Hm… Makoto is right. I didn’t realize you had so many…”

“Well, he’s fought before.” Ryuji’s sudden poke made him jump. “Most of ‘em are pretty faded.”

“Can we please… not talk about this…” Ken muttered.

“This is perfect!”

Ken felt his shoulders slump in relief at Futaba’s interruption. And then… he actually saw her.

Futaba’s head was wrapped in a… towel. She was wearing a bathing suit, more on the cuter side, with frills, yellow with red polka dots. More suited for Futaba, the youngest out of all of them. But due to her being essentially blinded, she just stumbled forward, her arms flailing wildly.

“I think she needs perfect redefined,” Ryuji muttered.

“Come on now,” Makoto sighed, before walking over to Futaba. She began to unravel the towel, slowly unmasking Futaba “Don’t be shy! You look great.”

Futaba’s bright hair cascaded down her back, as she anxiously looked around. She didn’t seem to relax until Ren smiled to reassure her. “Like Makoto said… you look great, Futaba.”

She then smiled shyly, pink dusting her cheeks. “T-Thanks.”

They then headed towards the area they had set up, before Anne spoke. “There are a lot of people here today… Guess it makes sense since summer’s almost over.”

“Are you going to be okay, Futaba?” Ken asked, frowning. Maybe they should’ve done something else…

Futaba looked around, taking a step back as she took in all of the people. Then she squared her shoulders. “N-No… it’s okay.” She smiled shyly again. “Y-You guys are here.”

“Let’s have some fun!” Ryuji cheered. “But first… how ‘bout we eat first?”

“Always thinking with your stomach,” Anne teased, poking him in the side.

“Aw, quit that!” Ryuji swatted her hand away. “Unless you’ve got something else in mind, I just thought getting food would be the best way to go!”

“No, he’s right.” Yusuke shook his head. “The salty air is making me famished.”

…Somehow he got the feeling it wasn’t just the sea air.
Ryuji collected money from everyone (except for Yusuke), and repeated everyone’s orders. Then he paused, squatting in front of Morgana. “Morgana, what do you wanna eat?”

“Huh?” Morgana blinked up at him. “Um… grilled fish if you can find it?”

“Heh. Figures.” Ryuji patted him on the head, all while laughing. “I’m on it.”
Ren went with him to carry the orders, all while Futaba reached for the familiar bowl of ramen.

“Ramen again?” Ken sighed.

“It’s my staple food.”

…Okay, Shinjiro-san may have a point. Though with them finding out about everything, Shinjiro-san may insist on feeding her proper food himself…

Ren and Ryuji returned soon after, and passed out the food. They settled onto the blanket and dug in.

“Mm, I love the beach.” Anne let out a happy sigh. “There’s just something about it, you know? Sand between your toes, the ocean, the breeze…”

“Oh, can we rent a banana boat?” Futaba asked eagerly, a noodle hanging from the corner of her mouth, as she tugged onto Anne’s arm. “Pleaseee?”

“We’ll check it out,” Makoto promised.

“Whaaaat?” Ryuji groaned, hanging his head. “You’re seriously gonna ditch us?”

“Come on, we’ll do something as a group later.” Anne waved a hand. “A banana boat is pretty fun. We should help Futaba gain all these experiences!”

Ren looked between them. “You know… we have seven people,” he said thoughtfully. “Anyone up for beach volleyball later?”

“That sounds like fun,” Makoto smiled. “Though how would we divide the teams?”

“I’m referee,” Futaba announced. “I lack in stamina, so I would be the weak link.”

“Darn, I was hoping girls versus boys,” Anne sighed. “But hmm… How about me and Makoto, with Ken? I mean, both Ren and Ryuji are pretty athletic. And we all know that Yusuke’s pretty strong.”

“That sounds fair,” Yusuke said with a nod. “I look forward to this competition.”

Morgana just sighed, his ears drooping. “I wish I could do more…”

“Aw, Morgana…” Anne frowned. “Should we look for another activity?”

“No, no…” Morgana sighed. “I’ll just enjoy the food…”

…Poor Morgana. Even though Morgana’s attitude was aggravating sometimes, Ken couldn’t help but feel sorry for him.

After they finished eating, the girls got up to go pick up the banana boat. And it wasn’t long before Ryuji started complain.
“This sucks! I can’t believe they ditched us!”

“You’re acting like they up and left us for the rest of the day,” Ken said dryly. “Relax. It shouldn’t be that long.”

“Yeah, but…” Ryuji groaned. “Come on! Look at us! We’re practically celebrities now! We’ve made headlines!”

“Ryuji…” Ken hissed, shooting him a look.

“Okay, okay!” he huffed. “I just… We should be doing something fun too, dammit!”

 “…We could rent something to do in the water too?” Ken suggested.

“Nonono, you don’t get me, Ken!” Ryuji waved his hand wildly. “I’m talking about something fun with girls.”

“…He’s joking, right?” Ken knew it was a rhetoric question but there was a slight chance it was true. “…Please tell me he is.”

“I believe he is not,” Yusuke said.

“Come on, we’ve got some practice already!” Ryuji argued. “We could totally steal girls’ hearts! Anne, Makoto, and Futaba don’t get it… they just see us as guys, not men!”

“You do know I’m dating Anne now, right?” Ren said slowly.

“Dude, nobody could miss that-“

“So I can’t do that!” Ren exclaimed, all while staring at Ryuji.

“You could referee!” Ryuji countered. He clearly was keen on this idea.

But as for him…

Ken pressed a hand to his forehead. “That’s a no from me too,” he said flatly. “I have no interest in picking up girls.”

“Dude, are you serious?” Ryuji squinted at him, before his eyes lit up. “Oh man…” he shook his head, before he laughed, “it’s so freakin’ obvious.”

“Oh?” Yusuke raised an eyebrow. “What is?”

“You have your eye on someone, don’tcha?” Ryuji grinned wildly at him. “I mean, Ren’s got Anne, but you… you’re as free as a bird.” He jabbed a finger in Ken’s direction. “That’s why you don’t wanna go and pick up girls!”

“W-WHAT?!” Ken sputtered out, feeling his face grow hot. “I most certainly do not! I just don’t want to flirt with random girls!”

He remembered fighting the urge to grimace whenever his old friends had started talking about who was the cutest girl and them lamenting about how she was taken by someone. He wasn’t against being in a relationship. He just had no interest in something that came from purely physical attraction. What was the point if you just cared about how pretty your partner was? It just felt… shallow. And pointless. Maybe this was due to how most of his teammates were fortunate enough to find love when they were his age but…
“That’s a pretty intense denial, Ken,” Ren teased. “Though I’m kinda curious… what kind of girl is your type?”

“Do we really have to do this?” Ken knew that he was sorta whining, but just… whyyyy…

“How ‘bout you start, then, RenRen?” Ryuji nudged him in the side.

Ren just blinked, before a smile slowly curled at his lips. “I don’t have one.”

“…Wha?” Ryuji stared at him. “What are you talking ‘bout?”

“Dark hair, light hair, tall, short… they don’t matter to me.” Ren shrugged. “If I like someone… I like them.”

“Dude, that’s gotta be the most cliché thing to say.” Ryuji rolled his eyes. “What about Anne, then?”

“I guess I never told you but…” Ren shrugged. “You remember that we met when you saw Anne get into the car with Kamoshida, right? I took shelter under a store and Anne took cover there too. When she caught me staring… she just smiled. I had been in Tokyo for barely a day, but Anne was the first person to show me kindness since… the incident, if I’m being honest.”

As he talked, Ren’s smile turned adoring. Yeah, he was definitely besotted. He could give Kanji-san a run for his money.

…Hm. He wondered what Kanji-san would think of Ren. He knew that Kanji-san and Ryuji would get along, at least…

“Anne’s both strong and kind. I just like her.” Ren shrugged. “I can’t really pin what exactly about her that got my attention first. I like… all of her.”

“A well thought out response, Ren,” Yusuke chuckled. “Though I must concur with your line of thought. I do not have a personal preference for women, a ‘type’ as Ryuji put it. There are different kinds of beauty… but if I were to be in a romantic relationship, I would want them to inspire me… to be my Mona Lisa.”

“Mona… Lisa?” Morgana repeated.

“It’s a famous painting in the Louvre,” Yusuke explained. “Over the centuries, people have marveled over the mystery of her smile.”

“Like the Sayuri!” Morgana said. “Though that really does suit you, huh, Yusuke?”

“I can only aspire to create such a beauty as the Sayuri or the Mona Lisa…”

“What about you, Ryuji?” Yusuke asked.

“Don’t laugh… but…” Ryuji smiled sheepishly. “A kind, graceful girl who I can protect.” He then crossed his arms over his chest. “My dad… he was a piece of shit. He would take his anger out of Mom… and she’d protect me from getting hit…” He shook his head. “It was such a relief when he left,” he muttered. “I want to be the opposite of him. To always protect my girl… and always make her smile.”

“That’s…” Morgana’s voice was faint. “…That’s very thoughtful of you, Ryuji.” His ears drooped. “…I didn’t know the extent of how bad your dad was.”
“It ain’t easy to talk about, so how could you know?” Ryuji shook his head. “But yeah, it’s lame, isn’t it?”

“It’s not,” Yusuke said, frowning. “Though, that being said, I don’t think you’re going the right way about meeting a girl.”

“Aww, shuddup!” Ryuji swatted his shoulder. “But anyways, what ‘bout you, Ken? It’s your turn now!”

Ken frowned as he thought. He… honestly didn’t know. Minako-san… just what had he liked about her? He remembered that the first thing that had caught his attention was her hair. It had a summer day when he had met her, so the sun had shone on her hair, making the red in her hair gleam. And he had found himself admiring how cheerful she was, how she was able to lift everyone up with just a little remark, how brave she was, how powerful she was in battle… The list went on.

But… he didn’t know if that was something he just liked in general. Or was it because those were the parts that made up Minako-san, and he had liked her?

“I don’t know.” Ken shrugged. “I just know that I don’t really care about a specific hair or eye color.”

“Laaaame.” Ryuji groaned. “After we talked so much…”

“I’m telling you, I don’t know.”

“You know…” Morgana said slowly. “…The girls have been gone for a while. Maybe we should check up on them.”

“Yeah, let’s go~” Ren then blinked. “Um… where did Yusuke go?”

He had just… walked off. Maybe he got hit with some inspiration?

“Whatever, let’s find the girls first,” Ryuji said, waving his hand before he frowned. “I hope Futaba didn’t get overwhelmed…”

“Come on, Morgana.” Morgana nodded, before jumping onto Ren’s shoulder, curling his body around Ren’s neck to balance himself. Ren grimaced. “Not what I meant, but okay.”

They didn’t have to search for long before they heard Anne’s indignant voice. Ren’s mouth immediately tightened.

“Figures,” Ken sighed.

“I’m telling you, we’re here with friends!” Anne hissed out, before she stomped her foot. “So buzz off!”

Standing rather close to Anne and Makoto were two older men, their skin both a deep bronze color. Just looking at them caused warning bells to ring in Ken’s head.

Makoto put a restraining hand on Anne’s shoulder, before Anne could lose really lose her temper and let the two men really have it. Her element wasn’t fire for nothing, after all. “Anne’s right,” she said, her voice like steel. “If you will please excuse us, we’ve been making them wait for a while…”
The taller of the men grabbed Makoto’s wrist, making her flinch. “C’mon, baby, we just want to invite you and your pretty friend onto our boat. We’re having a party. Tons of celebs will be there, too.”

“Are you listening to us?!” Anne’s hands clenched into fists. She was probably ready to pop a punch at the rate these idiots were going.

Makoto’s smile was strained, as she yanked her arm free. “We really have to go-“

“Come on, we just want to have fun with you girls-“

Ren narrowed his eyes, before marching up to them. “Sorry for the wait,” he said, though Ken could tell that he was struggling to keep his voice casual. Though Ken couldn’t blame him. An older man was trying to hit on the girls and had… skeevy intentions.

He could see what Ren was doing, though… Making a scene would probably embarrass the girls.

“Yeah, how was the banana boat ride?” Ryuji kept his voice nonchalant. “Hope it was worth the money.”

“Where’s Futaba?” Ken asked.

“Huh, so you were right about being with friends…”

“That’s right,” Ren said coolly, before pointedly grabbing Anne’s hand and glaring at the two men. “You shouldn’t just assume that they’re lying.”

Anne squeezed Ren’s hand for a moment, before glaring at the two men. “That’s what we were saying from the start! “

“Tch.” He shook his head. “Are you bored spending all of your time with boys? Wouldn’t you enjoy spending time with men?”

“Men?” Makoto echoed, before narrowing her eyes. “Where? I don’t see any here.”

“Excuse me?” The men took a step towards Makoto, glaring, but Makoto just glared back.

“We have no interest in spending time with you,” she said coldly. “Do you understand now?”

“Or have your brains been fried by the tanning machines you obviously frequent?” Ken said dryly.

“How childish.” The taller of the men shrugged. “Fine. We’ll let the children play with children.”

Never mind that they kept creeping after two of the supposed children. Ken scoffed. That was just pathetic.

“Good riddance!” Anne didn’t bother waiting for them to walk out of earshot. Though judging by how she smirked at how they twitched at the jab, maybe she wanted them to hear it.

“Thank goodness…” Makoto breathed in relief, pressing a hand to her chest. “I thought they would never go away.”

Ken frowned. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Makoto reassured. “He didn’t even leave a mark on my wrist.”
“Those two seriously gave me Kamoshida vibes.” Ryuji scowled. “Uh… do you wanna go home then?”

“Ryuji’s right.” Morgana nodded. “It was an… unpleasant experience.”

“No.” Anne slipped her hand out of Ren’s, placing both of hers on her hips. “We’re here to have fun. We aren’t going to let two creeps ruin things.”

“I’m glad you’re okay.” Ren smiled at her. “Though you seemed like you were ready to pounce on them if they didn’t leave you two alone.”

“Kitty has claws,” Ryuji stage whispered.

Anne stuck her tongue out at him. “Sometimes you have to do what you have to do.”

“Speaking of that, where is Futaba?” Ken asked. “I hope she didn’t get lost in the crowd—”

“Inari, let me see!”

They all turned to see Yusuke and Futaba slipped out of the crowd. And surprise, surprise… they were arguing. And clutched tightly in Yusuke’s hands were…

“…Are those lobsters?” Makoto asked slowly.

Morgana’s eyes lit up, before he jumped off of Ren and bounded to Yusuke and Futaba. “Are you planned on roasting them?! Make them into sashimi?! Or make them into lo mein?”

…Morgana was drooling, wasn’t he?

“I think drawing them would be more likely,” Anne commented.

“Inari won’t let me see!” Futaba complained, before she tried to grab the lobster right out of Yusuke’s hand.

“Enough of your vile postulations!” Yusuke exclaimed, all while using his height advantage to hold the lobsters out of Futaba’s reach. “How dare you imply that I wish to eat them?! These are purely for the sake of visual appreciation!” His gaze turned adoring, and if he had a free hand, he’d probably be stroking them. “I had to have them… I haven’t been struck with such inspiration since I had laid eyes on Anne for the first time!”

“You’re comparing me to a lobster?!” Anne exclaimed, her eye twitching ever so slightly.

“Lady Anne is far more lovely than a lobster!” Morgana seconded.

“Well, you both do have red on ya,” Ryuji teased, quickly dodging Anne’s smack.

“Inari, I just wanna hold one!” Futaba then turned to Ken. “Ken, make him share!” she whined at him.

“Ken, make her stop!” Yusuke snapped. “I bought them with my own money! They’re mine! I won’t hand them over!”

…They were joking, right?

“Did he seriously just say that?” Morgana winced.
Yusuke definitely gave Chidori-san a run for her money, when it came to being eccentric…

Ken just facepalmed. “Since when am I the one in charge…? Shouldn’t you be turning to Ren?”

Ren just shrugged. “It’s not my fault you act more like a dad than me.”

“So I’m the dad now, am I?” Ken crossed his arms over his chest. “Then you’re both grounded.”

“What?” they chorused together, before Futaba pointed at him. “He started it!”

“No, you did!” Yusuke retorted.

“You are definitely grounded,” Ken announced, making Ren, Ryuji, and Anne burst into laughter. Makoto was more subtle about her amusement, holding a hand to her mouth to stifle her giggles, but her red eyes were dancing in amusement.

Good god. Sometimes he didn’t know how Yukari-san did it…

The setting sun painted orange hues in the sky, the golden rays making the ocean glow. They had really spent the whole day, playing in the water, sunbathing, and generally just enjoying themselves. It was nice after worrying about Medjed for so long.

“You know, I really haven’t had fun like this on the beach in the longest time,” Anne mused, gazing out at the sea. “I’ve been to a lot of beaches, when my parents took me with them on their travels… But there’s something about going to the beach, with your friends.”

“I haven’t been to one, before,” Ren said. “Where I live, you have to drive pretty far to go to the beach. And to my parents…” He shrugged. “…It just meant effort.”

Had Ren’s parents even bothered to contact since the transfer…?

“But enough about that…” Ren shook his head. “Sorry. Don’t wanna kill the mood.”

Ryuji slung an arm around Ren’s shoulder. “Man, don’t be. Your parents don’t know what they’re missing.”

Ken glanced over at Futaba, who was staring out at the sea. “…Is something wrong, Futaba?”

“You’ve done quite well today,” Yusuke chimed in. “You don’t seem bothered by the crowds at all.”

Futaba just cracked a grin, before flashing a victory sign. “Hehe! It seems that I’ve gone up ten levels! I’m ready to take on the rest!”

“So, basically the trip was a success,” Morgana said with a nod.

But then Futaba’s expression darkened. “But still… finding out the truth about my mom’s death…” She shook her head. “…It’s so overwhelming. For the past two years, I thought it was completely my fault…” She bit her lip, before wrapping her arms around her torso. “Everyone looked at me, thinking I was a murderer… I… I ended up hating this world. That’s why I shut myself in and covered my ears.”

“Futaba…” Anne looked down.
“It’d felt like… I wasn’t really awake. I’d wake up, hate myself for what happened to Mom… and go to sleep. Then the cycle would start all over again.”

Ken swallowed hard. He… really understood how Futaba felt. Not to her extreme but… he had felt there was no point in living.

“But you’re not like that, anymore,” Ren said quietly.

“No. I…” Futaba’s expression steeled. “You guys woke me up. You pulled me out of my nightmare. And I… I can’t forgive whoever killed her!” Her lip trembled for a moment. “…I really looked up to her. It was my aspiration to be like her…”

“What she studied…” Makoto folded her arms over her chest. “…It was called cognitive psience.”

Futaba closed her eyes. “The cognitive world can be distorted with desires,” Futaba recited. “If it becomes distorted… a person begins to exhibit problematic behavior in reality.” She then reopened her eyes, pacing the sand. “The cognitive world disappears when you remove its core… and further problematic actions stop.”

“That sounds like Palaces…” Anne said, her eyes wide. “So your mom was researching Palaces…?”

“No surprise there,” Ken said. “She quickly grasped the concept of Palaces due to her knowing about her mother’s research.” He met Futaba’s eyes. “…She must have been murdered because of it. I assume that she wanted to utilize it in some sort of therapy but… someone didn’t want that knowledge to get out.”

“But how could she know about the Metaverse?!” Morgana demanded. “Normal people… they can’t enter the Metaverse.”

“It’s a bit strange that you yourself recognized that your desires were distorted…” Yusuke commented. “Not many people come to that realization.”

“Still pretty crazy how you asked us to steal your heart…” Ryuji shook his head.

“You know, I didn’t believe you originally,” Futaba said. “I thought it was crazy… But then I overheard you talking about things in LeBlanc…” Ken narrowed his eyes at Futaba, which made her huff. “I know, I know! I did what I promised, okay? I deactivated the bug!”

This earned them a couple of weird looks, but they moved on. It turned out that Makoto’s sister Sae had been threatening Sakura-san. Her drive… was worrisome. Without a doubt, she would continue to look into this. And the true reason… why Futaba was so desperate for her heart to be stolen… was because she wanted to help Sakura-san.

“…In all honesty, I was surprised by your concern.” Futaba looked between all of them. “I didn’t think you would worry so much.”

“We’ve been in your situation, y’know,” Ryuji said. “Feeling helpless. Watching from the sidelines. We couldn’t let you go through the same thing.”

Futaba nodded. “Thank you. Um…” She bit her lip. “…I’ll be honest. I don’t want to go after changing people’s hearts. I want to learn about what happened to my mom… who wanted to steal her research so badly…”
“What do you mean?” Yusuke asked.
“I saw it in her notes… If you kill the self in the cognitive world, the self in the real world will lose consciousness.”

Morgana gasped. “Then… mental shutdowns…”

It was just like Apathy Syndrome…

“That was what Sis mentioned before…” Makoto said slowly. “And Kaneshiro had mentioned a person in a black mask…”

“The criminal who was abusing the Metaverse,” Yusuke finished. “Hm… it appears that the puzzle pieces are assembling themselves.”

“Yeah.” Futaba nodded, before her eyes suddenly looked faraway. “Before my mom died… she didn’t seem right. She had gone all quiet… and wouldn’t respond, even when I pulled on her arm. And she… didn’t throw herself into the street, so the car would run her over. It was more that she fell…”

He remembered that flashback of sorts in the Palace… All of this… was disturbing. Strega had taken advantage of the Dark Hour to murder people… but this was on a new level. The mental shutdowns… were disguising something.

“What happened to your mom’s research though?” Anne asked. “It was destroyed, according to Boss.”

Futaba shook her head. “No. It’s worse than that. All evidence of Mom’s research was wiped away. Like she never conducted it in the first place.” Her hands balled into fists. “…It was them, I know it. The men in black… who read out the fake suicide note to me.”

That was just cruel of Shido… It wasn’t enough to orchestrate Isshiki-san’s death. He had to torture Futaba too…

“If I can stay with you guys… I’m sure I’ll be able to find out what happened.” She then looked at them nervously. “…Is that okay? If I have a personal reason for this…?”

“No.” Ren put a hand on her shoulder, making her jump a little. “We all had personal reasons to fight back. You’re the same as us, Futaba.”

“And you helped us out a lot already in the one fight you’ve been in,” Ken said. “You’ve earned your place, Futaba.”

“We do need to come with a code name for you, though,” Morgana piped up. “If you really want to join us.”

Futaba tilted her head. “A code name?”

“It was Morgana’s idea,” Anne explained. “It’s not cool to use our real names.”

“How about… PC?” Ren offered, but the shit eating grin he was wearing made it obvious that he was messing around.

Futaba scrunched up her nose. “It’s not funny to offer such a dumb name,” she huffed. “Hmm…” She tilted her head, before her eyes lit up, before flashing a victory sign. “Call me… Oracle. With
“Of course!” Anne giggled. “Not even Ren has a Persona that can do what you did.”

“Hey!” Ren protested.

“Anne’s got a point there, RenRen!”

“Stop ganging up on me,” Ren grumbled, sulking even when Anne gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

“There’s also something I want to say…” Ken said hesitantly. They were all here… He would have to bite the bullet some time.

“What’s up?” Ren asked.

“The truth is… I want to tell you everything about what happened to me, how I awakened to my Persona…” Ken said.

“Here?” Yusuke looked bewildered.

“No…” Ken bit his lip. “…Are you guys free tomorrow? This will be a lengthy conversation…”

“I’m game,” Ren said, only to be seconded by everyone else.

This was it… Tomorrow he would lay out the truth.

Tuesday, August 30th, 2016

“What do you think that Ken wants to talk to us about?” Morgana asked. “He looked… nervous.”

“Who knows?” Ren shrugged. “Though if you ask me… I don’t think Ken’s had a very happy childhood.”

From what Ken had told him, and what he had inferred with some of the things Ken has said… It didn’t paint a super happy picture.

“But can you really say that about any of us?” Morgana pointed out.

 “…Touché,” he acknowledged, before he glanced over at Futaba. “…You know anything?”

“Uh… a little.” Futaba looked up at him. “From what I’ve seen from hacking.”

“When did he talk to you about the bug, though?” Ren asked.

“A few days ago,” Futaba said. “He said it was an invasion of privacy, so I shouldn’t wiretap LeBlanc anymore…”

“Well, it kinda is,” Ren said dryly.

Futaba stuck her tongue out at him. “Though this is a pretty fancy place! Ken must be loaded.”

“He mentioned to me this is on loan from a friend of his guardian, actually.”

“Huh…”
“Morning, guys!” Anne greeted, before pecking Ren on the cheek. “Should we head up now?”

“Yeah, let’s do it.”

They rode up the elevator, before Makoto knocked on the door. But Shinjiro-san opened the door… not Ken.

“Aragaki-san?” Yusuke frowned. “What are you-“

“Ken will explain,” he said coolly, before stepping aside.

They filed in, before Ken stood up from the loveseat. “Good morning, everyone.”

“Ken, what’s this about…?” Ren asked. “Why is Shinjiro-san…?”

“Uh…” Ken swallowed hard. “…Sit down. I have a lot to explain.” Ken waited for them to get comfortable before speaking again. “But to start out with… you were wondering how Futaba’s mother knew about the Metaverse… but I think that’s not exactly the case. She knew about Shadows and Personas, before researching cognitive psience.”

“And how would you know that?” Makoto frowned.

“I know… because she worked for the Kirijo Group originally, researching Shadows.”

“WHAT?!”

“The Kirijo Group researched Shadows?!” Yusuke exclaimed. “I’ve heard that the current CEO has taken a different direction compared to her predecessors but…”

“Is that why my mom would go see Mitsuru Kirijo then…?” Futaba asked. “She worked for the Kirijo Group?”

“Isshiki used to, but she left before you were born,” Shinjiro-san answered. “No clue why. Might have been she wanted to go in a different direction with her research, she didn’t work well with the head… Only she would know the answer.”

“How would you know that, though…?” Makoto frowned. “Futaba’s fifteen… and you’re twenty-five or so…”

“Yeah, you’re not that old,” Ryuji said, making Ken snort quietly.

“Isshiki came back, a couple years after Mitsuru took charge of the Kirijo Group,” Shinjiro-san said, before he grabbed one of the throw pillows and casually smacking Ken with it.

Ren then frowned. “But… what’s this got to do with how you got your Persona?”

“I was getting to that…” Ken replied, before he dragged his fingers through his hair. “It started on December second, 1999…”

Ken talked for a long time. He explained how the Kirijo Group didn’t just research Shadows, but they experimented on them… How the experiments led to an explosion, creating the phenomena they called the Dark Hour… and a place crawling with Shadows… Tartarus.

“The Kirijo Group seriously created this whole mess?!” Ryuji demanded. “Maybe the person who asked for a hit on Mitsuru Kirijo was right…”
“Mitsuru isn’t her grandfather, Sakamoto,” Shinjiro-san snapped, the sharpness in his voice make everyone look at him in shock. (Well, except for Ken.) “She gave up her childhood, to try and reverse the mistakes her family had made.”

“So… she’s got a Persona too…” Futaba said slowly. “Just… how many of them are there?”

Shinjiro-san sighed. “Countless, kid. And probably more that we don’t even know of.”

“Hey, I’m not a kid!” Futaba protested.

“That’s what you focus on…?” Morgana sighed. “Perhaps you really are a child…”

“Zip it, kitty!”

Shinjiro-san just smirked in her direction. “Look, you’re fifteen. Younger than me when I got my Persona. You’re a kid.”

“Meanie,” Futaba grumbled.

“Not helping your case there.”

“So… let me get this straight,” Makoto interjected, turning her gaze onto Ken. “The Kirijo Group created an actual Shadow nest on the island… then why didn’t people evacuate…?”

“The human mind’s a powerful thing.” Ken bit his lip. “…Mitsuru-san’s father didn’t die from an illness.”

He… didn’t? Though Ren hadn’t paid attention to the news coverage about that, seeing that he was ten.

“They built Gekkoukan on top of where the experiments took place,” Shinjiro-san continued, “to try and mask it.”

“You seriously went a school that would sprout Shadows?!”

“I didn’t… but my senpai did.”

…Wait a minute.

“That’s what you were saying?” Ren stared at him. “That you met your senpai because of the Shadows running around on Port Island?” He then turned to stare at Shinjiro-san. “What the hell?! How old was he when he got his power?”

“Eleven,” Ken said reluctantly.

“Eleven?” Anne whispered, her eyes wide. “But you were just…”

“…A kid,” Ken finished for her. “…I know.”

“That’s not all, Amamiya,” Shinjiro-san said flatly. “There’s more. A lot more.”

The experiment… apparently Death had been separated into thirteen different entities. But the thirteenth, the one called Death was forcibly sealed away. Into a little boy.

But years passed by. Mitsuru Kirijo had awakened to her Persona first, and reached out to Akihiko Sanada, Shinjiro-san’s best friend since childhood, when they were both in middle school. He had
accepted it, but Shinjiro-san thought it was too dangerous, so he went after them. It turned out he had the ability too. They had formed the group SEES, dedicated to investigating Tartarus.

“So… you can determine the ‘potential’ in people?” Makoto seemed intrigued by the idea. “…How?”

“Well…” Ken swallowed hard, his eyes darting back and forth. “…Our means of summoning is um… different. Very different.”

“What do you mean?” Yusuke asked.

Ken gestured to the coffee table, where a silver briefcase sat on. “You should open it.”

Ren frowned, but reached out and picked up the briefcase. He undid the latches, revealing a red armband marked S.E.E.S. The only other thing inside was a… silver gun.

No… way… Ren just stared in horror, a pit forming in his stomach.

Makoto sharply inhaled. “You… You can’t be serious,” she choked out, pressing a hand against her mouth for a moment. “You can’t tell me that you…?” Makoto trailed off, before she bit her lip. She didn’t want to say it. He didn’t really blame her.

He didn’t know if he could do it now.

Ken closed his eyes, remaining silent for a moment. The silent yes hung in the air. “In order to summon in our circumstances, you… have to accept death,” Ken said, opening his eyes again. “That it comes to us all.”

“You were a child,” Morgana breathed out. “How could you…?”

It was because of his mother’s death. It had to be. No child… should have to go through that. Except… Ken’s childhood was stolen from him.

“So… you, Kirijo-san, and Akihiko-san fought Shadows for a while?” Anne said hesitantly, looking at Shinjiro-san, which only made them stiffen.

“…It was Mitsuru and Aki for a while,” Shinjiro-san said finally. “I left… after Ken’s mother died…”

“Ohhh right…” Ryuji said. “You mentioned that he was there when your mom died, right, Ken?”

“…Yes,” Ken said, after a moment of hesitation. “But anyways… as Shinjiro-san said, it was Mitsuru-san and Akihiko-san for a while. But then Yukari-san-“

“She’s one, too?” Futaba blurted out.

“Does this mean that Fuuka-san is one, too, then?” Yusuke asked.

“Yes, to both,” Ken answered. “Yukari-san’s abilities are a lot like Morgana, wind and healing, and Fuuka-san was our navigator.”

Ken then explained how Akihiko-san’s now wife, Minako, and her twin brother, Minato, returned to Port Island after ten years of moving around. How they awakened to their Personas, after the dorm was attacked by a large Shadow… and their Wild Card ability.

“There’s seriously more like Ren?” Morgana demanded.
“Translation?” Shinjiro-san said dryly, looking down at Ken.

“You know that Morgana can talk?” Anne blinked at him.

Shinjiro-san shrugged. “Ken told me. It’s not the weirdest thing I’ve seen.”

Ryuji squinted at Ken. “…And that would be?”

“Not important to the story right now.” Ken dismissed, with a wave of his hand. “It would just… deviate from what we’re getting at. Another time. And well…” Ken eyed him, before he smiled wryly. “…I can honestly say that there’s nobody like Ren.” Then he turned to Shinjiro-san. “He was just asking if there really are more people like Ren.”

“I’m unique,” Ren said simply. “There’s only one of me.”

Joking aside, he didn’t think that there would be more like him… What were they like? Were they the leaders of their groups too? The idea of other Persona-user groups was just… too much… to wrap his head around.

And a group of Persona-users… hiding it in the shadows. Where were they when all of this started…?

Ken then moved on to explain that these large Shadows would appear at every full moon. How SEES had made it their mission to eliminate these Shadows, to hopefully eliminate the Dark Hour.

It made too much sense. Some of the things Ken had said, the way he had acted, the vibe Ren had gotten that he had seen far more than a kid their age should’ve.

“This is the case of Apathy Syndrome, isn’t it?” Makoto asked quietly. “What Sis asked you before…”

Ken bit his lip. “It’s… complicated. Your sister does not know of Shadows and Personas.” His gaze lowered to the ground. “People had forgotten all about Apathy Syndrome, what had went down during that year… We had nearly forgotten.”

“What is Apathy Syndrome?” Anne asked hesitantly. “This is the first time I’ve heard of the phrase…”

“No surprise, there,” Shinjiro-san said dryly. “You were ten when it was eliminated.”

“Apathy Syndrome was noted by the media for only affecting residents on Port Island,” Ken explained. “We called the people who suffered from it the Lost. When you’re first inflicted… you would collapse and lapse into a vegetative state.”

“It was like a half-life,” Shinjiro-san picked up from Ken. “You were alive and breathin’, but you couldn’t move, eat, or take care of yourselves.”

Futaba curled into herself, drawing her knees to her chest and wrapping her arms around her legs. A soft whimper escaped her lips. “Like Mom…”

“Futaba…” Anne scooted closer to Futaba, and wrapped an arm around her. Futaba leaned in closer to the touch, offering Anne a smile in thanks.

“…Like the mental shutdowns,” Yusuke added. “The mere idea of this happening before is just…”

“Insane?” Ren offered.
"I was thinking ludicrous, but that does suffice," Yusuke chuckled, only for it to quickly fade away.

"But… how?" Morgana asked. "From what you’ve described, there’s no Shadow selves there."

"Normally, people are protected from Tartarus and the Dark Hour by changing into coffins… but sometimes people are called to Tartarus by Shadows. Their psyches would be eaten by Shadows, and that’s what left them as a shell."

"That’s still so freaky," Ryuji muttered. "Seriously, if you didn’t have a Persona, you turned into a coffin?!"

God, no wonder Ken didn’t even flinch with the thing at Sojiro’s house. It seemed like Ken had seen worse. Much worse. Ren couldn’t help but shudder. He was glad that he hadn’t become a Persona-user until this year now. The Dark Hour just seemed like… the stuff of nightmares.

"Though… there was the matter of why… I joined SEES. My Persona wasn’t always Kala-Nemi."

"Your Persona… wasn’t always—" Morgana cut himself off. "…Just what do you mean by that?"

"A Persona is a facet of yourself," Ken said. "So… you have to go through a significant change for your Persona to shift into another. When I first joined SEES… my Persona was Nemesis."

"Nemesis?" Anne tilted her head. "Doesn’t that mean ‘enemy’?"

"No… that’s not what he means." Makoto shook her head, her eyes darkening. "What Ken is referring to is Nemesis, the Greek goddess of vengeance."

*Two years after my mother’s death… the one responsible was shot. But… it didn’t make me feel better. But because of that… I forced myself to move on. My mother would’ve wanted me to live, not hung over her death.*

God. Ken wasn’t kidding when he said he was in a bad place when he was younger.

"Someone in SEES… murdered your mom… didn’t they?" Ren choked on the word ‘murder’, but he forced it out. "And the Kirijo Group. They’re the one who covered up the truth about her death… weren’t they?"

"It was…" Ken winced, "an accident. I didn’t understand the full story at the time…"

"An accident…" Makoto repeated. "You can’t tell me that you forgave them…? I know that you shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, but…"

Shinjiro-san’s expression was… unreadable, though he had gone completely tense. "Who said he’s dead?" He then looked at Ken. "…Did you tell them that he’s dead?"

"No, I just… said that they were shot…” Ken looked uneasily up at him.

Shinjiro-san then sighed. That was a big one. "Fuck it," he muttered. "Ken, I know that you’re just worried ‘bout what they’ll think of me, but you can’t keep beating around the bush." He rubbed his face. "My Persona wasn’t the most stable thing when I was sixteen. I lost control of it during an outing with Aki and Mitsuru, and we were in a residential area."

A Persona could be… unstable? That didn’t make any sense to him. Though he supposed it could
Shinjiro-san’s cheeks tinged with pink. “Jeez… you don’t have to put it like that…” he muttered.

Ren couldn’t help but snicker. He didn’t know why but it was too funny to see him getting embarrassed. Then Shinjiro-san glowered at him.

Makoto sharply inhaled. “You mentioned that your mother’s murderer got shot before… he did that to protect you, didn’t he?”

“…Yes.”

Ken and Shinjiro-san explained about Strega, how the Kirijo Group had rounded up orphans to experiment on to see if they could combat Shadows. How the Kirijo Group had developed the drugs in the first place, since Strega’s Personas were forced unnaturally, and would attempt to kill them if they didn’t keep taking the drugs. Ten years of having to take those drugs… and it was slowly killing them.

And how the ringleader, Takaya, wasn’t too enthusiastic about SEES wanting to get rid of the Dark Hour. And he wanted to stop them.

“I… had called Shinjiro-san out on October fourth, the night of the full moon,” Ken said. “It was the second anniversary of Mom’s death. I wanted to confront him… about Mom. But I felt so conflicted. I had seen what Shinjiro-san was like. I felt like I had no choice… I had only pushed myself to live because I had convinced myself that the only point of me living was to avenge Mom.”

Ken then fell silent, his expression growing dark.

This was just… unexpected. He had known that Ken had been in a bad place, as a kid. He had. But
to this extent?

Were there other kids like him? Who felt that they were pushed to the brink and felt like that they only could do one thing?

...Wasn’t this what Shiho had felt?

“Takaya showed up during all of this,” Shinjiro-san said. “He wanted to kill us both, but not before finding out just who was determining the locations of the Shadows.”

A strangled gasp escaped Anne. “That was… Fuuka-san, wasn’t it?”

Fuuka-san was a petite woman. And she was so nice. She couldn’t hurt a fly. And yet… this Takaya guy wanted to kill her…?

“So Ken trying to be all noble, tried to claim that he was the navigator.” Shinjiro-san stared at Ken. “…And Takaya tried to shoot him.”

“But you got in the way,” Makoto guessed.

“Shot right in the chest.” Shinjiro-san smiled sardonically, lightly touching his chest. “If Minako hadn’t found my old pocket watch, I probably would’ve died that night.”

…He understood what Ken was talking about. Why Ken was willing to forgive the one responsible for his mother’s death… He was willing to atone with his life.

But… the Kirijo Group still made him feel uncomfortable. The way they had manipulated the scenes… it reminded him all too much of his accuser.

Ken then took over, since Shinjiro-san fell into a coma after that, explaining how they were tricked about the full moon Shadows, how that would instigate a doomsday where everyone would become like the Lost.

It was just… unbelievable. That Ken had made the resolution to fight, even if he had died trying. And their leader, Minato Arisato, had died to defeat Death.

“But… your leader died?” Anne said feebly. “He died… to protect the world?”

Ren reached out, grabbing her hand and squeezing it tightly. Anne looked up, giving him a little smile. He… He honestly didn’t know if he would have the strength to pretend that everything was okay, knowing that he would have to leave his loved ones soon…

But… the Kirijo Group was why he had Death sealed in him in the first place. How could any of them forgive that…?

“…He did,” Ken said quietly.

“He was so young…” Makoto muttered, before her hands twisted the hem of her shirt. “He’s… the twins’ father, isn’t he?”

Ken just answered with a little nod.

That explained… a lot. Why Ken had been on the defensive when Yusuke had unintentionally forced Yukari-san to admit that she was an unmarried mother.

“He was our age.” Ryuji’s voice cracked, before he shook his head. He stared down at his lap.
“That… That’s effed up, man.”

“But what are the Shadow Operatives?” Futaba asked.

What he wanted to know was how Futaba knew… Oh, wait. How she always did. By hacking.


“The Shadow Operatives were founded by Mitsuru-san in 2011.” Ken began, “Its purpose was to deal with Shadows on a larger scale. It took Mitsuru-san a year to finally get the government to agree to setting it up. We have different sectors all over Japan. Well…” Then he pursed his lips together. “Mostly now…”

“They’re government?” Anne asked in disbelief.

“A secret organization tied to the government but… yeah.”

In all honesty, Ren did not trust the government. The system they enforced was broken as hell. He was just one example of that. Why would they choose to ally with the government?

“But… what happened?” Makoto asked, pressing her hand to her mouth as she thought. “The way you talk…” she lowered her hand, looking straight at Ken, “…it sounds like some of them were shut down.”

“Just one,” Shinjiro-san answered. “Tokyo’s sector was shut down completely.”

“But… why?” Yusuke frowned. “Tokyo is no doubt the largest but… what motive would the government have?”

“Would they even get what Shadows are?” Ryuji shook his head. “I know that I would’ve called you crazy if I hadn’t seen this shit with my own eyes.”

“Good thing you aren’t most people,” Morgana ribbed, making Ryuji glare at him.

“It’s not the government who orchestrated the shutdown,” Shinjiro-san said flatly. His eyes then flicked to Futaba, before he nodded in her direction. “…It was the guy who ordered the hit on her mom. Mitsuru had also wanted Ken to see what his next move was.”

“Mom…?” Futaba stared at Shinjiro-san. Her voice was almost fevered when she spoke again. “You know who killed my mom?!”

“His name is… Masayoshi Shido.” Shinjiro-san made a scoffing sound. “He’s always going on and on about reshaping Japan to a better country, but it’s a load of shit. He doesn’t give a damn about anyone but himself.”

“A politician, huh…” Ren scowled.

Just like him.

“So… the Shadow Operatives were blocked from action…” Yusuke narrowed his eyes. “…So they sent you.”

“Even though this Shido guy seemed pretty dangerous…?” Anne shook her head. “And there’s the guy behind the mental shutdowns… Weren’t they worried…?”

“Of course we were,” Shinjiro-san snapped, before Ken could say anything. “Look, Mitsuru didn’t
force Ken into it. He wanted to do it. I sure as hell wasn’t encouraging him to take it.”

Shinjiro-san didn’t want Ken to do this…? He wondered why.

“It felt wrong… to look away,” Ken said quietly. “Mitsuru-san assumed that I would just be doing… reconnaissance. Just sneaking around and keeping an eye on you.”

“That’s why you were trying to ask me about them, the day we met,” Makoto said quietly.

Ren felt a pit form in his stomach. That was right. If he was sent here to look into the Phantom Thieves… He looked between his friends. They… didn’t know what to think of it. He could see it in his eyes.

“Was everything a lie, Ken?” Ren demanded. “You wanting to join the Phantom Thieves… was it just to…?” Ren’s voice broke off, as his free hand tightened over his knee.

He couldn’t say it. He didn’t want to think about it. He was backstabbed by the law. His parents turned their backs on him. His so-called friends wanted nothing to do with him. He couldn’t bear another betrayal.

“No!” The strength in Ken’s voice made Ren look up. Ken’s eyes were wide with panic. “No… I’d never…” Ken’s voice broke. “I… I wasn’t entirely truthful about why I was in the Metaverse. I glossed over a lot of things, but I did not lie about empathizing with you and your goals. I did not lie about wanting to join you, I swear it!”

Ren stared at him. Sincerity shone in his eyes, even as his body went all rigid. And his nervousness when they first came in…

He could’ve kept quiet if he had ill intentions. He should have, if he just cared about relaying their plans. But… he didn’t. He wanted all of them to know the truth.

“I believe you, Ken,” Ren said softly.

Ken sagged against the chair in relief. “…Thank you.”

“Seriously, man… this is just…” Ryuji shook his head. “I wouldn’t have expected this. In a million years. But…” Then he smiled. “…I believe ya. You wouldn’t have bothered to actually hang out with us, if you just cared ‘bout spying on us.”

Futaba then spoke. “I’m the rookie, but… You wouldn’t have said those things to me, if you just were here to spy. You wouldn’t have run to me when my fake memories were coming at me. And… you told me who’s responsible for my mom dying…” Futaba’s hands clenched into fists, but when she looked up, her smile was bright. “I believe you, too.”

“You wouldn’t go out of your way to bring me meals if you did not care.” Yusuke smiled, before shaking his head. “Truth be told, I would be more shocked if we hadn’t just come out with an encounter with a hacker.”

“Yeah… seriously.” Anne smiled at Ken. “I’m guessing you were the one pushing Ren to go for it with me. You wouldn’t bother talking to us, besides the Phantom Thief work, if you just were relaying everything to Kirijo-san. You wouldn’t have worried so much about Futaba, so determined to help her if you didn’t care.”

“Ken…” Makoto met his gaze. “…You know, you were the first one to be nice to me, for the longest time,” she said quietly. “It was just a simple act but it’s stuck in my mind since then…
And… everyone else basically said it.” She let out a chuckle. “And besides that, you coming out with the truth is telling. You didn’t want any secrets between us…” For some reason, Makoto smiled sadly.

“You really know how to lay on the sap, don’t you?” Shinjiro-san said dryly. “…But I’m glad. I know that you have Ken’s back.”

Ken just… stared at all of them for a long time. “I… thank you.” His voice cracked, as he shook his head. “I… I can’t tell you how much this means to me.” He then closed his eyes for a moment. “…There’s one last thing though.”

“Oh, really?” Ren couldn’t help but joke a little after all of these bombshells. “What, have you had a run in with the black masked guy Kaneshiro mentioned?”

“…Actually, yes.”

“WHAT?!”

Morgana jumped right into Ken’s lap, pressing his paws against it. “Who?! And why did you keep all of these secrets?”

“Morgana’s right, you know.” Ren looked at him. “Why…?”

“Would you have believed me if I had straight out told you?” Ken asked, raising an eyebrow. He shook his head. “…I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I should have mentioned all of this earlier.” He pressed a hand to his forehead. “Though to be honest, I can’t tell you much. Except that he’s strong. He triggered me being able to use Kala-Nemi in the Metaverse but… I was no match for him. He was strong and fast… I had to use the environment to get the advantage and escape.”

That was… bad. Ken had the edge on them when they had first explored Futaba’s Palace, though they had eventually caught up in abilities. But if Ken was no match for him… there was no way that they were.

“What do you…” Ryuji gaped at him. “Holy shit, you’re the one who wrecked the alley?!”

“That was him, not me,” Ken said. “I just egged him on to do it.”

“That means…” Anne gasped. “You literally dropped a pile of bricks on him!”

“Um… guys?” Makoto interjected. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What do you mean?”

“It means that this Persona-user… knows of us too,” Yusuke said grimly. “Am I correct in that is your line of thought?”

“Yes…” Makoto frowned. “This is concerning… It means that he could be watching our every move.”

Futaba shivered. “D-Don’t put it like that…” she muttered. “That means… he was crawling in my mind too…”

“I’m sorry, Futaba…”

“So… what’s our next move then?” Ryuji asked. “We go after this Shido guy?”
“We have to!” Futaba leapt to her feet. “I want him to pay for what he did to Mom!”

“Hold on a minute!” Makoto’s eyes were wide with panic. “Futaba, I understand how you’re feeling. I do… But we can’t act rashly. Acting rashly just creates… a whole mess.”

“And what do you mean by that?” Shinjiro-san narrowed his eyes at Makoto. “You talk like you’re experienced with that.”

Makoto just winced. “I rather not talk about it…”

“Makoto’s right, though,” Ren interjected. “If this guy’s powerful enough to shut down something connected to the Kirijo Group…” He then sighed. “…And in all honesty, after hearing all about the crap the Kirijo Group pulled, I’m not sure if I can’t take Kirijo’s word for it.”

Ken and Futaba both looked ready to protest, but Ren held up a hand.

“I’m not saying no, okay?” Ren said. “I just want to look more into it, before we decide whether or not we’ll target this Shido guy. We can’t swing in all gung-ho.”

“And… that’s not all we have to worry about…” Makoto sighed. “Sis’s been working on the case investigating us. We’ll have to figure out what to do with that…”

“Your sister’s investigating into this?” Shinjiro-san frowned. “Hasn’t she been suspicious about you?”

Makoto shook her head. “She… practically lives at the precinct…”

“Kinda got that vibe when I met her at the station,” Shinjiro-san muttered.

“Oh…” Makoto frowned. “…I hope she didn’t bother you or anything.”

Shinjiro-san glanced in Ken’s direction and then Makoto’s, a little snort escaping him. What was that about? “It was nothing. Nothing important, at least.”

“Oh. I’m glad about that at least…” Makoto looked puzzled, but she seemed to shrug about that. She then stood up, smoothing down her clothes. “But um… thank you for having us… But we shouldn’t intrude any longer…”

“You’re here. Might as well feed you for giving us, what, two, three hours of your time?” As if his words had just reminded his stomach it was lacking food, Ren’s stomach let out a growl.

“More like Shinjiro-san wants to feed you ‘proper’ food,” Ken muttered.

Shinjiro-san grabbed a throw pillow again and smacked Ken on the head.

“Ren… did you really mean what you said?”

Her boyfriend just raised an eyebrow. “You’re going to have to be more specific about that, Anne.”

“It’s just…” Anne shook her head, pursing her lips together. “…Crazy,” she admitted. “Ken being a secret agent, all of Ken’s senpai being Persona-users…” She sighed. “I was asking about… Ken.”

“I trust Ken,” Ren said simply. “What about you?”
“I do,” Anne said. “If he had joined us to just spy on us, he wouldn’t be concerned with Futaba. He wouldn’t go out of his way to feed Yusuke. He wouldn’t spend time with us the way he has.”

“I don’t trust the Shadow Operatives as a whole, though,” Ren said flatly. “Them choosing to be a government subunit... all the crap they pulled, the experiments...” He shook his head. “It’s like a huge conspiracy.”

“I don’t know if we can trust Ken,” Morgana said. “He’s been keeping all of this to himself...”

“He wouldn’t have come out and told us if he was looking to backstab us, Morgana,” Ren pointed out.

“...Yeah.” Anne wrapped her arms around herself. “I just can’t believe...” She choked on a sob, as tears began to well up in her eyes.

“Lady Anne!” Morgana’s voice was filled with panic. “D-Don’t cry!”

She had known that Yukari-san had loved and lost. Not too many girls would have kept a baby while in high school still. But to that kind of extent... She didn’t know how Yukari-san had the strength to move on.

“Anne?” Ren gently touched her shoulder. “I’m here. I’m still here.”

“I... I know.” Anne bit her lip, before she wiped at her eyes. “I just... poor Yukari-san... She had lost her dad, and just around the time she came to terms to her death... she lost her boyfriend...”

It wasn’t just her. SEES seemed to have all kinds of sad stories.

“I can’t believe that Ken had carried all of this for so many years...” she muttered. She smiled weakly. “…Guess you didn’t expect this when you came to Tokyo, huh...?”

“No,” Ren admitted, before he brushed a stray strand of hair out of her eyes. “…But I don’t regret it. I wouldn’t have met any of you guys.” He huffed out a laugh. “Maybe if I ever find the guy who got me in this whole mess... I’ll thank him.”

Anne managed a weak giggle. “Maybe I will, too. I wouldn’t have met you if it wasn’t for all of this, after all.”

“Though I think Makoto has a point... with Sae. We’ll have to look into things with Shido but... Sae’s on our tail. We’ll have to figure out what she’s looking into exactly...”

Anne hummed. “Makoto will be in charge of that, then.”

“Yeah, Futaba says she’s gonna work on... something.”

“...Right,” Morgana muttered. “She’s really looking to prove herself immediately...”

Anne frowned in his direction. Morgana had been doubting himself lately... She would have to talk to Ren in private... somehow... about this sometime soon. Morgana seemed even more down because of Ken revealing everything. Was it because Morgana had taught them about stealing Treasures in the first place? But if that was the case... Morgana had nothing to worry about. Ken didn’t seem interested in a leader role. He seemed content in letting Ren do his thing.

Anne giggled. “Guess you can’t take the hacker out of Futaba, huh?”

“Yeah...” Since they were standing right in front of her apartment door, Ren just leaned forward
and kissed her. “I’m not going to leave you, Anne,” he said quietly, cupping her cheek as he gazed into her eyes. “I promise.”

Anne smiled weakly. “…Thank you, Ren. I’ll see you soon, right?”

“Of course.” Ren cracked a grin as he pulled away. “I mean, school’s starting in two days.”

Anne groaned, before she hung her head. “Ugh… don’t remind me!” she whined.

Ren just chuckled, shaking his head. “I missed sitting behind you, you know.”

Anne lightly swatted his arm. “You’re so silly sometimes!” she giggled.

“I’m called Joker for a reason, you know.” Ren grinned. “See ya, Anne.”

He then strolled away, as Morgana scolded him for mentioning his codename out in public. Anne just watched him go with a goofy smile. Sometimes she couldn’t believe that he liked her back…

Anne shook her head, before digging out her keys and unlocking the door. It was her caretaker’s night off, so Anne just flopped onto the couch. What a day. It hadn’t even completely sunk in…

Finding out about Ken, the truth behind how he gained his Persona… and finding out just who killed Futaba’s mother. But even then, Ren had a point. Could the Shadow Operatives be trusted? They seemed kinda shady…

Ken trusted them but… there was a lot they didn’t know. They would have to judge this Shido with their own eyes.

 Somehow… she got the feeling that things were going to get a lot crazier…

Chapter End Notes

Okay, this is my longest chapter yet, but I felt that I couldn’t split it up. So combined beach episode and Ken’s little story. I skimmed over a lot of SEES’s story, but I wanted to focus more on the reactions over repeating what most people know.

I also decided that the Phantom Thieves’ Personas will change to their ultimates in story scenes, much like Persona 3’s. I felt that P3’s did it better because the character growth does not feel optional, which I felt it did in P4/P5, with the ultimates being locked behind maxing out the Social Link/Confidant.

But yeah. The Phantom Thieves trust Ken, but they’re not all too sure about the Shadow Operatives, since they’ve been burned by authorities and there’s Ren’s little encounter with Shido. A lot of people expected it to be a huge explosion, but I don’t want this to overshadow Haru’s arc. Haru’s arc was just overpowered with Morgana’s little self-identity crisis, but I intend for it not to happen here. The conflict will be a sideplot, because I want to address the Phantom Thieves’ lack of trust in adults.
The Phantom Thieves (minus Futaba) return to school, which is abuzz with the Phantom Thieves' victory over Medjed. The Phantom Thieves decide on their next move, and settle on focusing on determining what exactly Sae's next move is going to be. The Phantom Thieves also introduce Mementos to Ken and Futaba.

Thursday, September 1st, 2016

Ken stifled a yawn. The first day of the semester always sucked… He was already missing sleeping in.

"Morning, Ken!" He turned to see Ryuji jog up to him. "Dude, I got up early today to go and jog, and you wouldn't believe the things I heard people talk 'bout us," Ryuji whispered to him.

Ken just blinked. Oh… right. He had kinda zoned out during the train ride here…

"Dude, isn't this amazing?!" Ryuji asked, slinging an arm over his shoulders. "It's like, a complete flip from their attitudes when we left for the summer!"

Ken just raised an eyebrow at Ryuji. "Someone's excited. Especially for the first day of the semester."

Ryuji just gave him a little shove. "Aw, shut it," he grumbled. "I ain't that lazy. Don't listen to Anne!"

"Duly noted, Ryuji," he said dryly.

"Seriously, man! I really can't believe the Phantom Thieves could be students here!"

"Yeah, they took down Kamoshida first. I wonder who their next target is."

Ryuji just nudged him, a wide grin on his face. Ken just rolled his eyes at him, before he began to walk again. "You need to work on your poker face, Ryuji."

"Yeah, yeah…” he grumbled. "You got the text, right? About us getting together today, after school?"

"Yeah, of course," Ken answered. "We're going to my place, after all."

"Is Shinjiro-san gonna be there?"

"It depends, on how fast we get out of school. He starts work at five, so he usually leaves around..."
four, sometimes earlier."

"Jeez, he's a busy one," Ryuji grumbled, as they passed the gate and entered the main building. "I think we'll have to figure out what Makoto's sis's next move is."

"Yeah, that makes sense." Despite himself, Ken frowned. They would have to do research on Shido too… Find out just what his Palace was… But they had to prioritize and figure out how to outmaneuver Makoto's sister…

"Ryuji!" Anne and Ren were standing at the foot of the stairs, waving at their fellow junior.

"See you later, man!" Ryuji said with a cheerful wave, before jogging over to Ren and Anne. They began to chat as they ascended the stairs to the second floor.

Ken watched them go before heading for 3-D. He pushed the door open, and he immediately spotted Makoto sitting at her desk.

"Good morning," Ken greeted, sliding into his seat as Makoto turned to a fresh page on her notebook.

Makoto smiled at him. "Good morning, Ken-" She then paused as the chattering of their classmates grew even louder. "…They really can't stop talking about the Phantom Thieves… can they?"

"Apparently not." Ken shook his head. "…Ryuji told me he overheard some people talking about it while he was on a morning jog, too."

"Hm." Makoto chewed on her lip for a moment. "…I don't know if you heard about the article written about Shujin but…" She shook her head. "It's… bad. Principal Kobayakawa is… laying low, because of it."

"Shujin's reputation is really plummeting…" Ken said slowly, before glancing at his friend, "…isn't it?"

Makoto winced, before tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "…It looks like it. People seem to be working themselves into a frenzy about how the Phantom Thieves took down Medjed too…"

Maybe Shinjiro-san had a point when he called the interest in the Phantom Thieves almost cult-like…

The hours quickly flew by, even though the teachers had to constantly scold their classmates about focusing on the Phantom Thieves instead of the class. It actually reminded him of his Gekkoukan classmates gossiping about the Phantom Thieves' debut.

"Ren, shouldn't we go get Futaba first…?" Anne asked. "Yongen-jaya isn't that far away."

"Nah." Ren shook his head. "Yusuke texted me and told me that he could go get Futaba since Kosei apparently let out early today."

"Hopefully they won't make a scene," Ken muttered.

"Come on, they're not that bad, Ken," Ryuji laughed.

Ken just stared at him. "They fought over lobsters, Ryuji. Lobsters."

"I mean, they're in a packed train," Anne said. "I don't think they would find something to argue
over…” She then paused, frowning. “…At least I hope so.”

The train ride to Shibuya was short, and the walk to the apartment complex was lively. At one point, Anne had gotten sidetracked by crepes being half off today, forcing Ren and Ryuji to all but drag her away.

"Honestly, Anne, just the cream alone is so fattening…” Makoto sighed, shaking her head at the younger girl.

"They're so good though," Anne moaned. "I can't help it. They call to me!"

"Don't be dramatic, Anne."

"But they do!" Anne whined.

Ren just laughed, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "Guess we'll have to come up with a calorie burning routine for you, yeah?"

"Yeah, if Ryuji would just-"

"I ain't a trainer!" Ryuji retorted. "Come up with your own routine!"

"You're an athlete!"

"So is Ken! Why aren't you bugging him about this?!"

"Please don't drag me into this," Ken sighed, cradling his face with his palm, all while Ren and Makoto laughed at Anne and Ryuji's bickering. "But Ren, did Yusuke mention if he's going to be in the lobby or upstairs?"

"I think upstairs?" Ren said. "I mean, more privacy."

"Yeah, that makes sense." Ken began to dig out for his key as they approached the building.

"The friend you mentioned before…” Makoto said. "The one who's giving you the place to stay… it's Kirijo-san, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is," Ken answered. "She felt that she needed to provide lodging since I was doing this for her…"

They then entered the elevator, riding it to the top floor. The elevator doors opened, revealing Yusuke and Futaba. Futaba had brought her laptop and she was tapping furiously away at it.

"Hey, guys," Ren greeted, before cocking an eyebrow at them. "…I hope you didn't run into any trouble."

"None at all." Yusuke shook his head. "Futaba was rather surprised when I had showed up at her door."

"Such a patronizing Inari…” Futaba grumbled, shooting him an annoyed glance. "I can handle myself just fine! I don't need to be babysat by him!"

"Hey, there's nothing bad about needing help," Anne said gently. "Yusuke was just concerned—" she glanced in his direction, "—right?"

Though honestly, he did sympathize a little with Futaba. He still remembered how everyone else
seemed to fuss over him, especially during those grueling training sessions in Tartarus. He remembered Akihiko-san and Shinjiro-san giving him a ride on their backs when he felt exhausted to his very core, a few times.

"Come on, let's get inside." Ken unlocked the door to let everyone inside.

They removed their shoes, before finding seats on the two couches. The juniors squished into the larger couch, with Morgana crawling into Anne's lap, while he, Makoto, and Futaba sat together.

"So, what's this meeting about?" Yusuke asked.

"Okay, so…" Ren rubbed his chin for a moment. "I was thinking. We need a game plan about our next step. Everyone is watching us, so we can't make a misstep."

"Yeah, seriously!" Ryuji grinned. "Look at us! The Phan-site is getting so many hits now!"

"And our rating is at sixty percent now!" Anne exclaimed. "This is honestly amazing!"

"Seriously, we're like heroes now!" Ryuji's eyes were gleaming with excitement now. "We've really made it big!"

"Hey, calm down," Ren chided, frowning at his best friend. "But yeah, we've got a lot to think about. There's the black masked guy running around…"

"Sis…" Makoto said almost reluctantly.

"And Shido…" Futaba's voice came out as a hiss, before she clenched her hands into fists.

"So, we'll have to deal with them in succession," Ren said. "Divide and conquer. Dealing with Makoto's sister seems to be the best way. She just…" Ren sighed, glancing at Makoto. "…No offense, Makoto, but she's honestly kinda scary. The way she seems to have a one track mind when it comes to investigating…"

"No, I… I understand," Makoto murmured. "Sis came home in a foul mood, right after Medjed withdrew their threat. She was angry because we made 'fools' out of the police department… the SIU…"

"The SIU?" Ryuji repeated. "What's that?"

"The Special Investigation Unit," Makoto answered. "It's an elite team… meant to deal with government scandals and equally serious cases."

Ryuji let out a low whistle. "Damn. How old is your sister again?"

"Twenty-five," Makoto answered.

"The same age as Shinjiro-san, then," Ken commented.

"Jeez…" Anne winced. "…That's honestly kinda scary."

"But what can we do?" Yusuke asked. "If your sister is tied to such a powerful group… I doubt that she would be forthcoming with you."

"Well, I can't exactly say you're wrong, Yusuke…" Makoto heaved out a heavy sigh, closing her eyes. "I'll be honest. I'm lucky if I see her three nights out of the week. She's that dedicated to work…"
"There's nothing wrong with having a passion for work but…" Morgana studied Makoto, smiling sadly. "…That's not it, is it?"

"No," Makoto answered, albeit reluctantly.

That… reminded him of how Minako-san and Yukari-san often got onto Mitsuru-san's case for being so hyper focused on her work. But somehow he doubted that Niijima-san had that kind of luxury.

The thought was… saddening.

"She was already looking into us, with her interest in cognitive psience," Morgana said. "We have to discover what our next move is."

"So we'll basically be playing chess with her," Ren said. "Or shogi. I'm more familiar with shogi."

"The question is… how?" Ken asked. "If she won't tell Makoto…"

"Hehe…" Futaba let out a mischievous chuckle. "Silly KenKen-"

"Don't call me that."

Futaba just flapped a hand at him. "But! I have a solution to that!" She whipped out a… USB drive? "Your sister has a laptop for work, right?" she asked, looking at Makoto. "Just pop this little baby in and it'll copy everything on the hard drive. You don't even have to sign into the computer."

That… That was a little uncomfortable.

"I don't know about this…" Ken said uncertainly.

"Come on, Ken!" Ryuji shook his head. "I mean, Futaba's solution is a pretty good one! And it's not like we're looking to see if she has any sexy pictures-"

"Ryuji!" Makoto exclaimed, looking rather horrified. "My sister… she's not like that, okay?!" She sighed. "…But all right. I'll… I'll… do it. I don't know when my sister will come home though…"

"Don't rush," Ren said. "I mean, if she's away, she could be strategizing… or something."

"Yeah, that's true." Makoto took the USB from Futaba.

But despite her agreement… Ken couldn't help but be worried. They were basically asking her to invade her sister's privacy.

He didn't know the whole story with Niijima-san but… He had already seen what Makoto is like with her sister. Would all of these secrets wear down on her eventually?

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Friday, September 2nd, 2016

You would think with a day to talk about the Phantom Thieves would be enough. But apparently not.

In all honesty, Ken found it… disturbing. Surely, there was something else to talk about… This interest… it wasn't natural. People talked like they were almost in a fever.
It felt almost… suffocating.

Ken stood up, making Makoto glance at him in surprise.

"Ken?" Makoto studied him closely, concern in her red eyes. "What's wrong?"

"It… It's nothing." Ken winced, forcing himself to smile reassure her. "I need some air."

"Are you feeling sick?" Makoto pressed.

"No, it's just… I need a break," Ken said wearily.

Makoto's eyes swept over to their gossiping classmates, before her eyes filled with understanding.
"I agree with that," she said quietly. "Can I come with you, then?"

Ken just smiled at her. "You don't even have to ask."

They ended up going to the roof, and Ken found himself staring at the skyline. Shujin offered a

nice view, but it really highlighted how big Tokyo was. You could see everything on Port Island if you stood on the roof of Gekkoukan.

"What's on your mind?" Makoto asked, looking at him in concern.

"I guess…" Ken frowned. "…A lot," he said quietly. "Everyone seems to be expecting us to go for someone even bigger than Medjed. Their expectations are… suffocating. And…" He shrugged.
"…It's kinda stupid, but I found myself thinking about Port Island, looking out here."

"It's not stupid," Makoto contradicted. "You grew up there, didn't you? All your life?" She looked at him straight in the eye. "…There's nothing wrong with missing Port Island. You must have fond memories there."

"I did," Ken mused. "Just a couple nights before we were supposed to be fighting with Nyx, we went on a walk. We ended up at the local shrine. There was a playground built right next there, so we kinda… stayed there." He chuckled. "Akihiko-san scolded me for going down the slide in a 'boring' way." A snicker then escaped him. "He took off his shirt in the middle of the winter, too. He thought he could use it to slide down faster."

"Akihiko-san sounds like a… character." Makoto covered her mouth with a hand, even as her eyes danced with laughter. "He's childhood friends with Shinjiro-san… right?"

"Yeah, that's right. They would get into the silliest arguments…" Ken mused. "Like, who could open a pickle jar the fastest. I think one time they tried to see who withstand standing next to a furnace the longest."

"I… I can't imagine that," Makoto laughed, only for her expression to grow somber. "…Hey, Ken? Do you… regret coming to Tokyo? Getting entangled with all of this…"

"I don't." Ken shook his head. "I… I know this isn't the safest thing to do but it… feels right. Besides…" He glanced in her direction. "…I wouldn't have met you and everyone else if I had stayed on Port Island."

The door suddenly opened, and out stepped Haru-san. She blinked at them. "Oh… I didn't expect anyone to be here…"

"Hello, Haru-san," Makoto greeted. "Are you here to tend to the flowers?"
Haru-san shook her head. "Actually, I'm here for the vegetables!" She then beamed. The pride shining in her eyes was almost… motherly. "The first crop should be ready for harvest!"

Ken looked over to see that she had indeed cultivated quite an impressive crop of vegetables. The tomatoes especially were impressive, plump and round, the skin a brilliant shade of red.

"Wow… these look incredible," Makoto complimented. "You grew them all by yourself!"

"Mmhm!" Her head bobbed, before clasping her hands behind her back. "All natural too!"

"They must be full of nutrients…” Ken mused.

"Shinjiro-san would approve, no?" Makoto asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Hm?" Haru-san tilted her head. "Who would that be?"

"He's my guardian," Ken explained. "He likes to cook. He's trying to save up money to open up a restaurant at some point."

"Oh!" Her eyes lit up. "If he's really such a good cook, why don't you bring some of the vegetables to him? I would love to hear some input from a cook!"

"I didn't mean-" Ken began to protest, but she was already plucking a couple of the ripest tomatoes from the vine. "Shouldn't you be taking them? You grew them…"

"I insist," she added, holding them out to Ken. "Tell me what your guardian thinks!"

"But-" Ken tried to protest again, but Makoto caught his eye and gave a little nod. He sighed, before accepting the tomatoes. "Very well. I'll let you know."

"Oh, thank you!" she exclaimed, smiling brightly at him. "Though, Amada-kun, Niijima-san…"

She tilted her head. "What are you doing here, exactly?"

“Well…” Makoto pursed her lips. "…We just needed a break from all of the speculating about the Phantom Thieves…"

“Oh…” Haru-san bit her lip. "So… you aren't fans?"

Ken shook his head. "That's not it. We both think the Phantom Thieves' work is… admirable. It's just a bit tiring of hearing about it so much."

"I can understand that…” She nodded. "Though… if that's the case…” She clasped her hands behind her back again. "…What do you think of the poll? Have you submitted any names?"

Ken and Makoto shared an uneasy look. The poll… It honestly unnerved Ken. He had overheard people talking about just submitting their boss's name to the website. That wasn't what the Phantom Thieves were meant to do...

"…We haven't," Makoto said cautiously. "What about you, Haru-san?"

She just smiled sadly. "I have. There are… so many people in this world that should have their hearts changed…”

Ken frowned. Just what was she hiding…?
"So… it turns out that the school trip is going to be Hawaii, after all." Makoto rifled through the papers, her eyes going back and forth as she skimmed the contents. "I'm honestly surprised…"

"So who goes?" Ken asked.

"First-years and second-years," Makoto answered. "So it doesn't really pertain to us." She then laughed. "I suppose we'll have to ask the juniors to take pictures, huh?"

"Yeah, looks like it-" Ken was interrupted by the door sliding open, revealing a woman in her late twenties, early thirties with dark, unkempt hair.

"Oh, Miss Kawakami." Makoto bowed her head in greeting. "Is there something Principal Kobayakawa needed…?"

"No, no, it's nothing like that, Niijima-san." Miss Kawakami shook her head, before folding her arms over her chest. "But as you know… the article written about Shujin Academy has led to some suspicion. Most of the faculty is required to remain here. So… we're lacking some chaperones. You two are both dedicated students, so…" She sighed. "…Will you come and be chaperones?"

Ken frowned. "Well… if you really have need of us."

"Thank you." Miss Kawakami looked too relieved. "Seriously… thank you."

"I-It's no problem…"

Miss Kawakami bid them farewell, leaving them alone in the room. Ken just turned to Makoto. "…That was unprofessional."

"Oh, stop." Makoto huffed. "You know that the situation is… difficult. And it's too late to cancel…"

"I suppose," Ken sighed. "Looks like we'll be going to Hawaii too, then."

Makoto just smiled. "Let's make some good memories there."

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Sunday, September 4th, 2016

"Do you know a Tsukasa?"

The friendly promoter's face suddenly darkened. "Tsukasa… that bastard…" he hissed out.

"So, you know him?" Makoto asked.

The promoter just shook his head. "It's the sake bottle trick, isn't it?" he said wearily. "Get that girl out of there. He's known for wrecking lives… he breaks a sake bottle, and then ends up selling his latest girl's life to pay it back." He then scowled. "…Happened to one of my friends."

Makoto felt a pit form in her stomach. That was awful and yet…

"We have proof now." She looked at Ren. "Come on, Eiko's shift is almost over."

She hoped that her plan worked…

Eiko emerged from the building, raising an eyebrow at them. "What do you want?"
Makoto winced. She was still mad about her refusing to give her some money, wasn't she…

"Um… Eiko… look." She took a deep breath. "We did some investigating into Tsukasa. He's infamous for tricking girls into debt… and forcing them to sell themselves."

"Are you serious?" Eiko demanded, narrowing her eyes. "Ugh! I've had enough of your lying bullshit, Makoto!"

"We spoke to a club promoter around here," Ren said. "He said that Tsukasa ruined the life of a friend of his."

"It'll start off as little… but it'll keep piling up. Eventually, he'll ask you to sell your body!" Makoto took a step forward. "Eiko, please, I was just worried about you-"

"Shut up!" Eiko snapped. "Shut up, Makoto!" She shook her head. "Forget this… I have a date with Tsukasa today, anyways."

"Hey, did I make you wait, babe? Came a little late after your text but I guess you're already here…" He then glanced over at Makoto and Ren. "Oh, hey, I remember you guys. Want to stop by my club? It'll be a blast!"

"They were lying about you, honey." Eiko frowned. "They made up all of this stuff about you tricking girls into debt… and selling themselves. But that's just a big lie, right?"

"Huh…? They seriously spouted that kind of crap?" He shook his head, smiling at Eiko. "Listen to me… I'd never lie to you, princess."

"It's always princess, isn't it?" Makoto asked. "Why don't you ever call her by her real name? Or are there too many princesses to remember by name?"

Tsukasa was silent for a moment, but then he smiled. "Come on, I know you! You just texted me, remember?" His smile turned into a grin. "I've never forget you, Makoto."

Hook, line, sinker.

"I knew it…" Makoto tucked her hair behind her ear. "I was the one to text you. I mimicked Eiko's texting style, so you'd think I was her." She took a step forward, staring down Tsukasa. "Admit it. Every girl you get money from is your princess. You have too many princesses that you can't even remember their names!"

"You see now… don't you?" Ren asked. "Tsukasa is just tricking you, Eiko!"

"B-But you tricked him!" Eiko protested, shaking her head hard. She was in denial. "What do you know about love, huh? Tsukasa is all that I have!"

"Snap out of it!" Makoto pleaded. "Eiko, you're too good for him! He has you wrapped around his finger, but that's not true! Tsukasa is all that I have.' That's not true! You know it's not true!"

"I…"

Tsukasa then growled, glaring daggers at Makoto. "I'm really getting tired of your bullshit!" He then stalked forward. "Someone oughta shut your mouth!"

Eiko let out a squeak. "T-Tsukasa?"

Ren tensed up, but in the end he didn't have to do a thing.
A tanned hand suddenly grabbed onto Tsukasa's wrist, the shadow of its owner looming over Tsukasa.

"S-Shinjiro-san?" Makoto gasped.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Shinjiro-san growled out, his grip tightening on Tsukasa's wrist. "Tryin' to hit a girl like that?"

"Who the hell are you?" Tsukasa tried to struggle out of Shinjiro-san's grip, but Shinjiro-san just held on tighter. "This bitch… she's selling me out!"

"A host, huh?" Shinjiro-san looked him up and down, his lip curling with disgust. Then he looked at Eiko, who still looked like she was at a loss, and then back to Tsukasa. "You're a piece of shit," he said flatly. "Aiming to use a girl like that, huh?"

"I…" Tsukasa looked uneasy. "I don't have to answer to you!"

"Tch, and you don't even deny it." Shinjiro-san stared at him. "Give me one reason not to beat the shit out of you right now. Someone who targets high school girls like that…" he cracked his knuckles, "is nothing but scum."

Tsukasa let out a yelp, yanking away from Shinjiro-san, before he fled for his life.

"Makoto… why?" Eiko's eyes began to fill with tears. "Why did you…? Tsukasa is the only one who cares about me!" She choked back a sob, even as the tears began to roll down her face. "You drove him away!"

"Eiko, please-" Makoto extended a hand to her friend, but Eiko just smacked it away.

"You wouldn't understand!" she yelled, now angrily wiping away her tears. "You have a boyfriend, good friends… you're the damn student council president! I have nothing! My parents don't care about me, just throw money at me so I don't have to bother them… You… You have everything! It's not fair! Why did you take away Tsukasa too?!"

A protest was on the tip of her tongue, but it died when she saw the look on Eiko's face. She really felt that she had nothing, didn't she? That she was all alone…

"That's not true." Shinjiro-san approached Eiko. "Look, Tsukasa or whatever his face is… he's scum. He was only tryin' to use you. He was taking advantage of you, because you thought you were alone. But that ain't true." He looked over to Makoto. "…Niijima cared enough to look into this, because she didn't think that he sounded right."

"I…" Eiko hung her head. "…I'm sorry, Makoto." She rubbed her eyes. "Y-You're right, Mister… I'm sorry." She then bit her lip, before fresh tears welled up in her eyes. "I-I'm sorry, but my head's all messed up… I'm just gonna go home…"

"Eiko…!"

"Let her go, Makoto." Ren grabbed her arm, stopping her in her tracks. "She needs time to think this over…"

"Dude, did you see that?"

"Isn't that the guy who bartends at Crossroad?"
"I always thought he was scary…"

"But that guy tried to hit that girl! What was that about?"

"Oh, jeez..." Ren muttered, shaking his head. "Sorry about dragging you into this, Shinjiro-san…"

Shinjiro-san just looked unimpressed with the gossiping. "Come on, let's get you to somewhere quiet." He jerked his head down the road. "And we're gonna have a little chat while doing so."

Makoto couldn't help but feel trepidation at the stern look on his face. This would probably be worse than Sae's lectures...

She was right, of course. Shinjiro-san lectured them the whole walk, scolding them for being reckless, not going to anyone else for help. He finally ran out of steam, when they reached the place where Shinjiro-san seemed to be heading for, a bar called Crossroads.

"...I'm sorry for getting all worked up like that," Makoto sighed. "That's why I always try to remain composed... or else I get carried away as you saw back there..."

"Reminds me of a certain someone I know," Shinjiro-san muttered under his breath, before setting two glasses of water before them.

Makoto just looked at him curiously. Really? Who?

"Don't be," Ren said, catching her attention. "It's not good to bottle up your feelings like that, Makoto."

"I suppose..." Makoto pursed her lips together. "...But I'm surprised that you're familiar with this. You... You know so much..."

"A little too much, if you asked me," Shinjiro-san said, eyeing Ren.

"And I know too little," Makoto sighed. "You have so much more life experience than me, Ren. And you're younger than me..." She then shifted in her seat. "...Honestly, getting to know you and Eiko has given me a lot to think about."

No... It was her whole experience with being a Phantom Thief. Her main motivation was to help Sae but... she was grateful for the other things her experiences have taught her so far.

"There's so much you can miss by burying your head in a book..."

"There are just some things that life will have to teach you," Ren said simply. "You have to experience it yourself."

"Yes." Makoto nodded. "Even after all of this... I still struggle to reach out to people. And I still don't understand..." Makoto cut herself off, biting her lip.

Love... She didn't understand it now. She knew that Ren and Anne adored each other, that they supported each other through their own personal struggles. But... how did you know that you felt romantic attraction towards someone? Even when Ren held her hand, when he was posing as her boyfriend, she didn't really feel anything different.

"You'll find someone someday," Ren said, giving her an encouraging smile. "There's no need to rush." His eyes then softened. "Trust me, when you do... it's the best feeling."

He'd know, wouldn't he? At least that was another good thing coming out of this... Ren and Anne
would finally be able to date in the open. She still felt bad that they had to wait nearly a month…

"Mm. I suppose you're right-"

But then the door suddenly pushed open.

"Shinjiro-san!"

Shinjiro-san paused in pouring a drink for another customer, setting down the bottle before he looked at his ward. "…Ken? What are you doing here?"

Ken just gave him a wry smile, before holding up a bento box. "Someone forgot their dinner today… I didn't want you to go hungry, since your shift ends at one in the morning."

The woman behind the bar just raised an eyebrow. "Oh, so this is the kid you're taking care of, Aragaki? He certainly looks like a smart boy."

Ken gave his guardian an annoyed look now, before handing the box to Shinjiro-san. "…What have you been talking about behind my back?"

The woman just chuckled. "It's nothing bad, honey, I promise."

"I'll have to take your word for it," Ken sighed, before stepping closer to Makoto and Ren. "…Though, what are you guys doing here?"

"We… um…" Makoto bit her lip. Ken hadn't been thrilled with what she was planning on doing before. "W-We kinda caused a scene when confronting Tsukasa…"

"He nearly hit Niijima," Shinjiro-san said flatly. "Probably would've if I hadn't caught him in the near act."

"He what?!

Makoto caught his hand, which caught his attention. "Ken, please don't," she pleaded. "I'm not hurt, thanks to Shinjiro-san…" She looked up at him. "He didn't lay a finger on me. It's sweet of you to be worried, but I'm okay."

Ken looked down at her, pink flushing his cheeks, but he didn't pull away. "…As long as you're okay," he finally said, before he sighed. "But Makoto, I really wish you wouldn't be so reckless…"

Ren just gave him a playful smile. "You could use a walk on the wild side once in a while, you know."

"Oh hell no," Shinjiro-san said flatly. "Ken makes me worry enough already. I don't need you to fill ideas like that in his head."

Ken just rolled his eyes at his guardian. "Thank you for having so much faith in me."

"But you should get home," Shinjiro-san said. "It's gonna get dark sooner than later."

"Okay, Dad." Ren apparently couldn't resist teasing Shinjiro-san, all while flashing his trademark grin at him.

"Watch it, Amamiya," Shinjiro-san snapped, before glowering at Ren.

"Are you two children done?" Ken deadpanned.
"Okay, okay, I'm done." Ren held up his hands with a chuckle. Then he looked at Makoto. "Like I said… you don't have to rush, Makoto."

"Rush…?" Ken frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"U-Um, nothing!" Makoto blurted out, feeling her face flush for some reason.

The idea of Ken knowing what they were talking about was… embarrassing. He'd probably think it was silly…

"Okay…?" Ken asked slowly. He looked pretty confused, but he was willing to let it slide, at least. "Well, if that's the case, why don't we head home together, then?"

"It is getting pretty late," Shinjiro-san said. "You don't want to be in Shinjuku late at night."

"You're right..." Makoto agreed, before she stood up. She bowed before the two adults. "Thank you for having us."

"Oh, it's nothing." The woman waved her hand. "Besides..." She nodded in Ren's direction. "He's no stranger here, after all. He's always helping Ichiko-chan."

"...What?" Ken asked.

"Uh..." Ren grew pale. "I think Sojiro asked me to help him close anyways... Gottagothanksbye!"

"Oh boy..." Ken sighed.

"Ren, what's she talking about?" Makoto demanded, even as Ren edged towards the exit. Ren darted out of the door. "Ren, you get back here!"

Tuesday, September 6th, 2016

"Should we really be doing this today? You're leaving for Hawaii tomorrow!"

Ren just shrugged. "We've got a lot of targets. And we need to introduce Ken and Futaba to Mementos."

"I guess you have a point," Morgana grumbled. "You shouldn't put it off so much!"

"It'll be fine," Ren dismissed, waving his hand. "Though, Ken... I have a question for you."

"What is it?" Ken asked.

"Your..." Ren said carefully, "...Evoker. How does it work? It's not a real gun..."

"It's not," Ken confirmed. "It was made in the shape of the gun, because our Personas are... different. Morgana described awakening to your Persona is a manifestation of rebellion, right? The Evoker is a symbol of death, a reminder of your mortality."

"That's cheerful," Ryuji said, before scratching his head. "I still don't get how it works, though. Really hard to wrap my mind around it."

"The Evokers were created by the Kirijo Group. I don't know the entire story but..." Ken frowned. "Evokers were created to take the form of a gun because of the reminder of death."
Anne shuddered. "I'll stick to our method, thanks."

"Right, because ripping off the mask from your skin hard enough that you bleed profusely is completely painless," Ken said dryly. "No method of awakening to your Persona is... harmless. You have to confront yourself, in order to tame your Shadow."

"Though I'm guessing that all of you confronted death... somehow?" Ryuji looked uneasy at that.

"More or less," Ken said. "A lot of us in SEES... had lost someone they had loved. Fuuka-san and Junpei-san were the two exceptions, but they didn't have a happy childhood either way."

"That's why you care about them so much, huh?" Futaba asked. "Because you guys didn't have anyone else..."

"...Yeah," Ken said.

Hopefully, someday... they would realize that SEES... the Shadow Operatives weren't so different from the Phantom Thieves. They were all taking steps in order to ease Minato-san's burden, even just a little bit.

"Ken... can I..." Makoto bit her lip. "Can I try using the Evoker? It may be morbid but I'm curious. To see what it's like."

...She wanted to what? Then again, Makoto had been interested in how they were able to determine the potential...

"Do we really have to focus on this?" Morgana grumbled. "The past is the past..."

"It would be useful if we could summon in the real world," Yusuke pointed out, before he winced. "Though the method itself... would be difficult to use, I'd find. I'm not sure I'd be comfortable utilizing an Evoker."

"I... I don't know, guys..." Anne said uneasily, her face paling. "I mean, it's not like the Metaverse is in the real world!"

"Though I'm kinda curious if the Evoker can be used as a gun in the Metaverse..." Makoto said. Ha... Ha... If only they knew how close he was to using his Evoker in the Metaverse.

But the look on Anne's face... and Futaba still had very recently started to recover from her suicidal thoughts. "...I don't think that's a good idea," Ken said carefully, glancing at Anne and Futaba for a moment, before looking back at Makoto. "Besides, we have Mementos to concern ourselves with."

Makoto just winced, tucking her hair behind her ear. "...Right."

"Okay, we have a lot of targets today," Morgana announced. "We have the couple blackmailing Kawakami, a boss abusing his employees, a person attacking innocent cats, and Ohya's boss trying to silence her..."

"And someone who's trying to shut down areas of Yongen-jaya for development and a gamer using cheats," Ren continued. "And lastly... Tsukasa, who almost scammed Makoto's friend, Eiko."

"Jeez..." Anne huffed, shaking her head, "...seven targets. You've let them pile up, Joker."

Ren just smirked at her. "You mean like you let your summer homework pile up?" he asked
innocently.

"Yeah, exactly-" Anne flushed, her face as red as a beet, before glaring at Ren. "Hey!"

Ren just gave her a shit eating grin. "Just speaking the truth."

"You shouldn't bully your girlfriend," Anne said sulkily.

"Though… Tsukasa…" Yusuke frowned. "I did notice an influx of requests on him since yesterday."

"Eiko must have realized the truth about Tsukasa," Ren said. "It's time that he pays for his crimes."

"Let's do this, then," Morgana said firmly.

The keyword was simply Mementos, which was… surprising, considering the hoops they had to jump through in order to access Futaba's Palace. Not to mention the research they had to do for Kaneshiro.

But they stepped through the portal and into a… subway? Blue flames swept over them, replacing their school uniforms (and Futaba's street clothes) into their thief outfits.

Futaba twisted around, examining her outfit. "Huh. This will take a while to get used to."

"This is Mementos?" Ken asked, looking around. "Not sure what I was expecting… but this wasn't exactly it."

"Well, it's not exactly Tartarus," Ryuji said, shrugging. "But yeah. This is Mementos. Not terribly exciting like Palaces, but yeah. This is the place where we fill requests."

Though… he wasn't so sure about that. There was the question of what exactly Fuuka-san had detected originally. If Mementos was everyone's Palace, and they had an easier access to the place… wouldn't it make sense that Juno would be able to sense Mementos more easily…?

Well… either way, he'd have to see. At least he didn't have to worry about running into the Reaper here. The Reaper had been just… the stuff of nightmares. He was pretty sure that those encounters had shaved off at least a decade of his life.

"The Shadows…" Ken said slowly, "they're like in the Palaces, right?"

Morgana just stared blankly at him. "…What else would they look like?"

"Well…" Ken folded his arms. "…You know how I talked about the full moon Shadows?"

"Dude, those sound kinda freaky," Ryuji commented. "They're closer to what we had seen with the Palace hosts except for Futaba's, but still different."

"Right." Ken nodded. "Minato-san and Minako-san… they had never tried to talk to the Shadows we fought. They… were a bit strange, to be honest."

"We've fought pixies, angels, a freaking demon on a toilet-"

"…I'm not gonna ask." Ken shook his head. "But yeah… some of the Shadows we had fought were strange. We had fought Shadows who had looked like a tank…"

Ren frowned. "But you said they had the Wild Card ability. How did they gain their Personas,
then?"

"I'm guessing that you went into the blue room… the Velvet Room," Ken said.

"The… Velvet Room?" Anne repeated with a frown. "Wait, is that why you would sometimes go off to a corner and just stare off into space?!"

"How do you know that, Ken?" Ren asked.

Ken just winced, running his hands through his hair. "It's a long story, but the entire group of SEES had visited the Velvet Room at one place… Shortly after Minato-san had died."

"Just how many 'long stories' do you have?" Makoto raised an eyebrow at him.

"Two," Ken answered. "But another time, okay? We're wasting time, aren't we?"

Technically three if he wanted to talk about the incident with the Midnight Stage. Mitsuru-san had not been happy about how the Investigation Team had just jumped into things. She had griped about the trouble that had given her for two weeks…

…Though honestly, the idea of it was strange. Purging Shadows by dancing? The mere idea was ridiculous.

"Dude, what the hell have you seen…" Ryuji grumbled.

"I want to know what crazy thing that you've seen that makes a talking cat seem normal," Futaba piped up. "But anyways, Ace's got a point. Give me a sec!"

Blue flames swept away her goggles, as she summoned her Persona. Necronomicon lowered its tentacles, pulling in the depths of the UFO.

"Did another area open up?" Yusuke asked. "Since we've taken the Treasure of another Palace…"

"Yep!" Futaba answered. "Though, that's not entirely it. Why Mementos keeps expanding."

"What do you mean?" Morgana demanded.

"It's more like… the more people try to search up the Phantom Thieves. The greater presence we have in people's cognition. That's what's expanding Mementos. Not just us taking Treasures."

Makoto rubbed her chin. "Hmm. That does make sense." Then she glanced at Morgana. "Though, I do think that Morgana's theory did make sense with the information we had at the time…"

"I guess…" Morgana grumbled. "But… yeah. Let's get going. We cleared about thirty floors when we last visited, so we should try and explore as much of the new area as possible."

"Ugh… I wonder how much further we have left…" Anne sighed. "It feels like it drags on forever."

…Guess he shouldn't say just how tall Tartarus was… If he remembered right, a block alone was about fifty floors high. Though to be fair, they could only scale about twenty-five floors each month…

"Enough comments from the peanut gallery," Ren laughed. "Morgana?"

Morgana nodded, before he leapt into the air and transformed into his bus form.
It was Ken's turn to stare blankly as everyone started to climb inside. "What are you doing?"

"Did you expect us to walk through Mementos?" Yusuke inquired, tilting his head. "Mementos is quite large, I assure you. It's convenient that we have Mona's alternate form."

"If you say so…"

"Ugh, just get in the bus, Ace!" Futaba shouted, sticking her head out of the door. "Stop flapping your jaws and get in! Times a'wasting!"

Mementos was… interesting. Like Tartarus, the different areas seemed to be color coded. But as they continued to descend, the area grew more… twisted.

This area had become purple, but that wasn't the disturbing part. The Mementos floors had rail tracks, twisting and winding through the area. But this area… the rail tracks looked more skeletal.

…At least it wasn't hard on the eyes like the fifth block of Tartarus, dubbed the disco block by Minako-san and Junpei-san. The bright colors had just… seared his eyes.

But even then… Ken couldn't help but feel uneasy. Just what was Mementos hiding…?

The targets put up a fight, though he couldn't say the same about the Shadows that had roamed Mementos. He had recognized Shadows that both came from Kaneshiro and Futaba's Palaces.

"Okay… last stop," Ren announced. "The cheater was a bust, so I'm guessing all of you are raring to bust heads, right?"

"Hell yeah we are!" Ryuji cheered.

"Let's get going." Makoto's expression grew determined. "Tsukasa must pay for his crimes."

"He's seriously scum," Anne spat. "Using and manipulating girls like that!"

Ren just laughed. "Enough comments from the peanut gallery. Let's get him!"

Ren led the way, revealing a man in his late twenties cloaked in a black and red aura. "Money, money, money!" he chanted. "It's not my fault that girls these days are so stupid! My princesses… they make me rich as a king!"

Makoto scowled. "We'll make you pay!"

"No… you'll be the ones who will pay!"

His form trembled before transforming into Pazuzu.

"Joker, I think its weakness will be ice or bless!" Ken shouted.

"Go for it, then, Ace!" Ren extended a hand towards the Shadow.

Ken tore off his mask. "Kala-Nemi!"

Light surged forward, knocking the Shadow to the ground.

"Nicely done, Ace!" Futaba crowed. "Get 'im, guys!"

"Joker?" Ken prompted.
"Let's do it!" Ren nodded firmly. They lunged forward, attacking the Shadow ferociously, but it was still standing when they pulled back.

"Ha!" the Shadow growled. "Take this!"

Shadowy energy exploded, the force sending Ken skidding backwards. The Shadow laughed, before leaping in the air and slamming down on the ground. The attack sent Ken flying backwards. He heard a loud crack, before warm blood started to trickle down the back of his head.

"Ace!" Futaba shrieked. "Someone help him! He's not doing too well…"

He felt… so dizzy… His vision was blurring…

"Ace!" He was vaguely aware of the sound of Johanna's engine revving, before Makoto knelt in front of him. "Hang on, Ace…" she murmured, putting a hand on the back of his head. "Diarama!"

The pain lessened and he stopped feeling blood dripping from the back of his head. But he still felt really dizzy…

"Look out!" Futaba warned. "He's using Mudoon!"

He wasn't sure what happened next, but he felt a rush of air before he felt himself being set down on the ground again. Ken slowly blinked, before his cheeks became flushed. Makoto had… carried him…

"Ace, are you okay now?"

"Y-Yeah…" Dammit, why was he stuttering? Ken quickly shook his head. "Come on, let's get back to the fight."

Makoto's hand clenched into a fist as her red eyes darkened with anger. "…Agreed."

The fight dragged on longer than what he had expected, since most of the targets they had fought today had been weaker than them.

But eventually Shadow Tsukasa fell, reverting to his human form.

"What… What have I done?"

"Fallen victim to your greed," Yusuke said firmly.

"You understand what you've done is wrong now, don't you?" Makoto demanded. "What you did to Eiko… and countless other girls… it's unforgivable!"

"What should I do now then?"

"Repent," Ren said.

"I… I suppose you're right. It's the least I can do with what I've done…"

The Shadow then disappeared, leaving behind a pair of gauntlets.

"At least you get a nice pair of gloves out of this." Ren waved it at Makoto.
Makoto let out a chuckle. "Yes… but…” She bit her lip. "…I hope that Eiko will be okay."

"Hey." Anne put a hand on her arm. "Eiko was one of the girls who submitted him as a target. I think you'll patch things up with Eiko. Just give it time."

Makoto offered her a small smile. "…Thank you, Anne."

"So, Joker, what should we do now?" Yusuke asked as they walked outside. "Continue forward?"

"Nah…” Ren shook his head. "We're all pretty beat. And besides that, we spent a long time fighting Tsukasa's Shadow. We might attract the Reaper."

…What.

"The Reaper's here, too?!" Ken demanded.

Ren blinked slowly at him. "…Too? The Reaper ran around in Tartarus?"

"Yes…” Ken grumbled. "Nearly killed us too many times…”

It was official. Mementos was definitely what Fuuka-san had sensed…

"Well, in that case, let's get going then!" Anne said, before she stretched. "I'm beat…"

"At least we'll sleep like babies tonight," Ryuji laughed. "Though we probably could use that on the flight to Hawaii…"

Ren just laughed. "Let's go home, guys."

Chapter End Notes

Bit of a filler chapter, basically covering the start of school to the Hawaii trip. The Hawaii chapter will be fun, though.

And happy late birthday, Yusuke!
Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves head to Hawaii for their school trip.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wednesday, September 7th, 2016

Group Chat: Former SEES

[Junpei Iori]: Dude, the fact that Shujin gets to go to HAWAII of all places

[Junpei Iori]: IS SUPER UNFAIR

[Minako Sanada]: I’ve gotta say I’m kinda jelly :(

[Yukari Takeba]: Why are you complaining…?

[Yukari Takeba]: I mean, we went to Yakushima. Multiple times!

[Junpei Iori]: BUT HAWAII YUKA-TAN

[Junpei Iori]: H A W A I I

[Yukari Takeba]: ugh you’re unbelievable -_- 

[Akihiko Sanada]: Ken, you should try and set an alarm! Get up then, so you don’t get jet lag

…Leave it to Akihiko-san to say that. Ken shook his head, before tapping out a reply and then stowing away his phone. He wouldn’t be missing out on much.

“So… where exactly are we going?” Ren asked, catching his attention. “Hawaii has multiple islands, doesn’t it?”

“Oahu,” Makoto replied. “It’s where the capital Honolulu is at. There are some historical landmarks, such as Pearl Harbor.”

“Pearl Harbor, huh…” Ren winced. “Though I guess it makes sense that they’d pick that kind of area for a school trip. Gotta educate us somehow.”

“At least they won’t be dragging us from temple to temple, like we did last year.” Ken rubbed the back of his neck. “Kyoto wasn’t the most exciting place to go to. The hot springs were nice, at least.”

…Though there had been the little incident that occurred at the hot springs, when everyone else had gone to Kyoto.
“You’d think an elite school like Gekkoukan would be able to come up with a better trip,” Makoto mused.

“Well, sometimes Port Island is the school trip,” Ken said. “One of Inaba’s schools had a partnership of sorts with Gekkoukan, so they come to visit Port Island around October. There’s been talks of a student exchange program, even.”

“Port Island is pretty famous already,” Makoto mused.

“Maybe we can visit someday,” Ren suggested. “What do you think—Anne?”

“Tiredddd…” she yawned out, before she rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. “Thank god that the flight is on time at least…”

Ren just laughed, before wrapping an arm around her waist and then kissing the crowd of her head. “You should sleep on the plane. It’s what—six hours long?”

“More or less,” Ken answered. “Miss Kawakami mentioned that it’ll be around mid afternoon when we make it to the hotel. But that’s no surprise. International flights are always late, to accommodate the time change.”

“Jet lag is gonna suck though,” Ren remarked, allowing Anne to lean against him to rest her head, even just for a little while. “I don’t even know what even is the time change.”

“Probably close to half a day,” Ken sighed. “So better get ready for a long ride…”

Hawaii… A completely different country, even though Hawaii was separated from the main United States by the miles of ocean. Though, it’d be nice to take a little break from hearing about Phantom Thieves.

“Is there any change on Futaba’s analysis, though?” Makoto asked. “It’s a pity that Morgana couldn’t come…”

“What, and get me busted for trying to smuggle a cat onto a plane?” Ren huffed out a laugh, before he shook his head. “My record can’t take another hit. Futaba promised me to take care of him while she works on decrypting whatever you had copied onto the drive for her.”

Makoto winced. “That’s true…”

“At least you managed to sneak Morgana into a theater,” Ken mused. “Minato-san and Minako-san had tried with Koromaru, but they ended up getting kicked out of the theater.”

Anne lifted her head to snicker. “Everyone in SEES are dog people, huh?”

“It’s hard not to love Koromaru.” Ken shrugged.

“I can’t argue with that logic.” Anne giggled, pressing a hand to her cheek. “He must have been even cuter back then.”

“I can’t believe that an ordinary dog is a Persona-user, though…” Makoto shook her head. “The concept is just… mind boggling.”

“Ren carts around a talking cat who can turn into a bus in the other world,” Ken said dryly, raising an eyebrow at her. “How do you think I feel?”

“…Point taken.” Makoto then raised an eyebrow at the two juniors. “Though, I’d watch it if I were
you. Our classmates will talk if you two continue to act like that. I know that the thing with Eiko cleared up, but I assumed that you would wait a little longer until you were open about your relationship..."

“Let them talk,” Anne grumbled, tossing her head (Ren narrowly missed being smacked by one of her pigtails.) “They thought that Ren and I had a thing from day one.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” Ren said. “But yeah.” He then smiled fondly at Anne. “But I am looking forward to spending some free time with Anne. I mean, Hawaii is a top choice for honeymoons for a reason.”

…More like that he was looking forward to seeing Anne in her swimsuit again.

“I don’t mean to change the topic, but… where is Ryuji?” Makoto took a quick look around, but Anne was the only blonde in the vicinity. “He’s late…” She frowned. “We’ll have to check in soon…”

As if her words had summoned him, Ryuji suddenly appeared, all but tripping over his feet. “Crap, I’m sorry!” he gasped out, keeling over and grasping his knees, as he panted for air. “Didn’t mean to make a mad dash like that…”

Makoto just folded her arms over her chest, staring at him sternly. “Where have you been?” she scolded. (He was surprised that she wasn’t tapping her foot out of impatience.) “Punctuality is a virtue, Ryuji.”

“Sorry, sorry…” He straightened up before he held up his hands. “I got too excited last night, couldn’t sleep at all. So… I…” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I kinda stayed up the whole night playing games.”

“Really?” Anne shifted away from Ren, staring at him unamused. “Coming late on a day where we’re getting away on a trip?”

Ken found himself staring at Ryuji’s… bag. Sure, Shinjiro-san had only packed a duffel bag when he visited Port Island in August, but he had some of his belongings back at the apartment on Port Island. “Did you pack enough?”

“Whataya mean, Ken?” Ryuji scrunched up his face. “Dude, we’re only staying four nights!” He gave his bag a firm pat. “This is plenty!”

“He’ll make it work,” Ren said, with a shrug.

“See?” Ryuji slung an arm around Ren’s shoulder with a wide grin. “I knew that Ren would have my back!”

“Any time, buddy.” Ren grinned at him in return.

Anne just turned unamused eyes onto her boyfriend, displeased with how he was enabling Ryuji’s laziness. Ken just sighed to himself. Well, he hoped that Ryuji was right. For his sake.

“There you are.” Miss Kawakami then approached them. “We’ll be boarding the gate soon, so get ready.”

“Yes, Miss Kawakami,” they chorused.

Anne tugged on Ren’s sleeve. “Let’s take a selfie when we’re in Hawaii!” she suggested. “It’ll
They had finally made it. Going through customs was a huge pain, but it was a relief to finally climb off the bus and enter the hotel. And while the younger students got to relax a little, Miss Kawakami called all of the third-years to go over the itinerary and what they were expected to do, over the trip.

“That settles almost everything…” Miss Kawakami ran her pencil along her clipboard, her lips pursed. “We just need to settle rooming arrangements. The students will have to stick to people in their homeroom, but since the chaperones are fewer in number… you can pick your roommate without that limitation. And while it’d be preferable that you have a roommate who is the same gender of you…” Miss Kawakami glanced around, as there were more girls than boys, narrowing her eyes for a moment. “…I’ll let it slide. Just don’t try anything funny.”

…Crap. He could already see a few of his female classmates staring at him.

“That’ll be all.”

“Ken, do you want to room with me?” Makoto interjected the moment Miss Kawakami had walked away, earning a few glares from their female classmates, but Makoto ignored them. Relief immediately flooded him.

“I’d love to.”

He didn’t want to have to deal with girls trying to latch onto him, so he was thankful that Makoto had been so quick about asking him.

“Okay, why don’t we get our room key and then check up on the others?” Makoto suggested. “Somehow, I imagine that their picking out their roommate won’t go as smoothly…”

“I just hope that Ren or Anne don’t do anything like sneak into each other’s room,” Ken muttered.

“They better not…” Makoto said sternly, folding her arms over her chest. “They’ll have some explaining to do if that’s the case.”

“I’m sure they’re not going to go that far,” Ken said hastily, before he lowered his voice. “They’ve only been together for a month, after all.”

…And honestly, he’d prefer not to be privy on what exactly Ren and Anne have been doing. He had walked in on too many making out sessions to be comfortable about hearing about that kind of thing.

…Sometimes he wished mind bleach was an actual thing. He could have really used that during a certain incident…

“I would hope so…” Makoto mumbled, almost under her breath. “They shouldn’t even be considering that. There are too many factors to consider and we already have a lot on our plates…”

look really pretty!”

“Okay, okay,” Ren laughed. “We will… in like eight hours.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Anne huffed.
After checking up on the juniors, and promising to meet up later to explore the nearby area, they headed to their hotel room. It was rather nice, wide and spacious… topped off with a nice view of the beach. It definitely had a different look than Yakushima, with the palm trees swaying in the breeze, the gleaming white sand, and the clear blue ocean…

“Wow, it looks so nice,” Makoto breathed, gazing outside. “I honestly didn’t expect it to be this nice.” She then chuckled. “Almost feels surreal. We’re actually in Hawaii.”

“Junpei-san was complaining that it wasn’t fair on the group chat,” Ken laughed, perching on the edge of the bed closer to the exit. “Because Gekkoukan went to Kyoto both school trips for him.” He then cleared his throat. “Um… look… if you need me to step out when you’re… in the shower, I completely understand.”

It would probably be for the better for them to set boundaries… He didn’t want to do anything that made Makoto uncomfortable.

“No… no, that’s not necessary.” Makoto’s expression softened as she turned to face him. “I know that you wouldn’t dream of doing anything inappropriate… I trust you, Ken.”

“Makoto…” Ken felt his face warm up, before looking away.

“Um…” She shifted on her feet uncomfortably, before she nodded towards the door. “Shall we, then? Today’s a free day, so I think it’d be nice to just spend time on the beach with everyone.”

Ken nodded. “Yeah, let’s go.”

They returned to the lobby, where the juniors were lounging in the seating area. Ryuji was texting on his phone, while Anne had stolen Ren’s glasses from him and was now currently wearing them. It looked almost comical on her, the glasses magnifying her eyes. Ren definitely pulled it off a lot better.

“I can see just fine, you know,” she said. “Is your vision even bad?”

“Yeah,” Ren said, snatching them back before sliding them back onto his face. “Because they’re just glass. I thought it would help me blend in.”

“That’s kinda hard to do that,” Anne said with a giggle.

“At least you don’t need them… at all,” Ken said dryly.

“Oh, yeah, that’s right…” Ren said. “When Anne and I met you for the first time, you were wearing reading glasses.”

Ken just shrugged. “Shinjiro-san claims that I shouldn’t have spent so many nights staying up to study or work on student council tasks.”

“He kinda has a point, y’know.” Ryuji stowed away his phone.

Ken just stared at him. “…And you were late to arrive at the airport, why?”

Ren snickered. “You walked right into that, Ryuji.”

“Ugh, shuddup!” Ryuji retorted, which only made Ren smirk.

That was when a couple girls wearing the Shujin uniform passed by. They stopped at Ryuji’s outburst, their eyes honing in on Makoto for some reason.
“I can’t believe they asked her to chaperone,” the taller of the two whispered, but they heard her perfectly clear. Some people just really didn’t know how to whisper. “What were they thinking?”

“She’s a total teacher’s pet, that’s why,” her companion huffed. “I really hope she’s not going to chaperone our group.”

“You’d think she’d stay at Shujin during all of this, with Kobayakawa in hot water.”

Ken gritted his teeth, his hand clenching into a fist. From what he understood, Makoto had made a lot of mistakes with how she handled Kamoshida. But either way, she didn’t deserve to be badmouthed like that.

“Hey!” Ryuji shot to his feet, glaring at the girls. “How about you-“

“Ryuji.” Makoto’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Don’t.” She was staring down at her lap. “…It’s okay. Really.”

Ryuji scowled, but reluctantly sat down.

“Whatever, Sakamoto,” she said with a scoff.

Her friend nudged her in the side, staring at Ken now. “I hope that Amada-senpai is our chaperone, though,” she added in a whisper. “He’s so cute.”

It took all of his willpower to not facepalm right then and there. It felt like he’d never escape that. Ugh. Not to mention… he’d never be interested in a girl who badmouthed Makoto.

“Let’s go, guys,” Anne interjected, shooting the girls a quick glare. For someone as kind as Anne, she had one nasty glare. “We have better things to do, don’t we?”

“Yeah, we could be having fun now,” Ren agreed, before standing up. “Let’s go.”

They left the hotel, though Makoto stayed awfully quiet.

“You didn’t deserve that,” Ken said, the moment they came to a stop under the shade of some palm trees.

“I don’t know about that…” Makoto answered, folding her arms over her chest. “I let down a lot of people, by not looking further when Kamoshida’s behavior was suspicious. I know… that there wasn’t a lot I could have done. But I do not blame people for being angry at me…”

“Makoto…” Anne frowned, putting a hand on her shoulder.

 “…It doesn’t matter what they think, though,” Makoto continued. “I know better now… I won’t turn a blind eye again…” she offered them a small smile, “and I have all of you.”

“Hehe…” Anne smiled brightly, giving Makoto’s shoulder a light squeeze. “We’re glad to have you.”

“Though I’ve got a question…” Ren said, glancing at Makoto first and then Ken. “Which one of you are going to chaperone us during the class outings?”

Ken shifted on his feet. “Well, given the behavior of those girls… and how I doubt that they’re in the minority… I think Makoto would be the better choice if Miss Kawakami gives us a choice…”

Makoto’s expression soured. “…And girls taking the opportunity to harass you in hopes you’ll find
one of them attractive is better?” she asked.

Ken just sheepishly smiled, rubbing the back of his neck. “…Okay, you have a point. Though it’s nothing I’ve dealt with before…”

Makoto just scowled. “That doesn’t make it okay. You’re obviously not interested!”

“Hey, it might be divided in classes again,” Ryuji offered, before he abruptly slung an arm around Ken’s shoulders. “I can protect Ken from the scary, terrifying girls who want him to take them out on a date.”

“Your sacrifice is well appreciated, Ryuji,” Ren said solemnly. “I wish you good luck on this task.”

“Honestly, you two…” Makoto sighed, as their serious façade broke and they started to crack up.

“Aw, just let them have their fun,” Anne laughed, before her eyes lit up. “Oh!” She snagged her boyfriend’s sleeve, giving a light tug. “Ren, remember how I wanted to take a selfie of us in Hawaii? We should totally do it now!”

“Good idea, Anne,” Ren laughed, pulling out his phone, before glancing around. “We’ll probably have squish a lot, though.”

“We’ll make it work!” Anne said, determination filling her face.

Ren was right though. It was a tight fit, but they finally managed it. Ren raised his phone in triumph. “Say aloha!” he exclaimed.

“Aloha!”

Friday, September 9th, 2016

“YUSUKE?!”

Ryuji’s outburst earned them a few (actually, several) stares. But Yusuke didn’t seemed bothered by it. “Overseas travel has been quite an eyeopener,” he declared. “I do wish that we would be staying here longer.”

“What are you doing here?!” Anne cried, her eyes wide with shock.

“Didn’t you mention that your school would be going to Los Angeles?” Makoto asked with a frown.

“They apparently couldn’t land on the west coast, due to a terrible storm.” Yusuke shrugged. “There were no signs of it letting up, so the destination was changed to here.”

“A storm…?” Ken asked. “I thought that was more of an east coast thing, with hurricanes. Isn’t the west coast more known for earthquakes?” He then sighed, shaking his head. “…And I thought we had bad coordination on this trip…”

Ryuji’s head drooped. “Do you just… bring rain everywhere you go?!” he groaned.

“It did rain heavily at the fireworks festival too…” Makoto added, her eyes wide.
“I think that’s a bit of a jump,” Ken said, frowning at the two of them. “I’m sure it’s just a coincidence.”

“Well, just think of it as a good thing.” Ren smiled at Yusuke. “I mean, it’ll be nice to hang out, right?”

“There aren’t any plans after this,” Ken said. “Is there anything you want to do? Ryuji mentioned wanted to go diving before…”

“Oh, wait!” Ryuji interjected, his eyes growing wide. “I’ve gotta go shop for souvenirs. Promised my mom I’d get her something nice.”

“Just don’t beg me for money this time, Ryuji,” Anne ribbed with a playful smile.

Ryuji huffed. “That was one time! Will you ever let that go?!”

“But that’s a good idea, Ryuji,” Ren said. “I should get some things for everyone back in Japan.”

They both had a good point. What would Shinjiro-san like? Macadamia nuts? Coconut oil…? Though, despite how much he had harped Ken for not drinking that much coffee when he was younger, he always did prefer drinking coffee over tea… And there was everyone else too. Mitsuru-san would probably like Kona coffee… But then again, Minako-san would probably get on his case for encouraging her to drink coffee…

“Thinking about what to get Shinjiro-san?” Makoto asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“That, and everyone else…” Ken shook his head. “…I have a big list of people to shop for.” He then shrugged. “Though, it’s not like they haven’t given me a lot over the years…”

“Yeah… I don’t envy you, Ken,” Anne said with a wince.

“So… it’s decided?” Yusuke raised an eyebrow. “We will go shopping in our spare time today.”

“Yes, it’s pretty much unanimous,” Ren said. “Let’s get going then. We’re burning daylight.”

“Dude, you don’t have to make it sound so serious…”

Shopping was… interesting with Anne. She had dragged them to practically every store, even though most of the time, she was just window shopping. (She’d get along swimmingly with Yukari-san and Minako-san.) But Ken had managed to find souvenirs for everyone (mostly food), and Ren had bought gifts for the Sakuras and Morgana as well. But it was still afternoon when they had managed to finish their shopping, so Ryuji had offered a tourist spot for them to go see.

“…This is your recommended tourist spot?” Anne didn’t bother hiding her disappointment. “From what you said, King Kamehameha’s statue felt more… impressive.”

“I thought it’d be like… the Buddha statue,” Ryuji said sheepishly. “You know, like the one on Nara?”

“It is rather magnificent, though,” Yusuke commented. “Though I’ll admit that I would love to see the jade Buddha in Hong Kong.”

“You want to take a picture, Ren?” Ken asked. “For Futaba.”

“Might as well,” Ren agreed, before snapping a picture with his phone. A few seconds later, his
phone went off. He let out a snort. “She’s completely unimpressed,” he reported. “Said that she could’ve just googled a picture right on her phone.”

Ryuji sighed. “I mean, it is just a dude wearing a loincloth.”

“And just who recommended this place?” Anne asked flatly.

“You don’t have to keep giving him a hard time, Anne,” Ren laughed, resting a hand on her shoulder. “You pick on him enough already.”

“Oh, and what about you, huh?” Anne quirked an eyebrow at him, before she poked him in the chest. “You mess with everyone.”

Ren took on an offended expression, pressing a hand over his chest. “Excuse you, that’s part of my charm.”

Ken couldn’t help but roll his eyes at that.

“Uh huh.” Even as she sounded doubtful, Anne’s eyes twinkled before she let out a giggle. “Sure, Ren.”

“This man is responsible for a great achievement, though,” Makoto commented, gazing up at the statue. “He created a law called Kanawai Mamalahoe. It stipulated the protection of human rights of non-combatants in times of battle.”

“Guess we’re having an impromptu history lesson, huh?” Ren quipped. “I had a lucky guess when I was asked about this guy in class just a few days ago. Asked me what he was holding in his right hand.”

“It’s pretty cool, though,” Ryuji said. “Protecting the weak and all that.”

“You sure know a lot though,” Anne said, looking at Makoto. “Wait… is this kinda guy your type?”

Makoto didn’t seem to hear her though. “Remember how my sister’s a public prosecutor? That’s why I’m interested in legal history.”

“Psst, Ken.” Ryuji prodded his shoulder, his voice a whisper now. “What would you do if Makoto seriously had a thing for older guys?”

“…Why are you asking me this?” Ken whispered back.

“Uhh… maybe because you’re rooming with her?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Ken hissed, feeling his traitorous face heat up. At least he could claim it was the heat.

“Ohhh I get it…” Ryuji nodded seriously. “I mean, you’ve got some pretty gorgeous lady senpai.” He began to tick off his fingers. “There’s Mitsuru Kirijo, Yukari-san is a model and actress, and Fuuka-san was really pretty. And Minako-san is pretty cute when she was our age, from the pictures. Guess older women make everyone else pale in comparison, huh?”

“You—that has nothing to do with that!” Ken retorted. It took some restraint to not let his voice go above a whisper. Forget Makoto, Anne would murder them both in broad daylight if she knew what Ryuji was pushing. Rightly so.
And besides that, Makoto was pretty.

…Wait, what was he thinking?

“What are you two whispering about?” Makoto blinked at them, apparently oblivious to everything. (Thank God.)


“Haha, yeah!” Ryuji seconded with a grin.

Ren just raised an eyebrow at them, tilting his head ever so slightly. “Huh.”

Gah. How did he manage to infuse such curiosity in a one-syllable word?

Yusuke was still staring at the statue, though. His eyes were filled with awe. “The raised right hand, the spear in his left… His sharp gaze piercing the horizon…” His eyes then closed, before a satisfied smile came onto his face. “So this… this is the aloha spirit!”

…Sometimes Yusuke was really on an entirely different wavelength.

A ping pierced through the air. Ren took out his phone again, before he begun to read aloud. “Inari is the epitome of a Japanese weirdo.” He then looked up. “According to Futaba.”

“…Wait, how can she hear us?” Makoto asked with a frown.

Another ping. “She said that she put an app on my phone that lets her hear us. And see us.”

Ugh. Was she serious?

Ken just stared at Ren’s phone, unimpressed. “Futaba…” he ground out, “what did we say about hacking?”

Yet another ping. Ren glanced up at him, an amused smile on his face now. “I’m not a messenger, you know.”

It was then Ken’s phone went off. There was a text from Futaba.

_You’re such a killjoy sometimes._

Ken couldn’t help but make a face. Maybe this was why Shinjiro-san was so grumpy sometimes, with how he had to play impulse control to almost everyone in SEES. He remembered one time where Junpei-san wondered aloud what would happen if he had poured coffee into his cereal, rather than milk. Shinjiro-san then confiscated the entire coffee pot from him.

“Hey, do you think we can get into the building behind the statue?” Ryuji pointed to a rather ornate building, which was indeed behind the statue. “Looks pretty damn fancy!”

“That’s the judiciary building,” Makoto explained. “The Hawaii Supreme Court is inside.”

“Sounds like a place we should avoid then,” Ren quipped.

“Well, this was a bust…” Ryuji groaned, hanging his head.

“Again, whose idea was it?” Anne retorted.
“Ugh, are you gonna let it go?!” he fired back.

“Ryuji, I believe you know the answer to that already,” Yusuke intoned.

“Gah, you too, Yusuke?!”

“Okay, okay, enough,” Ken sighed, shaking his head at them. “It’s nearly six… do you want to get dinner and call it a day?”

“I noticed a Big Bang place while we were walking,” Anne noted. “I’m surprised that they’re all the way in Hawaii.”

“Okumura Foods has expanded enough for them to go international,” Makoto said.

“Okumura…” Ren repeated. “Mishima mentioned to me this morning that he has climbed to the top of the poll. The one where people can vote who we should target first.”

Anne made a face. “This isn’t a popularity contest…”

“It’s pretty great, though, isn’t it?” Ryuji asked. “People actually know about us here! All the way in America! We’ve really made it big!”

“It is quite amazing,” Yusuke nodded. “We’ve come a long way.”

“We can’t let people down,” Ryuji added. “We’ve really gotta wow people when we make our next move!”

“Keep it down, Ryuji,” Makoto admonished. “But still… I agree… People are expecting great things now…”

“Don’t worry, we’ll do great,” Ren reassured. “We just gotta take it one step at a time.”

“We should proceed with caution, though,” Yusuke warned. “But anyhow, that’s enough talk of that. I am rather famished.”

“It is close to lunch time in Japan, I believe,” Ken said. “Where do you want to go?”

“Let’s do something that’s really Hawaiian!” Anne suggested. “Like Hawaiian barbeque! Or poke bowls!”

“Jeez, and you’re supposed to be on a diet?” Ryuji mocked. “Better watch it.”

Anne let out a little growl, scowling at him as her hands clenched into fists. “Ugh, shut up, Ryuji!”

“Anne, you look fine the way you are,” Ren reassured her, before flashing her a smile. “Perfect, in fact.”

Yusuke then stopped in his tracks. “…Isn’t that the girl we met at the festival?”

“Huh?” Ren glanced at their friend, before following his line of sight. “I think you’re right. Same hair.”

Ken looked to see that it was Haru-san. She was gazing at the Big Bang Burger restaurant, her expression almost… mournful.

“She really is cute,” Ryuji said. “Wonder why she’s so bummed out about-“ Ryuji then suddenly
snapped his fingers. ‘Ohhh, right… She’s a girl. She probably cares about her figure and has sworn off burgers! But burgers taste really good, so she wishes she could eat ‘em!”

There was a very pregnant pause. Both Anne and Makoto gave him unimpressed stares.

…If he had dared to say that in the presence of any of his female teammates, he’d probably come out with some kind of physical damage. Well. Save for Aigis-san. Aigis-san would probably lament that she doesn’t know what burgers taste like.

Ryuji looked between the two girls, bewildered. “…What? Ain’t it true?”

“…Really, Ryuji?” Anne deadpanned.

“I do not believe you are supposed to say that, Ryuji,” Yusuke said, his eyes solemn. “I believe you have made a faux pas.”

“W-What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Haru-san then heaved out a sigh, interrupting the bickering, before trudging down the sidewalk. Ken couldn’t help but frown, watching her go.

“She seems… lonely,” Makoto said softly, her eyes filling with pity.

“Let’s catch up with her, then,” Ryuji suggested, his expression becoming determined. “Invite her to dinner!”

Without warning, he rushed after Haru-san.

“H-Hey, Ryuji, wait!”

All of her classmates and juniors seemed to be enjoying themselves but… all Haru could think of is how Sugimura had dropped heavy hints that he would like to visit a tropical paradise for their… honeymoon. Just the idea of him having his hands on her… even more than he did now just made her skin crawl.

Everything felt like a countdown… slowly dwindling to the day where she would have to walk down the aisle, vow to tie herself to a man whose very gaze made her shudder. Just thinking about it made Haru want to cry. She just felt trapped… doomed to a future that she just knew would make her absolutely miserable.

“Hey! Haru-senpai! Wait up!”

Blinking in confusion, Haru turned to see Sakamoto-kun skid to a stop right in front of her, his friends not too far behind. It was a bit startling for him to stand so close to him, if she was being honest. Haru quickly took a step backwards, so that he wasn’t in her personal space.

“Is there something you need, Sakamoto-kun?” she asked, trying her best to infuse some kind of energy in her voice. She wasn’t sure if she had succeeded.

“Uh, yeah!” He bobbed his head. “We were talking ‘bout heading for dinner now, and it looks like you’re… uh…” He rubbed the back of his neck. “…You wanna join us?”

Haru just stared at him. They… They wanted her to join them…?

“Jeez, you can be fast when you wanna, Ryuji,” Takamaki-san huffed to her fellow blond, before
flashing Haru a brilliant smile. She had been… indifferent to the rumors about the foreign blonde, but seeing that smile… Haru couldn’t see how anyone could view her as a stuck-up… um…

…Unpleasant person.

“Whataya say?” Sakamoto-kun asked, giving her a friendly smile as well.

“I… I don’t mean to intrude,” Haru said hesitantly, watching as the others caught up.

“Nah, the more the merrier!” Amamiya-kun interjected, giving her a friendly smile. Haru couldn’t help but blush a little. She had never seen him up close except that one time at the festival. She had to admit… he was quite handsome. Much more handsome than Sugimura, though all four boys present could boast that, in her opinion.

“But Ren’s correct,” the blue haired boy—Kitagawa-kun—added. “We simply wish to enjoy your company as well.” He then smiled gently. “Nobody should be eating alone, especially when on an outing.”

Haru just blinked. They were… this was a new experience. She could see the sincerity shining from each and every face. It wasn’t because of her father. They didn’t even know her surname. “All right,” she agreed.

“The tomatoes were delicious by the way,” Amada-kun informed her. “Shinjiro-san really was impressed. He said that he could taste the vitamins.”

“Thank you.” Haru couldn’t help but smiled, pleased at the compliment. Gardening was one of the few joys she indulged in now, and to hear that someone had enjoyed the fruits of her labor so much… “And um… if you don’t mind…” She bit her lip. “…Can we not go to Big Bang Burger?” she asked.

She didn’t want to see how foreigners ran the chain here. She didn’t want the reminder…

“See, what did I tell ya?!?” Sakamoto-kun whirled on his friends, triumphant over… something. “I was right!”

“Ryuji.” Niijima-san just folded her arms over her chest, her stare flat. “…No. That is definitely not the case.”

“Say what?!”

Haru couldn’t help but laugh softly. She had noticed that they had gravitated towards each other over the past few months… They were definitely close. “Do I… want to know?” she asked.

“No,” Amada-kun said dryly. “No, you don’t.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it, then.” Haru offered them a shy smile. “Shall we, then?”

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Saturday, September 10th, 2016

It was the third day of their trip, but it felt like it had passed by in a blink of an eye. This would be their last final day.

“Are you ready to go, Makoto?” He rapped lightly on the bathroom door.
“One second!” Makoto responded, her voice muffled by the door. Moments later, the door swung open and Makoto stepped out, smoothing down her uniform. “Sorry, my hair was being a bit unruly today.”

“I can understand that,” Ken said with a laugh, before he opened the door.

The hotel offered free breakfast, buffet style. Though Ken couldn’t help but think that Shinjiro-san would side-eye most of the available choices.

Today seemed to be pretty lax, though, since it was technically the last day. They would have several hours to themselves, after returning to the hotel. They had a half day tomorrow, but they would be flying back to Tokyo tomorrow night.

“So you have any plans for the free time?” Makoto suddenly asked, as if she had been reading his thoughts.

Ken paused at that. “No. Nothing really.”

“Oh, I was just thinking… it’d be nice if we could spend that time together. Especially since our duties have us separate for the most part…”

Well, he couldn’t deny that wasn’t the truth. It turned out that Ryūji was right, and the groups were restricted by classes. Ken ended up being responsible for Ryūji’s group, while Makoto took care of Ren and Anne’s group. It would be nice to spend time with Makoto.

...Besides that, Ryūji might get it in his head that he wanted to go and hit on girls during their free time too.

“Sure. I’d love to-“

The door in front of them suddenly opened, and out stepped… Ren and Anne, the former’s arm around the latter’s waist. They stared at Ken and Makoto in horror, very much like deer in headlights. Anne quickly scrambled away from Ren, blood draining from both of their faces.

“Uh… h-hey?” Anne stammered out.

“Good… good morning?” Ren looked unnaturally nervous, too.

“Ren Amamiya… Anne Takamaki…” Makoto ground out, before tapping her foot impatiently.

“You have thirty seconds to give me a good explanation.”

Anne paled even more. “C-Come on, Makoto-“

“We didn’t do anything, just so you know,” Ren said. “Kinda kills the mood with Ryūji and...”
Mishima there.”

“Well…” Makoto’s frown softened. “…I suppose that’s fine. Just take care to not repeat this.”

Both juniors’ shoulders slumped in relief but Ken eyed Ren carefully. He didn’t know just how far their relationship had gone so far, and frankly, he didn’t care to find out. If he had it his way, all the couples he knew wouldn’t broadcast it to him. But still he better make sure that Ren knew the meaning of protection.

“Okay, let’s go get breakfast now then!” Anne smiled brightly now. “Don’t want to miss out on the good stuff!”

“Read: pancakes,” Ren intoned. “The closest we have to crepes, after all.”

Anne scowled at him for a moment, before she smacked his shoulder. “Oh, shush, Ren!”

The girls then headed off, but Ken grabbed Ren by the shoulder. “Ren, a word please.”

“I thought-“

“You don’t get off that easily,” Ken said flatly, raising an eyebrow at the younger boy. “Look. I don’t particularly care if you and Anne are sleeping with each other or if you want to do it with her in the future.” Ren’s only answer was a sheepish smile. Ken then narrowed his eyes. “But I do care if you’re being stupid about it. None of this pullout crap. If you’re going to sleep with Anne… Use. Protection.”

Ren held up his hands. “Come on, Ken-“

“I mean it, Ren.” Ken stared at him. “Don’t be stupid about this. I lived with a group of teenagers for a year and a half. I’ve had the… misfortune of learning that they usually forget to lock the door.”

It was Ren’s turn to stare. “Wait, did you learn-“

“Take it as you will,” Ken said dryly. “I’m not going to confirm anything.”

After that, Ken refused to talk any more on the subject, despite Ren’s prodding, and they eventually caught up with the girls. They then met with Ryuji and Mishima and ate breakfast together at one huge table.

“So…” Ryuji began, “what’s the plan today?”

“It’s a half day, really,” Ken answered. “The entire afternoon will be yours to do whatever you want… within reason.”

“Really…” Ren then turned to Anne. “So, Anne, could you free up your schedule for little ol’ me?”

Anne giggled. “Depends,” she said, “what do you have in mind?”

“Me, you, and the beach.” Ren grinned at her. “Sounds perfect, right?”

Anne let out a hum, before she offered him a bright smile. “I’d love to.” She then pushed her plate away from her, glancing past them for some reason. “I see my roommate though, gonna ask her for the key so I can freshen up a bit before we go.”
She then gave Ren a quick kiss on the cheek, before standing up and walking up to a dark haired girl. Ren watched her go with an almost goofy smile.

“I… I can’t believe you two are together…” Mishima said slowly.

“We were keeping it quiet at first,” Ren explained. “Sorry for not telling you.”

“No… it’s okay.” Mishima shook his head. “I mean, you kept quiet because of the rumors… with Kamoshida, right?”

“…Yeah. Something like that.” Ren then leaned over, stacking his empty plate over Anne’s abandoned one. “Gonna grab seconds. I’ll be back.”

The moment Ren walked away, Ryuji started to grin like crazy.

…What was he planning?

“…Ryuji.”

“Whaaaat?” He did his best to go for innocent. (Didn’t really work.)

“What are you planning?” he said flatly, looking at him suspiciously.

“It’s just…” Ryuji’s smile turned sly. “This is Ren and Anne’s first real date, yeah? I mean, sure they’ve done dates at LeBlanc, where they’re probably all cutesy with each other and feeding each other dinner, but this is a totally different level! Don’t you wanna spy on them?”

“Ryuji!” Makoto exclaimed, shooting him a sharp look. She looked scandalized. “You shouldn’t spy on them!”

“Do I want to watch Ren and Anne making eyes at each other and possibly make out or do I want the afternoon to relax?” Ken asked rhetorically, eyeing his friend. “…That is a tough decision.”

Mishima let out a snicker. “Good one, Senpai.”

“Aw, c’mon, don’t you wanna see what Ren does?” Ryuji cajoled, leaning closer to Ken. “For when you’re dating someone?”

“That probably won’t happen in a long time, Ryuji,” Ken said dryly, before he picked up his coffee and took a small sip. “And if Anne finds out? It’s your funeral.”

“Actually Sakamoto has a good point…” Mishima said thoughtfully.

“So, you’re in?” Ryuji asked with a grin.

“Honestly!” Makoto sighed, before pinching the bridge of her nose. “Ryuji, you are not to spy on Ren and Anne. They deserve some private time together and as you said… on a proper date.”

“But-“

Makoto stared flatly at him.

“Ugh. Fine!” Ryuji groaned, before muttering under his breath that sounded suspiciously close to killjoy.

Makoto narrowed her eyes. “I heard that.”
“Niijima-senpai really doesn’t give you a break, huh, Sakamoto?” Mishima mused. “Then again, you are the type to be underneath a girl’s thumb…”

“Ugh, shuddup, Mishima!”

It was nice… to get a breather. Organizing everyone, making sure nobody got left behind… it was more stressful than he had imagined. He had a new respect for their teachers.

…At least he was assigned a group of boys to chaperone.

“You too?” Makoto sighed.

“It has been fun, but not exactly lacking in stress,” Ken answered. “Though I enjoy our free time more, since that leaves us able to spend time with everyone.”

“That is nice,” Makoto agreed with a soft smile. “Though…” She tilted her head. “…A shirt today?”

Ken shrugged. “Usually prefer to wear a shirt, actually. Last time at the beach, it was just… too hot. Comparable to outside of Futaba’s Palace, if you ask me.”

“That’s fair.” Makoto nodded. “Though speaking of Futaba…” Her expression darkened. “…Do you think she’s done analyzing the data I got from Sis?”

Knowing Futaba… the answer was probably yes. Her talent honestly made her… terrifying. What she had done to Ren’s phone couldn’t help but make him feel a little paranoid that she had done something to his phone.

But her voice had… gone all quiet.

“Makoto…” he said, gently putting a hand on her shoulder “do you need to talk about it?”

“There’s nothing really to say…” Makoto shrugged, before biting her lip. “We… We need to know what Sis’s plans are. So we’re one step ahead of her…”

…It sounded like Makoto was more trying to convince herself. But it looked like Makoto wasn’t too eager to discuss this. Her relationship with her older sister seemed… complicated. Really complicated. Then again, he couldn’t really talk, with Shinjiro-san… He couldn’t imagine sneaking around his senpai, either. (More so Mitsuru-san, but the point still stood.)

“I’m here, if you ever need to talk about it,” Ken said finally.

Makoto offered him a smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “…I know. Thank you, Ken.” She then sighed, offering a weak smile. “We… We should be trying to enjoy ourselves. I didn’t mean to bring down the mood.”

“I am enjoying my time with you,” Ken contradicted, before he raised an eyebrow at her. “Unless I’m boring you, of course…”

“That’s not—” Makoto then narrowed her eyes, before she smacked his shoulder. “Don’t tease me like that,” she grumbled, but she couldn’t fight back a smile now.

“It made you smile, didn’t it?” Ken asked.

“I think you’ve been spending too much time with Ren,” Makoto huffed, before her eyes stopped at
a stall selling fruit smoothies. She then gestured at it. “Want to get one?”

“Sure.”

“Hi there!” The stall vendor was a young woman, in her mid twenties. She looked like she was Polynesian, with her jet black hair, dark eyes, and tanned complexion. Her smile was friendly. “What can I get you two?”

“Hmm…” Makoto rubbed her chin. “I’ll try pina colada. That’s pineapple and coconut, right?”

“Yes!” she answered. “Though your accent…” She tilted her head. “You’re Japanese, aren’t you?”

“That’s right,” Ken answered.

The woman laughed. “I have to admit, I’m a bit envious of you. You may not be from Tokyo, but I bet you hear news of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts a lot faster, don’t you?”

Makoto blinked. “You’ve heard of the Phantom Thieves all the way here?!”

“Oh yeah.” The woman pressed a button on the blender. “It’s pretty exciting news.” She then sighed. “If only they would target a certain president candidate,” she remarked, her expression darkening for a mind.

“Oh, that’s right,” Ken said. “I forgot that America is having an election this year.”

“Mnhm.” The woman nodded, after she released her hold on the button. She then looked at Ken. “And what about you?”

“Hmm…” Ken did a quick glance over the menu, as the woman poured out Makoto’s smoothie. “I’ll take a strawberry smoothie.”

She quickly blended up a smoothie for Ken. “That will be eight dollars and fifty cents,” the woman announced, handing the smoothie to Ken. “Or do you want to split the check?”

“I’ve got it,” Ken said, reaching for his wallet in his pocket. He handed the woman a ten dollar bill. He had to say, it was a bit weird how many coins the American currency had.

“Let me pay you back later then,” Makoto said.

“That’s not necessary,” Ken replied. “That’s not even five hundred yen.”

“But-“

“Makoto, it’s fine.”

The woman just laughed, looking amused for some reason. “Okay, your change will be one dollar and fifty cents.” She smiled brightly. “Enjoy the rest of your stay!”

“We will,” they chorused together.

Ken hadn’t drank smoothies all that much, but this one was pretty good. Too bad it wasn’t that much of a thing in Japan.

“I’m honestly surprised,” Makoto suddenly said, after taking a sip from her smoothie. “That a place as far as Hawaii has heard of the Phantom Thieves.”
“Well, Futaba seemed to imply that Medjed is a world-wide thing,” Ken said. “It is surprising but… it was probably inevitable.”

“No pressure there, right?” Makoto chuckled.

Ken sighed, watching the sunset. Where had the time gone? Soon, they would have to return to Tokyo, and resume their lives…

Sae’s eyes were narrowed on her. “How could you?” she spat out. “Becoming a Phantom Thief…” She shook her head. “It was all to spite me, wasn’t it?”

“No, Sis, please…” Makoto took a step closer to Sae. “It’s not that.”

“No sister of mine would become a criminal,” Sae spat, before turning on her heel. She looked over her shoulder, her eyes colder than ice. “So, I suppose you’re no sister of mine.”

Makoto felt like she had the rug yanked from underneath her feet. “W-What?”

“Goodbye, Makoto.”

Makoto… Makoto…

She couldn’t mean that, could she…? Sae still cared for her, didn’t she? Then why had she-

Makoto, WAKE UP!

Makoto’s eyes snapped open with a gasp. She realized that Ken had been shaking her awake.

It was a dream. It was just a dream. Sae didn’t hate her, thank goodness-

Something wet splashed onto her hand. Makoto blinked and another wet droplet splashed onto her hand.

Makoto then quickly turned away from Ken, hastily wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. It was bad enough that Ken had to see her having a nightmare, but the fact that he had seen her crying… just made it doubly worse.

“Makoto, look at me.” Ken lightly grasped her shoulder.

“Go back to bed, Ken,” Makoto said hoarsely, before she swallowed thickly. “It… It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing!” Ken snapped, suddenly climbing onto Makoto’s bed so that he was in front of her again.

“It’s just a dream, I’m stupid for being so affected by it-“

“You’re not stupid, Makoto!” Ken retorted, shaking his head. “You’re allowed to get upset over something. You’re not weak for crying about something that distresses you.”

“But I…” Makoto bit her lip. “I feel like a scared little girl,” she mumbled out, before swiping at her eyes again. “Sis… she’s so important to me. She’s the only family I have left… but at the same time, I can’t agree with what she’s doing. And the Phantom Thieves have been the first people to accept me in the longest time… It’s silly that I worry about her opinion so much…”

“It’s not,” Ken said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "She's your sister. And you love her."
Of course he could say that... He didn’t feel like he’d have to choose…

“I know I’m lucky,” Ken said quietly, as if he had read her mind. “Mitsuru-san almost said no to me. I don’t know if I would have it in me to defy her, if she had told me no. She’s done so much for me over the years. And… I don’t know if I could choose between the two of you.”

That made sense. From Ken’s story, she knew that SEES had forged a tight bond due to the tribulations they had faced together. They had become a family, a family that none of them had when they were younger…

“And…” Ken continued, “even then, I still worried… that you would be hurt… feel betrayed about me masking the truth. I was scared that you would… hate me for this…”

Ken’s expression… it was so raw. He hadn’t been this open, even when he had spilled the entire story. Ken had been struggling to keep it together, but he had managed it.

“Ken, I…” Makoto swallowed hard, slowly placing a hand over one of his. “I don’t think… I could hate you. Ever.”

A soft smile touched his lips. “I don’t know your sister,” Ken continued carefully. “But I do believe that she does love you and just wants the best for you. I don’t think that she’d hate you over this…”

“I hope so…” Makoto murmured.

She wanted to believe that it was the truth. She didn't know if she could handle it if it wasn't.

Ken was quiet for a moment. “Tell me more about your sister,” he said finally. “Back before… she had to step up and become your guardian.”

“Well…” Makoto pursed her lips. “You know already that she’s a pretty big fan of Neo Feathermen. She would sometimes ask me to play me hero with her. I would act as the civilian in danger while she swooped in to save the day…”

She talked for what felt was a long time. Memories that she hadn't thought of in years came to the surface. Sometimes, she desperately missed those days. It had never been easy, with their dad having to act as a single parent... But it had been easier. Sae had mothered her even back then due to the death of their mother, but... Sae was different then. More optimistic. She had remembered more than one dinner conversation when Sae had enthusiastically discussed her law classes, and how she couldn't wait to become a prosecutor so she could punish wrong doers. Just like their father.

She had honestly forgotten how many good memories she had with Sae. Their strained relationship had occupied her mind completely.

Eventually, she felt her eyelids droop, as exhaustion covered her like a cloak. She felt Ken’s weight on the bed shift, probably to climb back into his bed, but she reached out and grabbed him by the shirt. He inhaled sharply, looking at her wide-eyed.

“Stay here,” she murmured.

“Makoto, I don’t know…”

She just… she felt steadier with him around. His presence was just… comforting to her.
“Please, Ken,” she pleaded with wide eyes.

Ken was silent for what felt like forever. “Is this what you really want?” Ken asked quietly.

“It is.”

She felt him sigh. “All… All right,” he murmured and he shifted back to lie on the bed. “Good night, Makoto.”

“Good night, Ken.”

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**Sunday, September 11th, 2016**

Makoto blinked sleepily at the already bright sunlight streaming through the window. She felt so... warm and comfortable. Even her pillow felt nice and toasty. Which was odd, since the pillows were actually kinda flat-

...Wait a minute.

Makoto felt her cheeks grow warm before she quickly inched away. This was... This was definitely a *don't ask, don't tell* moment. Her pillow was... *Ken*. Just a few minutes ago, she had buried her face against his shoulder. When did that happen?!

Then the memories of last night started to flood in. Makoto pressed a hand to her now burning face. She had all but begged him to sleep with her. Er, sleep in the same *bed* as her... not... the other activity...

Why was she thinking that? Makoto quickly shook her head, to try and shake the thoughts out of her mind. That kind of thinking was just inappropriate!

Makoto rubbed her still hot face, before she grimaced. She must have it on her mind because of seeing Ren and Anne leaving his room together. And the conclusions that she had jumped to just yesterday morning. Yes, that was it.

Still, Ken was rather... cute when he was sleeping. Ken had gotten up earlier than her the past two mornings since they had roomed together. His cheeks were flushed pink from sleep, and he looked... more peaceful while he slept. His bangs fell into his eyes. Makoto eyed his hair. Both Fuuka-san and Yukari-san had been fond of mussing up his hair, even though Ken hated it. Fuuka-san claimed it was rather soft. Ken *was* asleep, so... why not?

Makoto ran her fingers through his hair. In the sun, there were glints of russet in his hair. And honestly... his hair was softer than hers. Though she had to wonder why Ken hated his hair being touched. She could see why Fuuka-san and Yukari-san liked to ruffle his hair-

"Having fun?"

Makoto let out a squeak, dropping Ken's hair in an instant and quickly scrambling to her side of the bed.

Ken huffed out a laugh, before he sat up. Ken's hair stuck up in several places, a far cry from his usual neat hairstyle. "Good morning to you too," he said dryly, running his fingers through his hair in an attempt to tame it somewhat, before he stifled a yawn. "Just so you know, I hate it when Fuuka-san and Yukari-san did it because I hate my hair getting all mussed up. I'm not saying
"I love waking up to you playing with my hair, it's not annoying."

"O-Oh... I guess that makes sense."

An awkward silence fell between them. Makoto began to fidget. Of course it'd be awkward, they had shared a bed last night-

"How are you feeling?" Ken suddenly asked.

Makoto blinked. "Oh... much better." She hesitantly met his gaze. "Um... thank you. For everything last night."

"Anytime, Makoto." He just gave her a tired smile. "I'm glad that you're feeling better." He then rubbed the back of his neck. "And... I meant what I said last night," he said quietly. "I don't think I can ever express how much your and everyone else's acceptance means to me."

"Ken..." Makoto breathed.

Ken coughed, his cheeks turning slightly pink. "I... I better go freshen up," he mumbled out, before making a hasty retreat.

Makoto watched him go. She... She supposed that Ken just wanted to move past this whole thing. It was a one time thing, after all.

...But why did she feel a little disappointed?

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*Monday, September 12th, 2016*

Makoto was glad that she had the afternoon and evening to rest up. When she had gotten home, she had showered, napped a little, before preparing dinner. She was studying when the door opened and Sae stepped through.

"Hey, Sis," she greeted.

"Hello, Makoto," she said, before glancing at the textbooks spread in front of Makoto. She smiled, looking pleased. "You just got back from your trip and you're already studying." She shook her head. "Color me impressed."

"I got a souvenir for you," Makoto said, before standing up. "I should get it for you-"

"Wait, Makoto," Sae said tautly. "There's something you need to know." When Makoto looked up, she continued. "Just yesterday... Principal Kobayakawa passed away."

"P-Passed away?" Makoto repeated. "From what?"

The principal was middle aged and... obese, but it wasn't like he'd just drop dead from a heart attack...

Sae folded her arms over her chest. "He was crossing the road, when he suddenly stopped. He was hit by a truck, head-on. Death by external trauma. And some people... they believe it was suicide. From all of the investigations into Shujin."

"He... He really committed suicide?" Makoto managed to spit out.
"I don't believe that," Sae said. "He was walking towards the police station at the time of his death. If he was really suicidal... why would he be walking there? He had even taken a taxi there. No..." Sae shook her head, her lips pursed. "There's something suspicious about this."

"Wait..." Makoto said slowly. "You think this is another incident? A mental shutdown...?"

"Even if he had a sudden shift of his mind... it's unnatural," Sae answered. "I can only think of a change of a heart."

"Are you really saying that he was targeted by the Phantom Thieves?!" Makoto exclaimed. "That's just impossible!"

Sae narrowed her eyes. "Makoto, you still don't hold that childish notion that the Phantom Thieves are just misunderstood heroes, do you?" she asked icily. "The Phantom Thieves are nothing but menaces. They pervert justice."

"But...!" She had to calm down. She didn't want a repeat of what happened before... She took a deep breath to steady herself. "Sis, you can't deny that they've done a lot of good... And... I don't think that's the case. Didn't they always send a calling card before? And their purpose was to make the person confess to their crimes."

"Hmm..." Sae rubbed her chin. "Well, you had to have spoken with him lately... had Principal Kobayakawa seemed any different?"

Had he? He had seemed nervous for some reason. But anyone would be, with the investigations.

"I see..." Sae sighed, before her expression became determined. "I... I have to catch them," she said in an undertone, but Makoto heard it loud and clear. Just hearing it made Makoto's heart sink.

"But Sis..." Makoto began to protest. "You don't have to-

"Yes, I do," Sae all but snarled out, making Makoto flinch at the fierceness of her tone. "I'm being charged with stopping the Phantom Thieves, and should I fail... I don't know what will happen." She then sighed again. "You're busy studying," she said quietly. "I'll leave you be."

Makoto's stomach twisted into knots as she watched her elder sister leave. She wasn't particularly religious, but she prayed that she wouldn't have to choose between her sister or the Phantom Thieves...

Chapter End Notes

Happy Valentine's Day! Finally got this chapter done.

Some of you may recognize the scene with the Kamehameha statue. I took it from a deleted scene in P5, and tweaked it.

I was asked this on FF, but I thought I'd clarify. Out of the Phantom Thieves, there are going to be only two canon ships: Ken/Makoto and Ren/Anne.

And the updates will be slowing down a little bit. I intend to update at least once a month, but I've also started to work on oneshots for the Shuann/RenAnn/AkirAnn week that me and my friends have been organizing. I want to make submissions for
each day, so I need more time to work on them. If you're a fan of the ship and are interested in participating, you should check out the tumblr (shuann-week) or twitter (@ShuannWeek)!
Change Of Plans

Chapter Summary

Principal Kobayakawa's death has several ripple effects. The Phantom Thieves discuss the data from Sae, and visit the Diet Building. However, they have an encounter that has them reconsidering the decision to look into Shido as a target.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tuesday, September 13th, 2016

"Ken, you need to eat."

Ken just pushed the plate of food aside, shaking his head. "...I'm not hungry," he mumbled out, reluctantly meeting Shinjiro-san's gaze. "Must be the jetlag still."

That was just... an excuse. But he just couldn't bring himself to continue eating. Not only that, but the few bites he managed to get down just... tasted like ash.

Shinjiro-san just sighed, before pressing a hand to his forehead. "You know that wasn't your-"

"He died!" Ken snapped, only for guilt to flood him. Shinjiro-san was just trying to reassure him. He stared down at the table. "And just how he died... It's not exactly a Strega assassination, but it isn't pretty either."

"A full on collision..." Shinjiro-san muttered, before turning back to the fridge and opening it. He rummaged around for a moment, before pulling out a couple of onigiri. He wrapped them in plastic, before setting them on top of Ken's bento box. Probably to sneak eat if he got hungry during the morning classes. "Look, Ken," he said, looking straight at him, "try not to listen to whatever crap the students are gonna spout. Let them talk."

He had said... something similar right after Shinjiro-san had gained guardianship of him. One of his teachers had made an offhanded remark about how he couldn't believe that Shinjiro-san would normally want to take guardianship of someone, unless he had an ulterior motive. But Shinjiro-san hadn't cared. He had just shrugged things off. Sometimes he didn't know how Shinjiro-san just didn't care what people thought of him.

"...I'll try," Ken murmured, before he let out an involuntary yawn. He had barely gotten any sleep last night, with the combination of the news and the major jetlag...

Shinjiro-san just huffed out a laugh, smiling slightly. "Knew that the jetlag would kick your ass," he said dryly, shaking his head. "Try not to pass out during class."

Ken rolled his eyes. Yeah, that was Shinjiro-san's style of 'parenting'. And yet... that somehow made him feel a little better. "Duly noted," he deadpanned, before he stood up. "I better get going now, though."
The walk to Shujin felt… tense. The news seemed to have leaked out to some of his classmates, and they were discussing it, not taking care to keep their voices down.

"Did he seriously die?!

"Who cares, man? He totally deserved it. He was gonna let Shujin go down the tubes."

Ken's stomach twisted into knots and he suddenly felt the urge to vomit. The lack of empathy… it just made him sick. Principal Kobayakawa was no saint, but…

He forced himself to stare out of the window. He just had to tune it out… What they said didn't matter…

The train ride seemed to last forever. It was a relief when the train conductor finally announced that they had stopped at Aoyama-Itchome Station. It took some squeezing to get out of the door, but it felt like he could actually breathe once he was outside.

He went straight for his classroom, and he gratefully sank into his chair. He pressed a hand to his forehead. This was going to be a long day. He could feel it already.

His phone suddenly buzzed in his pocket and he pulled it off. It was a text from Makoto, asking him to meet her in the student council room.

Ken couldn't help but frown. What was wrong? But Makoto wouldn't ask him to come see her like this, if there wasn't something wrong so…

He climbed the two flights of stairs, before finding the student council room and sliding it open. Makoto was sitting at the table, all alone.

"Makoto?"

"Ken!" Makoto's head shot up. There were dark circles under her eyes and she looked just… tired. "I'm glad you could come." She wrung her hands for a moment. "...I didn't expect you to come so fast."

"I just got to the classroom when you texted me," Ken explained.

"I see." Makoto patted the seat next to her. "Come sit."

"What's the matter, Makoto?" Ken asked.

"It's just…" Makoto sighed. "They're cancelling the first morning class," she said quietly. "An emergency assembly of sorts… The teachers called the student council and informed us just now in a meeting."

An assembly…

"This is about the… incident." It wasn't a question.

"Sis told me a little…" Makoto said. "Eye witnesses reported that he just stood there, not getting out of the way when the truck was crossing the street."

Ken felt his blood run cold. "You're not saying…"

"I don't know." Makoto bit her lip. "Sis thinks it's him committing suicide, with the stress of the investigation and the fallout of Shujin's reputation, but…"
Ken met her eyes.

It felt like too much of a set-up. It was too suspicious.

He completely agreed.

"What do we do now?" Ken asked quietly.

Makoto looked down at the table. "That's the thing," she answered, her voice barely audible. "I… I don't know. We'll have to talk to everyone about this after school."

Well. He was right about it being a long day. The callousness of some of their classmates was just… appalling. Their lack of caring that Kobayakawa had died, especially in a horrible way, seemed to pass over their heads.

Though the implication that one of the girls had said… that the Phantom Thieves had targeted him…

Would he have thought the same, had he not gotten involved? The fact that he wasn't sure wasn't very reassuring… He couldn't help but sigh.

"That was a big one." Ren's voice snapped him out of his thoughts.

"Yes, well…" Ken glanced at his friend, before he grimaced. "Today wasn't exactly stress free."

"No kidding." Ren shook his head. "I know it'd be crazy since our principal died, but… what we got was on a completely different level."

"Um…" Futaba fidgeted for a moment. "What should we start off with?"

"We need to talk about what exactly happened with Principal Kobayakawa," Makoto said with a wince.

"I've already seen some forums talking about it," Anne said. "People seemed to find it…"

"A spectacle," Ryuji finished for her, making a face. "So far nobody's been saying it's 'cause of the Phantom Thieves but…"

"It's only a matter of time, I assume," Yusuke sighed. "If what you described at the assembly was as bad as it sounds… somebody will come to that conclusion eventually."

"That tabloid's article doesn't help." Ken couldn't help but wince. "Dealing with that kind of pressure from the media… That would be a logical explanation to the incident."

"There are so many questions to be asked," Morgana muttered. "And… no answers."

"Hey…" Anne's voice trembled for a moment. "A-Aren't we kinda responsible for Principal Kobayakawa's suicide…?"

"Anne, whataya mean?" Ryuji demanded.

"I mean, this whole incident with the tabloids… it happened because we stole Kamoshida's heart to begin with. Maybe if we hadn't done anything, he wouldn't-"

"No." The fierceness in Ren's voice made them all look up. "Anne, don't you dare blame yourself
for this!” He pointed at Ryuji. "Are you going to blame Ryuji for losing his temper when Kamoshida purposely provoked him so he could break Ryuji’s leg? Mishima for being scared to speak out, even though Kobayakawa was silencing everyone? You for trying to appease him so he wouldn't punish Shiho? Kobayakawa may not have deserved dying like that, but he covered up Kamoshida's crimes! He let Kamoshida pull that crap with his blessing. Kobayakawa shouldn't have died, but you can't forget the shit he pulled. All so he could run a school with a good rep."

Disgust dripped from every syllable. Personally, Ken couldn't help but feel horrified. He knew that Kamoshida had been bad, but Ren had spelled out what exactly the man had done. He had truly terrorized them all.

"You… You're right," Anne murmured, before she hung her head. "I'm sorry, Ren…"

Ren just squeezed her shoulder. "You didn't deserve that kind of torment, Anne," he said softly. "Nobody had…"

"Um… it's not quite suicide," Makoto interjected, causing all attention to shift onto her. "Well… at least Sis doesn't think that's the case," she quickly amended. "She suspects that it was a change of heart, but there was something that bothered me. She said that Kobayakawa just suddenly stopped walking, in the middle of the road. Didn't respond to the driver of the truck that had killed him…"

Wait, she wasn't saying…?!

"W-Wait, that means…?" Anne's eyes were wide. "Principal Kobayakawa had a mental shutdown?!"

Futaba shivered. "T-That does sound a lot like what happened with Mom," she mumbled out. Her gaze then moved back to her computer. Ken moved behind her to see that Futaba had several articles pulled up. "…There's a lot of opinions online, though. Like… He deserved it… covering up crimes is wrong."

"But the question is… why?" Morgana piped up. "Why would a mere school principal be entangled with Shido?"

"That's the million yen question, isn't it?" Ken sighed. "Shujin's reputation is rather prestigious but…"

"There's more," Yusuke interjected, looking up from his phone with a grimace. "More than one person has proclaimed that, 'Only the Phantom Thieves are on our side!' Claiming that we should replace the government itself."

"H-Holy shit…" Ryuji breathed.

Ken couldn't help but shiver. This… This was frightening, if he was being honest. This was like fanaticism. Like… when the Cult of Nyx swept through the city. Except they were the ones looked upon as saviors. Personas granted them powers that other people could only dream of, but… they weren't gods. This behavior simply wasn't normal.

"It's not just that." Ren shook his head. "I've heard people talking about Phantom Thieves merch too. I found it tasteless and tacky at the time, but coupled with the public opinion right now…"

Ken pressed his lips together. "The Phantom Thieves are talked all over the country," he stated. "And internationally as well…"

"This is scary…" Anne murmured, wrapping her arms around herself. "W-What's going on…?"
Ren just looked at her in concern, worry in his eyes. He then blinked, and the worry disappeared. He... He was trying to hold it together, wasn't he? For them?

"Now I can't help but wonder if we're doing the right thing..." Makoto murmured.

Ken looked over at her. She... She had a point. Ren had agreed to look into targeting Shido but this was... Not to mention Principal Kobayakawa's death was looking like it was connected to Shido.

"I mean, doesn't he deserve it?" Ryuji asked. "He covered all of that shit, and he only cared that Kamoshida added to Shujin's rep."

"Ryuji!" Ken stared at his friend in horror. "He may not have been the best person, but he literally died two days ago!"

He hadn't even found any joy when Takaya and Jin had died on the Day of the Fall. It just felt... wrong to speak ill of someone, when their corpse wasn't even cold in the grave.

"I ain't lying!" Ryuji retorted.

"While that's true, that's..." Makoto trailed off, biting her lip. She couldn't even put words to her thoughts.

"That's enough, guys," Ren interjected. "I know that this is a bit confusing and scary, but there's a reason why we became Phantom Thieves in the first place, remember?"

That's right... They all believed in justice.

"Guys, let's get back on topic," Morgana suddenly interjected, suddenly circling around Futaba's laptop. He then nodded in Futaba's direction. "We met here to discuss the data we've obtained from Makoto's sister."

"That's true." Yusuke sighed, shaking his head. "I must confess... it had completely slipped my mind."

"It's a... mess." Futaba winced, before pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "First... she's researching into cases of people collapsing suddenly. Because of that, she's looking into Apathy Syndrome."

"Apathy Syndrome?" Ken repeated. "She's still looking into that?"

"Whataya mean by that?" Ryuji asked with a frown.

"I was with Makoto once, when we ran into Niijima-san," he explained. "She inquired into Apathy Syndrome, after finding out that I'm from Port Island."

"And... about that." Futaba bit her lip, chewing on it for a moment. "She seems to think that Shinjiro-san is research worthy too. She's dug up some info on him already, like where he works."

...She wasn't planning on cornering him at one of his jobs, was she? Shinjiro-san was the only one who wasn't scared to challenge Mitsuru-san. If he didn't hold back on her... he definitely wouldn't with Niijima-san.

"How would she know about Shinjiro-san?" Anne tilted her head. "I mean, wouldn't she have to dig into your records or something?"

"Or maybe she saw you two together at some point," Makoto mused, only for her to sigh. "Still...
"She seemed to note that most of these incidents seemed to benefit one person… Kunikazu Okumura, the CEO of Okumura Foods… better known for being the owner of Big Bang Burger."

Futaba glanced back at her screen, tapping on her keyboard for a moment. She then repositioned her laptop, showing an image of a dark haired man wearing glasses. "A lot of Big Bang’s rivals have had some kind of scandal over the past few months. Wild Duck Burger… some employee had some nude selfies incident. An arson happened in Haneruya Foods factory. A Goodness Food driver lost control of his vehicle and killed four people."

"Damn… and that completely missed me," Ren admitted, shaking his head.

"It’s not quite groundbreaking news," Yusuke remarked. "Such as that subway accident that occurred back in April. Though coupling this with the supposed rumors of Big Bang Burger overworking their employees is… concerning."

"Okumura seems like target worthy to me," Ryuji said. "What about you guys?"

Futaba snapped her laptop shut. "Maybe after Shido," she said flatly. "We only looked into this, so we know what move Niijima is gonna make."

The distaste in her voice was clear. Though he couldn't blame her, with Sakura-san's remark about Niijima-san hounding him… repeatedly.

"I don't know…" Morgana looked at Futaba uncertainly. "The poll voted Okumura too… We could always go after Shido afterwards."

"We agreed to look into Shido before," Ken said sharply, shooting Morgana a look. "Are you planning on going back on your word now?"

Besides that, wouldn't that be just playing into what the public wanted? Following the status quo? Wasn't that going against the Phantom Thieves?

Morgana just scowled at him. "Don't put words in my mouth!"

"Hey, hey, enough!" Anne interjected, taking a step forward. "Jeez, don't go for each other's throats." She looked between them, frowning in disapproval at them. "But still, from what you told us, Shido seems like the bigger evil. What do you think, Ren?"

"Jeez, thanks for putting me on the spot, Anne," Ren said dryly, before he shook his head. "But… We pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, looking at Ken and then Futaba. "...We did make a resolution to look into Shido. We'll look into him first."

Morgana didn't look too happy at Ren's decision. He actually looked somewhat… sulky. "...Fine."

"We need to uncover some more information on Shido, then," Yusuke said. "Perhaps we can discover something if we go to the Diet Building…"

"That's a sound idea, Yusuke," Makoto complimented. "Shall we set off now then?"

The Diet Building was located in a ward that Ken had never visited before. The Diet Building was impressive, carved from white stone. A small flight of stairs led up to an area with pillars, also carved from white stone. The entrance was just beyond that. An iron gate surrounded the area completely, but since it was the afternoon still, the gates were open. There were tour groups
congregated at the foot of the stairs.

"Hmm… we didn't think this through…" Anne mumbled, tilting her head slightly. "Even if we got inside without attracting attention, how are we going to get info on Shido…?"

"I mean, it's kinda tough unless we happen to find him campaigning," Ryuji grumbled, scuffing his shoe before he kicked a pebble.

Futaba's hands clenched into fists. "We've gotta try still!" she argued.

"Hey, I'm not saying I'm giving up!" Ryuji protested, holding up his hands in surrender. "Jeez. Chill, Futaba!"

Futaba opened her mouth, but Ken put a hand on her shoulder. "Futaba, he didn't mean anything by that," Ken said, keeping his voice low. "Trust me… it wasn't easy to gather enough information to unlock your Palace."

Futaba appeared mollified by that, rocking on her heels for a moment. "Hmm, I could always hack into-"

"Futaba, how many times do I have to go over this?" Ken deadpanned. "It's illegal."

Futaba just narrowed her eyes. "Yeah, 'cause what you've been doing lately is soooo legal."

Ken automatically opened his mouth to retort, only to shut it. Dammit. He didn't have a counter for that.

"She's got you there," Ren teased, throwing a smirk Ken's way. "But anyways… let's take a look inside. Especially since we made the commute the way here."

"This will not be an easy target," Morgana mumbled to himself as they entered the Building.

Inside the building was even more opulent. Ken couldn't help but feel like a tourist as he looked around.

"I must say…" Yusuke breathed. "I did not expect it to look so… luxurious."

"It does make sense, though, doesn't it?" Makoto asked. "I mean, this is where the elected officials decide on laws and such… I don't think there's such a thing as a plain government building. Remember Hawaii's Supreme Court?"

"You do have a point there," Yusuke agreed, before he grimaced. "...Though I must say, I do feel out of place here."

"I mean, tourists come here all the time, don't they?" Ryuji asked. "If Americans can come and gawk at the place, why can't we?"

"So this is where Yoshida worked, before he fell out of favor, huh?" Morgana said, looking up at Ren.

"Yoshida?" Ken asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Oh, he's a politician that I help out sometimes," Ren explained. "He makes really great speeches, so he's been teaching me that."

...Okay, then. That was kinda bizarre, but two of Ren's associates consisted of a doctor who
seemed to give him medicine under the table and a former yakuza, so a former politician? Why not? Then again, Minato-san had some odd friends too. None of them had expected Tanaka of all people to show up at Minato-san's funeral.

…He had no idea why Ren would want to learn how to make speeches, though. And he didn't think he had it in him to be a politician?

"Amamiya-kun?"

They all turned as one at the familiar voice. It was Haru-san, still dressed in her school uniform.

"I… I'm surprised to find you all here," she said slowly.

"We… uhhhh…" Ryuji's eyes were wide. He didn't really blame Ryuji for panicking. They had not expected to run into anyone that would recognize them.

"I could say the same about you," Ren cut in smoothly.

"Oh… um…" Haru-san bit her lip, staring at the floor as if she suddenly had found it very fascinating. "I'm actually here with my father and-

"Haru, what are you doing?" a sharp voice cut through the air. A tall, dark haired man suddenly appeared what felt like was out of nowhere.

"Wait… that's…" Anne whispered.

Kunikazu Okumura.

"I-I was just speaking to some classmates, Father," she said meekly, still looking downward.

Wait. Father?!

They looked nothing alike… Though granted, he's known his fair share of relatives who looked nothing alike. Minato-san and Minako-san were the prime example, of course, being twin siblings who didn't share hair or eye color. The twins also took mostly after Minato-san, but they still have features from Yukari-san. But these two? He couldn't see it… Okumura was sharp features and angles, while Haru-san's features were gentle and soft.

"You're an Okumura?!” Ryuji blurted out, eyes wide with shock.

…This really explained why she was so keen on hiding her surname. The Okumura family wasn't quite the powerhouse that the Kirijo family was, but it still held enough presence to grab people's attention.

"That's right," Okumura said coldly, staring at Ryuji like someone would stare at a bug right before squishing it. His gaze seemed to be affixed on Ryuji's hair particularly. "My daughter is above associating with people such as you."

"Indeed. My fiancée should be careful about who she speaks with." Joining them was a man several years older than them. At least in his mid-twenties, but Ken wouldn't be surprised if he was older. He was certainly older than the eldest of SEES. His brown hair was slicked back, and he wore an almost completely white suit. "After all, she will be marrying a future politician." He then smiled, a smarmy smile that prickled at Ken's nerves, before he looked over at Okumura. "…And hopefully she'll be the daughter of a soon-to-be politician."
"I apologize, Sugimura-san." Her voice was feather-soft, before Haru-san stared at the floor, apparently finding it fascinating. "I just… was surprised to see them here, that's all…"

"Fiancée?!" Anne blurted out. "You can't be serious! She's only…"

"You know the minimum age of marriage, Anne," Makoto said quietly, looking grim. But despite that, Makoto almost seemed to recoil at that. He didn't blame her. Marriage at their age… it wasn't exactly something that came to mind easily.

"It's still wrong!" Anne protested.

"You'd do well to watch your tongue, girl," Sugimura snarled out, before leering at her. "Pretty looks can only get you so far."

"And you'd do well to keep your eyes off of Anne," Makoto snapped.

Anne looked ready to add to that, the fury in her eyes plain to see. But then Ren stepped forward, partially blocking Anne from view as Sugimura wouldn't stop looking. He didn't blame Ren for that. Ren's eyes were narrowed dangerously, smoldering with barely suppressed anger. "You know, it's polite to look at someone's face when speaking to them," he said. His voice was light, but there was a current of steel underneath. "But of course you don't need to be reminded that, right?"

"Yeah!" Futaba interjected. "If you're happily engaged, you shouldn't be looking at Anne like that!"

Haru-san seemed to cringe ever so slightly at Futaba's words. God. Their past conversations made all too much sense. She admired Mitsuru-san, for being a single woman, yet being able to hold her power confidently. She wanted someone's heart to be changed, be it her father or her wonderful fiancé. Or maybe even both. They both seemed target-worthy. Big Bang's profits… were they all for just launching their CEO into politics? Maybe he shouldn't have dismissed Okumura as a target so quickly…

"Listen here, you little brat…" Sugimura hissed out, narrowing his eyes. "Someone obviously was remiss when you were to learn manners!"

"Could say the same to you!" Ryuji quickly jumped to Futaba's defense, glowering at Sugimura.

Makoto drew Futaba away, tugging her closer as if she was afraid of what would happen if she let the man too close to Futaba. "Excuse us," she said, her voice cool and polite. But her eyes were filled with barely veiled disdain. "We were preparing to leave when Haru-san approached us."

She glanced at Ren for confirmation, who didn't look too happy, but he reluctantly nodded.

"…See you at school, Senpai," Ryuji mumbled out.

"…I'll see you," she murmured.

They hastened away, but nobody spoke until they returned back to the penthouse.

Yusuke, who had fallen silent during the entire confrontation, was the first to speak. "…He's just like Sensei."

Anne bit her lip hard. "Yusuke…" she whispered.

"It's disgraceful!" Yusuke spat out, anger burning in his usually cool gray eyes. "I'll admit that I
know Haru-san not too well, but from the looks of it, she's a daughter that any man would take pride in and that vile man would seek to sell her off to the highest bidder like that?! Like she's nothing but cattle?!

"And the guy…" Futaba scrunched up her nose. "I think he's in his late twenties. That's just…"

"Creepy?" Ren offered.

"That about sums it up," Futaba sighed.

"Is he really engaged to her?" Morgana piped up. "She's in Makoto and Ken's year, right? She's not an adult yet. She can't get married."

"Not… exactly," Makoto said with a wince. "According to Japanese law, girls sixteen or older can marry with parental permission. The age requirement is slightly older for boys, though. I believe it's eighteen, two years under the age of majority."

"Which is totally sexist," Anne grumbled under her breath.

"Mitsuru-san was betrothed when she was our age too," Ken volunteered. "She eventually kicked her fiancé to the curb, but for a time… she had intended to go through it. For the sake of the Kirijo Group."

"Really?" Futaba looked up at him in surprise. "First time I've heard of that."

"You were eight when Mitsuru-san broke it off," Ken pointed out.

Futaba waved him off. "Eh. Details."

"But… But that's wrong!" Morgana suddenly protested, a fire lighting up in his bright blue eyes. "She obviously doesn't even like him. Why is her father trying to force her to marry someone she doesn't love?! Isn't that point of marriage? Love?"

Oh, Morgana… He was still so naïve, despite being one of the founding members of the Phantom Thieves.

"Because he's obviously an abusive piece of shit," Ryuji spat out. "He's just using her as a tool, like what Madarame tried with Yusuke!"

Ren huffed, ruffling his bangs. "Now… I'm not sure who to target." He gestured at Futaba's laptop. "Okumura being voted to the top… the whole reveal that he wants to be a politician… Gotta say, I'm just a little suspicious."

"Big Bang's profits…" Ken said slowly. "…It could be just funding for his campaign."

"We need more information," Makoto sighed, shaking her head. "We can't decide if Okumura is worthy of being a target but if he is…"

"Maybe he could lead us to some info on Shido," Ryuji offered. "I mean, he's gotta be in certain circles, if he's looking to be a politician. It'd be easier than just running around like headless chickens."

"I never thought about that!" Futaba's eyes went wide. "That's pretty smart of you, Ryuji."

Ryuji squinted at her. "...That's supposed to be a compliment, right?"
"Okay, let's divide up the work, then," Ren said. "I'll take Morgana and visit the Big Bang place on Central Street tomorrow. Futaba, I want you to dig up on more info about Okumura. Yusuke, can you help her out with that? Ryuji, Anne… can you look into who exactly this Sugimura guy is and why Okumura could be making Haru-senpai marry him? Ken, Makoto… I want you to talk to Haru-senpai tomorrow."

"Why us?" Ken frowned.

"You were the one to recognize her, at the festival," Ren pointed out. "Plus you're her age. She might be more comfortable talking to you two over anyone else."

"All right… I suppose that makes sense." Makoto bit her lip. She probably was a bit nervous, after the whole thing with Futaba…

But… if it wasn't for Haru-san… Would he have agreed to look into Okumura would be for the better? Weren't the supposed reports of overworking enough?

"So, we're decided then?" Anne asked, her expression determined. "We're going to look more into Okumura?"

"I'd say so, yeah." Ren nodded. "Okay, that's all for today, guys. Dismissed."

Today had been just… a blur. Makoto couldn't help but feel overwhelmed…

First it had been dealing with the aftermath of Principal Kobayakawa's death. Then it was them switching targets completely. And Haru-san…

Hearing Sugimura's words and watching his eyes linger on Anne made Makoto's skin crawl. And the thought of her classmate being married to such a man was just… sickening. She had only been vaguely aware of her classmate before. But nobody should be forced into marriage like that…

The juniors had slowly trickled out. Ren and Futaba were walking Anne home, before heading back to Yongen-jaya, while Yusuke and Ryuji departed together.

But Ken… Makoto looked over at her friend, whose eyes were glazed over as he stared out of the window.

"Is… something the matter?" she asked hesitantly, walking over to him.

Ken then seemed to snap out of it, his eyes flickering to Makoto. "It's… It's…” He shook his head. "…I feel a little… selfish."

"Selfish?" Makoto echoed, frowning at him. "What do you mean?"

"Haru-san… her father's treatment of her… That's what pushed me into rethinking Okumura as a potential target."

"Ken, you're just concerned," Makoto said. "About Shido. He's aiming to become Prime Minister… he orchestrated Futaba's mother's death…"

"Mitsuru-san is also afraid that he wants Aigis-san."

Honestly, it was bizarre. To think that a robot could be a Persona-user. But the Kirijo Group had managed it. But if Shido knew of Personas and Shadows and Black Mask worked for him… having a robot under his command would benefit him. A robot could withstand more damage than
a human can.

"Aigis-san once had her will stolen from her. Forced to turn against us." Ken stared down at the table. "If you recall, that had led to the death of Mitsuru-san's father. I think… if she had to go through that, it would destroy her."

"Ken, you're not selfish for wanting to take down Shido," Makoto said, gently touching his shoulder. "You're just worried about your friend. And Shido… he's a man that must be stopped. You're not selfish, for putting that above what the public was voting for. We're not mercenaries or attack dogs that the public can just set on public enemy number one. That's… treading dangerous territory."

To her relief, Ken smiled. "I suppose you're right… I just felt that I was selfish because seeing how Okumura treated his daughter is what made me reconsider things."

"Forcing his daughter into marriage, to an awful man like that…" Makoto couldn't help but frown. "…To tell you the truth, I had been sure that I didn't want to marry not too long ago."

"What changed your mind, then?" Ken asked.

"Just a mix of things, I suppose." Makoto shrugged. "Though I'll admit seeing Ren and Anne helped contribute to this… I'm starting to see why people say that love can move mountains. Your senpai… they've been together since high school, haven't they?"

"I know it's rare but… it's not exactly common for you to go through the tribulations that Persona-users do," Ken said, his expression becoming pensive. "You can't exactly share this kind of things with just anyone."

Hmm. She had never thought of it that way. But… it made sense. Even seven years later, they were still friends. Not many people could boast of having a tight friendship with their high school friends.

She… hoped that the same would apply to them, in the future.

But then Ken's expression suddenly darkened. "…I think Morgana hates me," he said quietly. "Or… more that he really resents me for some reason."

She had noticed that too. Morgana had seemed really riled up when Ken had reminded him what they had promised after Ken had revealed the truth to them. But… she had a theory why.

"I think he's jealous of you."

"Jealous of me?" Ken frowned.

"Ken, think about it," Makoto said. "You reveal that you've had your Persona for seven years. Before you had showed up, he was our main healer. You've had insight on Personas and Shadows that none of us have. Morgana has been… somewhat unbalanced, especially after Futaba took over being our guide."

"I guess… that makes sense," Ken said slowly. "What am I supposed to do, then?"

Makoto sighed. "I have no idea. Not challenge Morgana so much?"

"I suppose…" Ken grumbled. "We'll have to handle this… some other time." He then looked at Makoto. "…Though, how do you want to handle Haru-san?"
Makoto winced. She didn't want this to end up like the disaster that was their first time with Futaba. "Well… I think we should probably find her during lunch. Invite her to eat lunch with us?" she suggested tentatively. "Maybe… sorta as an apology for making a scene like that…?"

"That's a great idea." Ken smiled at her. "Don't worry about lunch. I'll make it for tomorrow. And…" He suddenly touched Makoto's hand. "…Just relax, with Haru-san. I think part of the problem with Futaba was that you were trying to force things. You've spoken to Haru-san just fine before. You'll be fine."

Well... hopefully Ken would be right...

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Wednesday, September 14th, 2016

The bell rang shrilly, signaling the beginning of lunch. Makoto caught Ken's eye before they both stood up.

"Where should we look for her?" Makoto murmured to him, all while she scanned the sea of the students, hoping to find a flash of light brown. At least Haru-san's hair was fairly unique, making it easier to seek her out.

"Let's try for the entrance to the roof," Ken suggested. "I think she spends a lot of time there…"

"Amada-kun? Niijima-san?" Their heads turned to see Haru-san was standing not too far from them, her hands clasped behind her back. "U-Um…" she said softly, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "D-Do you have time to speak today?"

"We'd love to," Ken answered.

"Thank you." Relief flooded her face. "Let's go to the roof, then…"

So they went up the roof. Ken pushed the door open, leaning on it to keep it open and allowing both Makoto and Haru to step forward.

"What's this about, Haru-san?" Makoto asked, attempting a friendly smile. She just had to keep it natural. Don't force it…

Haru-san bit her lip, before she bowed low at the waist. "I-I just wanted to apologize to you… and your friends… for my father's behavior…"

"Haru-san, you're not your father," Ken interjected. "You don't need to apologize about that."

"B-But…"

"Haru-san, believe me when I say I know the feeling," Makoto said gently. "I've… I've been compared to my older sister too many times."

"I suppose that makes sense…" Haru-san said. "Thank you for your time…"

"Why don't you join us for lunch?" Ken suggested. "I made this to share with Makoto, since she often forgets to make lunch for herself, but there's plenty for a third person."

Makoto huffed, before nudging Ken in the side. He just had to bring their first conversation up. Not that Haru-san knew that had been just one time, but it was a good cover to invite her to lunch.
"Ah…" Haru-san frowned. "I-I don't know… I should really watch my figure…"

Wait, what? Makoto glanced over at her form. While Haru-san wasn't as slender as Makoto or Anne, she wasn't fat either. Though… that might not be her own thoughts. Makoto wasn't the gambling type, but she'd bet good money that Sugimura had told her this…

"You're fine the way you are," Makoto quickly reassured her. "And besides that, you may pass out if you don't eat *anything."

Haru-san just blinked. "…You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"I believe you know the answer to that already," Ken said with a wry smile.

Haru-san then smiled, before she giggled. "Fair enough. Very well, then."

They sat on the ground, before Ken opened the lid. Several pieces of tonkatsu sat on a pile of fluffy white rice. Tucked to the side were a few pieces of tamagoyaki. There was shrimp tempura, croquettes… There was also a salad, with dressing drizzled on top.

"Wow…" Haru-san's eyes were as wide as saucers. "You cooked this, Amada-kun?"

Ken rubbed the back of his neck. "It's nothing too fancy. You should see some of the things Shinjiro-san can make."

"Don't sell yourself short," Makoto said. "Everything looks good."

Haru-san let out a happy hum, before accepting the pair of chopsticks Ken passed her. "I have to agree with Niijima-san. I don't know how to cook at all." But then her expression grew sad. "… Though I suppose I should start learning, since I'm to be a wife soon…"

"Haru-san," Makoto began.

"Niijima-san, don't. Please." Her bottom lip trembled. "I… I'm a daughter of the Okumura family. I have duties to my family…"

"But marriage?" Ken questioned. "You won't be an adult for at least another two years… You should be allowed to find yourself before even considering marriage."

"It's kind and thoughtful of you to say that but…" She bit her lip. "…It's not the same," she said softly.

"You should be allowed to choose someone you love," Makoto protested. "It's not fair for your father to betroth to someone…” Makoto trailed off. She… didn't know how to phrase this eloquently. "You shouldn't have to concern yourself with marriage at this age."

Haru-san's smile was wobbly. "Love is merely a benefit for marriages involving the upper class. Not… everybody is fortunate enough to find love at a young age."

For some reason, she looked between both of them.

"…Why are you looking at us like that?" Ken asked slowly.

She just blinked at them. "…Aren't you two dating?"

Makoto choked on the piece of tonkatsu she had chewing on. She coughed several times before she finally caught her breath. Her face felt as hot as a furnace. "D-DATING?!" She shook her head
vehemently. "N-No, you misunderstand! We're just friends!"

Her eyes darted to Ken, whose cheeks were slowly growing redder and redder. "I-I'm not sure where you got that misconception, Haru-san-

"You cook for her," Haru-san pointed out. "She also wanted to room with you. There was also the time I saw you together on the roof-

"Those are all just coincidences!" Makoto exclaimed, her cheeks still hot. At this rate, she might have to find a bucket of water to dunk her head in. "And was I supposed to just throw Ken to the wolves?! All they care about is flirting with Ken…" The last part came out as a grumble.

She really hated how the girls never seemed to get the hint. Ken had zero interest in any of them, but they couldn't get it through their skulls. Not to mention that their interest in him was just… superficial. They didn't even try to get to know him… So of course she had to step up…

"If you say so…" She didn't looked convinced at this, though. "But… I have duties to my family. Duties to my father. I can't just ignore that… That's why I agreed to marry Sugimura-san. It's… It's a mutual benefit for both of our families."

A benefit… It sounded so cold. Haru-san just seemed resigned to things. She… She was just keeping her head down.

"What about your duty to yourself?" Ken asked. "You deserve to be happy, Haru-san… Do you want to marry Sugimura-san? Because your father can't force you to say I do. You have your own free will… you don't have to tie yourself to Sugimura-san if you truly don't want to."

"Free will…" Haru-san repeated. "I… I don't know," she finally admitted, her voice breaking. "I don't know what I want, Amada-kun…"

"You deserve the chance to figure that out. It's not fair for your father to decide your future for you like that."

Haru-san bit her lip, before she shakily stood up. "…I'm sorry but I should go." She looked down. "I'm… I'm so confused…" She then smiled weakly. "…Thank you for the food."

Ken sighed. "Duties, huh…?"

"That's just… that's just not fair to her…" Makoto said. "She seems like a kind girl from what I've seen. She deserves someone who thinks the world of her."

"Yeah, I can imagine the life Sugimura would put her through." Ken shuddered. "…It's not a pretty image. And… everyone who marries deserves to marry for love."

"They do," Makoto agreed.

Love…

Not… everyone is fortunate to find love at a young age.

And… Haru-san thought… they were in love?

Makoto's cheeks began to burn again at the mere thought. That was… that was…

…What? Why couldn't she finish that trail of thought?
She snuck a look at Ken, who seemed to be looking at Tokyo's skyline. A comfortable silence had fallen between them. She would be lying if she said that she didn't find Ken attractive. She had always thought if she was to choose a romantic partner, she'd prefer someone who was both smart and could defend themselves easily.

But… there was so much more to Ken than that. He was kind. She didn't think that she could forget how he had invited to eat lunch with her, when they had been strangers, as he noticed that she had no lunch on her. Ken had done it without thinking. He cared about Futaba's wellbeing too, after they delved more into her past. He never hesitated on comforting her, when she was stewing on her insecurities. And… and there was what happened just a few nights ago.

He had told her that he was scared of being hated over his secrets…

And she had told him that she could never hate him… She could never… because she…

Makoto's fingers curled around the hem of her skirt as she gazed at Ken.

It was the exact opposite.

She had never realized it. Her affection for him had just gone hand-in-hand with everything else she had felt for him. She wouldn't be able to pinpoint when exactly she had fallen for him but…

All she knew was that she did have feelings for him. She… She wasn't ready to label it as love, but… She felt something for him.

And to think, just a couple weeks ago, Ren was telling her that she'll find someone to love someday.

But… Ken wasn't interested. He didn't want to date… at all. Maybe she could have pushed herself to do something about it, but she wasn't going to press it if Ken didn't want a relationship. Their friendship was just too important to risk that.

And… they had more important things to worry about. Romance should be the last thing on her mind. Okumura was shaping up to be someone they should target, in her eyes. They would have to see what the others had discovered…

Chapter End Notes

So, I've changed things a bit with the title and summary. I've never completely liked the title of Justice For All, but I just figured out what I want to call it instead. I felt that the title was more generic. I feel this title refers more to Ken getting involved in the events of P5 due to him being an unknown factor to Shido, and it also references to Ken's codename being Ace.

Though I always found it interesting how Haru came to the conclusion that she can't abide her father's crimes any longer, and that she wants to actively fight against her betrothal. I wanted to write about her slowly coming to that conclusion, which is why she's made an appearance in every chapter ever since school started up.

Also, I didn't make up any of the scandals with Big Bang's rivals. These were all taken from news reports in the game.
And yeah, Makoto was the first to figure out her feelings. Mostly since love has been on her mind with the whole thing regarding Eiko. Haru just had to give her a little push. As for Ken... he's gonna be oblivious for a little longer, but he will have figured it out sometime during this arc.
Fate Is In Your Hands

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves exchange the intel they gathered, and make a visit to Big Bang's headquarters. They didn't expect Haru to be there, however...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Thursday, September 15th, 2016

"You're looking into… Okumura?"

At least Minako-san sounded more confused than anything.

"I know, I know," Ken sighed. "But… we couldn't find much info on Shido, by going to the Diet Building. We don't know how to gather intel on him… and we ran into Okumura there. He revealed that he's aiming to enter politics, and furthermore some intel Futaba gathered points to something… fishy."

Minako-san was quiet for a long time. "Can't say I envy you, Ken-kun," she finally said. "Dealing with Tartarus definitely feels a lot simpler."

"Can't argue with that," Ken sighed. "So we split up on getting info… Ren had Makoto and me talk to his daughter Haru, who's apparently arranged to marry some guy Sugimura-"

"SUGIMURA?!

Ken's hand jerked his phone away from his ear. Damn, that was loud. His eardrums were ringing. After rubbing his ear, he pressed the phone to it again. "Don't tell me…"

"Yeah, I know of him," Minako-san said, and she didn't bother to hide the disdain in her voice. "About three years ago, the Sugimura family decided they really could use the Kirijo fortune." He could practically see her rolling her eyes. "It'd be useful for campaigning. So their son set about 'charming' Mitsuru, to try and get her to marry him."

"Let me guess… she wasn't too happy with that."

Minako-san burst into giggles. "Is that even a question, Ken-kun? Mitsuru eats guys like Sugimura for breakfast. But wait…" Her voice grew suspicious. "Sugimura is older than Mitsuru… How old is this Haru…?"

Ken winced. "…She's in my year."

Minako-san immediately started gagging. "Ugh, that's just typical!" she huffed. "This is just like"
Ken opened his mouth to reply, but he was interrupted by some sharp rapping on the door. He covered his phone's speaker. "I'll be there in a second!" Then back to his phone: "Sorry, Minako-san, I have to go. You should rest up."

Minako-san huffed. "Ugh, you sound just like Aki. I'm pregnant, not helpless!"

Ken rolled his eyes, letting out a huff. "Bye, Minako-san."

She just giggled, before chirping, "Bye, Ken-kun!"

He hung up before going to answer the door. Everyone was waiting outside. "Sorry about that," he apologized. "I was talking to Minako-san on the phone."

"Don't worry about it," Anne was quick to reassure him. "We weren't waiting for long."

Ren waited for everyone to seat themselves, before speaking. "Okay, let me go first," he said. "Visited the Big Bang place on Central Street."

"The employees look pretty exhausted," Morgana piped up. "I never paid attention when Ren wanted to do the Big Bang Challenge, but the manager kept urging the employees to go faster and faster." He frowned. "Surely they can afford to hire more employees, to ease the workload."

"Hmm. It appears that they're utilizing a simple business model," Yusuke noted, but he was frowning. "Minimize the costs and maximize the work input."

"Greedy asshole," Ryuji spat out, before he scowled. "Makes me sick just hearin' about this shit. Big Bang is an international company now. They don't need to maximize profit like that!" He glowered at the coffee table.

"But is that it?" Makoto asked slowly, tilting her head. "That's wrong, I'll admit, but not what we usually look for in targets…"

"Usually, I'd agree with you, Makoto," Ren said with a nod, "but I tried to talk with a Big Bang employee on break. Pretended I was thinking of applying here, but the guy was super close-mouthed. It…" He suddenly grimaced. "…It reminded me of when Ryuji and I tried to ask the volleyball team members about Kamoshida's abuse. He kept trying to deflect my questions."

"That is a bit more suspicious…" Makoto admitted, rubbing her chin before she glanced over at Ken. "But Ken and I spoke to Haru-san, as you requested."

Anne immediately straightened up. "Did she seem okay?" she asked, a concerned frown on her face. "I… I felt bad… She was pretty much dragged into things…"

"She apologized to us, for something that she didn't even do," Ken couldn't fight back a grimace. "We spoke to her about her arranged marriage but she…"

"I… I feel so bad for her," Makoto confessed. "While I don't doubt that arranged marriages do occasionally develop into true affection and love… that's not the case for the most part. She seems… just resigned to things. And it's all for the benefit of her father."

Though honestly, Ken had a hard time agreeing with Haru-san's attitude about being loyal to your family. His blood relatives had only saw him as a burden, a drain of their funds.
"It's... not that simple." Yusuke's hands were clenched tightly, so tight that his knuckles were white. "You have to understand... it's not simple to just rebel against a parental figure. You want to believe that they're still kind and good, that they're concerned about what's best for you."

He... hadn't thought of that. Madarame's confession had whizzed by him, since he had been caught up with the preparations with the move to Tokyo. Yusuke was an orphan... he just never thought that Madarame was a father figure to Yusuke. The closest to a father to Yusuke.

Why Yusuke had gotten so worked up after seeing Okumura made all too much sense now.

"Yusuke..." Anne breathed, a small frown on her face.

"But... I digress." Yusuke suddenly coughed, shifting in his seat. He seemed uncomfortable with everyone's eyes on him. "I wish... to aid Haru-san. Her father shackling her to a despicable man like Sugimura, whose eyes most likely linger on any woman that catches his fancy..." He pursed his lips. "...He's all but selling her body to Sugimura."

"Gahh... he seriously needs to pushed off a cliff or something..." Ryuji grumbled.

"But anyways, my turn!" Futaba chirped, looking up from her laptop. "Inari and I looked into the history of Okumura Foods. From the looks of it, he's the third head of the company, but it only gained serious profit when he inherited the company after his father died. His father actually died in debt. He ran a café, sorta like LeBlanc."

"But what really caught our attention is the growth Okumura Foods has developed over just the past two years," Yusuke added. "We dug further, and Okumura Foods gained this growth after all sort of scandals happened to their main rivals."

"Hmm..." Morgana hopped over to the armchair where Futaba sat, worming his way so he could peer at her laptop. "Two years..." he repeated. "That's when the mental shutdowns began. We still don't know who exactly Black Mask is. If we target Okumura, maybe we can gather some intel on their identity."

"That's a good point," Ren said, before he turned to Anne and Ryuji. "Any information on Sugimura?"

"Nothing super solid, Ren," Anne informed him. "Sugimura seems to be expecting to be a politician, since his family has produced several politicians. Family connections and all. Like three generations of politicians from what I found..."

"It's like a dynasty or somethin'," Ryuji said, shaking his head. "They're pretty rich too, but if I had to guess, they're agreeing to the marriage 'cause the Okumuras are richer."

Hmm. That would tie into what Minako-san had told him. The Sugimuras were greedy for money...

"Sugimura must be just another stepping stone for Okumura's goal," Ren said, frowning in distaste. He then pulled out his phone. "But before we continue..." He suddenly let out a chuckle. "...We should check if Okumura has a Palace to begin with."

Oh... right. That had completely slipped his mind.

"There's no doubt of it," Yusuke said firmly.

"Well... let's find out." Ren unlocked his phone before pulling up the app. "Kunikazu Okumura."
"Candidate found."

"So... it's a hit," Morgana said. "Hmm. Not sure where exactly the Palace would be..."

"Couldn't it be like... all of Japan?" Ryuji scratched the back of his neck. "I mean, think about it. Big Bang's literally everywhere."

"Hm." Makoto rubbed her chin. "...That's a good point, but I don't think that's it. It's not quite like Kaneshiro... While his cognition is warped due to his greed for money, money isn't his only motivation."

"So like... a headquarters?" Ken suggested. "It should be in Tokyo, if the CEO lives in the city..."

"Let me do a quick search," Futaba said, before she began humming to herself as she tapped away at her laptop.

"Should we bring in all of our equipment?" Ken asked. "It may be... difficult for us, if we don't transform, with Shadows lurking about."

Ren just met his gaze. "If Okumura is involved with Shido... I don't think we have to worry about that."

...Okay, he had to admit Ren had a point with that.

"Found it!" Futaba exclaimed. "It's in Marunouchi."

Marunouchi, huh...? It was a district known for business and finances, if he remembered right. It'd only be fitting for Okumura Foods' headquarters to be located there.

"Okay, let's go, then," Ren said, grabbing his bag. Morgana seemed to take that as his cue, as he jumped into the satchel.

The walk to the station was short, and they purchased their tickets. They were fairly cheap, but Ken insisted on paying for Yusuke's ticket. Yusuke really was scrapping for money... While that was pocket change for him, it wasn't exactly the case for Yusuke.

It took them nearly twenty minutes to arrive at the station, and even longer to locate the building.

"Okay... let's get cracking, then," Ren sighed, his phone in his hand. "Any ideas, guys?"

"Diet Building...?" Anne suggested tentatively.

Ryuji shook his head. "Nope. How 'bout... mansion?"

Ken fought the urge to sigh. Both negatives... Figuring out the keywords was just annoying.

"I think... we're looking at it in the wrong manner, again," Yusuke stated. "Big Bang was started by Okumura, correct? And it's the source of his funding. Perhaps that can lead to a clue."

"It's... pretty much space themed," Ren said slowly. "So I guess... spaceport?"

"Candidate found."

"Hm, that does make sense," Makoto mused, all while rubbing her chin. "The 'Big Bang' could refer to the Big Bang theory, after all."
"Let's get going, then!" Ryuji cheered, pumping a fist.

"Wait," Ken said quickly. "We're out in the open." He stared flatly at him. "…There's not going to be a repeat of Kaneshiro's Palace."

"Hehe…" Ryuji could only smile sheepishly. "You saw all of that, didn't you?"

"Where did you go to use the app then…?" Makoto asked.

"Oh, that's easy. I went back home and activated the app. Since it was still in Shibuya, it satisfied the app's requirements."

"Huh, must be useful," Ren mused.

Anne rolled her eyes at him. "Well, we're using it now, aren't we?"

"But if we're looking for secrecy…" Morgana said slowly. "I suppose that's my cue."

"Wait, Morgana—" Ren began to protest.

But Morgana didn't listen, jumping out of Ren's bag and disappearing into the building.

"Greaaaaat…" Ryuji grumbled, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Now what?"

"We should go after him!" Futaba then looked uncertainly at Ren. "…Right?"

Ren frowned. "I don't know… Morgana would be upset if we went and fetched him like this. He seemed pretty set on doing this. Besides that, people would be… confused about a cat. They'd ask more questions about a group of teenagers entering the building… So…" He shrugged, before folding his arms over his chest. "…We wait for Morgana to come back."

Haru didn't know why Father insisted on her sitting in on board meetings. While she was her father's only child, she wasn't naïve enough to think that she would be inheriting the company when her father stepped down as CEO. Not when she was marrying Sugimura…

He would control the family company, like every aspect of her life.

Haru couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief when Father closed the meeting. She slowly rose to her feet. Maybe she could go home now, tend to her garden before she started her schoolwork. It was… one of the few leisure activities she enjoyed.

"Haru, where are you going?" Father asked sharply, just when she was about to open the door.

Haru bowed her head. "My apologies, Father, but I really must return home," she murmured, keeping her eyes downcast. "The meeting was… insightful, but I must work on my assignments."

"Hm." Father studied her closely, before he gave a curt nod. "Very well. An Okumura must not shirk their work."

"Yes, Father." Haru bowed to him again before she exited the room.

When did Father become so cold and calculating? She didn't understand…

Amada-kun's words to her yesterday were still rooted in her mind. Did she really have a choice in this? What would happen if she said no? She… She didn't want to lose her father's love…
…She was a coward. She submitted her father's name on the Phantom Aficionado Website, but she was afraid to defy her father any further…

"Seriously, how did it get in here?"

…Huh? Haru snapped to attention. The secretary and one of the interns were speaking in frantic whispers, the intern doing his best to hold onto a squirming black cat.

Though… that cat look oddly familiar for some reason. But she couldn't put her finger where exactly.

"What's the matter?" she inquired.

"Oh, Okumura-san!" The intern did his best to bow, all while still holding the squirming cat. "We found this cat in the building. B-But don't worry, I will dispose of the cat as soon as possible!"

There was… fear in his eyes. That was wrong…

Haru shook her head. "There's no need for that," she said kindly. "I was on my way out already. I can take him off your hands."

"Oh, but…" The intern frowned. "…He's kinda feisty. He bit me a couple times. I don't want you to be harmed, Okumura-san. Your father wouldn't be pleased."

Haru fought the urge to sigh. It always came down to the matter of Father… They were courteous only because they feared Father and his reaction.

"I'm sure it's because you were chasing him earlier." Haru then smiled at the cat, whose bright blue eyes were… remarkably intelligent. She held out her arms. "You want to come out with me, don't you?"

The cat settled down, before letting out a series of meows. He then squirmed his way free before jumping into Haru's arms. She let out a giggle, gently rubbing the cat's ears.

"Shall I call a car, Okumura-san?" the secretary asked, already plucking her phone from the desk.

"No, it's all right," Haru declined with a shake of her head. "The walk will do me good."

The secretary just frowned, but she reluctantly nodded. "If you believe so…"

She bade the two a farewell before heading for the doors. And to her surprise, she saw Amamiya-kun and his friends gathered near the gate, talking quietly amongst themselves. The cat meowed several times, catching Amamiya-kun's attention for some reason.

"Morgana!" he exclaimed, before the cat leapt to the ground and darting back to Amamiya-kun. He knelt down, scooping up the cat, apparently named Morgana, and then jumping into the satchel on Amamiya-kun's shoulder.

"Jeez, you shouldn't just run off like that," Takamaki-san immediately began to fuss, frowning at Morgana.

Morgana's ears just lowered, pressed against his skull, before letting out another series of meows. If it was possible for a cat to look abashed, Morgana certainly did.

Though she couldn't help but notice there was one new member of the group. She was petite, with long orange hair that fell to her waist, and her purple eyes were magnified by the large pair of
glasses on her face. She looked about… fifteen, sixteen? It was a bit difficult to determine… She stood out amongst the group, as she was the only one not wearing some sort of school uniform.

"Hello, Senpai," Amamiya-kun greeted, hesitating for a moment before speaking again for some odd reason. "We were just… passing by when Morgana ran out."

Haru couldn't help but frown. Passing by…? This district wasn't exactly popular amongst teenagers.

"I… I see…" she said slowly, before looking over at the small girl. (Though Haru couldn't really talk.) "Hello…" She smiled gently at the younger girl. "I don't believe we've met."

"This is Futaba Sakura," Nijiiama-san introduced, and the now named Futaba gave a little wave, even though she looked a bit unsure. "She's the daughter of the man looking after Ren."

"That's stretching it a little," Amamiya-kun said lightly, a smile tugging at his lips.

"Ren!" Takamaki-san chided, before smacking his shoulder.

"Hey, I'm just stating the truth."

"I, uh…" Sakamoto-kun rubbed the back of his neck. He looked sheepish. "We didn't expect you to be 'round here, Haru-senpai."

"My father wished for me to sit in on the board meeting today," Haru said, clasping her hands behind her back. "I usually don't really visit the headquarters…"

"How are you, Haru-san?" Kitagawa-kun suddenly inquired, his gray eyes filled with concern. "I must confess… we were… concerned after meeting your father…"

Haru's eyes widened. If she remembered right, Kitagawa-kun had been silent during the whole… argument.

"O-Oh… I'm fine," she quickly fibbed, averting her eyes. "It's fine."

Sugimura had been furious and rather… jealous. That had not been a fun conversation… She still had a bit of a bruise on her arm still…

Though she noticed that everyone else was frowning… exchanging looks.

"Look, Senpai, you don't…" Takamaki-san winced, before she wrapped her arms around herself. "We're… just a bit worried about you. That Sugimura isn't exactly… nice."

"Far from it," Amamiya-kun agreed, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"…Thank you for your concern." Haru stared down at the ground. "…So, what brings you here?" she asked, hoping to change the subject.

"I… er…" Sakamoto-kun's eyes went wide with panic. "We were… uh… scoping out possible internships? For Yusuke especially! He's never got enough money, y'know."

Kitagawa-kun just frowned sternly. "Do not drag me into this. I have no intention in getting a job other than what I have now."

"Dude!" Sakamoto-kun protested, shooting him a disbelieving look. "Can't you-"
"Ryuji, shhh!" Takamaki-san hissed at him, and Amada-kun responded by pressing a hand to his forehead.

They were… hiding something. Why were they gathered here to begin with? Amamiya-kun seemed to be lying to her. Something was awfully suspicious…

Haru had noticed that the group seemed to swell every month. Everyone had noticed that Ren Amamiya, Ryuji Sakamoto, and Anne Takamaki had been thick as thieves since April.

But… the headquarters especially… they were visiting it for some reason. Wait…!

"You're… You're…" Haru stared at them with wide eyes.

"I plead the fifth?" Amamiya-kun offered weakly.

…Wait, what? The fifth… what?

Amada-kun shot him an exasperated look. "Why does someone always have to try that?"

"It's gotta work once, right?"

"It's not and you should stop trying!" Amada-kun retorted.

"You're no fun sometimes, Ken."

"But are you really them?" Haru asked.

"No, that's silly!" Takamaki-san tried to scoff, but it was awfully strained.

Haru frowned. "But I just-"

She had to reassure them that she wasn't going to the police or anything…

Futaba's eyes suddenly grew wide with shock, all but bugging out of her sockets. "Hey, what's that?!" she demanded, pointing behind Haru.

Huh…? Haru immediately turned around to see just what she was talking about. Nothing seemed out of the blue… What was she referring to?

"Run, guys!" Futaba suddenly shrieked out, catching Haru's attention.

Haru whirled around to see that the others had listened to her cue, and were now fleeing.

"Wait!" she exclaimed. "I didn't—please come back!"

She huffed to herself before rushing after them. Her shoes weren't the best for running but she had to try. Though she ended up bumping into an older man in his mid-twenties, wearing a black trenchcoat. His dark brown hair was tied in a low ponytail, and his piercing steel gray eyes were… intimidating for some reason.

Haru quickly bowed. "I'm so sorry, sir! Please excuse me!"

She had to try and catch up to them… She wasn't going to rat them out. She just wanted them to listen about targeting her father…

"Looked like he was right to listen to Minako. Shinjiro hadn't been thrilled with her suggestion that..."
he follow the kids to the Big Bang Headquarters, but Minako being her usually annoyingly persistent self had insisted on it. Though she was more worried about them being caught, since there were guards crawling everywhere.

Looked like he still had to save Ken sometimes.

He followed after the girl, who ducked into an alley.

"Please wait!" she pleaded. "I'm not… I have a request!"

"Haru-senpai, it's really not what you think!" Takamaki protested, her voice going up an octave higher than usual. "It's er…"

Shinjiro just pressed a hand to his forehead, fighting the urge not to cringe. Maybe Takeba should give her some acting lessons. Takamaki probably had an awful poker face too.

"Nono!" the girl cried. "It's just—I wanted to talk to you… about my father."

"What about him?" Niijima asked warily.

"You've… You've seen the requests, haven't you?" Her voice was quiet now. "I just…"

"Move," a voice suddenly hissed at his ear.

Someone waltzed by him, and Shinjiro only saw the back of him as he entered the alley.

"You!" Sakamoto hissed out. "What are you doing here?!"

"Why shouldn't I be tracking down my lovely fiancée?" he asked silkily. "State of the art GPS."

"You put a GPS on Haru-san?!" Ken sounded outraged now, and he could imagine Ken glowering at this guy. "What is your problem?!"

"My problem is my fiancée spending time with other men when all of her attention should be on me," the man spat out. "She'll be a married woman soon after all. I won't tolerate my wife to pay any attention to other men."

"…Was that a threat?" Amamiya asked.

"…I think so," Ken said dryly.

"Do not mock me!" the man growled. "I am a Sugimura! My pedigree is better than all of yours put together!"

God, not even when Mitsuru had acted like a prissy little princess had she spouted such bull. Though figures it'd be Sugimura. Minako had warned him about the guy too.

"Must make up for several other things," Kitagawa noted.

"Excuse me?!" Sugimura growled. "Just what are you implying?!"

"Isn't it obvious?" Kitagawa bit out, and Shinjiro had to press his hand against his face. He could tell that Kitagawa wasn't implying what Sugimura thought he was implying but… Sugimura clearly didn't see it that way.

"Come on, Haru, we're going back to my place," Sugimura hissed out, and the girl yelped when she
was yanked closer to him. "We can… entertain ourselves." He let out a chuckle. "In several ways."

"You creep!" Takamaki growled out.

"Get your hands off of her!" Nijima snapped, and Shinjiro took a look to see that Nijima pulled Haru out of his grasp.

"You don't get to tell me what to do!" Sugimura retorted and his free hand flew at Nijima's face. But Ken grabbed her by the wrist, yanking both girls backwards out of Sugimura's range. "She's my fiancée! Keep your nose out of people's business!"

Then the cat suddenly yowled, jumping out of Amamiya's bag, aiming right for the face but Sugimura just swatted him away. He slammed into the brick wall, slumping to the ground.

Haru let out a squeak. "S-Sugimura-san!"

"What, am I supposed to let that mangy cat claw this?" Sugimura scoffed, his hands tracing his face. "He completely deserved that, the dumb animal."

"Morgana!" Sakamoto yelled, before he and Amamiya ran to the cat. He knelt down, carefully scooping the cat in his arms. He glared at Sugimura. "You asshole!" he growled.

Amamiya lightly touched his head, before the cat weakly lifted his head and letting out a soft meow. "Morgana, why did you…?" The cat meowed again before Amamiya's face softened. "Jeez… that was like a total Ryuji move."

"Hey!" Sakamoto protested.

"You are a piece of shit," Ken hissed out, releasing Nijima's wrist. He glared daggers at the man as his hands clenched into fists. He sucked in a unsteady breath. "I don't give a flying crap about your stupid family pedigree, but what gives you the right to manhandle a woman like that?! Hurting an animal like that?! Your head is obviously stuck into four centuries ago!"

Shinjiro couldn't help but smirk. Ken didn't know it, but he was setting up a good opportunity for Shinjiro to scare the shit out of Sugimura. As Ken continued to rant and chew Sugimura out, Takamaki and Kitagawa hurried over to Haru, whispering frantically to her. Haru just whispered something back to her, but her expression was more… resigned. The sight made Shinjiro's heart clench. For some reason… she reminded him of Fuuka.

"You brat!" Sugimura raged, glaring at Ken. "Who do you think you are, to lecture me?! You really think you can threaten me?!

"No, but I can," Shinjiro growled, taking just a few strides to cover the distance between them. He couldn't help but smirk as Sugimura whipped around and his eyes went as wide as dinner plates. Tch. Figures. Total pansy.

"S-Shinjiro-san?" Ken stammered out, but Sugimura spoke next.

"You're… you're one of Kirijo's dogs," he hissed out.

"Yeah, and you're a little bitch," Shinjiro returned, unable to stop himself from smirking as Sugimura's face bright red with anger. "What's the matter, Sugimura?" he couldn't help but taunt. "Mitsuru's an enemy now because she saw right past your little act to get your hands on her money?"
"Kirijo was a fool to not ally with us!" Sugimura retorted, his hands clenched into fists. "She's just a sentimental woman... what does she know about investment? Finances?! We could've created a truly powerful partnership... but she threw it all away."

"Oh yeah, 'cause Mitsuru must be a real idiot for not wanting your family to use her family's money," Shinjiro mocked. "Though I bet your family is still trying to ally with Mitsuru... Bet she'll love hearing about how you manhandled your so called fiancée and how you tried to hit another girl... Probably will get in a lot of trouble with your father too, if Mitsuru's pissed at you."

"That's... you..." Sugimura sputtered out, apparently unable to think of a good retort. Or even a full sentence.

And Mitsuru could put up a better fight when they were just teenagers. That was kinda sad.

"I could call Mitsuru even now," Shinjiro said, as Sugimura's eyes went wide with fear. Ken feared Mitsuru less. "Or... you can just leave now."

Sugimura scowled, his eyes affixed on Haru. "This isn't over," he bit out. "Your father will find out about this. He won't tolerate you spending time with riff-raff and neither will I."

He then shoved past Shinjiro, disappearing from their sight.

And this was why Mitsuru could almost never convince him to go to one of the stupid balls that the upper class liked throwing so much. Some of Mitsuru's 'peers' had such huge egos that he was surprised that they could fit through the door.

"Thank god," Takamaki breathed, before turning to Haru. "...Hey." She gingerly took the shorter girl's arm, and she just winced. A strangled gasp then escaped the blonde girl's throat. "Your arm..."

"...It's nothing," she mumbled out, but she stared down at the ground.

"You can't just accept that!" Sakura blurted out, her eyes wide. Her hands then clenched into fists. "It's wrong! Yusuke's right! Your dad's just treating you like some property that he can hand over for more money!"

"Your father is nothing but scum!" Kitagawa snapped. "He can't just hand you off like that! Especially to a disgusting man such as Sugimura!"

"I..." She looked overwhelmed by everything.

"All right, all right, enough," Shinjiro cut in. "Yelling about this kind of thing in public ain't exactly the smartest thing to do."

"Maybe we could go back to our place?" Ken suggested. "We should patch up Morgana too."

"Oh, that's right!" Haru scrambled over to Sakamoto's side, gently running a hand over Morgana's spine. "Thank you for trying to defend me," she said sweetly. "It was so brave of you..."

He meowed and Sakamoto scoffed before he rolled his eyes. "Cocky as always."

Haru blinked at him. "...You can understand him...?"

"Uh...!" Sakamoto stiffened.

Shinjiro fought the urge to facepalm. God, how did the whole school not know about the Phantom
Thieves' identities.

"Oh, Ryuji's just a cat whisperer," Amamiya said with a completely straight face.

"Dude!" Sakamoto cried, making Sakura burst into laughter.

"I know you want to keep it a secret, Ryuji…" Amamiya shook his head seriously. "But it's something that should be embraced."

"Indeed!" Haru nodded enthusiastically. "I wish I could talk to animals! Then I could thank him properly!"

"Ren, I hate you," Sakamoto grumbled.

Amamiya just smirked at him. "Love you too, buddy."

…Guess it was just a Wild Card thing to be a little shit.

"Ah..." Niijima shifted on her feet. "Should we get going then?"

"Yeah!" Takamaki nodded enthusiastically. "Let's go, Senpai!"

"Huh…?" She looked at Takamaki in confusion. "Me too…?"

"I'm fairly sure that Ken meant you as well," Kitagawa said. "Am I correct in my assumption?"

Ken nodded. "Yeah. We should look at your injury, too."

"Oh, but..." Haru looked down at her feet. "It's not necessary…"

"It's fine," Shinjiro said, making her look up in surprise. "Ken's right, we should look at it. May be just a bruise, but you shouldn't just dismiss it."

"We should talk too," Amamiya interjected, before frowning at her. "…Sorry we just kinda left you in the dust."

She bit her lip, staring down at the ground. "…Okay."

"How are you feeling, Morgana?" Ken asked, having finished securing the bandage around Morgana's torso. He put the roll back in the first aid kid and snapped it shut.

"A bit sore..." Morgana then hissed as Ren prodded him slightly in the side. "Okay… a lot sore," he confessed with a wince.

"Morgana, that was really reckless," Ren scolded with a deep frown. "You really scared me back there…"

"I know, I know..." Morgana mumbled, his ears lowering to the point where it was pressed against his skull. "I just... I couldn't sit there and do nothing." He frowned. "Especially to such a nice girl too!" He scowled. "She's wasted on her father."

Ren's eyes softened with sympathy. "I understand that, but you're lucky that none of your ribs are broken…"

"Maybe we can go to the Metaverse later then."
Hm. He had never tried it on a cat (or Koromaru, for that matter), but he could try... And Haru-san was distracted right now.

Ken placed a hand on Morgana's back before concentrating on Kala-Nemi.

_Diarama._

Blue surrounded Morgana for a moment. Morgana blinked several times, before arching his back. "Wow!" he exclaimed. "That's a _lot_ better!" He then cocked his head. "...How did you do that?"

"Healing is easy to channel, once you have the hang of it," Ken said in a whisper. "It's a matter of focus. The pain won't go away completely, but it should heal rather quickly."

Morgana gave a little frown. "I... I didn't know that."

"Morgana!" Futaba chirped, suddenly pushing Ken aside. A second later, Morgana yowled. But Futaba just ignored that. "I'm so glad that you're okay!"

"Call her off! I'm hurt!" Morgana whined, even as Futaba pulled at his cheeks.

"Your face isn't hurt!" Futaba exclaimed, sounding almost gleeful. "This is your punishment for worrying us!"

"Ren!" Morgana cried out, squirming in Futaba's grasp. "Save me!"

Ren just sighed, shaking his head. "Come on, Futaba, that's enough. He's been through a lot already."

"Jeez, have you even had a pet before?" Shinjiro-san scolded. "It looks like you're torturing the thing with how he's yowling." He then looked over at Ken. "I need to pick up some groceries at the store," he said nonchalantly, glancing over at Haru-san for a moment. "You'll be fine on your own, right?"

Hm, that was smart. Haru-san didn't know that Shinjiro-san was aware of all of this. Ken nodded. "Yeah," he said. "See you, Shinjiro-san."

Everyone threw in their own goodbyes, before Shinjiro-san left.

"Your guardian... is rough on the edges, but he's very kind," Haru-san said with a hesitant smile. "I can see it in his eyes."

"I dunno, Shinjiro-san's pretty scary," Ryuji said, plopping onto the couch. "He looks like he could snap your spine into two if you pissed him off enough..."

Ken rolled his eyes before sitting next to Ryuji. "He's not that bad. You've seen what he's really like."

Anne nodded. "Yeah, he's like one of those guys who acts all tough but is a total softie! And Fuuka-san seems to have him completely wrapped around her finger."

Ren just threw him a smirk. "Yeah, Ken wouldn't make fun of him if he didn't know he could get away with it."

"Oh, stop." Anne smacked his shoulder, rolling her eyes at him. "Besides, we brought Haru-senpai to talk, remember?" She smiled kindly at Haru-san. "Why don't you sit down?"
Haru-san chose to sit in the loveseat. Futaba and Ren sat at the couch with Ken and Ryuji, while Makoto, Anne, and Yusuke sat on the smaller couch.

"So… is it true?" Haru-san asked softly. "You're…"

Ren inhaled. "…Yes. We are."

"Then Kamoshida… Madarame… Kaneshiro…"

"All us!" Ryuji boasted with a wide smile. "Pretty cool, right?"

"Ryuji…" Makoto sighed.

"What? Can't we take pride in this?!

"Then… please… listen to my request," Haru-san pleaded before she quickly bowed her head. "Please steal my father's heart!" Her hands gripped the hem of her skirt. "My father… he's changed so much in just the past two years…" she whispered. "I don't recognize him anymore. I… I don't want to marry Sugimura-san."

"Rightfully so," Yusuke said, folding his arms over his chest. "Haru-san… I… I understand how you feel," he said quietly. "I know that it's not easy to fight against a parental figure…"

Haru-san's eyes grew wide. "Kitagawa-kun… I…" She gave a little nod. "…Thank you."

"What can you tell us?" Makoto asked, leaning forward. "There's so many rumors circulating about the abuse. Is it true?"

"I… I don't know, honestly." Haru-san looked up, before she bit her lip. "It's not easy for me to see how my father has twisted Okumura Foods so much."

"But hey!" Futaba blurted out. "After we saw you at the Diet Building, we decided to look into your dad. We're gonna target him. Um…" She fidgeted for a moment. "I-I never had a dad," she admitted. "Unless you count Sojiro… But! I-I'm sorry that your dad is abusing you like this…" She smiled sadly. "…You don't deserve that."

"Asshole dads…" Ryuji scoffed, before he scowled. "Ain't nothing new."

"Father wasn't always this awful…" Haru-san said. "I just don't understand when exactly he had changed."

"…People change," Makoto murmured, only for her expression to grow somber. "…Sometimes not for the better."

"…I'm sorry that Sugimura has targeted you like this," Anne said softly, before she grimaced. "You don't deserve that, Senpai. It's not fun… to be the target of a creep." Her hands clenched into fists. "And the stuff he spouted about going to his place! Ugh! I kinda wished I punched him…!"

Shinjiro-san could have easily done that. But he hadn't. Probably since he knew that the Sugimuras could press charges. But that was why Shinjiro-san had attacked him verbally. Not that he was any less relentless.

"Whoa, Anne, calm down." Ren shot her an amused look. "Sugimura isn't here."

"I still wish that I punched him," Anne grumbled.
"Your concern means a lot to me," Haru-san said. "Though, that's right… You and Mr. Kamoshida…" She winced.

"…Yeah." Anne bit her lip. "But…" Her expression then grew determined. "…We'll be targeting your father. We'll make sure that you won't suffer under him much longer."

"Thank you, Takamaki-san." Haru-san clasped her hands in her lap. "I… I know it's cowardly but…"

"It's not cowardly to wish for your father to change," Yusuke cut in. "Haru-san, you're nothing but the victim in this. You at least are aware that your father is in the wrong here." He stared down at his lap. "…It took me a while to actually admit this."

"Madarame screwed you up," Ryuji said. "It ain't easy to admit that kind of crap."

"But it's… not me…" Haru-san murmured, before her eyes lit up. "Oh! Perhaps I could aid you in this somehow…? This is regarding my father after all…"

"Uhh…" Futaba shook her head. "Sorry, no can do. It's sorta…"

"A trade secret," Ken said.

"Oh… I see…" Haru-san's face fell. "I suppose that makes sense. The Phantom Thieves are like superheroes. And I'm just… me."

"Nonono, that's not what we meant!" Futaba cried.

"It's… dangerous, Haru-san," Makoto said gently. "It's best to leave you out of this…"

"I… I understand." Haru-san then slowly stood up. "…Thank you for the hospitality, but I must head home." She winced. "…My father won't be pleased that I've been out for so long."

"Let me go with you," Makoto offered. "It's starting to get dark anyways…"

"It's probably out of the way…" Haru-san began to protest. "I'll be fine! Really!"

"It's nothing, Haru-san," Makoto insisted. "It… doesn't feel right otherwise."

"I…" Haru-san then sighed. "…Very well. Thank you, Niijima-san."

Soon after, everyone else began to depart. Ryuji and Yusuke left together, so Ryuji could pay for Yusuke's train ticket. Ren and Futaba left with Anne, intending to walk her back to her apartment before catching the train back to Yongen-jaya.

And so… he was left alone. His head was swirling with all of the things he had seen and heard today.

Okumura… he was going to pay for what he was putting Haru-san through. They had to get to the bottom of him…

Futaba suddenly tugged on Anne's hand. "Anne, is everything okay?"

Anne looked at the younger girl. "Huh? Of course it is…"

"It's just…" Ren looked at her carefully, before taking her hand. He gave it a little squeeze. "$…
You've been quiet."

"It's not… it's just…" Anne trailed off, unsure to put it.

She had been angry enough when they had met Sugimura the first time. But this last encounter… just made her blood boil when she just thought about it. How could Haru-senpai's father put her through this? Her parents were absent in her lives a lot, but… she knew that they loved her.

"…Haru-senpai just gave me a lot to think about." She looked over at Futaba. She hadn't expected Futaba to become so endearing to her. It was hard not to. Her enthusiasm was just… contagious.

"When I had first awakened to Carmen, all I could think about is making Kamoshida pay. But… that feels selfish."

"For what…?" Ren asked. "For making you want to fight back? Assert yourself? There's nothing wrong with that, Anne."

"I know but…" Anne looked back at Futaba. "…Futaba. And now Haru-senpai… Helping them… is what being a Phantom Thief is really about. Helping those who can't fight back."

She had never felt so strongly about this. Fighting for the weak… being a hero, as Haru-senpai put it. She may admire the villains for being so strong and confident, but… they weren't villains. They were meant to help people who couldn't fight back. That was a cause worth fighting for.

They weren't here for fame or recognition.

"You did save me," Futaba piped up, a bright smile on her face. "You helped me out of the closet!"

Anne laughed. "Thanks, Futaba."

"We'll save Haru," Futaba said with a firm nod. "And everyone else under Okumura's thumb!"

Yes… this was what they were here to do.

That was when Carmen's voice began to whisper to her.

*Thou art I… and I am thou. Thine resolution hast transformed me… and hast given me a new form. I am…*

"Hecate?" Anne murmured.

She felt… stronger and… at peace.

"Anne?" Ren frowned at her.

Anne just smiled at her boyfriend, slipping her hand out of Futaba's. "…It's nothing."

Ren just laughed. "You're so silly sometimes," He leaned in close and kissed her sweetly. Again and again… Anne found herself melting against his kisses as usual, but then Ren pulled back slightly. "…But I love you," he breathed.

Anne giggled. "I love you too, Ren. I feel with you at my side… I can do anything."

"Uh, you know I'm still here right?" Futaba grumbled.

"Sorry, Futaba," Ren laughed, though the smirk on his face told her that he really wasn't. "Come
Haru delicately nibbled at the crepe the chef had prepared for her. It was expertly made, with powdered sugar and sliced strawberries on top. But she could barely taste it.

She could feel Father's eyes on her. His displeasure was clear in his eyes.

Haru reached for her cup of tea, taking a slow sip to savor the taste. When she set it down, Father spoke.

"...Haru, Sugimura-san tells me that you didn't immediately go back."

Haru stiffened. "There was a… misunderstanding," she murmured.

"Sugimura-san also tells me you've been ignoring his calls. Doing your best to avoid him." Father's eyes narrowed dangerously on her and he fiercely scowled. "You do recall that this match has been made for the interests of this family, yes? You know your duty to your family?"

More the interests of him. But Haru held her tongue in that regard. That would do nothing but infuriate him.

"Yes, Father," she said softly.

Father scrutinized her face closely, before he finally nodded. "Good," he said coolly. "Sugimura has also informed me that he would be pleased to welcome you in his home within a month."

"W-What?"

"You are to be his bride after graduation," Father stated. "It's only natural that you become acquainted with how the household is run. After all, you will be running it once you are his wife. Sugimura believes that you should come to him on the eleventh."

Haru lowered her eyes, murmuring an agreement all while blinking furiously. She couldn't cry. What had happened to Father? Was it Mother's death?

This wasn't the man who had cried out of relief, when well wishers had visited Grandfather's café to honor his death. This wasn't her father.

The Phantom Thieves had promised… they had promised…

No.

She was going to make sure of it personally.

Amada-kun was right. She couldn't just wait and pray for a miracle. She had to seize her own fate. She didn't want to marry Sugimura. She was positive being married to him would be nothing but hell.

She knew it was dangerous, but she was done with being complacent. She wasn't going to just keep submitting Father's name to the Phantom Aficionado Site and sit there hoping that he would change.
It was time for her to take action.

Chapter End Notes

Haru's starting to hit her limit… Can't wait to get her awakening. That will be fun.

Though I was really wondering why exactly Haru was there at the HQ when Morgana tried to infiltrate the Palace, so I had to come up with an explanation for that.

But yeah, Sugimura is acquainted with Mitsuru. Tried to woo her before, but Mitsuru wasn't having it. Gotta say, I really enjoyed writing Shinji dragging him.

And Anne is the first to get her ultimate. I think a lot of people ignore how empathetic she is, so I wanted to tie that into her ultimate awakening.

(And yes, this chapter's title is totally a reference to the awesome Persona 3 movie song.)
Enter Noir, the Phantom Thief

Chapter Summary

Haru confronts her father's Shadow, and Noir is born.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Friday, September 16th, 2016

Haru slowly peeked out from the corner. She needed to confirm that the Phantom Thieves were going to Okumura Foods' headquarters… She didn't want to follow them to no avail.

She had resolved to do something… The Phantom Thieves were going to change her father's heart… and she was going to follow them until she saw what exactly they would do.

Her goal was to follow Sakamoto-kun. He seemed like the easiest target, with how he didn't easily notice his surroundings. Since Takamaki-san and Amamiya-kun were classmates, she accompanied the boy who seemed to be the leader. And well… something about Amada-kun held himself made her feel that he preferred to be on the cautious side than not. So, the choice was narrowed down to Sakamoto-kun.

The younger boy munched on a snack as he casually walked down the stairs from the second floor. He paid her no mind as he passed by, walking out of the entrance. Haru let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding. Okay, all was clear.

She followed Sakamoto-kun to the train station… And Sakamoto-kun was waiting for the train for Marunouchi… Her heart soared at that. They were going back.

She scurried over to the booth to purchase a ticket, but she was careful to keep her distance. Sakamoto-kun may not be incredibly perceptive but he wasn't stupid.

Haru couldn't help but feel antsy during the ride, though. Just what were they going to do…? How did they change hearts, as their calling cards proclaimed?

It was a relief when the conductor announced that they had arrived at Marunouchi Station. It was an odd feeling… especially since that usually brought her anxiety.

Haru stepped off of the train, scanning the area for Sakamoto-kun's bright blond hair. She followed him, ducking behind a billboard close to the entrance of Okumura Food's headquarters.

"Hey, Ryuji," Amamiya-kun greeted. "We can go now, right?"

Go…? Haru couldn't help but frown. Were they planning on going inside the building?

She had remembered reading on a forum, speculation that the Phantom Thieves changed people's
"...Sorry."

"I'd prefer it if we had more privacy," Amada-kun murmured.

"It'll be fine, Ken!" Sakura-san said confidently. "I mean, who's gonna be around here now? Stop being such a worrywart!"

"I suppose..." Amada-kun said slowly, even though he didn't sound entirely convinced. "But yeah, let's go, Ren."

"And so he has spoken," Amamiya-kun said teasingly. "But okay, okay... Kunikazu Okumura. Okumura Foods Headquarters. Spaceport."

A mechanical voice then spoke. "Beginning navigation."

W-What? Why did Amamiya-kun speak those random words?

Haru peeked out, and she had to clamp a hand over her mouth so she wouldn't reveal herself. A pulsating portal had appeared. What was that?! And... where did everyone go?

Haru slowly stepped out.

It's too dangerous.

That had been their claim about why she couldn't come and see.

But what had made it dangerous? Haru took a deep breath. She had... resolved to not stand back anymore. Hoping to be saved. She was going to take action...

And there was just one way to find out where exactly everyone had gone.

Haru stepped through the portal.

Ken didn't think he would ever get used to how... ornate Palaces were. It was like they had stepped inside of a movie. A sci-fi movie, to be precise.

Everything was all high tech. The Shadows had taken on a robotic form, though they looked nothing like any robot that Ken had seen.

"Seriously, this is so cool!" Futaba's eyes were gleaming with excitement. "It's like we're on an actual sci-fi movie set!"

"You're not gonna fangirl on us, like with Yukari-san, right?" Ryuji snickered.

Futaba stuck her tongue at him. "Better sci-fi than your pointless action movies, Skull."

"Whataya mean pointless?!"

"Okay, okay, enough," Makoto chided, before glancing over to Ren. "Joker, we should get
"Agreed," Ren said. "All right, so… starting team…" Ren rubbed his chin. "Let's go with Mona, Fox, and Queen today."

Morgana looked at him in surprise for some reason, but then he nodded. "Let's get started, then."

And so they began. They traveled down a hall, the team that Ren had selected fighting the occasional Shadow. They eventually came across a door.


"Biometric…?" Anne asked.

"Ugh, don't tell me…" Ryuji groaned. "This is gonna be like a block like Kaneshiro?!!"

"What do you mean by that?" Futaba asked. Of course she wouldn't know, being the only one who hadn't entered Kaneshiro's Palace.

"Kaneshiro would only let 'customers' enter his bank," Yusuke explained. "It's… complicated how we managed to get that."

Makoto immediately began to fidget, wincing ever so slightly.

"But… biometric…" Anne repeated. "What does that mean?"

"It's related to biology," Ken said slowly. "Though… don't places like this in movies usually require like… a fingerprint scan? Or scanning your iris… Something along those lines."

"Crap…" Ren groaned, rubbing his forehead. "I think you're right…"

"M- Maybe we can do something to the door?" Ryuji said desperately. "I mean, c-c'mon, Makoto can blow up things with her Persona! Can't we do something to it?!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Ryuji," Morgana scolded. "It's never worked before, so why would it now?!"

"I'm just trying to find a way to get in!"

"Did you really think that you could target me?"

From the shadows… out stepped… well, Shadow Okumura. He… looked even stranger than Shadow Kaneshiro. Why did Shadow selves in the Metaverse have to look so… weird?

He was clad in an astronaut's suit, but the helmet had two antennas sticking out of it, making him look like an alien. His dark blue skin and eerily golden eyes didn't help either. But the actual suit was covered with glowing buttons, a black cape draped over his shoulders.

"This looks familiar…" Anne murmured.

"Are you for real, Panther?" Ryuji asked.


But Shadow Okumura chuckled. "Oh, I'll be greatly rewarded for this! I will be the one to deliver
the Phantom Thieves! What luck!"

"Not a chance in hell, you bastard!" Ryuji exclaimed.

"It will be you who pays," Yusuke bit out, glowering at Shadow Okumura.

"Is that all you care about?" Ken demanded, his hand wrapping around the shaft of his spear. "Rewards? Riches?"

"Silence!" he barked out, glaring at Ken. "You think you understand what it's like?! I had to claw my way up to success! I had to clean up my father's messes! You're just a naïve brat who knows nothing! I won't go back…" He shook his head. "Never. I will climb higher and higher… The sky isn't even the limit! 'Overcome failure at any cost, if it means betraying others…' That is the Okumura family motto. Failing is not possible. Not for me!"

"And it doesn't matter who you crush?!" Anne demanded. "You're nothing but scum!"

"What an awful motto…" Makoto murmured. "This is how you became so successful…?"

"Ugh, you need to beat the crap outta him!" Futaba exclaimed.

"F-Father…?"

They all whirled around to see that Haru-san was standing in the doorway.

"Haru-senpai?!" Anne blurted out. "What are you doing here?!"

Haru-san glanced over at them, but her eyes focused on Okumura. "Father, why are you dressed like that…?"

"Haru…" Shadow Okumura's eyes narrowed. "What are you doing here? Are you here with them?"

He spat out the word like someone would spit out vermin.

"Haru-san, we told you it was too dangerous!" Ken exclaimed.

Why couldn't anyone just listen? Okay, Futaba following them inside had saved them from her mother's cognitive self, but still.

"I… I know." Haru-san's expression grew determined. "I'm sorry, Amada-kun, but… I can't. A conversation with my father this morning convinced me… I… I can't stand back anymore. I have to take action to get what I want!"

"Yes… Yes…" Shadow Okumura nodded enthusiastically. "You pushed the Phantom Thieves into coming here, didn't you?" He laughed, a wide grin spreading across his face. "My, what a dutiful daughter I have… You'd do anything I ask, wouldn't you? Even deliver the Phantom Thieves to me, correct?"

"No, that's not it…!" Haru-san shook her head, before she pressed a hand against her chest. "Father, that's not it! I… I can't stand Sugimura-san! He's a creep who thinks he's much better looking than he actually is! He can't keep his hands to himself! And it's like listening to nails on chalkboard when listening to him talk! I… I want to change your heart!"

She was panting by the end of her tirade.

…She had this bottled up for a long time, didn't she?
Shadow Okumura's expression morphed into a rather fierce scowl. "You don't intend to follow through with the marriage?!" he demanded. "It's for the good of the family! The company! How dare you defy me?! You've wanted for nothing and you turn your back on me?!

"I..." Haru-san flinched at Shadow Okumura, shrinking back. "It's wrong... what you're doing... And it..." Her expression seemed to steel. "You claim it's for the good of the company, but that's just a bunch of lies! You're pushing for this marriage, because it'll benefit you and only you!"

"So... you've made your resolution, have you, Haru-san?" Yusuke asked.

Haru-san's eyes flew to Yusuke, her expression startled. But then she slowly nodded. "This... This is why the company has a bad reputation..." she said slowly. "Because all you do is treat them like tools!" She shook her head. "No more, Father! It's wrong! Grandfather would be ashamed of the man you've become... Mother even more so!"

"Do not mention them..." he hissed out. "To gain, you must give... One must be resolved to give even more if they wish to stand above others. All of my work... it is to boost me to an entirely new level... the world of politics!"

"So your theory was correct, Ace," Makoto said grimly.

"The cold reality of kicking people down is a part of business!" Okumura continued, apparently intent on giving them a motive rant. "Virtue and sentiment are for losers."

...Yeah, that was a lie. He may not be privy to how exactly Mitsuru-san ran the Kirijo Group, but he knew that Mitsuru-san would never do such a thing. And the Kirijo Group was as powerful as ever.

"And for what?!!" Haru-san demanded, dropping her hand. "Father, can't you see that you slowly destroying your soul?! I... I won't stand for this! Your heart must be changed!"

"My own daughter... betraying me like this..." Shadow Okumura scowled fiercely. "I won't tolerate this disobedience... Sugimura will beat that out of you."

"You were the one going on and on about betrayal for your own benefit!" Futaba exclaimed, scowling at him as well. She looked at Haru-san in concern, who was cringing at the mention of Sugimura. "You're nothing but a hypocrite!"

"Seriously, you don't deserve Haru!" Morgana spat out.

"H-Huh...? A-A talking cat...?" Haru-san asked, eyes wide.

...Did she really just notice him now...?

"Hmm... It appears we cannot go forward with our deal, Okumura-san." Appearing by Shadow Okumura's side was... Sugimura.

"W-What?!" Haru-san's eyes were as wide as saucers, as she took a step backwards. "Sugimura-san?!!"

Then his eyes seemed to drink in Haru-san and he licked his lips. "...What a pity. She was such a lovely girl... I will mourn this loss."

"Can he be more of a creep?!" Anne hissed out, her hands all but strangling the handle of her whip as if she was imagining she was wringing Sugimura's neck.
"And why not?" Shadow Okumura turned to Sugimura.

"Your daughter is more interested in interacting with riff-raff than spending time with me. She keeps companies with thieves. Who's to say that things will change once we marry? No… My father would never accept such a bride. Such a pity though… My father thought such an alliance would have benefited us both so much…"

"Riff-raff…?" Yusuke repeated with disgust. "The only shameful people in this room is you and Okumura."

Shadow Okumura just shrugged, waving a hand. "Then take her as your lover or however else you'll please. You don't have to take her as your lawful wife anymore. I don't particularly care."

"Huh?!!" Haru-san stumbled back, her eyes wide with shock. "Lover…?"

Sugimura just nodded, a lustful grin on his face. "Yes… Yes… that will do just fine…"

…God, why did he have to sound so creepy?

"You piece of shit!" Ryuji snarled out, hands clenching into fists.

"He… He really went there," Futaba breathed.

"You… You would sell me to that man… and make me his plaything?! All to satisfy your ambitions?!" Haru-san's voice cracked as she fell to her knees. Anne ran to her side, dropping to her knees as well and putting a hand on her shoulder. Haru-san opened her eyes. "I… I was raised under this company. I was taught that I must put it first for as long as I can remember… I accepted a political marriage for your sake! I had convinced that it was for the best… that I should listen to what you want…" A choked out sob escaped her. "Father… why?!"

She sounded so… broken. But… this was no surprise to him. Some people… just did not care for their children… their family as they should. As far as his relatives were concerned, he was nothing to them.

"I am your father. You will do what I say!" Shadow Okumura gazed at her, no pity in his eyes. "Why are you fretting so? You should be honored that you are fulfilling your role as my daughter. That's the only value you've had from the very beginning."

"How can a man say something like that… to his own daughter?!" Makoto demanded, looking rightfully horrified.

"I think I'm gonna be sick…" Ryuji muttered.

Ken kept his eyes on Haru-san. She was… shaking. She wouldn't stop shaking. Wait… Her hands… they were clenching into fists. She wasn't shaking because she was scared. She was shaking because…

"…You are not my father," Haru-san said lowly.

"…Excuse me?"

Haru-san staggered to her feet. Moments later, Anne rose to her feet and took several steps back. "You are not my father," she hissed out, venom dripping from her voice as she lifted her head. "You know what fathers do?! They raise you! They protect you! They love you! You have failed in all accounts! You're not the man who mourned Mother's death for weeks… months! You're not the
man who cried out of joy because Grandfather's customers loved him so much that they wanted to pay tribute to him! You're a cold, unfeeling man who knows only greed and lust for power!"

"Holy shit…" Ryuji breathed. "She's really letting him have it…"

"Oh, she's just getting warmed up," Ren commented, all while keeping her eyes on Haru-san.

"Not to mention that you want to sell me to a disgusting man who just wants his hands on my body! You don't care if he just plays with me and throws me aside!" Her voice was slowly rising as she continued her rant. "You are not my father! You're a twisted man who just wears his face! You abuse workers! You've pushed me into accepting marriage to Sugimura all to satisfy what you want! You may protest until you're blue in the face, but the claims about it being for the 'good' of the company is nothing but lies! You've never even considered about what I wanted!"

Haru-san must have had these thoughts for the longest time. She was just voicing them now.

Haru-san's arm then swept through the air. "No more! You've quoted the family motto to me countless times… Maybe it's time I betrayed you for my benefit! Why should I be loyal to a man who's just interested at throwing me at trash?!" Her hands clenched into fists, before she looked at Shadow Okumura straight in the eye. "I… I… will never forgive this!" she finally shrieked out.

Futaba's breath suddenly hitched. "It's… It's really happening."

"So… she has the potential as well," Yusuke commented, before his hand clenched into a fist. "Good! She'll be able to fight back!"

Suddenly a spotlight shone, directed on Haru-san.

…Where did that come from…?

"Ahhh…" A haughty feminine voice echoed throughout the room. "It's about time that you've made up your mind, my dear fated princess."

Haru-san let out a sharp cry, clutching her head as she fell to her knees once again. Blue flames flickered over her face, leaving behind a black masquerade mask. Her eyes… they had turned golden.

"Uh…" Ryuji blinked up at the ceiling. "Where the eff did that come from?!

…At least he wasn't the only one thinking that.

Ren quickly hushed him. "Come on, Ryuji, let's enjoy the show."

"Freedom for you must stem from betrayal. And as you said… why do you owe loyalty to such a vile man? A man who just uses everyone around him as stepping stones… A man who just sees you as a pawn! He's just begging for betrayal. If you still yearn for freedom, you must not stray from your path. Now tell me… who shall you betray?"

"My heart… has been set," Haru-san whispered, her voice etched with pain. "You know that, most of all, don't you… Milady?" She then looked up, glaring at Shadow Okumura. "You will not use me as a tool any longer!"

"Yes, that gaze!" A deep, throaty chuckle. "I can finally reveal myself! I am thou… thou art I…" Haru-san then gripped her mask with both hands, tugging and pulling. "Let us adorn your departure into freedom… with a beautiful betrayal!"
"Come, Milady!" Haru-san cried, finally tearing off her mask, droplets of blood flying as blue flames swept over her body.

When the blue flames died away, she was revealed to have a completely new outfit. Haru-san looked like she had stepped right out of the book *The Three Musketeers*.

But her Persona… Milady…

It looked like an upper class woman, with an elaborate pink ballgown with golden flowers scattered over the fabric. Back in the… 1800s? He wasn't entirely sure. She even held a masquerade mask in one hand, hiding her face, though that mask was gold and pink. But then suddenly her skirts flew apart, revealing gatling guns.

"Holy shit!" Ryuji yelped, staggering backwards.

"Was my awakening like this?" Futaba whispered.

"You were… a special case," Ken said with a wince.

"Farewell, dear father." Haru-san dipped her hat, before looking up to stare at Shadow Okumura right in the eyes. She then pointed at him. "I am no longer your subservient puppet!" she declared.

"Hmph. As you wish." Shadow Okumura then turned, his cape swaying as he looked at Sugimura. He stood in front of the door, the biometric door apparently accepting the scan. "Deal with them as you wish."

Sugimura then laughed. "Very well. I'll toy with her until I get bored! A high school fiancée… what a turn on!"

He then transformed into a large robot, one mostly white with a few splashes of purple—a mimicry of his business suit.

He then swung wildly at Haru-san but Milady just blocked the swing with a feather fan. Her skirts then swept aside to reveal the guns, blasting Sugimura backwards.

"How dare you!" the robot ground out.

"I think you don't understand," Haru-san bit out. "I am done letting you toy with me! I'll chop off your hands if that is what's needed to get the message to sink in! Or perhaps…” Her purple glove clad hand came to rest on her chin, a thoughtful look settling in her light brown eyes. "I should go for another body part."

Ken couldn't help but cringe at the thinly veiled threat. Sugimura may deserve that but… It was clear that Haru-san was probably not someone to be messed with…

Haru-san then held out her hand, and blue flames formed a battle axe. She leapt in the air, swung the axe with ease, leaving a huge gash right in the chest. She landed easily on her feet, not even looking winded.

Just… how. Okay, the axe was a bit smaller than the ones Shinjiro-san used but still! He still had no idea how Shinjiro-san comfortably used axes in battle, and yet Haru-san had swung with one arm.

"Holy crap," Ren breathed.
"Girls are scary, man," Ryuji mumbled, shaking his head. "Girls who have Personas doubly so."

"You don't have to tell me twice," Ken muttered, his mind automatically veering to the women who were all but his adoptive older sisters.

"Mmmhm." Yusuke nodded. "Just look at Queen and Panther."

"Um, can you not talk like we're not here?" Anne demanded, hands on her hips. She did not look amused with their little conversation.

"Hey, come on, Panther, I'd take that as a compliment." Ren winked at her. "Seeing you in battle is always amazing. In more ways than one."

Anne's face immediately reddened. "Just… Just go!" she huffed, waving at Sugimura.

"Honestly, Joker, now is not that time," Makoto chided, before shaking her head.

"Right." Ren snapped to attention, giving a quick nod. "Mona, Fox, let's get to it, then!"

"As you command, Joker!" Yusuke exclaimed, before he and Morgana leapt into the fray with Ren.

"You dare…" Sugimura gritted out.

"Yes, we dare," Ren cut him off, turning fierce eyes at Sugimura. "That's what the Phantom Thieves do! We dare to challenge the authorities who abuse their powers!"

"That's right!" Morgana nodded firmly, pointing at Sugimura. "We're the Phantom Thieves… here to take your bride!"

"Zouchouten!" Ren tore off his mask, summoning a new Persona. Zouchouten thrust his sword forward. Electricity sparked at the tip, shooting forward and striking Sugimura right in the gash that Haru-san had created. Sugimura just stumbled backwards for a moment, but quickly righted himself.

"My turn!" Morgana declared, as blue flared around him. "Witness my resolve!"

Zorro slashed with his rapier, whipping up a powerful gust of wind that sent Sugimura's two robot cronies flying against the wall. Sugimura itself fought to withstand the powerful gale.

"Oooh, nicely done, Mona!" Futaba cheered. "Come on, pass the baton already!"

Morgana flicked an annoyed glance at Futaba, before bounding over to Yusuke's side. "Do it!"

Morgana leaping in the air and slapping Yusuke's outstretched palm.

"Understood! I will not waste this power…" Yusuke nodded firmly, before he ripped off his mask.

"Take this!"

Goemon slashed at Sugimura several times, widening the gash even further. They weren't even letting Sugimura get an opportunity to attack.

"Milady, come!" Haru-san exclaimed, summoning her Persona. She swept her fan, a ray of hot pink energy shooting out from the fan. The psychic energy surrounded Sugimura, lifting him up and tossing him as easily as a rag doll against the wall. Sugimura slumped against the wall, twitching ever so slightly.

"Defeated by… inferior brats…" Sugimura gritted out. "How?!"
"That's your problem," Ren spat out. "You keep underestimating your enemies. You underestimated Haru-senpai the most of all!"

"That's right," Haru-san said, before twisting to look at Ren. "Come, it's time to punish them!"

"Gladly!" Yusuke seconded.

At Ren's nod, they lunged forward. Sugimura and his lackeys fell too easily.

Haru-san was panting heavily. "He's… gone…" she murmured, before her legs wobbled.

Yusuke lunged forward, catching her by the arm just in time before she collapsed to her knees. He cautiously released her, relaxing when Haru-san immediately didn't fall down. "Haru-san, are you okay?"

"Okay?!" Ryuji demanded, before he began to wave his arms. "Dude, she was a total badass! She was like WHAAAAAM! Did you see what she did to Sugimura with that axe of hers?! And holy shit that magic spell of hers!"

Haru-san just let out a weak giggle. "Thank you, Sakamoto-kun…" Then she blinked. "…I think."

"Crudely put but…" Morgana smiled, before nodding firmly. "…I have to agree. You were like… like a Beauty Thief!"

"A… what thief?" Futaba raised an eyebrow.

"You know…" Morgana looked down, embarrassed. "One of those beautiful heroes who moonlight as vigilantes!"

Futaba looked at Ren, unamused. "What kind of shows have you been watching?"

Ren just shrugged at her. "Gotta have some variety. You should try it sometime."

"Pass," Futaba scoffed, rolling her eyes. "I'll stick to the good stuff."

Anne nudged Ren in the side so to stop his retort, before smiling brightly at Haru-san. "Seriously, you were amazing, Senpai," she said sincerely. "You really showed Sugimura! And your dad!"

"Thank you…" Haru-san smiled. "I… I want to take control of my own fate," she said quietly. "I have my own free will… it's time that I actually realized that."

Free will, huh…?

Ken just smiled at her. "…I'm glad that you have, Haru-san."

"It… It feels so freeing," she confessed. "It's like I've been reborn."

"Hey, we've all been there," Ryuji laughed. "You've gotta break free from all the shit society's piled on ya, you know?"

Haru-san just giggled. "Yes… I've finally begun to understand." Then she suddenly swayed for a moment, pressing a hand to her forehead. All color seemed to drain from her face within seconds. "But… I feel awfully dizzy."

Makoto frowned in concern. "We should get you out of there. Awakening to your Persona takes a lot out of you."
"Can you walk?" Morgana asked.

Haru-san just blinked at him. "I'm not entirely sure who you are but... thank you for your concern... Mona, was it? May I call you Mona-chan? It just seems to suit you."

Morgana looked like he wanted to protest—badly—at the cute nickname, but he seemed to deflate at Haru-san's expression. "If that's what you'd like."

"But... I'll be okay," Haru-san said. "You'll... You'll explain more about this, won't you?"

"We will," Ken promised. "But... let's get out of here first."

"So... the place where we were just now... is a physical manifestation of my father's heart?" Haru-san asked. "And... the two people we saw... weren't the real Father and Sugimura-san?"

...Was it her imagination or did Haru-san sound a little disappointed at the last part? Then again, Haru-san had threatened to... mutilate Sugimura if he didn't learn his lesson...

At least she accepted the explanation about Morgana talking rather easily...

"Yep!" Morgana nodded. "That was your father's cognition of Sugimura. How he views Sugimura."

A sad little smile formed on her face. "So... Father knew of Sugimura's nature all along," she whispered, her lips trembling. "Oh, Father... What made you change so much...?"

"You mentioned other family before," Makoto ventured. "Your grandfather especially..."

Haru-san nodded firmly. "That's correct. My grandfather... he was a very kind man. He ran a small coffeeshop." Her expression could only be described as nostalgic. "I remember Father taking me there a couple times when I was a little girl... before he died. I distinctly remember how cozy it felt... Grandfather didn't care about the profit... he just wanted to serve people. And... what stood out the most to me is when Father took me to the café, shortly after Grandfather's death. You see... many of Grandfather's regulars came to the café, shortly after his death. They brought flowers and other mementos... they wanted to mourn a man that they had come to respect and care for deeply."

Haru-san's eyes squeezed shut and she seemed to tremble for a moment.

"...Father had cried and cried at that. I remember asking him why he was so sad when people had obviously thought so well of Grandfather... and he just told me that he was crying... because he was happy."

It seemed from just that little information... Haru-san took more after her deceased grandfather.

Though she could understand Haru-san's feelings. You sometimes could only just helplessly watch as the differences only pushed you further and further away from a loved one.

"So he really wasn't always like this," Yusuke said slowly.

"At least... that's what I believe." Haru-san placed a hand over her chest, opening her eyes. "But my father is no longer like that. He just sees everyone as a potential pawn. He's been consumed by greed. Please..." She quickly bowed her head. "Allow me to join you! I may not understand everything regarding Personas and Shadows... but I want to change my father's heart personally!"

Changing a loved one's heart...
Well, she could really relate to that.

Makoto bit her lip, gripping the hem of her skirt. Maybe… she should have brought up Sae's Palace sooner, when she still had the chance…

She desperately wanted Sae to be more like the older sister she remembered. She didn't want that Sae to be just a memory… But at the same time, she was afraid. Afraid of what exactly would happen if they stole Sae's Treasure…

…She was such a coward.

"Senpai, we were never going to turn you down," Ren said, flashing her an amused smile. For some reason, Haru-san seemed to blush a little at that, staring down hard at her lap. "Seriously, you were amazing back there."

"T-Thank you, Amamiya-kun." Haru-san's blush then darkened at that, before looking up at him shyly.

…Oh.

Since when did Haru-san have a crush on Ren…?

Makoto looked over to Anne. Did she notice that? Anne met her gaze, before giving a very slight shake of her head.

So… Anne had noticed it. But she didn't seem upset. Maybe she had no reason to be jealous, since she had been dating Ren for over a month now. She was secure in how Ren felt about her, so she saw no need to be jealous.

"Call me Ren," he insisted, before he threw Ken a playful smirk. "Don't want a repeat of Ken."

Ken's expression was unamused. "Excuse me for wanting to be polite."

"Seriously, man, it took like three tries to get you to drop it!" Ryuji huffed. "Just… come on! You call Shinjiro-san Shinjiro-san for crying out loud, and you've known him for seven years!"

"That's different, and you know it," Ken retorted. "He's seven years older than me!"

"So?" Ren raised an eyebrow, before smirking. "Futaba calls Sojiro with no honorifics and he's definitely old enough to be her biological dad."

Ken scowled at him, but didn't give a retort.

Did it really take several tries to convince Ken? Then why had Ken agreed so easily with her?

…She shouldn't focus on that. It probably meant nothing…

"So… you want to be on first names basis…?" Haru-san asked slowly.

"If you want," Futaba piped up all while smiling. "I mean, we're all friends here!"

"Friends…" she echoed softly. "That is… a new experience, I must confess." She looked down at her lap. "…Growing up, people were kind to me because they wished to please my father. Adults… people my age… it didn't matter. It felt that nobody was genuinely kind to me because they wanted to get to know me. They just wanted to be rewarded by my father…" She then looked up, a sweet smile on her lips. "But you treated me so kindly, when you didn't know my surname.
I… I would love to be on first name basis with all of you.”

"Welcome aboard, Haru!" Ryuji then blinked. "Uh, shit, should we stick to senpai still…? I mean, Makoto and Ken don't care but…”

Haru-san just laughed softly. "Just Haru is fine, Ryuji-kun." Then she looked over to Ren. "But Personas… Shadows… I must confess it does sound vaguely familiar."

"Oh, that's 'cause it's Jungian psychology!" Futaba interjected. "One of the older psychologies, but eh," she waved her hand, "it's wayyy better than Freudian psychology."

…Didn't Ken use that as an excuse to explain his knowledge of Shadows before?

"Of course you would look into that," Yusuke huffed, making Futaba stick her tongue out at him.

"And what we saw… was my father's Shadow?" Haru-san asked slowly. "He looked so strange."

"Essentially he's the representation of all of your father's negative repressed emotions," Ken explained. "Not all Shadow selves are representations of negative emotions, but most tend to be. I'm not all too experienced in it, but they tend to have golden eyes."

"But going against your father…” Makoto said slowly. "Are you prepared for that?"

Haru-san nodded firmly. "Yes. It's wrong for my father to continue the way he has been…”

"And it's not like it's the first father figure we've gone against…"

"Eh?" Haru-san looked over at Yusuke. "What do you mean, Yusuke-kun?"

"Well…” Yusuke heaved out a sigh. "…Madarame was my mentor. But he was more than that to me… He was the closest to a father that I've had." Then he looked at Haru-san. "…So I know how you feel. Maybe not completely, but…”

Haru-san just smiled, placing a hand over Yusuke's. "…Thank you, Yusuke-kun," she said sincerely. "That's… That's why you were concerned earlier… wasn't it?"

"I…” Yusuke cleared his throat. "…I didn't want to see someone suffer the same thing as me."

Madarame… Okumura… How could Yusuke and Haru-san be so selfless?

"But anywayssss…” Futaba suddenly said, interrupting her thoughts. "If Haru's gonna join the team, she's gonna need a codename!"

"Oh, right!" Anne nodded enthusiastically, before letting out a thoughtful hum. "Hmm… what should we go for?"

"Her mask is a domino mask…” Yusuke said slowly. "How about Domino?"

Haru-san's nose wrinkled. "I don't particularly like that. No offense, Yusuke-kun."

"Your costume is totally Three Musketeers," Anne piped up. "Maybe we should pick something from that?"

"Musketeer?" Ryuji suggested.

"That's a bit too obvious," Morgana grumbled.
"Yeah, it'd be like us calling you Pirate," Futaba agreed.

"Hey, I don't see you coming up with any ideas!" he retorted.

"Three Musketeers…” Haru-san repeated, only for her eyes to light up. "Oh, I know! I want to be called… Noir."

"Noir…” Ken echoed, his expression growing thoughtful. "That's French for black."

Haru-san nodded enthusiastically. "Yes! I thought it would be fitting, since the Phantom Thieves operate on the dark side of justice. C'est magnifique, non?"

Ken just raised an eyebrow at that. "Oh, you'd definitely get along with Mitsuru-san," he said dryly. "Better be careful, though. Mitsuru-san might like you enough to want to adopt you."

Haru-san gave a little gasp, before clapping her hands. "Adopted by Kirijo-san… Oh, that would be wonderful! Just imagine what I could learn from her!"

For some reason, Ken blanched at that. "Right…” he said unenthusiastically, "that would be great…"

Ryuji squinted at him. "Isn't she like a big sister to you?"

"She is!” Ken insisted. "It's just…” his voice then lowered to a mumble, "Mitsuru-san's kinda scary…"

"Haru was talking about chopping off Sugimura's dick just half an hour ago," Futaba deadpanned. "I don't think that she's sunshine and rainbows."

"Futaba!" Makoto couldn't help but gape at their youngest member.

She was just… so blunt about it.

"What?” Futaba shrugged, blinking innocently at her. "It's totally true, Makoto! Besides, you'd be surprised what pictures of dicks you can find on the internet…”

"We are not talking about this,” Makoto ground out, before Ken seconded her with: "We're never talking about this."

"Oh, speaking of which… Haru…” Yusuke looked over to her. "We need to consider what gun to get for you."

"Oh, that's true…” A considering look settled in her eyes. "Oh! I've always thought it'd be fun to try out using a grenade launcher!"

"A… grenade launcher…?” Ryuji gulped. "Is she for real?"

"Um… She's enthusiastic, at least?” Anne offered.

…Enthusiastic was one word to describe this. Not exactly the word she'd use, though…

Haru-san just gave a weak giggle. "Too much?"

"No, it'll be fine,” Ren said. "I mean, come on, look at she wielded that axe. I'll stop by the airsoft shop tomorrow and pick something up."
Haru-san just clapped lightly. "Thank you, Ren-kun! I can reimburse you the money too…"

"No, no, it's fine." Ren shook his head. "We've got funding for this."

"Thank god we can demand money from Shadows," Anne mumbled. "We'd be totally broke if we had to buy this on our own."

"Though isn't it kinda weird that they have money?" Futaba piped up. "I mean, they're Shadows! Just figments of the mind! Why would they have money?!"

"Just… 'cause?" Ryuji offered.

Futaba just stared at him, unimpressed. "That's a lame theory, Ryuji."

"Hm, for once, I must concur with Futaba," Yusuke intoned.

"HEY!"

What a crazy day… But then again, he had a surplus of those ever since he had come to Tokyo.

The girls except for Futaba had left together, since Makoto and Anne lived in Shibuya and they wanted to walk Haru home. And as usual, Ryuji and Yusuke left together. Ren was grateful that Ryuji looked after Yusuke like that, even if it was just a small thing like paying for his train ticket and seeing him off to the dorms.

But… Morgana was awfully quiet.

He was… worried. Ever since Futaba had joined them—no, even before that—Morgana had been acting weird. Really weird. But he had been oddly closemouthed about what he was thinking…

"Hey, hey, Ren, are you ready to go?" Futaba chirped, before jumping onto his back and wrapping her arms around his neck. "Sojiro's probably got curry waiting for us!"

"Does Sakura-san even know to make anything else than curry?" Ken asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Hmm…" Futaba dropped back to the ground. She then tilted her head, humming as she thought. "Pretty sure he does, but I'm not too sure."

Her blithe answer just made Ken facepalm, making Ren laugh. God, sometimes Ken just made it wayyy too easy. "Do me a favor… and don't tell Shinjiro-san this," he groaned.

Futaba just shrugged. "Hey, you were the one who asked."

"…I have a question for you." Morgana suddenly walked up to Ken. "There's something about you that's been bothering me…" Ken just raised an eyebrow, as to say go on. "…Why do you know about Shadow selves? You never explained that."

Ken just blinked at that. "Well… that was due to another incident…" he said slowly.

"Oh, right, you mentioned that before," Ren said. "It's a 'long story', as you put it."

Ken huffed out a laugh, before rolling his eyes at Ren. "It really is, okay? But… it happened about four years ago, and in Inaba."

"Inaba?!" Futaba repeated, her eyes wide with shock. "Wasn't that where that creepy murder case
happened? The guy who murdered those two women just because he was bored?"

"The Adachi case, the Hanged Man case, call it what you like." Ken waved his hand. "But that case… it wasn't an ordinary case."

"It was… related to Shadows?" Ren asked.

Ken nodded. "Honestly, I don't know the whole story, but the Shadow nest was called the Midnight Channel. You could enter it… through the TV."

"…What?" Morgana frowned up at Ken. "You can't seriously expect us to believe that."

Ken just raised an eyebrow. "We use a cellphone app to enter the Metaverse."

Futaba snickered. "He's got you there, Mona," she teased, making Morgana grumble.

"So… you would encounter Shadow selves there too?" Ren asked.

Ken nodded. "Pretty much. The Persona-users who solved the case had to face their Shadows in order to gain their Personas. And a few months after solving the case, the Midnight Channel started back up and that incident… was how we had met them."

"…I see." Morgana then heaved out a sigh, before lowering him to lay on the table. "You really would…" he mumbled, the rest of his words too quiet for them to make out.

"I would really what?" Ken asked.

Morgana then scowled, looking up at Ken. "You're just as good of a healer as me, you've got the past experience… and Futaba's got mission control covered! Not to mention all of the things she can do with her hacking! What do you need me for?!"

"Whoa, whoa, what are you talking about, Morgana?!" Ren quickly cut in. "Is this why you've been so… quiet lately?"

Morgana glared down at the floor. "You don't need me," he repeated. "I don't belong here… I'm stuck in the form of a cat. The only thing special about me is that I can turn into a bus. I'm just… dead weight. I'm useless."

"Morgana, that's not true!" Futaba protested. "I… I..." She looked helplessly at both Ren and Ken. "I'm sorry if I said something dumb about you not being human," she said quietly, all while fidgeting. "I just run my mouth and it… it was stupid of me…"

"Ha…" Morgana looked to the side. "You would never understand how I feel," he muttered. "I just… don't belong here anymore…"

"Oh really?" Ken said, crossing his arms over his chest. "I guess I would never understand what it feels like to be at a disadvantage being smaller and physically weaker. Or feeling that I would never catch up to my teammates. Or feeling like the weak link, because someone has the same healing abilities as me."

Morgana gaped at Ken. "I…"

Ken huffed, before running a hand through his hair. "Look, Morgana, our situations may not be exactly the same, but I remember feeling like the weak link. I felt that I had to work twice as hard just to keep up. But you're a Phantom Thief, just like the rest of us."
"Yeah, the Phantom Thieves wouldn't even exist if we hadn't met you," Ren interjected. "You were the one to push us into stealing Kamoshida's Treasure. You're my advisor in so many things, Morgana. You're one of my first friends here... You will always have a place next to me, I promise." He then smirked. "Even though you drag me to bed at ridiculously early times." He touched Morgana's head lightly. "I don't keep you around because you advise me or coach me through making lockpicks and other tools. You're my friend, Morgana."

Morgana stared at him, blinking several times. Then he quickly turned away. When Ren rounded around the table to look at Morgana right in the eyes, he turned around again. And again...

Then Futaba snapped a photo. "Caught it~" she said in a sing-song voice. "You don't have to be all shy, Mona!" But then Morgana launched himself at her, so Futaba chucked her phone at Ken, who barely caught it in time.

"A little warning, next time?" he asked dryly.

"Ken, give it here. Pleasease?!" Morgana begged.

"Well, since you asked so nicely—ack!" Futaba pounced on Ken's back, making him stumble forward, snatching her phone back.

"Ren, make her give it back!" Morgana whined at him.

"It was never yours to begin with, Mona!" Futaba shot back.

"Okay, okay, enough," Ken groaned. "Futaba, you can keep the picture, but you aren't to show it to anyone else."

"Where's the fun in that?" Futaba grumbled, with a pout.

"Or you could just delete it and make Morgana happy," Ren offered.

"Ugh, fiiiiine." Futaba huffed. "I'll take Ken's option..."

Ren just laughed, before picking up the still grumbling (more like pouting) Morgana. Morgana then jumped into Ren's bag and he picked it up. He then met Ken's gaze. "Is it safe to say that the Persona-users in Inaba have a Wild Card too?" he asked.

"They do," Ken said. "Why do you want to know?"

Ren just shrugged. "I just... thought my power was unique, and it turns out I have senpai," he said. "Can't blame me for being a little curious, y'know?"

Ken just raised an eyebrow at that, a thoughtful look in his eyes now. "I see. And I suppose you would be open to possibly speaking to them?"

"I mean... it'd be cool if you could swing it." Ren shrugged. "It's not a huge deal if you can't, though."

Ken just laughed. "I'll see what I can do."

Then Ren and Futaba both said their goodbyes and headed back to Yongen-jaya. But Morgana didn't speak until they had seen Futaba to the house.

"...Hey, Ren?" Morgana's voice was small. "I just wanted to let you know... you're my best friend. And... thanks for reminding me about that."
Ren just laughed, looking down at his friend. "I mean it, Morgana. I would be… I don't even know where I'd be, if you hadn't come and convinced us to target Kamoshida."

Morgana puffed up at that. "Hehe, I'm kinda the founder of the Phantom Thieves, aren't I? We've got our work cut out for us… We need to make sure that Okumura goes down."

When Morgana put it that way… it sounded so easy.

But… it never was.

Chapter End Notes

Haru's awakened and joined the team! Had fun with her awakening in this chapter. Even though she never becomes Beauty Thief in this, I had to make a little reference to it.

But I firmly believe that Morgana's issues could've been aired out with a good conversation. I see no need for Morgana to go all AWOL like in the game, especially since it hurt Haru's intro arc. It felt more about Morgana than Haru.

And the IT characters won't be so prevalent in this story, but I have plans to work in some P4 appearances.

I also wanted to thank you guys for giving this story over 300 kudos! It still blows my mind to see the love and support this story receives.
Lasting Impressions

Chapter Summary

Sae attempts to speak with Shinjiro about Apathy Syndrome, as she continues her investigation. Not too long after, Haru spends some time with Makoto and Ken, and discovers that she has more in common with Makoto than she realizes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday, September 17th, 2016

"Are they seriously going after Okumura? It kinda feels pointless to me."

Shinjiro rolled his eyes. “Aki, they’ve got no intel,” he said dryly. “The places are basically password locked. Besides, you weren’t there to hear the bullshit Sugimura was spouting.”

Aki was silent for several moments, to the point where Shinjiro thought that the connection had cut off, before he spoke again. “Define how bad.”

Shinjiro just snorted. “Let’s just say if Mitsuru was there, she would’ve executed him right there on the spot.”

Though he wouldn’t lie. He would pay good money to see that. Only Minako and Aigis had been there when Mitsuru kicked Sugimura to the curb and told him to scram. He wouldn’t be surprised that Sugimura had put Mitsuru’s name on the site out of spite.

“She nearly did when Sugimura tried to ‘court’ her a few years back.”

Shinjiro glanced around the bar to make sure there weren’t any eavesdroppers. It was a slow night. Hardly any customers, though Amamiya had shown up a little over an hour ago to speak with Ohya for some reason. He had shown up several times since the first time back in June to talk to Ohya. One time he cornered Ohya about that, but Ohya just shrugged and claimed he wasn’t doing anything illegal. He really didn’t know what they were up to, but Ohya would always excitedly scribble in that notepad of hers after Amamiya left the bar. But then again Minato and Minako always seemed to run off somewhere, unless they decided they should train at Tartarus.

“But anyways… Shido’s been building his powerbase, and Okumura’s old man’s Shadow all but confirmed that he’s with Shido,” Shinjiro said. “They’re hoping to poke him for some info so they know where to go to target Shido.”

Aki just let out a thoughtful hum. “Makes sense. Mitsuru’s probably going to get antsy about all of this though…”

Shinjiro rolled his eyes, even though Aki couldn’t see it. “Yeah, well, tell her that they can’t really help it. Probably would help if you told her about Okumura being engaged to Sugimura.”

“…Please tell me you didn’t beat him up.”
Shinjiro just scoffed. “Look, I know there’s a difference between fighting you and a spoiled brat. Just scared him a little.”

“Yeah, that’s really assuring.” Aki snorted out a laugh. “Your definition of scaring someone a little is a bit skewed, Shinji.”

“Aragaki, break’s almost over!” Lala warned him, before Shinjiro could think of a retort.

“I gotta go, Aki,” Shinjiro said. “Talk to you later.”

He hung up after Aki said his own goodbye, slipping his phone back into his pocket. His conversation with Aki had distracted him so much that he didn’t notice the new wave of customers coming in.

Not soon after Shinjiro returned back to work, Amamiya had gotten up with Ohya. They both walked to the door, and Amamiya walked out. Shinjiro wished he could follow Amamiya out, just to make sure that he got on the train safely. Then Ohya plopped onto one of the bar stools, demanding yet another drink, grabbing Shinjiro’s attention.

Several minutes passed, and the customers slowly began to trickle out of the bar. But that was then the door opened, revealing Niijima’s older sister. She stepped inside and pointedly seated herself right in front of where Shinjiro was standing.

“Hello, Aragaki,” she greeted, her voice cool.

“Niijima,” Shinjiro returned, his voice curt. “What can I get for you? This doesn’t look like a place you’d go to.”

Niijima leaned forward, her voice dropping to barely a whisper. “Some information would be nice.”

Shinjiro couldn’t help but narrow his eyes, before forcing himself to look as neutral as possible. So that was her game, was it? Ken had talked a little about how Niijima’s older sister was determined to get some more info on the mental shut downs. She had apparently put him down as a potential lead. How Niijima got that idea in her head… he had no clue.

“Sorry, but we’re fresh out of that. Can I start you off with wine? You don’t look like the type to enjoy beer,” Shinjiro said blandly. Niijima’s expression turned baffled, so he continued. “Or maybe sake? Or would you prefer a mixed drink? How ‘bout a margarita?”

Niijima blinked at him several times, before irritation flashed in her eyes. “What are you doing?” she ground out, leaning in close to him.

“Stop playing games,” she retorted, glowering at him.

“What games?” Shinjiro asked, raising an eyebrow. He had to fight back another smirk as Niijima’s eye started to twitch. “I’m just doing my job.” He then looked at her. “Are you sure you don’t want to order something? You look like you need to unwind a little.”

“I DON’T NEED TO UNWIND!” Her outburst drew just about everyone’s attention. Well, everyone who wasn’t completely wasted.
Lala raised an eyebrow, but Shinjiro quickly shook his head. Lala hesitated for a moment, but a customer waved her over. After shooting him a look, she went to go help the other customer.

Niijima coughed, fidgeting until everyone settled down. But she stared at Shinjiro intently. Her hands clenched into fists until her knuckles turned white. “Amada-kun may be too young to remember about Apathy Syndrome, but you were eighteen at the height of the activity,” she said lowly. “You have to know something.”

Shinjiro just scowled at her. “How ‘bout you leave Ken out of this?” he snapped. “What the hell are you doing, asking him ‘bout this crap?”

He knew that Niijima had met Ken before. Otherwise she wouldn’t have recognized him at the train station. But what exactly had she tried to pry out of Ken? He made a note to ask Ken about this tomorrow.

“So you do know something.” She smiled victoriously.

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t,” Shinjiro said, shrugging. “You’re not gonna play that shitty game you played with Sakura with me.”

“How do you…?” Niijima scowled, shaking her head. She then folded her arms over her chest. “I was just doing what I had to do. As I am now. Just tell me what you know about Apathy Syndrome. From what little I’ve managed to dig up… it could be a key to the mental shutdowns.”

“I ain’t telling you shit, Niijima, and you can’t fucking make me,” Shinjiro bit out, narrowing his eyes at her. There was something in Niijima’s eyes that… unnerved him. There was a wildness, an intensity to them, that he didn’t like. Not one bit. “And ‘sides, a testimony from just a guy off the streets…” Shinjiro stared at her coolly. “That probably won’t fly in court.”

Niijima scowled. “But-“

“If you’re not gonna order a drink…” He nodded in the direction of the exit. “There’s the door.”

Niijima exhaled deeply, but her expression was almost murderous. Yeah, like he hasn’t dealt with that before. Niijima may have intimidated someone else, but not him. “This isn’t over, Aragaki.”

Yeah… it was far from over. Shinjiro couldn’t help but scowl a little, watching her leave. And he thought that Mitsuru was a bratty princess when they had first met.

He was glad that Ken had warned him about this, after Sakura had deciphered the info that they had taken from Niijima’s laptop. He wasn’t a huge fan of the method, but the warning had prepared him a little.

…Though maybe he shouldn’t antagonize Niijima so much, with how Ken was behaving around her little sister…

“Someone you know, Aragaki?” Lala finally asked.

“…No,” Shinjiro said shortly, looking away. “It’s nothing.”

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**Monday, September 19th, 2016**

“I’m glad that they let the third-years off the hook for booths,” Ken grumbled, as he thumbed
through a file. “Things are crazy enough already… I really don’t envy the juniors.”

“Well, it’s not like we’re not busy ourselves,” Makoto sighed, leafing through her own file. There was so much preparing to do for the school festival, even though it was over a month away. “We’ll have to run a vote about our guest speaker soon…”

“Guess it’s a good thing that Ren’s not jumping into things right away,” Ken muttered, before dragging his free hand through his hair. His bangs fell into his eyes, due to his mussing up his hair, and Makoto had to fight back the urge to brush it out of his eyes.

Makoto shook her head. She had to get her head on straight. She was acting nothing better than the girls who liked Ken just because they thought he was cute.

She kinda wished that Haru-san hadn’t pushed her to realize it. Then she wouldn’t be pining over a friend who only saw her just that… a friend.

Makoto quickly turned her attention to the file in her hands, so to distract herself from her thoughts. The first-years had turned in what attractions they wanted to do for the school festival. Most of them were fairly common options but…

“…Group date café?” Makoto rubbed her eyes, but it didn’t change. She raised an eyebrow at that. “…That’s an odd one, honestly.”

“I’ve heard of that before,” Ken said, before he shrugged. “Not something I’d particularly want to partake in but… it’s not exactly new.”

“O-Oh, I see…”

She had that double date with Eiko, but she… couldn’t help but feel incredibly awkward during all of that. Though she supposed it hadn’t really helped that she had asked Ren to help her, when Ren had feelings for Anne…

“Though the guest speaker…” Ken frowned. “Just what are we supposed to get?”

“Oh, most people want an idol or some other celebrity,” Makoto explained, feeling relieved that Ken had changed the subject. “Last year, Risette had won the poll, but we didn’t get to book her. She was far too busy.”

Though she suspected that people had voted her last year because of how Risette had seemed to transform once she had turned twenty. She was always a pretty girl (though Makoto never paid much attention to pop idols), but she had blossomed into a gorgeous woman once she hit twenty. There was just… a certain magnetism to her.

“That’s no surprise,” Ken mused. “Though that makes the whole guest speaker thing rather pointless to me.”

Makoto sighed. “Well, it’s kinda… a tradition.”

Though she also remembered the other tradition Shujin had… She would avoid that at all costs, even though it was highly unlikely that she would be chosen for the Shujin Sharing Special. She’d probably die of embarrassment, right there on the spot if the MC had asked her something if she liked anyone.

“Guess you can’t do anything about that, then.” Ken shrugged. “We’re about done today, right?”
Makoto nodded. “Just about. I need to drop off some paperwork at the office, though…”

They straightened up the student council room, before Ken accompanied her to the administration office to drop off the paperwork. It was still… chaos. The vice principal was acting as principal, and it seemed they wouldn’t hire a new one until the next school year.

Though that wasn’t a surprise. It was really only a week ago since Principal Kobayakawa had died… Even though it had felt a lot longer…

“I could really use a pick-me-up,” Ken muttered, before he stifled a yawn. “I need to catch up on some studying… Been kinda neglecting that.”

“Why don’t we stop by the diner on Central Street?” Makoto suggested. “For some coffee. Or we could stop by LeBlanc—” A sudden movement by the stairs caught her eye and she glanced over to see Haru-san was descending the stairs.

“Oh, Makoto-chan, Ken-kun!” Haru-san greeted, hastening over to their side. She then tilted her head slightly. “Student council work?”

Makoto nodded with a smile. “Yes, that’s right. I assume that you’re tending to the garden?”

Haru-san just nodded enthusiastically, her curls bouncing a bit, before her eyes began to sparkle. “The vegetables are looking wonderful! I should be able to harvest some soon.” But then she tilted her head. “Are you heading back right now?” she asked hesitantly, before she clasped her hands before her back. “If not… I was wondering if you would like to get some coffee.” She then smiled shyly. “I’d like to get you know better…”

“We were just talking about that,” Ken noted, before turning back to Makoto. “What do you say? I’m fine with that, if you are.”

Makoto just smiled again. “I’d love to.”

“Oh, wonderful!” Haru-san’s smile turned bright. “Do you have any recommendations then?”

“Did you know that Ren’s guardian runs a café?” Makoto asked. “Ren actually… lives in the attic.”

Haru-san’s eyes went as wide as saucers. “H-He is?!” She then looked down. “I knew about his probation but… I thought he would be living in his probation officer’s house…”

“There’s a reason why Ren has joked about living with me and Shinjiro-san before,” Ken said dryly.

“To be fair, Shinjiro-san is a phenomenal chef,” Makoto said lightly. “I’m sure Ren has more than one reason.”

Ken just snorted. “You think I don’t know that? But I’m guessing we’re going with LeBlanc?”

“What do you think, Haru-san?” Makoto prompted.

Haru-san just nodded enthusiastically. “I’d love to try it! Let’s go!”

Since it was later in the afternoon, the train leaving Aoyama-Itchome was a little less crowded than usual. Makoto was glad that Yongen-jaya wasn’t too far away.

“Oh…” Haru-san spun around slowly, taking in the small neighborhood. “How quaint.”
“Where do you live, then?” Ken raised an eyebrow.

“Ah… Aoyama-Itchome, actually,” Haru-san admitted. “I will admit it’s convenient when we have school.”

That had surprised her when she had taken Haru-san back to her home. But it did make sense. Aoyama-Itchome's real estate were geared towards the wealthy.

Makoto just nudged Ken in the side. “I don’t think you can complain about that, Ken. You live in a penthouse, of all things.”

Ken just rolled his eyes at her, before letting out a huff. “You know perfectly well that place is on loan from Mitsuru-san. We have a perfectly normal apartment back on Port Island, thank you.”

“There’s no need to argue,” Haru-san was quick to interject, holding up placating hands. “Let’s get going.”

They led Haru-san to LeBlanc, and the bell chimed cheerfully when Ken pushed open the door, allowing both her and Haru-san to step in first.

Makoto inhaled the scent of coffee. There was really something comforting about LeBlanc.

Sojiro just looked up when they entered. He was wiping a glass clean. “Oh, hey, it’s been a while,” he greeted.

“Hello, Boss,” Makoto greeted, and a beat later, Ken said, “Hello, Sakura-san.”

He just chuckled, his eyes now on Haru-san. “It seems that you’re constantly adding to your group of friends.” He then smiled at her. “Hello. I’m Sojiro Sakura, but you can call me Boss.”

Haru-san quickly bowed. “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance, Boss,” she said. “I’m Haru Okumura.”

Sojiro raised an eyebrow on that, but didn’t further comment on that. Honestly, Makoto thought that was what Haru-san preferred. He just nodded towards one of the booths. “Why don’t you take a seat?” he invited. “What can I get you? Coffee? Curry? Or both?”

“Just coffee for me,” Ken requested. “It’s getting close to dinner, after all.”

“Would you like to share a curry?” Haru-san inquired, turning to Makoto. “I’d love to try it, but I’m afraid that’s simply too much for me to eat on my own…”

Well… it’s not like Sae will be home to eat dinner with. Makoto had to fight back a sigh at the thought, before she forced herself to smile. “I’d love to.”

“Wonderful!” She beamed at Makoto for a moment, before turning back to Sojiro. “I’d love some coffee too, though. The house blend, please?”

“Coffee for me too,” Makoto added, before sitting down at the booth.

Haru-san sat next to her while Ken sat opposite of them.

“So this is really where Ren-kun lives?” Haru-san asked, looking around. She then smiled fondly. “It… It reminds me of my grandfather’s old café. It has the same… homey feel.”

Makoto let out an affirmative hum. “Though it’s been a while since we’ve visited LeBlanc as a
“group,” she mused, glancing over at Ken. “It had to be…”

“It hasn’t been *that* long ago,” Ken said. “It was back when Futaba woke up.”

“Woke up?” Haru-san echoed, a puzzled frown on her face. “What do you mean?”

“Futaba was our last target, actually,” Makoto said. “Her cognition was distorted because of… multiple reasons. She was a shut-in, so she requested us to steal her heart. In return, she would deal with Medjed.”

Haru-san’s eyes went as wide as saucers and her mouth formed a little o. “She’s so young…” she breathed out, though she took care to keep her voice low. “She really took down Medjed? All by herself?”

Ken opened his mouth to say something but then Sojiro came by, carrying a tray with their cups of coffee and containers of cream and sugar balanced on top.

“Enjoy,” he said, passing out the cups and setting down the sugar and cream on top of the table. “I’ll be done with the curry soon.”

Ken didn’t even touch the cream and sugar, instead just drinking it straight. Haru-san just tilted her head at that. “No cream or sugar?” she asked. “Honestly, I can’t imagine doing that…”

Ken just lowered his cup slightly, his lips suddenly forming a wry smile. “I’ve had enough milk to last me a lifetime.”

Makoto raised an eyebrow at that. “Just what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, well…” Ken flushed for a moment, his smile turning sheepish as he lowered the cup to the table. “I… I was short in elementary school.” His cheeks then suddenly flushed. “And you know what they say about calcium…”

“Oh, that’s just adorable, Ken-kun!” Haru-san cooed, pressing a hand to her cheek before letting out a giggle. “You’re adorable, Ken-kun.”

Ken just scowled at that, a hint of a pout on his lips. “Why do girls always say that?” he grumbled.

“Why do guys find it an insult when people find them cute?” Makoto asked back. “It is what it is. Haru-san is just observing what she sees.”

Ken just narrowed his eyes at her. “And you agree with her?”

“Well…!” Makoto felt a flush spread across her face, before she began to fiddle with a lock of her hair. “Um… maybe?” she said weakly.

…Smooth, Makoto. *Ugh.* how did Ren make flirting look *so* easy? He didn’t even bat an eye when he complimented Anne. In fact, he never failed to couple his flirting with a charming smile. Meanwhile, she was turned into a blushing *mess*.

…Not that she should be *trying* to flirt with Ken. *Ugh.* Why did it have to be so hard to like a friend? How did *anyone* handle having a crush on a good friend…?

Ken froze for a moment, pink beginning to creep on his cheeks again.

*Ugh.* Why did she have to say something weird like that?! Of course he would be embarrassed! If it wouldn’t embarrass her even more, Makoto would have slammed her head against the table. Haru-
san could have said it, with her being so feminine and soft (despite her wielding an axe in the Metaverse), but just came out strange when she said it.

Haru-san pointedly cleared her throat. “Well, it’s two against one, Ken-kun,” she teased lightly. “I’m afraid you’ve lost this round.”

Ken just grumbled, before folding his arms over his chest and looked away. Then he looked past their booth. “Curry’s coming.”

“Oh, wonderful!” Haru-san’s eyes gleamed as Sojiro placed the platter heaped with fluffy rice, with thick curry generously ladled on top, in front of them. “I must confess, I do prefer simple food over fancy food.”

Sojiro just laughed, slipping a hand in his pocket. “Be prepared for this curry to knock off your socks, then. It’s my best dish, after all.”

“I’m sure it’ll be delicious, Boss.” But after Sojiro left, Haru-san’s expression grew puzzled. “But… why would he want to knock off my socks? They’re not anything special…”

…Well, she supposed her confusion did make sense… Haru-san was a bit sheltered after all.

“It’s not quite that…” Ken said. “He’s just trying to say that his curry will really wow you.”

“Ohhh!” Haru-san’s eyes lit up with understanding, before she smiled. “Well, let’s find out then, shall we?”

She picked up her fork and took a dainty bite. She had barely started to chew when her eyes began to sparkle.

After she swallowed, she exclaimed, “This is simply delicious!” She then let out a wistful sigh, pressing her free hand against her cheek. “I’ve always wanted to learn how to cook such meals… There’s just something about a homecooked meal that makes it more special to me than five star restaurant food.”

She could understand Haru-san’s mindset. Makoto looked forward to the rare occasions when Sae came home early enough for them to sit down and eat dinner together.

Ken just laughed, before taking another sip of his coffee. “You would probably get along well with Shinjiro-san,” he mused. “We rarely go out to restaurants for dinner. And usually when we do… he claims that he can make it better.”

Haru-san just giggled. “Well, in that case, maybe he should open a restaurant then.”

Ken suddenly faltered at that, staring down at the table. “…Yeah, he should,” he said, his voice barely audible.

“Ken…?” Makoto asked, setting down her fork and reaching over to touch the hand resting on top of the table.

Ken just smiled faintly, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “It’s nothing, Makoto. Nothing important, at least…”

“Ken-kun…” Ken stiffened at Haru-san’s voice. “You’re lying,” she said flatly. “Won’t you tell us what’s going on?”
Ken just heaved out a sigh, before rubbing his face. When his hand lowered, his expression was weary. “Shinjiro-san does want to open his own restaurant back on Port Island. The problem is… me.”

“You?” Haru-san frowned. “You’re… not making sense, Ken-kun.”

Ken sighed again. “I’m another mouth to feed. Shinjiro-san has my schooling to think about too. I do what I can to ease the finances but…” He shrugged helplessly. “I even gave Shinjiro-san my mother’s old engagement ring to give to Fuuka-san when he proposes but… it’s not much.”

Watching Ken’s face was… upsetting. He really thought that he was a burden on Shinjiro-san…

“…Stop it,” Makoto said lowly.

“Huh?”

“You’re talking like you’re some kind of… leech,” Makoto said. “You’re not, okay?! You gave him something that belonged to your mother. And from what you’ve talked about her, that is not something you would give away lightly. And… And Shinjiro-san cares about you. A lot. There’s simply no way that he would view you as a burden.”

Haru-san just smiled. “Makoto-chan is right,” she agreed. “Besides, he chose to take you in, correct? I’ll admit that I don’t know Shinjiro-san all too well… but he seems like a kind man. He probably cares about you a lot.” She then sighed. “…You shouldn’t take that lightly.”

Ken looked shocked, before closing his eyes for a moment. “You’re… You’re right. I’m sorry…”


“Oh, she has,” Ken said. “But Shinjiro-san’s a bit… weird about accepting Mitsuru-san’s help. He views it as charity. He grumbled enough about the penthouse.”

She… hadn’t expected Shinjiro-san to have a bit of a prideful streak. But then again, what did she know about Shinjiro-san? Not all that much, honestly…

“That’s rather silly if you ask me,” Haru-san said with a frown.

Ken just shrugged. “Well, maybe you should do something about it then,” he said dryly. “You’re similar to Fuuka-san in a couple ways. Maybe he’d listen to you.”

“Oh!” Haru-san’s eyes lit up. “Perhaps I can after we deal with Father—“

“I-Haru-san, Ken was joking,” Makoto said, putting a hand on her arm. And then she turned to Ken, shooting him an exasperated look. “You shouldn’t use sarcasm on someone who’ll take it at face value.”

Before Ken could even open his mouth, the door suddenly opened. Sojiro straightened up.

“Welcome to—”

Sae stepped inside.

Sojiro just scowled. “…Hello,” he said flatly.

Makoto bit the corner of her mouth. She didn’t blame Sojiro for being a bit… cold with Sae. But then again… she had done something similar to everyone… hadn’t she?
She… She didn’t even know if Sae was sorry about that…

“Makoto-chan?” Haru whispered, and Makoto turned to see confusion swimming in her light brown eyes. “What’s the matter?”

“It’s… It’s complicated,” Makoto mumbled out.

Sae just sighed, running a hand through her hair. “Listen, Sakura-san, I was just trying to do what I thought was right at the time… Are you really going to turn away a customer? Your coffee is one of the finest in Tokyo, after all.”

Makoto fought the urge to sigh. She was still justifying her actions… Of course…

She then felt fingers brush against her hand. She looked to see Ken giving her an encouraging smile. Just seeing it made her heart flutter. She couldn’t help but smile back.

Sojiro clicked his tongue loudly. “Fine,” he said in a clipped voice. “Just don’t harass the other customers.”

Sae’s eyes then flicked to where they were sitting out. “Makoto…” she said slowly. “I didn’t know you liked this café so much.”

Ken then withdrew his hand, looking at Sae calmly. “A friend of ours works here sometimes,” he said, somehow keeping his expression rather blank. “And we spend time with him here. And the coffee is excellent. Is that really a surprise?”

“Ohmm, I suppose.” But Sae seemed to study him closely. “Amada-kun, your guardian is awfully stubborn,” she said flatly.

…Oh no. Makoto could feel a pit forming in her stomach. So Futaba’s analysis of the files was right. She was looking into Apathy Syndrome… and she thought Shinjiro-san was some intel.

And… Sae had tried to blackmail Sojiro before. Who’s to say that she wouldn’t try it… again?

“Sis… please tell me you didn’t…”

“He was ridiculously close mouthed,” Sae huffed, brushing her hair out of her face. “And where he worked… I didn’t want to cause a scene.” Then her eyes moved to Haru-san. “…And who might you be?”

“H-Hello…” Haru-san said nervously. “I-I’m Haru Okumura…”

Sae’s expression turned… intrigued. “Okumura, you say…?”

“I’m warning you,” Sojiro said sharply, glaring at Sae. “Do not harass my customers.”

“Ah…” Haru-san glanced at the clock. “It’s starting to get late. Maybe we should head home…”

Sojiro nodded firmly. “Let me get you a to-go box for the curry, then.”

It was a relief to leave the café. Seeing Sae’s behavior was just… saddening. She didn’t want to think that their differences had created a too big chasm for them to close, but… sometimes she couldn’t help but think it was too late already.

“I… I can’t believe that’s your sister.”
“That’s nothing new,” Makoto murmured. “Sis is just… a completely different person from before…”

Haru-san’s expression softened. “I’m sorry,” she said gently. “I… I know how that feels.”

Makoto just smiled weakly. “…I know.”

She was being selfish. Sae’s behavior was wrong, but at least Sae didn’t demand something that was so wrong. Why should she be complaining about Sae when Haru had her father trying to sell her body to Sugimura?

“It seems that she’s more determined to find something about the mental shutdowns case,” Ken remarked, folding his arms over his chest. “Than before. Though sad to say, it’s more common than it should be with people enforcing the law.”

Makoto just sighed. “I’m… I’m sorry that you had to see that.”

“Oh, Mako-chan, don’t apologize!” Haru-san rested a hand on her shoulder, somehow still smiling. “It’s not like you haven’t witnessed some of the darkest parts of my father…”

“That’s true—” Makoto blinked. “…Mako-chan?”

“Ah, well…” Haru-san clasped her hands behind her back, suddenly sheepish. “It just… slipped out? I didn’t realize that we had more in common than I realized and you are the same age as me…” She then raised her hands. “I understand if you don’t like it. I’ll stop if you want me to!”

“No, no… it’s fine.” Makoto then smiled. “I’ve never had someone call me that before,” she admitted. “It’s… nice.”

Haru-san—no, Haru—beamed at her. “I’m glad!” she exclaimed. “I’ve said this before, but… I’m so glad that I’ve found you all,” she confessed. “I’ve never had friends who truly cared…”

“You’re not the only one, Haru,” Ken said. “And… we’ll take on your father soon. I promise.”

“Oh, wonderful!” Haru beamed at him as well. “I’ve been hoping that was the case. I could use some stress relief after all!”

…Okay, she could understand the stress relief, but Haru really did sound too happy about fighting Shadows…

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**Wednesday, September 21st, 2016**

“Your total’s three hundred twenty thousand yen today, kid.”

Ren fought back a groan, before pulling out his wallet to dig out the needed money. Even after all of the loot they had found in Futaba’s Palace and then Mementos, today’s purchase cost an arm and leg. Anne had a good point when she said that it was a good thing that Shadows somehow carried money on them. Not to mention that he could demand more by negotiating with Shadows.

Sometimes he wondered if the other Persona-user team leaders had this problem…

He pulled out several bills, before laying them on the table. Iwai just raised an eyebrow, before scooping up the pile to count them.
After he finished counting, he just looked back at Ren, before letting out a chuckle. “You know, I really gotta wonder where you get this kinda cash.”

Ren just shrugged. “You’ve got your secrets... I’ve got mine.”

What else could he say?

Iwai laughed at that. “You got me there, kid,” he acknowledged with a smirk. “But hey, you free tonight? I’ve got some work for ya if you can swing it.”

“I’ll think about it, Iwai,” Ren answered, before Iwai turned and bagged Ren’s purchases.

Iwai just shrugged. “No pressure if you can’t,” he said, before handing them over. “Though I’ve gotta wonder, why do you need an axe all of the sudden? Got some firewood to chop?”

“Something like that,” Ren said, giving a shrug of his own. He wasn’t gonna question where Haru had learned to swing that axe of hers, but he wasn’t gonna complain as long as she used them against the Shadows and not him. He raised his hand in farewell. “Later, Iwai. Thanks again.”

Iwai just nodded at him. “See ya, kid.”

“So we’ve got weapons covered,” Morgana piped up as Ren headed for the train station. “Should we buy some medicine from Takemi then?”

“I dunno, Morgana,” Ren answered out of the corner of his mouth, as he usually did. “The weapon purchases were steep enough... and Futaba’s summarized Haru’s abilities for me. She knows a spell that can cure any ailment, apparently. So we can strike that off the list... I think we can just stick to buying the medicine for injuries, so you and Ken don’t get so wiped out healing us.”

Morgana tsked. “That’s risky, Ren,” he scolded.

“Tell that to my wallet,” Ren sighed, shaking his head.

He would have to visit the Velvet Room sometime before they entered the Palace again. See what kind of Personas he could fuse... And that was pretty killer on his wallet too...

“...Fair enough,” Morgana grumbled. “What do you want to do then?”

“Not too sure,” Ren admitted. “We’ve gotta hang tight for a couple more days... I’m gonna whip up some more coffee and curry for the couple next nights, so we can have more energy to keep going in the Palace.”

He could ask Kawakami to come over and make coffee for him while he did something else, but her rates were also killer.

Morgana nodded in approval. “Yeah, that’s a good idea.”

“So maybe I’ll swing by LeBlanc first to drop off everything because this is so damn heavy...”

Ryuji and Haru’s weapons were hands down the heaviest weapons, but Ken’s was definitely the most cumbersome with how long spears were. He really questioned how Ken could wield a spear back when he was a kid—wouldn’t he be like half the size of the spear?

“Need a hand, then?”

As if his thoughts had summoned him, Ken had appeared out of nowhere. (Well, not really. He was
pretty close to the train station, after all.)

“Uh, yeah, that would be great—“ Ren’s stomach rumbling loudly suddenly cut him off.

Ken sighed. “Please tell me that you ate something more than bread today,” he deadpanned.

“I had curry for breakfast?” Ren offered. When Ken stared at him, unamused, Ren just held up his hands as the best as he could with the bag he carried. “In my defense, it’s not like I can borrow LeBlanc’s stove to cook anything!”

“Come on, we’re going back to my place,” Ken droned, grabbing one of the bags from Ren.

“Seriously, you’ve got to take care of yourself, Ren…”

“Get Shinjiro-san to certify himself as a probation officer and I can just live with you guys,” Ren joked, before following him.

Ken turned to roll his eyes at Ren, before huffing out a laugh. “Uh huh. Sure, if you’re willing to put up with his constant nagging.”

“Sure you say that, but we all know better,” Ren teased.

Ken’s cheeks darkened to pink. (It was just too easy to tease him.) “Just come on,” he grumbled.

The walk back to Ken’s place was brief. They left Ren’s purchases near the door, though not so close so that if Shinjiro-san returned, he would trip over them.

“We have way too much leftovers,” Ken said, before ducking into the kitchen. “Let me heat that up for you…”

Ren found himself walking around the living room. He hadn’t really noticed during his previous visits, but there were quite a few framed photographs set up on the glass table right underneath the plasma screen TV.

One was a shot of Shinjiro-san and Fuuka-san standing at the kitchen counter, his hand over hers as he guided her into chopping some vegetables. They looked like they were in their late teens. They were both wearing a fancy school uniform, probably Gekkoukan’s. Shinjiro-san’s hair was shorter, while Fuuka-san’s hair was several shades darker and went to her shoulders. His expression was surprisingly gentle as he seemed to coach her. Ren couldn’t help but snicker a little at Shinjiro-san being a total softie.

Another was a shot of Ken on the soccer field, wearing a teal uniform. He looked a few years younger, though—maybe fifteen or so? He seemed to have made a headshot as the ball flew towards the opposing goal.

And the last picture was a group picture, though Shinjiro-san wasn’t in it. It was far from being a good picture though. One guy was falling backwards of all things, his baseball cap knocked askew, while several of the people looked on in alarm. Everyone but the older man with an eyepatch wore a red armband. But Ren’s eyes were drawn to two people, in particular. They seemed to be opposites in several ways. A blue haired boy with silver headphones hanging around his neck, his eyes a cool gray-blue. An auburn haired girl with bright red headphones, and her eyes were crimson red.

“Ren, what are you—oh.”

Ren hastily set down the photo. “Sorry, I just… didn’t notice this before,” he said sheepishly.
Ken just waved him off. “It’s fine,” he said. “The last couple times you’ve come here were more so for business, and Fuuka-san just put them up during her last visit.” He then let out a chuckle, before smiling an amused smile. “She thought the area looked a little bare, so she brought a few photographs and set them up.”

“She looks so… different,” Ren remarked, looking back at the photo with Shinjiro-san and Fuuka-san. “When she was what… seventeen? Eighteen?”

Not to say that she was plain or anything. She was more cute than anything, but Fuuka-san had matured into being more… graceful. More confident in a way. She was apparently a bit of a late bloomer, from the looks of it.

Ken nodded. “That was before Shinjiro-san and Fuuka-san started dating. Minako-san snapped a photo of them in the kitchen, and gave a copy to Fuuka-san right after they graduated from Gekkoukan.” But then his eyes traveled to the third photograph, before a soft sigh escaped him. “That’s the closest we have to a group picture,” he said.

Ren then looked back at it. “Of SEES?”

Now that he looked more closely at it, most of the people in the photo were wearing a red armband. He could make out S.E.E.S.

Ken let out an affirmative hum. “That night… wasn’t particularly happy,” he said quietly. “But Fuuka-san wanted a reminder of all of us, I think.”

“Well… which one is…?”

“Minato-san?” Ken guessed. “The one with the dark blue hair.”

Oh right. Ren felt a bit dumb once Ken had said that. He had stated before that Miyuki and Kaito had inherited most of their looks from their dad, and they both had dark blue hair. Though looking at the girls in the picture, and from what he knew… Minako-san had to be the auburn haired girl. She had the same type of headphones.

Though… he couldn’t help but be curious.

“Tell me about them,” he said suddenly. When Ken just blinked at him, he clarified with, “I mean… about everyone. They’re important to you, but I’ve only known what they’ve accomplished at a group.”

“Well…” Ken sighed, wrapping an arm around himself. “Come on, let’s sit down. Your food’s getting cold. I’ll tell you more while you eat.”

The leftovers turned out to be lo mein. (He better not tell Yusuke. He’d probably find it an atrocity, given how attached he became to those lobsters of his.) Ken had taken some of the extra lobster, removed the shells, and gave Morgana that to eat. While it wasn’t the fatty tuna Morgana adored so much, Morgana greatly appreciated it judging from the happy sounds he was making.

Ken let out a thoughtful hum. “Well, to start with… there’s Mitsuru-san.” Ren couldn’t help but stiffen at the mention of her name. But he quickly shoved that out of his mind. Judging her was just as bad as how everyone jumped to the conclusion that he was a crazy, violent delinquent when he first moved here.

“She’s a total ice queen, according to the media,” Ren said. “Is that true?”
“Hmm… but yes and no. Mitsuru-san has a tendency to try and fix things on her own, and she’s tried to take on her family’s burden on her own shoulders several times. But at the same time, she always tried to look after all of us.” Ken’s lips twitched into a smile. “This was before I had even met them all, but when Fuuka-san had disappeared and her homeroom teacher hadn’t done anything to try and find her, Mitsuru-san raked him over the coals for pulling that stunt. Minako-san said that they never got to find out what his punishment was…”

“Damn, we could’ve used that with Kamoshida,” Ren said, before he frowned. “Probably would’ve saved us a lot of grief…”

From what Anne had said about Shiho, she used to be a bit of a goofball. But by the time Ren had met her, she had been kind, but quiet. He kinda wished that he got to know his girlfriend’s best friend better. Before Kamoshida had pulled all of his shit.

Ren winced. “…Sorry. Didn’t mean to distract you.”

“Speaking of distractions…” Ken just raised an eyebrow at him. “You should really eat before it gets cold.”

Ren sheepishly began to eat again. He really had to convince Sojiro to cook different dishes. His curry was great and all, but variety was the spice of life.

“Well… Ren could understand that. He couldn’t imagine going back to a normal life, after trekking the Metaverse for so long.

“He grew up with Shinjiro-san in the same orphanage,” Ken continued, before he laughed. “I wish you were there when they came face to face with each other, after not seeing each other for over two years.” Ken snickered for a moment. “He took one look at Akihiko-san and went, ‘Aki, what the FUCK are you wearing?’.”

Ren couldn’t help but burst out laughing at Ken mimicking Shinjiro-san’s voice. Ken’s voice was far from high, but Shinjiro-san had a gravelly voice.

Ken then continued to talk about some of the stupid competitions they had gotten up to over the years. It was a bit hard to believe, with them having a pickle jar opening contest, but there was just no way that Ken would make this shit up.

Ken talked for a long time. About Minako-san—who was apparently his first and only crush. (Well, according to him, at least. Ren personally didn’t see that.) How she was the first one out of SEES to treat him as an equal, though she did have her moments when she had fawned over him.

Aigis-san, being a robot, actually looked closer to their age. Though over the years, she had developed a weird sense of humor. She apparently had a tendency to sass Mitsuru-san. But the idea of a robot becoming more human was… really hard for Ren to wrap his mind around. Though Ken just had to point out the weird stuff they had seen.

Junpei-san was apparently very similar to Ryuji, and he was a PE teacher at a junior high on Port Island. And as Yusuke had mentioned before, he was married to Chidori Yoshino. Who he apparently absolutely adored and would do anything she asked of him. Ren had to wonder how Yusuke would react if he actually met her.
“So Yukari-san really is like the Anne to Junpei-san’s Ryuji?” Ren asked. “I find that hard to believe.”

Ken just laughed. “Yukari-san’s got a better handle on her temper nowadays, but Junpei-san is **really** good at pushing her buttons. Though of course, him saying something he shouldn’t to the twins is a **really** good way to set her off.”

Ren snickered. “What did he do, get them to swear for their first word?”

“No.” Ken suddenly cracked a smile. “Their first word was actually… *Junpei* in a way. Because Yukari-san has a… nickname for Junpei-san when she’s mad at him. Stupei. Yukari-san was yelling at him for some reason, and the twins just… imitated her.”

Ren burst into laughter. “I bet he never lived that down.”

Ken just nodded. “He would constantly try to bribe the twins into saying something else.”

“Aren’t babies not supposed to have that much sweets?”

Ken just raised an eyebrow at him. “You tried to bribe Kaito with sweets.”

“He’s five, not a baby. And he didn’t even like Morgana!”

“You tried to bribe Kaito,” Ken said slowly, “with *Morgana*.”

“He was being all huffy and pouty,” Morgana piped up. “I don’t blame Ren.”

Ken just snorted. “I suppose. Yukari-san did teach them not to trust strangers all too easily.” His eyes then traveled back to the group picture. “And that leaves… Minato-san.”

“He was the leader, wasn’t he?”

“In a way,” Ken answered. He just smiled wryly when Ren gave him a confused frown. “Because Minato-san and Minako-san were co-field leaders. But Mitsuru-san was the overall head of SEES.”

Ren frowned. Well… that made sense in a way. Morgana often offered advice to him, after all.

“Though… what was he like?” Ren asked.

The whole idea of having predecessors—senpai, in a way—was still mindboggling to him. And from what Ken had said from before, SEES did view the male Arisato twin to be their field leader, though Minako-san was his lieutenant of sorts.

Ken let out a thoughtful hum. “He was… quiet. He kept to himself a lot, but he always was pretty insightful.” He then shook his head. “He would make the strangest jokes sometimes. One time, he insisted to me, with a completely straight face… that he drank coffee with hot sauce.”

“H-Hot sauce?” Ren couldn’t help but gape at him. “And you… you *bought* it?!”

“Hey, I was eleven!” Ken quickly defended. “And he sounded so serious about it…”

“Oh my god, Ken.”

Just thinking about it made him cringe. Just the idea of hot sauce *tainting* coffee like that…

“Shut up, Ren,” he grumbled out.
“Anything else I should know about him?”

“Well…” Ken’s expression turned thoughtful. “He was… very protective of Minako-san. When she started dating Akihiko-san, he took Akihiko-san on a solo run inside Tartarus.”

Oh jeez. He’s never met the man, but he couldn’t help but feel bad for him. Dealing with an overprotective sibling couldn’t be fun.

Ken suddenly huffed out a laugh. “Minako-san was not happy with that…” But then his face became somber. “…He didn't breathe a word about how he was slowly dying... He wanted us to have the illusion that everything was okay until he passed away.” His lips then trembled for a moment. "He always had a weird way of showing his concern..."

Ren’s eyes widened. There was nothing he could say to that. Hiding the truth like that. He couldn’t imagine doing it.

"I wish that I had spent more time with him before he had died," Ken continued quietly. "I always had fun with him when he watched Feathermen with me. One time he took me to the movies… But Minato-san always seemed so busy at night.” He shook his head. “Sometimes I have no idea how you manage to juggle so much.”

“I mean, it’s a good way to stop yourself from being bored,” Ren said, with a shrug. “Though… I can see why you’re so attached to them now. It’s nice to hear about them instead of their exploits.”

Ken then smiled sheepishly. “I guess we didn’t get to talk about the things we did in between the fights, huh?”

“Hey, I don’t blame you.” Ren shrugged. “It probably would’ve taken you days to talk about it all. But Ken…”

“Hm?”

“You’ve talked about the Shadow Operatives before…” he said carefully. “Are you planning on joining them full time?”

“Well…” Ken pursed his lips. “If you asked me this just a few years ago, I would have said yes,” he confessed. “But honestly, now… I’m not so sure. I’ve wanted to become a defense attorney for a couple years now… but… what we’ve been up to has had me thinking that there’s something more I can do. To even the odds for people who don’t have a voice.”

“Well, nobody said that changing society was easy.”

Ken just rolled his eyes at Ren. “That’s a lofty goal, anyways.” His eyes suddenly grew far away. “But… it’s a noble one. Maybe we can ease his burden this way…”

Ken bringing up his former leader couldn’t help but make him think… could he make the same sacrifice? Sacrificing himself to ensure his friends’ safety?

Ren shook his head. No… He didn’t want to dwell on the what ifs. Nothing good came out of that.

“It definitely won’t be easy,” Ren agreed. “But nothing worth fighting for is, right?”

Ken just smiled. “You’re right, Ren.”
Chapter End Notes

Shinji and Sae’s relationship is gonna be… interesting. They’re somewhat foils in this. I really can’t wait to dive more into that, because Shinji will have a lot to say about Sae’s actions. But that’ll be later on in the story.

Though while I think that Makoto and Haru could have a great friendship, I always thought the way the game went about it was… strange. They couldn’t touch on it as much as they could’ve. So I tweaked the whole Mako-chan thing. I also did not make up Aoyama-Itchome being for the wealthy. I looked into where the wealthy live in Tokyo, and since Haru attends Shujin I thought it’d work well.

I never showed it but the Adjustment Confidant rank 6 would be locked until after 8/30 (the day where Ken reveals the truth). Someone remarked that it was a pity that we didn't get Ken's perspective on Minato's death but I was saving it for this rank.
The Spaceport of Greed

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves make their first visit to Okumura's Palace and they gradually witness Okumura's sins be brought to light. And not long after, Ken visits Ren at LeBlanc and makes good on his promise.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Friday, September 23rd, 2016

“Is everyone ready?”

Ren glanced around, but nobody was really around at this time. At everyone’s nod, he activated the app, allowing them to step into Okumura’s Palace, the Spaceport of Greed.

Ren passed out the new weapons he had purchased, before scanning the group. Hmm… who to pick today?

“Noir, you’re definitely in today,” he announced, before his hand drifted up to cup his chin.
“Hmm… Let’s do Fox and Ace, too.” He would swap people out more, though. He had a feeling that it was going to be a long run. After the named members stepped forward, flanking Ren, he just looked over his shoulder at them. “Let’s go!”

Ren led everyone through the hallways, eventually bringing them to the door that blocked off their way before.

“Biometric scan…” Futaba said slowly, tapping her chin. “And it let in Okumura…” She then pointed at Haru. “Noir! Try standing in front of it. Just you. Everyone else, back up.”

“Leave it to me,” Haru said firmly, stepping forward. She pressed a hand against the metal door. The screen above the door lit up with green letters: Accepted.

“It makes sense,” Morgana said, before his face broke into a grin. “Noir’s Okumura’s daughter. This door is nothing, now that we have his daughter on our side!”

They passed through the door, descending to a lower floor using the elevator. When they stepped out… they seemed to be in some kind of terminal. A building with antennas perched on top caught their attention.

“That building…” Ren turned to see Morgana staring at it. “I can sense the Treasure. We’ll have to get in there… somehow.”

“Easier said than done,” Yusuke said with a sigh, glancing around. “There doesn’t seem to be any clear path for us to take.”
“We’ll have to figure it out as we go,” Ken said, absentmindedly twirling his spear.

“That’s what Joker usually does anyways,” Ryuji joked. “Coming with stuff on the fly and somehow it works out in the end.”

“Hey!” Ren protested, before briefly glaring at Ryuji. “Jeez, you act like I’m Indiana Jones or something…”

Ryuji scratched the back of his head, before shooting him a baffled look. “Indiana what?”

Anne just giggled. “Some American movies I showed Ren during our last date night. We should watch them as a group sometime!”

“Oh, that sounds like fun!” Haru chimed in, clapping her hands together.

“Hey, focus!” Morgana chided. “We can’t let our guard down until we find the Treasure, remember?”

“Yes, sir!” Haru did a quick salute.

She was certainly enthusiastic. Though Ren couldn’t help but smile at that.

“Jeez, someone’s getting a big head again,” Futaba snarked.

“Oracle!” Makoto exclaimed, shooting Futaba an exasperated look.

Futaba just held up her hands. “You’re all thinking it.”

Ren coughed. “Seriously, guys, enough comments from the peanut gallery. We’ll get distracted.”

Futaba just stuck her tongue at him. “Yeah, like you can talk, Joker.” Ren just smirked at her before ruffling Futaba’s hair. Futaba yelped, before smacking his hand away.

“Look at who’s getting distracted now,” Ken said dryly.

There was some sliding doors on both sides of them, so Ren went to the right. A Shadow was lurking right by the door, so Ren reached for his pistol and quickly fired. It wasn’t a sneak attack but better than being ambushed.

The Shadow divided into three, all of them taking the form of… Slime? They were an oily black, instead of a murky green though.

“Any idea, Ace?” Ren called out to him.

Ken made a face. “No idea. I’ve seen one that’s green but I don’t think they have the same qualities.”

“Head in the game!” Futaba shouted. “Seriously, focus, guys!”

“You do the same, then!” Ren quipped, twirling his gun in one hand. "Help us find a weakness!"

God, what affinity did Slime even have? He fused Slime away ages ago, but he couldn’t remember what Slime’s affinity was, for the life of him… Maybe he should just try experimenting with the Personas he had.

The Shadow crawled forward, bashing his head against Haru. Haru staggered back for a moment,
before glaring at the Shadow.

Haru swung her axe with such force that Ren was surprised that she didn’t cleave it into two. Ken then dashed forward, lunging forward with his spear. He stabbed the Shadow several times before making a sweeping motion. He then pulled out his gun, shooting it right in the face.

“Nice!” Futaba crowed. Ren could hear the grin in her voice. “Keep it up, Ace!”

Ken then tore off his mask, summoning Kala-Nemi. Kala-Nemi’s torso spun, before tendrils of light sprang to life and striking all three Shadows. The Shadow that Ken had knocked down died, but the Shadows remaining were easy pickings.

They surrounded the two Shadows, pointing their guns at them. “Let’s get them!” Ren exclaimed, before they lunged forward.

The Shadows easily fell under their attack. Ren couldn’t help but grin. They were off to a great start. Only Haru sustained damage in that fight and it was barely a scratch.

“Okay,” Ren turned to face everyone, “let’s keep it… up…” He trailed off, blinking at the sight before his eyes.

Makoto was… staring at Ken. And was she blushing?

Holy shit, she was.

Huh. Ren couldn’t help but smirk. Just when did this happen? Must be a pretty new change.

Anne nudged him in the side, eyes narrowed. “What are you smirking about?”

“Noooothing…” Ren went for an innocent look, but his girlfriend’s unimpressed face told him that it wasn’t working. “Don’t know what you’re talking about, Panther.”

“Uh huh,” she drawled out, hands on her hips now. “Suuuure.”

Ren pressed a hand against his chest. “Don’t you trust me, Panther?”

“Oh, I trust you with most of the time,” Anne said. “Just not when you’re looking like you’re the cat who got the canary.”

Ren stared at her blankly. “I’m the cat who got the what?”

Anne rolled her eyes. “It’s an American saying.” She shook her head. “You’re really lucky you’re cute.”

“I think about how lucky I am every day,” Ren quipped, before grinning at her.

Anne just huffed, but her cheeks flushed a light shade of pink. “Flatterer.”

“Do you really gotta do this here?” Ryuji complained, surprisingly quiet, making them both jump. “Sheesh… I guess we’re lucky you’re keeping your hands to yourself…”

“Ugh, shut up, Skull!” Anne rounded on their friend, quickly lapsing into a bickering fest with him.

With Anne distracted, Ren sidled up to Makoto. “You know looking’s all good,” he whispered to her, “but you might want to make an actual move.”
“W-Wha…?” Makoto’s blush deepened before glaring at Ren. “I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Uh huh.” Ren nodded understandably, before giving his friend a sly smile. “And you weren’t staring at Ken. What he pulled off with his spear was kinda impressive, though…” He gave her a sideway glance. “A little flirting never hurt anyone, you know. Maybe that’s why the fake dating never worked with us, huh?”

“You… It’s not…” Makoto turned as red as a tomato.

“Is something the matter?” Ken asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, nothing!” Ren smiled innocently at him. “We were just talking about you!”

“Uh huh…” Disbelief was written all over Ken’s face. “Wanna try again, Joker?” he asked dryly. Ren just smirked. “I’m good.”

Ken let out an aggravated sigh. “Fine, don’t tell me.”

“Ace!” Makoto blurted out, which got everyone else’s attention immediately.

Ken blinked. “Um… is something the matter, Queen?”


Ken just stared at her blankly. “Uh… thanks?” he asked uncertainly. “I just got lucky during that fight…”

Ren had to bite down on his lip hard so he wouldn’t burst out laughing. You could practically see the question marks floating around Ken’s head. Though Makoto wasn’t helping with how awkward she was being. God, he wished he had some popcorn. Or a camera. Preferably the latter.

“Maybe you show her some of your moves later?” Ren said innocently, catching Ryuji’s eye. His best friend was desperately trying to hold back his snickers. (And kinda failing.)

Ken frowned. “Er… our fighting styles are rather different.”

“Oh right.” Ren nodded. “My bad.”

Makoto glared at him, but it was marred by the blush in her cheeks.

Ken just sighed. “If this is some kind of joke, it’s not very funny,” he deadpanned. “Did you set up Queen to say that?”

Yusuke cleared his throat. “Now that’s taken care of…” he said dryly, even as his lips twitched into an amused smile. “Shall we move on?”

They explored the area, looting the treasure chests, before coming across another door. Haru stepped forward but there was no light, scanning her.

“Hmm…” Morgana frowned, scanning the area. “Wait… there’s a slot… for a card?”

Understanding dawned in Haru’s eyes. “Oh, that must be the card key. Because in the HQ, some places are blocked off unless you have the right authorization from personnel.” She bit her lip for a
moment as she thought. “We would probably have to find the Chief Manager’s card for this.”

“And I assume with how Cognitive Sugimura and his lackeys appeared…” Morgana continued, “this Chief Manager would most likely be a robot.”

“All right…” Ryuji cracked his knuckles. “Let’s find this guy and steal his card key, then.”

Yusuke sighed wearily. “You make us sound so… uncouth. Like we’re mugging him.”

…It was kinda true, though.

“Skull’s got a good point, though,” Ren said, tugging at his gloves. “If we just stand around here discussing, it’ll accomplish nothing. Let’s get going.”

So they pushed forward. It wasn’t long until they found a safe room.

“Is there any injuries we should take care of here?” Anne asked. “It’d be better to treat them here than outside where Shadows are running around.”

Ren did a quick scan of everyone. There were some injuries, so maybe it’d be best to treat them right now. He passed out the medicine, so Morgana and Ken could reserve their energy for casting spells in battle.

“What is this place, exactly?” Haru asked, looking around. When she turned back to face them, her expression was puzzled. “It seems… closed off.”

“It’s called a safe room,” Makoto explained. “Mona explained it as… a place where the Palace owner’s cognition is… weaker? Shadows can’t come in here, so it’s where we can take a little breather.”

“How are you guys feeling, though?” Ren asked. “Do you need anything to restore your strength? I brewed a lot of coffee in prep for this.”

“I’m feeling fine, but what about you two?” Haru asked, turning to Yusuke and Ken.

Yusuke shook his head. “I am feeling fine,” he stated. “Of course, that’s due to me using a mix of physical attacks and spells.”

“Likewise,” Ken agreed. “I can keep going.”

Hmm… Well, with the Chief Manager, it’d probably be a tough fight. He’d probably swap out the current team after that. But they didn’t seem tired, so Ren saw no need to swap them out right now. Not to mention that Ken seemed to compliment Haru’s fighting style pretty well. He had to wonder if one of the members of SEES used an axe. He seemed to know just how Haru would strike when she used her axe.

“Sounds good to me.” Morgana nodded. “Should we get going then, Joker?”

“Yeah, let’s,” Ren agreed, standing up.

Everyone but Ryuji and Futaba filed out slowly, so Ren raised an eyebrow at the two of them.

“Something the matter?” he asked.

Ryuji’s face broke into a wide grin. “Dude. Did you see how red Queen’s face was?”
Ren just smirked in response. “How could you miss it?”

“Ace certainly did!” Futaba cackled, breaking into snickers.

Though, he had to wonder when exactly Makoto had realized her feelings. He figured that something was brewing between the two of them for a while, with Makoto insisting on the welcome party for him after finding out that he turned down a visit back to Port Island, the whole Hawaii trip, and there was Ken’s reaction to Tsukasa trying to hurt Makoto…

“And Ace was so confused.” Ryuji joined her in snickering, all while grinning widely. “You’d think he’d see what’s going on, with how he’s been flirted with before.”

“I think it’s because they had spent a couple months as friends and then Queen suddenly does a bit of a flip,” Ren mused. “From what Ace has told me, girls immediately hit on him. They don’t bother to get to know him.”

“Y’know, I thought Queen had a little thing for him back when we kicked Kaneshiro’s ass,” Ryuji said.

Huh. He had never really thought about it, but Ryuji had a point. Makoto had been pretty adamant about Ken not having bad intentions after Ken had accidentally revealed himself.

“I thought they were together when I first met you guys,” Futaba added. “With how she all but hugged his arm.”

Ah, good times. Who knew that Makoto of all people were afraid of the dark like that? Though Ren couldn’t help but think of when Ken had shown up at Shibuya, after they had finally resolved things with Eiko.

“Dude, what did you even tell her?” Ryuji asked. “She was turning as red as a cherry.”

“Oh, that…” Ren grinned at him. “I just told Queen that she probably try and take initiative instead of just admiring the view.”

Ryuji just scoffed. “You mean like how you would flirt with Panther and she brushed it aside as you messing around?”

“Hey, I meant every word of it!” Ren protested.

Ryuji made a face. “I still dunno why you didn’t make a move sooner. Didn’t Ace complain about that too?”

…He was lucky that Ken didn’t say anything more on the subject. Especially after Ken had given Ren that advice.

“Maybe we should give the same advice to Queen,” Futaba snickered.

“So…” Ren gave his two friends a sly smile. “Care to bet on when they’ll actually get their act together? My guess is by Christmas.”

Ryuji just scoffed, shaking his head adamantly. “No way, man! Did you see how awkward Queen was? And Ace’s completely clueless. I’d say by the time they graduate!”

Futaba was quiet, but her face broke into a wide smile. “By the end of next month,” she announced.
“Pffft, there’s no way that’ll happen, Oracle!” Ryuji shook his head.

“Oh yeah?” Futaba challenged, suddenly poking him in the chest. (Which was a comical sight, given that Ryuji towered over her.) “Put your money where your mouth is then! Two… no, three thousand yen that Ace and Queen will start dating by the end of October!”

“I’m in,” Ren said, all while grinning. “Could use some entertainment, if anything. What about you, Skull?”

“I’m game!” Ryuji nodded vigorously. “Person who’s closest gets the whole pot, yeah?”

They shook on the deal. Either way, win or lose… it’d be entertaining to see.

…Of course, he’d prefer to win.

“So, how are we gonna go ‘bout this, Joker?” Ryuji asked. “Finding this Chief Manager?”

“Lemme do a quick scan.” Blue flames swept away Futaba’s mask, and she disappeared into Necronomicon. Lights flashed green as she scanned the area. “Hmm… I can sense several large Shadows in rooms… It’s probably one of them.”

“So how can we figure out which one is the real one…?” Haru asked.

Haru was really unsure on how to go about that. That sounded difficult… They probably looked one and the same…

“Everyone, look out!” Morgana suddenly barked out.

They quickly squished behind one of the holograms, watching the same robots that had fought with Sugimura run into a room.

“Oooh, perfect!” Ryuji grinned as they came out of hiding. “Let’s go ask ‘em who’s the Chief Manager?”

“Skull, I don’t think that would be prudent.” Yusuke frowned. “They could easily report us and we would get swarmed.”

Ryuji’s expression turned sheepish. “Oh yeah…”

“There’s gotta be a way to get some intel though…” Anne frowned.

“There’s always eavesdropping,” Futaba offered, making Ken glower at her for some reason. “Ugh, don’t give me that look, Ace.”

“What look?” Ken droned out.

Futaba stuck her tongue out at him. “The only other way would be to beat them up for info!”

Ken just sighed, before rubbing his face with one hand. “…I suppose.”

She felt… out of the loop.

“Um… am I missing something…?” Haru asked tentatively.

Futaba fidgeted for a moment. “I… may have wiretapped LeBlanc before meeting everyone…”
“Anyways, let’s get us some intel,” Ren said, striding forward already.

Ren was just so… confident. She couldn’t help but admire that.

They snuck into the room, crouching and crawling so they wouldn’t get caught.

*The Chief Clerk has it easy… all he does is munch sweets all day.*

*This job never ends…*

This job… never ends…?

Did Father just… intend to squeeze every last drop out of his workers?

Haru’s heart squeezed painfully. And it was only going to get worse. She could feel it…

She jolted when she felt a hand lightly squeeze her shoulder. She looked up to see concern in cool gray eyes. “Noir, are you…” He trailed off. “…Never mind. Let’s get going, shall we?”

Haru just smiled weakly at Yusuke. It was sweet of him to be so concerned… “…Yes, let’s.”

“Though aren’t we looking for the Chief Director?” Ryuji interjected. “These guys were talking about the Chief Clerk.”

“We may have to work our way up,” Ken mused. “Maybe there are areas that we can access with the Clerk’s cardkey that we can’t right now.”

“That’s a solid theory,” Futaba chimed in. “I mean, it’s like… we’ve gotta fight the minibosses before the head honcho.”

Mini… bosses? What was Futaba talking about? But either way, they had a good point. They would have to work their way up.

Futaba directed them to the large scans she had detected earlier, and Ren probed them by offering sweets. The chief clerk turned out to be a gangly red robot.

They were forced to fight the Chief Clerk, but in the end were able to secure his key card.

But then a voice rang out.

“CHANGING SHIFTS! CHANGING SHIFTS! KEEP WORKING UNTIL YOU DIE!”

Until… you die? Haru couldn’t help but press a hand to her mouth. She just… she just felt sick. This was built up their family?! Father… why? Why was he so desperate to build up wealth like this? To the point of abusing his employees like this?

They were people too… They must feel stuck here because there aren’t any other opportunities for them…

Haru pushed it out of her mind. They had to take down her father… It was the only way to help the Big Bang employees.

“Noir… do you need to take a break?” Anne asked hesitantly. “We could… We could go back to the safe room…”

“No.” Haru lifted her chin. “…Let’s press forward. The sooner we take care of this, the better.”
But as they pressed forward, Haru felt her heart sinking further and further, as they eavesdropped on the employees.

*There is no future for us if the company doesn’t turn a profit! We have no choice but to push on with all of our effort. This is just the way it is…*

*The section chief always says, “this is for your own good”. It always makes me so mad…*

*Don’t worry, someone will surely do something about this eventually.*

*Life is only work. They make you surrender your hopes, dreams, and personalities.*

She knew that their family hadn’t always been so prosperous. In a way she was grateful for the lifestyle her father had given her, before he decided to betroth her to Sugimura. But this…? Nothing could be worth destroying multiple lives like this…

“Noir.” Makoto’s voice was whisper-soft and filled with pity. No… not just that. Understanding.

Haru squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. “Let’s go find the chief director. We have the information we need…”

She didn’t know how much further they had left but… she had a feeling they had a ways to go before reaching her father’s Treasure. They had to make him realize his issues.

She just had no idea how much her father had fallen from the man she had once knew…

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They returned to the original door and Ren inserted the card key in. They took the lift up, and it took them to an area with glowing platforms. They left across, dodging Shadows, all while climbing upwards. Makoto was relieved when they finally found their way in front of the building.

“Sweet!” Ryuji cheered, pumping a fist. “This is where the Treasure is, right, Mona?”

Morgana looked up at the building, before giving a firm nod. “Just past this building, but we’re definitely getting warmer. Let’s get moving, guys!”

“But isn’t it odd that we haven’t found anything on the mental shutdowns?” Yusuke asked with a frown. “We should’ve found something, with the suspicious trend of mental shutdowns paired with Big Bang’s rivals…”

“If anything, I think whoever that black masked Persona-user is…” Ken said slowly, “is just the hitman. Okumura probably just requested for him to go after his rivals.” He glanced over at everyone. “…Shido’s the one behind it all.”

Makoto glanced over to Haru. Her expression was just… pained. Makoto’s heart twisted up, looking at her. And Yusuke… he had to go through Madarame’s Palace too. She closed her eyes. This was why she was afraid to bring up Sae’s Palace, but… they were willing to do something about their father figures.

She… She didn’t know if Sae was that far gone yet, but she hoped desperately that her sister was still on the edge.

“Shido…” Haru said slowly, and Makoto opened her eyes to look back at her. “Father has spoken with him before. He’s been over at dinner a couple times.” She shook her head. “…Father always did say it was a pity that Shido was a bachelor and therefore, had no children. If Shido had a son…
Father would’ve chosen him to betroth to me in a heartbeat.”

“He really is just shopping around for the best political advantage…” Anne looked to Haru with a sympathetic frown, “…isn’t he?”

Haru just nodded slowly.

“…Let’s go, guys,” Ren interjected. “We’re getting closer to the Treasure. We can’t stop here!”

They entered the building and took a lift down. They found a safe room, taking a short break. Ren swapped out the current team, choosing Morgana, Ryuji, and Makoto as the active team. She was honestly glad about being put in the active team, because the fights were a welcome distraction from her… blunder before. God, why did she do that? It was like her brain was set to auto pilot… But when they pressed forward, they discovered that the building they were in was a… factory of sorts.

"What are they building?" Futaba questioned, a frown on her lips. "I haven't gotten a clue."

“Wait a sec…” Ryuji narrowed his eyes, drawing closer to the window. He pressed one hand against the glass. “Aren’t the robots moving kinda weird?”

They all moved closer. They could hear the robots chanting, “Deliverance” several times, before one finally collapsed.

“…It matches what we heard while listening for clues before.” Haru wrapped her arms around herself. “What… What is the truth… The man I knew as a little girl… or the man I see now…?” She then pressed a hand against the window as well. Her lip trembled for a moment “And… this factory set-up… is almost identical to our bun factory…” She then heaved out a sigh, before squeezing her eyes shut. “Father… he truly doesn’t care for anyone but himself…”

“Noir…” Yusuke put a hand on her shoulder, making her start. She looked at him in surprise. “Don’t lose your way,” he said quietly. “You vowed to change your father’s heart. Believe me when I saw that I know how difficult it is to see someone like your father reveal his true colors, but you mustn’t lose heart. You’ll see this through, won’t you?”

Haru gradually smiled. “…Thank you, Fox. I… I needed that. After seeing all of this already…” She sighed, pressing her hand against her chest. “And I know that there’s more to come…” she said gloomily.

Yusuke just smiled back at her. “Anytime, Noir. That’s what friends are for, no?”

Haru just giggled. “Yes… you’re right.”

“All he cares about is himself…” Makoto murmured. “It’s sickening, but he just views everyone as a means to his goal.”

“Yeah, but it gives us an even bigger reason to take him down and change his heart, right?” Ryuji rolled his shoulders, before turning away. “Let’s go!”

They entered the factory, before running straight for the door. According to Morgana, the Treasure was a straight shoot for the door ahead. But when they approached, a couple things happened. Blocks fell from the ceiling, and they saw one of the machine arms break.

Anne grabbed Ren’s arm, yanking him backwards. “Are you okay, Joker?”
“Yeah.” Ren nodded at her, giving her a smile in thanks. But then it morphed into a disgusted scowl. “Should’ve known it wouldn’t be that easy… Especially with no authentication.”

“That broke way too easily…” Ken muttered.

“Let’s try and find some way around it then,” Futaba said, tapping on her chin. “I saw that arm collapse before the metal almost crushed us. Maybe it fell to the other side.”

“You’re… saying that a bit too casually, Oracle,” Anne remarked.

After checking around, Ren found a control panel that allowed them to increase the arm speed.

“Hm…” Ren rubbed his chin. “Let’s go for ten times the speed!” he announced, and before anyone could say anything, he pressed the button to confirm the change.

The nearby robotic arm then… went berserk, before finally collapsing onto the other side.

“…Well, that’s one way to do it,” Ren quipped. “Looks like we have a bridge now.”

“But still…” Yusuke frowned. “This truly does show how overworked the machines are…”

“…And the same could probably be said about the workers,” Makoto said grimly, all while frowning.

“…I wouldn’t be surprised if that was the case,” Haru murmured, her hands tightening around her axe’s handle. “But… with that arm collapsing… we can climb it and cross to the other side, right? Let’s go check it out!”

Ren led them to the broken arm, and they continued to explore the area and search for another console for them to take advantage of. But then a Shadow caught sight of them.

Ren pulled out his knife and took a swipe at the Shadow. The Shadow broke into three, forming three female… vampires? That was the closest comparison Makoto could think of.

“Who are you?!?” the Shadows demanded.

One of them twirled, before a sickly green aura surrounded them all. Makoto felt her limbs grow heavy.

“Be careful, your agility’s down!” Futaba warned. “And these guys can inflict Fear on you!”

Some of the status ailments were… really irritating to deal with. Fear basically paralyzed you… sometimes it would make you flee.

“Noted!” Ren shouted. “Be on your guard, guys! Ace, do you have any ideas for weaknesses?”

“Hmm… I’d try light or wind attacks,” Ken answered.

“Sweet,” Ren said, his face breaking into a grin. “Mona, you know what to do!”

But another of the Shadows struck first. A black aura surrounded her before it exploded in a wave. They all somehow managed to dodge the spell, but since Ken was standing behind Ren… it hit him.

“A-Ace?” Anne asked.
Makoto whipped around just in time to see Ken backing away from Anne. He shook his head as Anne reached out to him.

“It’s better if I should just go.” Ken’s voice was feverish. “I’m just dragging you into problems that don’t involve you.”

“What…?” Yusuke asked. “Ace, snap out of it!”

Ken just shook his head vehemently, slowly backing away. “It’s better if I just… stay away from you. For good.”

Without warning, he turned on his heel and fled down the path where they had just come from.

“Ace!” Makoto cried out. She wanted to chase after him, but she forced herself to stay rooted on the spot.

“Panther, switch with Queen!” Ren suddenly shouted. He then gave her a little nod, before looking pointedly down the way Ken had ran away.

Makoto’s breath hitched but she nodded. Anne took her spot, already tearing off her mask.

“Hecate!”

…Hecate? What happened to Carmen?

“Dude, your Persona changed?!” Ryuji demanded.

“Less talk, more fighting!” was Anne’s only retort. “We can talk about it later!”

Makoto pushed all thoughts out of her mind, and looked down the path. Luckily they had killed the Shadows down this path… But even so, she had to find him…

But… What had he been talking about? The fevered way he had talked could be like babbling but… it still bothered her.

Makoto shook her head. She’d worry about that after she found Ken.

And she finally found him, crouched in front of the glass window.

“Ace,” she called out softly to him, only to wince as he flinched. Makoto grabbed him by the sleeve, holding him in place. “Ace,” she repeated, crouching so that they were eye level. “It’s okay…”

She had only seen Ken scared once before, and that was when Ren had asked him if everything had been a lie, the day Ken had revealed the truth.

“No, it’s not,” Ken insisted, his eyes wild. “I always drag people into trouble and they get hurt from it! Why would it be any different this time? Why did I tell you about Shido? He’s not your problem… I’m just burdening you with my problems. I’m a burden.”

“Ace, stop.” Makoto’s hand moved to his shoulder, slowly moving down to his arm so she could grasp his hand. Ken’s fingers weakly curled around her hand. “You’re not a burden. You didn’t force us to look into Shido, either. We wanted to.”

“I’m weak,” Ken whispered, looking down at the ground. His hand slid out of hers. “I’ve always been… It’s not just Shinjiro-san who had to save me. Akihiko-san had to talk me out of doing something stupid right after Shinjiro-san had died… And during the Shadow incident right before I
left the Shadow Operatives, I had to be saved from a Shadow *again*…”

“Nobody is strong one hundred percent of the time,” Makoto said softly. She tilted his chin up so he was forced to look at her. “You’re being too hard on yourself…”

But there was still doubt in his eyes. Makoto bit her lip. What could she do to make him believe her?

…There was what she had done when Ken seemed to flashback to his mother’s death, back in Futaba’s Palace. She could do that. It was just a hug.

(God, she was screwed.)

She took a deep breath, before wrapping her arms around him tightly. “You said before that you should’ve just stayed away,” she murmured, somehow keeping her voice steady as her heart pounded so hard that she felt it might burst from her chest. “I’m… I’m glad that you came to Tokyo.”

She was about to pull away when Ken’s arms suddenly wrapped around her waist. “…I’m glad I met you,” he mumbled out.

Makoto felt suddenly dizzy. Last time, it had been just her hugging him. But this time… he was hugging her back and his arms felt so strong-

Makoto mentally smacked herself. Now wasn’t the time to fantasize about Ken.

“So… you’re okay?” she asked, pulling away. If Ken kept hugging her, she’d probably pass out… very soon…

Ken’s smile was gentle and warm. “I’m more than okay…” He hesitated for a moment, his cheeks growing a warm shade of pink. “And… thank you, Makoto. I… needed that kind of reminder.”

She helped Ken up and they headed back for the general area where everyone had been fighting the Shadows. They were crouching, hiding from the Shadows’ patrol.

Makoto let out an awkward cough. “Um… sorry for taking so long…”

“Ace!” Futaba jumped to her feet and launched herself at Ken without warning, making him stagger back a couple steps. “Seriously, you had us worried!” she exclaimed before frowning at him. “What took you so long??”

“I’m sorry for worrying about you,” Ken apologized, awkwardly patting her on top of her head.

“You better!” she huffed, puffing her cheeks out at him.

“But…” Yusuke frowned, tilting his head slightly. “You can use Energy Shower, Queen,” he pointed out. “Why didn’t you?”

*Oh.*

“I… ah… forgot?” Makoto offered feebly, her face beginning to burn with embarrassment.

“So were you hit with Makajama then?” Ren teased, flashing her a knowing smirk.

…Could she smack him? God, Ren was going to be relentless about this.
“I’m sure Queen was just caught up in the heat of the moment,” Haru piped up, though she was smiling knowingly. Makoto fought the urge to press both hands against her face. Or crawl into the nearest hole. “It’s nothing to focus on.”

“Though Joker’s got a point.” Ryuji flashed her a knowing grin as well. “That’s not something you’d usually do, Queen.”

…Did she need to tattoo on her forehead I like Ken Amada? Was it that obvious?!

Ryuji and Ren yelped in unison as Anne abruptly grabbed their ears and giving both of their ears a hard tug. “Okay, that’s enough, both of you,” she droned. “Ace’s fine, so we can continue now, right?”

“Bossy, bossy,” Ren sighed, shaking his head as Anne released them. “Maybe you should be the leader, then.”

Anne just responded by sticking out her tongue at him. “We’re wasting time.”

Morgana coughed. “Anyhow, Panther’s right. Let’s keep up this pace!”

“Seriously, how are we gonna stop those effin’ presses?!”

Well… Ryuji had a point in being so… concerned. Haru hadn’t expected that of all things to show up in her father’s palace…

“Calm down,” Morgana chided, frowning in Ryuji’s directions. “Yelling about it won’t solve anything.”

“There’s gotta be something around here that can help…” Ren sighed. “Come on, guys, let’s get to exploring.”

They eventually found a control panel. On the screen, it read: Now changing shifts!

“Lunch… Break…” Anne read aloud. “Huh… what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, lunch is usually longer than a break…” Ren said thoughtfully. “Maybe it’d help with our little pressing problem.”

Haru couldn’t help but giggle. Maybe it was a corny joke, but somehow Ren managed to deliver it well.

Ken immediately groaned. “Puns are and never will be funny,” he said flatly.

“You’re no fun, Ace,” Ren grumbled before selecting lunch.

The hydraulic presses slowed down to a halt. An automatic voice then rang out.

“It is now lunchtime! Let us consume our slop and gleefully reenergize!”

“Don’t tell their lunch is a mere thirty seconds?!” Yusuke suddenly blurted out, pointing at the screen. Sure enough there was a glowing red timer, slowly ticking down to zero.

“And lunch is the longest break…” Makoto said, with a frown. “Isn’t this breaking labor laws?”

“They probably use some kind of loophole…” Ken mused. “I can’t fathom what it would be, but
someone had to have noticed that…”

“…Or they could’ve been silenced,” Futaba mumbled. “We didn’t even look into that… Inari and I focused on the rivals.”

Had Father truly done anything to maintain the status quo? When had he become so… ruthless?
…She wished she was in the active team right now. She could use some Shadow therapy right now.

“Right…” Ren said as the timer hit zero. The automatic voice then talked about how the employees were supposed to gleefully return to work. “Okay, guys, we’re gonna have to make a break for it when I hit lunch again. Ready?” At everyone’s nod, he selected lunch again. “Run, guys!”

But a Shadow caught sight of them and ran towards them. Haru gripped her axe tightly before lunging towards it. They were forced to fight it, but of course that caused the timer to reset completely.

Ren sighed, wiping some perspiration from his brow. “This is gonna be harder than expected…”

“Yeah, no kidding!” Ryuji groaned, leaning forward and resting his hands on his knees.

“Wait, Noir may be onto something…” Ken said slowly.

“I was?” Haru asked with a frown.

Ken nodded. “We’re a pretty big group now… why not use that to your advantage?”

“What do you propose, Ace?” Yusuke asked.

“Remember back in Futaba’s Palace, when we used a pincher movement to trap the bandit?” Ken asked. “Why not use the inactive team to bait the Shadows?”

“Like… shooting their guns and attracting their attention somewhere else?” Makoto continued, rubbing her chin. “Hmm… we do have a limited time, and it would increase security, but these Shadows are a hassle.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Ren said, looking thoughtful. “Let’s try it out…”

“We’ve got nothing to lose…” Anne sighed.

They tensed as Ren selected lunch. Ren let the inactive members run ahead and bait the Shadows with their guns as Makoto had proposed. And as Ken predicted, they ran towards the source of the gunshot.

Haru scrambled up the hydraulic lift, but Yusuke pulled her up completely. Haru barely could give him a smile in thanks before they were forced to scramble off the lift.

“We did it,” Morgana got out in between pants.

“Annnnd we have several more to go,” Anne said flatly. “This is gonna be fun…”

But they managed it. It was a relief when they finally cleared the area and stumbled across another safe room.
“I’m beat,” Ryuji groaned, plopping down in a seat. “What about you guys?”

“More than beat,” Anne agreed with a sigh.

“I think this is a good place to leave off,” Ren said, before looking towards Morgana. “What do you think?”

“Hmm… I think we’re over halfway through the Palace…” Morgana said. “If we keep up the pace, we should be able to clear it during our next visit!”

“But…” Haru began to protest.

“Hey, calm down,” Ryuji said.

“Skull telling someone else to calm down?” Morgana snipped. “I really must be tired. It’s like I’m dreaming.”

“Oh, shuddup!” Ryuji retorted. “But anyways, we can’t push ourselves so hard, y’know? You’ll collapse out of exhaustion.”

Ren nodded. “Skull’s right, Noir,” he said gently. “We’re making great progress. We’ll visit the Palace again and reach the Treasure. That’s a promise.”

“…Okay,” Haru said with a frown.

Father’s atrocities… his sins were coming to light. She just prayed that changing his heart would help mend the rift between them…

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**Saturday, September 24th, 2016**

Being productive was all good and well, but Ren loved the lazy afternoons as well. Especially when he spent them with Anne. They had snuck upstairs—though Sojiro had given him a smarmy grin when he saw it was Anne by his side. (Okay, it really wasn’t sneaking.)

Anne let out a pleased hum as Ren kissed down her neck. He really appreciated that Anne wore a top that bared her neck… It made everything more… accessible. His hands slid down her sides, before he wrapped his arms around her waist before going to kiss her on the lips again. Anne’s hands ran over his chest for a moment, before they slid into his hair. She gave a light tug, and he couldn’t help but groan. Anne just responded by giggling and then pulling him down so that he was right on top of her.

“Ren? Sakura-san said that you were up… here…”

They both snapped to attention, looking towards the stairs. Ken was standing at the top of the stairs, his hand tightly clamped over his eyes.

“Ken!” Anne gasped, immediately flushing red as Ren rolled over so she could sit up. “Uhhh… we were just…”

“Save it,” Ken droned. “Just… make yourself presentable so I can actually look at the two of you.”

They began adjusting their clothes before Anne leaned over and began to rub at his lips. “Lip gloss,” she whispered to him.
“I loved it,” Ren whispered back, making Anne roll her eyes at him.

“What’s it safe now?”

“Safe?” Ren echoed. “Jeez, you act like you walked in on something a lot worse.”

Ken just responded by dropping his hand and giving him a stern glare. “…That kind of thing better not be happening without the right precautions.”

Ren just shrugged. “You already told me once, you don’t have to again.”

Ken just responded by pinching the bridge of his nose. “Sometimes I wonder how we’re friends,” he muttered.

“Because I’m charming as hell?”

Anne poked him in the chest, making him jump. “Oh, stop it, Ren,” she chided. “Ken came here for a good reason.” Then she looked to their friend, raising an eyebrow. “Right?”

“Right,” Ken agreed, before folding his arms over his chest. “Now, Ren, you’ve talked to me before about wanting to speak to another Wild Card.”

That made Ren sit up. “Wait, I thought the other Shadow Operatives couldn’t come to Tokyo… Are you thinking of a video call?”

Ken shook his head. “No, not quite…” he said. “You know how I told you about there being Persona-users in Inaba, right?”

Anne frowned. “This is news to me.”

“It was during a conversation with just me, Futaba, and Morgana,” Ren said, turning to her. “I don’t know if you remember, but there was a serial murder case in Inaba about five years ago. That murder case… was connected to Shadows.”

Anne’s eyes went wide and her mouth formed an o. “Wow… And these Persona-users solved this case?”

Ken nodded, before letting out an affirmative hum. “Their leader, Yu Narukami, is their Wild Card and he’s visiting Inaba this weekend-“

“Yu Narukami…” Anne repeated, before her eyes grew wide. “Wait, isn’t that Risette’s boyfriend?”

“Yeah, that’s right-“ Ken stopped short, apparently having just noticed the Risette poster hanging on Ren’s wall. “…Rise-san is the reason why Yu-san’s visiting, actually.”

“Wait a sec… Rise-san?” Anne interrupted, holding up her hands. “How are you first name terms with Rise-san?”

Ken just rubbed the back of his neck. “Ah… well…” he trailed off for a moment. “I met her four years ago. Fuuka-san’s pretty good friends with her.”

Okay… he had to know. Just how many celebrities did Ken even know? Two of his senpai were famous in their fields of work, which was weird enough. And now he’s acquainted with Risette? Who’s friends with Fuuka-san?
But then what Ken was trying to propose sunk in.

“Wait a sec… you want us to go to Inaba?” he asked slowly.

Ken just sighed, before giving a shrug. “I know it’s not ideal, but Yu-san is studying at the University of Kyoto right now. That’s a lot further than Inaba. I checked last night, and a train to Inaba is only an hour and a half away. Yu-san would be expecting us, but he understands if you don’t want to go with school.”

Talking to a Wild Card… meeting them in person… That wouldn’t be an opportunity that would come around any time soon. And he had asked Ken if he could help with that…

Ren took a deep breath, before looking at Ken steadily. “Let’s do it.”

Ken blinked. “You really want to do it?” he asked.

Ren nodded. “Yeah. You did what you promised, Ken. I don’t want to throw your efforts in your face. Though…” He looked at his friend. “Do you think we could bring… everyone?”

“Everyone?” Ken repeated, rubbing his chin for a moment. “Well, if they were up for it…”

Okay, part of his reasoning was… kinda selfish. He felt a bit… nervous about going to see this older Wild Card. What if this Narukami guy judged him for what they were doing? They solved the Hanged Man case, which had stumped the police for nearly a year. Though, it’d be not as bad as compared to meeting Minako-san. Her brother died to save the world from Death. How could he compare to that?

Anne glanced over at him, blonde brows furrowed for a moment. There was a… thoughtful look in her aquamarine eyes. But then she reached for her phone. “I’ll text the others, and give everyone a time limit to answer,” she said. “What time is the first train to Inaba anyways?”

“Well…” Ken’s forehead wrinkled for a moment. “I think it was 9?”

“Oooh, that’s perfect,” Anne mused, as her fingers flew across her phone screen. “We can grab an early lunch before we go to see Narukami. Oooh, I wonder what kind of food we’ll find there!”

Their phones went off just as she finished, since she understandably messaged the Phantom Thieves group chat.

“But anyways, thanks, Ken,” Ren said, looking at the older boy. “You didn’t have to do this.”

Ken just shrugged. “You asked me to. It’s nothing really… But anyways…” He gave them a wry smile. “I’ll leave you two be. I’ve intruded on your alone time long enough.”

“A-Alone time?” Anne squeaked out, her face flushing.

“It’s not like you’re being chaperoned,” Ken said dryly, before he ducked to dodge the pillow Anne chucked at him. He was already descending the stairs now. “And that’s my cue to leave.”

“Oooh…” Anne fumed, pouting for a moment before she plopped onto the bed. “The nerve of him… I feel a little sorry for Shinjiro-san now.” But then she looked at him with a beaming smile as he joined her on the bed. “But hey, it’s so cool that you get to talk to a Wild Card like this!”

“Yeah…” Ren did his best to infuse some enthusiasm in his voice. “It’s great that Ken pulled this for me.”
“Ren…?” Anne spoke up hesitantly, resting a hand on his arm. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing, Anne,” Ren said.

“Uh-uh.” Anne frowned at him, wagging a finger at him. “Don’t try to lie to me. Come on, talk to me. What’s bugging you?”

Ren heaved out a sigh. “What if… I’m not… good enough?” He hated how weak he sounded, but it was… how he felt. “Not a good enough Wild Card, not a good enough leader…”

“Ren.” Anne touched his cheek for a moment, smiling warmly at him. “No talking about what ifs, remember?” She then leaned in and kissed his cheek. “It’ll be fine, Ren… I don’t think Narukami will expect you to be him. You’re you and he’s him. And…” She blushed for a moment. “…I wouldn’t change a single thing about you. My confident, sexy boyfriend who makes a kickass leader. I wouldn’t want any other leader.”

“Ohhh, I’m sexy, am I?” Ren couldn’t but grin at her. She really had a way to cheer him up and make his worries melt away. She was just so… optimism. She was like the sun, all fire and warmth. “Shall I demonstrate further?”

Anne just giggled, but she didn’t smack him. Not even playfully. “Of course you focus on that.”

“Don’t give me ammo then.” Ren ran his fingers through Anne’s loose blonde tresses. “So…” He gave his girlfriend a half-lidded gaze. “Shall we pick up where we left off?”

Chapter End Notes

I hope the first half of Okumura's Palace was interesting enough to read, given it spans most of the chapter. Some of the mechanics were... difficult to translate.

I hope this chapter answers the question of just which Wild Card Ren will be meeting in person. I took some liberation with the train time, but I’m basing Inaba's location off of Fuefuki, the Japanese city that seems to be Inaba's inspiration.
The Inaba Episode

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves meet the Investigation Team. Shenanigans ensue.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sunday, September 25th, 2016

“Last stop… Yasoinaba Station… I repeat, Yasoinaba…”

The conductor’s voice dragged Ken out of his slumber. He blinked several times. That was right… they were on the train riding to Inaba. He must’ve fallen asleep at some point…

He then shifted, only to realize there was a weight on his shoulder. Ken felt his face begin to burn when he realized just what the source was.

Makoto had fallen asleep on his shoulder. And she looked so peaceful when asleep… He almost felt bad for having to wake her up. Her hair fell in her face as she shifted slightly, and Ken brushed it away without thinking. Makoto was sitting closer than she usually would… if they were sitting closer, it’d be almost like back in Okumura’s Palace-

Ken groaned, pressing a hand to his still flushed face. When he had been hit with Evil Smile, what he said was a blur. What he did remember was Makoto comforted him, the way she held his hand, and the way she had hugged him…

Ken normally wasn’t fond of being touched. He didn’t mind being touched on the shoulder or being briefly touched on the arm—that was usually how his male senpai showed affection anyways. But hugs, even ones from Minako-san or Fuuka-san which were strictly platonic, made him a bit squirmy. But with Makoto… it was different. It felt nice, and he honestly had been a little disappointed when Makoto had pulled away.

But now… he was just confused. Makoto was his friend… why did he feel all of that?

And lately, Makoto had been acting… off. Though he blamed Ren for what happened when they first started exploring Okumura’s Palace. He had whispering something to her and then Makoto went and blurted something out… not to mention that she had looked so embarrassed the entire time… Yeah, Ren definitely egged her on.

…Anyways, he’d figure this out later. They would have to get off the train pretty soon.

“Hey, guys, wake up,” he said, before reaching to shake Makoto awake.

“Huuuh?” Futaba blinked her eyes open, before yawning. She then patted her face, frowning when she discovered that her face was bare. “Where are my glasses…?”

“Mm… we’re here?” Haru asked, yawning herself. She rubbed her eyes, before looking around.
“That was shorter than I had suspected.”

“Yeah, it is only an hour and a half,” Ken answered, before looking over to Futaba. “And Futaba, I took your glasses and put them in the front compartment of your bag,” Ken said. “I didn’t want them to fall off your face during the train ride.”

Futaba yawned again, though she did try to stifle it with her hand. “Thanks. Though early train rides should be made illegal…”

Haru just giggled. “Futaba-chan, it wasn’t that early.”

“I had to get up at eight today, Haru! Eight!”

He had to wonder if Futaba had forgotten that you had to get up at seven for school…

Makoto suddenly woke up with a gasp, yanking away from him. Her eyes were wide with shock. “S-Sorry! Oh god, Ken, I’m sorry!”

Ken couldn’t help but frown. Was sleeping on him so embarrassing? “Makoto, it’s fine-“

The door suddenly slid open and Anne stuck her head inside. “Hey, what are you guys doing sitting around?” she asked with a frown. “This is our stop!”

“We had to… wake up Makoto,” Ken said, before he stood up. “But yeah, you’re right, Anne.”

They grabbed their various bags and met up with the rest of the second-years—their group was too big for them to get just one compartment, so they had split into two.

Ryuji looked around the moment they stepped out of the station and into Inaba. He shook his head. “Damn, I knew that Inaba would be kinda sleepy but I didn’t think it’d be that quiet.”

“I like it,” Haru said with a content smile. “It’s quaint. A change of pace after Tokyo.”

“Indeed.” Yusuke nodded firmly. “The countryside is picturesque. I imagine that you could paint some lovely landscape pieces here.”

“Eh.” Ren just shrugged. “I’m used to that kind of thing. My hometown’s pretty much like this.”

“Oh, right, I forgot that you came from a country town…” Makoto remarked. “Tokyo must’ve been a big change for you.”

“Pretty much.” Ren nodded, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Tokyo was a nice change. A lot more exciting.”

“Dude, it looks like you could fall asleep just walkin’ around here,” Ryuji groused. “What do you even do here?”

“I don’t know about that,” Ken said, folding his arms over his chest. “Granted, I wasn’t in Inaba for too long when I last visited, but the people are quite lively. It makes the town bigger than what it seems.”

“But anyways…” Makoto glanced over at Ken. “Shall we get going? Where are we going, by the way?”

“Yu-san stays with his uncle and younger cousin when he visits Inaba,” Ken explained. “We’ll be going to their residence.”
Ren suddenly tensed at that, making Anne frown. She squeezed his arm for a moment, making Ren smile at her in response.

Ken had to wonder what that was about. Though he supposed that given how everyone was a bit cautious about the Shadow Operatives, Ren would be a bit leery of meeting other Persona-users. He had no idea what Yu-san even thought of the Phantom Thieves. Or any of the Investigation Team, for that matter. Aside from Yu-san and Rise-san… who was home? He knew that Yukiko-san and Kanji-san were a given, since they were working with their families’ businesses… And Naoto-san was having some trouble finding work lately…

“Helloooo?” The sound of snapping fingers dragged him out of his thoughts. “Dude, why are you zoning out on us like that?”

Ken flinched at the sudden movement. “Sorry. I was just… thinking.”

“Ryuji, there’s no need to be so impatient,” Yusuke chided. “Ken’s not all that much more familiar with Inaba than us.”

“No, no… he’s right.” Ken sighed, rubbing his temples. “Come on.”

They entered the shopping district. It was pretty lively with several of the denizens coming and going in the family owned businesses.

“That torii gate…” Makoto stared at it with a frown. “Is that gold?”

“Daaaamn…” Ryuji gaped at it. “You’re right! How the hell can they afford that?!”

“Oh, you must be new here.” A passing by housewife turned to look at them. “This shrine is really special. If you make a wish, it somehow miraculously comes true! We truly have a benevolent spirit watching over us.”

“Huh.” Ren tilted his head. “Sounds like a bit of an urban myth.”

The housewife laughed. “Well, you can believe me or not. Though, if you want a real urban myth, you should hear about the Midnight Channel! It was the craze just a few years ago.” She then shook her head, looking wistfully towards the south entrance. “It’d be right about time for Namatame-san to make his usual speech, but he’s moved higher up. I do hope that he does visit soon. He made a wonderful mayor.”

“Namatame-san…?” Haru questioned, tilting her head.

The housewife shook her head. “Look at me, talking your ears off. You kids probably have some place to go! What brings you here to little Inaba?”

“Oh, we’re here to visit with a… friend,” Ken said. “Do you know Officer Dojima’s nephew?”

“Do I?” she echoed with a laugh. “There isn’t a soul in Inaba who doesn’t know who Yu Narukami is! He was such a polite young man. It came as a huge surprise when the news came out that he was dating Rise-chan. They’ve been friends since high school but Rise-chan being an idol had to keep herself at an arms-length apart.” She then smiled. “They do make a sweet couple, though.”

Right… aha… ahaahaha… If only she knew just how long they had been dating.

“But anyways, you shouldn’t keep Narukami-kun waiting,” she said, with a wave of a hand. “It was nice to meeting you all!”
“It was nice speaking to you,” Makoto said politely.

The housewife had barely stepped away when Ken’s phone suddenly went off.

Message From: Yu Narukami

[ Yu Narukami ]: Shinjiro-san told me that you’re coming after all

[ Yu Narukami ]: I know it’s around lunch time, so we ordered Aïya’s takeout

[ Ken Amada ]: Um… did Shinjiro-san tell you that we’re bringing everyone?

[ Yu Narukami ]: Yeah he did

[ Yu Narukami ]: Don’t worry about the price. You’re high school students after all

[ Ken Amada ]: …University students aren’t much richer

“That was from Yu-san,” he said, slipping his phone into his pocket. “He said he ordered lunch from a local restaurant so we should just head straight there.”

“Oooh, sweet!” Ryuji cheered, pumping his fist. “I’m starving!”

“Since when aren’t you?” Morgana snarked.

“Ugh, shuddup, Morgana!” Ryuji retorted. “How come you never make fun of Anne when she talks about bein’ hungry, huh?!”

“Hey, don’t drag me into this!” Anne cried, glaring at Ryuji.

Ren just chuckled at the two of them. “Come on, guys, settle down. We have to walk to Narukami’s uncle’s place still.”

“And you’re making a scene…” Futaba mumbled under her breath. And then she spoke louder. “But there seriously aren’t any trains here? This is seriously primitive.”

Yusuke frowned. “I do not see the issue. I usually walk while commuting.”

Even though Yusuke had mentioned this before, it was always unsettling. Especially since the train fare always felt like inconsequential.

Haru coughed, shuffling her feet. “This is getting us nowhere. Lead the way, Ken-kun.”

Ken activated the GPS on his phone and it took them to the Dojima residence. The metal plaque that read Dojima residence out in front confirmed that they had found the right house, so Ken rang the doorbell. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Ren tensing up again.

Yu-san was really nice… He hoped that Ren wouldn’t let his trepidation affect his conversation with Yu-san.

“Coming!” Rise’s melodic voice rang out.

“Dude, is that Narukami’s cousin?” Ryuji asked. “She has a hot voice!”

Uhhh… this was awkward…

“Not… quite…” Ken began with a voice. “It’s—”
The door yanked open, revealing a short woman in her early twenties. Copper ringlets cascaded down several centimeters past her shoulders. She was dressed in a light pink top that bared her shoulders, paired with a pair of beige capri pants, which showed off her toned legs.

“Ken-kun~!” Rise-san said brightly. “You’re here!” She then giggled, pressing a hand to her cheek. “Fuuka-chan is right. You just keep getting more and more handsome as the years go by.”

“Rise-saaaaaan…” he groaned.

“Hey, I’m just stating the truth!” Rise-san winked at him, her brown eyes twinkling. “Sooo… have you been charming the ladies in Tokyo? Or do you have a special lady of your own now?”

“Rise-san!” Ken’s cheeks flushed and he fought the urge to start smacking his head against the wall. “I don’t… there isn’t anyone, okay?!”

Dammit, why was he getting so flustered over this? It wasn’t like he hadn’t been teased about this before…

“Holyyyyy shit….” Ryuji gaped at Rise-san and then back to Ken. “You know… Risette?”

“Am I… missing something?” Yusuke asked, tilting his head.

“Aww, a pure soul!” Rise-san cooed. “It’s nice to meet all of you! I’m Rise Kujikawa, but Rise’s just fine! Some people—” she looked pointedly at Ken, “—are a tad too formal!”

“Dude! You know Risette?!” Ryuji repeated, before punching Ken in the shoulder. “Dude! Why didn’t you tell us?! She’s even hotter in person!”

Anne grabbed him by the ear and yanked hard. “She has a boyfriend!” she hissed. “Don’t you have any manners?!”

“I mean, Risette’s a bit too poppy for my tastes,” Futaba interjected, before she shot Yusuke an exasperated look, “but seriously, Inari? How do you not know Risette? Her face is plastered everywhere in the subway! Ren has a poster of her!”

“Hey, don’t drag me into this!” Ren protested.

“Ah.” Yusuke’s eyes lit up in understanding. “You’re the one who just released the album… Sapphire.”

“Yep, that’s me!” Rise-san nodded. “Though I do wish the agency hadn’t used my old look. I haven’t sported that look in years.” She then shook her head. “But here I am, talking your ears off!” She beckoned them forward. “Come in, guys! We can make proper introductions inside!”

They removed their shoes, and Ken was relieved to see that Ren had relaxed slightly with Rise-san’s chattering. There was something about Rise-san that made people at ease. There was a reason why Rise-san and Fuuka-san had clicked so easily, even with the three year age difference.

Rise-san suddenly latched onto his arm, tugging him close. “Soo…” Her smile turned devious. “Shinjiro-san is planning to propose to Fuuka-chan soon… right?!”

Ken couldn’t help but cringe. He should’ve known that would have gotten out to Rise-san. While Rise-san was very close to Fuuka-san, she was also good friends with both Yukari-san and Minako-san. And they were both in the loop about Shinjiro-san wanting to propose…
“He is… it’s not helping that Fuuka-san has only been able to visit for a few days at a time.”

“Hmmm…” Rise-san studied him closely. “He better make it a good one. I offered to help him with ideas, but noooo… my ideas are too ‘crazy’ apparently. And it better be soon. Or else I’m coming after him. I’m having a concert in November, so it’s not like I won’t have a reason to be in Tokyo!”

Ken just cringed again. “Duly noted, Rise-san. I’ll let Shinjiro-san know.”

Not. Shinjiro-san always complained that they already had one Minako-san, when Rise-san was around. Shinjiro-san or Fuuka-san haven’t even mentioned to him when Fuuka-san was visiting next.

Rise-san just giggled. “I just wanted to let you know. I want Fuuka-chan to be happy!”

“It must be nice to be out in the open about dating Yu-san, huh?”

Rise-san just winked. “Oh, you have no idea, Ken-kun.” Then she flashed him a sly smile. “So… you really don’t have a lady in mind? Really? With all of your pretty lady friends now?”

Ken groaned. Not even Minako-san teased him about this…

Even if Anne wasn’t taken by Ren… he couldn’t see himself dating her. Ren may find her silly moments endearing but… not him. And Futaba… she was nearly three years younger. If anything, he saw her more like a younger sister. And Haru… she was nice, but he honestly didn’t know much about her still. He supposed if he had to pick… he would choose Makoto. She was smart, pretty, and he always enjoyed spending time with her-

…Wait, what was he thinking?

“Oooh, you’re blushing!” Rise-san giggled, all while smiling deviously. “So who is it, hmm?”

…Okay, he understood why Shinjiro-san called Rise-san nosy. Rise-san was always nice to him, but apparently he was a new target to her now.

“We’ve been making everyone wait,” Ken blurted out. “We better go.”

“Heeeeey!” Rise-san protested. “You get back here, Ken-kun!”

Ren hated that he was nervous about this. Why should he care about this random stranger’s opinion of him? It’s not like many people thought highly of him. Not even his own parents did. Who cared if Yu Narukami thought he was an obnoxious delinquent who had too much time on his hands?

Oh wait, he did. He thought it’d be good for him to meet a fellow Wild Card but the Shadow Operatives were already doubting their intentions. Why would Yu Narukami and his team be any different? Especially since Naoto Shirogane was famous for helping solve the Adachi case at the young age of sixteen. Why would a detective trust him? He didn’t know if Shirogane was even part of Narukami’s team, but it was kinda suspicious…

Anne silently took Ren’s hand and gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. Ren looked at her, and she just smiled softly at him. Ren squeezed her hand back. How did he luck out?

They stepped into the living room, which was modestly sized. There was a couch, but Ren’s eyes
were drawn to the kotatsu. Just like his old house.

Sitting on the couch were three adults, all looking like they were in their early twenties, while another sat on the floor. Ren’s eyes were immediately drawn to the man sitting on the couch at the far right.

He had steel gray hair in a bowl cut style—but somehow he managed to pull it off—and his eyes were silver. There was something piercing about his gaze. Confidence radiated around him, and he held himself tall and proud. He wore a light gray v-neck and a pair of jeans.

Two women sat with Narukami. The taller of the two had a slender, willow-like build. She had long jet black hair, with the front strands braided around her head, porcelain skin, and dark eyes. She sorta was like Hifumi, in how she looked like a traditional Japanese beauty. She wore a red chiffon top with a bow, paired with a black skirt.

The shorter woman had wispy dark blue hair that she wore down to her shoulders. Even though she was sitting down, Ren could see that she was positively tiny. She wore a dark blue sleeveless top, paired with black slim-fitting pants. She had a quiet serious air to herself, and there was an intelligence in her dark blue eyes. She seemed to be observing all of them. Ren honestly felt like he was underneath a magnifying glass.

Leaning against the shorter woman’s legs was a tall man. Just… damn. Ren could tell that he was tall, even though he sat on the floor. He was built like a brick wall, with broad shoulders and muscled arms. His appearance was offset by his neat black hair and the glasses he wore. He wore a black leather jacket over a purple top, paired with jeans.

“So… are you just gonna stare at us the whole time?”

Ren snapped to attention. It was the tall man who spoke.

“Kanji-kun…” The blue haired woman nudged his side with her foot. “That was rude.”

“…Sorry, Naoto,” he grumbled.

…Yeah, that confirmed his suspicions. Ren’s hand tightened around Anne’s.

That was then Ken entered the living room, looking flustered for some reason. Rise grumbled about him running off before perching herself on the couch’s arm next to Narukami.

“I was wondering what took you so long, Rise,” Narukami laughed softly. “Pestering Ken about Shinjiro-san proposing, right?”

Rise just giggled, her eyes twinkling. “Something like that~”

Ken just groaned, pressing a hand against his face. “I want to wipe it from my mind,” he muttered.

…Okay, what did Rise say to Ken? And he wanted to know her secrets. It was always fun to see Ken being embarrassed by his senpai.

Shirogane coughed. “It’s been a while, Ken-kun,” she said, a gentle smile on her face. “I hope you’ve been well.”

“Yeah!” Kanji leaned forward, smiling widely at Ken. “How ya been, Ken? Haven’t gotten to talk to you in months.”
Huh. Shirogane and this Kanji seemed pretty fond of Ken. Similar to how SEES treated Ken as their collective younger brother.

Ken rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, sorry… Things have been kinda crazy.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Narukami chuckled. “We never would have expected you of all people to join the Phantom Thieves.”

“It’s so exciting though!” the dark haired woman exclaimed. “I’m a bit jealous of Ken-kun, I must admit. Being a Phantom Thief… it must be so exciting!”

…Wait, what? She… really thought that? She looked like a traditional Japanese lady…

…Then again, they did have Haru. She looked all demure, but she was pretty vicious with that axe of hers. Not to mention when she had Milady use her gun attack…

“Ahaa…” Ken rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s nothing really.” He bowed his head. “I hope you’re all well.”

Kanji just made a face at Ken. “Dude, we’re always telling you that you don’t hafta be so polite… For crying out loud, you’re only two years younger than me.”

That reminded him of how Ren had to give Ken a very hard nudge to get him drop formalities. At least Ken didn’t use the -san honorific with them. Though if he had to guess, Ken stuck to that since he was the youngest for the longest time.

“Speak for yourself, Kanji,” Rise teased, leaning forward all while resting her hand on Narukami’s arm. Her smile could only be described as impish. “You’re the baby of the group, after all.”

Kanji scowled at Rise. “Ugh, shuddup, Rise! We’re in the same school year! And I’m born in January!”

“You’re still the baby of the group!”

That was when the dark haired woman started to chortle. “Kanji-kun… wearing baby clothes…” She then burst into a laughing fit, clutching her stomach. “That’s such a funny sight! Just imagine it…!”

“And you set off Yukiko-senpai,” Shirogane sighed, shaking her head.

Narukami cleared his throat. “Settle down,” he said calmly, somehow able to speak above the woman’s hysterical laughter. “We should introduce ourselves.”

“Three guesses who’s the leader, and the first two don’t count,” Futaba muttered.

“Yeah, for real,” Ryuji mumbled.

“Seems like you’ve already figured me out but…” Narukami straightened his posture, before his eyes met Ren’s. “My name is Yu Narukami. For the longest time, I was the most recent Wild Card.”

“Rise Kujikawa,” Rise said with a bright smile, before winking at them. “But you all seem to know me quite well.”

“Naoto Shirogane,” Shirogane introduced herself, before she grimaced. “…Kindly refrain from using the moniker the media gave me. I don’t particularly like being called it.”
Huh. Wondered why Shirogane didn’t like that title. Though what did she think of Akechi, anyways? Shirogane stayed away from the spotlight.

“The…” Makoto gaped at Shirogane. “The Detective Prince?!?”

“Any other celebrities you know, Ken?” Futaba demanded. “Seriously, first Mitsuru Kirijo and Yukari Takeba! And then Risette and the Detective Prince?!”

Shirogane’s expression became flat. “…What did I just say?”

“Come on, it’s not that big of a deal…” Anne said. “I mean, we have Haru.”

“Okumura Foods ain’t comparable to the Kirijo Group, Anne!” Ryuji protested. “And seriously… Risette and the Detective Prince?! You’ve been holding out on us, Ken!”

Ken sighed. “So I should’ve just listed all the celebrities I know…?”

“Yes,” Futaba said brightly. “Glad to know you’re catching on!”

Ken rolled his eyes. “Duly noted,” he said dryly.

Shirogane coughed. “Moving on.” She then smiled at the unnamed man. “You’re next, Kanji-kun.”

“Uh right… Kanji Tatsumi,” Kanji said, before scratching his cheek. “Er… I help run my family’s textile business?”

Textile? This guy worked with sewing? Or maybe he handled the business side of things. Though that was weird in itself.

The black haired woman finally calmed down with her laughing fit, apparently regaining her poise. “I’m Yukiko Amagi. I’m the junior manager of the Amagi Inn, a traditional inn.”

“The Amagi Inn…” Yusuke said thoughtfully. “It’s rather famous for its onsens, isn’t it?”

Amagi nodded. “That’s the main draw for people staying at the inn. If we have time today, maybe we can use the hot springs. It’s been a while since I’ve soaked in them myself.”

“That sounds wonderful!” Haru exclaimed, lightly clapping her hands together.

Narukami cleared his throat. “But now we’ve introduced ourselves… it’s your turn.”

They took turns introducing themselves. Narukami’s team seemed nice enough at least. Ren found himself relaxing a little.

Narukami invited them to sit around the kotatsu, since the adults had taken the couch. Morgana wiggled out of Ren’s bag, jumping on top of the kotatsu.

A strangled sound escaped Tatsumi. “He’s so… cute…” He was blushing. “It looks like he’s wearing little socks!”

Morgana just hissed. “Don’t patronize me!”

“Can I pet him?” Tatsumi pleaded.

“Stop treating me like I’m a cat!” Morgana shouted. “I’m not a cat!”
Ren leaned toward to Ken, who sat to his right. “…They can’t understand Morgana, can they?”

Ken shrugged. “Not surprised,” he murmured. “Shinjiro-san and Fuuka-san can’t understand him either.”

Morgana really was an odd case… Though Morgana was pretty convinced that his memories lurked at the bottom of Mementos. That may be connected.

Tatsumi’s smile faltered. “…So no?”

“Don’t feel bad, Kanji-san,” Ken said. “Morgana’s prickly to begin with.”

“Don’t spread lies about me!” Morgana protested.

“Is it though?” Ryuji asked, smirking at Morgana.

“Ugh! Shut up, Ryuji!”

“Settle down, you two,” Makoto chided, before she let out a sigh. “Honestly…”

“Are you… arguing with the cat?” Amagi asked slowly.

“Wait… you don’t know about Morgana?” Anne asked, her eyes wide.

Narukami shrugged. “It’s not like we’ve been holding a video conference. Yeah, Ken reports to Mitsuru-san, but we’re not privy to everything he tells her. Their organization is pretty secret, anyways.”

“So says the part-time Shadow Operative,” Rise teased.

Narukami just laughed. “Okay, I guess I’m not the best person to say that… But either way, we have a vague way of how you operate in the…” He frowned. “…Metaworld, was it?”

“Metaverse,” Yusuke corrected.

Shirogane coughed. “Yu-senpai, I believe that you promised everyone lunch? Perhaps we can exchange stories while we eat?” she suggested. “Before the food gets cold.”

Narukami nodded. “Yeah, you’re right, Naoto.” He then looked over to everyone else. “Sound good to you?”

“Hell yeah!” Ryuji nodded vigorously. “I’m starving!”

It took some time to serve the food, but they settled in the living room and dug into their food. Narukami had gotten the food from a place called Aiya’s, a Chinese diner in the shopping district. Ren dug into his share with gusto. It had been a while since he’s had Chinese take-out.

“Wait, wait, wait—” Ryuji waved his chopsticks for a moment. “You go inside a TV? That’s so weird!”

“Yes, about as strange as accessing a Shadow nest by using a phone app,” Ken said dryly, before taking a bite of an eggroll. “Imagine that.”

Futaba snickered at Ryuji’s chagrined expression. “He got you there, Ryuji.”

Tatsumi just laughed at that, smirking in Ken’s direction. “I mean, after ya see enough weird shit,
you just kinda shrug it off, don’tcha?”

“Pretty much,” Ken agreed.

Though Ren had to agree with Ryuji… the whole story of the Midnight Channel was pretty trippy. Turned out that they fought a goddess as well. Though he had to wonder what kind of other bizarre stuff Ken had witnessed.

“You really have accomplished a lot… haven’t you?” Haru said.

“Hey, come on, it’s not like you’ve been twiddling your thumbs,” Rise interjected. “I mean, you’ve been choosing your targets because you want to help people who can’t fight back, right? That’s pretty noble in itself. There’s no need to downplay yourselves or compare yourselves to us.”

Ren just blinked. He didn’t think that they would understand.

“Comparison is the thief of joy, after all,” Shirogane agreed.

Yusuke frowned. “Ah, no offense, Shirogane-san, but I thought that you would be the last person to…”

Shirogane let out an exasperated sigh. “I’m by no means, associated with Goro Akechi,” she said dryly. “Frankly, my so called successor is…”

“Full of it?” Tatsumi offered.

“Inflated with hot air,” Rise added with a giggle. “Seriously, he’s got nothing on Naoto-kun.”

“I think he has a point with his argument that your actions could make people self-reliant,” Shirogane stated. “However… his argument holds less ground for me with his arguing that justice must be upheld through the law. The law is malleable, after all.”

She… agreed with them? The original Detective Prince? Ren knew it was rude, but he couldn’t help but stare.

“Not to mention how we didn’t let the police take care of things for us,” Narukami added. “Yosuke, Chie, and I decided to form the Investigation Team to begin with, because we felt we couldn’t let the police just take care of the case and let more people die.”

They… had taken things in their own hands as well. Ren had to admit that he wasn’t expecting that. He had formed all of these assumptions in his head. That the older Persona-users wouldn’t know how they felt, how they probably wouldn’t come to an understanding…

But… was that any better with how people formed assumptions about him because of his record? Ren couldn’t help but feel a bit ashamed of all of his preconceptions.

“Wow…” Anne whispered. “It seems so simple when you put it that way.”

Futaba nodded vigorously. “I thought you would be totally giving us the side eye.”

Haru winced. “Ah, Futaba-chan, you shouldn’t just outright say it.”

“No, it’s fair,” Narukami said. “The confessions of the criminals who personally affected you… it’s given you mistrust of adults. I can understand that…”

“But I hope that you understand now that we don’t have to be your enemies,” Amagi said.
No… they didn’t. Ren could see that now. He was still unsure about the Shadow Operatives as a group overall… but the Investigation Team seemed to understand their motivations. They didn’t seem so intimidating now…

“But anyways, Senpai and Ren-kun probably have a lot to talk about!” Rise chirped, before winking at her boyfriend. “We’ll get out of your hair then. We’ll take everyone else around town.”

They helped clean the area, before everyone said their goodbyes and left the house.

But before Anne left with the others, she squeezed his hand before whispering to him: “It’ll be fine.”

When he looked back, he saw that Rise was whispering something to Narukami as well, before she quickly kissed his cheek and left with Anne. Narukami just watched her go with a fond smile.

“…She’s not subtle, is she?” Ren asked.

“No, she isn’t,” Narukami agreed, still smiling rather goofily. (God, did he look like that with Anne? Ken claimed that he looked besotted with Anne sometimes, but he couldn’t help but feel Ken exaggerated a little with that.) But then he snapped to attention, his expression becoming serious. “…But you’re the newest Wild Card.”

Ren swallowed. “…I am.”

Narukami suddenly let out a laugh, brushing his bangs out of his face. “This is… still all very new to me,” he confessed. “Not being the youngest Wild Card anymore. Having a junior in that regard.”

Ren took in a shaky breath. “…It’s new to me having a senpai too.”

Narukami smiled faintly. “You seem to have gathered a good group of friends.” He then closed his eyes. “…It brings back memories of when I was in high school.”

Ren raised an eyebrow when Narukami opened his eyes again. “You’re not that old… You’re what—twenty-one?”

“Twenty-two,” he corrected, all while smiling nostalgically. “It feels so long ago and yet not…”

“…How did you do it?” Ren asked. “Not too long ago, when we went to steal Futaba’s Treasure… her twisted cognition of her mother nearly killed us. If Futaba hadn’t followed us in and awakened to her Persona, we wouldn’t have made it out of there. I don’t want that to happen again…”

He didn’t want to be a failure, not after hearing of the past Wild Cards’ feats. Would he even measure up?

“…Ren.” Narukami looked at him straight in the eyes. “Don’t compare yourself to me. Or Minatosan. Or Minako-san.”

“Kinda hard when one of my teammates was led by two of them,” Ren muttered.

“Hmm.” Narukami tilted his head. “That doesn’t sound like Ken,” he remarked. “Granted, I didn’t connect to him as well as Kanji or Naoto. But has he ever brought up Minato-san to you when you’re exploring the Palaces?”

“No…”

Ken only brought up his deceased leader when explaining SEES’s story and when Ren had asked
him. But still… Ren couldn’t help but wonder… In hindsight, he realized that Ren reminded Ken of his two leaders. But was it a good thing? A bad thing? He hated that he didn’t know.

“You’re not me,” Narukami said. “And you’re not the Arisatos. I’m not either. I haven’t seen you in combat, so I can’t say what your strengths are. But your friends listen to you for a reason. You don’t have to doubt yourself because you suddenly know that there were Wild Cards before you.”

Ren looked back at him. Narukami was right. What was he doing, second guessing himself like this? He had made a resolve to fight against criminals who oppressed those who couldn’t fight back. He didn’t need to be anyone but himself.

Ren smiled. “…Thanks. I think I needed that reminder.”

“You’re allowed to have doubts,” Narukami said. “I know that it was pretty strange myself when I met Minako-san. I wasn’t the only one with this power. But…” He closed his eyes with a smile. “…One thing that the Wild Cards have in common is that your bonds are your true power. Keep your friends close and you can accomplish anything.”

Ren just stared. “That’s so corny.”

Narukami’s eyes popped open. His expression could only be described to be like a kicked puppy. “C-Corny?” he repeated, sounding baffled.

Ren couldn’t help it. He burst out laughing. God, and to think, just a few hours, he was nervous about meeting this guy. Ren wished that Ken had told him what a massive dork Narukami was.

As per Rise-san’s suggestion, they were taken around Inaba. Their first stop had been the shopping district. It had been rather lively, with people coming and going out of the shops. The Investigation Team as a whole was well known. They were stopped a couple times by some elementary students, who called Kanji-san “Sensei”, quizzing him about advice for a… sewing project they had. Even though he had mentioned working with textiles before, Makoto had a hard time connecting him with traditionally feminine work.

Then they went to the Samegawa River, the water being surprisingly clear. It sparkled under the golden sunlight and Makoto could see fish darting about. Morgana jumped out of Haru’s arms, batting at a nearby fish. He then leaned too far when the fish swam out of Morgana’s reach, tipping into the river.

Ryuji burst into laughter as Morgana sputtered before crawling back to shore. Morgana was completely drenched, his fur sopping with water.

Rise-san giggled, before fishing out a handkerchief. “Aw, Morgana, you could’ve sweet talked Senpai into giving you some fish! He’s got such a soft spot for cats.” She then glanced around. “Anyone else have handkerchiefs? Morgana should be dried off or I think he’ll get a cold.”

They managed to dry off Morgana with the handkerchiefs they all carried with them, but Morgana’s fur was still slightly damp.

Morgana then plopped onto the grass. “Ugh,” he groaned out. “Ren makes it so easy when he fished at the fishing pond…”

Anne giggled before sitting down herself, stretching out her legs. She scratched behind Morgana’s ear. “I’m pretty sure Ren used a fishing rod, Morgana.”
“Oh, Ren-kun fishes a bit?” Yukiko-san asked. “So does Yu-kun. He says it’s relaxing.”

“Yeah, that sounds like Senpai,” Kanji-san said, his voice fond. “But yeah… that’s about it for Inaba, I guess.” He shrugged. “Must be pretty boring for you city people.”

“When we walked around the shopping district… it sounded so lively!” Haru said. “I think that the people here make it worth living here in Inaba. That’s just… the feeling I get.”

Naoto-san just chuckled, before sitting down next to Kanji-san. “You described it quite well. I always look forward to returning to Inaba for a short reprieve after I close a case.”

“And Kanji has nothing to do with that, riiiiight?” Rise-san interjected, a sly smile on her lips.

…Makoto would have to be careful and not let things slip around her. She seemed the type to tease people about their crushes.

“This again, Rise?!” Kanji-san glowered at Rise-san, but she didn’t look fazed at all. Makoto didn’t know how because Kanji-san had a rather nasty glare, but Rise-san just giggled at Kanji-san.

“Seriously! We’ve been datin’ for over a year, when are you gonna let it go?!”

“Hmm… probably never.”

Yukiko-san just laughed softly. “Hmm, that does sound like Rise-chan.”

Rise-san just shrugged. “Guilty.”

Ryuji just leaned in close. “Can’t believe this is really Risette!” he hissed at them.

Ken just looked at him, exasperated. “Ryuji, Rise-san’s just a normal person.”

“You’ve known her for years, man!” Ryuji protested. “You could’ve given us a warning, y’know!”

Ryuji’s outburst caught the attention of the older Persona-users and they glanced at him quizzically.

“Ryuji-kun, you’re not very… quiet,” Yukiko-san said delicately.

“That’s Ryuji to a T,” Futaba said lightly.

“Ugh, shuddup!” Ryuji scowled at her. “Besides, you can’t really talk with how you totally fangirled over Yukari-san! You were totally babbling ‘round her!”

“Um, that’s because it’s Yukari Takeba!” Futaba scoffed, folding her arms over her chest. “Pink Argus trumps any singer.”

Yusuke tilted his head. “Furthermore, I believe that you’re only reacting in this way because you find Kujikawa-san rather attractive, Ryuji.”

Anne grinned. “She was so his celebrity crush when we were in junior high.”

“HEY!” Ryuji scowled at her. “Jeez, why are you throwing me under the bus like this?!”

Rise-san giggled. “I should’ve expected one of you to be a fan.” She winked at Ryuji then. “I’d be more than happy to take a picture with you.”

“Shit! Haru, I didn’t mean to actually pinch me!”

“Really?” Haru tilted her head. “I wish you had been more clear then, Ryuji-kun!”

Naoto-san just sighed, shaking her head as Rise-san indulged Ryuji and then Anne. Haru rejoined them, since she didn’t have much interest in taking pictures. “You’ve certainly found a… colorful group of friends, Ken-kun,” she remarked.

Ken rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah… though you could say that about everyone else.”

“She just… commands your attention,” Yusuke remarked, shaking his head as Futaba questioned why she was so popular. Rise-san didn’t mind though, only choosing to sing a few bars from a song that Makoto didn’t recognize.

It was a lovely song though… Makoto leaned backwards, listening to Rise-san’s sweet voice. It was about the singer apparently having realized some kind of truth and being excited to start a journey and seeing the world. Makoto couldn’t help but chuckle as Futaba was suddenly enraptured by Rise-san’s impromptu performance. Rise-san had just earned a new fan.

Yusuke added, “I don’t think I can even begin to capture her essence.”

“That’s Rise for ya.” Kanji-san shrugged. “She’s a real firecracker.”

Yukiko-san nodded. “That much hasn’t changed since we’ve been in high school.” Then her lips curled into a soft smile. “I hope we’ll be able to get together soon. It was nice to see Rise-chan and Yu-kun for the weekend, but it’s not the same without all of us.”

Ken nodded. “I can understand that. It was really nice but when everyone came back to Port Island.”

Makoto couldn’t help but look at the Investigation Team. They had their own lives, but Inaba seemed to keep calling them back. She hoped that she would stay close with her friends after graduation…

“Though I must say…” Haru looked at them. “I’m curious about how you met the Shadow Operatives to begin with.”

“Ah…” Naoto-san nodded. “That is quite a story too…” But then she smiled. “But the song Rise is singing… that was actually inspired by something during that incident.”

They began to explain about how they met Labrys, Aigis-san’s “older sister”, who had been pushed into the TV world and she had formed her own dungeon due to her bottled up feelings.

Though Makoto couldn’t help but feel intrigued at the idea of the TV world still existing. After all, Ken had said that Tartarus and the Dark Hour had been wiped from existence after Minato-san had sealed away Nyx.

This had led the Investigation Team to meet Mitsuru-san, Minako-san, Akihiko-san, and Aigis-san. But even though they had saved Labrys, there were some unanswered questions, such as who kidnapped Labrys to begin with. Or who had been pulling the strings the whole time.

And they would be shortly answered on the last day of Golden Week. The Shadow Operatives had been kidnapped, so the rest of SEES had to step in.

Though Makoto had a hard time making sense of this red fog… Or these so-called Shadow
selves…

“We actually met Ken-kun here on this bank,” Naoto-san said with a smile. “Though Kanji-kun… he just threw himself in danger’s way for Ken-kun.”

“Wasn’t gonna let a kid get hurt like that,” Kanji-san grumbled.

And Sho Minazuki… he seemed to really lash out at the world with his upbringing. Though Makoto couldn’t help but wonder just hard Mitsuru-san took it when she was reminded of her family’s sins.

“Seriously, you guys fought another god?” Futaba asked incredulously.

Yukiko-san just shrugged. “Technically, it had been Yu-kun, Labrys, and Minako-san. Labrys and Minako-san worked together to take down Hi-no-Kagutsuchi, and Yu-kun and Adachi-san landed the final blow.”

“Yeah, he kinda shot himself in the foot with that.” Kanji-san smirked. “He was the one who let Adachi out to begin with.”

“Dude… this is just too crazy…” Ryuji shook his head. “I hope that we never have to do any crazy shit like that.”

Rise-san just giggled, looking at her friends. “We’ve seen some crazy stuff over the years, huh?”

Naoto-san just smiled in response. “We have. Though I don’t think anything can ever compare to the Midnight Stage…”

Kanji-san groaned. “I don’t think we can ever forget that…”

“We’ll stick to fighting in the Metaverse, thank you,” Yusuke said dryly.

“I do wish that I could visit the Metaverse,” Naoto-san mused, rubbing her chin. “It really seems fascinating…”

“We can’t take you to the Metaverse…” Morgana said slowly, “but what about the TV World? I’m curious about that.”

Makoto just smiled at Morgana. “I was thinking the same thing, actually,” she informed him, making Ken raise an eyebrow at her. When the Investigation Team looked at her quizzically, she quickly clarified. “Morgana was saying that he wants to see the TV World. I’m… curious about what your Shadow nest looks like.”

For some reason, they exchanged an uneasy look.

“Well…” Yukiko-san said slowly, “I suppose we could take you.”

“What’s the matter?” Ken asked. “Is something wrong with the TV World?”

Kanji-san rubbed his face. “Ted’s been visiting it on and off. He totally freaked out when he saw that the TV World reverted from the peaceful place it was.”

Ken frowned. “That’s… strange.”

“Hmm… I wouldn’t say so,” Naoto-san said. “When we defeated Izanami, the fog was lifted. We were able to see the beauty in people’s hearts…” she pursed her lips, until it formed a thin line,
“but lately…”

“People are… scared,” Rise-san said with a wince. “The mental breakdowns… Even with us knowing… it’s still scary. I can only imagine what it’s like to people who don’t.”

Anne winced, wrapping her arms around herself. “Yeah, all those incidents… they were really scary.”

“At least Teddie said there’s no fog,” Yukiko-san offered. “It’s just… there are dungeons if we venture further from the usual spot.”

“Do you want to go still?” Ken asked.

Morgana nodded. “Yeah. I really want to see what it’s like.”

Everyone else added their agreements, so Naoto-san nodded. “All right.” She then stood up. “We’ll head to Junes then.”

They were led to Junes, the large department store sticking out like a sore thumb in the small country town.

“Is Teddie-san working today?” Ken asked, looking at Kanji-san.

He nodded in response. “Yeah, he got called in, because some part timers called in sick today. Ted was pretty upset about that…” He then glanced in the distance. “Speak of the devil.”

Rise-san intercepted the brightly colored mascot with a laugh. “Hello to you too, Teddie. You’re almost done for the day, right?”

“Save me, Rise-chan!” he whined.

Futaba sidled close. “That’s… the Junes mascot,” she said.

“I remember going to the Junes in Tokyo with my mom…” Ryuji said. “The guy in the costume was griping about it so much, grumbling ‘bout who the hell came up with this costume.”

Anne giggled. “Guess we have the answer.”

“Yeah, no kidding!”

Yusuke’s eyes were filled with disdain. “The costume’s coloring is blinding. They’re so garish.”

“Yusuke!” Makoto scolded.

“It’s true, you cannot deny it, Makoto.”

Makoto just sighed. Sometimes she wished she could convey that just because something was true… you shouldn’t say it.

“Woooow!” Teddie-san suddenly pushed forward, looking back and forth. “KenKen! You could’ve said that you had a bunch of cuties as friends!” But before Ken could even open his mouth, he zipped over to Anne. “What’s your name, cutie? You have blonde hair and blue eyes… just like me!”

…Wait, what?
“Teddie-san…” Ken sighed. “Anne’s off limits. She has a boyfriend.”

“Oh, I see…” Teddie-san suddenly was in front of Makoto, giving her a bit of whiplash. “What about you, hmm? Would you like to score with me?”

Yukiko-san suddenly scowled. “Can you please drop that already?! It’s been years!”

Makoto just stared blankly at him. He wanted to… score? What was that supposed to mean? He was… flirting, right? He was flirting. But what did that even mean?

“Teddie-san!” Ken suddenly snapped. “When I told you that Anne has a boyfriend… I didn’t mean move onto Makoto!” He then pinched the bridge of his nose. “Can you not flirt with my friends?”

“Oh, KenKen, you’re such a wet blanket!” he huffed.

“…KenKen?” Anne echoed. “I thought you didn’t like being called that, with how you told Futaba not to call you that.”

“I don’t,” Ken deadpanned.

“But Mako-chan is single!” he protested.

Makoto coughed. “U-Um… that may be true but… I’m not interested, Teddie-san.” She smiled apologetically at him, before her face began to burn. “I… I have feelings for someone else.”

“You… You do?” Ken’s voice was filled with shock. His face could only be described as flabbergasted.

…She shouldn’t have said that. But she had to deter Teddie-san somehow… right? Right? God, she hoped she didn’t regret opening her mouth like that…

“Oooh, she said it!” Futaba cackled, a knowing grin on her face.

…She was starting to regret it. Futaba’s grin was uncannily like Ren’s. She was probably spending too much time around Ren…

“Maybe we should head to the electronics department?” Anne quickly interjected. “I mean, we’re kinda a big group…”

“Electronics?” Teddie-san echoed with a frown. “Are you going back?”

“Yes.” Naoto-san nodded, smiling apologetically. “We’ll be careful, Teddie. And when we come back… hopefully you’ll be off work.” Then she looked at Anne. “However, Anne-san… we’re not going to the electronics department. Yosuke-senpai realized near the end of his senior year that the TV would soon be considered obsolete, so he had it tucked away in the back.”

“Hmm… okay.” Teddie nodded, before he rummaged around and produced a ring of keys, handing it over to the petite woman. “I trust you, Nao-chan! Though, if KenKen brought his friends… who’s Sensei’s junior?” He quickly scanned the area, his eyes lighting up. “Oh, it’s you—” he jabbed a finger in Yusuke’s direction, “—isn’t it?!”

“Me?” Yusuke blinked owlishly at Teddie-san.

“Ted…” Kanji-san groaned. “What the hell makes you think that?”

“Silly Kanji!” he chuckled. “He looks like Mina-chan’s brother!”
“Uhh… that’s stretching it a bit,” Ken said.

“He’s got blue hair!”

“So does Naoto-san,” Ken pointed out. “And don’t you have a classmate who had blue hair?”

“There’s Mishima too,” Ryuji chimed in. “Though his hair is more bluish black.”

“Why are we talking about this?” Morgana moaned. “This is pointless!”

“Hm?” Teddie-san turned at Morgana’s voice. “Oh! A kitty!” He then laughed. “But I bet my fur’s silkier than his!”

“Excuse me?!” Morgana bristled at that. “You take that back, you garish colored doll!”

“Translation?” Rise-san asked.

“Um.. Mona-chan says hello?” Haru offered.

“Somehow…” Yukiko-san tilted her head, “…I feel that’s not the truth.”

“This is looking to be quite a crowd.”

Makoto turned around to see that both Ren and Yu-san had entered Junes. Ren looked at ease, a bit of a flip of how he had radiated trepidation earlier.

“Ren!” Anne exclaimed, running over to him. “How was your talk?”

“Good.” Ren smiled at her, before taking her hand. But then his smile turned sardonic as he looked over to Ken. “You could’ve mentioned that he was a huge dork. He was going on about the power of friendship of all things.”

“Hmm… that does sound like Yu-kun,” Yukiko-san mused.

“Yukiko!” Yu-san protested, but the dark haired woman just shrugged at him.

Rise-san just giggled, before standing on her tiptoes to kiss him lightly on the cheek. “Aw, Senpai, don’t pout. It’s very endearing.”

“It doesn’t sound like it,” he mumbled. “But anyways, Rise mentioned that you wanted to visit the TV world?”

“I wish I could go, but I’ll join you later!” Teddie-san exclaimed, before he heaved out a huge sigh. “I better get back to work before Papa Hanamura yells at me for slacking off…”

“Papa… Hanamura?” Anne echoed, raising an eyebrow as Teddie-san walked away.

Naoto-san chuckled. “Yosuke-senpai’s parents adopted Teddie shortly before Yosuke-senpai graduated. He calls Yosuke-senpai’s mother ‘Mama Hanamura’ as well.”

“Aww, that’s so sweet,” Haru cooed. “So Hanamura-san is like Teddie-san’s older brother?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Yu-san said with a nod. “Yosuke gripes a lot about him, but everyone knows how much he cares about Teddie.” He then shook his head. “But anyways, let’s get you to the TV world.”
Yu-san led them to the backroom, and they were somehow able to slip past the employees’ notice. They entered a room and Kanji-san flicked on the light. A 2010 plasma screen was pushed against the opposite wall, and Yu-san walked up to it confidently. He touched the screen, and his touch sent ripples across the screen.

“Whoa!” Ryuji’s eyes were wide with shock. “Daaaaamn… even with your story, I wasn’t expecting that!”

“Minako-san relayed the story… but it’s something else actually seeing it,” Ken remarked.

Yu-san pulled his hand away, turning to face them. “Ready to go inside?” he asked, smiling fondly now—it must be bringing back memories.

Without another word, he turned around and plunged into the TV.

“Damn.” Ren blinked at the TV. “Didn’t know what I was expecting but…”

Rise-san giggled. “It’s not something you see every day. See you on the other side!”

She and Yukiko-san jumped in first, quickly followed by Naoto-san and Kanji-san… leaving them alone. Even though Makoto had been the one to broach the idea… she did feel a bit uneasy about the whole thing. Ken hadn’t even visited the TV world…

“This is just freaky,” Futaba muttered. “I’ll take the Metaverse any day.”

Ken just let out an exasperated sigh. “Why don’t you come me, then?” He then glanced. “If you’re still feeling unsure, maybe we should pair off then,” he suggested.

“Welllll, since it was Makoto’s idea to begin with…” Ryuji gave Makoto a push forward. “She should go with you!”

It took some willpower for Makoto to not glare at Ryuji, since that would probably just confuse Ken. And she had confused him enough already. Just… Ryuji, why?! Why did she ever do to him?!

…Okay, she nagged at him a lot about his schoolwork. And she did think that he could have a more balanced diet, instead of just eating beef bowls. But still…!

“Well, sure,” Ken said, though he raised an eyebrow at Ryuji. But then he turned back to Makoto. “Let’s go then, Makoto.”

They stepped forward and Ken pressed his hand against the screen. His touch sent waves rippling across the screen, before his hand began to sink inside.

Without warning, he used his free hand to snag Makoto by the wrist and pulled her in with him. Makoto let out a squeak, as they were suddenly engulfed in white. It was like they were free falling. But Ken suddenly twisted so that she landed on him when they hit the ground. His arms even went around her to steady her.

Makoto’s face heated up. He was touching her waist. His hands on her felt… nice.

…She should shove that thought of her mind. Far, frrrrrr away…

For a moment, she just stared down at Ken, whose face was starting to grow pink. Of course he was embarrassed, she was on top of him, for heaven’s sake. “T-Thanks,” she stuttered out.
At least she knew how to talk still. Ugh. How did someone have a crush on a good friend and not die?

Naoto-san suddenly coughed. “Ah, Makoto-san… you might want to get up so Ken-kun can too,” she said delicately.

“R-Right!” She quickly scrambled to her feet, extending a hand to help Ken up.

Ken just rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s no problem, really.”

Everyone else soon dropped down. Even Ren, who was normally so dexterous, had stumbled. He would’ve fallen on his face if Yu-san hadn’t steadied him. But the most glaring part wasn’t even their surroundings…

“Mona, you’re in your Metaverse form!” Ryuji said.

“I am…” Morgana twisted around. “That is strange.”

“Forget that,” Yu-san said, suddenly serious.

“W-What are you doing?” Morgana backed away from the advancing man. “Don’t try to pet me or I’ll… meowwwww…”

Yu-san rubbed the top of Morgana’s head, scratching behind Morgana’s ears. He even rubbed Morgana’s cheeks. And Morgana seemed to be in nirvana, judging by his blissful expression.

“I’m next, Senpai!” Kanji-san exclaimed, rushing over.

Naoto-san just sighed. “Shouldn’t they be more concerned about how we can suddenly understand him…?”

That was a bit strange… Maybe they had to be in a Shadow nest for Morgana to take on his Metaverse form…? This was really confusing.

“They’ve fought gods,” Futaba said flatly. “They don’t act like it.”

“Well, how should they act like then?” Rise-san asked, raising an eyebrow at Futaba. “Senpai’s always been a sucker for cats, and Kanji even more so… for anything cute. You should’ve seen him when he brought Momo home.”

“…Momo?” Haru asked.

“Oh, that’s one of Masamune’s pups,” Yukiko-san answered. “Fuuka-san promised him one.”

“Masamune?” Yusuke echoed, eyebrow raised. “As in… the Sengoku general?”

Ken just sighed heavily, pressing a hand to his forehead. “Yuiko-san, we’ve told you a million times. His name is Koromaru. I don’t know why you try to give him such strange names…”

Yukiko-san just frowned at him. “I think Masamune suits him well.”

“You’ve said the same thing when you tried to rename him Chosokabe, Yukimura, and Akechi.”

“Damn, she probably confused the crap out of poor Koromaru,” Ren snickered.

“You have no idea…” Ken grumbled.
“Soooo cute!” Kanji exclaimed, rubbing Morgana’s head rather vigorously. “And so soft!”

Naoto-san just sighed softly, her expression both exasperated and fond. “Kanji… that’s enough… He’s not a toy.”

“You really like cute stuff, huh?” Ryuji asked.

Kanji straightened up, narrowing his eyes at Ryuji. “Yeah? I like cute shit,” he said confidently. “So what?”

“You mentioned that you help run a textile shop,” Haru said. “I think it’s wonderful that you’re continuing your family’s business.”

“And you know how to sew and knit, right?”

“Hold on…” Yu-san stepped forward with a frown. “There’s nothing wrong with that kind of thing—“

“Huh?” Ryuji scratched the back of his head. “Whatcha talking ‘bout? I think that kinda thing super cool! My mom’s always like handmade gifts more! I was thinkin’ it’d be cool if I could knit my mom a scarf! She always gets pretty cold so I bet she’d love that!”

Naoto-san then laughed. “Pity you’re only here for today,” she said. “Perhaps if you were here for longer, you could have enrolled in one of Kanji-kun’s sewing classes.”

“Dude, that would be so awesome!” Ryuji then hung his head. “Man, why can’t Inaba be closer…?”

Haru just giggled. “I didn’t know you loved your mother so much, Ryuji-kun.”

Ryuji then coughed, his cheeks suddenly growing red. “It’s just been me and her for the longest time, y’know…” He rubbed the back of his head. “It ain’t a big deal.” He then pointedly looked around. “But this is it, huh…”

Yu-san nodded. “Yeah, this is the TV world.” He looked out to the distance. “I bet if we walked far enough, we could actually visit everyone’s dungeons.”

This earned him a few unamused stares. Oddly enough, Rise-san was the only one who didn’t react in such a way.

“You described it earlier…” Yusuke said slowly, “as losing control of your Shadow self. And if they’re not rescued in time… the Shadows will kill them?”

“That’s the gist of it,” Yukiko-san answered. “Our Shadow selves… they represented things deep in our hearts… something we didn’t want to admit.”

“And facing ourselves just made us stronger!” Kanji-san clenched his fist. “That’s how we got our Personas.”

Though Kanji-san, Yukiko-san, and Naoto-san all seemed a little… embarrassed by their places. But then again, they represented their dark side…

“That does hold some similarities to Palaces,” Ren noted, looking down at Morgana. “That’s probably why Morgana took on his Metaverse—Shadow nest?—form here.”

“That sounds close to how I got my Persona,” Futaba said thoughtfully, tilting her head.
Ren looked back to Ken. “Guess this is how you got your knowledge of Shadow selves.”

Ken just let out an exasperated sigh, though pink tinged his cheeks. “You talk like I’m some sort of walking encyclopedia about this kind of thing,” he mumbled.

“It seems like you don’t know about the Metaverse all too well,” Naoto-san noted, tilting her head. “Though perhaps you will find some more information the more you descend Mementos.”

“I can’t deny that the Metaverse is a… strange place,” Haru agreed. “When we come here, we don’t change into our Metaverse suits.”

“Wellll…” Anne tilted her head. “We stay in our normal clothes, if the Palace ruler doesn’t view us a threat. So I guess it makes sense that we don’t…?”

“What’s this about Metaverse suits?” Yukiko-san asked.

“Oh, um…” Makoto glanced at the older woman. “When we visit Palaces, we transform into a suit, granted to us by our Persona. It comes with a mask, which we have to rip off to summon.”

“Waitwaitwait…” Ryuji waved his hands. “If you don’t have special clothes… what do you wear?”

“…Our school uniforms?” Yu-san raised an eyebrow. “I’ve never heard of such an occurrence.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve never heard of jumping into an effin’ TV until today!” Ryuji retorted.

“…Okay, you have me there,” Yu-san acknowledged, making them laugh.


“…Like the rest of us?” Makoto asked. “Did you think he used his Evoker?”

“Ohh, so he gets a costume as well!” Yukiko-san’s eyes brightened with excitement. “What is it?”

“Why am I suddenly dragged into this…?” Ken sighed.

Futaba just poked him in the side, making him jump. She then flashed him a grin. “I thought you’d be used to it already.”

“Special costumes created by your Persona…” Kanji-san muttered under his breath. “What kind of material would they use…? It’s gotta be pretty sturdy, ‘specially with how crazy strong Shadows can be… Damn! I wish I could see.”

Was Kanji-san… gushing about fabric? Then again, he did work with fabrics a lot. It seemed to be his livelihood.

Naoto-san just chuckled, smiling fondly. “It seems that you’ve piqued Kanji-kun’s interest.”

“Though if you want to know about Ken’s outfit still…’” Ren smiled slyly. “Ryuji did compare it to Tuxedo Mask once.”

Haru tilted her head. “…There are some similarities, I have to admit.”

“Aww, that sounds so cute!” Rise-san cooed, pressing a hand to her cheek. “Now I wish I could see you in the Metaverse!”

Ken just pressed a hand to his face.
“Do you not… like it?” Makoto asked. “Because you look… nice in it.”

Anne had once said that Ken looked almost princely as Ace. There was something… dashing about Ken’s Metaverse costume. He really did look good in blazers.

Ken lowered his hand. “Um, it’s not that… it’s just…”

“The girls have always babied Ken a bit,” Yu-san offered. “They always found him adorable. Add that with the Tuxedo Mask comparison…”

“Oh, Senpai, are you jealous?” Rise-san batted her eyes at him, which only made him shake his head at her before chuckling. “You know you’re the only one for me!”

“Ugh, can you not flirt ’round us?” Kanji-san groaned.

“But anyways, I think we’ve spent long enough talking.” Yu-san rolled his shoulders, before gesturing towards the stack of televisions. “Let’s head back.”

They took turns exiting the TV world, and Makoto stumbled when they made it back to the real world. But somebody grabbed her by the shoulders, steadying her. She blushed when she glanced back and saw it was Ken. It always had to be Ken…

But then she was suddenly hit by a wave of exhaustion. She winced, pressing a hand to her forehead.

“We didn’t even fight any Shadows,” Futaba said. “Why are we tired…?”

“Visiting a Shadow nest still will tucker ya out,” Kanji-san said.

“Hmm…” Yukiko-san tilted her head, before reaching into the purse that dangled from her shoulder. She drew out her phone. “Oh, it’s about to change to the women’s time,” she noted. “For the hot springs.” She then turned to the two older women. “Rise-chan? Naoto-kun? The offer’s free to you, too!”

“What about you, Yukiko-senpai?” Naoto-san asked. “Do you have free time left?”

“Oh, Mother gave me the whole day off,” Yukiko-san said. “So I can join you too.”

A hot springs… Makoto had gone with Sae to go soak in one about… a year ago? Two years ago? Though she did remember that it had been nice.

“I’m game!” Rise-san exclaimed. “What about you girls?”

Anne smiled at them. “That sounds awesome! Thank you, Yukiko-san.”

“Well, what are we gonna do then?!” Ryuji demanded.

“…We could always go fishing?” Yu-san offered.

“…Pass.”

Crystalline water cascaded down in a small waterfall, filling a large pool. Amazingly enough, it was completely empty. Steam rose from the water, making Makoto anticipate that the water was rather hot.
Futaba would confirm that, dipping her foot into the water, only to yelp. “Hot! Hot!” She yanked her foot out, waving it back and forth frantically to cool it off.

“Jeez, you’re like a little kid,” Anne laughed, perching on the rocks. “Just relax, okay? Your body will adjust.”

“This is my first time, okay?” Futaba grumbled, before sitting next to Anne.

“How’s your hair, Futaba-chan?” Yukiko-san inquired. “I hope I didn’t wind it too tight.”

It was etiquette for women with long hair to tie back their hair so it wouldn’t drop in the water. Makoto was glad that she didn’t have to worry about that. But Futaba was used to just wearing her hair down, so Yukiko-san had done her hair, twisting Futaba’s long orange locks into a neat bun, expertly sticking pins in it so it wouldn’t loosen.

Futaba shook her head. “Nah, it’s good.”

Anne loosened her towel, slipping into the water before folding the towel and setting it neatly on the rocks. She let out a blissful sigh. “Oooh, this feels amazing…” She then looked at Yukiko-san. “And you grew up with this? I’m a bit jealous!”

Yukiko-san laughed. “Well, that also came with me having to help my mother with the inn since I was very young.”

“Hehe, true.”

“You’re not hot at all, Anne-chan?” Rise asked. “You just slid in there without even reacting!”

“Well, Anne’s element is fire,” Makoto explained. “And her Persona Hecate doesn’t even react to fire spells.”

“Ah, I see…” Naoto-san said, “you’re like Yukiko-senpai then. Her element is fire as well.”

They all gradually entered the pool, and Makoto winced as the hot water touched her skin. It took a few moments for her body to adjust.

“Oh, when was the last time we were able to do this kind of thing…?” Rise-san asked, looking to her two friends.

“Hmm…” Naoto-san let out a thoughtful hum. “I think it was right around graduation for us…? Though Kanji-kun was the only one to actually graduate from Yasogami…”

“Yeah, it was both online classes for us.” Rise-san mused. “But I can’t believe it’s really been that long! Has it really been three years…?”

“It is a pity that Chie-senpai couldn’t get away…” Naoto-san remarked.

“She was pretty disappointed…” Yukiko-san said with a nod. “Though I’m glad that Yu-kun decided to come back to Inaba this weekend.”

Rise-san just giggled. “You don’t have to tell me! Though we were stopped so many times during our date yesterday.”

Naoto-san chuckled. “Well, you and Yu-senpai are very well known around here.”

“You’re one to talk, Naoto-kun!”
“So… how long have you been together?” Anne asked.

Rise-san’s cheeks reddened, as a slow smile spread across her face. “It’s been a while.”

That was… awfully vague. But then again, idols weren’t supposed to date so they could appeal to their fans better. Makoto supposed it shouldn’t be a surprise that Rise-san wasn’t broadcasting just how long she’s been dating Yu-san. They had just met, after all…

“What about you, Anne-chan?” Rise-san asked. “You and Ren-kun make a cute couple.”

It was Anne’s turn to blush, her cheeks turning pink. “N-Not long,” she said sheepishly. “It’s been…” she frowned, chewing on her lip for a moment, “six weeks, I think?”

Haru looked at her in surprise. “I… I didn’t know that you were together for that long…”

…Was it her imagination or did Haru sound a little… sad?

Anne just let out an embarrassed laugh, her cheeks still glowing pink. “Y-Yeah, it happened right before we went into Futaba’s Palace for the first time.”

Makoto couldn’t help but shake her head. That little… scene had been… something else. Though that had been her fault, with her dragging Ren into the fake dating…

“Man, I can’t believe I missed that,” Futaba sighed.

She really didn't miss anything, in Makoto's opinion. It was kinda embarrassing to watch Ren flirt with Anne.

“But… you’re happy together now, right?” Haru asked.

Anne nodded, smiling widely. “Yeah! Ren just…” her smile turned bashful, "makes me feel so loved.”

Makoto couldn't help but smile. She was glad that the two of them could be happy like this.

“What about you, Makoto-chan?” Rise-san asked, smiling deviously. “It’s pretty obvious that you’re sweet on Ken-kun.”

“W-What?” Makoto stammered out, before sinking lower into the water. “It’s… um… we’re just friends!”

“Rise!” Naoto exclaimed, shooting her an exasperated look. “You shouldn’t pry into this kind of thing…”

“It’s… It’s stupid,” Makoto mumbled, wrapping an arm around her chest. “Ken just sees me as a friend.”

And why would he? She wasn’t bright and vivacious like Anne, quirky and energetic like Futaba, or even sweet and elegant like Haru. She had to content herself with being Ken’s good friend…

“When did this even happen?” Anne asked. “I thought something was up after the last day at Hawaii but… you suddenly started blushing like crazy around him-“

Futaba grinned. “And there’s the time in Okumura’s Palace-“

Makoto let out a moan, pressing both hands to her face. “Stoooop…”
She knew she was whining, but it was… mortifying to hear this.

“I’m curious myself, Mako-chan,” Haru said. “You were adamant that you were just friends before and then I joined you…”

Makoto sighed, lowering her hands. “It… It was when we went to talk to you about your father,” she admitted. “And you assumed that we were dating and it got me thinking about it… and it just… hit me.” She forced herself to stare at the wall. “I kinda… buried myself in the books for the longest time. I just thought that didn’t interest me… so when I realized I liked Ken… it was like a switch flicked on.” She sighed again. “I’m pathetic, aren’t I…?”

She felt all flustered around Ken, she sounded foolish when she opened her mouth… It was enough to make Makoto want to crawl into a hole.

“There’s nothing wrong with having a crush, Makoto-chan.” Yukiko-san suddenly put a hand on her shoulder, making Makoto look up. Her gentle smile relaxed Makoto a bit. Oddly enough, she did feel a pull towards the dark haired woman, not dissimilar to Fuuka-san. “Especially on a good friend. Love should blossom from a good friendship anyways.”

Rise-san’s smile turned sly, before her eyes slid to Naoto-san. “Naoto-kun knows that the best. She and Kanji had been friends for nearly three years and then she realized that she liked him. Took them over a year to actually get their acts together.”

Naoto-san’s face flushed. “Rise!”

“You know it’s true, Naoto-kun~” she sang out.

Yukiko-san just chuckled at the two of them. “Well, to be fair, Kanji-kun has had a crush on you since your first year of high school.”

“First year of high school?” Futaba’s eyes were wide. “That’s like a romance out of a manga!”

Rise-san giggled. “See?” She gestured to Futaba. “Futaba-chan gets it!”

“Why did you drag me into this…?” Naoto-san muttered.

“Though, Makoto…” Anne swam closer to her. “You should just… try to relax with Ken, y’know? No offense, but lately you’ve been…”

“A blushing mess,” Futaba offered, before smiling impishly. “Just… ‘You fight good’?”


Then Anne rolled her eyes. “Well, I did see Ren talking to you right before all of that… I wouldn’t be too off if I said that Ren gave you a good shove into doing that, right?”

Makoto nodded. Ren just enjoyed messing with people too much…

Rise-san giggled. “Gosh, I wish that Ren-kun could meet Minako-san. I have a feeling that they would get along just swimmingly.”

Naoto-san just sighed. “Please don’t… I feel like they’d leave a trail of mass destruction…”

“But anyways, Makoto, just… relax with Ken, okay?” Anne said. “You’ve already got a foot on the other girls, since you’re close friends with him.”
Makoto stared down at the water. Anne’s advice… made sense. She seemed to think that there might be a chance that Ken liked her back…

She hoped that Anne was right…

Ken stared at Ryuji, utterly unimpressed. “No.”

“Just a little peek, that’s it!” Ryuji insisted.

Ken fought the urge to smack his friend. Instead, he pinched the bridge of his nose. “It’s disrespectful to the girls, even if you ‘peek’. And secondly… do you want to die?”

Ryuji blinked. “Uh, what?”

“Anne would burn you to a crisp, Makoto would beat the crap out of you, and do I have to remind you of how Haru threatened the cognition of Sugimura?”

Not to mention the time his senpai got caught by the girls in the Kyoto hot springs. For years, he had been in the dark. But this past New Year’s, Junpei-san got insanely drunk while having a drinking contest with Minako-san. He babbled on about that incident, and how Mitsuru-san had punished them all by executing them all then and there. So yeah. He wasn’t touching that with a three meter pole.

Ren blinked. “…Now that I think about it, we do have a scary group of girls.”

Ken rolled his eyes. He seriously didn’t realize this until now…? “So, no, I do not want to spy on the girls. I don’t have a death wish.”

“You don’t have to be so dramatic,” Ren said, raising an eyebrow at him.

“You’re telling… me this,” Ken said flatly.

Ren blinked, before tilting his head slightly. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Ryuji stared at him incredulously. “Uh, dude, you’re kinda the king of drama.”

Yusuke looked thoughtful, chewing on his lip for a moment. Then he nodded. “Hm. I’m inclined to agree with Ryuji and Ken.”

Ren huffed. “Traitors, all of you.”

“Your just proving their point, Ren,” Morgana said from where he lounged on a pillow.

“Even you, Morgana?!” Ren clutched his heart. “I thought you would never betray me!”

Yu-san and Kanji-san just looked on with amusement, before Yu-san took a sip of beer that one of the Amagi Inn employees had offered the two men. “You run around with a colorful group of people, Ken.”

“Don’t I know it,” Ken sighed, rubbing his face.

Ryuji suddenly slung an arm around Ken’s neck, nearly strangling him. “Oh, don’t act like you’re too cool for us! You know you love us!”

“I don’t think strangling Ken is the best way to go about showing affection, Ryuji,” Yusuke said.
“Exhibit A,” Yu-san intoned before Ryuji released Ken.

Kanji-san just snorted. “Like we’re any better, Senpai.”

“Hmm that’s true~

The door suddenly slammed open with a force that made them all look up. “Teddie’s here!” Teddie-san announced, barging into the room in his human form.

Morgana yelped, darting away before Teddie-san could trample in. “Can’t you come in a little quieter?!?” he snapped.

“Hmm?” Teddie-san turned. “Oh, you’re that kitty!”

“Hey to you too, Ted,” Kanji-san said dryly.

“Ooh, did you miss me, Kanji?” Teddie blinked at him. “You should’ve just told me! Do you need a bear hug?

“Ugh shuddup you~” Kanji-san then suddenly cut himself off, staring… at something that Teddie-san was holding. “…Why are you carrying chopsticks?”

“Welllll you see~

“Oh, I see them!” Haru suddenly entered the room, her skin glowing. Then she paused, blinking at Teddie-san. “Oh, hello…”

“You’ve met him before,” Yu-san said. “This is Teddie.”

“Oh, right, he has a human form,” Futaba said, stepping inside. “Still dunno how that’s even possible by just doing sit-ups.”

“We’re not entirely sure how it’s possible either,” Naoto-san added. “Admittedly this happened months before I knew the entire truth.”

“Maybe you should try sit-ups too, Morgana!” Ryuji suggested. “I mean, it can’t hurt to try!”

Morgana huffed. “Teddie’s a Shadow! I’m human!”

“Hey, how was the hot springs?” Ren quickly cut in, before a bickering fest could break out.

“It was amazing,” Anne sighed, plopping down to sit next to Ren. “They even had all these skincare products to use afterwards! My skin feels so soft now!”

Ren just grinned at her. “I don’t know, your skin always feels soft to me.”

Anne rolled her eyes at him, but then she smiled. “Flatterer.”

…Why did people feel the need to flirt in front of people? How didn’t they get embarrassed about it?

They make some quick introductions to Teddie-san and Ken was silently grateful that he didn’t try to flirt with the girls anymore. It had been annoying that Teddie-san had tried to flirt with Makoto, after finding out that Anne was taken.

But after that was taken care of…
“You didn’t answer Kanji’s question, Teddie.”

“Oh, right!” He perked up at Yu-san’s question. “You see… I was thinking… this is a special occasion! Meeting a new group of Persona-users, and it wasn’t a crisis like when we met Mitchan and the others—“

“Mitchan?” Yusuke repeated incredulously.

“Mitsuru-san,” Ken supplied.

“And she lets him?!”

“More like you can’t stop Hurricane Teddie,” Kanji-san muttered.

“Don’t be so rude!” Teddie-san huffed, hands on his hips. “But anyhow… I was thinking that we should commemorate this! So…” He thrust his hands out. “We should play the King’s Game!”

The reactions were immediate.

“HELL NO, TED!”

“Teddie, do you not recall what happened last time?!” Naoto-san snapped, glowering at him for a moment. “Senpai, can you please—“

“I like the idea,” Yukiko-san piped up.

Kanji-san slapped his forehead. “Ugh, of course you would.”

“Uhh… what’s the King’s Game…?” Ryuji whispered to Ken.

“Don’t look at me!” Ken whispered back.

“Senpai, can’t you say something—“ Naoto-san said.

Yu-san just shrugged. “It was fun enough last time.” He looked over to them. “What about you guys?”

“Um… I don’t think any of us know what this King’s Game is,” Haru interjected. “So we really can’t say yes or no…”

“It’s more or less… a truth or dare game,” Naoto-san sighed. “The last time we played…” She sighed. “It was embarrassing, to put it lightly.”

Ren shrugged. “Sounds fun enough to me.”

“Of course you would say that,” Ken sighed. “But… I suppose that I owe Yu-san a favor for even agreeing to letting us come… If three more people agree with Ren, I’ll vote yes.”

Futaba just grinned, rubbing her hands together. “This should be good! I’m in!”

And of course… Ryuji being Ryuji was all for it. Morgana claimed that he probably couldn’t even do any the dares, so he was sitting this out. Yusuke didn’t care either way. And Haru thought it was fun, so she had said yes.

…He hoped he didn’t regret this.
“If we’re going to do this…” Naoto-san’s eyes swept through the group as Teddie-san gleefully dropped the chopsticks in a plastic cup, setting in the center of the circle they formed. “I’m laying down some rules,” she said sternly. “For one… no inappropriate commands. Furthermore, no commands that will force the person to cheat on their partner of sorts.”

Ken eyed Ren, who was fighting back a smirk. Wait a minute…

“And Ren,” Ken added, frowning sternly, “no using the Third Eye.”

“The… Third Eye?” Yukiko-san echoed.

“It’s an ability that Igor gave me,” Ren said. “It lets me catch things that you usually would miss.” Then to Ken: “And I’m offended that you think that I would-“

“Just taking precautions,” Ken said flatly.

Yu-san was frowning. “Igor never gave me any sort of ability…”

Ren faltered at that. “…Really?”

“Hmm… maybe he felt circumstances were different this time.” Even though Yu-san’s rationalization made sense… his expression was troubled. “…Anyhow, it’s not important.”

“Let’s begin!” Teddie-san cheered, jiggling the plastic cup enthusiastically.

He selected a chopstick, before passing it off to Yukiko-san. It took a minute to pass one off to everyone.

Ren suddenly smirked, flashing the chopstick marked with red at everyone. “Looks like I’m the King for the first round.”

“Oh boy…” Anne groaned, pressing a hand to her forehead.

He didn’t blame her for being apprehensive.

“And my command as King…” Ren’s eyes twinkled behind his glasses. (He really hoped they hadn’t created a monster.) “Is for Number 7 to serenade either their significant other or their person of choice.”

“You want me to do WHAT?!” Kanji-san squawked out, his face growing red. “I don’t know any freaking serenades!”

Naoto-san just slouched in her seat. “Ren-kun… is that necessary?”

“I believe the King’s order is…” Ren pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, all while smirking, “absolute.”

“Ken, you should’ve just said no,” Makoto said flatly.

Ken grumbled out, “I realize that now…”

Kanji-san followed Ren’s command albeit with a lot of grumbling. He knelt in front of Naoto-san, taking her hand. Both of their faces were bright red.

“Uh… lessee…” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Roses are red… violets are blue, you’re so freaking smart and cute, and I… love you?”
Naoto-san’s face was still so red, but she smiled shyly at Kanji-san. “I love you too, Kanji-kun.”

“Hmm…” Ren rubbed his chin. “That’s more love poetry, but I’ll take it.”

“Nice, nice, Ren-kun!” Rise-san said cheerfully, nodding in approval. “A good first command!”

“Ugh, screw you, Rise!” Kanji-san scowled at her.

“Just saying the truth, Kanji!”

They put the chopsticks back into the cup and redrew.

“Oooh, it’s me!” Yukiko-san exclaimed, showing off her chopstick. She tapped her chin for a moment, letting out a thoughtful hum. Then she smiled. “Number 5… I order you to give Number 1 a piggyback ride!”

Yusuke’s forehead furrowed. “I’m number 5… who’s number 1 then?”

“That would be me!” Futaba jumped to her feet.

Yusuke tilted his head before he stood up. “Go on then.”

“Uh… Yusuke?” Ryuji spoke up. “Don’tcha have to y’know… kneel down? You’re like a head and a half taller than Futaba.”

“She can climb.”

Ken sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead. “Yusuke, come on, don’t be childish.”

“I am not,” he said, raising his chin. Ken fought the urge to roll his eyes.

Futaba puffed out her cheeks, a look of determination settling in her eyes. Her hands clenched into fists. “Fine! Just watch me!”

It was… rather comical watching Futaba pounce onto Yusuke’s back, her grabbing onto the back of Yusuke’s shirt to get a good grip on him. She scrambled him up like he was a tree, and she was panting by the time she was perched on his back. She smiled victoriously, flashing a V sign at them.

But then she dropped her head onto Yusuke’s shoulder. “Ugh, this is why I don’t exercise.”

…Okay, they would have to change that. He would have to convince Futaba to start exercising, since that probably contributed to her sleeping so much after awakening to her Persona. Ryuji would probably like training with Futaba, wouldn’t he?

Haru clapped. “Bravo! Good job, Futaba-chan!”

Yu-san chuckled. “Very nice. Though Yusuke, you could’ve just knelt down…”

“She needs the exercise,” Yusuke said, kneeling down so Futaba could drop to the ground.

“Ugh, screw you, Inari,” Futaba huffed before darting back to her spot next to Anne.

They redrew for the third round, before Teddie-san let out a cheer. “Teddie’s got the red! That means Teddie’s the King!”
“Oh no…” Naoto-san sighed.

…He could understand why Naoto-san was a bit… concerned. Teddie-san was just… shameless.

“I order Number 2 to plant a big ol’ smooch on the person they’d like to date the most!”

“W-WHAT?!” Makoto blurted out, suddenly blushing furiously. “Y-You can’t be serious, Teddie-san!”

“This is pushing it, Teddie…” Yu-san scolded. “Makoto, you don’t have to-“

But then Makoto’s jaw tightened. “No, it’s fine. If Kanji-san can say a love poem to Naoto-san… then I can do this.”

Was she seriously going to admit this? She had said that she liked someone before, and Futaba seemed to know who it was…

There had to be only one person… it had to be Ren.

It made sense. Ren was very charismatic, after all. And at one point, all of the girls in SEES had feelings for Minato-san… It seemed to be a Wild Card thing-

…Wait, why was Makoto approaching him?

Makoto’s face was glowing like the setting sun, as she knelt in front of him. Her hands rested on his shoulders before she swiftly leaned in, pressing her lips to his cheek.

“W-Wha…?” Ken’s face flushed as well. “M-Makoto…?”

Makoto pulled away, but where her lips touched his cheek still burned. Wait, Makoto… she… No, that wasn’t it… She probably picked him because she didn’t want to make a scene by kissing Ren. Especially after they were both there when Ren and Anne got together…

Futaba pushed her glasses up her nose. “Makoto, I think you broke Ken.”

“You didn’t say where I had to kiss him,” Makoto announced. “So this satisfies the command, doesn’t it?”

“Damn, so that’s it…?” Ryuji shook his head.

…Yeah, she only kissed him because she didn’t want things to be awkward…

But… why did he feel disappointed…?

Yu’s head was spinning, even after the Phantom Thieves had departed for Tokyo.

He liked Ren. He really did. But something was nagging at him.

Igor was an observer. He was there to help the Wild Cards, but not to the degree of bestowing a strange ability. Yu couldn’t help but feel unsettled.

Marie had left Inaba months ago to look into why the Velvet Room had been shut away… and they haven’t heard anything from her since.

What did this all mean?
“Senpai?” Rise gently touched his arm, catching his attention. He looked down to see concern in Rise’s brown eyes. “You looked so far away just now…”

“I was just… thinking.” Yu smiled at her to reassure her. “They were a good group of kids, aren’t they?”

“Not the type that I’d expect Ken to run around with,” Kanji remarked. “But yeah, gotta agree with you there, Senpai. They’re good kids.”

“I do wish I could’ve asked more about my… successor…” Naoto commented with a frown. “There’s something so… off about his rise to fame. Not to mention the cases he solves.”

“They don’t seem to like Akechi-kun too much,” Yukiko observed, brushing her hair back.

“Well, he’s been badmouthing the Phantom Thieves,” Rise said. “I’m not surprised.”

“And besides,” Teddie interjected, “he basically stole Nao-chan’s name!”

Naoto let out an exasperated sigh. “Honestly, that was all the media. I didn’t ask for that name.”

“You’re a hundred times the detective Akechi would ever be,” Kanji huffed.

Naoto smiled warmly at him. “Thank you, Kanji-kun. However, I don’t think I can judge him unless I actually meet him. And I don’t think I would. Not by a longshot. Akechi-kun doesn’t have a reason to visit a small town like Inaba.”

“I can’t believe how late it is…” Yukiko then let out a small laugh. “Goodness, I can’t remember the last time I had a full day off like this…”

“Hey, you deserve it, Yukiko-senpai!” Rise chirped. “Just look at how much popular the Amagi Inn is compared to when we were in high school!”

Yukiko smiled. “Thanks, Rise-chan.”

They then headed their separate ways: Teddie for Yosuke’s house, Kanji and Naoto for Tatsumi Textiles, and Yu walked Rise back to his uncle’s place so they could have dinner with his cousin and uncle.

“So…” Yu gave his girlfriend a knowing look. “When are you going to text Fuuka-san about the information on Makoto?”

“Why, Senpai!” Rise gasped, pressing a hand to her chest. “I would no such thing-“

“You texted her already, haven’t you?” Yu laughed.

“Hehe. Maybe.” Rise winked. “Though is it a crime to want everyone to be as happy as we are right now?”

Yu smiled, before wrapping an arm around her waist and drawing her close. He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “Well, I can’t fault you for that, I suppose.”

Especially with what they were dealing with right now… they could use all the happiness they could get.

“Hehe. I knew you’d see it my way.” Rise’s expression then grew serious. “…Though, seriously, what’s up? You were in deep thought mode.”
“Some things about the Velvet Room… unsettled me,” Yu admitted. “I don’t think Ken noticed, since while he’s been to the Velvet Room… he doesn’t know just how involved Igor is.”

“Hmm…” Rise tilted her head. “I’d normally say have Minako-san talk to Ren, but they still don’t trust the Shadow Operatives… do they?”

“I can’t blame them, to be honest,” Yu sighed. “I mean… to start with Ryuji and Anne were both screwed over by people who should’ve supported them. Futaba’s relatives were horrible to her… And what Haru’s father planned for her…”

“Yeah…” Rise sighed, before she frowned. “I wish we could help them.”

“That makes two of us,” Yu agreed. “But I guess… we’ll have to wait and see.”

He just hoped his gut feeling about the Velvet Room was wrong…

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the late update! But as you can see, this update was… a bit of a monster. I had so much I wanted to cover and I didn’t think I could split it. And I had plans for a Nanako cameo, but ah well.

But yeah! Some Investigation Team-Phantom Thieves interactions for you. I really hope I did it justice. And… Ken is getting to the realization, I promise. He won’t be oblivious for much longer.

And in case it wasn't clear, the song that Rise sings is Now I Know, or the end theme of P4 Arena. I thought it'd be a nice shout out especially since one of Rise's songs in P4D is a remix of Now I Know.

We also finally got some news on P5R and P5S. Not terribly excited for P5S, but I'm intrigued by the info we got in P5R's trailer! However, I won't be incorporating anything from P5R into this story. I'm way too deep into the story to wait for P5R to come out. I'm hoping to be done with the story by the end of this year, but we'll see.

And happy late birthday to Makoto and Naoto!
Conflicting Feelings

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves enjoy some down time, but Ken is still rather confused over what happened in Inaba.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tuesday, September 27th, 2016

“I order Number 2 to plant a big ol’ smooch on the person they’d like to date the most!”

But Makoto just saw him as just a friend… didn’t she?

It was just… a stupid dare. It didn’t mean anything. And besides, if Makoto was to like a guy, as she claimed to Teddie-san… it’d be Ren. They had pretended to be a couple already. Maybe Makoto just pretended that she just saw Ren as a friend, since Ren liked Anne.

Ken heaved out a sigh, pressing a hand to his forehead. Dammit, why couldn’t he stop thinking about this…? The clean, fresh scent of her shampoo… the way her lips had felt again his cheek… and how he couldn’t help but wonder what it’d be like to have her lips pressed again his-

Ken shook his head furiously, feeling heat rise up in his cheeks. Makoto was just a friend! What was he doing, thinking about her like that?!

Ken just groaned, whipping off his reading glasses so he could press his hand to his burning face. Fuck. What was wrong with him? Why did he have to be so confused?

He stared down at his notebook. He had made an excuse to Makoto that he had needed to study, with everything going on, but he had barely written anything down.

What was going on? Was he just… attracted to Makoto? She was a pretty girl…

But this was nothing like back when he had a crush on Minako-san… He could still remember the butterflies that fluttered in his stomach and how his heart pounded when he was around her.

But with Makoto? He felt comfortable around her. When she smiled at him, he felt warm, but his pulse didn’t race at it. It only felt natural to comfort her when she was sad… because that’s what friends do.

He was just… so confused. And he couldn’t really talk to anyone about this… Ren would be absolutely merciless about this, not to mention that the person Makoto supposedly had feelings for was most likely him… Ryuji… yeah, no. That was just asking for a disaster. And Yusuke was completely oblivious to this kind of thing.

And there was no way he’d go to his male senpai about this… Junpei-san would have a ball of teasing him, Akihiko-san would flounder, and Shinjiro-san would probably have his are you
He just… hoped it would go away soon. It’s been two days since their visit to Inaba… and he still couldn’t make sense of this whole thing.

He might as well go home… No sense in brooding over this, hogging one of the library’s tables when someone else could use it better than him. Ken gathered up his belongings, stuffing them in his bag, before slinging his schoolbag over his shoulder.

Ken was descending the last flight of stairs, when he saw Ren and Futaba enter the building.

“Oh! Ken!” Futaba greeted, waving at him enthusiastically before darts up to him. Ren followed her at a more sedate pace. “I came to explore a real high school!”

Ken blinked at them. “What’s going on? Why do you want to explore Shujin?”

Futaba winced, adjusting her glasses. She rocked on the balls of her feet for a moment. “Um… you see…”

Futaba quickly explained that she used to make a promise list with her mother, earning herself a reward by completely the list. She now was repeating the process to try and rehabilitate herself. So she could go around more comfortably, without having to rely on Ren so much.

“So… you picked Shujin?” Ken asked.

Ren shrugged. “Better Shujin than Kosei,” he said. “The only people I know who go there are Yusuke and Hifumi.”

“…Hifumi?” Ken raised an eyebrow at the unfamiliar name.

“Hmm… that sounded familiar. Ken couldn’t quite put his finger on what exactly, though… Though he should have figured that Ren had even more friends he had never met. He still remembered how many people had came to Minato-san’s funeral… and how many of those people had made speeches about him.

“She’s that shogi prodigy, isn’t she?” Futaba piped up. “They call her the Venus of Shogi, don’t they?”

“Yep, you got it.” Ren nodded. “But anyways, I thought Shujin would be better since I actually know it. Sorta.”

Ren really didn’t stick around school, did he…? But then again, he doubted any clubs would want to do anything with him. So he couldn’t really blame Ren for that.

“And besides, if the faculty doesn’t like it all that much, we could always ask Makoto for help to clear it up,” Ren added.

Ken couldn’t help but stiffen. He didn’t need a reminder of Makoto right now, not when he suddenly had jumbled up thoughts about her… Though he had to admit that they did have a point, with going to Makoto about this.

“Did you… get in an argument?” Futaba frowned at him.

“It’s… It’s nothing,” Ken quickly looked away from Futaba. It was nothing… It should be
nothing… “You should go find Makoto then. In case you run into any faculty.”

Ren studied him closely, his lips pursed together. “Why don’t you come with us, Ken?” he suggested, tucking one hand in his pocket. “It could be fun. And well…” He looked down at Futaba, playfully smirking at her for a moment. “…She’s a bit of a handful.”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?!” Futaba’s hands flew to her hips, before she let out a huff. But then she looked at Ken. “But Ren’s right about that, y’know! It could be fun!”

…She wasn’t going to take no for an answer, was she? For someone who refused to come out of her house not too long ago, Futaba was surprisingly forceful.

“If that’s what you want,” Ken said, trying not to sigh.

He just… didn’t want to make things awkward with Makoto. He didn’t even know what exactly he felt…

“Yayyy!” Futaba cheered, giving a little hop. Her eyes were gleaming with excitement “But where’s Makoto?”

Ken blinked at her. “I’ve been studying at the library. I haven’t been with Makoto.”

“Well, you can’t blame Futaba for thinking that,” Ren said, raising an eyebrow at Ken. “You spend a lot of time with her.” When Ken opened his mouth to protest that they didn’t spend that much time together, Ren just continued. “It’s not a bad thing, Ken.”

“Futaba?” Ken turned around to see that Makoto was descending the stairs as well. “What are you doing here?”

Ren and Futaba explained again, and Makoto’s lips puckered together in thought.

Ken founded himself staring at her lips. They were soft. Ken immediately mentally smacked himself for the traitorous thought. He needed to stop it. Makoto was just his friend.

“A promise list…” she said slowly. “I think it’s a good strategy, to ease you into interacting with strangers again.”

“So it’s okay?” Futaba piped up. “Ren said that we’d go on a tour!”

Makoto blinked, before slowly turning to Ren. “…And you just volunteered me for this?”

“I mean, you’re the student council president.” Ren shrugged. “Isn’t it kinda your job to show people the school?”

“That’s…” Makoto sighed. “…Okay, I see your point.” She then shook her head. “Though I suppose it’s a good thing that most of the students are gone, and the teachers are in a meeting right now.”

“Yes!” Futaba pumped her fist. “With so little people around, this will be easier than fighting a trash mob!”

Makoto just blinked owlishly at her. “A trash… what?”

“Note to self: educate Makoto on video game slang…” Futaba muttered to herself, pretending to write on her hand. “Oh, and introduce her to video games in general!”
“I’m not that illiterate with video games!” Makoto protested.

Futaba adjusted her glasses, narrowing her eyes at Makoto. “…Do you know about Super Bash Bros?”

Makoto frowned. “Super Bash… what?”

Ken shook his head. “It’s a popular fighting game made by Mintendo.”

Ren grinned. “I get really into it, honestly. Sometimes I wish I could jump in and be one of the fighters, you know?”

Futaba grinned. “That would be soooo awesome. You could bust out your Persona! And shoot them with your gun! Like… BAM! They’d never see it coming!”

Ken let out an exasperated sigh. “You do know Mintendo prides itself in being family friendly, right?”

“Ah… right.” Makoto coughed. “…Shall we get started then?”

The tour didn’t start out well, with them showing Futaba the cafeteria. Futaba started talking about some of her bad experiences—which admittedly, cafeterias did not offer the best food—so Makoto hastily suggested they move on. So they moved onto the library. Futaba looked around, humming for a moment. She then snapped her fingers. “This place should be a recreational room! You know, with video games!”

“Um… Futaba…” Ken said slowly, “no high school has that kind of thing.”

“Whaaaaat?!” Futaba rounded on him. “Come on, that can’t be true! Gekkoukan’s gonna be superrrr rich!”

“Just because the Kirijo Group personally funds Gekkoukan High doesn’t mean we have a gaming room…” Ken crossed his arms over his chest. “Sure, the school receives funding for the top technology but… video games…? That’s ridiculous.”

“What about your house then, huh?”

“I assume that’s Minako-san’s doing. She can be very… persuasive.”

“Ugh, lame.” Futaba grumbled. “I mean, the library’s got books, but I’ve got that at home!”

“…Don’t you read mostly manga?” Ren asked. “It wouldn’t be a bad thing to read literature for a change.” He then rubbed his chin. “Oh, speaking of that, I’ve gotta return The Three Musketeers soon.”

“I’m surprised that you can read that,” Makoto commented. “English is already difficult enough to read, but making sense of the classics with how wordy they are… It gives me a headache, honestly.”

Ren just laughed. “Well, my English is getting better, thanks to Anne.”

“Ugh, English,” Futaba groaned. “Why do they make you study a whole language?! I have Google Translate! I don’t need to learn an entire different language!”

“Well, Shujin’s less stringent than Gekkoukan.” Ken shrugged. “They started us in the fifth grade. I remember having to study etymology.”
Ren just looked at him in shock. “You’re kidding, right?”

Ken rolled his eyes at him. “Yeah, because I’m known for my jokes,” he said dryly.

“Oh, right, that would mean the world is ending.” Ren smirked. “My mistake.”

“Well, Gekkoukan is known for being one of the top schools in the country,” Makoto said, giving them both exasperated looks. “Though I will say that’s a bit extreme, making fifth graders studying to that kind of level.”

Ken shrugged. “It’s prepared me well. I can say that at least.”

“Do you want to look at any books you might be interested in, Futaba?” Makoto offered. “You like sci-fi, don’t you? There’s a section dedicated just for that. One of us could check it out for you.”

“That’s… okay….” Futaba stared past Makoto, a little frown on her face. She was… staring at the shelf? “…One time I memorized the books’ order on the shelf. I just glanced at them and I remembered the exact order.”

“You have photographic memory?” Ren asked.

Futaba shrugged, as if it was no big deal. “…The kids at school didn’t believe me when I said it. They thought I was making it up. And when I recited the order to prove it, they just…” she squeezed her eyes shut, “…laughed at me. They called me a freak.”

…Ugh. Kids could be cruel. But he didn’t realize the extent of how ostracized Futaba had been from her peers when she was young.

“Am I… weird?”

Ren put a hand on her shoulder, making her look up. He quickly shook his head. “No way. They’re just jealous of your talent.”

But instead of being reassured, Futaba just frowned. “I don’t wanna be talented, if people make fun of me for it…” She then heaved out a sigh. “School’s just the worst…”

“Come on, Futaba-“ Makoto began.

Futaba puffed out her cheeks. “It’s true!” she snapped out. “People were awful to me! Nobody would ever like me…” She shook her head. “…Why did I think this was a good idea…? Things are never going to change…”

Ken frowned. Futaba had a defeatist attitude, regarding this… But… that wasn’t healthy.

“That’s not true.” Ken stepped forward. Futaba just pressed her lips together, giving a small shake. “You say things never change,” he said quietly. “But it’s not true. Just look at where you were just two, three months ago… You stayed in your room. You wouldn’t even talk to Sakura-san. But you’re slowly improving, Futaba. And the worst thing you could do is give up.”

Futaba was silent for a moment. “I… Do you really think so?”

“Ken’s right, you know,” Ren interjected. “You may have struggled to make friends before, but you’re not the same person as you were before, Futaba.”

“And the fact that you’re looking to fulfill the things on your promise list is really saying something,” Makoto added. “You said that nobody would ever like you… but that’s not true. We
like you, don’t you?” She pressed a hand to her chest, smiling gently. “I know that things have changed for me since I’ve met everyone.”

“Ugh…” Futaba’s face scrunched up. “Why do you have to be so logical about it?”

“So you can’t really argue about it,” Ren said with a smirk. “But you feel a little better about things now, don’t you?”

“Yeah… but…” Futaba looked back at him defiantly. “Don’t expect me to beg Sojiro to enroll me in Shujin any time soon!”

…Well, better than nothing. They just had to keep taking little steps.

And then he caught Makoto’s eye, but he quickly looked away. Ugh… It was easy to forget while they were showing Futaba around but he still felt… funny with Makoto.

…This was all Rise-san’s fault. And Teddie-san’s fault. Now he was all jumbled up because of Makoto kissing him and ugh. He just had to distance himself from Makoto until he figured himself out…

Thursday, September 29th, 2016

“So… how are you feelin’, Mina-tan?”

Minako groaned, before sticking a spoonful of ice cream in her mouth. “I’m so bored,” she complained. “Mitsuru is insisting that I should be taking maternal leave already and I’m barely into my third trimester!”

Chidori just laughed softly. Sometimes it still boggled her mind seeing how different Chidori was… She was more… gentle and kind. Though she did have her blunt moments too, which was part of how she kept Junpei in line. Even now, she was dressed more casually compared to when she used to wear gothic lolita clothing. She was wearing a white sundress today, and her bright red hair was pulled up in a high ponytail, a white ribbon tied around it.

“Well, Yukari did ask you to take care of the twins for a couple months while she finishes wrapping up the last of the shoots,” she said. “That should occupy your time.”

Junpei frowned. “Speaking of that… are you sure you can keep up with ’em? I mean, you are getting there-“

“…Are you calling me fat?!” Minako demanded, narrowing her eyes at Junpei.

“Wha?” Junpei blanched at that, all color draining from his face. “No! Shit, I just meant-“

Chidori just patted his arm in sympathy, raising an eyebrow at her husband. “It never gets easier for you, hmm?”

“Hey!” Junpei protested.

Minako just grumbled. Well, she supposed that Junpei was just concerned. She probably should let it slide. “You’re lucky I’m holding a spoon, not a fork.”

Suddenly the front door opened, and Aki stepped through. “Mina, I’m home!” he announced. “And look who I brought-“
“AUNTIE MINA!” The twins pushed Aki out of the way, clambering on the couch to give her a big hug.

Minako hugged the two of them. She ruffled both of their hair, smiling down at her niece and nephew. “You’ve gotten so big since I’ve seen you last!”

“Silly Auntie Mina!” Miyuki sighed, sounding more exasperated than she should, as she shook her head at Minako. “You saw us in July! It’s not that long ago!”

"That may be true..." Minako grabbed her niece in a hug, tickling her for a moment. "But two certain somebodies turned six just a couple days ago!"

“Jeez, you two!” Yukari scolded, striding forward. Her hands were on her hips. “You nearly knocked Akihiko-senpai over!”

The twins both smiled sheepishly at Yukari’s chastisement, ducking their heads. “Sorry, Uncle Aki,” they chorused together, all while smiling cutely at Aki.

“Aw…” Aki rubbed the back of his neck, a small smile creeping onto his face. “Who could stay mad at these two for long?”

Minako couldn’t help but giggle. The twins were admittedly very good at the puppy dog eyes. But she was glad that the twins seemed happy and well. If she was present when those bitchy women had called her precious nephew a bastard… she would have happily wrung their necks. Not to mention that they seemed to begrudge Yukari having a well established career as an actress. Jealous harpies.

“But you’re so big now, Auntie Mina…!” Kaito’s eyes were round before his fingers brushed against her stomach. “How much long until you’re having the baby?”

Junpei just snorted. “You’re lucky that it’s still cute for you to ask that, Kaito-“ Then he yelped as Yukari suddenly grabbed him by the ear and yanked. Hard. “Yowch!” He yanked away from Yukari, nursing his now sore ear. “Yuka-tan, that hurts!”

“It’s supposed to!” Yukari fired back, glowering at him. “Jeez, what are you doing, saying stuff like that?!"

“Hey, I’m just saying…!”

“And I’m saying that’s something stupid to say!” she retorted. “Jeez, sometimes I swear you don’t even know the meaning of tact.”

“Mommy said a bad word!” Miyuki gasped, clamping a hand over her mouth in horror. Minako couldn’t help but laugh at how scandalized her niece sounded.

Chidori sighed, shaking her head. “You’re just getting into all kinds of trouble with women today, aren’t you, Junpei…?”

“What about you, Chidorita?” Junpei asked innocently, sidling close to her. “Am I in trouble with you?”

Chidori just huffed, but a slight blush came to her cheeks. “…No. Not me.”

Yukari huffed as well, shaking her head for a moment. But then she turned to Minako, her eyes softening. “Thanks for taking the twins while I finish wrapping up these last shoots. Especially
since you’re approaching your last trimester.” She ran a hand through her hair. “It’s getting really
crazy…”

“It’s no problem, Yukari-chan,” Minako reassured. “You know that we love the twins and would
be more than happy to take care of them.”

Yukari then laughed. “But still… thanks. Once we move out here, I’d be more than happy to
babysit, if you and Akihiko-senpai need a date night or something. Speaking of that…” She gave
Minako a once over. “How are you feeling? I know that you’re finally getting over your cravings
but…”

“Oh, I’m fine.” Minako rested a hand on her stomach. “The baby’s been kicking some more—“

“THE BABY KICKS YOU?!” Kaito demanded, outrage clear on his round face.

“Kicking’s not nice!” Miyuki scowled as well. “Specially kicking your mommy!”

“That’s right!” Junpei mock gasped, suddenly hoisting Miyuki up by the waist and making her
squeal with laughter. He grinned at Aki. “So, are you gonna haul your baby to jail once she’s
born?”

“You’re being silly, Junpei.” Chidori sighed, shaking her head before smiling at Miyuki and then
Kaito. “It’s natural for the baby to do that. You did that when Yukari was expecting you as well.”

“Whaaaat?” Miyuki puffed out her cheeks for a moment, before pouting at Chidori. “No way,
Auntie Chidori!”

“Yeah, we would never hurt Mommy!” Kaito insisted indignantly.

Yukari just laughed, ruffling Kaito’s hair for a moment. “Sorry, sweetie, but it’s true.”

“Besides…” Minako smiled as her daughter kicked in response, as if she knew that they were
talking about her. Her hand glided to where the baby was talking, smiling as she felt a light thump
against her palm. “It feels nice.”

“Nice?” Miyuki frowned, looking rather skeptical. Minako couldn’t help but smile. The twins had
never met Minato, but there was no question that he had left his mark on his two children.

Minako beckoned Kaito forward and Junpei set Miyuki down so she could join them on the couch.
She took their hands, guiding them where the baby was kicking. She smiled as twin expressions of
delight bloomed across their faces.

“Hey, it tickles!” Kaito exclaimed, his eyes shining with delight. “You feel this every time the
baby kicks, Auntie Mina?”

“Yep!” Minako nodded.

“How much sooner until the baby comes?” Miyuki piped up. “I wanna play with the baby!”

“A little under three months,” Aki said. “The baby’s going to be born a couple weeks before
Christmas.”

“But you can’t play with the baby right away,” Junpei chimed in. “She’ll be very small.”

“Whaaaat?!” Kaito pouted. “It feels like it’s been ages and ages! And we have to wait even
longer?!” He then huffed. “And it’s a girl too.” He looked at Aki. “Hey, hey, do you think that
Uncle Junpei and Auntie Chidori could have a baby too?"

“W-What?” Chidori stammered out, before exchanging an embarrassed look with Junpei. “Um… that probably won’t be happening soon, Kaito-kun.”

“Aww…”

Minako giggled, wiggling her eyebrows at the two of them. “Not ready yet, huh? But Junpei’s great with kids!”

Chidori let out an exasperated sigh. “It’s just not happening now, Minako.”

“Aw, but it’d be so cute if our kids would grow up as best friends…”

As it was past noon, Aki offered to cook lunch. Aki was a decent enough cook when he followed recipes, so she had no complaints. (Shinji had given Aki a cookbook, after witnessing one too many of Aki’s schemes to incorporate vitamins to the point where it ruined the meal.) She was just glad that she could eat food again without getting nauseous. Feeling like she was gonna puke just from smelling certain foods wasn’t fun.

After lunch, Minako put on Neo Feathermen for the twins—naturally, it was one of their favorite shows. Specifically, the Victory incarnation. It was cute to hear them to yell, “Yeah, go Mommy!”

“So… Yuka-tan,” Junpei suddenly interjected, “how long are you gonna stick around until you gotta jet?”

“I’ll be staying until Thursday morning,” Yukari answered. “I need to talk to the real estate agent about the house I’m buying, not to mention the place in Paulownia that I want to lease for the boutique…” She rubbed her face for a moment. “God, I can’t believe it’s been nearly six years since we graduated.”

“Hey, it’s not like we’re old geezers!” Minako joked, making everyone laugh. “But seriously… I’m glad everything’s working out. And it’ll be a few months and you’ll be back on Port Island!”

Yukari smiled. “Yeah. I’m glad to be able to come back…” But then she tilted her head. “…But you know, I heard from Rise that Ken took…” She looked carefully at the twins. They did have a tendency to hear what they shouldn’t, after all. “…his friend to visit last Sunday. Did you hear from Yu-kun about how it exactly went down?”

“Yu-kun seemed to get on with Ren-kun,” Minako said, trying not to wince. Aki caught her eye, frowning slightly, but he didn’t say anything. At least nobody picked up on it. Though knowing Aki, he would probably be talking to her about this in private later. “Everyone seemed to.”

She had confided in her husband when Yu had called her about her perspective, when he had picked up an… odd conversation between Ken and Ren. The Third Eye ability… it seemed supernatural, even by their standards. But… she didn’t know what they could do. It would be best to keep quiet for now. God, if only Elizabeth would drop in. She swore that Elizabeth was the textbook definition of a loose cannon…

“That’s good,” Yukari said.

“Are you talking about Uncle Ken’s friends?” Miyuki piped up.

“Oh, you remember them, sweetie?” Minako asked.
Miyuki nodded. “Uh huh. They were nice! The frizzy hair guy even bought Kaito a snack!”

“Frizzy… hair…?” Chidori questioned, raising an eyebrow.

Her head bobbed. “Uh huh! He had reallyyy big glasses! It covered a lot of his face! Oh, and one of the girls was really pretty! Her hair was like gold!”

“Nobody’s as pretty as Mommy though,” Kaito quickly jumped in.

Miyuki scowled at him. “Didn’t say she was prettier than Mommy,” she huffed.

Yukari huffed as well, but a light blush came to her face. “You two…”

“So Ken’s got some pretty lady friends, huh?” Junpei grinned at the twins. “Wanna tell me more about them?”

“Um…” Miyuki scrunched up her face. “There was the girl who…” she looked down at the floor, “was with Uncle Ken when he went to find me and Kaito… What was her name?”

“Makoto!” Kaito piped up.

“Yeah!” Miyuki bobbed her head. “She kinda reminded me of Auntie Fuuka.”

“Makoto…” Minako repeated. “She’s the student council president of Shujin, if I remember right.”

“So… Miyu-tan,” Junpei drawled out, a wide grin on his face. “There’s a whole package of mochi ice cream with your name on it if you tell us more about Ken’s lady friends.”

“REALLY?!” Miyuki gasped.

Minako couldn’t help but giggle. Her niece and nephew really did have a weakness for sweets. Better for them, she supposed.

“Heyhey, what about me, Uncle Junpei?!” Kaito demanded. “I want mochi ice cream too!”

“Hey, don’t bribe my daughter!” Yukari cried out, before smacking his shoulder.

“Poor Ken-kun,” Chidori muttered. “I bet he’s sneezing like crazy right now.”

“No bribing my kids with sweets,” Yukari said with a huff, hands on her hips.

“Come on, Yuka-tan, aren’t you a liiiiiittle curious about it?” Junpei wheedled.

“Oh jeez…” Aki shook his head. “Poor Ken. Maybe it’s a good thing that he never found a girlfriend.”

Minako just snickered before sharing a conspirator grin with Junpei. “That just means we have to make up with it when he does get one.”

“Mina, you shouldn’t torture Ken.”

“Maybe we can get Fuuka to feel things out when she visits next week,” Junpei snickered.

There was their bet to think about too… Ken was graduating in less than six months too.

…Holy crap, Ken was only six months away from graduating. God, she felt old.
Chidori sighed. “Junpei, don’t bug Ken-kun about this kind of thing. If it’ll happen, it will.”

“But—”

Chidori just raised an eyebrow, giving Junpei a disappointed look.

Junpei huffed, crossing his arms over his chest in a pout. “Fiiiiine.”

“You’re so whipped, Junpei,” Minako teased.

“We’ve known that since high school,” Yukari quipped.

“What’s whipped mean?” Kaito tilted his head, looking rather mystified.

“It means Uncle Junpei will do whatever Auntie Chidori wants him to,” Minako said, before throwing an innocent smile Junpei’s way. “Right, Junpei?”

“HEY!”

“That’s silly, Aunt Mina!” Miyuki piped up.

“Thank you, Miyu-tan—”

“All guys are like that!” she finished, all while smiling sunnily.

Would Junpei be mad if she snapped a picture right now? The look on his face was just priceless.

“Wha—” Aki stared, dumbfounded at Miyuki. “No, they aren’t! I’m not!”

“But you do whatever Auntie Mina wants you to!” Kaito protested. “And it’s the same with Uncle Shinji and Auntie Fuuka. Only Uncle Ken isn’t like that and he doesn’t have someone he like-likes.”

“That’s—” Aki glared at Minako, Yukari, and Chidori, who were all beginning to chuckle. “Stop laughing! It’s not true! It’s not!”

Minako patted her husband’s arm. “Aww, it's okay, Aki, I still love you.”

“Gross,” the twins chorused, identical looks of disgust on their faces.

This just made everyone break into laughter. The twins would definitely bring some liveliness in the house…

It… honestly would be a welcome distraction from all of the Phantom Thief business… and how she couldn’t do anything to look into the Velvet Room…

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Saturday, October 1st, 2016

Ren knew that time was ticking away. There were ten days before the deadline, to be exact. But in all honesty, they weren’t ready to go back… He felt that he would have to upgrade their weapons again, before they faced off with Okumura…

He looked over at Anne, who was texting on her phone.

“Hey, Ren?” she asked, leaning in close. “Are we going to visit Okumura’s Palace today?”
Ren shook his head. “Sorry, Anne. Iwai promised me the goods if I helped him out a couple more nights. But soon, okay?”

“Oh-oh.” Anne frowned. “I guess that works out… I got asked if I was free today by my agency.”

Ren smiled at her. “That’s great! You’re getting more gigs, huh?”

Anne just nodded, a smile lighting up her face. “Yeah! It’s all thanks to you, Ren.”

Ren shook his head. “Come on, give yourself some more credit, Anne. I just gave you a push to the right direction.”

Anne giggled, before standing up and walking up to him. She cupped his cheek with one hand, leaning in to kiss his other. “You’re still my light, Ren. You make me want to be better.”

Ren just smiled up at her. “Love you too. Knock ‘em, dead, Panther.”

Anne blew him a quick kiss before she headed out of the classroom. Ren ignored the whispers and stares as he packed up and left the classroom as well. Let them talk. He had other things to concern himself with.

He began to run things in his mind as he descended the flight of stairs leading to the first floor. Maybe he should check with Futaba, to see if she wanted to continue with her promise list? Or maybe practice with Shinya? Or-

“—study with me today?”

He looked at the voice, stopping in his tracks. Makoto and Ken were standing right outside their classroom, but Ken looked like he desperately wanted to bolt with how he shifted weight between his feet.

…Damn, he had hoped that roping—okay, kinda forcing—Ken into helping him and Makoto show Futaba around Shujin would… diffuse the awkwardness between them. Ken honestly seemed like he didn’t know what to feel.

…Should’ve known he would kinda suck with girls.

Ken just tugged at the cuff of his blazer. Man, it was kinda weird seeing Ken in the winter uniform. Especially since the orange sweater vest he wore over his turtleneck made him look more like a dressed down version of Ace. “Fuuka-san’s visiting for the next few days. I really shouldn’t stay that long today, Makoto.” He forced a smile. “Maybe another time.”

“Okay.” Makoto’s face fell. “Say hi to Fuuka-san for me then.”

“Jeez… nothing like drama, I guess,” Morgana grumbled, poking his head out of Ren’s bag.

“Shhh, Morgana,” Ren quickly shushed him. “Don’t want them to know that we’re listening.”

He watched Makoto turn away, a sad smile on her face. Dammit, he had to catch up to Ken. Snap him out of this somehow. He swore that he really needed to be paid for this.

He ran after Ken, ignoring Morgana’s yelps. Okay, it was a little rough on Morgana—Ren would have buy something nice for him to make it up to Morgana—but he had to be fast. Ken was fast even when he was walking.

“Ken! Ken, wait up!” he called out to his friend.
Ken stopped in his tracks, turning around to face Ren. “Ren? What’s wrong?”

“I was just…” Uh, crap, what was he supposed to say?

*I was kinda eavesdropping on you and Makoto, and you need to get over the fact that you may have the hots for her.* Yeah, no. Ken would get all defensive and huffy on him. Maybe even pouty. He might be able to figure out a way to ease into the conversation but…

“I just… wanted to hang out today!” he said quickly. “It’s been a while, since it’s been just us, you know?”

“…Okay.” Ken just sighed, rubbing his face. “What do you want to do?”

Wow, okay, Ken was *out* of it. He didn’t even question it. He would have to seriously talk to Ken about this. Like, why was Ken ever reacting like this? Didn’t Ken have a crush before? On Minako-san?

“How about Akihabara?” Ren suggested, before smothering the grin threatening to break across his face. “We could look for Neo Feathermen figurines—”

Ken just responded by pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’m really regretting letting you find out about that,” he muttered.

Ren just smirked at him. “It would’ve come out, one way or another.”

Though he had to admit, it was too fun to tease Ken. It was just funny to see him getting all embarrassed and flustered, especially since it was over *Feathermen.*

Ken huffed. “Let’s just go then.”

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Ren was still surprised that Ken enjoyed reading manga and playing video games. Like, he knew that Ken wasn’t quite what you’d guess him to be at first glance but *still.* He could be so serious sometimes.

Despite how Ken had been far from amused by his suggestion, they did end up going into a hybrid video game/figurine shop. They had mostly figurines from anime or video games, but they had some from TV shows. Funnily enough, one of them was of Yukari-san.

“Is it ever weird to see her on TV?” Ren couldn’t help but ask.

Ken made a face. “It’s weirder to hear people talk about her because they think she’s attractive.”

…Yeah, okay, that was fair.

Hmm… maybe he could shop around for some video games for his 3VS. His retro console was fun and all, but he picked up his 3VS again because Anne was especially into portables. It was fun battling her in *Pusémon,* even though she constantly kicked his ass.

“What are you looking for?” Ken asked.

“Nothing in particular.” Ren shrugged, as he looked over the shelves. “But it’d be nice to play another game. The games I have right now are getting a bit stale.”

“That’s understandable,” Ken said. “What games do you like?”
“JRPGs are pretty fun,” Ren answered. “I like Campfire Emblem, too.”

But then something caught his eye. He picked up the case, which read *Spirit of Justice*. Oh damn, he forgot about the new Legendary Lawyer game.

He turned to Ken with a grin, holding the case out to him. “Maybe you should play this. You *do* want to be a defense attorney, after all.”

Ken rolled his eyes at him. “Haha, very funny,” he said dryly, looking rather unamused. “You’re not the first to make that joke, you know.”

“I’m not?” Ren snapped his fingers. “Darn.”

Ken just snorted in response. “Junpei-san thought it’d be funny to show me the original trilogy shortly after I started to become interested in law.”

Ren slipped the game back on the shelf. “What did make you interested in law, anyways? I mean, it’s a pretty typical career for student council, but…”

“Oh well, I suppose I got inspired after hearing Akihiko-san talk about how skewed the law is towards the prosecution.” Ken rubbed the back of his neck. “And well…”

Ren raised an eyebrow. “Well?”

“Well…” Ken said slowly. “It’s just… it’s pretty impressive too. Becoming a lawyer.”

Ken then winced, as if he knew that it was a lame excuse.

Ren folded his arms over his chest. “I don’t believe that,” he said flatly. “You’ve never cared about reputation. You didn’t give a crap when people were staring and whispering about us talking.”

Ken winced again. “It’s… It’s complicated,” he muttered out.

“Then clarify.” Ren quirked an eyebrow at him.

Ken let out a frustrated sigh, running his hand through his hair. “…You’re really stubborn, you know that, right…?”

“It just means that I don’t give up,” Ren quipped. “Come on, out with it.”

“Fiiine…” Ken grumbled out. The hint of the pout in his voice made Ren snicker. “Can we step out with this?”

Since they had been just browsing, they stepped out of the shop and found a bench to sit at. Ken was quiet for a moment, his brows furrowed together as he stared down at the ground.

“…What did you think of Shinjiro-san when you first met him?” he finally said, lifting his head.

Ren frowned, scratching the back of his head as he racked his brain. “…You’re really stubborn, you know that, right…?”

“Fiiine…” Ken grumbled out. The hint of the pout in his voice made Ren snicker. “Can we step out with this?”

In hindsight, maybe that was why Ken didn’t care about Ren’s reputation to begin with. Ken just talked to him like a normal person.

Ken smiled half-heartedly. “Better than most people’s first impression of him. Better than *mine.*”
“You can’t be hard on yourself for that…” Ren said quietly. “Your circumstances are different. But… why are you even asking me about this?”

Ken fidgeted for a moment. “Well… People always assumed that Shinjiro-san was a violent delinquent… Some of my classmates had older siblings who had attended Gekkoukan High, when Shinjiro-san had been shot. Nobody had known the truth… so people assumed that he got shot by a gangster. When he had taken custody of me… people just… wondered why.”

“But how would people know?” Ren asked.

“After everyone graduated from Gekkoukan, we removed all of the SEES equipment and Mitsuru-san left it open to other students,” Ken explained. “She allowed me to stay there and I got to know my dormmates over the past couple years, before Shinjiro-san took me in. Though I guess part of it was my fault… I was kinda vague about why I was suddenly moving out, and they met Shinjiro-san and jumped to conclusions that he wasn’t… a nice guy. It doesn’t help that Shinjiro-san literally doesn’t care about people’s opinions.”

Huh.

“But… what’s bugging you then?”

Ken shrugged. “I guess… it just got to me, especially in high school. The classic literature teacher at Gekkoukan, Mister Ekoda… he really didn’t like Shinjiro-san. Fuuka-san had been in his homeroom, and when she had disappeared in Tartarus, he had covered her disappearance for the ‘good’ of the school.”

Ren made a face. Figures. It seemed like shitty teachers were just a staple of any school.

“He always took on a tone of surprise when he saw me working for student council. He’d make backhanded compliments all the time… like it’s nice to see that you’re such a hard worker… though I’m not sure where you learned that from.”

“He sounds like an ass,” Ren said flatly.

“That’s an… apt way to put it,” Ken said. “He wasn’t too happy when Mitsuru-san introduced more scholarship students.” Then he shrugged. “And I dunno… it just got to me. Especially since Shinjiro-san didn’t have to take me in… And I guess that I just wanted to prove people wrong… that Shinjiro-san wasn’t bringing me down. I already burden him enough…”

“But that’s not a good reason to do that,” Ren said. When Ken looked to him, Ren continued. “It sounds like you’re just doing it… going along with it. The fact that you seemed to be bouncing between that and being a Shadow Operative kinda proves my point. I know you’re graduating in the spring, but you don’t have to jump into this. Especially since you decided on this pretty quickly.”

Ken shrugged. “It just… doesn’t seem too far away. University entrance exams are only a few months away.” Then he blinked, pressing a hand to his face. “Oh my god, entrance exams are only a few months away… And I haven’t studied all that much…”

Ren laughed. Though… he was a little bit worried about how Ken just brushed aside what he had said about shinjiro-san and being a ‘burden’.

“I’m sure you’ll do fine,” Ren reassured him. “You tied with Makoto for the top score out of the third years during the last exam. But hey… you know that Shinjiro-san cares about you, right? He’s not taking care of you out of duty.”
Though he had to wonder just who had been taking care of Ken before he had met SEES… Ken never said it, but Ren could guess that Ken’s family didn’t care about him. Though that was nothing new…

Ken was silent for several moments. “Yeah, I know…” he said quietly. “I… I think I just need to be reminded of that.”

Ren just smiled. “Any time, Ken.”

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**RANK UP! Adjustment Confidant has reached Rank 7.**

**Unison Attack:** Two or more party members may step in with a special attack, after Ren knocks down a Shadow.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait, especially for a filler chapter. The Adjustment Confidant scene was giving me a lot of trouble.

But the next update will be a good one, though. A certain anniversary is coming up, and we’ll finally get to wrapping up Okumura’s Palace. The Okumura arc will be finished in the chapter after the next.
Good Parents, Bad Parents

Chapter Summary

October fourth rolls by, and Ken comes to a realization. Not soon after, the Phantom Thieves visit Okumura's Palace once more and even more of Okumura's sins come to light.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tuesday, October 4th, 2016

A crash dragged Ken out of his sleep. He rubbed his eyes, feeling disoriented.

"Ken!" Mom rushed to his side, tugging on his arm. "Come on, honey, get up," she urged. "There's-

Another crash, this time louder. Ken couldn't help but flinch at the sound.

Ken stood on wobbly legs. "Mom, what's going on?"

Mom bit her lip. "I don't know. But we can ask questions later. We need to get out. Now."

The tone of her voice brooked no argument. So Ken let her tow him out of his room, as the walls shook. When they reached the living room, they could see that… something broke through the wall. Glass shards flew everywhere. Ken couldn't move… he just stared in horror.

Mom didn't hesitate. She grabbed him, hugging him close as she shielded him from the shrapnel. A black gleaming monster, astride on a horse, tore through the house with no abandon. She just gasped as it pierced her in the back.

"M-Mom?" he croaked out.

Mom just gave him a pained smile even as the monster disappeared. Blood was pooling at their feet. "I… I love you," she gasped, her arms tightening around him. She slid her hand against his cheek. "I love you so much, Ken…" Her voice cracked for a moment. "You're my everything. Please don't forget that. And…" She was shaking. She suddenly coughed. "…I'm sorry."

Her grasp on him slackened as she crumpled to the floor, blood pooling from her back.

"Mom? MOM!" Ken fell to his knees, shaking her. Her blood soaked his clothes, coating his hands, but he didn't care. "Mom, wake up!"

But she didn't respond. Ken bit his lip. Was she… Was she dead? Tears stung at his eyes. What had even happened? One moment, he had his mom and another… he didn't.

"What the fuck did I do?"

Ken whipped around to see a teenager in the rubble of his house. In the dim lighting, he could
barely make out the dark brown of his hair.

"There's no time for that!" Another voice, this one feminine. "We can't be held culpable for this!"

"What the fuck—did you see what I did?!"

"You killed her..." Ken mumbled. He was shaking. He could not stop shaking. "You... You killed my mom! You monster! I HATE YOU!"

Why... Why did he have to take Mom away?

Ken looked back at Mom. There was so much blood...

There was so much blood. Even though Shinjiro-san's trenchcoat was maroon, nobody could miss the blood soaking through the thick fabric.

"Why?" Ken blurted out, staring at Shinjiro-san in horror. He didn't understand... why did Shinjiro-san protect him?

"Heh..." Shinjiro-san tried to smile, but it only came out as a pained grimace. "What's with the long face? Isn't this what you wanted?"

"But I...!" Ken bit his lip. "That's not—"

He just didn't know anymore... He felt torn enough about wanting to kill Shinjiro-san in the first place. He saw with his own eyes that Shinjiro-san was a good person.

But he had told himself that his reason for living had been to avenge his mother. Nobody knew the truth... but him. He owed it to Mom, to avenge her... Especially since she had died protecting him.

"It's all right... give yourself time. Let your anger be your strength. You're just a kid... you've got your whole life ahead of you. Don't waste it. Make it your own."

A blur of voices.

A coma... A very slight chance of him waking up.

It was his fault... If he hadn't been so stupid and called Shinjiro-san out for something he was conflicted on. If he hadn't been so caught up with the idea of revenge, then Shinjiro-san would be still okay...

Ken woke up with a gasp. He pressed a hand against his forehead, letting out a sigh. It was just a dream...

Ken bit his lip. Ha... He didn't even have to look to know what the date was.

October fourth... Over the years, it had gotten slightly easier. But he couldn't forget what had happened. He didn't always dream of his mother's death or when Shinjiro-san almost died protecting him on the anniversary, but...

He heaved out a sigh, rubbing his face. Maybe it was a reminder... because he couldn't visit Mom's grave today. He had always visited Mom's grave on the anniversary...

His door creaked open. Koromaru squeezed through, darting over to his bed. Instead of his usual
playful pounce and licking of Ken's face, Koromaru jumped onto Ken's bed by his feet. His ruby
eyes were mournful as he curled into Ken's lap.

Koromaru was always good at sensing emotions.

Ken spent several moments just petting Koromaru. It was nice. It… helped calm his nerves a bit.

"Thanks, boy," he murmured.

Koromaru let out a soft whine before he licked Ken's face.

Someone lightly rapped on the door. "Ken-kun?" Fuuka-san called. "Can I come in?"

"Sure," he answered.

Fuuka-san pushed the door completely open. "Hey," she said softly, walking to stand next to the
side of his bed. "How are you feeling?"

Ken shrugged. "Okay, I guess. I, um, had the dream."

Her eyes filled with sympathy. "Do you need to talk about it?"

"Not really…" Ken mumbled out, making Koromaru whine.

"Okay." She nodded, before leaning in to lightly kiss his forehead. She gently ran her fingers
through his hair. "You should get dressed. Shinji's calling Shujin so you can have a sick day."

"He… He didn't have to do that."

It had become routine for Shinjiro-san to do that, ever since he had gained custody of Ken. But…
part of that was to visit Mom's grave. And they couldn't exactly do that…

Fuuka-san smiled. "Well, he's doing it right now. And he can't exactly take it back. Besides that,
you've had a lot on your plate lately, Ken-kun. With pursuing things with Okumura, organizing that
trip to Inaba… and can't forget how exams are coming up in just a couple weeks."

Ken groaned, pressing a hand to his face. "Don't remind me."

Fuuka-san just ruffled his hair. "You'll be fine, Ken-kun. You always do well in exams. But,
regardless, I think a day where you can take it easy would be good for you."

"You act like I'm a workaholic."

"The way Shinji talks, you seem like it sometimes."

"You know that Shinjiro-san shit talks. A lot."

"Language, Ken-kun!" Fuuka-san's tone was scolding, but the twinkle in her eyes told him
otherwise. She then shook her head. "But anyways, I'm going to let you get ready for the day.
Shinji's probably starting breakfast, so I'll give him a hand."

After that, she left. Ken nudged Koromaru off his lap so he could crawl out of bed. After
freshening up with a shower and his usual routine, he slipped on his favorite hoodie and a pair of
jeans. He may dress properly with the school uniform for the most part, he did like being
comfortable. He didn't touch his phone, though. He knew that there would be messages from
everyone else in SEES, at the very least… He'd get to it eventually.
Ken then headed for the living room. Fuuka-san was setting the table all while humming a little ditty under her breath. And Shinjiro-san was pouring coffee for the three of them. It was a normal scene for them before the move but it felt like it's been years since he's seen since this, rather than just months.

"Good morning," he greeted quietly.

"Morning," Shinjiro-san answered, as he measured out sugar and cream out for Fuuka-san's cup of coffee. "Go ahead and sit down." Ken grabbed the two mugs Shinjiro-san had already poured out, setting them on the table.

Ken sat down just as Fuuka-san did. Shinjiro-san brought Fuuka-san's mug to the table before he sat down himself.

Fuuka-san let out a soft hum before she took a long sip of the coffee. She then lowered her mug. "I must admit that this pales in comparison to Sakura-san's brews."

Shinjiro-san snorted, before sipping his own coffee. "Dunno 'bout you, but I'd prefer to know how to cook over knowing how to brew coffee like Sakura."

Fuuka-san just raised an eyebrow. "Shinji, are you still mad about Futaba-chan's diet?"

Shinjiro-san slammed down his mug. Somehow, none of the coffee splashed out. "He let her eat whatever! No shit that she's tiny and has no energy! I mean, who the hell just lets the crap slide?!"

"Futaba's not that much smaller than Fuuka-san," Ken said, taking a sip of his own coffee. "And I've been taking the boxed lunches you've made to her."

"Someone's gotta feed her right." Shinjiro-san scowled.

Ken ignored their light banter, choosing to dig into his breakfast. Shinjiro-san had made omurice, like he always did on October fourth.

To be honest, it took Shinjiro-san several tries to perfect his omurice recipe. Not that it wasn't good the first time, but it wasn't like his mother's version. But Shinjiro-san tried again and again… In fact, he didn't perfect it until the first October fourth after his near brush of death.

He still remembered tearing up, because it was like he was tasting Mom's cooking all over again. Of course, Shinjiro-san had panicked in a very Shinjiro-san-like way, before Ken corrected him and clarified on why he was crying.

He was snapped out of his musings by a sudden sharp rap on the door.

"What the hell…?" Shinjiro-san questioned with an annoyed scowl.

"I've got it," Ken said, standing up and pushing in his chair. He was the closest to the door, after all.

He crossed the short distance to the front door, opening it to reveal Futaba… who rather looked like a drowned rat. Her waist length hair was absolutely soaked, water dripping from it. Her clothes stuck to her skin. Her dark green parka was zipped up for once, probably since the shirt she wore was white.

"F-Futaba?"
"You…" She let out an annoyed growl, before standing on her tiptoes to poke Ken in the chest. "Why are you suddenly sucking at answering your phone?!

"I haven't checked it today," Ken said quickly.

Futaba huffed, before her expression grew… sad. "Um, l-look… I know today's not… easy for you. I… I was worried so I came to see you. Especially with how you were so worried about me because of my mom…"

Oh… He… He felt stupid.

"But… why didn't you bring an umbrella?"

Futaba grumbled out, "I kinda… forgot it… at the train…"

…That was a complete Futaba move.

"Futaba-chan, why don't you come in?" Fuuka-san quickly interjected, rising to her feet. "You must be freezing."

Shinjiro-san was already on his feet, disappearing down the hallway. He returned moments later, holding one of their larger towels. "Dry yourself off, Sakura." He approached her, handing over the towel. "Mitsuru would kill me if we ruined the flooring."

Of course he'd use that excuse.

"Thanks," Futaba mumbled, wrapping the fluffy towel around herself.

Fuuka-san tilted her head, letting out a thoughtful hum. "You're close to my size. You can borrow my clothes. We can throw your clothes into the dryer for you."

She had apparently made her mind, as she turned on her heel and strode down the hallway. Moments later, she returned with a set of clothes. Futaba took it, staring at the clothes like it was a foreign creature. A long woolen turquoise sweater, paired with black leggings. Ken recognized as one of Fuuka-san's favorite outfits when she wanted to be comfortable.

"It's so… different," Futaba said. But then she looked up at Fuuka-san. "But, um, thank you."

Fuuka-san just giggled, patting Futaba on the head. "Wow, I haven't been able to do this since Ken-kun hit his first growth spurt."

"Why do you always have to treat me like I'm a child…?" Ken grumbled.

While Futaba went to the bathroom to change, Ken looked into the fridge for the extra portion that Shinjiro-san cooked—because Shinjiro-san always made extras. He pulled it out, heating it up briefly. Shinjiro-san plugged into the electric kettle to get the water boiling for a cup of tea for Futaba. (No surprise that Shinjiro-san didn't want Futaba to drink coffee.)

Futaba returned, clad in the clothes that Fuuka-san lent her. She carried her wet clothes at arm-length.

Shinjiro-san took her clothes, disappearing down the hallway where the laundry room was. Futaba plopped into the seat next to Ken's, running her fingers through her hair before looking down at her plate.

"Thanks!" she exclaimed cheerfully. "Wow, omurice! I haven't had this in the longest time!" Then
she reached for the mug, frowning. "Hey, why do I get tea?" Futaba complained. "You all have coffee!"

Shinjiro-san just snorted, sitting down again. "Maybe 'cause you're tiny? Coffee stunts your growth."

"Whaaaat?" Futaba puffed out her cheeks, glaring at Shinjiro-san. "Fuuka-san's not much bigger!"

"Fuuka didn't live on a diet of instant food for two years," Shinjiro-san retorted. "I should really have a talk with your old man 'bout that..."

"There's nothing wrong with how I eat!" Futaba said indignantly.

"You did not just say that..." Ken groaned out, pressing a hand to his forehead.

Fuuka-san just laughed. "I think Shinji could write a book about that."

Shinjiro-san shot them both annoyed glares. "I can hear you, y'know."

"Stop making it too easy then," Ken said dryly.

Shinjiro-san huffed, before looking over to Fuuka-san's plate. "Fuuka, are you hungry still?"

"Shinji, I'm fine," she insisted.

"You worked overtime for a week just to take half a week off!"

"It was worth it," Fuuka-san insisted, before giving him her usual sweet smile. "I got to see you and Ken-kun after all."

Shinjiro-san immediately shut up at that, a slight pink tingeing his cheeks. Ken just snorted, taking another sip of his coffee. Typical. There was a reason why everyone else joked that there were two people that Shinjiro-san was soft for: Fuuka-san and... Koromaru.

Futaba suddenly squeaked, jerking in her seat. She banged her knee against the table, making it rattle.

Ken looked down. Koromaru was brushing against Futaba's legs, probably to beg for seconds. "It's okay, Futaba. This is just Koromaru. He's just begging for scraps because a certain someone likes to spoil him."

"That's enough, Ken-kun," Fuuka-san said mildly. "There's no need to tease Shinji like that."

"Aw, he's pretty cute..." Futaba reached down, scratching Koromaru behind the ears. "Cuter than Morgana!"

"Better not let him know that," Ken said dryly.

Futaba snickered. "I won't tell if you don't." Then she picked up her chopsticks, and took a bite. Her face lit up. "Wow! This is pretty good! On par with Sojiro's curry for me!"

She then took another big bite and began to chew furiously, making Ken sigh. "Slow down... It's not going to run away from you."

"But ish good!" she protested through the mouthful of food in her mouth.
"Why do I even bother…" Shinjiro-san groaned, pressing a hand to his forehead for a moment. He then shot Ken an annoyed glare. "Why can't you make friends with people who actually eat well?"

"Makoto eats healthy," Ken offered.

A little too well in his opinion… One time they were eating together, Makoto had offered him some of her lunch because of how he usually shared with her. He knew it was very healthy but it tasted rather bland.

"Well, thank god for small blessings," Shinjiro-san snarked, rolling his eyes at Ken.

Fuuka-san just laughed softly, before looking over to Futaba. "So, Futaba-chan, you really like Sakura-san's curry, don't you?" she asked.

"Oh, um…" Futaba looked down at her plate. "Actually… Sojiro came up with it but… Mom perfected it. I couldn't even look at a plate of curry for a while because of that…"

"…I had no idea," Ken said quietly.

"Well, it's not something Sojiro exactly advertises." Then Futaba coughed. "A-Anyways, let's eat! It'll get cold if we don't…!"

Ken couldn't help chuckle at her attempt to change the subject, causing her to shoot him an annoyed look. But they continued eating breakfast. Futaba was still a bit shy, but Fuuka-san managed to coax her into talking by bringing up what she was working on during work. That really brought her out of her shell, and Futaba started rattling off all kinds of jargon that Ken had no idea meant. He was happy to see that Futaba was relaxing around Fuuka-san and to a lesser extent, Shinjiro-san.

After they finished breakfast and the table was cleared, Shinjiro-san waved him away from the sink. "Go entertain Sakura," he said. "She's here to see you, not us."

So Ken ended taking Futaba to his room.

"So… what do you—" he began, only to cut off by Futaba latching her arms around his waist.

"Futaba…?"

"I'm sorry about your mom," she mumbled out, giving him a tight squeeze.

Ken awkwardly patted her on the head. "…Thanks. It's… easier when I'm with the others."

But then something occurred to him. Futaba… had become a shut-in by the time the first anniversary of Isshiki-san's death. And it was worse for her because she had thought she was the one responsible for Isshiki-san's death.

"…I'm sorry that you had to go through your mother's death anniversary all alone last year."

Futaba gave a little sniff, pulling away from him. She then took off her glasses to rub at her eyes. "T-Thanks, Ken… This year's wasn't so bad. I mean, I got on to take those posers who took the Medjed name!" Futaba then wandered over to his desk, suddenly picking up the framed picture of him and Mom. That was their last summer vacation, just two months before she died… "This is her, isn't she?" At Ken's nod, Futaba examined it closer. "…She's pretty. You look a lot like her, except for your hair and eye color. Though I guess your hair used to match hers."
Ken touched his hair for a moment. "Um… yeah. It lightened over the years. I guess the sun bleached it a bit."

Futaba then plopped onto his bed without invitation, but Ken didn't bother chastising her over it. It seemed like a little thing to quibble over. "Tell me about her, Ken. I mean, you've got to have some pretty good memories about her, right?"

Ken joined her on the bed. "Well… Mom was a pretty good cook…” he began. "But she was awful at sewing and knitting…”

He still had the scarf that Mom had knit for him, even though he had outgrown it long ago. He really did wished that he had worn it when she was alive. She had been so proud that she had finally made something half-decent too.

…He still had a lot of regrets.

But… looking back at Futaba, he knew that she was right. He shouldn't focus on the sad memories…

Hours passed by and the rain still wouldn't let up. So Futaba ended up staying for a long time. Ken didn't mind though. It was a good… distraction.

"Ugh, I hate rain," Futaba grumbled, staring outside the window. "It's just so… wet."

"Well, water is wet," Shinjiro-san deadpanned.

"I'm just saying!" Futaba protested, before sticking her tongue out at him. "You don't have to be such a wet blanket!"

Shinjiro-san opened his mouth to fire back a response—surprise, surprise—when a knock sounded on the door. Ken went to answer the door, only to stare wide-eyed at the person on the other side.

"M-Makoto?"

"G-Good afternoon." Makoto hastily bowed. Once she straightened up, she winced, tucking her hair behind her ear. "I-I know that you told us that you were okay and that Futaba came to see you but WHY DIDN'T YOU ANSWER YOUR PHONE ?!" Makoto suddenly latched onto his shoulders, shaking him hard. She then seemed to freeze, yanking her hands away and letting out an awkward cough. "Um… I was just… worried about you. A-And I wanted to see you."

She… wanted to see him?

He suddenly felt a sharp rap on the top of his head. "Are you gonna to just gape at Niijima or are you gonna let her in?" Shinjiro-san deadpanned.

"Wha—?" Ken whipped around to glare at his guardian. "I'm not gaping!"

"Gape, stare, gawk, take your pick," Shinjiro-san deadpanned, all while ticking off his fingers. "Your vocabulary's decent enough."

"Ugh!" Ken fumed, folding his arms over his chest. "You're impossible to deal with sometimes!"

"Shinji, that's enough," Fuuka-san chastised, before she turned to Ken. "Ken-kun, shouldn't you let Makoto-chan inside?"

"Tch, you and the other girls always side with him," Shinjiro-san grumbled as Ken stepped aside to
let Makoto come in. He took her umbrella from her.

"Um… do you want to come to my room then?" Ken said. "Futaba?"

"Hmm… I'm good. Maybe later," Futaba answered, before turning to Shinjiro-san. "Shinjiro-san! I hunger! Feed me!"

"Do I look like your personal chef to you?" Shinjiro-san grumbled. "And we didn't eat that long ago!"

"You've had me bring food to the others how many times?" Ken asked, before quickly sidestepping the throw pillow Shinjiro-san chucked at him. "Come on, Makoto."

Koromaru perked up when they entered the room, jumping off the bed and crowding Makoto. Makoto let out a quiet chuckle, before kneeling down and scratching him behind the ear. Koromaru barked before enthusiastically licking her face, making Makoto squeak.

"He likes you," Ken offered, leaning her umbrella against the wall.

Makoto shot him an annoyed glare. "I can see that," she grumbled out, digging out a handkerchief and wiping the dog drool from her face. She then unzipped her bag, pulling out a folder. "I, um, copied the notes for today for you. It's nothing too difficult, but I thought you wouldn't want to miss any of it…" She then bit her lip, looking up at him. "Um… are you really okay, Ken? I know that you texted us about it hours ago but…"

"It's not just because it's the anniversary of Mom's death."

Makoto looked at him quizzically. "What do you mean?"

Ken sighed, sitting at the edge of his bed. "Sure, my mom's death is a big part of it…" He then rubbed his face. Koromaru jumped onto the bed, resting his head on Ken's lap. He stroked the top of Koromaru's head. "I didn't go into everything about October fourth, because I wanted to tell you the entire story of what happened back in 2009… But…" He looked down at his lap. "I was completely consumed by my bitter feelings. I felt like I had to avenge her… because she died protecting me." He bit his lip. "…Sometimes I think I haven't changed much. I can be so narrowminded sometimes… Back then, I knew Shinjiro-san was a good person. But I couldn't let it go…"

"Is this about what happened before we decided to target Okumura?"

"Not completely," he answered. "I hesitated for the longest time about telling you and everyone the truth about me. And if I had kept silent and you found out…?" He let out a short, mirthless laugh. "…It would've been my fault one hundred percent, if that angered everyone else. I would've deserved it."

"You're being too hard on yourself, Ken."

Makoto suddenly took his free hand, making him start.

"You were a child when you lost your mother and you were told that it was all in your head. And to see your mother die… because of you… I can't imagine how it would feel." Her eyes then met his. "I didn't know you back then, but I know you now… You've always tried to look after us. With Futaba, especially. I know that you regret a lot due to what happened in the past but… it's shaped you into the person you are today, hasn't it?" She squeezed his hand. "…I think that's worth something."
"Makoto…" Ken breathed.

He was just… speechless. She… really thought of him in that way?

Makoto's cheeks began to turn a warm shade of pink, her face now glowing like the setting sun. "I- I'm just stating the truth, you know..." she mumbled out, suddenly fiddling with her hair. "I... I'm glad that you're holding up okay." She abruptly withdrew her hand from his, resting it on her knee. "...I know that it'll still be... difficult for me when Dad's death anniversary comes."

"It hasn't come up yet?" Ken couldn't help but mentally kick himself for not thinking about Makoto.

Makoto shook her head. "No... it's in November. November nineteenth, to be exact." A soft sigh passed her lips. "...I wonder what he'd think of all of this... of me..."

Makoto jolted slightly when Ken rested his hand on her arm. "I'm sure that he'd be proud of you," he said quietly. "You've talked about how hard I'm on myself, but I think the same could apply to yourself."

Makoto then sighed. "Well... I guess I'm just used to not being good enough... Especially when I look at what Sis has accomplished so far. She graduated from high school a year early... she took an accelerated program throughout university... I just... don't measure up to her."

"That's not true," Ken said sharply. "Look, Makoto, I don't know your sister too well... But... she seems... difficult to approach. She's forged her own path, and it's rather admirable. You've just picked another path than hers... It's not lesser. And you're a wonderful friend."

Makoto's eyes softened. "Thank you, Ken. I... That means a lot to me, coming from you. You mean a lot to me."

...He did?

"I'm nothing special," Ken muttered.

"You are! To me at least..." Makoto then trailed off, a bright blush on her face.

He didn't understand how Makoto had a reputation of being cold and haughty. She was kind. She sometimes stumbled when she tried to reach out to people but... she tried so hard.

"I... ah, thank you," Ken stammered out, feeling his face flush.

What was wrong with him?

Then Makoto smiled at him. Ken's heart started to flutter.

Oh.

Oh.

Oh no.

When did this even happen?! Panic started to bubble inside of him as he tried to comb through all of the times he had spent with Makoto... and he couldn't pick out the moment he had...

No... that wasn't right. He started feeling confused about her when she had pulled him out of his
fear. He was just… in denial. Because he didn't want to admit it. He even avoided her about it, after what happened in Inaba… He had been just running away from his feelings.

"...Ken?"

"Ah—" Ken suddenly coughed. "It's nothing," he said lamely.

He was so screwed. He had went through this once already. And like before, the girl he had feelings for just saw him as a friend...

"Mwehehehe!"

Shinjiro leaned towards Fuuka, glancing over at the now cackling Sakura and then back at his girlfriend. "...Should we be worried?"

"Um… well, Futaba-chan is eavesdropping…" Fuuka shot the young girl a concerned look, before taking a step closer to her. "Futaba-chan?"

She looked up at Fuuka's voice. "Oh hey! You wanna hear the recording?" To add to it, she wagged her phone at Fuuka.

Shinjiro sighed, rubbing a hand against his forehead. She was giving him a headache. Why did more and more Minakos keep popping up? First Kujikawa and now Sakura… Maybe he was just doomed to be annoyed by redheads.

"I'm so gonna win the bet!" She began rubbing her hands together. Was it his imagination or were her glasses glinting? "Hehe, I can't wait!"

"What do you mean by a bet?" Fuuka asked.

"Oh!" She then ducked her head. "Wellll… last time we visited the Metaverse, Makoto was kinda staring at Ken and Ren teased her a little and egged her into trying to flirt with him. And me and Ren and Ryuji were talking about how clueless Ken was about it and we bet about when they'll get it together!" Sakura's face then broke into a wide—maniacal, in Shinjiro's opinion—grin. "And from the looks of it, I'm going to win!"

…Were they really that bored? Then again, Minako and Iori bet over anything under the sun… He supposed he shouldn't be too surprised.

Shinjiro sighed. Fuck, he needed a drink. Badly. Who knew that Ken would be so damn clueless? That was more Aki's style. But then again, back in August, Ken was all oh, I'm sure you look great in your swimsuit, Makoto! Friends totally say that to each other!

"Ah… um… I see…” Fuuka fidgeted for a moment.

At least someone else here was sane.

"Do you want in on the bet?" Sakura tilted her head. "We're betting three thousand yen each!"

Shinjiro groaned. "You…" he ground out, pointing at her, "are not allowed to meet Minako. Or Iori."

"What's that supposed to mean?!" she demanded, puffing her cheeks out at him. "And I've met Minako before!"
"Do you even remember anything 'bout her?" Shinjiro shot back.

"...Uhh..."

Sakura's sheepish smile was all he needed to know.

Shinjiro snorted. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

"You can't really fault her for that, Shinji. That was over two years ago," Fuuka defended.

"...Weren't you hungry, Futaba?"

"Ken!" Sakura jumped to her feet. "Shinjiro-san is tired and he doesn't want to cook."

"Really?" Ken raised an eyebrow. "That's new. But anyways, if Shinjiro-san's too tired, I can cook you something."

Ugh, was he serious? That was a total half-assed lie.

"You're the best, Ken!" Sakura cheered, latching onto his arm. "You should make something for Makoto too!" She then shot Nijima a knowing grin.

...Yeah, Sakura was absolutely not allowed to meet Minako. Who knew what kind of havoc they'd cause.

Ken gave Nijima an almost panicked look. "Oh, um..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "If she wants me to..."

...What the fuck was that about?

"Oh nono, it's fine!" Nijima protested.

"Makoto, you should never turn down free food!" Sakura reprimanded.

Fuuka just giggled, watching the banter. "Well... this was an interesting October fourth... wasn't it?"

"Sure, if you mean a huge fucking headache," Shinjiro deadpanned.

"Come on, Shinji, it wasn't all bad," Fuuka protested.

"Well... I can't exactly complain," Shinjiro said, taking her hand. "You're here, after all."

Six years ago, Minako had told him that while October fourth had bad memories for him in the past... it didn't mean the date always had to. And... she was right. He still sometimes dreamt of the time he lost control of Castor but... he knew he wasn't that person anymore. He was happy, something he thought he shouldn't be after accidentally killing Ken's mother.

...Though it'd be nice if Ken's friends didn't give him a headache. Aki, Minako, and Iori were bad enough.

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*Thursday, October 6th, 2016*

There was less than a week left before she was supposed to be shipped to Sugimura's. The mere
thought of Sugimura having her alone in his house just made Haru's skin crawl. Who knew what he'd try to do… Oh, Haru hoped that they would be able to change Father's heart in time…

"Okay, is everyone ready to head out?" Ren asked. When everyone nodded in response to his question, he let out a thoughtful hum before rubbing his chin. "Let's see… Definitely going with Noir. Ace… and Queen."

"Hey, team senpai today!" Ryuji said with a laugh.

Ren winked at them. "I'll try to pull my weight."

Instead of Ken's usually exasperated reaction to Ren's quip, Ken just shifted uncomfortably. "Um… right."

Makoto cleared her throat. "S- Shall we get going?"

Haru blinked at the two of them, tilting her head slightly. She wanted to ask them what was wrong, but given how they were acting right now… they'd panic, wouldn't they? Futaba seemed to confirm that with how she was snickering to herself. She didn't even bother holding her hand over her mouth.

Ren shot Futaba an amused look for a moment, before he nodded. "Yeah, Queen's right. Let's head out!"

But since they knew what they were doing, racing against the timer was easier. It wasn't before long until they found themselves just a few meters away from the elite group. They were blue, though… like the ones that flanked Sugimura. What made them so special?

"Joker, are you ready?" Morgana asked, looking at him. "Be careful… this battle will be tough."

"Let's kick some ass," Ren declared, before turning to Haru. "Noir, fire a warning shot."

"Not going for subtlety I see…" Yusuke remarked.

"I mean, we're gonna fight 'em, anyways," Ryuji pointed out. "Might as well go in with a bang, yeah?"

"Skull…" Ken winced. "I think you got the saying wrong…"

"Be careful, guys!" Anne exclaimed.

"How about a kiss for luck then?" Ren asked, giving her a charming smile. "I could always use some more luck."

Anne rolled her eyes at him. "Uh huh. I'm sure."

Haru couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy at their little exchange. Anne had mentioned that they had been dating for about a month and a half when they had visited Inaba. She couldn't help but wish that she had met Ren a month or two sooner…

Not that it really mattered… they were happy together, and that was the important part.

Haru shook her head. She had to focus… She pulled out her grenade launcher and pulled the trigger. The ground shook as the bomb exploded, scattering the robots. But then two larger robots —like the chief manager robot they had fought during their last visit— lumbered into view, out of nowhere.
Haru just stared with horrified eyes. They… they had trouble with just one of the chief manager robots. And there were two now?!

"Crap," Ren muttered under his breath, before twisting around to face the others. "Everyone, I need you on board with this fight!"

"Understood!" everyone else exclaimed.

"Dance, Hecate!" Anne cried out, her Persona coming forth and hitting their enemies with a red light.

"Okuninishi!" Ren followed up with summoning a samurai-like warrior, who thrust his sword forward. A red aura shimmered around them for a moment, and Haru could feel strength coursing her veins.

Yusuke summoned Goemon, which then blew his pipe. Ice suddenly crystallized and Morgana summoned Zorro to whip up a powerful gale to send the ice spell rushing towards the robots.

Ken used the moment they staggered from the attack to launch a light spell, and Ryuji had Captain Kidd add to the attack. The stream of lightning intertwined with the golden light, making it crackle with electricity as the spell slammed into its targets.

"Keep them on the defensive!" Ren commanded. "If you're using single attacks, focus on the big ones!"

It was… chaotic. Haru switched from both gun attacks and psy spells, occasionally using her axe when the robots came to close.

Milady sent the robots flying with a Psio spell, allowing Makoto to nail them with a Freila spell when gravity sent them crashing down. The attack destroyed two of the robots, but two more just stepped forward in their place… like they were just waiting in the wings to come forward.

"Ugh!" Ryuji groaned. "You've gotta be kiddin' me!"

"Less complaining, more fighting, Skull!" Morgana shouted back at him.

"Doesn't mean I can't get annoyed 'bout it!" he fired back.

"Panther, look out!" Futaba's voice suddenly echoed in their minds.

Haru looked over to see that one of the larger robots had lumbered over to Anne, its arm crashing down on her.

"Arhabaki!" Ren shouted, a hint of desperation tingeing his voice, tearing off his mask. The stone statue blocked the robot's swing. Anne took the opening to summon her Persona, which unleashed a torrent of dazzling flames, engulfing the entire force of robots. "Panther, are you okay?" he asked.

Anne nodded fiercely. "Yeah! Thanks for the save, though."

Ren grinned at her. "Anything for you."

"Care to pass the baton, Panther?" Makoto called out to her.

"Right!" Anne nodded before dashing over to her. "Do it, Queen!"
Haru's eyes drifted to the larger robots. Their gun attacks hardly fazed them… It seemed like they were barely chipping at the robots.

"Guys!" Futaba suddenly shouted. "I know that Joker wants you to focus on the larger robots but be careful! The smaller ones…"

One of the said smaller robots tottered over to where Ryuji and Morgana stood. It then… twitched, before self-destructing. The blast knocked Morgana skidding backwards. Ryuji just stumbled backwards but that didn't stop him from letting out a stream of cuss words.

"…Explode," Futaba finished belatedly. Then she gasped. "Queen, look out…!"

Ken dropped his spear before he tackled her out of the way of the blast, his hand cradling the back of her head to shield her from the brunt of the force. They stared at each other for a moment, before Makoto stammered out a thanks.

Haru was… confused. Very confused. What had even happened between them?

"Noir!" Yusuke's shout snapped her out of her thoughts. Another robot self-destructed, the blast sending her stumbling backwards. Then one of the larger robots swung his arm. "GOEMON!"

Goemon intercepted the blow with his pipe. Haru quickly aimed her grenade launcher at the robot, firing it. The blast caused it to stagger back.

"Let's stop you in your tracks," Yusuke murmured.

Ice crystallized on the ground, creeping up on the robot's feet. Ken cut in with another light spell, and Makoto quickly followed up with a nuclear spell. The blast was strong enough to send the robot teetering backwards.

"Any weaknesses, Oracle?!" Ryuji demanded.

"Ghh…" Futaba made a frustrated sound. "I can't sense any, sorry! It may be just one of those annoying suckers that don't have any!"

"That's okay!" Ren said. He twirled his knife in his hand for a moment. "Oracle, I want you to see if you can figure out any attack patterns they have, okay? Mona, try to knock the larger robots with Miracle Punch!" Then he ripped off his mask. "Astraea!"

A woman clad in a sparkling silver cloak appeared. Her dark hair was as black as the night sky, making the golden stars in her tresses stand out. She carried a golden staff with a milky white orb, laurels intertwined around the orb. She pointed her staff at Morgana, a yellow light engulfing him for a moment.

"Good idea, Joker!" Futaba complimented. "Hopefully Mona will land a critical hit now!"

"Keep the robots back," Makoto suggested. "They can't hit us with that blast, if we keep our distance."

"Yeah, good idea." Ren nodded. "Panther, hit 'em with everything you've got! Noir, I want you to help her out with your gun attacks. Ace, you too, but heal us up if necessary! Skull, Fox, Queen, I want you to focus on the larger ones! Critical hits can help us so much!"

"Understood!" they all cried at once.
It was chaos as they launched their attacks. Haru could feel her legs trembling as she kept up the
gun attacks. They were a bit stronger than her magic spells, but they drained so much energy out of
her. It was a relief when the familiar aura of Ken's healing spell wrapped around her, infusing a
warmth in her as the spell restored her energy.

Zorro then darted forward, slashing with his rapier for a moment before… sucker punching the
robot. The force knocked it down, causing the ground to shake violently.

"Nice, Mona!" Anne complimented.

"Hehe, what did you expect?!" he crowed. "Pretty impressive, right, Joker—"

He was cut off by Ren breezing past them, taking a running jump, and scrambling up on the
second robot. He was looking for something?

"Dude!" Ryuji exclaimed. "Are you nuts?!"

"Joker, what are you DOING?!!" Anne shouted, the fear in her voice completely palpable.

"Control panel… control panel…" Ren muttered under his breath, twirling his knife in his hand.
He was somehow clinging on with one hand, despite the robot's attempts to shake him off.

"Joker, that's too dangerous!" Haru exclaimed. "There has to be another way!"

"I've got this!" Ren yelled back at them. "Don't worry about me!"

Ken just pressed a hand against his face. "Don't worry about me, he says…” he muttered. "Why am
I not surprised about this…?"

Yusuke sighed wearily. "This is Joker we're talking about…"

"Everyone, focus!" Makoto said sharply. "Keep the others at bay! We can manage that at least!"

Haru shook her head. Makoto was right… Ren was being stubborn about this, but the least they
could do was play keep away with the other robots.

They used the same strategy that Ren had proposed earlier, but Ryuji, Yusuke, and Makoto
focused on the one robot that Ren wasn't on. Captain Kidd was essentially like a battering ram,
slamming into the robot repeatedly. Goemon caused shockwaves to ripple through the air with his
powerful physical attacks.

But the larger robot was stubborn. It kept pushing forward, even through Makoto's nuclear attacks.
But then a whip coiled around its arm, tugging it backwards.

"Not… on my watch!" Anne ground out, even as she was dragged forward. She then yanked at her
whip with both hands, all while digging in her heels, making the robot stagger backwards.

Captain Kidd crashed into the robot moments later and Morgana nailed it with another Miracle
Punch.

"Gotcha!" Ren exclaimed, before using his knife to pry off the panel. A moment later, Haru heard
a loud *zap!* Ren jumped off, landing with a roll, as the robot twitched, falling forward. He leapt to
his feet, pivoting to face them. "Everyone, let's go for an All Out Attack!"

They lunged forward and went… well, all out on the robots. Haru couldn't help but imagine that
the robots represented everything wrong… Everything they had seen… what Father viewed his
workers as, how he viewed her… She put everything in every last swing of her axe.

When they were through, all of the robots were just scraps of metal. Haru wiped the sweat from her brow… That was… an intense fight.

"Damn… that was a tough one," Ren groaned, sinking to his knees. "I'm not looking forward to the fight with Okumura if his elite robots were giving us a tough fight…" Ryuji grabbed him by the arm, pulling him to his feet. "Thanks, Skull." He then looked towards the doors. "We should get going now though. The way's clear."

"Wait. There's one more thing…" When Ren looked at her quizzically, Anne suddenly smacked Ren upside on the head. "WHAT WAS THAT STUNT?!" She completely bypassed yelling, skipping right to shrieking. Haru couldn't help but wince… Anne really had a pair of lungs on her. She was surprised that her eardrums weren't ringing.

"Ow!" Ren rubbed the spot she hit him. "Jeez, Panther, that hurt!"

"Well, you gave me a heart attack!" Anne huffed, hands on her hips as she glowered fiercely at him. "That was completely reckless!"

"Yeah but—" Ren then faltered when he caught sight of the look on Anne's face. He then hung his head. "…Sorry, Panther. That was a stupid move. I just thought it'd help us win faster, that's all…"

"And he actually admits it…" Ryuji waved a hand at them, a knowing grin on his face. "Just hurry up and kiss and make up already!"

"SKULL!" Anne's face immediately turned bright red, before one of her hands clenched into a fist. "That's… YOU…"

"It's true, though, riitiight?" Ryuji taunted with a smirk.

Yusuke sighed wearily, shaking his head. "Sometimes I can't help but think that you have a death wish, Skull…"

"Shut up!" she snapped at Ryuji, completely ignoring Yusuke's comment, before letting out a growl. "I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!"

Anne lunged for him, but Ren caught her around the waist and hauled her backwards with little effort. "Come on, Panther, Skull's just messing around."

Anne glowered at Ryuji but she slowly nodded. Ren cautiously released her. "But anyways… let's getting going. We're not accomplishing anything just standing there."

"Though… that fight…" Makoto said slowly. "It seemed that Okumura has countless people in the wings…"

"Are you truly surprised?" Yusuke inquired, fiddling with the hilt of his katana. "Big Bang Burger is always hiring. It seems that when one worker steps down…"

"…Another will be there to replace it," Haru finished, just barely able to keep her voice from trembling.

She couldn't help but feel so… ashamed. She had concealed her surname at school so not to get preferential treatment from her classmates but… She had never been ashamed to be an Okumura… until now. She just… didn't know how far Father had gone.
"Come on." Anne put a hand on her arm. "Let's keep going!"

Haru forced a smile. ". . . You're right."

Ren led them towards the door, but when they stepped through, Futaba gasped. "What the…?"

"Fuel addition has increased output! Incinerator throughput has reached 270%!"

Haru dropped her axe, making Ryuji yelp. Her hands flew to her mouth, as they watched a conveyor belt dump a robot inside the incinerator.

No… why…

"The employees…" Yusuke breathed. "They're being dumped inside the incinerator…"

"All of the employees then…" Ken said. "They're being turned into…"

"Fuel for the company…” Makoto finished for him.

Ren tensed up. "And that means… what's running the company is…”

"People's lives…” Haru said softly..

She… She felt so disgusted with herself. She had been living in the lap of luxury. Her fine clothes, the food she ate, her education… they were all paid for with the lives of her father's workers. Their lives fueled the company. Why hadn't she questioned it before? Why did it take this long for her eyes to be opened?!

Hot tears spilled down her cheeks. She peeled off her mask, angrily wiping at them.

She… She couldn't forgive Father for this. When had he crossed the line? When had he decided that nothing was too much? Didn't Father see how wrong this was?!

And the employees were just trying to survive. And Father… he abused that. Just like how he had abused her.

"Noir…?" Yusuke asked.

"It… It's nothing." Haru stared mournfully as more and more robots were dumped into the furnace. Her heart gave a painful squeeze as she watched their bodies sink under the lava. "...I cannot allow my father to continue with this. I will make him atone for what he's done…” She squeezed her eyes shut. "I… I cannot forgive my father for this!"

"Noir…” Anne said softly.

"What… What makes him believe that he has the right to do this…? That money in his pocket should be placed above innocent lives… people who just wanted to make a living!" Haru shook her head, kneeling down to pick up her axe. "Let's go! We must change his heart!"

Ken was disoriented… for more than one reason.

He had to admit that the air shafts had been cool. At first. But after spending fifteen, twenty minutes wandering around… he was over it. Beyond over it.

And then there was Makoto.
After he had gotten over his crush on Minako-san during the sixth grade, girls had barely been on his radar. The fact that girls only seemed to notice him after he joined the soccer club only made him want to ignore them. And yet somehow, he had fallen for Makoto without him noticing. How on earth did that even happen?

Not that it mattered… if Makoto was to like someone, it'd be Ren. Of course, there was Anne head over heels for him and Haru also seemed to be taken with him as well. It seemed to be a Wild Card thing…

Could he just… not feel this? He hated feeling all jittery and flustered from just looking at Makoto. …They needed to fight some Shadows already... The adrenaline of battle helped him forget about his jumbled up emotions.

They landed in the area where they had started… but a Shadow was lurking about. Ren actually groaned aloud when it spotted them but he grabbed his knife, slashing right in the Shadow's face.

The Shadow split into three… Scathachs? Wasn't that… one of Minato-san and Minako-san's most powerful Personas? If he remembered right, they also used it in one of their fusion spells…

First Arhabaki and now Scathach? What was next—them fighting Norn?

"Any ideas on weaknesses, Ace?" Ren asked.

"Er…" Ken rubbed his chin. Crap, what was Scathach's weakness? He couldn't remember… Minato-san and Minako-san really had too many Personas… Did Scathach even have a weakness? "It was pretty strong… it might not have a weakness."

"This one's average, though," Futaba piped up from her vantage point inside of Necronomicon. "Right around you guys' strength!"

…What. Not even one of the stronger Shadows? This was just too strange…

Then again, they'd probably be in trouble if this Scathach matched the power of Minato-san and Minako-san's Scathach…

A ring of fire exploded from one of the Scathachs, fanned by the gust of wind produced by another of the Scathachs.

The last Scathach was suddenly in front of him, slashing at him several times before knocking him down with one final jab. Ken stumbled backwards, the back of his head hitting the wall hard enough so that he saw stars.

"Ace!" Futaba shrieked. "Come on, get up!"

Ken's hand clenched around his spear, blinking several times as he struggled to move. But his muscles just refused to listen. Ugh… He felt so dizzy…

He looked up with blurry eyes to see that a Scathach was hovering above him, a flame dancing above her palm.

"JOHANNA!"

The Scathach was knocked away with a blue blast. Makoto then charged forward on Johanna, slamming Scathach with such a force that she was sent flying. He was vaguely aware of Haru
 summoning Milady.

Makoto then dismounted from Johanna, hurrying over to him before she dropped to her knees. She helped him sit up, her hands lightly resting on his shoulders, leaning in close as she scrutinized him. And suddenly, he was dizzy for more than one reason.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm… I'm okay," he managed to spit out. "Thanks, Queen."

"I'm glad." She then slid her hands off of his shoulders, moving one of them to grasp his hand and pulled him up with her. "Come on," she said over her shoulder. "We have Shadows to fight."

They rejoined the fight and in the end, Ren managed to convince Scathach to join him. Ren ended up swapping him out for Morgana, but Ken had no complaints. It gave him a reason to hang back.

Ren had talked to him about not ignoring Makoto, after they had hung out last week, so he knew that he couldn't keep fobbing her off with lame excuses. And Ren was right… it wasn't fair to Makoto either.

He just… had no idea how to handle this sudden influx of feelings.

"I think we deserve a little break after this whole…" Ren waved his hand, sweeping the area, "… maze. So let's head back to the safe room and chill for a little bit. We need to breathe."

Since they were back where they had started, the trek back to the safe room didn't take long. Ken was just relieved to sit back down. He felt drained… more drained than he had initially realized. He didn't mind Morgana taking over. He could until Ren decided that they should head back.

His eyes suddenly drifted over to Makoto. She was stretching… working out the kinks in her body. Sometimes he forgot just how toned Makoto was-

Argh, he needed to stop it! Ken suddenly felt the urge to introduce his face to the table. What was wrong with him?! He may be attracted to Makoto, but that didn't give him the right to stare…

Logic dictated that he try and get over these overwhelming emotions, like he had with Minako-san. But… something in him balked at the idea. Was it really a bad idea to try and go for it…?

Ken rubbed his temples. What was he thinking? Of course it'd be a bad idea! It wasn't at all like the case of Ren and Anne. He honestly felt like logic and emotion kept yanking him back and forth. It was giving him vertigo.

"Heeeeey, Ace!" Ryuji's exuberant voice snapped Ken out of his ruminations. "Wanna see some pictures of Shoyu?!"

Shoyu… that was what Ryuji had named Koromaru's puppy. As promised, Fuuka-san had brought a puppy with her during her recent visit.

Meeting Ryuji's mother had been… interesting. He wasn't sure what he was expecting Mrs. Sakamoto to be like, but he didn't expect her to open her mouth and a thicker Kansai accent than Labrys-san's to come out. She had been very nice, though. He could see where Ryuji had picked up some of his mannerism from, though.

Ryuji rambled on and on about his new puppy as he scrolled through the pictures on his phone. Shoyu seemed like a bit of a troublemaker, but Ryuji had energy to spare to deal with him. A good
match. Though who knew that Ryuji would be so… doting?

…Then again, you probably wouldn't expect that from Shinjiro-san.

That was when Anne came over, sighing over Ryuji's pictures. She even snatched Ryuji's phone out of his hands so she could get a closer look, forcing Ken to step in.

But with Ryuji's attention on Anne, he was left brooding in his thoughts again. Ken just sighed, before his eyes drifted over to Makoto again. He felt pathetic. Utterly pathetic.

"So." Ren had taken Ryuji's spot next to him, a glint in his dark eyes.

"So…?" Ken echoed.

Ren's shit eating grin was on his face. "So… when did you realize that you like Queen?"

"W-Wha…?" Ken felt his face flush. His hand wrapped around the shaft of his spear, like it was an anchor. "O-Of course I like her," he stammered out. "She's my friend."

"Hm." Ren tilted his head, a devious light entering his eyes.

"…What's that for?" Ken glowered at Ren.

"So do you stare at all of the girls like you do to Queen? Not sure how I feel about that, if you do that to Panther."

"That's—" Ken felt his face burn even hotter. He squeezed his spear even tighter as he glared at Ren again. "Why do you have to put it like that?!"

Ren just smiled innocently. "Well, do you?"

Ugh! Why did Ren have to be like this?! He was just telling himself not to stare at Makoto and Ren just had to point it out. Ken was snapped out of his thoughts by the sudden sound of wood cracking. Ken looked down. He had to stamp down the urge to swear. Profusely. He had cracked the shaft of his spear. How did that happen?!

"Huh." Ren tilted his head, a knowing smirk on his face. That little shit. "Good thing I swapped Mona in before all of this. And I always upgrade weapons before we take on the Palace ruler."

Ken glowered at him. "Shut up, Joker."

"You know it's true," he said in a sing-song voice, before leaning in close. "You know… someone wise once told me… you should take what happiness you can. Pretty solid advice, right?"

"That's… you…" Ken was floundering. He knew that he was floundering. "This is different, okay?!" he hissed out.

Ren just smirked, leaning back in his seat. "Clarify for me, then."

"S-Shouldn't we get back to the exploration?" Ken stammered out. "W-We can't stay here forever!"

He was not ready to talk about this. And not to Ren, of all people. Ren was a good friend but he was a little shit. He sure wasn't going to give Ren some ammo…

"Fine, fine, I suppose you're right." Ken let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding. But then Ren leaned in close. "…But you know you need to talk it out sometime, right? You can't keep it
bottled up or you'll explode."
"...I'll keep that in mind, Joker."

It had taken a long time but... they had finally done it.

Haru gazed at the hazy orb, which according to Morgana, represented the Treasure... the physical manifestation of her father's twisted desires.

Though she wasn't sure what exactly the factory had been "building"... That really bothered her. Not to mention the mental shutdowns... That was rather worrisome, as well.

But... that meant she would have to face her father. Her flesh and blood. She had such a difficult time connecting the despicable man whose sins were on display in this Palace... to the father she remembered.

Could she really do it...?

"Noir?" Makoto gently placed a hand on her shoulder. "We need to get going..."

"R-Right!" Haru forced a smile. "You're right, Queen..."

Over Makoto's shoulder, Yusuke's eyes met hers. She could see the sympathy swimming in his gray eyes.

They slipped into the safe room they had found near the Treasure, before Ren activated the app once more. They were whisked back to the real world.

"So... when will we be sending the calling card?" Ken asked.

Ryuji pounded a fist into his palm. "Yeah! Okumura's got a lot of explaining to do!"

"Don't worry, guys, it'll be soon," Ren reassured, with a confident smile on his lips. "Two days tops. I just need to upgrade our equipment and make sure we're all stocked up on medicine... Don't worry, Haru. We'll make sure your father regrets every action he's made."

Haru bowed her head. "...Thank you."

"We're getting so close!" Morgana exclaimed, his eyes burning like blue fire. "We'll be one step closer to our goals after this...!"

"Calm down, Morgana," Anne scolded. "We have to take things one step at a time..."

"I know, I know! But imagine what this will do for us!"

"Settle down..." Makoto chided. "It's getting late, anyways... We should all head back home..."

Oh... that was right... She didn't realize that evening was approaching so quickly...

But even so, after bidding farewell to her friends, Haru found herself gazing at Okumura Foods' HQ. It was big. It felt so impersonal.

And yet... could she really accept sending her father to jail? Was it right for her to decide...? And if Father was arrested... what would happen to the employees? There was so much she was so unsure of...
"Haru?"

Haru flinched at the sudden hand on her shoulder. She whirled around to see it was Yusuke. "Yusuke-kun!" she gasped, clutching a hand to her chest. "Y-You startled me!"

"My apologies, Haru." Yusuke quickly bowed. "I did not mean to frighten you. I just thought… you could use a listening ear."

Haru looked down, ashamed. She was just a couple months shy of turning eighteen. She was a school year above Yusuke. Yusuke and the other juniors should be looking up to her as someone to lean on…

"..I don't think Father will be home," she murmured. "Let's go there."

"As you wish."

The walk home was quiet. She honestly didn't know Yusuke that well. She knew that he was a scholarship student of Kosei High, he was formerly Madarame's student, and… he struggled with bills and was constantly hungry.

"Why don't you sit down?" she prompted. "I'll make us some tea."

She was trained in tea ceremony, but she saw no need in that. So she set a tea kettle to boil. She sorted through the types of tea they had while she waited for the water to boil. Once the tea was hot enough, she poured it in two porcelain tea cups.

"These tea cups seem to be handcrafted," Yusuke remarked, before gently blowing on his tea and taking a careful sip. "Mmm… this tea is exquisite."

"Thank you, Yusuke-kun." Haru looked down at her own tea. "My mother's parents gifted them to her when she and Father got married."

"What happened to your mother?" Yusuke inquired.

Haru bit her lip. "…She died in childbirth. When I was four, she became pregnant again… and my little brother had been stillborn. I don't have many memories of her, but I remember that Mother was gentle and kind…"

Yusuke's eyes widened. "I… I'm so sorry, Haru. I didn't mean to rehash that…"

"It's okay, Yusuke-kun." Haru smiled to reassure him. "I don't remember much of her… it's difficult to mourn someone you hardly remember."

"…I can relate to that." Yusuke set down his cup. "I haven't really discussed it but the Sayuri… It was actually a painting of my mother… with me as an infant. Madarame's Shadow revealed that he let her die… and it was an atrocious crime, I cannot deny that… However, I felt Sensei's betrayal, his façade as a kind and benevolent man being a lie… more sharply than him being responsible for my mother's death."

"…How did you accept fighting him? I can't deny that seeing all of Father's crimes has made me want to see him atone but… I…!" Haru closed her eyes. "Part of me wavers… I can't help but feel weak about that… For still feeling affection towards him."

"…I was blinded by Sensei's actions," Yusuke said. "I did not want to admit what I already knew. It took me having to face his Shadow to realize just how much I was lying to myself. You are not
weak for feeling affection towards your father still, Haru… Not everything is black and white, unfortunately." He then smiled at her. "…But you don't have to shoulder the burden alone, Haru. We are here for you."

Haru looked into his eyes. "T-Thank you, Yusuke-kun… I needed that reminder…"

"Any time, Haru." He then reached for his satchel. "…May I show you something?"

"What is it?" Haru frowned.

Yusuke's hand dove into his satchel, pulling out his sketchbook. He flipped through it, apparently searching for a specific drawing. "Ah, here we are."

He handed it over to her. Haru took it and looked down. She couldn't help but gasp.

It was a colored sketch… of her. Her as Noir, her axe on her shoulder… with Milady in the background. Milady's artillery was pointed at some unseen enemy. The detail was incredible. Blue flames encircled them, reminiscent of when she awakened and when they transformed into Phantom Thieves in the Metaverse.

"Is this… really me?"

"It is." Yusuke nodded. "I recently developed my passion for art once more… but you… stoked a fire in me. You were truly a sight to see… you shed all of your inhibitions. You were determined to fight… Don't lose heart, Haru. You may hesitate… but we'll be here to reassure you."

"T-Thank you, Yusuke-kun…" Haru looked down at the sketch. "I can't believe you drew this… mostly from memory! That's just amazing."

"The moment you awakened was seared in my mind. It was truly incredible." Yusuke gently eased the sketchpad out of her hands, before tearing it out. "Keep it, Haru. I think looking at it will remind you that you are both Haru Okumura and Noir. They're both sides of you."

"Yusuke-kun…" Haru breathed. "Thank you… Thank you for everything."

His gentle reminder… the beautiful sketch…

"It's nothing, Haru." Yusuke shook his head. "I merely saw a friend in need. It's nothing more than what I should do." He then stood up. "Thank you for the tea, but I really should get going… I'm afraid that I'll miss the train if I dawdle too much."

Haru grabbed his sleeve. "Give me a moment, please," she requested. She then reached for her bag, pulling out her wallet. She dug through it, rifling through it.

"Haru, you don't need to pay me-

"You didn't need to talk to me…" Haru said, pressing several two thousand yen bills in his hand. "…But you did. You reassured me. Just let me do this… Let me help you, Yusuke-kun… in the way I can."

Yusuke let out a soft sigh. "…Very well, Haru. As you wish."

"And again, Yusuke-kun… thank you."

She could do it… she could face her father. She was going to make him atone for his crimes… So many people have suffered under his hand. It was nothing more than her duty.
Astraea

**History:** Astraea is the Greek goddess of justice, purity, and innocence. Astraea, the celestial virgin, was the last of the immortals to live with humans during the Golden Age, one of the old Greek religion's five deteriorating Ages of Man. According to Ovid, Astraea abandoned the earth during the Iron Age. Fleeing from the new wickedness of humanity, she ascended to heaven to become the constellation Virgo. Astraea also means star maiden.

**Level:** 42

**Affinity:** Bless, Support

**Blocks:** Bless

**Resists:** Psy

**Weakness:** Curse

**Spells:** Kouga (innate), Mediarama (innate), Rebellion (innate), Makouga (level 44) Amrita Shower (level 46)

Chapter End Notes

So… consider this my late Mother’s Day chapter. It discussed a lot about parents in general. I knew from the start that I wanted to cover October 4th when the time came but I didn’t expect it to span so long. And of course, there’s Okumura in the latter half of the chapter.

And I truly believe that we had a lost opportunity by not having Yusuke empathize with Haru. There’s more of an emphasis on Madarame over his mother, after all, and they’re the only Phantom Thieves with a father figure who are Palace rulers.

We’re reaching the end of Okumura’s arc soon! Next chapter will involve the confrontation with Okumura.

And… with the PQ2 videos floating on the web, I’m seriously considering a side project of Ace in the Hole’s version of PQ2. It wouldn’t be a full on adaptation, like this, but it’d be a series of oneshots. Would anyone be interested in reading that?
**Crash Landing**

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves face down Shadow Okumura... leading to consequences they hadn't expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Friday, October 7th, 2016*

The red card fit in Haru’s palm comfortably, but it felt heavy in her hand.

It was just… incredible that this little card would allow them to steal Father’s Treasure. Now… she just needed to plant it so Father would read it.

She couldn’t help but admire Yusuke’s handiwork, down to the now infamous Phantom Thieves logo and the actual message.

*Sir Kunikazu Okumura, the great profiteering sinner of greed. The success and global fame exists due to the tyranny you rain over your employees. Thus, we have decided to make you confess all your crimes with your own mouth.*

*From, The Phantom Thieves of Hearts*

Now all there was left to do was to plant it…

Haru looked back and forth. None of their servants were in sight. She slipped into his study, placing it right on top of his paperwork.

Now she just needed to wait and see… how Father reacted to the calling card. Haru took a deep breath to steady herself as she stepped outside of Father’s study.

She could do this. Yusuke’s kind words echoed in her mind. They would… steal Father’s heart and make him atone.

*Saturday, October 8th, 2016*

It was time… time to steal Father’s treasure. They had huddled behind an advertisement, and Ren had his phone out.

But then Makoto suddenly gasped, grabbing Ren’s wrist. “Wait!” she whispered.

“What’s wrong?” Anne whispered back, her eyes swimming with confusion.

Haru carefully peered around. “Isn’t that… your sister, Makoto? And… that’s Goro Akechi, isn’t he?”
“Damn!” Ryuji hissed out, his face twisting into a scowl. “What are they doing here?!?”

“Futaba did discover that Niijima-san had traced several mental shutdowns to Okumura,” Yusuke said. “Perhaps she’s secured a search warrant?”

“And Akechi is her partner,” Ken added. “It’s no surprise that he’s here as well…”

“Should we go back, then?” Haru frowned. “What if they see us…?”

She regretted the moment she said that. The blood drained out of Makoto’s face at that and she seemed to tremble for a moment.

“We can’t!” Morgana exclaimed. “Sending the calling card will only allow the Treasure to manifest for one day. It’s now or never.”

“Shh, Morgana,” Ren hushed.

“Oh… I didn’t know about that…” Haru said.

“It just slipped our minds,” Ren said, smiling reassuringly. “Still… this is kinda a problem… We have to come up with a solution… and fast.”

“Hmm…” Futaba looked to Morgana. “…I think I have an idea.”

Morgana narrowed his eyes at Futaba. “…What are you looking at me for?”

“Well…” Futaba glanced at Haru, smiling cheekily. “Remember how Haru found us out? Morgana ran inside…”

“And maybe a certain someone could be looking for clerical work for some extra money.” Ken eyed Yusuke. “…And his friends came for moral support.”

“So basically break into smaller groups and slip inside… before activating the app…” Ren rubbed his chin before he nodded. “I think that could work…”

“Using the app in a different place of the area of the Palace will still land you there… We’ll just meet there,” Ken said.

“Sounds like a plan!” Ryuji flashed them a thumbs up.

Though… Haru was worried… She hoped that they could slip in without much notice.

Haru went in first, because nobody would question if the CEO’s daughter would come into the HQ. She often attended the meetings, after all.

“Miss Okumura? A moment, please?”

Haru froze at the pleasant voice. But she slowly turned to face him. “Akechi-kun,” she greeted politely, before bowing. “How can I help you?”

Akechi-kun’s smile was pleasant, but she couldn’t help but notice it didn’t quite reach his eyes. Haru couldn’t help but feel taken aback by his resemblance to Ken. The same soft facial features… the slope of his jawline… even the shape of his eyes.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Okumura.” Akechi-kun bowed his head. “I don’t know if you’re aware but…” He trailed for a moment. “…Your father was sent a calling card.”
“He was?” Haru tilted her head, before looking down so he couldn’t read her expression. “…I had no idea.”

She was lying between her teeth, of course. She was there when Father had called the police, demanding that something be done. She was so foolish! Why didn’t she think that police would be here…?

“Yes…” Akechi-kun nodded. “He was rather concerned… he contacted the police department today, due to that. It’s concerning that they were able to slip in, undetected, and plant the calling card in his study. That’s what we can’t figure out…”

Haru nodded feebly. “It really is… frightening. And for someone to threaten my father like that…” Haru trailed off. “What had he done to attract the Phantom Thieves’ attention…? I know that people have been submitting his name to the site but…”

“We’ll do our best to protect your father.” He gave her an encouraging smile. “Don’t fret, Miss Okumura.”

Haru nodded. “Thank you, Akechi-kun. But will you please excuse me…?”

“Of course.” Akechi-kun waved his hand. “I shouldn’t be talking your ear off like this…” He let out a nervous laugh. “Sae-san always says that I talk way too much…” He then swept a bow. “Have a nice day, Miss Okumura.”

Why had Akechi-kun approached her? Haru bit her lip as she stepped inside. Did he think that she would have an idea…?

She waved off the employees’ greetings, before she slipped into a room to activate the app. It whisked her to the Metaverse. It was nerve wracking, waiting for her friends.

But to her relief, Yusuke, Makoto, and Ken eventually appeared.

“Noir, what did Akechi want?” Makoto asked with a frown.

Haru winced. “I… I don’t know. He just told me that he and your older sister were there because Father called the police when he found the calling card. Maybe he wanted to know if I had an idea of how the calling card reached him…”

“That’s… awfully mellow of him.” Yusuke folded his arms over his chest. “He’s been clear on his stance on the Phantom Thieves… he thinks that we’re nothing better than our targets for interfering with ‘justice’.”

“Maybe he’s softening towards it?” Haru offered. “People can change their minds.”

“Now that I think about it…” Yusuke rubbed his chin. “His interviews have been lessening.”

“Though that could be contributed to his dwindling popularity…” Ken said. “There’s a lot we don’t know about Akechi.”

“It’s probably better if we keep that way,” Makoto said grimly. “We can’t afford to get caught…”

Haru winced. That was right… Makoto’s sister was a prosecutor. It must be difficult on her.

That was when the remaining juniors, Futaba, and Morgana appeared.

“Good, everyone’s here.” Morgana bounded up to them. “Are you guys ready? Our only objective
today… is to steal the Treasure!”

They then took off, easily making their way to the location of Father’s Treasure. But then Ryuji suddenly stopped short. “Whoa… what is that!”

“Woooow!” Futaba gasped. “A UFO? That’s so cool!”

Ken’s smile was exasperated. “Your Persona’s a UFO, Futaba.”

“So?! Doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate others!”

A UFO… why would Father want to create that?

Above their heads, a PA system crackled. “The SS Utopia will soon enter its launch sequence from the shipbuilding dock. After retrieval of the main core, the launch sequence will commence.”

Anne blinked. “SS Utopia? Wait…”

“That must have been what the workers have been talking about…” Makoto mused.

“Father did say that he was going to ascend to the political world…” Haru said. “Never mind that he’s using so many people as stepping stones…”

“Noir…” Anne’s voice was soft and filled with pity, as she lightly touched Haru’s shoulder.

“You could say that the company itself is a stepping stone for him…” Yusuke said grimly. “How despicable… This makes Sensei’s crimes seem like child’s play.”

“Oi, don’t degrade yourself about that,” Ryuji interjected. “What Madarame was pretty damn shitty too, Fox.”

Ken shook his head. “But even so… this is bigger than I would have expected…”

“But wait a sec… they were talking about the UFO launching!” Ryuji exclaimed. “If that happens… Okumura will get away!”

Futaba groaned. “Ugh… Skull’s right! Let’s hurry!”

Morgana nodded vigorously. “Lead the way, Joker!”

They ran forward, only to stop as a gleaming silver orb came into their view.

“That’s it… that’s the Treasure!” Morgana exclaimed.

As they approached, the ground began to shake violently. A voice announced, “Emergency launch sequence will soon be activated. Certain areas may be shut off or destroyed. I repeat, emergency launch sequence will soon be activated. All personnel is advised to evacuate immediately to the safe area of the facility.”

The Treasure was suddenly lifted, disappearing into the UFO. That was when Father’s voice echoed throughout the area.

“I don’t have any time for you thieves. I must make my exit. You can all stand and watch in despair as you go down along with this base! Your destruction is imminent!”

“Father!” Haru stepped forward, ignoring his laughter. “No! Think about all of the people still
“Noir, he’s not…” Anne began gently.

Haru lowered her head. “…I know, Panther” she whispered, unable to stop her voice from cracking. She had to blink rapidly to hold back her tears. “I know…”

Father… was it truly too late for him…?

“There’s no time, we must hurry!” Makoto said sharply.

They rushed up the ramp that Futaba had pointed out to them, dodging the Shadows as best as they could.

“Dammit…” Ryuji hissed. “We’re running outta time!”

“Stop bellyaching and keep running, Skull!” Morgana snapped. “We can make it!”

It was a long sprint, but they finally made it. They caught Father just in time… He was just about to board the UFO.

“Looks like we finally caught you,” Yusuke panted out. He drew out his sword, pointing it at Father. “Prepare to confess your sins!”

“I…” Father’s face was etched with… remorse. “I’m sorry! I… I’ve had a change of heart.”

“You… have?” Haru breathed.

“Oh, Haru… my sweet daughter…” Father sighed, placing a hand over his chest. “You were such a loving girl… You always did whatever I asked you, no questions asked. The extra lessons… going with me to speak with my peers… even agreeing to an arranged marriage. You’re a daughter any man would take pride in.”

“Something’s up…” Ken muttered, his voice tinged with suspicion.

“Yeah, seriously…” Ryuji shook his head. “Did he hit his head or somethin’?”

“Don’t you remember, Haru?” Father continued. “You cried your eyes out when my work kept me from attending your first sports day. That was when you stopped talking back to me.”

Haru looked down. She… still remembered that. She had looked frantically for him… for so long… And she broke down crying, because Father had promised he’d be there. But… maybe something deep down in her had realized that maybe Father hadn’t intended to be there. At all.

“But still… you stood up against me and you have become an independent woman…” Father’s smile was proud. “Nothing can make a father happier than seeing that!”

“You… You really think that, Father?” Haru asked. “I… I don’t know what to say…” She shook her head. “I can’t believe that you remember something that happened years ago…” She bit her lip. “Father… why? What changed? I remember when you would pour your heart into making delicious food… You wanted to bring joy to others. Why did you change?”

“Haru, please forgive me…” He dropped down to his knees, pressing his head against the ground. “But I would never last if my Treasure was stolen! Please, don’t do it! I’m begging you!”

Haru cautiously approached him. “Father… let’s go back, then.”
“And so we shall!” Father suddenly whipped out a remote.

A forcefield sprung to life, separating Haru from everyone else. Angry cries came from all of them and Ryuji even took his club and tried to strike at it.

“What?!” Haru gasped. “Father… you…” Anger started to burn through her veins. “You tricked me!”

“Come now, Haru…” Father extended a hand out to Haru. “Do you really want to be my enemy, Haru?” His voice was coaxing, softer than any tone than he had used with her recently. “You’re my flesh and blood. I do not want to fight you, Haru. I love you, my dear. We can fix everything that’s gone wrong with us… you want that, don’t you?”

Haru squeezed her eyes shut. Of course. Father was up to his old tricks again. Using her love for him again…

“Noir!” Ryuji pounded hard on the force field. It rattled from the force, but it didn’t give way. “Don’t listen to him! Remember all of the shit he’s done!”

“Noir, NO!” Anne cried, pressing her hands against the force field. “Don’t listen to him! He’s just manipulating you!”

“You’re my only flesh and blood…” Haru said softly. “I cannot forget that.”

Father’s face broke into a wide smile as he rose to his feet. He believed that he had won. Haru hid a smile, just like she had been taught. It was unladylike to express joy so openly, according to her tutors.

“However…” Her grip tightened on her axe before she swung the flat of the blade at Father’s face not once, but twice. The glass of his helmet cracked. He reeled from the blows, stumbling backwards but Haru darted forward and slammed the butt of her axe into Father's abdomen. He keeled over with a groan, dropping the remote. It fell to the ground with a clatter.

Without hesitation, Haru smashed it with her foot, crushing its remains with her heel. The force field fizzled out.

She pointed her axe at Father. “I cannot abide what you’ve done, Father! Abusing your employees! Making them believe that there’s no other option! Fueling the company with human lives!” The last part came out as a shriek. “I will fight you, Father, because it’s the righteous thing to do! And nothing you say will dissuade me! I am not your tool! Not anymore!”

“You… fool…” Father hissed out. “You sentimental fool! What happiness comes from pursuing justice but losing the battle anyways?!”

“What happiness comes from profit that only can be achieved by crushing the hearts of others?!” Haru shot back.

“Better that than fail!” Father retorted. “I refuse to go back to wallowing in debt and misery! I refuse!” He then shook his head, before sweeping his hand through the air. “Regardless, I will soon set sail in the political realm! To the upper echelons of the world! To utopia! My name shall be etched in the annals of history!”
“Oh, great, another self-absorbed lunatic,” Ken said dryly. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Why… Why would you choose them over me?” Father demanded.

“Why…?” Haru questioned. “I choose them because they offered me kindness! They encouraged me to fight back!” She could see her friends flanking both of her sides. “I can’t stand by and watch you commit these crimes… all for the sake of greed! I will not back down! Prepare yourself, Father! For this is where you will fall!”

“Hmph… there’s plenty time before launch…” A chair zoomed out of nowhere, and Father seated himself. “I will crush you all!”

“It’ll be you who will be crushed!” Ren retorted.

“Hit us with your best shot, Okumura!” Anne exclaimed. “We’re ready!”

Father snapped his fingers and silver pods shot down, releasing several of the robots they had fought before.

“Panther, it’s yours!” Futaba cheered on. “Turn ‘em to ashes, so we can beat up Okumura!”

“Gladly!” Anne exclaimed. “Hecate!”

Flames danced through the air, engulfing the robots. They fell to her powerful fire spell with little resistance.

“Hmph… That was just a warm-up.” Father snapped his fingers. “Try your hand with these!”

The silver pods returned, and the same robots stepped out.

“Argh!” Ryuji groaned. “It’s like those elite workers from before!”

“Any problem can be solved with manpower… that is the strength of my company!”

“Yes, it’s not like you’ve been utilizing mental shutdowns,” Ken deadpanned, spinning his spear in his hand. “Don’t make me laugh… You’ve got nothing on Mitsuru-san.”

“Don’t backtalk me you little-“ Father hissed out. “Men! Attack!”

“They’re just small fry!” Ren shouted. “We can take them! Reserve your strength!”

“Joker’s right…” Morgana said. “He’s probably hiding the big guns. We can’t let ourselves get worn out!”

Ren summoned Okuninishi once more, and he cast the strength increasing spell. Haru worked with Ken to wipe out the robots with their gun attacks.

Another snap of Father’s fingers summoned yet another wave of robots. Two of them were the blue robots they had been fighting before, but the remaining two were yellow.

Anne sent the robots to the ground with a well placed fire spell, before dashing over to Yusuke, passing the baton.

“Goemon!” he called his Persona’s name. His Persona appeared with a flash. Snow and ice appeared in a flurry. One robot fell to the assault, collapsing to the ground, but the other managed to dodge.
“I sense another weakness!” Futaba shouted. “It’s weak to psy magic!”

“Do it, Noir!” Yusuke exclaimed.

“Milady!”

Pink outlined the robot as Milady sent it flying. With the robots all flat on the ground, she was able to summon Milady again. Her skirts flew back, shooting bullets in all of the robots. That attack destroyed them.

Father summoned yet another wave of robots… was there really no end? The three yellow robots were accompanied by the gangly red robot they had fought… the one that was supposed to be the Chief Clerk.

Captain Kidd rammed into the robots so hard that they were sent flying. They crashed to the ground, just in time to caught in the explosion that Johanna produced. The red robot collapsed to the ground. Zorro whipped up a gale but the yellow robots seem to shrug it off.

But an attack from both Milady and Goemon felled the remaining of the robots. Ken finished them off, nailing them with a gun attack.

More of the red robots… accompanied by the blue gangly robot.

They slowly chipped through the waves of robots. It felt like it was coming to no end… They weren’t particularly strong, but they just kept coming…

But then Father did something strange. “Show your dedication!” He then threw a sheet of paper at the blue robot. It then grew stiff, before it began to tremble. Black smoke began to pour from it.

“What’s going on…?” Ren questioned. “Oracle?”

“Crap…” Futaba breathed. “Beat that robot and do it fast! It’ll explode! And it’s a big one! It’ll probably hit all of you!”

Ren swore under his breath. “You heard Oracle!” he barked. “Go all out on the blue one!”

But the red robots formed a wall around the robot that Father had set to explode.

“Get outta our way, dammit!” Ryuji growled as Yusuke whipped out his assault rifle, quickly firing bullets into the robots. “Whip ‘em, Captain Kidd!”

Captain Kidd sent the robots flying. Anne cracked her whip, wrapping around the torso of one of the robots, and she sent it flying at the blue robot. They skidded backwards. Moments later, Makoto whizzed by, astride on Johanna. Johanna glowed blue for a moment, before a nuclear explosion came to life.

But one of the robots managed to dodge the attack. It then raised its arms. It twitched for a moment, before smoke began to pour out. But a wave of blue light swept through the area, healing all of its allies. It swayed on the side, like it was nearly out of energy.

“Ugh! It healed all of the damage you dealt!” Futaba fumed. “That’s such a cheap move!”

“Yes… that’s it! Show your dedication!” Father suddenly exclaimed.

“Brace yourselves!” Ren shouted, just as the robot exploded like a bomb.
The backlash was strong enough to send Haru flying backwards. Haru couldn’t help but let out a cry as she painfully skidded backwards.

“Come on, guys, don’t lag!” Futaba exclaimed. “Hang on… here come the buffs!”

The symbols on Necronomicon flashed a bright green, before rainbow light seemed to surround them. Haru felt her muscles grow lighter… strength filling her veins… it felt incredible.

“Greatly appreciated, Oracle!” Ren said, quickly pivoting around to flash Futaba—or rather Necronomicon—a thumbs up.

Morgana’s healing spell swept over them like a pleasant spring breeze.

“Up you go!” Ryuji said cheerfully before grabbing Haru’s hand and pulling back on her feet.

“Fortuna!” All the while, Ren summoned a new Persona, a dark blue haired woman with part of her torso replaced with a spinning wheel. She spun the wheel with one hand, whipping up a powerful gust of wind that struck at all of the robots. The red robots resisted the attack, but the blue robot was sent sprawling. “Queen, it’s yours!”

Makoto raced forward on Johanna, slapping Ren’s hand. With the boosted power, she was able to destroy the rest of the robots with a single blast.

Father summoned another wave of robots. Two of the blue and two of them… were the robots they had fought during their last visit.

“Here it comes…” Ken said grimly.

“Don’t you dare pull that trick again…” Anne warned, shooting Ren a look.

“Okay, okay…” Ren groaned. “You don’t have to repeat yourself!” He then looked to Ryuji. “So, Skull, are you feeling up to it—”

“JOKER!”

“Honestly…” Ken heaved out a sigh.

“Hey, no time for party banter!” Futaba shouted. “Remember, we’re on a time limit!”

“Easy for you to say!” Ryuji quipped back. “You’re our mission control!”

Ren summoned Scathach. A gust of wind rippled from her, knocking down the blue robots flat. “Mona, take it!” he ordered, and Morgana leapt in the air, slapping Ren’s outstretched hand.

Zorro whipped up a hurricane that tore into the robots, destroying the blue ones. But the green robots were barely pushed back, even with Morgana powered up from the baton pass.

The ground shook as the green robot approached. It seemed focused on Yusuke.

“Milady, please!” Haru cried. Milady swept her fan, a translucent shield forming around Yusuke. The robot struck a moment later, but the attack harmlessly bounced back and reflected against the robot.

“My thanks, Noir!” Yusuke called out to her. Anne darted forward, quickly firing several bullets. Hecate appeared above her, lighting the bullets on fire.
The robot stumbled backwards, giving Ken an opening to attack with his spear. He then summoned Kala-Nemi, launching a light spell. Yusuke then summoned Goemon, slamming down on the ground, creating shockwaves that made the robots wobble precariously.

Ren darted in, slashing furiously at one of the robots. The moment the robot stumbled, he nailed it with his pistol.

Ryuji let out a little whoop. “Nice one, Joker! Show ‘im who’s boss!”

This was a good opening…

“Panther, Queen!” Haru called out. “Let’s do this!”

“Understood!” Makoto exclaimed, just as Anne pumped her fist before saying, “Right behind you, Noir!”

They charged forward as a unit.

“Milady!” Haru called her Persona forth, pointing at the robots.

Bullets flew forward, making the robots stumble backwards. Anne jumped forward, summoning Hecate with one hand. Ribbons of fire danced, before Anne cracked her whip. Makoto then jumped forward, nailing a robot with a well placed punch. The punch was strong enough to send the robot flying into the other. Haru then swept in with a wide swing of her axe.

“Together now!” Makoto cried, clenching her fist. “JOHANNA!”

“MILADY!”

“HECATE!”

Hecate’s flames struck first, but just a second later, Milady’s psychic spell caught the robots in its grasp, tossing them both in the air with ease. Gravity sent them crashing down, and a heartbeat later, Johanna created a nuclear explosion that reduced them to rubble.

Haru was panting during their attack. Sweat trickled down her brow. That attack had been… intense.

“Woohoo!” Futaba cheered. “You really kicked their asses!”

“What…?” Father gasped. Haru looked over to see that his jaw was on the ground. “Even them?! It seems that ordinary workers are not fit for this job!” He let out a thoughtful hum, before his hand clenched over his arm rest. “Yes… It is time… to call them out.”

“Bring it on, you asshat!” Ryuji shouted. “We can take anything you throw at us!”

“Come… Executive Director! And bring her with you!”

“Her…?” Yusuke questioned.

Two silver pods dropped down. One was huge, and out stepped an even larger robot than the green ones, clad in a black business suit. And the second…

“WHAT?!” Haru couldn’t help but cry out. She stared with wide eyes.

“I will do whatever Father requests of me.”
It was… a robotic version of her.

“That… That looks like Noir!” Anne squeaked out.

Morgana huffed. “And I was wondering why we hadn’t seen a cognitive Noir as of yet…”

“Guys, you’ve got to hurry!” Futaba yelled, her voice cracking for a moment. “Half of your time’s up!”

“Let’s go all out, everyone!” Ren urged. “Come!”

“Lemme give you a boost!” Futaba exclaimed. “Hmm… this one! Defense up!”

Necronomicon’s symbols flashed again before a purple aura shimmered around them.

“Yeah, let’s do this!” Ryuji shouted. “Captain Kidd!”

But then the cognitive version of her raised her hand, pointing at the robot.

“Skull, wait…!” Ken shouted.

But Captain Kidd crashed into the robot. But Ryuji stumbled back, a “Shit!” spilling from his lips.

“Damn!” Ren hissed out. “That version of Noir must have Noir’s skills! Focus your attacks on the cognitive Noir! She’ll probably prioritize protecting the executive director!”

Haru’s lips tightened at that before she heaved her grenade launcher. She fired at her cognitive self, but she didn’t even look fazed. Anger surged through her. She was just a doll… just like what Father wanted her to be…

She grasped her axe with both hands and rushed forward. Her cognitive self just calmly blocked her strike with her arm.

“Why…?!” Haru hissed out, straining to push her axe against the robotic version of her. “Can’t you see…?”

“I was born to further the Okumura line,” she said tonelessly. “I am here to be molded as Father deems fit. I must protect Okumura Foods… no matter what. Their benefit is mine.”

Hot tears stung at Haru’s eyes. Further the Okumura line…

All of the visits to the doctor’s. The doctors commenting that it was good that she had wide hips, for they were better for childbearing. Her diet being adjusted so she would be more fertile. And then later, her diet being adjusted because she had to be tiny… slender… the perfect woman to be on Sugimura’s arm.

Was that really how her father viewed her?

“WRONG!” A whip wound around her cognitive self’s arm, yanking her to the side. “Noir’s her own person! It’s disgusting that Okumura sees her that!”

“Panther’s right!” Morgana declared, jumping on her shoulder for a moment before doing a somersault and slashing downwards on her cognitive self. “Noir, you’re not defined by your family… by Okumura Foods!”

They were right… She couldn’t lose heart!
“Milady!” Haru tore off her mask.

Pink outlined her cognitive self, lifting her in the air. When she was sent tumbling down, Haru swung her axe, cleaving her into two.

Haru stared at the broken pieces. She wasn’t that girl… not anymore. She wouldn’t listen docilely anymore.

“We’ve really got to focus on taking down that… thing,” Anne said with a grimace. The others were pouring in everything into it.

Haru nodded. “Yes, you’re right.”

“Hey, Mona!” Ryuji called out to him. “Wanna do a double attack with Captain Kidd?”

“Let’s do it!” Morgana said with a firm nod, sprinting over to Ryuji’s side. Ryuji summoned Captain Kidd, and Morgana jumped on top, perching on the bow.

Captain Kidd raced forward, ramming into the robot. Morgana then jumped off, slashing with his sword. Blue flared around him and Zorro nailed the robot with Miracle Punch.

“Awesome team up, you two!” Futaba complimented. “I’m honestly a bit surprised…”

“Noir!” Ken called to her. “Care for a team up as well?”

“Gun attacks?” she asked, and a beat later, Ken nodded. “Let’s do it!”

Their doubled attack forced the robot to be on the defensive. Haru couldn’t help but feel a little frustrated at how their efforts were just slowly chipping away at the robot.

“What are you doing?!” Father yelled. “Work harder! You’re not allowed to fall here! You will kill the thieves, even if it costs you your life!”

Haru’s stomach twisted at his words. Father… why…?

“For the… prosperity of Okumura Foods!” the robot intoned as a blue light flashed.

“Accept your defeat!” Father declared, snapping his fingers.

A sickly yellow light emitted them, before both Yusuke and Ryuji began to sway. Yusuke clutched his stomach. “So… hungry…” he groaned out.

“That’s nothing new,” Morgana quipped.

“For real…!” Ryuji said, sounding woozy as he clutched his stomach as well. “I could really use some ramen now!”

“Gah!” Futaba groaned. “Fox and Skull are hungry! Their attack power’s seriously weakened!”

“Noir, try to get one of them cured!” Ren ordered, before whipping out his pistol and firing several bullets. Anne summoned Hecate to set his bullets alight.

“I’ll make you into a human burger!” the robot declared.

“Brace yourselves!” Ren barked out.

And it wasn’t a moment too soon… The robot raised his arms. A burger rained down from the sky.

“FOOOOOOD!” Ryuji and Yusuke cried out in unison.

But then the burger started to glow, before detonating like a bomb as it struck the ground. Due to Haru bracing herself, she only staggered back but…

Her entire body was aching horribly.

“What… What WAS that?!” Morgana exclaimed, sounding flabbergasted.

“I have no idea but… it cured Skull and Fox at least,” Ken said dryly.

“Well, that’s one way to feed Fox, I guess,” Anne quipped.

“Looks like Shinjiro-san’s chopped liver now, then,” Ren quipped right back at her. “But anyways, let’s go all out on this guy! I don’t know about you, but I’d rather avoid another attack like that!”

“Understood!” they exclaimed.

Futaba then swooped in, buffing them with that rainbow light again.

Ren summoned Astraea again, strengthening himself with that yellow spell that he had used on Morgana during their last visit.

Hecate’s flames were bolstered by Zorro’s gust of wind. Yusuke used Goemon to freeze the robot’s legs in place. He then jumped backwards as Makoto charged forward on Johanna, letting loose a powerful Freila spell. Electricity crackled around Kala-Nemi’s light spell, striking right in the center of the robot’s torso. Milady fired away, shooting several bullets with her artillery.

“It’s time!” Ren declared. “White Rider!”

White Rider charged forward, slamming into the robot with such a great force that it sent the robot down onto its knees.

“Oi, Fox! Ace!” Ryuji cracked his knuckles. “Let’s kick some ass!”

“Let’s have at it,” Yusuke declared, before Ken nodded in agreement.

“Show no mercy!” Ken shouted, before the three boys rushed at the robot.

Ken used his spear as a pole vault, launching himself him in the air. He then jabbed downwards, creating a large gash in the robot.

“You’re mine!” Yusuke growled out, before slashing with his katana. He yanked his sword out, sidestepping so Ryuji could smash his club against the robot.

“Let’s get ‘im!” Ryuji shouted. “CAPTAIN KIDD!”

“GOEMON!”

“KALA-NEMI!”

Goemon’s ice spell struck first, the ice quickly spreading across the robot’s body. Kala-Nemi’s gun
attack shattered the ice, before the bow of Captain Kidd’s ship crackled with electricity. A lightning bolt exploded from the tip, exploding as it struck inside the robot.

The robot staggered backwards, before finally—finally—falling.

“YES!” Futaba crowed. “You guys did it!”

“No!” Father shouted. “It can’t be!” His hands tightened on the arm rests of his chair. “Is there anyone here?!”

Silver pods appeared but nobody showed up.

“CAN ANYONE HEAR ME?!” Father cried out, to no avail.

“You’ve been abandoned, Father…” Haru said softly. “You have… no one.”

“This can’t be…” Father gasped out.

“Noir!” Ren extended his hand out to Okumura. “It’s all yours!”

“Haru… no… please…” Father pleaded, his voice suddenly cracking. “Don’t do this!”

Haru studied him closely. Father truly looked frightened. He did not want it to end like this. But… she had to do this. She couldn’t let Father continue the way he had.

“Adieu, Father,” Haru murmured, before she tore off her mask. “Milady!”

A pink light surrounded Father, lifting him in the air. He landed in a heap on the ground. A final bullet shot out, striking Father right in the chest. He fell forward, and there was a loud crack.

He dragged himself to his knees. “So… I’m the last of a line of failures…”

Was that… how he viewed their family?

“Do you really resent Grandfather, Father…?” Haru asked.

“Haru, I…” Father looked down. “I have mixed feelings on my father… He was a very loving father but he was too kind. He would give the shirt on his own back to a stranger… even at his own expense. I… I always thought to myself, growing up… that I would never do that. But…” A broken sob suddenly escaped him. “What have I done…? Selling my daughter… the mirror of my wife… like that?” He shook his head. “…I was wrong. Terribly wrong…”

Oh, Father… Haru’s heart ached for him. She could understand his mindset. She far from agreed but… she knew that Father had a difficult childhood…

Father then looked up. “Haru, I will rescind the arranged marriage. I know it’s not even beginning to apologize what I’ve put you through… for not being the father you deserve… but you deserve to be free, Haru.” He then kowtowed, pressing both his forehead and palms against the floor. “I will not beg for your forgiveness… because I know that I do not deserve it. I do not deserve you as a daughter. You loved me so much that you would do whatever I asked of you… and I took advantage of that.”

“Father…” Haru sighed.

“All right, tell us!” Ryuji marched forward. “Who’s been doing all the crazy shit with the mental shutdowns and psychotic breakdowns?!”
“You… You know of that?” Father questioned.

“You ordered so many…” Ken stated. “Wild Duck… Haneruya Foods… Goodness Food… They were all for your benefit.”

“Yes… I admit to that… But all I did was make requests.”

“So… a dead end,” Ren groaned as Father continued to sob. “We need a lead on Shido…”

“Dammit…” Morgana groaned. He wobbled as the ground suddenly gave an especially strong tremor. “We… We’ll have to speak with him… in the real world.”

“Once his heart has been changed…” Anne looked over to Haru. “…Which should be soon.”

“Speaking of that…” Yusuke pointed up.

Haru looked up to see that Father’s treasure was floating down to them.

“Take it, Noir,” Makoto said.

Haru slowly took the Treasure. It glowed and sparkled in her hand. Just what would it be in the real world.

“Get ready,” Ren warned.

“Ready for—?” Haru let out a cry as she staggered forward from a tremor. Yusuke grasped her by the shoulders, holding her upright.

“Annd here we go,” Ken said flatly.

“Hold on a sec…!” Morgana flipped into the air.

“Woo! Go Mona!” Futaba cheered.

“Come on, Noir.” Yusuke urged her to the bus.

Makoto then floored the gas, and they sped out of the Palace.

It was too easy.

Goro watched as the strange bus sped away. He had heard most of Okumura’s rant. He had no qualms about what he was about to do.

His bottom lip curled as he stared at the pathetic Shadow on the ground. This vermin… he would gladly take out, regardless of Shido’s orders.

He was no better than Shido… Absolute scum who would just throw out their children like trash.

His footsteps were light as he approached Okumura’s Shadow. What a pathetic, sniveling creature…

“Who… Who’s there…?” he asked, looking up.

Akechi pulled the trigger. The Shadow didn’t make a sound as he died.

The Phantom Thieves had just signed their own death warrants. This was the first step… to their
Shinjiro really hated when people played with their food. Food was there to be eaten, not to be played. Ken absentmindedly pushed the contents of the stew in his bowl, before finally spooning a little and raising it to his lips.

Ken had been... quiet for the past few days. Since October fourth, but something told him that it wasn’t because of the anniversary. In the past, Ken was usually sad on the day, but he managed to overcome it on the same day.

Shinjiro waited until Ken finished chewing the bite of food in his mouth before opening his mouth. “Soo...” He eyed Ken. “...Are you going to tell me what’s up?”

Ken stiffened. “What... What do you mean?”

Shinjiro snorted before he set down his spoon. “Cute, Ken. The innocent act worked when you’re twelve. But now? Not so much.” He looked at Ken sternly, before resting his cheek on his hand. “Spill it. Something’s bugging you.”

“N-Nothing’s wrong.” Ken quickly looked away.

…Ken was really a shitty liar.

“Bullshit,” Shinjiro deadpanned. “Seriously, what the hell’s going on, Ken? You’re not exactly sulking but you’re pretty damn close to it.”

…There was Sakura’s cackling about Ken and Niijima. Maybe he needed to poke at Ken, to get him to talk about this.

“Did you get in a fight?” Shinjiro asked. “With Niijima, maybe?”

“No!” Ken shook his head. “I didn’t get in an argument with Makoto... it’s just...” He trailed off, before biting his lip. “...It’s stupid,” he mumbled out, staring down at the table. “Nothing worth talking about.”

“But it has to do with Niijima, right?” Shinjiro raised an eyebrow at him. The blood drained out of Ken’s face. Yeah, that was all he needed to know. Ken really sucked at hiding how he felt. “Come on, Ken, just tell me. I can’t help you if you keep it bottled up.”

The silence dragged on. And on. To the point where Shinji was tempted to smack him. He usually reserved that for Aki, but he didn’t have time for this.

Then Ken spoke. “How... How did you realize that you liked Fuuka-san?”

…Fuck. He had never expected to have this conversation with Ken. Ignoring his lack of interest in girls, Ken was rather levelheaded and mature for his age—something Takeba frequently reminded Iori of. Shinjiro had never considered that Ken would even need this kind of advice.

“See??” The sound of a chair scraping against the floor snapped Shinjiro out of his numb thoughts. Ken was pacing in front of the table now. “I told you it was stupid! But you insisted! It’s not a big deal...” Ken even began to hyperventilate a little. “It’s no big deal! It’s fine... I’ll get over it like I
Shinjiro just stared at Ken, who was furiously pacing now, circling around the table. He had… no words. What the fuck? Was he seriously panicking over having a crush on Niijima?

“Ken, you kinda dropped this all of a sudden—" Shinjiro began, before scowling in Ken’s direction. “And stop pacing already! You’re making me dizzy…"

Ken stopped in his tracks. “I told you, it’s fine!” he repeated. “It’s stupid… it’s just a crush. Nothing to get worked up about!”

Shinjiro just groaned, fighting the urge to slam his face against the table. He settled for pressing his hand against his forehead.

What the fuck, Ken? Why the hell was he panicking like this? Especially since he’s had a crush on Minako years ago… Was it because it’s been years since he’s had a crush so it was kicking him right into panic mode?

“You say that, but you’re working yourself up in a frenzy,” Shinjiro said carefully. “And why do you have to get over it? Looks like to me that Niijima likes you. A lot.”

Ken then stopped and stared. “…You don’t sound surprised.”

“What—that you have a crush on Niijima?” Shinjiro scoffed. “I haven’t been around you and Niijima that much, but I picked up a lot.” Ken continued to stare, so Shinjiro just rolled his eyes at his charge before continuing. “Let’s see… you met her in July, right? And when I met her just a few weeks later, you were calling her by her first name. No honorifics either.” Ken opened his mouth to argue, so Shinjiro held up a hand. “Don’t give me an excuse that she’s your age. If that was the case, you’d be calling Amamiya and the others by their first names. I remember pretty clearly that Sakamoto was bitching ‘bout you being so formal. And there was the whole thing with her swimsuit…”

“I was being polite!” Ken protested. “She was unsure about how she’d looked.”

“Uh huh. Sure it was,” Shinjiro deadpanned, before letting out a soft scoff at Ken’s disgruntled expression. “Thirdly… your exchange at Crossroads stood out at me.” He raised an eyebrow at Ken. “Takamaki seems like the affectionate type, you know. Would you let her hold your hand like you let Niijima do?”

“Wha—?” Ken flushed. “No… that’d be weird! Anne’s dating Ren!”

Shinjiro reached for his drink—god, if only it was hard alcohol—before taking a quick sip. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Well… no…” Ken mumbled out, “but I never really thought about it…”

Shinjiro just raised an eyebrow. “You let Niijima do it without even questioning it.” He shrugged. “Look, Ken, I’ve known you since you were a kid. I’ve seen you around other girls. It may not be obvious to other people but it is to me. You do treat Niijima differently compared to other girls.”

Ken was silent for a moment, but then his face crumpled. “…It doesn’t matter. If anything, Makoto would like…” he trailed off at that, but it didn’t take a genius guess who he was referring to.

At Ken’s pained expression, Shinjiro couldn’t help but feel a twinge of pity. Though Ken was being really dramatic about this all… He personally blamed Amamiya.
But years ago, he had thought similar thoughts when it came to Fuuka.

The first few weeks after he had woke up from his coma had been… rough. He had to be hooked up to machinery as he slowly regained his strength. Mitsuru had brought Fuuka to help out with the machinery monitoring. He was all too used to the yelling, tears, and overall emotional reactions, but Fuuka had been quiet yet supportive. It had been a breath of fresh air, having her show quiet support.

And then Mitsuru had forced him to repeat his senior year. Fuuka had offered to personally tutor him, since he’s never been the greatest at school. In turn, he roped her into helping him cook dinner for everyone, since he noticed that she was still trying to improve.

It had been gradual, but he noticed how Fuuka was so quietly determined… how much she cared about her friends. But it had just taken one smile from her to realize that he had fallen. Hard.

But they had been drastically different… he had thought that he didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell with her. So he was stuck quietly crushing, getting red as hell when they were cooking together or Fuuka was tutoring him.

If Minako and Takeba hadn’t pushed Fuuka into asking him out, he probably wouldn’t have made a move.

…He’d rather eat glass than tell Ken that though.

“…Ken, look…” he said quietly. “I don’t know Niijima all that much. But she pretended to date Amamiya for weeks. If she was interested in him, she would’ve been in a good position to do something ‘bout that.”

“But-“ Ken began.

“But what?” Shinjiro cut him off. He then heaved out a sigh. “Ken, look at it this way… If you don’t take the chance, you’ll never know.”

Though if Sakura was to believed, Niijima had it bad for Ken. Just holy hell, Ken was smart. He wasn’t quite Mitsuru brilliant, but he was a hard worker. He wouldn’t have earned a partial scholarship for Gekkoukan if he hadn’t. So why was he being so stupid about this?

He would’ve thought Ken would be the last person to freak over this kind of crap.

“But… I don’t want to ruin things with Makoto,” Ken protested. “She’s a really good friend… I feel that I can talk to her about anything.”

Was… Was he hearing himself? And yet he couldn’t figure it out earlier?!

Shinjiro just groaned, pressing both hands to his face. Of course Ken had to be dumb with love. Ken had idolized Aki when he was a kid. He had taken after Aki, being a sport star with gushing fangirls, up to this past year. Of course he’d be stupid with this.

“Plus it would throw things off with our Phantom Thief work,” Ken continued to ramble, only to pause. He shot Shinjiro an annoyed look. “Stop giving me that look!”

“What look?” Shinjiro said flatly, folding his arms over his chest.

“Well, if it fits—”

“HAVE YOU NOT BEEN LISTENING TO ME?!” Ken cried out. Shinjiro was surprised that he wasn’t flailing.

Shinjiro groaned. Could Ken chill the fuck out already? It wasn’t the end of the world if he liked a friend. Ugh, he really needed a stiff drink. Preferably two.

“Look, Ken…” Shinjiro rubbed his forehead. At the very least, he needed some aspirin after all of this. “I’ve given you what I think what you should do. But it’s in your hands.”

Ken was silent for several moments. “…Okay,” he mumbled out. “I’ll… I’ll think about it. I have a lot to think about it.”

“So think about it.” Shinjiro waved a hand towards the hallway where their bedrooms were. “’Sides, you’ve probably got piles of homework.”

Ken grumbled at that, but he grabbed his bowl of stew and headed for the fridge to stick his bowl in it.

Shinjiro just sighed to himself before Ken excused himself. Aki and Minako had their work cut out for him. Parenting was kinda a pain in the ass.

As if his thoughts had summoned him, his phone rang. He took one glance at the caller id before answering. “What is it, Aki?”

“Jeez, you sound cranky,” Aki remarked. “And on a Sunday, too. Did you have an argument with Ken?”

Shinjiro groaned. “It’s not that. Be grateful that this kid of yours is a girl. Won’t be running to you about dating advice.”

“…What?” Shinjiro could hear the frown in Aki’s voice. “Shinji, what are you talking about?”

Shinjiro rubbed his forehead. “Ken’s been acting kinda weird this past week, so I asked him what’s going on? And what does he do? Dump all of this crap on me about how he’s crushing on Niijima and when I suggest that he’d do something, he’s all ‘no, no, I can’t do that!’ Then what the hell am I supposed to tell him then?!”

“Uh… Shinji?” Aki said hesitantly. “We’re talking about the same Ken, right?”

“Who else could I be talking about, Aki?” Shinjiro snapped into his phone.

“Okay, okay, you don’t have to yell at me,” Aki huffed. “Seriously, Shinji, Ken… likes someone? That’s kinda hard for me to wrap my mind around. He’s never looked at any girl.”

Shinjiro snorted. “Uh huh. What about you with girls before you met Minako, huh?”

“…Shut up,” Aki retorted. “But uh… good luck with that, then, Shinji. That sounds rough.”

Shinjiro heaved out a sigh. “Don’t I know it,” he grumbled. “Maybe I should just run out and buy a pack of beer. I need a drink.”

“I don’t think getting drunk over this is gonna solve anything.” Aki then paused. “…Are you getting a midlife crisis over this? I mean, you’re kinda like Ken’s dad…”
Shinjiro scowled, even though he knew that Aki couldn’t see. “Go jump off a cliff, Aki,” he snarled out. “At least I don’t have a head full of gray hair.”

“Will you stop bringing that up?!”

Tuesday, October 11th, 2016

Message From: Ken Amada

[Ken Amada]: Mitsuru-san, Haru told us this morning that her father called for a press conference. It’ll probably be like when Madarame confessed to his crimes.

[Mitsuru Kirijo]: Understood, Amada. Thank you for letting me know.

Mitsuru set her phone down on her desk, before rising to her feet. She gazed out of the window of her office. Hearing about Okumura’s sins hit… a little too close to home.

Of course, her grandfather had endangered so many people with his experiments and had nearly brought on the Fall… so her family’s sins were more… intense than Kunikazu Okumura’s.

But it was the same principle.

She had to wonder what Okumura’s daughter… Haru… was feeling about all of this. The Kirijo Group’s sins were never revealed to the public… their powerbase was too strong. But Okumura Foods? It didn’t have that kind of protection.

What would become of Haru Okumura, never mind the countless workers employed by Okumura Foods? Okumura Foods was an international business, so it wouldn’t just affect people living here. There was even a Big Bang Burger built right here in Port Island.

Mitsuru just… couldn’t shake off an ominous feeling… that Okumura’s confession would not be so simple.

A soft sigh passed her lips. Hopefully Okumura would be able to give some information on Shido… so Shido could finally be taken down. Maybe she should see if everyone could watch the stream together…

When Ken had woke up this morning, he hadn’t expected to be going to Destinyland, of all place.

“Wow!” Futaba’s eyes went round with shock. “This is… amazing.”

“Have you never been to Destinyland, Futaba?” Anne asked.

Ren nudged her in the side. “And you have?”

Anne nodded. “Yeah, I’ve been to the one in Florida. Back when my parents still took me with them during their travels.”

“Oh, what do your parents do for a living, Anne-chan?” Haru inquired.

“My parents are fashion designers,” Anne explained. “They’re not exactly Chanel high end, but their jobs are pretty demanding. They’re flying off from country to country most of the time… We’ve lived in Finland… America, just to name a couple places.” She shrugged. “They eventually
decided that I should have some stability and that I should be staying in one place, so they sent me
back to Tokyo back in junior high.”

Oh… He never really thought about Anne’s family life, he was being honest. Anne never really
seemed to talk about it, so he assumed she had at least a decent family life. Then again, there was
the crap with Kamoshida…

Haru winced. “That… That must be rough, Anne-chan,” she said softly.

But Anne shook her head, her smile a little too bright. “But we’re not here to talk about that! Man, I
can’t believe we’re at Destinyland for a celebration party!”

“Yeah, talk about the real VIP treatment!” Ryuji said with a grin.

“I think you’ve created a monster, Haru,” Ken said dryly.

Haru weakly giggled. “I just thought we might as well take advantage of this…”

Ren elbowed Ken in the side. “You’re one to talk. You’ve known Mitsuru Kirijo for years, haven’t
you?”

Ken smiled sheepishly. “Well… I can’t deny that Mitsuru-san has treated us before… like take us
to Yakushima but she’s never done anything this extravagant.”

“Well, this kind of thing is difficult to beat,” Makoto remarked. “Thank you for doing this, Haru.”

Haru’s smile turned bright. “It’s nothing, really! I… I’m just glad to share it with all of you.”

Futaba coughed. “But we should have some fun then! We’ve got a few hours until the stream,
right?”

Haru nodded. “I was thinking that we could get together at around seven. The employees will have
prepared some food for us!”

Yusuke closed his eyes. “Wonderful. I truly appreciate it, Haru.”

Haru laughed. “It’s no problem, Yusuke-kun!”

“Sooo, who wants to hit the roller coaster?” Ryuji drawled out.

“Ooh, me!” Anne said. “What about you, Ren?”

“Sure.” Ren linked his arm with hers. “Are you going to latch onto me, though?”

“Pffft!” Anne shook her head. “I love rollercoasters! But be careful… I scream really loudly.”

Ren raised an eyebrow. “…Huh. I’ll keep that in mind.”

…Ren, why. He did not need to hear that.

“Waitwaitwait!” Anne cried, waving her hands frantically about. “That’s not—get your head out of
the gutter!”

“You’re the one jumping to conclusions, Anne,” Ren said innocently, but that little shit grin gave
him away. “Maybe you’re the one who’s got their head in the gutter.”
Anne smacked his shoulder. “You’re awful!” she huffed, even as her cheeks grew pink. “Absolutely awful!”

“And yet, you still love me,” Ren said with a smirk.

“I wanna see Haru try her hand at that hammer game!” Futaba interjected, thankfully interrupting Ren and Anne’s banter/flirting. “You know, the one where you swing it and you try to hit the bell!”

“Hmm…” Yusuke looked towards the famous castle. “I wish to sketch that,” he announced. “It is truly a magnificent sight.”

“Ugh, Inari, you want to draw?” Futaba complained. “We’re at Destinyland! We should be having fun!”

“Drawing is something I wholeheartedly enjoy,” Yusuke said plainly. “Just like how you find joy in those video games of yours. I don’t complain about your hobby so kindly do the same for me.”

“Okay, okay, sheesh,” Futaba grumbled.

“Anywayssss, we’re gonna head off now!” Anne said. “See you guys later!”

“Soossooo, can we go to the carnival games then?” Futaba asked.

“Actually…” Haru said. “I’d like to stay with Yusuke-kun.” She clasped her hands behind her back, smiling bashfully. “…I never realized just how talented Yusuke-kun was with drawing until recently. I’d like to watch.”

At Futaba’s pouting, Makoto put a hand on her shoulder. “Come on, Futaba, there’s got to be some kind of attraction you want to do…” She then chewed on her lip. “How about the bumper cars?”

Futaba let out a hum. Then her eyes lit up. “Oh! How about Space Mountain?” Her eyes began to sparkle. “We’ll get a show and it’s a roller coaster! It should be fun!”

Haru was handed the hammer by the attendant. She wobbled under its weight for a moment, before her hands wrapped around the handle more tightly. She squared her shoulders and swung.

The puck shot up, gradually slowing down as it made its ascent. But it managed to strike the bell, even if it was just barely.

Holy crap… Ken couldn’t help but stare. He knew that Haru was strong… but damn.

“Oh…” Haru tilted her head. She seemed oblivious to the attendant’s bugged eye stare. To be fair, Ken would be shocked if a petite stranger had managed to pull that off too. “I just made it…”

“What’s oh?!” Futaba cried out, waving her hands about. “You hit it! That’s freakishly hard! Like boss level hard!”

Haru giggled. “I suppose I was hoping that I would make it more than just by the skin of my teeth.”

“You should take your victory, Haru,” Yusuke stated. “However… I am unsurprised. You have a strong will… a strong heart… of course you would be physically strong as well.”

…He wasn’t sure if that was how it worked. If that was the case, Yukari-san would be really strong.
Then again, Yukari-san did beat Akihiko-san in an arm wrestling contest once. Shinjiro-san never let him forget that…

Haru giggled, smiling up at him. “Thank you, Yusuke-kun. You’re so sweet sometimes.”

“Pffft, sweet?” Futaba scoffed. “Inari’s more of a sourpuss.”

“Be nice, Futaba,” Makoto chided. “But anyways… is there any last thing you’d like to do…? It’s twenty to seven.”

“Haru, why don’t you pick?” Ken said. “Since you did this because Futaba pleaded with you.”

“Hmm…” Haru’s eyes then lit up. “Oh! How about the Haunted Mansion?”

Makoto immediately blanched at that, tensing up at that. Right… her fear of the dark. Though honestly, Ken wasn’t too keen on going on that kind of ride either.

“Actually, I’d like to see the castle up close,” Ken cut in. “Makoto, do you want to come with me?”

The tension in Makoto’s shoulders seemed to melt away. “That sounds like fun. I’d love to.”

Futaba snickered for a moment. “Have fun with that. Haru, Inari! Onward!”

They exchanged goodbyes, before he and Makoto headed towards the castle.

“Um… thank you about that,” Makoto murmured. “I know you just made that up because I don’t really like the dark… Or horror…”

Then she smiled at him, making heat flood his cheeks. “N-No problem,” he managed to spit out.

Ugh. Why couldn’t he say something more smooth like Anything for you. He wished he knew just how Ren got to be so smooth and charming.

“This really is a beautiful place,” Makoto remarked, looking around. “Dad was always so busy with work… and Sis had piles of schoolwork… so we never could go.” She shook her head. “I would’ve liked to go to even Seaside Park. I’ve never been to there, either.”

“Maybe we could go sometime.” The suggestion slipped from Ken without him thinking, and he blushed furiously when Makoto looked at him in surprise. “I-I mean, all of us!” he blurted out.

“…Mm.” Makoto nodded. “That would be nice.”

Was it his imagination or did she sound a little disappointed…?

…Of course it was just his imagination. Ken sighed to himself, only to snap to attention when his phone buzzed in his pocket. Ken fished out his phone to see just who it was. A message from Junpei-san? His face suddenly started to burn with embarrassment as he read the message.

[Junpei Iori]: Sooo… A little birdy tells me someone has a cruuuuush ;)

Ken pressed a hand to his forehead. Dammit Shinjiro-san… He could easily guess what had happened. Shinjiro-san had been clearly frustrated with him during their conversation. He probably vented to Akihiko-san. Akihiko-san then blabbed to Minako-san, because he can’t hide a secret from her to save his life. And Minako-san told Junpei-san.

Great. Just great.
Though it was especially embarrassing because Junpei-san just had to text him now…

They reached the castle, so they scaled the winding staircase.

“Oh wow…” Makoto breathed as she leaned against the railing. “The view’s… incredible.”

She was right… the view showed Tokyo’s skyline beautifully. As it was approaching night time, some of the lights were turned on. It made the city glow.

It really brought home just how big Tokyo was… Tokyo really made Port Island look tiny.

Soft laughter reached his ears. Ken looked over to see that Ren and Anne were having an impromptu dance over by another balcony.

Well… it was more that they were holding each other all while swaying. But then Ren spun Anne, before abruptly dipping her. Anne smiled up at him, her arms going around his neck. Ren then leaned in close, kissing Anne.

A soft sigh passed his lips. Ren had parroted Ken’s advice back to him but it was just… not the same. Not even close. Makoto just viewed him as a close friend…

“Poor Ryuji,” Makoto suddenly commented. “Ren and Anne probably gave him the slip for some… privacy.”

Oh… that was right. He hoped that Ryuji wasn’t too mad about that. But then again, the three of them were rather close. Ryuji should forgive them.

But then something boomed above their heads. They looked up to see that various bursts of color were lighting up the night sky.

“Oh!” Makoto’s eyes grew wide with awe. She tilted her head up, gazing at the fireworks. “So beautiful…” she breathed out.

Ken gazed at Makoto, his attention on her entirely. “…Yeah,” he said softly.

“Ugh, have you seriously been making out here THE WHOLE TIME?!” Ryuji’s brash voice suddenly snapped him out of his thoughts.

“R-Ryuji!” Anne squeaked out. “We were just…”

“Well, save it,” Ryuji huffed. “I hope you don’t have any shoots planned any time, Anne. You’ve got a bunch of hiccups everywhere-“

“Oh.” Ren didn’t sound apologetic at all.

“Honestly…” Makoto sighed to herself.

“That’s Ren and Anne for you,” Ken sighed as well. He was starting to think that he’d better buy contraception for the two of them. Better than Ren and Anne being unprepared with Ren having an impulsive streak in him. “But Ryuji probably is looking for them since it’s seven. Let’s meet with everyone else.”

It was time for the press conference.

Cameras flashed as Okumura rose to his feet. Okumura thanked everyone for coming to the press
“Today, I’d like to elaborate upon the whole truth behind my company’s labor situation.”

“This is it…!” Ryuji hissed out.

“Ryuji, shush!” Anne admonished.

“How my employees were forced to work under severe conditions, how lax we were with sanitation.”

…Ugh. He didn’t like Big Bang Burger to begin with but that reminder was just…

Then he looked up to see that Haru’s expression had become morose. A far cry with how she had been cheerful when with everyone.

“And how my corporation acted as a whole to… cover up every facet of this scandal. For all of this…” Okumura’s voice suddenly cracked, bowing low at the waist. “I wholeheartedly apologize.”

A journalist quickly jumped in with a question. “So are you saying all of this was done under your orders?”

Okumura squeezed his eyes shut. “…Yes. I… I am solely responsible.”

The journalist then pressed forward with another question. “We heard that dozens of your employees were forced to resign due to mysterious illness. Furthermore, these happened to be officials who opposed your proposals for oversea expansion. The same thing happened to executives of competing companies who were looking to expand abroad. Is all of this true?”

“Yes,” Okumura answered.

The journalist continued to press Okumura, asking for confirmation that if his inquiries were true.

Okumura grimaced, before swallowing hard. Ken frowned. Something… Something felt off. He couldn’t put his finger on it but…

“About that…” Okumura said slowly. “I have a critical piece of information to announce here today.”

“Here it comes,” Morgana breathed. “Okumura… he’ll reveal the person behind the mental shutdowns!”

Okumura took a sudden breath to steady himself. But then his face contorted with pain, his hands clutching at his chest. He jerked backwards, panting heavily all while pained cries fell from his lips. His eyes then rolled backwards, only showing the whites of his eyes. He then stumbled forward, his face nearly hitting the table.

“What on earth…?!” Yusuke breathed.

“F-Father?!” Haru squeaked out.

Then Okumura’s head slowly raised… revealing that black had oozed from his eyes, dripping down his face all the way to his chin.

Screams from the audience echoed from their phones’ speakers, but Ken just stared in horror. His
phone slipped from his fingers. Bile welled up in his throat. He… He was going to be sick…

He remembered seeing something similar… when the Shadows ate someone’s psyche.

This was a mental shutdown…

But… why?! What had they done wrong this time? They had left Okumura’s Shadow alive…

“W-What happened to Father?!” Haru blurted out. “That’s… That’s like the mental shutdown, isn’t it?!”

Tears were welling up in Haru’s eyes, spilling down her cheeks.

“I… I don’t understand…” Ren said faintly, all color draining from his face. “We… We did everything right! We just defeated the Shadow self… we didn’t kill it!”

“I-I want to know just as much as you guys!” Morgana exclaimed. “I… I…” His ears lowered.

“I’m sorry, Haru,” he croaked out.

“Father…” Haru choked out, her voice suddenly cracking. Her pained voice was like a stab to the heart. “Father…! I… I did this to you… What have I done?!”

Anne suddenly stood up, wrapping her arms around Haru’s shoulder. “Breathe, Haru,” she said gently, before fishing out a handkerchief and handing it over to Haru. “Breathe.”

“I… I can’t stay here,” Haru blurted out. Her eyes were red… still filled with tears. “Father collapsed… they took them to a hospital, then, right? I… I need to be there!”

“Haru, wait-“ Ren began.

“I’m sorry!” Haru shook her head, before fleeing the area.

“Haru!” Anne called after her. But Haru didn’t listen to her plea. Her shoulders then slumped.

“This… This isn’t our fault, is it? We did it just like before!”

“This is just… so sudden…” Yusuke said. “What had happened…?”

“…This confirms that apathy syndrome and mental shutdowns are the same affliction… just with different names,” Ken said.

“But why did it occur in Haru’s father?” Makoto questioned.

“We’ve done the same with Kamoshida, Madarame, Kaneshiro…” Ryuji listed out. “What’s the difference?!”

Ken began, “I have no idea—”

…Except… the other Persona-user. Had he…?!

“…Ken?” Ren asked. “You… You realized something.”

It wasn’t a question.

“…We’ve been framed,” Ken said lowly. “Shido must’ve been aware of our activity… and he
wanted to take us down…”

But a sudden sniffle grabbed all of their attentions. “Mom…” Futaba’s voice cracked, before her eyes began to well with tears as well. She then screwed her eyes shut, a single tear trickling down her face. “I remember now… This is just like what happened to Mom!”

“I-Hey, it’s okay!” Ryuji’s voice was panicked, as he patted Futaba’s shoulder. Futaba sniffled again, taking off her glasses to wipe at her eyes. Anne quickly sat down next to her, wrapping an arm around Futaba’s shoulders.

“Ken…” Yusuke looked over to him. “What happened to the victims of Apathy Syndrome? You mentioned how they became unresponsive…”

Ken swallowed. “Apathy Syndrome didn’t kill them… when we killed the Full Moon Shadows, it seemed to restore them.”

“So there’s a chance that Okumura will be okay?” Ren said, his voice suddenly shaky. “I… I hope my mistake didn’t kill him…”

“Stop!” Anne cried, pushing the chair back and standing up. “Ren, don’t you dare blame yourself for this! If Ken’s theory is right… then all of this was a huge setup!”

“I know but… dammit!” Ren suddenly thumped the table, making it rattle violently. “WHY?! I… We thought we were doing good… to help the helpless… And this whole time with Okumura… we were just playing into Shido’s hands!”

“This is all just…” Makoto closed her eyes, “…insane… I think we need to get our bearings… We should head home for the night.”

His friends all murmured their assent to that and they broke into groups to start heading back home.

Ken walked home in a daze. Just… Just how was Mitsuru-san going to react to all of this?

You could hear a pin drop.

Minako slowly looked to Mitsuru-senpai. Her face was pale… all blood had drained out of her face.

“That… That was like Apathy Syndrome!” Junpei blurted out. “What the hell happened?!”

Chidori was shaking slightly. “I… I could’ve gone my entire life without seeing that.” She then shuddered, so Junpei wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer to him.

“Ken-kun and the others wouldn’t have made some kind of mistake like that…” Fuuka protested, her eyes wide. “But… what could’ve gone wrong?”

“Ken-san encountered another Persona-user… who was not a Phantom Thief,” Aigis said flatly. “Back when he first accessed the Metaverse.”

“What?!” Minako blurted out. “And you’re telling us now?!?”

Did that mean… this Persona-user was the one responsible for what happened to Okumura?

“I did not mean to make it a secret, it just… slipped from our minds,” Aigis stated.
“But this means… that Persona-user is probably…” Fuuka said faintly.

“…Working for Shido,” Mitsuru-senpai finally spoke. “Shido… is working to undermine the Phantom Thieves.”

Minako pressed both hands to her face. What… What had she done? “Which means… Ken-kun could be in danger,” she moaned out.

And it was her stupid idea. Stupid! What was she thinking?!

“Oh man…” Aki frowned. “…I didn’t think about that. But hey, that just means Ken and the others need to take down Shido faster right-“

“No.” Mitsuru-senpai’s voice cut through the air, the sharp tone immediately silencing Aki.

“Wait, Mitsuru-senpai, what are you-“ Minako began.

“I…” Mitsuru-senpai squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. She trembled slightly. “…I will not allow Amada to be endangered like this… I cannot. I’m sure that Shinjiro would agree with me… that he and Amada should return to Port Island.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope the Okumura confrontation was satisfactory. I had a little trouble with that.

So, about the PQ2 spinoff… I will be writing it. It’ll be a side project, so I would write when inspiration strikes. So Ace in the Hole will continue to have my main focus. However… expect this to be the last update until after July.

Why? Because Shuann Week is closing in and I still haven’t finished all of my prompts. I have two more left. School is also wrapping up and there’s finals and projects that I have to worry about.
Chapter Summary

The aftermath of Okumura's death sends ripples throughout all of Japan, leaving the Phantom Thieves utterly shaken.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tuesday, October 11th, 2016

"You want me to go back to Port Island?!

"Amada-" Mitsuru-san began.

"Don't 'Amada' me, Mitsuru-san!" Ken retorted, his hands clenching into fists. "You saw what happened to Haru's father! How can you ask me to leave after all of that?!"

"That's exactly why I want you to!" Mitsuru-san snapped, anger flushing her cheeks. "Shido clearly set this up so to discredit the Phantom Thieves! And who knows what he'll do next?!" She then took in a shuddering breath. It was… mind boggling to see her so unnerved, if Ken was being honest. "Sending you to Tokyo was obviously a mistake. I need to rectify that… at once. You and Shinjiro are returning to Port Island as soon as I can arrange it."

The word mistake was like a stab to the heart. It wasn't a mistake. Coming here to Tokyo… befriending everyone… it was the opposite of a mistake.

He had to change her mind… He couldn't go back to Port Island. Not like this.

"But-" Ken began to protest, only to be cut off.

"Stop fighting me on this!" Mitsuru-san suddenly snapped out, the force in her voice making him flinch. He had never been the direct subject of her ire. "Don't—" Her voice suddenly cracked, before she closed her eyes and bowed her head. "...I can't bury another person I care about... Someone who died too young. I can't."

Ken bit his lip. He… He could understand Mitsuru-san's viewpoint but… it was still wrong. So wrong… "Mitsuru-san, please," he pleaded, his voice suddenly cracking. "Don't make me come back to Port Island. I can't. Not like this. I helped create this mess… D-Don't make me leave."

"Amada..." Mitsuru-san's face crumpled for a moment, before her expression steeled. "No," she said firmly. "This is for your own protection."

"How is this any better than Takadera-san trying to forcibly disband SEES after your father's death?" Ken argued. "You're doing the exact same thing!"

"Don't you dare compare that situation to this," Mitsuru-san snapped. "I'm not drugging you and
forcibly keeping you under house arrest! Aren't you listening to me?! This is for your own good!"

"And are you listening to me?" Ken returned, his fingernails digging into his palms. "I'm part of the Phantom Thieves… It's only right that I stay and help figure out what to do about this. How is it fair if I get to flee, while Shido has his eye on everyone else?"

"Fair?" Mitsuru-san questioned fiercely, staring him down. "If things were fair, Minato wouldn't have died. Father wouldn't have died that night either because of Ikutsuki's delusions. Shido would be rightfully punished if things were fair!"

"Knock it off, both of you," Shinjiro interjected, speaking for the first time since Mitsuru-san had made her call. "You're both exhausted by everything today. You're jumping the gun, Mitsuru. We'll talk again when your head's clearer." And without another word, he shut Ken's laptop, effectively cutting off the video call.

Ken knew that Mitsuru-san was most likely furious at that. But he'd worry about that another time.

Ken slumped in his chair, pressing both hands against his face. As if he didn't feel awful enough already. He could feel Shinjiro-san's eyes on him. He sighed, dropping his hands. "Go ahead and yell at me," he mumbled out.

"I'm not gonna yell at you, Ken." Shinjiro-san pulled up a chair, sitting across from him.

Ken eyed his guardian. "I'm hearing a 'but' in that."

Shinjiro-san snorted. "I can see where Mitsuru is coming from." He rubbed his face. "You were baited into targeting Okumura. I have no idea what Shido's next move is, but he's clearly looking to take you down." He looked Ken right in the eye. "…You can't deny that, can you?"

"…No," Ken admitted. "But—"

"Wasn't done yet," Shinjiro-san cut him off, holding up a hand. "And I can see your point too, Ken. You're right. It wouldn't be fair for you to slip out and the others have to deal with this shit." He sighed, rubbing his forehead this time. "…Not to mention that Okumura is prolly gonna lose her old man. He was pretty shitty to her, but she loved 'im, didn't he? That may help to convince Mitsuru. Remind her that there's a girl that's going through what she went through."

Ken's heart clenched at that. Haru… would be devastated if Okumura died…

…Ha. Of course Okumura would die. The dead can't talk. Shido wanted to silence Okumura… And it hurt just thinking about it… He knew exactly what it was like to lose a parent so suddenly. And Haru had talked about how she had yearned to repair her relationship with her father… The closest she got was her father's Shadow apologizing to her… telling her that he didn't deserve her.

But Okumura would die, most likely tonight. Haru would never get the chance she wanted so badly.

But he… He didn't get it. He knew that Shinjiro-san wasn't a fan of this plan to begin with… getting involved with the Shadow Operatives again.

"…What's with that look?" Shinjiro-san looked irritated.

"I don't understand," Ken said quietly. "I thought that you would be siding with Mitsuru-san… I-I thought you'd be glad to leave Tokyo and come back to Port Island…"
Shinjiro-san exhaled. "I'm still not thrilled with all of this," he said flatly. "But… this is important to you. And I know that you've connected to your friends in ways that you haven't been able to connect to others before. I don't wanna take that away from you."

Shinjiro-san… he really was observant. He hadn't even realized that Shinjiro-san had picked up on that.

"…And stop giving me that sappy as fuck look," Shinjiro-san said dryly, before rising to his feet. He then passed by Ken, only to pause and touch his shoulder. "…Get some rest, Ken. It's been a long day for you, and you need sleep."

A long day, huh…? And he could only imagine that it'd be so much worse for Haru…

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Wednesday, October 12th, 2016

Today had been nothing but shitty. Constant talk about Okumura's death… speculation about the Phantom Thieves killed him… It really made Ren feel great.

And nobody was able to get ahold of Haru. All of their texts were left unread. She wouldn't answer their calls. He was worried about her… she lost her father so suddenly. She… She couldn't be okay.

And… And it was all his fault.

He was an awful leader. He was a pathetic Wild Card… He bet that none of the past Wild Cards had screwed up the way he had…

"…Ren?" Morgana said hesitantly. "You… You've been really quiet today."

Ren looked at his friend sadly. He couldn't muster the energy to act confident. Not today… He really felt that all of their work was absolutely meaningless.

They… They've done good, haven't they? They had stopped Kamoshida, saving Anne from being raped by him… not to mention everyone he had been physically abusing. Madarame was committing fraud while taking advantage of his students. Kaneshiro was exhorting countless of people… destroying people's lives.

He sighed, looking down at Morgana who looked back with expectant eyes. "Sorry, Morgana… I just… I can't help that I'm a screwup." He let out a bitter laugh. "…Maybe Sojiro was right. Should've just kept my nose outta trouble…"

"Don't you dare say that!" Morgana said sharply. "Ren, I know that Okumura died… but don't you dare try and take back what we've done over the past few months! You're not a screwup because of this. You've done so many good things, Ren…" His blue eyes swam with sadness. "…Can't you see that?" he said softly.

Ren pulled off his glasses so he could rub at his face. "…Sorry. I just…"

"I know, Ren," Morgana mumbled out. "…Believe me, I know…"

Ren rubbed the top of Morgana's head. "But… thanks, Morgana. I needed that, I think."

"It's no problem, Ren."
They then jumped a little when Ren's phone went off. Ren reached into his pocket, eyebrow raising as he read the messages.

*Group: The Phantom Thieves of Hearts*

[Ken]: We... We really need to meet today. It's urgent

[Anne]: Urgent? What do you mean, Ken?

[Ken]: ...It's better to say it in person...

[Yusuke]: ...?

[Ryuji]: your place as usual, yeah?

[Ken]: No

[Futaba]: What do you mean no?!

[Ken]: It's... complicated. Can we meet in LeBlanc's attic?

[Makoto]: Ken...?

Ren frowned, before he stowed away his phone. Just what was going on? What did Ken want to tell them?

Ren's blood ran cold as a thought suddenly struck him. What if Kirijo had forbidden Ken to keep working with them? Would Ken listen to her demand?

Dammit...

"Ren," Morgana murmured, shifting so he could reach out and bat at Ren's arm. "Let's get to LeBlanc."

Ren sighed for what felt like the millionth time today. Today officially sucked. A lot. "Yeah... Let's try and catch the train before it pulls out."

And to think, just a few days ago, he had felt on top of the world. He had a group of great, loyal friends, a girlfriend that he absolutely adored, and he felt like he was accomplishing something. Not to mention that the public seemed to actually approve of him. Of their work.

Was that where they went wrong? They let the public's opinion affect them...

Thankfully they were able to catch the train. Ren wished he had some earbuds or headphones so he could block out the gossip, though... Everyone kept speculating about Okumura's death. Someone shoot him now...

Ren inhaled the scent of coffee as he stepped inside of LeBlanc. Anne was sitting at the booth, but she perked up when she saw it was him. She hopped off her seat and went over to him, taking his hand. She gave a light squeeze, giving him a sad smile.

He wasn't the only one being affected by this... He really had to pull himself together. For everyone else's sake. He was the leader, after all...

"You're back early." Sojiro's voice snapped him out of his thoughts. He looked over to see Sojiro
shaking his head. "...It's been really crazy. Everyone has been freaking out over Okumura's death."

"Dammit. Sojiro didn't know but it just... rubbed the salt in his wounds.

"U-Um, we're doing a study group today!" Anne quickly lied. "Exams are starting on the seventeenth!"

"Oh?" Sojiro raised an eyebrow. "You'll probably do well. You made it to the top ten last time, if I remember correctly."

"Yeah." Ren forced a smile. "Just gotta throw myself into it. Wouldn't be surprised if Futaba popped in, though. She'd be mad if there's a group get together and she's not included."

Sojiro laughed. "Can't argue with that. I'm glad that you've been spending time with her."

"It's nothing, Boss," Anne said with a wave of her hand. She then took Ren's hand, tugging him towards the attic. "See you later!"

Ren sank onto his bed once they were alone in the attic. Dammit... Everything seemed to just fall apart within a blink of an eye.

"Ren, please..." Anne's plea made him look back to her. She cupped his cheek with one hand, her eyes filling with sadness as she gazed at him. "Don't blame yourself for this. We did the same with Okumura as we did with Kamoshida, Madarame, and Kaneshiro. Ken's theory has a chance of being like... ninety-five percent correct."

"But Haru..." Ren began.

"We've known Haru for a month now," Anne said gently. "Do you really think that she would blame you for this...?" She bit her lip. "I... I still remember the look on her face when Okumura's Shadow apologized to her. Maybe it wasn't quite forgiveness but she could empathize with her dad. If she can do that, she won't blame you for this, Ren..."

Morgana jumped out of Ren's bag. "Lady Anne's correct," he said. "Haru is such a kind hearted girl."

"If you're not a Shadow, that is," Ren muttered.

"Stop!" Anne smacked his shoulder. "The thing is... that Haru won't blame you... or us. I know you're our leader, Ren, but we all had a part in this. We all messed up..."

"But I..." Ren hung his head. "I feel like such a failure. There was talk on the news about how countless people have lost their jobs... and they have no other ends. I bet that no other Wild Card screwed up like I did..."

"Stop comparing yourself!" Anne latched onto his shoulders. "Ren, please stop," she begged. "Beating yourself up about this won't help you. You're only human. You shouldn't push all these expectations onto yourself."

Ren sighed heavily. "I just... I just feel so lost."

"We all do, Ren..." Morgana said quietly. "But blaming yourself for this... something that was out of your control... That won't help."

"We'll figure it out the way we always do then," Anne said gently. "Together." She took one of his
hands in both of hers. Then she looked at him right in the eye. "Hell or high water, remember?"
Ren's lips twitched into a smile. "...Thanks. Both of you... for knocking some sense into me."
"Well, if that didn't work, I would've had Morgana bring out the claws."
"And he'd probably listen to you too," Ren said.
"I'm right here!" Morgana grumbled.
"...Are we interrupting something?" Ryuji, Futaba, and Yusuke had arrived together.
"No," Anne answered as Ren stood up. "We were just... talking."
They pulled up chairs and sat at the table together.
"Has anyone been able to get ahold of Haru?" Yusuke asked. "I'm... concerned for her."
Futaba pulled out her phone. "I hacked into her phone, just to check up on her... She's been in meetings all day."
"It makes sense," Anne murmured, a sad, sympathetic smile on her face. "She has to make arrangements for her dad's funeral, and there's the whole thing with Okumura Foods..."
"She just lost her old man." Ryuji rubbed his face for a moment. "And she's getting thrown in with all this crap. I hope she'll be okay."
"I was thinking of visiting her tomorrow," Yusuke said. "Would anyone like to accompany me?"
"...I would," Futaba said shakily.
...Futaba would really understand, wouldn't she?
"I would what?" Makoto had arrived as well.
"Ah..." Yusuke winced. "Tomorrow I was thinking of visiting Haru. I know that she's most likely busy but... I'm concerned after the radio silence today."
"I see." Makoto wrapped her arms around herself for a moment. "...May I come as well?"
Yusuke just smiled, before he nodded. "Of course. You're more than welcome."
"Um..." Futaba fidgeted for a moment, watching Makoto seat herself. "Do you have any idea why Ken called this meeting?"
Makoto just let out a soft sigh. "...Your guess is as good as mine," she said quietly. "He's been withdrawn, but... after what happened last night..."
Ren sighed as well, looking down at the table. Didn't that sum up all of them? Besides him, Anne took his hand from under the table and gave a light squeeze. Ren squeezed back.
"Sorry for being late."
"Ken, what's the matter?" Yusuke didn't mince his words, locking his eyes with Ken's. "You didn't say much but from what I can garner... it sounded serious."
Ken bit his lip, chewing it for a moment. "There... There's no easy way to say this..." he mumbled
out, running his fingers through his hair. He then inhaled. "…Mitsuru-san called last night after I
got home. She… She says that she wants me to return to Port Island."

Ren felt his heart sank. Of course his gut feeling was right… There was no way that the Shadow
Operatives would trust them after this mess-up.

And now Ken was going to leave. Why did he have to mess up so badly?

"ARE YOU FOR REAL?!!" Ryuji burst out. "You can't leave!"

Futaba nodded vigorously, her hands clenched into fists. "R-Ryuji's right! She can't seriously be
asking this!"

"This is preposterous," Yusuke protested as well. "After all of this time… she's recalling you back
to Port Island?"

"I-It's not in her hands," Makoto added, her voice suddenly shaky. Her eyes were wide with panic.
"She's not your guardian. Shinjiro-san is!"

Ken just looked at them all wearily. "Mitsuru-san is paying for my tuition at Shujin Academy. She
gave us lodging. It's… It's not in my hands. Or Shinjiro-san's." He then squeezed his eyes shut for a
moment. "I pleaded with her to reconsider… I don't want to go back to Port Island… I don't want to
leave all of you…"

Anne's eyes filled with sympathy and sadness. "Ken…" she said softly.

"What does Shinjiro-san think about all of this, though?" Morgana asked.

Ken rubbed his face. "Well… Shinjiro-san wasn't thrilled with the whole idea. Back when Minako-
san proposed the idea, he actually got a little mad at her…"

"Wait a sec…" Ryuji's face scrunched up at that. "…Why would he be pissed 'bout that?"

"It's… It's complicated." Ken sighed. "Shinjiro-san got involved with SEES to begin with because
he thought Akihiko-san joining them in the first place was reckless. He rejoined SEES because of
me… And the last time he fought with his Persona, it was because Mitsuru-san, Aigis-san,
Akihiko-san, and Minako-san had gotten kidnapped."

"So it's always been a personal reason," Makoto summarized.

"That's… kinda…" Ren trailed off, not knowing how to phrase it. He knew that Ken viewed
Shinjiro-san highly.

"Shinjiro-san has his reasons," Ken said. "Especially with how he nearly died back in 2009."

Yusuke let out a thoughtful hum. "But where are you going with this, Ken?" he inquired.

"Right." Ken winced. "Shinjiro-san kinda… cut the conversation short. He told her that she was
jumping the gun before shutting my laptop close."

"Shinjiro-san really doesn't give a crap, huh?" Ryuji commented.

Ken's lips twitched into a near smile at the remark. "No, he doesn't." Then he quickly grew somber.
"But after all of that… we had a conversation, as well," Ken explained. "He told me that while he
understood Mitsuru-san's fears… he can understand my side of things."
"Oh, that is good news!" Anne perked up at that, hope glimmering in her eyes.

"Why don't we talk to her then?" Futaba piped up. "Mitsuru-san."

"Wha…?" Ken's eyes widened at that. "I don't know about that…"

"Ken, pleaseee!" Futaba wheedled, clasping her hands in front of her. Her eyes went huge. "Maybe if we tried to talk to her… she'd understand where you're coming from more!"

"I… I…" Ken then sighed. "…All right," he relented, running his fingers through his hair. "I'll see if I can video call her tomorrow."

"Actually…" Yusuke began, "…not tomorrow."

"No?" Ken frowned, tilting his head slightly.

"We were talking about seeing Haru tomorrow," Makoto said softly. "Just to see how she's holding up, with her not responding to our messages."

"…I see," was Ken's quiet response. "Um…" He bit his lip. "Do you think I could come too?"

Oh… of course he'd want to come too. He lost a parent suddenly due to Shadow activity too…

Yusuke nodded firmly. "Of course."

"Is there anyone else who wants to come?" Makoto asked.

Ren shook his head. "No… It's probably for the better," he said quietly. "We don't want to overwhelm Haru with too many visitors."

Yusuke nodded. "I think Ren's right," he said quietly. "Not to mention everything she's been dealing with."

"So… we're all good for today, yeah?" Ryuji asked uncertainly.

"It appears so," Yusuke said. "I'll see all of you on Friday, then."

"If we can even convince Mitsuru-san," Ken mumbled. "She's awfully stubborn when she wants to. She'll probably dig in her heels…"

"Then we'll just have to out-stubborn her." Anne gave him a reassuring smile. "I mean, Ryuji alone could probably get the job done."

"HEY!

"Mwehehe, you can't deny the truth," Futaba snickered at Ryuji. She then turned to Ren. "I'll be heading back, okay? I'll say bye to Sojiro for you!"

"Futaba, wait," Morgana called out to her. "Um… I was wondering if you could…" He trailed off for a moment.

"Could…?" Futaba asked.

"I'll explain on the way, okay?" Morgana huffed. Then he bowed his head. "Please," he pleaded softly.
"Morgana…?" Yusuke questioned.

"I-It's nothing bad, okay?" Morgana grumbled. "Please, Futaba."

"Wellll, kitty is saying please…" Futaba mused, before nodding her head firmly. "Okay. I'll accept your quest!"

"Must you always inject such odd jargon when you speak?" Yusuke sighed.

"You're one to talk, Inari!" Futaba retorted, hands on her hips.

Still bickering, the two of them—along with Morgana in Futaba's arms—descended the stairs. Ryuji glanced over to Ren, but Ren made a shooing gesture. He tried to force a smile to reassure his best friend. Ryuji bit his lip, before calling out to Yusuke to wait up.

Makoto looked at Ken, and she opened her mouth for a moment. But then she wavered, hastily shutting her mouth close.

Ken rubbed his face. He looked so… tired. "…I'll walk you home, Makoto," he muttered.

So they left together, leaving Ren alone with his girlfriend. Ren heaved out a sigh before standing up. He walked over to his bed.

"Do you… want to talk about it?" Anne asked softly, rising to her feet.

"Ken… could leave," Ren said numbly, sinking onto his bed.

"Ren…" Anne sat next to him, turning to face him. She pulled him into a tight hug. He started to shake in her arms. "Shh…" she crooned, running her fingers through his hair. "This isn't your fault, okay?"

He was used to being the leader. The one with the plan. The confident one.

But now… it felt like he had nothing. And he was going to lose one of his friends.

"We'll take it one step at a time," Anne said softly. "Just breathe, Ren. Breathe."

"How can you be so confident?" Ren mumbled out.

Anne just smiled at him before leaning forward to kiss him on the forehead. "…Because I'm with you."

"And you say I pull out lines without even batting an eye."

Anne giggled. "I guess you're rubbing off on me."

Ren hugged her close, his arms wrapping around her waist. "Anne… can you… stay with me tonight?" he murmured, looking into her eyes.

Anne's smile turned gentle as she looked at him. "…Of course."

_________________________________________________________

She wants me to return to Port Island.

Those seven words kept echoing in Makoto's head.

If Ken left Tokyo… would she ever see him again? Even if they resolved everything with Shido…
Makoto wasn't sure if the Shadow Operatives would ever want to come near them again. She... She hated that she was so unsure about it.

And if Ken left for good... without her telling him how she felt...

She didn't know if she could bear it. But at the same time, what if Ken didn't return her feelings and he ended up staying in Tokyo...? She didn't want to ruin things...

"Ah, Makoto... we're at your apartment complex."

Makoto snapped to attention, and she looked at Ken. "Ah... right."

Ken smiled halfheartedly, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said softly.

"Ken, wait!" Makoto blurted, grabbing one of his hands. Ken froze, his eyes growing as big as golf balls. "I... I..." she stammered out.

What... What was she doing? She couldn't just dump this on him now. Especially with how he must be feeling...

Makoto licked her lips for a moment, before forcing herself to smile. "We... We'll figure something out," she said trying sound more confident than how she felt. "We'll convince Kirijo-san that you need to stay here."

Ken's lips formed a sad smile, before his fingers curled around hers. "...I hope you're right, Makoto."

"I mean... Mitsuru-san is just looking out for your safety..." Makoto bit her lip.

Her knowledge of Mitsuru Kirijo came from the media. She was supposed to be a beautiful woman. Fierce and unwilling to back down from a challenge.

"I know..." Ken sighed, before he rubbed his face with his free hand. Oh... He hadn't let go of her hand. "...I just wish that she had listened to what I said..."

"We'll make sure that she listens to us, then." Makoto gently squeezed his hand. "Ken, I... I don't want you to leave," she admitted in a small voice.

"Makoto..." Ken looked at her. "...I don't either. I never expected to befriend any of you... but now I have a hard time imagining my life without you." He heaved out another sigh. "...I hope you're right. Because without Mitsuru-san's support, we can't stay in Tokyo."

Makoto bit her lip. She had to pray that they could convince her then. "Like... Anne said... we'll have to out stubborn her."

"It... It could be worse," Ken admitted. "Shinjiro-san could be agreeing with her. He... He's not a fan of Tokyo."

"He's not?" Makoto tilted her head at that.

"He says it's too frantic. Some people are too much in a rush and would 'bulldoze people over to get where they're going', in his words."

Makoto couldn't help laugh a little at that. To say Shinjiro-san was colorful was putting it lightly. "And he puts up with it... because he was worried about you going to Tokyo alone?" Makoto
"Pretty much," Ken agreed, a fond smile touching his lips. "But speaking of Shinjiro-san..." He looked towards the elevator. "...I probably should get going." His hand slid out of Makoto's. "I'll see you tomorrow, Makoto."

Makoto watched him leave, biting her lip as he disappeared out of her sight.

She tried to act confident, but... she was scared that Mitsuru-san wouldn't be convinced. And that would mean Ken would leave Tokyo... Should she... tell him of her feelings? She almost did earlier. She might regret it if she didn't...

Makoto shook her head, pinching herself to snap her out of her thoughts. She had to think positively. If she was convinced that they'd fail, then they would have lost the battle already. She then let out a soft sigh as a wave of exhaustion hit her.

What a day... She knew that today was going to be rough, with what happened last night but... She had no idea just how rough it'd be. She should just get inside and heat the leftovers from a couple nights ago... She fished out her keys from her schoolbag, before unlocking the door.

"Do you always come home this late?"

Makoto let out a surprised squeak, gaping at her sister. Sae was sitting at the couch, her eyes on her laptop. "SIS?!" she gasped. "W-What are you doing here?"

Sae stopped typing, looking up to raise an eyebrow at Makoto. "Are you really asking me that, Makoto?"

"Nono, it's not like that!" Makoto said hastily, waving her hands for a moment. "It's just..." She trailed off for a moment. "...You've been so busy lately, Sis." She bit her lip. "It... It feels like you've been living at your office lately..." she added quietly.

Sae pursed her lips. "Yes, but it's not like the Phantom Thieves have been giving me a break," she said darkly. Then she tucked her hair behind her ear. "...However, they are giving me a chance of a promotion, so I suppose I can't complain all that much."

Makoto blinked at her. "A... A promotion?" she echoed.

Sae nodded firmly, a proud smile on her face. "Yes, the SIU director called me into his office earlier today. He said that I'm now being put in charge of the investigation of the Phantom Thieves. If I'm successful..." excitement started to brim from her voice, "I'll be promoted. So, I've started with speaking to Haru Okumura. You've become friends with her lately, haven't you?"

"I... I see." Makoto forced a smile as she stepped closer to her sister. "...Congratulations, Sis," she added softly. "You've always been a hard worker... you deserve it." She then bit her lip. "But... how is Haru?" she asked tentatively. "I tried messaging her today, but after what happened to her father..."

Sae's expression grew serious. "She's... not well," she admitted. "Very quiet and withdrawn. She seemed to draw into herself even further when her fiancé came to see her."

"Sugimura..." Makoto's hand clenched into a fist. Of course. Okumura didn't have time to break the engagement. Poor Haru... That must have been like salt rubbed into the wound.

"...I see," Makoto said slowly. "I... I feel so awful for Haru."
"It is odd though… Akechi-kun pointed out that Okumura is a bit of a step down from Medjed," Sae mused, stroking her chin. She then shook her head, pursing her lips together. "Excuse me, I'm just talking aloud…"

"I-It's okay, Sis." Makoto forced another smile, even as she lied in between her teeth. "It's your job after all." She then slid her bag off her shoulder, setting it on the loveseat. "I'll get dinner started, though. It shouldn't take too long."

Between Haru's situation and Ken possibly moving back… they had a lot on their hands. She… She would have to come clean about Sae having a Palace to everyone… wouldn't she?

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_Thursday, October 13th, 2016_

There was no denying the opulence of the Okumura residence. The architecture was a work of art. Modern furniture. Paintings with superb technique.

And yet… it was so cold. He couldn't help but compare it to LeBlanc. Warmth was infused in the very air, with LeBlanc. Even though returning to the atelier brought on… mixed feelings to Yusuke, he still had fond memories of Madarame teaching him how to draw, how to paint…

He couldn't help but wonder if Haru had any happy memories in her home like Yusuke had with the atelier. She had said that her father was once kind… and found joy in creating food, but…

He just couldn't imagine Haru growing up in such a place. Despite her upbringing, Haru was kind and gentle, never failing to have a warm smile on her face. Yusuke could only wonder how this was the case.

They were told to sit by the servant who ushered them inside. But Yusuke couldn't help but feel a bit anxious. How was Haru holding up? Was she… upset at them?

They had succeeded every time until now. But… her father ended up getting killed.

"Guys!"

They turned their heads to see that Morgana was in Haru's arms.

"Morgana?" Makoto's eyes went wide. "What are you doing here??"

"Mona-chan showed up last night," Haru explained, seating herself at the loveseat. Her grip loosened on Morgana, presumably so Morgana could wander away if he so wished. But Morgana remained firmly planted in Haru's lap.

Yusuke felt his heart sink as he took a good look at her face. Dark circles under her eyes, highlighted by how pale her skin was. A redness to her eyes that hinted that she had been crying. Her smile was wobbly.

Of course she wasn't holding up well. She had just lost her father and she had expressed a wish to reconcile with him… She wanted to make amends so badly…

Morgana lowered his head. "…I was worried," he mumbled out.

"So that's what you were asking Futaba yesterday, then?" Yusuke inquired.

Morgana nodded. "Ren was taking everything really hard so… I felt that he should be resting. I
didn't want to bother him about this."

"Ren-kun…" Haru said softly, her eyes filling with concern. "…Is he okay?"

"S-Shouldn't we be asking you that?" Futaba asked, her eyes wide at Haru. "I-I mean-!" Then her mouth snapped shut and she shrank into herself. "N-Never mind…"

Haru winced. "I… I'm o-" Then she stopped short, her hands clenching around Morgana for a moment. "…I'm holding up," she said finally.

"Haru…" Yusuke said quietly. "I… I…"

The words were heavy on his tongue. What could he say to her? He had no memories of his mother, and he had no idea of the whereabouts of his father. Whether he was alive or dead… Yusuke couldn't say.

The Sayuri was the closest tie he had to his mother. But he never would have known the personal tie he had to the Sayuri, if it wasn't for them confronting Madarame's Shadow. He knew that his mother loved him, pouring such emotion in the Sayuri, knowing that she was slowly dying. But that couldn't replace actual memories.

"…They said they did their best to sedate Father." Haru forced a smile, a smile that was too brittle to belong on Haru's face. "P-Please don't blame yourselves."

…Had she been worrying about them too? Perhaps… it came to her mind, because Morgana got Futaba to take him to Haru's home last night.

"Haru… there's something you need to know," Makoto said slowly. "A-About your father. I-I know the official excuse is that it's a sudden heart attack but…"

"…Mitsuru-san's father's death was credited to a sudden illness," Ken suddenly said. "Ikutsuki shot him. A bullet right to the chest." He looked down at his hands. "…It's never the truth," he added bitterly.

Sometimes… he forgot that Ken had been dealt a harsh hand of cards as well. He was surrounded by a group of people who cared and doted on him as a younger brother. But… he lost his mother at a young age and he had been hurt by authority… people meant to help him.

"B-But anyhow…" Makoto cleared her throat. "…We repeated the process of stealing someone's Treasure, but… we think the reason why your father's Shadow was killed by the black masked Persona-user." She bowed her head. "I-I'm sorry, Haru… None of us considered the idea that he might be lurking in the Palace… Maybe if we had, we could've…!"

"Mako-chan, please don't blame yourself!" Haru exclaimed, holding up her hands. Then she looked to everyone else. "…Please don't blame yourselves. You've expressed your wish to help me so many times… So… don't blame yourself, please. L-Losing Father was…" her lip trembled for a moment, but then she closed her eyes and the tremors ceased, "…unfortunate, but I know that this was not your intention."

…She was just trying to maintain a stiff upper lip, wasn't she… Even when suffering through this loss… she was trying to uplift them.

"B-But… at least your engagement has been broken, right?" Futaba asked.

Haru's face crumpled at that. "…No." Her voice suddenly cracked as she opened her eyes.
Yusuke's hands clenched into fists at the glimmer of tears in her eyes. "Father had been so unwell s-since we took his Treasure… he wasn't able to meet with the Sugimuras. I-In fact… the board is pushing for the marriage, to salvage the company. To them… Sugimura is their savior."

"WHAT?!" Yusuke was on his feet. "How dare they?! And how dare Sugimura take advantage of the situation?!"

"Haru…" Ken's voice snapped Yusuke out of his rage, and he looked to see that Ken's hands were gripping his knees tightly, "I can speak to Mitsuru-san. Maybe she can offer aid to Okumura Foods. The board shouldn't be forcing you to marry Sugimura."

"…No. I-It's okay…" Haru looked to him. "I… I appreciate the concern and your offer, but… you have enough on your plate, Ken-kun," she said gently. "You're on thin enough ice with Kirijo-san. I… I can't ask that of you."

"Haru… I… I'm so sorry," Yusuke said. "We… We've failed you."

"I… I'm sorry too," Futaba whimpered out. "I… I didn't want anyone to go through what I did before…" She squeezed her eyes shut, but a couple tears leaked out. "N-Nobody should have died like Mom…"

"Please, stop blaming yourselves!" Haru pleaded, suddenly blinking rapidly. "You had good intentions…" She then bowed her head. "I-I'm sorry, but I really can't spare much time. The board is pushing for a funeral as soon as possible and we've set it on Sunday. I've been caught up with the arrangements, which is why I was silent for the past few days…"

Except… was that truly the case? Yusuke had felt incredible with the reaction to Medjed… Had they… been swept up in their success?

"So soon…" Makoto murmured, pulling Yusuke out of his ruminations. Makoto was only fifteen when her father had died… Yusuke assumed that her elder sister had taken care of those arrangements.

"The sooner the better I suppose…” Haru forced yet another smile. "I-I'm sorry, but please excuse me…"

"…Haru, wait." Ken's quiet voice halted Haru in her tracks. She looked at him with wide eyes. "… You don't have to bear the burden all on your shoulders. That's what we're here for… as your friends."

Haru ducked her head, possibly to hide her tears. "…I understand, Ken-kun," she whispered. "Thank you."

…Something told him that Haru would not heed Ken's words… At least not yet. Haru's emotions must be a turbulence.

*And yet, whose fault is that?* a voice whispered to Yusuke. *You should have taken a step back. You should've seen that it was all too perfect…*

"…Yusuke?" Makoto's voice snapped him out of his reverie. "W-We should go."

"…My apologies," Yusuke mumbled out, before rising to his feet.

Futaba collected Morgana in her arms, before they all set outside.
"...Yusuke..." Ken said slowly, "what's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" Yusuke parroted back, before letting out a short, mirthless laugh. "You were there, were you not?"

"Yusuke..." Morgana began.

"Morgana, do not try and placate me," Yusuke cut him off, before sweeping his arm towards the Okumura residence. A residence where Haru was all alone. "You saw the toll this is taking on Haru!"

"Stop it," Futaba mumbled out.

"I will not!" Yusuke snapped. "What... What has become of us...? What has become of me? I savored the good opinion of the people, the fame that we had earned! I... I..." Yusuke looked down on the ground. Then his head shot up, his gaze sweeping between his friends. "I'm no better than Madarame!"

"I said STOP IT, YUSUKE! SHUT UP!" Futaba suddenly shrieked out, the screech making the rest of them wince. She was shaking so hard that her hair was trembling. "You... Stop talking yourself down," she ground out. "Yeah, we got caught up in the fame! But are you abusive?! Are you a cheat?" She shook her head vigorously. "No! You're the opposite of that! You're many things, which include annoying, having one track mind, and..." She trailed off, shaking her head again. "But anyways! You're a good person, okay? You've been worried about Haru this whole time. Madarame was willing to squeeze every last drop out of his students, as long as he had cash to burn."

Yusuke just stared at Futaba. To speak frankly, Futaba pushed his buttons so easily. But he... he had never thought that she thought of him in that way.

"Yusuke..." Makoto said softly, "Futaba's right, you know. We made a mistake... and Haru suffered from it. And I wish desperately that we could take it back."

"We were careless," Ken said quietly. "We thought that this would answer our problems. But Haru's right in a way... We can't keep beating ourselves up for this."

"I..." Yusuke bowed his head. "...You're right. I just got so caught up after seeing Haru that I..." He shook his head. "But this is a bitter lesson. We... no I... will never be caught up in the wave of fame again."

He wasn't Madarame. But this experience had taught him... that humility always had to be on the forefront of his mind.

"We mustn't forget why the Phantom Thieves were founded in the first place," Morgana said.

"Yes..." Yusuke bowed his head. "It will not happen again. I swear it."

_Thou art I... and I am thou. Thine resolve hast transformed me... and hast given me a new form. I am..._

"Kamu...Susano-o..." Yusuke breathed out.

"Huh?" Futaba looked at him in confusion. "What are you mumbling about, Inari?"

"My Persona... it has changed," Yusuke announced. "Goemon... has given rise to Kamu Susano-
"Oh, that's incredible, Yusuke!" Makoto complimented, smiling warmly at him. "Congratulations!"

"Thank you, Makoto."

He was not like Madarame. He was going to fight for what was right… not because it gave him fame. He'd never lose sight of what was right again.

Friday, October 14th, 2016

Makoto watched with growing trepidation as Ken and Futaba fussed with his laptop and the webcam that Futaba had brought with her. This would project the video call onto the admittedly high end television set.

"Annd here we go!" Futaba crowed, flashing a victory sign. "You just gotta call her now, Ken!"

"Simple, right?" Ken said dryly, before he smiled at Futaba. "…But thanks, Futaba."

"I can't believe that we're actually talking to Mitsuru Kirijo though!" Anne exclaimed.

"I mean, we've met the rest of the celebrities Ken knows," Ren quipped. "Maybe it was only a matter of time."

Ken rolled his eyes in Ren's direction, before he started the call. He set his laptop aside, before joining them on the large couch. They watched with bated breath as the call connected.

"Hello?"

Makoto's breath caught.

She had heard from the media that Mitsuru Kirijo was a beautiful woman. Incredibly beautiful, the media proclaimed. But she hadn't expected it to be the truth.

Her wine red hair was swept up into an elegant bun, while her bangs curled down to nearly her chin. Her eyes matched the shade of her hair perfectly. She wore a black ruffled blouse and the only piece of jewelry on her was a surprisingly simple silver necklace. She was elegant, with an air of authority to her.

She was… somewhat like Sae.

But then shock filled her eyes. "W-What…?"

Ken just ran his hand through his hair, smiling weakly at her. "Um, hi, Mitsuru-san."

"Amada…" She narrowed her eyes at him. "What's the meaning of this?"

"We're sorry for this huge mess!" Ryuji shouted.

"Please don't drag Ken back to Port Island!" Anne pleaded, clasping her hands in front of her, while Futaba shouted, "You can't make him go back! You can't!"

Kirijo-san's only answer was to blink several times. In honesty, she looked… flabbergasted at the whole thing. But then again, she was being screamed at…
Ken's response on the other hand, was just to introduce his hand to his face. "You guys…"

"…I suppose Shinjiro was not exaggerating when he claimed that you were a…" she paused, seemingly pondering over something, "…colorful group." But then her eyes locked onto Futaba, regret suddenly filling them. "…And you must be Isshiki's daughter, Futaba."

The fire suddenly died in Futaba's eyes and she tried to shrink into herself. "Um, that's me," she squeaked out.

"…I…" Kirijo-san closed her eyes for a moment. "I… beg for your forgiveness," she said. "I pursued the truth of your mother's death but… I drew back when Shido made his threat. I didn't know of your wellbeing… and it turned out that was a mistake." A sad smile pulled at her lips. "…You truly do resemble your mother." Then a pause, as she frowned. She looked puzzled for some reason. "…Well, save for your hair. I'm surprised that you chose such a vivid hair color to dye your hair."

"Wait… wait… wait…" Ryuji turned shocked eyes onto Futaba, before his jaw dropped. "You dye your hair?!"

"Um, duh," Futaba said flatly, looking unimpressed with Ryuji. "My hair's bright orange. You seriously thought this—" she seized a chunk of her hair, waving it at Ryuji, "—is natural?!"

"So?! Yusuke's hair is blue!" Ryuji cried out. "And Fuuka-san has practically green hair!"

"Do not drag me into this, Ryuji," Yusuke said flatly. "And I believe we're veering off topic."

"That's putting it lightly," Ken grumbled out.

"But um…" Futaba adjusted her glasses for a moment. "I-It turned out for the best!" she stammered out. "I-I mean, I wouldn't have met everyone if it wasn't for what happened…" Then she clasped her hands together. "P-Please don't make Ken go back to Port Island!" she begged all while her lips trembled. "He… He's the one who told me that I couldn't keep hiding from the world."

"I…" Kirijo-san looked taken aback by that. "…I knew Amada was deeply concerned about you but… I…"

"I'm sorry," Ren suddenly interrupted. Ren's stance was usually relaxed… fluid. Almost cat-like. But now… he was so… rigid.

"I… beg your pardon…" Kirijo-san then tilted her head. "…Ah, you're Amamiya, are you not?"

"That's me." Ren audibly swallowed. "I'm so, so sorry for what happened."

"C-C'mon, Ren, you can't keep blaming yourself-" Morgana began.

"…I'm not really blaming myself, Morgana," Ren said. Kirijo-san flicked her eyes towards Morgana, curiosity filling them. Oh, right… she couldn't understand Morgana. "Not anymore. However… I know that you trusted us enough to give us information… information we might not have uncovered for a long time. And… we blew it. Haru's dad is dead, and we didn't think of the black masked Persona user until it was too late. We thought we were just doing what we've been doing…"

"…The fame went to our heads," Yusuke added. "We were overconfident… we thought we would be able to continue freely. We did not think of the consequences…" He bowed his head, sorrow clinging to him like a cloak. "…And now Okumura is dead."
"…Mm." A considering light entered Kirijo-san's eyes. "This is all well and good but… this is just convincing me that it's better to recall Amada to Port Island… It's become too dangerous."

"No…" Anne whimpered out, her eyes filling with tears. "Please don't…"

Makoto felt her heart sink as she watched Ken's face crumple. Kirijo-san wasn't convinced…

"This is just running away!" Ryuji snapped out. "You're lookin' away from the real problem here!"

Makoto inhaled sharply at Ryuji's words. Running away…

"…Will it help if you look away?" Makoto said lowly. "What would it resolve?"

"I… beg your pardon?" Kirijo-san's eyes widened at that. "Just… what are you alluding to?"

"Makoto…?" Ken questioned.

"Makoto, wait—" Ryuji began. "You don't hafta—"

But she cut him off, shaking her head. "...Yes, I do." She then inhaled. "Ken has mentioned to you that I'm the student council president of Shujin, correct?" Kirijo-san just raised an eyebrow at that, but she slowly nodded. "...I had suspicions of Kamoshida's actions but I turned a blind eye to it all. And because of it… so many people got hurt…" her eyes drifted over to Ryuji and Anne for a moment, before she looked back to Kirijo-san, "because Kamoshida thought he could do anything and he'd still be worshipped by the school. I utterly failed in my duty as the student council president."

"Makoto…" Anne said softly. "I… It's not your fault-"

"Oh, but it is," Makoto interrupted, holding up a hand to stop Anne. "I did not think to look further into it. I looked away, and as a result… so many people were hurt. Suzui-san nearly killed herself because of Kamoshida. It was only by a stroke of good fortune that she managed to live." She then inhaled shakily. "B-But my point is… what good will it do if Ken goes back to Port Island?"

Kirijo-san's eyes widened at that. She had… struck a nerve, hadn't she?

"Y-You just said that you felt bad because you couldn't do more after Mom died…" Futaba said slowly. "But…" She bit her lip, before her eyes met Kirijo-san's. "…Is this much different?"

"I…"

"Give it up already, Mitsuru."

Futaba yelped, slipping out of her seat and landing on the floor. "J-Jeez!" she sputtered out. "Did you down like three stealth potions or what?!"

"Futaba!" Makoto exclaimed. "Are you okay?!"

Futaba winced, before she rubbed her bottom. "I'll live," she said.

"Hello to you too, Shinjiro," Kirijo-san greeted dryly. Then she looked back at them, before she heaved out a sigh. "...You're really adamant on this, aren't you, Amada?" she said quietly.

But before Ken could even open his mouth, Shinjiro-san beat him to the punch. "You should've figured that out when Ken actually argued with you when you called," Shinjiro-san snorted.
Mitsuru-sa looked irritated at that—somehow Makoto did not expect Shinjiro-san to have this kind of relationship with Kirijo-san, but in hindsight it did make sense... "And if you thought so, then why did you insist on dropping the subject until midterms were done with? You forcibly cut off the call!"

"It appears that Shinjiro-san... as Ryuji would put it..." Yusuke began, "...does not give a shit."

"Yusuke!" Makoto gasped, before she glared at Ryuji. "Ryuji, what are you doing, teaching Yusuke that kind of language?!"

"What?" Ryuji demanded. "C'mon, Makoto, Yusuke ain't a baby! Hell, I bet Futaba's seen worse with her surfing the web so much! And she's the youngest!"

"Hey, don't drag me into this!" Futaba retorted.

"I don't know why you're surprised, Makoto," Ken said dryly.

"...Heh." The soft chuckle had them looking back at Kirijo-san. "I see that what Shinjiro has been telling me hasn't been a stretch."

"And may I ask what exactly you've been saying?" Ren asked.

"Tch." Shinjiro-san huffed, pointedly looking away. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I think we're growing on him," Ren stage whispered to Futaba.

"And I think you need to mind your own business, Amamiya," Shinjiro-san retorted. "Sides, it'd be a complete pain in the ass to transfer Ken back to Gekkoukan after all of this."

"Um..." Futaba fidgeted for a moment, smiling awkwardly at Kirijo-san. "S-Sorry about bring up Mom earlier..."

"Mitsuru's stubborn as a mule," Shinjiro-san dismissed. "Besides she deals with ass kissers all the damn time. I bet someone laying the truth out to her like that was a breath of fresh air."

Kirijo-san just glowered at him through the screen. "Must you always be so crude, Shinjiro?" she practically growled out.

"Am I wrong?" he shot back with a smirk. (Something told her that Shinjiro-san liked irritating Kirijo-san...)

Kirijo-san just exhaled, before shooting Shinjiro-san a look. "You're impossible." Then she looked to Futaba. "...And don't worry about it, Sakura. I... I honestly deserved that."

"Yeah, yeah," Shinjiro-san waved her off.

Makoto found herself looking back and forth between the two of them. Kirijo-san just seemed so... poised. And yet Shinjiro-san tore that down without even blinking. Then she happened to glance over to Ken. He wasn't even batting an eye at the arguing pair.

"...Is this normal?" Makoto whispered, leaning closer to him.

"Hmm?" Ken turned to her. "Oh, this?" He waved a hand. "It's nothing really. You should see Shinjiro-san when he's with Akihiko-san..."

"I'm glad that this has been resolved!" Anne said gleefully, clasping her hands together. But then
she faltered. "Oh, but Haru…” She bit her lip. "You went and saw her yesterday, didn't you?"

"Oh, yeah, how is she?" Ryuji asked.

Morgana sighed. "…Not good," he mumbled out. "Not good at all."

"Haru…” Yusuke sighed. "She put on a brave face and yet…"

"…I see," Ren said. "Maybe she needs some time but…"

"The fact that she still hasn't been replying to our messages…” Ken said slowly, "…speaks volumes."

Makoto winced. She had sent Haru text messages… saying that she would always be happy to listen to Haru, should she need it… But still, nothing. But on the other hand, when Dad died… Makoto could barely bring herself to speak to anyone. The pitying whispers and looks… she had despised it all.

"You're speaking of Okumura's daughter, correct?" Kirijo-san inquired.

"Yeah…” Ren ran a hand through his hair. "She's drawing into herself… She'll barely talk to us."

Something flashed in Kirijo-san's eyes. Was that… understanding? Then again, Ken did mention something about her father's death just yesterday. "…I see," she said softly. Then she looked at Ken. "Amada, tell me, when is Okumura's funeral?"

Ken blinked at that. "Um… It's… Sunday, wasn't it?" He looked uncertainly at them. "I can find out and let you know, Mitsuru-san."

"Please do." Then Kirijo-san smiled at all of them. "I wasn't expecting this," she admitted. "But… I must say, it is a pleasure to meet you." Then back to Ken. "…You'll look out for him, won't you?"

"Mitsuru-san!" Ken complained. "Stop treating me like a child!"

"Oh, you're really helping your case there, Ken," Shinjiro-san snarked, and Ken glowered at him in response.

But Kirijo-san just laughed good-naturedly, smiling warmly at Ken. "It's purely out of worry, Amada." Then she gave a little wave. "Again, it was nice to meet you. I hope that one day, we'll be able to speak… in person."

Then she cut off the connection.

And then… it sunk in. Ken wasn't going back to Port Island. He was going to stay here in Tokyo…!

Makoto felt tears fill her eyes. This was just… such a relief…

"…She's nice," Ren said after a moment of silence. With everyone turning their heads towards their leader, Makoto took the moment to wipe at her eyes. "Nicer than I thought she'd be."

"Just wait until she gets execution mad," Shinjiro-san grumbled out. "Then you'll be runnin' for the hills."

…Execution? Had Kirijo-san… killed people?
"Who cares 'bout that?!" Ryuji suddenly flung an arm around Ken's shoulders, and Makoto jumped as in his enthusiasm, Ryuji accidentally smacked Makoto. "We should count this as a small victory!"

"Ooh, let's go out and eat somewhere together!" Anne suggested.

"Oden!" Futaba shouted gleefully.

"If we're gonna go that route, ramen all the way!" Ryuji retorted.

Shinjiro-san groaned. "If you want food to celebrate, I can cook for you," he said, doing his best to sound nonchalant. "No sense in eating that sodium loaded crap..." He then tapped Ken on the shoulder. "Oi, help me out here. Cooking for about nine people."

"Oh, I can help you cook then," Makoto offered. "If you're cooking for so many, it's only right that we try and help out."

...For some reason, Shinjiro-san swallowed hard. He looked... wary.

"Oh, relax." Ken rolled his eyes at his guardian. "Makoto cooks for herself all the time."

Was she... missing something? Maybe it was an inside joke?

"Hmm." Shinjiro-san then snorted, before walking towards the kitchen. "Suit yourself then."

Makoto went to follow him, but Ken gently grasped her hand to stop her. "Makoto..." he said softly, "...thank you. It's what you said that changed Mitsuru-san's mind."

Makoto felt her face warm at Ken's smile. "A-Anything for you," she managed to spit out. "I-I'm so glad that you're allowed to stay."

Light pink flushed Ken's cheeks, before he coughed. "U-Um... we should go join Shinjiro-san or he'll chew us out."

Makoto managed a smile. "We can't have that, can we?"

She... needed to tell him how she felt. Maybe not today or tomorrow but... soon. This experience taught her that she... couldn't keep waiting forever for a sign.

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**Sunday, October 16th, 2016**

Ever since she was a girl, Haru had hated staring. At first, it had been marveling over what a pretty little child she was. But then as Okumura Foods grew... the staring morphed into *Okumura's daughter.*

But this... this had to be the worst.

The speeches were insincere. And she could feel people glancing in her direction. Haru stared ahead at the tomb.

The funeral dragged on and on... She had to force a smile, accepting the condolences from strangers. To make it worse, Sugimura was by her side, always keeping a hand on her arm. His touch just made her skin crawl, even though her blouse covered her down to her wrists.
It should have been a reprieve to return home. No… the house. A home was filled with love and
good memories. This lacked both.

Haru collapsed onto her bed, grasping her pillow and hugging it to her chest. Tears filled her eyes
but she blinked furiously to push them back. It didn't matter. Father was still dead. Sugimura was
still demanding to marry her… On top of that, there was someone after the Phantom Thieves.

It was all so hopeless.

A light knock on the door. "Lady Haru?" the maidservant, Keiko, said gently. Haru forced herself
to sit up.

"What is it, Keiko?" she called.

"One of your school friends is here to see you…" Keiko trailed off for a moment. "Should I turn
him away?"

"N-No, it's fine." Haru tried to swallow down the lump in her throat. "Show him to the parlor,
please. I will come down in a moment."

"Understood, Lady Haru," Keiko said dutifully.

Haru heaved herself up, smoothing out the rumples in her clothes. She took a moment to check her
appearance in the mirror to make sure that she looked composed.

She then stepped out, and made her way to the parlor. It was… Ken.

"Hello, Ken-kun," she greeted, doing her best to smile at him. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, well…" Ken reached into his phone and unlocked it, holding it out to her. Haru just looked at
her friend, feeling utterly confused. "I… We… spoke to Mitsuru-san the other day," he said gently.
"She told me that she would like to speak to you, and I didn't feel comfortable with giving her your
number without your permission so she… she suggested this."

Haru stared down at it. Speaking to Mitsuru Kirijo, someone she deeply admired… It should've
been a dream. But with her… feeling so jumbled up… She'd probably sound like a fool.

"…Haru." Ken's voice was still gentle. "…Mitsuru-san would understand your situation better than
anyone. Please. Talk to her. You don't have to do it here… You can go back to your room."

"A-All right," she relented, before taking Ken's phone. She went into his contacts, scrolling through
it. She found the number and pressed call.

She looked at him uncertainly, but Ken just gave her an encouraging smile.

She then headed for her bedroom, sitting down on the edge of her bed just as the call connected.

"Hello?"

Haru inhaled. "H-Hello," she stammered out. "Um… I'm Haru Okumura."

"It's a pleasure, Okumura-san," Kirijo-san said, her voice surprisingly warm for a woman with an
ice queen reputation. Then she was quiet for several seconds. "First of all… I wish to extend my
condolences about your loss of your father."

Haru squeezed her eyes shut. "T-Thank you," she croaked out. "It was all so sudden and I…"
"...It's never easy losing your parent," she said gently. Then another silence. "May I... recount the tale of how my father died?"

Ken had said... Mitsuru-san would understand your situation better than anyone. Just what did he mean by that? Well, there was only one way to find out...

"You may."

"Thank you. As you know, my family, the Kirijos... have some dark secrets. My grandfather had been completely consumed in his goal. However... my father, his son, was deeply ashamed by all he had done... hurting so many people. He wished to atone for all of our family's sins. The reason why I became a Persona-user was fueled by my desire to aid my father. However... the night after we slain the twelfth Full Moon Shadow... we were betrayed by our advisor, Ikutsuki... and when my father confronted him... the confrontation ended with both of them losing their lives. I remember hopelessly trying to staunch the blood flow, but... I failed."

Haru pressed a hand to her mouth. That was just... horrible.

"I was completely consumed in my grief. I couldn't help but think that if only I could have acted faster... if I hadn't trusted Ikutsuki so blindly... then I'd still have my father." Then there was a sound that sounded oddly like a sniffle. "I felt so lost. I was just... numb. I felt that I had lost all drive to do anything."

"What... What snapped you out of it?" Haru asked.

"...Well. I was reminded of what I had to do by a dear friend... No, my best friend," she quickly corrected. "Lean on your friends, Okumura-san. They'll be more than happy to let you lean on them."

Her friends...

Haru closed her eyes.

Morgana showing up just a few days ago. His whispered: You don't have to talk now. But I wanted to be there for you. And so he had, curling up with Haru in her bed that night. His soft purrs had lulled Haru to sleep...

She reached for her own phone, opening it to various messages from her friends.

Hey, Haru, I'm here if you want to talk! Text me, okay? – Anne

Haru... I'm so sorry about your dad... But I've been told that I'm a pretty good listener. Hit me up if you need it – Ren

Chin up, Haru! Don't let 'em get to ya! If you need some ass kicking to be done, I'm your guy – Ryuji

Futaba... Makoto... and Ken... they had visited her. They understood what it was like to lose a parent so suddenly.

And Yusuke... he was always so kind to her. Her eyes drifted over to where his sketch of Noir was pinned to the wall. He helped inspire her when she was so unsure of facing Father...

"He wasn't the best father, Kirijo-san," Haru choked out. "He's been slowly neglecting me as a daughter over the past few years... But I...! I miss the father who cared and loved for me...!"
then began to sob, tears dripping down her cheeks. "Why…? Why did the chance to make amends have to be snatched away?!

Mitsuru-san comforted her, her voice a gentle balm.

"...But you're right," Haru said softly. "I… I have wonderful friends… Loyal and caring… I… I'm not alone…" She then wiped at her eyes. "...Thank you, Kirijo-san. I needed that reminder. And thank you… for reaching out to me. I needed this. All of this…"

"It's nothing, Okumura-san." Haru could hear the smile in her voice. "No one can stand on their own. You need to lean on others… I learned that several years ago, and I'm all the better for it."

She looked down at her phone, looking over the messages again.

She still wasn't done grieving for her father… But she knew that she could always count on her friends to be there for her. She didn't have to suffer through this alone.

Chapter End Notes

I think I misled some of you. I meant that I would be putting the fic on hold until I'm done with Shuann Week! (Though, I'll admit I thought I'd be updating after Shuann Week, not the last day of…)

But anyways! You didn't think I'd actually let Ken go back to Port Island, did you? This works out especially nicely, since the PTs were due a conversation with Mitsuru. Ultimax alludes to the drama CDs New Moon & Full Moon, so I thought I'd continue it here. I thought it'd tie in nicely.

I also strongly believe that P5 really glossed over Haru's grief. She literally bounces back in what... two days? And Haru seems rather okay. So, I tweaked it a bit. And yes, Yusuke is the second to gain his ultimate Persona!

Next chapter should be a good one! It's the school festival chapter and hopefully will be posted for the anniversary of the fic! It's really been nearly a year since I've posted Ace in the Hole. Again, I want to thank you for all the support!
The School Festival

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves start to plan out their next move. Due to people voting Akechi to be the school festival's guest by a vast majority, they decide to take advantage of that. But the least they can do is have fun at the festival, right?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Friday, October 21st, 2016

Exams had come and gone, leaving the school preparing for the school festival. But despite that, the Phantom Thieves were still a hot topic amongst the students of Shujin Academy.

Ken tried not to grit his teeth at the whispers.

"The Phantom Thieves are really crazy… you think they'll strike at someone else at the school again?"

"Oh, yeah… Kamoshida and Kobayakawa… But who else would they go for?"

He exchanged an uneasy look with Makoto. Just like that… public opinion of them had completely flipped.

"Come on," she murmured at him, before reaching for her schoolbag. "We need to get going-"

Right… Futaba had called for a meeting today. She actually wanted to meet up sooner, but with exams… They asked her to wait just a little longer.

"Niijima-san, wait!" One of their classmates stepped forward. "You're on cleanup duty today," she reminded.

"…Oh," Makoto said. She pressed her hand against her forehead with a soft sigh. "Forgive me, I've had a lot on my mind. It completely slipped my mind."

"Well, you do have a lot going on with the school festival coming up," their classmate remarked. Then she tilted her head. "Hey, when are we going to find out about the special guest speaker?"

"Oh…" Makoto blinked at that. "…In a couple days. We'll be counting up your votes soon."

"Oh, awesome!" Their classmate smiled brightly. "I hope Akechi-kun wins!"

"You will have to see, Miyasaki-san," Makoto said, doing her best to hide a grimace. "But Ken, why don't you go on ahead?" she suggested. "I'll catch up."

Ken shook his head. "No, it's fine. I can help out, if it'll speed things up."

Makoto looked taken aback by this, before she coughed and shuffled her feet. "T-Thank you."
Their classmates slowly trickled out, as they along with the other assigned students went through the necessary chores. The soft chatting suddenly screeched to a halt at the sound of the door sliding open.

Ken turned around from clapping the board erasers—he honestly couldn't believe that Shujin still used chalk—to see that it was Haru who had entered the classroom.

"O-Okumura-san!" one of the students stammered out. "Um… hey, how are you feeling?"

"Yoichi!" His friend smacked his shoulder. "Are you seriously asking that?!"

"But-!"

"It's all right," Haru said with a gentle smile. But then she shuffled her feet for a moment. "I was hoping that Mako-chan and Ken-kun were still here but they're busy with this so…"

"There's so many people here!" Yoichi blurted out, all but running towards Ken and snatching the erasers out of his hands before Ken could fully process at what he was doing. Ken could only blink at his reaction. "Niijima, Amada, why don't you get going? You don't want Okumura-san to wait!"

"But I said-" Haru began.

"Ah… I suppose we should count our blessings?" Makoto said. She shook her head. "Let's go then, I suppose. We were let off lightly."

Ken just sighed. "I suppose."

Haru just smiled sheepishly, clasping her hands behind her back. "Um… that wasn't the intended reaction," she said softly.

Ken shook his head. "Well, we do have things to do…" he said dryly. He then went to the corner where they stashed their bags, picking up both his and Makoto's bags.

"How are you feeling, Haru?" Makoto asked gently, as they stepped out of the classroom. She then turned and snagged her schoolbag from Ken.

Haru just smiled faintly at Makoto's question. "I'm doing… better," she admitted. "Not good but…" She placed a hand on her heart, closing her eyes. Then she shook her head, opening her eyes. "It's still… upsetting, knowing how Father died… However… I know that I have so many people who care for me." Haru's gentle smile appeared on her face. "Thank you for all your concern. I'm sorry that I didn't reach out to you earlier…"

"It's understandable," Ken reassured her. He hesitantly reached out and patted her shoulder. "You just lost your father… you should be allowed to grieve."

"Ken's right," Makoto agreed. "But… you know you can always look to us for support, right?"

Haru smiled before she nodded enthusiastically. "Mmh! Someone… reminded me of that recently."

Ken couldn't help but smile to himself. He was relieved that Mitsuru-san was able to speak to Haru… She would empathize with Haru, like nobody else could… Because years ago, Mitsuru-san had been in Haru's shoes.
"I'm glad," Makoto replied, smiling warmly at Haru. "Everyone's been so worried about you…"

Haru bowed her head. "…I should really apologize to everyone at the meeting." She then lifted her head. "I… have a lot to tell everyone at the meeting."

"What exactly is that?" Ken couldn't help but ask.

Haru just shook her head. "Let's meet with everyone. I rather only say this once."

"The police found a calling card in Kobayakawa's office?!"

Haru nodded firmly. "That's what I heard Mako-chan's older sister say. The day she visited to investigate…" She then swallowed. "…Father's death," she finished in a whisper.

The start of the meeting had been lively, even by their standards. Haru had been all but mobbed by everyone else, asking her how she was feeling and etc. Haru seemed to take the questions in stride, smiling at them warmly before giving them reassurances. But then… Haru's mood darkened, before she repeated her statement that she had something to tell everyone.

"Did you know anything about this, Makoto?" Morgana asked, a frown in his voice.

Makoto just winced. "Well…"

"Well?!" Futaba repeated. "You knew?!"

"I knew that my sister has been put in charge of the investigation of… us," Makoto said. "Sis told me shortly after… what happened that she was being promoted to spearheading the investigation."

"I mean…" Ryuji spoke up, "shit's been pretty crazy lately, yeah? I dunno how I'd react to a third bombshell."

"I can't deny that," Ken agreed. "That being said… this basically spells out we were baited in targeting Okumura. Add that to the reveal to that there was a calling card planted in Kobayakawa's office."

Futaba pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "That reminds me of why I wanted to say before."

"Go on, Futaba," Ren invited.

"Well…" Futaba winced, fiddling for a moment. Then her expression hardened as she steeled herself. "I did some digging on the Phan-Site. Even talked to Nishima a bit—"

"Uh, you mean Mishima, right?" Ryuji interjected.

"Close enough!" Futaba waved an impatient hand at Ryuji. "Anyways! We did some digging on the Phan-Site. The poll was… rigged. Shido must've wanted Okumura to be targeted for more than one reason."

"Okumura inspired to be a politician, did he not?" Yusuke asked. "That… That's probably a contribution."

"So… Father might have died anyways…" Haru said faintly.

Anne immediately slipped an arm around Haru, giving her a light squeeze. "Hey… I can't even
imagine how sad you're feeling right now but… his Shadow did apologize to you after everything," she said gently. "I know it's not exactly the same but… it's something right?"

Haru smiled wanly at Anne's attempt to comfort her. "Y-You're right."

"That's not all, though," Futaba continued. "Medjed's threat… it was set up by a complete phony."

Ryuji's eyes widened at that. "You're shittin' me! Even Medjed?!"

"So…" Ken folded his arms over his chest, "…that was Shido's ploy to begin with. Build our fame, only to completely discredit us."

"But man… what kind of web have we been caught into?" Ren asked, his lips suddenly pursed together.

An uneasy look spread amongst his friends. But Ken could understand… He still remembered the horrified look on Minato-san's face after Ryoji-san unveiled the complete truth. They had looked to Minato-san for inspiration, but in that moment, the rug had been yanked out underneath him.

"Let's not focus on that," Ken interjected. "What we need to do is figure out how exactly we'll be tackling this."

"…You're right," Ren agreed. "So basically, Makoto's sister is after us… the police think we're behind Kobayakawa's death, and… lastly, Shido rigged things so that we would want to go after Okumura."

"Well… we'd be closely watched if we ignore the police," Haru said hesitantly. "Wouldn't it be better if we try and get the police off our trails first?"

"Hmm…” Yusuke rubbed his chin for a moment. "Finding some intel would be a good first step, as Niijima-san has been placed in charge of the investigation. Futaba's intel was good for us once."

Ken glanced towards Makoto. She looked… uneasy, with her lips pursed.

"…Makoto?" he asked, reaching out to lightly touch her hand. His touch jolted her, and she flinched. Ken quickly retracted his hand. He should have known that this would bother her. She had a nightmare about her sister finding out the truth after all…

"It's… just…" Makoto trailed off. "…Sis has been different lately. I was lucky to see her two… three times a week before. But I've only seen her once since she's told me about her promotion."

"…She wanted to punish Sojiro just because he wouldn't tell her what she wanted," Futaba said with narrowed eyes. She then lifted her chin. "…She's a jerk."

"I can't judge as I've never met her…” Anne trailed off for a moment. "…But that is pretty concerning."

"And prosecutors… they'll often do whatever it takes to get a win," Ren said stiffly. "Wouldn't be surprised if it was the same for Makoto's sister."

Makoto was silent, but with the way she wrapped her arms around herself… It was like she was curling into herself. But then again, they were pretty against Niijima-san. He himself felt uncomfortable when someone made a less than… complimentary comment about the Shadow Operatives. Not to mention how Makoto looked up to her sister.
He… didn't like seeing her so uncomfortable.

"That's enough theorizing," Ken spoke up. "Okay, so, Nijijima-san isn't an… option. Do you know of anyone in particular that is working in Tokyo PD then?"

Ryuji made a face. "…Akechi. That's who."

"Akechi-kun…" Makoto repeated. "There is the guest speaker for the school festival."

"Oh, the school festival!" Anne perked up, her eyes sparkling at that. "I completely forgot with how things went all crazy!"

"You haven't had your school festival yet?" Yusuke frowned. "Kosei had it back in September."

"And you didn't invite us?!” Ryuji exclaimed.

Ren shook his head. "I was hoping that we'd get to see that peacock of yours too."

"My apologies." Yusuke bowed his head. "There's always next year."

"But the guest speaker…" Haru said. "You think that Akechi-kun may win that…? The past two years… the guest speaker declined the request."

"His popularity has been spiking lately," Morgana mused. "Remember, Ren? He was giving an interview just last night."

Ren nodded. "Yeah… but he did a complete a hundred and eighty…"

"What do you mean?" Haru asked. "Forgive me but I… I've been avoiding the news…"

"Yeah, don't blue ball us!" Ryuji agreed.

"It's… It's not as big as you think," Ren said. "Akechi had another interview and he said… that the Phantom Thieves did not kill Okumura."

"Are you for real!?!" Futaba blurted out. "W-What is he playing at?"

"Hey, that's my line!" Ryuji said indignantly.

Makoto suddenly coughed. "But… you know, we haven't counted the poll votes," she said. "I'll be counting the votes tomorrow… and I will let you know."

"Wait, all of them?!" Anne said, eyes wide. "There's like… four hundred people voting, though! That's way too much for just one person!"

Makoto raised her hands. "Oh, no, I can't ask to—!"

"Too late," Anne announced, raising her chin. "I'm helping."

"Yes, it's only fair," Haru chimed in. "Let us help you with this, Mako-chan. This is pertaining with our work. Not to mention it'll happen much quicker!"

At Anne and Haru's determined expressions, Makoto just hung her head. "Oh, all right," she relented. "If you insist."

Ren just looked in the direction of Anne, giving a small chuckle. "Nothing can stop you, huh?"
"Oh, shut up," Anne huffed out, sticking her tongue out at Ren.

But despite Ren's apparent lighthearted attitude, Ken was… concerned. He knew that a leader's burden was heavy. He had seen it with both Minato-san and Minako-san, how Mitsuru-san felt that she had to shoulder her burdens on her own…

"I know that we've made… mistakes. A lot of them." Ren ran a hand through his hair. "But we'll fix this. We just gotta take it one step at a time."

"Hell yeah!" Ryuji pumped a fist, flashing Ren a grin. "That's our RenRen!"

…Or not. Judging from Anne's bright smile, Ken had to guess that she helped Ren through some of his hang ups. But he was still kinda concerned…

The meeting slowly drew to a close. After a quick whispered exchange with Ren, Morgana darted off to go with Haru for the evening. Ryuji and Yusuke left with Futaba, presumably to walk her back to the Sakura residence before departing to their respective homes.

His eyes lingered on Makoto for a moment, but he pushed that out of his mind. He could talk to Makoto about her sister another time… He was worried about Ren, too. But he watched her leave with Anne, before he looked towards Ren.

Ren just shook his head. "You don't have to check up on me like this, you know." And then Ren held up his hand, not letting Ken speak. "I'm not going to lie…" He heaved out a sigh. "I still feel a bit… lost about the whole situation," he said quietly. "The police coming after us, this whole thing being a setup… I feel like all of this is a nightmare and I'm waiting to wake up already…"

Ren…

"…But it's not," Ren said, an oddly somber expression on his face.

He was very similar to Minako-san in that manner. Joking around, acting lighthearted to reassure everyone else. Minako-san had once remarked that Yu-san reminded her of Minato-san. They had the same calm, levelheadedness to them. But Ren? He was cut from a similar cloth as Minako-san. Minako-san had kept them together with her cheerful attitude, but Ren's joking around and flat out charisma had a similar effect.

"We'll get through this, Ren," Ken said, trying to smile so to reassure his friend.

"Thanks, Ken," Ren smiled halfheartedly. "I'd probably be more down about it if Morgana and Anne hadn't yanked me out of my thoughts the other day…" He heaved out a sigh, pulling off his glasses to rub his face. "Damn, what a mess we've gotten into, huh…?"

"At least this mistake isn't causing the end of the world," Ken said. Ren looked up, shock clear in his dark eyes. "…And just so you know, you're a great leader, Ren. You've heard of the other Wild Cards' accomplishments, but they've had their own sorrows and regrets too, Ren."

Ren's shocked expression said it all.

"But… it's not my place to talk about it in more depth," Ken continued. "I just… wanted to let you know that."

"…Thanks, Ken."
Makoto should have seen this coming.

Goro Akechi had won the poll. He had won by a landslide.

…Needless to say, Ryuji had been just thrilled with the outcome.

"The timing is a bit… tight," Makoto said, "but I'll make it work. Tomorrow is Sunday, so I could come by the precinct and 'bump' into Akechi-kun there… They are partners, after all…"

To the point where Sae had called her more than once in order to explain that she was doing something with Akechi… going over a case, Akechi pestering her for dinner…

…Sometimes it felt that Sae cared more about Akechi than her.

As much as she disliked Akechi… it was a good chance for her to find out about what exactly the police was planning. So she hoped that he would say yes…

Everyone helped her clean up all the ballots, stowing them back into the box. They were wrapping up when Anne spoke up.

"Hey, Ren, I know that it's kinda sudden but do you think that we could… go out on a date tomorrow?" Anne asked.

Ren frowned, shaking his head. "Sorry, Anne. Mishima wanted to tell me something—something super important—but with the ballot count, I had to tell him tomorrow. I don't think he'd be happy if I shrugged him off another time."

"Oh…" Anne's face fell at that.

"But my evening tomorrow is free. Care for dinner and a movie, my lady?" Ren asked.

Anne's face lit up at that, before she nodded enthusiastically. "Yes!"

Makoto smiled slightly at their exchange. It was nice to see that they were trying to take as much happiness as they can.

"I guess we're just sitting on our hands 'till the festival, then?" Ryuji asked, before he made a face. "I hope it's not too lame."

Anne giggled weakly. "Well… our stall is going to be a maid café. So there's that, at least!"

"H-Hey, what's that supposed to mean?!"

"Glad that we don't have to deal with setting up stalls," Ken said dryly. "Have you checked with Yusuke, though? How is he going to come if Kosei is still in session?"

"Futaba said something about hacking the school systems to excuse him," Ren said.

Ken's only response was to press his hand against his face. "Of course she did."

"It's… effective, at least?" Haru offered.

"It's many things, but I wouldn't use effective to describe it," Ken grumbled out.
"But we're done here, yeah?" Ryuji asked. "Guess I'll see ya on Monday, then!"

While she was almost completely sure that Akechi would say yes, given his penchant for the spotlight... she couldn't help but think that it was almost guaranteed that they had to do something to neutralize the police... stop the investigation.

And given that Sae was now in charge of the investigation... They would have to steal her heart.

But... Makoto was afraid... no, she was terrified. What if the black masked Persona user swooped in and killed Sae's Shadow too...? Losing her sister... just the idea of it made Makoto want to cry.

Despite the gulf that was slowly growing larger and larger between them, Makoto still loved Sae. She didn't want to lose her...

But what choice did she have? She really should have spoke up about Sae before... after she had found out that Sae had attempted to blackmail Sojiro into telling her what he knew or else he would lose Futaba. Maybe she could have saved everyone some grief...

"...Makoto?" Ken's voice suddenly snapped her out of her musing. She realized that Ken had his hand on her shoulder. "It's late... you should go home too."

Makoto slowly blinked at him. "Oh... you're right..." She stood up, pushing in her chair. She retrieved her schoolbag. "...I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I just... was thinking."

"No, it's okay," Ken reassured her as they left the student council room together. "With everything that's been going on... there must be a lot on your mind."

"Yes..." Makoto said faintly. "I just... I don't know anymore, Ken." She adjusted the strap of her bag with a sigh. "It's not just the police investigation..." She bit her lip. "Why did Sis have to be put in charge of the investigation...?"

It was childish, but she couldn't help but wish that. It wouldn't solve everything but...

"Makoto... you're just talking yourself in circles," Ken said, suddenly grasping her hand for a moment. "Take a deep breath, okay? We've talked about taking things one step at a time." He then hesitated for a moment, before his eyes met hers. "You're putting unnecessary stress on yourself..."

Makoto sighed, her shoulders slumping. "You're right... I just..." She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, looking back to Ken. "...I don't want to go against Sis," she said softly. "I don't want her to be like Madarame or Okumura..."

"Makoto...?" Ken stared at her. "What are you...?"

Makoto bit her lip. "I... I should have told everyone this a long time ago," she said quietly. "Shortly after we defeated Kaneshiro's Palace... I got thinking... Sis has changed for a while now... She basically called our father foolish for believing in justice... when before, she had called our father her role model. She wanted to pursue justice, just like him. So I..." She quickly silently prayed that Ken wouldn't hate her for this. "I put her name in the Meta-Nav... and I got a hit."

The shock on his face was as clear as day. "Makoto..."

"And things just kept coming up." She started pacing in front of the school entrance. "F-First Medjed... and then afterwards, you told us the truth and we thought we would be targeting Shido..." She then looked down to the ground with a big sigh. "...I'm just making excuses," she mumbled out. "I should have spoken up... especially after finding out about what she was trying to
She jumped a little when Ken put his hands on her shoulders. She found herself blushing a little at his touch. "Makoto… I’d never hate you." There was a… look in his eyes. She couldn't put her finger on it, but—wait! She needed to focus on what he was saying! This was no time to get all hopeful now. "And besides…" He drew his fingers away, taking a step backwards. "...I've had my own fair share of secrets and… you accepted me. It'd be wrong of me to not offer you the same."

"Ken, I…" Makoto's breath suddenly caught, before she quickly coughed. "...Thank you," she whispered.

"...You really should tell everyone about this… after the school festival," Ken said. "Akechi's intel on the police… may tell us something you won't like, regarding your sister."

Makoto exhaled. He was right. Keeping it a secret… wouldn't help.

"...You're right," she said. "I will…" Then she looked towards the direction of the subway. They really had to get home… With the days growing shorter, twilight was approaching. A strong gale suddenly blew through, making Makoto shiver.

There was a rustle of clothing, before Ken suddenly draped his blazer over her shoulders.

"W-Wait, what about you?" Makoto stammered out. "I-I don't want you to catch a cold!"

"It's fine," Ken said with a wave of his hand. "I've always been able to tolerate the cold better, and I don't want you getting sick. You can give it back to me on Monday."

"T-Thank you." Makoto felt her face heat up, as she tugged Ken's blazer more tightly around her. It was so warm…

As they walked towards the station, Makoto kept stealing glances towards Ken. Talking things out with Ken… always made her feel better. She really needed to figure out how to tell him how she felt. Maybe she should write out what she wanted to say and practice it…?

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**Tuesday, October 25th, 2016**

The excitement in the air was palpable. Banners hung high in the air, bright letters spelling out: WELCOME TO THE SHUJIN SCHOOL FESTIVAL.

"I'm surprised by how successful the festival is," Yusuke remarked.

"There's so many people…" Futaba mumbled out, huddling behind Anne and grasping onto the back of her varsity jacket.

"Come on, you've been working on this, Futaba," Ren encouraged. "There's nothing to be scared of."

"Ren's right," Anne said, twisting around to smile at Futaba. "Let's have fun today!"

"Futaba's got a point though…" Ryuji said as he surveyed the crowd. "There's a lot more people comin' than last year."

Huh. He knew that everyone back in Gekkoukan looked forward to the school festival as a much needed break from their rigorous coursework. And Shujin wasn't exactly a bad school. Each to
their own, he supposed.

"Well, Shujin has gained notoriety over the months," Ken remarked. "Kamoshida… Kobayakawa… the Phantom Thieves…"

"And Akechi's a guest speaker." Ryuji grimaced, his mouth twisting in disapproval. "Betcha some of his fangirls are comin' just for him."

"Wouldn't be surprised," Makoto agreed, before fiddling with the strap of her schoolbag. "There also may be some police officers in plainclothes."

"We should really be cautious of what we discuss," Morgana piped up, poking his head out of Ren's bag. "Be careful, everyone. Act like normal students."

"Bossy, bossy." Futaba clicked her tongue, making a face at Morgana. Then she shuffled her feet nervously. "But um… what do you normally do at school festivals?"

Haru giggled. "That's right. I forgot you haven't gotten to attend one yet, Futaba-chan."

"Just go around the exhibits, enjoy the food…" Ryuji grinned at her. "Come on, just think of it like the beach! There's just one rule: have fun!"

"I just hope this ends better than the fireworks festival," Yusuke remarked.

Ryuji then hung his head. "Why didja have to remind me…?"

"The rain did let us meet Haru, though," Ren said with a smile. "And we did get a good meal from Shinjiro-san."

Ken rolled his eyes at Ren. "Of course you think of that."

"Hey, you get to enjoy his cooking every day," Ren quipped. "We don't have the same luxury."

"Oh…" Haru chewed on her lip. "Is his cooking that delicious?"

"It's definitely top tier!" Futaba said, pumping both of her fists with a firm nod. "Though I could without the nagging about my diet. Pffft, he's totally stretching it…"

Ken just shook his head. He quietly agreed with Shinjiro-san—okay not to the same degree as Shinjiro-san but, still—but he didn't feel like picking a fight with Futaba. "What do you want to see first?"

"What did your classes do, by chance?" Yusuke inquired. "I'm curious to see your stands."

Ren and Anne exchanged a look, before Ren spoke. "Our class… took the cliche route. Maid café."

"I'm so glad I didn't pull the short end of the stick," Anne grumbled out, shaking her head hard enough that her pigtails bobbed a little bit.

Makoto nodded. "I can understand that. My class did that last year as well."

Oh, right. Makoto had mentioned that to him months ago…

Ryuji scratched the back of his head. "My class did a haunted house."

"Oh, a haunted house!" Haru's eyes lit up. "Can we go see it?!"
"You… want to see it?" Yusuke asked. "Forgive me, but aren't most girls terrified of the dark? Makoto and Anne both were." He cut himself off as said two girls gave him a death glare.

...And this was why he tried avoiding pissing off girls as much as possible. Women, especially women who had Personas, were terrifying.

"I know it's… unusual, but I find horror exciting!" Haru piped up. "I'm really looking forward to Pach-Saw coming out in a couple weeks!"

Ken tried not to cringe. Horror was just… not up his alley. And he really hated jump scares. He vaguely remembered this… movie or something where the characters were trapped in an abandoned school, and there was this creepy baby chasing them around. He couldn't remember where he watched it for the life of him, but he was pretty sure that was why he hated jump scares.

"But anyhow," Makoto said, tearing her gaze from Yusuke. "Don't drop your guard. Yusuke and Futaba may be part of the investigation too."

"That police interrogation was real fun," Ryuji grumbled out.

"You said it, buddy," Ren sighed. "But anyways, since Haru requested it… haunted house it is!"

Makoto just blanched at that, all blood draining from her face. That was right… her fear of the dark.

"Hey, Makoto…" Ken said to her in a low voice, as they ascended the stairs for the second floor. They were headed for Ryuji's classroom, after all. "You know what happened back at Sojiro-san's house…? Um, you can do it again if necessary."

Makoto looked at him in surprise. "That's kind of you, but… It really is a silly fear. Besides, what can a school run haunted house pull off?" Then she smiled at him. "Thank you, though."

"Okay," Ken said, continuing to speak quietly. "I just thought I'd offer."

Some of the things they heard though… it was so unnerving. They called Kamoshida a victim. Ken tried to push it out of his mind, but… there were so many people gossiping…

They arrived at Ryuji's classroom with a large sign that read: HAUNTED HOUSE.

They entered the area. It was a typical haunted house attraction. They were shrouded in darkness… sound effects. Though Ken was surprised they sprung for a fog machine.

In the darkness, he saw someone spring forward. But then someone grabbed them from behind, hauling them backwards as one hand pulled at their mask.

"W-WHA—?!"

"Show me your true form!" Ren exclaimed, over the poor student's surprised cries.

"Dude!" Ryuji cried. "Are you for real?!

"Ren, let him go!" Anne yelled.

Ken just marched over to Ren, smacking the backside of his head. "...Are you serious?" Ken said flatly as the poor worker scurried away from Ren.

They would definitely believe that Ren was a crazy violent delinquent like the rumors claimed
Ren only smiled sheepishly. "I… uh… got caught in the moment."

"Ren struck a terrifying figure…" Yusuke mused, framing Ren with his fingers. "Pity I can't draw in this lighting."

"Oh, Yusuke-kun…" Haru giggled. "You're so passionate about art!"

"Passionate is a word to describe it," Futaba grumbled out.

"Seriously, dude, why did you have to pull that?" Ryuji grumbled. "I bet they're gonna run away from ya whenever they see you now!"

"What's the difference?" Ren asked with a shrug.

"I think Ren completely killed the vibe they were going for," Makoto sighed. Even in the dim light, Ken could see that she was smiling.

She had such a nice smile…

Even though she was the one to caution them about there being eyes everywhere… he was glad that she was enjoying herself.

"Aww, it's so cute!" Anne cooed, staring at the Jack Frost plushie offered as one of the prizes for the shooting game.

"How much?" Ren asked the person running the stall.

"Five hundred," they answered and Ren pulled out a five hundred yen coin, flipping it in the air. The student fumbled with it, giving Ren an annoyed look before warily handing Ren the gun.

...Ren was such a showoff sometimes.

"You look pretty confident, RenRen." Ryuji elbowed him in the side with a grin.

Ren just winked, before giving Ken a knowing grin. "Ken's not the only one with good marksmanship. Just watch. I've been doing some special training."

What was he—oh. Right… He completely forgot that he had won that Bunchimaru toy for Makoto. Back before he even joined… That felt like a lifetime ago…

"Ooh, you've been doing some grinding, huh?" Futaba asked. "Willing to put your money where your mouth is?"

"Gambling?" Yusuke sighed, shaking his head. "How uncouth."

Futaba just stuck her tongue out at Yusuke. "Zip it, Inari!"

"Shh, that's enough," Haru hushed. "Ren-kun needs to concentrate!"

Ren was definitely channeling his inner Joker. Though Ken had to admit that over the past month, Ren had gotten good at wielding that pistol of his. Ren had no problem knocking down his prize.

Ren didn't even bother hiding his victorious smile as he was handed the doll by the grumbling
"For you, my lady." Ren presented the Jack Frost doll to Anne with a flourish. "A token of my love."

"You're such a dork!" Anne giggled, happily accepting it and giving it a light squeeze.

"I must say that your lessons with Shinya has really made you a good shot," Morgana praised, even though he was pointedly looking down as Anne gave Ren a thank you kiss on the cheek.

"I try," Ren said with a laugh. Then he looked amongst everyone else. "Anyone want me to try and win something?"

Haru let out a thoughtful hum, before she said, "Oh! How about that one?"

She pointed to a figurine of a dark haired man who for some reason… was wearing pink boxers. It was… interesting, to put lightly.

"What an avant garde design," Yusuke mused, hand on his chin. "You have excellent taste, Haru."

Haru just giggled. "Thanks, Yusuke-kun."

"I'll do my best." Ren paid the vendor again and he was given the gun once more.

He nabbed it right in the chest and it fell from the shelf. The rather peeved student passed it to Ren, who handed it over to Haru.

"Thank you, Ren-kun!" Haru said with a bright smile.

"...Amamiya?"

Ken turned to see that Mishima had approached them. He looked… nervous.

Well… things may be a little awkward, since just last Sunday… Ren had called everyone up and they had come to a decision that Mishima had become too warped and needed his heart stolen. But in the end, Ren cancelled it. Claimed that Mishima didn't need his heart changed and they left Mementos.

But Ren just gave Mishima a friendly smile. "Hey, Mishima. Enjoying the festival?"

Mishima just gave a stiff little nod. "Y-You?" he stammered out.

"Yeah, we've had a lot of fun," Anne said with a bright smile.

Ryuji grabbed Ren around the shoulders. "You should've seen what this guy did back at the haunted h-"

He was cut off by Futaba's sudden shriek.

"Futaba!" Makoto chided. "There's no need to yell."

"But what's wrong, Futaba-chan?" Haru asked.

Futaba pointed with a trembling finger. "P-Pink-

"Oh wow, is that really a figurine of Pink Argus?!" Mishima exclaimed, his gray eyes wide with
awe. "Man, Yukari Takeba is just so pretty. I wonder why she's never dated anyone…"

"It's like one of the few I don't have!" Futaba said. "I gotta have it!"

Morgana sniffed. "You and your dolls," he said disdainfully.

"Action figures!" Futaba emphasized, giving Morgana a stern look.

"Um, yeah." The vendor then cast Ren an annoyed look. "So are you gonna go for this too?" he grumbled out.

"Well, I—" Ren suddenly stopped, a glint gleaming in his dark eyes. "I'm not." Then he grabbed Mishima by the arm. "But he will!"

"I-I'm what?!" Mishima sputtered out. "T-There's no way I can—"

"Stop putting yourself down," Ren said sharply. "You're not a zero, Mishima! You need to believe in yourself."

"You can do it, Mishima-kun!" Anne said cheerfully.

"Y-Yeah!" Mishima nodded unsteadily. "You're right… I can do this!"

The gun was handed over, but Mishima's hand trembled slightly as he took aim.

"Calm yourself," Yusuke admonished gently. "If you hesitate, you won't hit your target. You must desire to hit it with all your might!"

"I think… everyone is taking this a little too seriously," Makoto sighed out.

"Just a little," Ken said dryly.

But Mishima just narrowed his eyes, his eyes on the prize. His hand stopped shaking as he pulled the trigger.

The figurine was knocked off the shelf.

The grumbling attendant handed it to Mishima. "I can understand getting one on the first try, but three?"

Ren just smirked. "Don't worry. That's all we want. See you."

"Amamiya, look, I-" Mishima began.

"Mishima, you don't have to say it," Ren cut him off, keeping his voice low. "You changed your heart, all on your own. That's the important part."

"Amamiya…" The shock was clear on Mishima's face. Then he ducked his head, staring down at the floor. "...Thank you." Then he abruptly coughed. "O-Oh, here you go." He handed the figurine over to Futaba. "Victory's my favorite incarnation… what about you?"

Futaba's eyes lit up at that. "You too?! Everyone says Neo is the best version but I say it's nostalgia talking!"
Mishima nodded vigorously. "The action scenes are always so great and the theme song is the best!"

"I know right?! I could sing it all day!"

"Me too!"

"Um…" Haru leaned in close, bewilderment clear in her eyes. "W-What is Feathermen?"

...Oh no.

"You too?!" Futaba's head whipped in Haru's direction. "You've been deprived!"

"Futaba, it's not a big deal," Makoto attempted to placate her.

"Feathermen's a classic!"

"Hmph, Feathermen is hardly The Tale of Genji," Yusuke sniffed. "You exaggerate far too much."

Futaba stared at him incredulously. "...You're telling me this?"

Yusuke blinked owlishly at her. "I do not understand."

"Ugh, of course you would!" Futaba huffed.

"Do they…" Mishima leaned in close, "...do this a lot?"

Ken just sighed. "You have no idea."

"But hey," Mishima said lowly. "Be careful with Akechi. Especially with how he's been constantly badmouthing you until recently."

Ren just nodded with a smile. "Thanks, Mishima."

"It's practically like a deserted island here."

After parting ways with Mishima, Haru said that she wanted to eat at a stall. So Anne and Ren took them to their class's stand.

"Well…" Ken said slowly, "at least we can talk a little more freely here."

"Maid Takoyaki…" Ryuji repeated with a shake of his head. "Seriously that's such a bad pun."

"Hand-Maid Takoyaki might've been a better name," Ren said, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

Ken just stared, unimpressed. "...It really wouldn't."

Puns were just… ugh. It only made him think of Ikutsuki's god awful puns.

"That's enough," Morgana scolded. "We need to act normal, but this is bordering ridiculous."

"Nothing is normal anymore…" Haru murmured with a frown.

"Hi!" One of Ren and Anne's female classmates approached them, injecting pep in her voice before curtseying. "Welcome home! Can I take your order?"
...Yeah, she had nothing on Kikuno-san… To be fair, she was professionally trained but…

"Isn't that… unprofessional?" Yusuke asked.

"Yeah, what happened to the atmosphere?!" Ryuji demanded.

...He couldn't help but wonder what Ryuji would think of Kikuno-san.

Yusuke then examined the menu. "...They certainly have a lot of strange flavors here."

"I would… prefer a not so… exotic flavor," Makoto said.

"Agreed," Ryuji said. "Who knows what they've added here..."

...It couldn't be _that_ bad, could it? He's enjoyed the weird takoyaki back at the strip mall well enough.

"If you ever go to the strip mall on Port Island… don't get the takoyaki," Ken said.

"Huh?!!" Ryuji stared at him. "What's _that_ supposed to mean?!"

"Mystery ingredient," Ken said.

"And you _ate_ it?!" Makoto said with wide eyes.

"On occasion," Ken said with a wave of his hand. "It wasn't my _favorite_ by any stretch of imagination, but I liked it well enough."

Haru just giggled. "I'd love to try it some day." She tapped her chin. "Are we going for the normal one then?"

The maid shook her head. "I'm sorry but we just sold our last one to the customer before you!"

...He couldn't help but feel that was a lie.

"How about… mentai cheese?" Yusuke asked.

"We're out of cod roe," the maid said cheerfully.

"Okay… what _is_ available then?" Ren asked.

"Yeah!" Ryuji said, frowning. "This whole menu is shaping out to be a sham!"

"Um… if you wait five or six hours, we can offer squid!"

"This is just…" Makoto shook her head, before shooting Anne and Ren incredulous looks.

"Ehehe…" Anne smiled weakly, toying with her hair. "We mayyy have spent most of our budget on making the costume look nice."

"Yeah, I can see that!" Ryuji said. "Jeez, I know our haunted house wasn't great, but…"

"Ryuji-kun, that's enough," Haru said mildly. She was smiling but there was a look in her eyes that was chilling… It easily silenced Ryuji. Then she turned to the maid. "What do you recommend then?"

"Oh, I recommend the Russian takoyaki," she answered. "Shall I get that for you?"
"Yes, please," Haru said with her usual sweet smile.

"Just hurrryyyy," Futaba moaned out, head on the desk. "I hunger!"

"We'll get it out as soon as possible," the maid said cheerfully. "Thank you!"

"Anyways…" Ren shook his head. "...All of the things we overheard today was just…"

Anne slammed her hand on the table. "People are saying Kamoshida is a victim!" she seethed. "I can't believe that! I swear I need crepe therapy after hearing all of that crap!"

"When you were in the haunted house," Morgana added, "I took the opportunity to look around. I heard some conjecture that the principal was killed for knowing too much."

"...But ain't it a bit weird?" Ryuji asked. "He was on his way to the police station. What if he was in cahoots with Shido?"

That… That was a good point.

"Mm… this is purely conjecture as well," Yusuke said. "But I feel Ryuji may be onto something."

"This is all just wonderful," Ken muttered. "But I think we're all avoiding the hottest topic…"

"...Goro Akechi's popularity has once again skyrocketed," Haru murmured, her eyes downcast.

"All because of the Phantom Thieves!" Futaba growled out. "Can you believe that?!"

"And Akechi was a bit downcast with how he was a bit discredited from our 'rise'," Ren shook his head. "Not that it matters. We'll be doing our thing… without caring about the public's opinion."

"I'm still surprised that he said yes," Makoto said, shifting in her seat.

"Just look at 'im on TV," Ryuji scoffed.

Anne nodded. "He definitely seems at home in the limelight."

Morgana looked down. "...I know we're doing this for intel but… what if this is a trap?"

A heavy silence fell. Morgana had a good point. Akechi was still an enigma…

"Come on, guys, think positive," Ren said. "We can get through this."

"Do you have the questions planned out, Mako-chan?" Haru asked. "You're leading the Q&A, right?"

Makoto nodded firmly. "Yes, that's right. I'll…" She rested a hand on her chest. "... I'll do my best."

"Thank you for waiting!" the maid's cheerful voice cut through the air. She carried their takoyaki, but she… kinda… plopped it down on the table. One of the takoyaki balls almost fell out.

"Hey, look!" Anne did her best to infuse enthusiasm in her voice. "It's freshly made!"

Futaba shook her head. "Lies! I totally heard a microwave go off!" She then looked amongst them. "You heard it, didn't you?"

Anne just let out a nervous giggle.
"It's not like we should really expect crispy takoyaki at a school festival..." Ryuji sighed. He then looked down at the takoyaki. "...So what makes it Russian? Some special sauce...?"

"Ooh, what about jam?" Haru suggested. "That sounds quite delicious!"

"Well... one of them is..." the maid wavered for a moment, "special."

"So... Russian roulette," Ren said.

"...Three guesses which one it is, and the first two don't count," Ken deadpanned.

Futaba huffed. "It's so the bright red one!"

"Any of us could have told you that," Morgana grumbled out.

"I'd prefer the most beautifully shaped one..." Yusuke said, before frowning. "...Unfortunately all of them are misshapen."

Haru just blinked. "... Aren't you going to eat? You were hungry earlier, right, Futaba-chan?"

"Yeah, but..." Futaba looked down at the takoyaki, disdain etched on her face.

"I think I will try the special one," Haru announced.

"You're a... brave one," Makoto said with wide eyes.

"What if I want it?" Ren asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh, I see..." Haru chewed her lip. "How about we do a quick competition then? Like... arm wrestling!"

"My money's on Haru then," Ken mumbled out.

"I'm with ya," Ryuji said.

Ren glared at the both of them. "I am offended," he huffed. "Very offended."

Anne patted his arm. "Don't feel bad, Ren. You use knives. Haru uses axes."

"Yeah, yeah," Ren grumbled out, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Oh, everyone's here."

The familiar voice had them all looking down the hallway. Goro Akechi was approaching them, his usual amiable smile on his face.

Beside him, Makoto stiffened. "Akechi-kun...? T-The panel isn't until tomorrow..."

"I just thought I'd check out the venue, that's all," he said. "I can't make a mistake... there's so many people watching me after all."

"Someone's eager," Futaba mumbled under her breath, watching Akechi with narrowed eyes.

"But... people ended up recognizing me and bombarded me with questions..." Akechi sighed. "I didn't expect this to this extent..."

"Perhaps you should have changed your signature look then," Ken said dryly.
Akechi looked in his direction. "Oh, I did consider it but I…” Akechi shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I escaped them and that's what is important."

"Well ain't that convenient," Ryuji grumbled out.

"Oh, takoyaki!" A smile came onto his face. "May I have one?"

Ren shrugged. "Go ahead."

"Thank you!" He beamed at Ren. "I must confess, I'm quite famished. I only had an apple for breakfast." He picked up the stick, selecting the… bright red takoyaki ball.

"Ah…!" Haru's eyes widened at that.

"The Russian one…” Anne said in a hushed voice.

"We'll just call this my performance fee," Akechi said, before popping it right in his mouth. ...

"Mm," Akechi said through a mouthful of food, "it's rather deli-"

He then cut himself off, his face growing red rather rapidly.

"HHHNGH?!"

Akechi pressed a hand against his mouth. Ken was honestly surprised that he hadn't spat out the takoyaki.

"Pride cometh before one's fall," Ren said gravely.

"Y-You really shouldn't have eaten it in one bite…” Anne said with wide eyes.

"Ngh… this is…!" Akechi choked out, his eyes watering. "M-My throat...This is… Urk!" He then keeled over. "And my stomach… it… it burns!"

"Do you require water?" Yusuke asked. "I admit that I enjoy spice to an extent but I have a feeling that this has pressed past the threshold…"

"W-Who, me?" Akechi grimaced. "D-Don't be silly! I… I love spicy food. Haha… Ha…"

"I think we broke him," Futaba whispered.

"P-Please excuse me… I will…I will see you tomorrow."

He then turned around, before stiffly walking away.

"Wow… he's really holding it together," Anne mused. "Even though he was waddling like a comedian."

"I think he was crying a little bit," Ken remarked.

Yusuke narrowed his eyes, before shifting in a more comfortable position. "But… was he really just checking out the venue?"

"Do you think he suspects then?" Haru frowned.
"He said… everyone's here." Futaba pressed a finger against her mouth. "...Isn't that kinda suspicious?"

That idea was… disturbing. Very disturbing. But if Akechi knew their identities… why hadn't he done anything about it?

Wednesday, October 26th, 2016

It was time for the panel to begin.

Makoto introduced Akechi as their guest of honor. Akechi joked around a bit, but Makoto wasted no time and quickly launched into questioning Akechi.

"Everyone is abuzz about the Phantom Thieves," she said. "I was wondering if you could go into more detail about the actual investigative progress."

"My…” Ken rolled his eyes as Akechi held a hand to his mouth. "I'm not used to being on the receiving end of interrogating. Please, Nijima-san… go easy on me."

Laughter echoed in the auditorium, which only made Ken roll his eyes even more.

Ken leaned against the railing, looking towards his friends. "How much do you think he knows?" he asked quietly.

"I wish I knew," Anne mumbled out.

"C'mon, Makoto…!" Ryuji hissed out. "You gotta get it outta him!"

"Ken."

Ken started at the sudden voice, before straightening up. "Shinjiro-san!"

"Hey." Shinjiro-san then ruffled Ken's hair, much to his irritation. Ken immediately began to pat down his hair. "Sorry I couldn't make it yesterday. My work schedule is a bitch."

"It's fine," Ken said. "I know you can't help it."

"Just feel a little bad since I've always been able to make it to the school festival in the past," Shinjiro-san muttered. He then coughed, looking towards the stage. "So Nijima's questioning Akechi already, huh?"

"So far Akechi's been kinda dodging Makoto's questions," Ren said. "Saying that there's no leads… and the motive is unclear."

"But… that means the police doesn't know much about us, then," Haru said tentatively. "That's good, isn't it?"

Ken shook his head. "But with Yusuke's suspicions… I can't help but wonder if… Akechi knows."

"Shh, Makoto's asking him another question!" Anne said in a hushed voice.

"Even with this country's power… arresting them is proving to be difficult. Is that true?"

Akechi chuckled. "Well, I wouldn't put it that way but essentially you are correct."
"Hmm…"

"Shinjiro-san?" Ken asked, turning to look at his guardian. His gray eyes were narrowed as he looked towards the stage.

"Like you've discussed before… it is weird that Akechi suddenly changed his tune. Especially with him saying how he's gonna arrest the Phantom Thieves himself… And he says that the Phantom Thieves aren't murderers..." Shinjiro-san narrowed his eyes. "...What exactly is his motive?"

"Wish we knew," Ren sighed.

They turned their attention to Makoto questioning exactly what Shinjiro-san was talking about.

"Aren't you a little too comfortable interrogating people?" Akechi tilted his head. "Why, it's as if you're a prosecutor."

Shinjiro-san just scoffed. "He's really eating this up, ain't he?"

Makoto coughed. "I beg your pardon. But… this is something I'm particularly interested in, so I can't help it. Please excuse my… zeal. But won't you tell us? Why do you think they're innocent when you were so insistent that they were unjust before?"

"Mako-chan is really pressing for an answer, isn't she?" Haru mused.

"...Tch." Shinjiro-san looked unimpressed. "Guess she picked a few things from that prosecutor sister of hers."

"Not a fan too huh…?" Futaba asked.

"You can say that," Shinjiro-san said shortly.

But then Akechi spoke. "Every person they've targeted were truly criminals. Kamoshida from this very school, Madarame, Kaneshiro… they all had committed heinous crimes. And while it was a… tragedy for Okumura to die so suddenly… he was a criminal as well. But that also poses the question… why was Okumura alone killed?"

Haru's expression grew pained as Akechi brought up Okumura. Futaba reached out, tightly squeezing Haru's hand. Haru just bit her lip, squeezing Futaba's hand back.

"Why is that?" Makoto questioned.

"I must admit… I cannot reduce a reason. That's why I believe that the Phantom Thieves are innocent of murder and a different party framed them."

"It still comes off as a surprise, given how adamant you've been about the Phantom Thieves," Makoto commented.

"I'm very aware," Akechi said. "And this is a big if but… if the Phantom Thieves are who I think they are, then I believe that the Phantom Thieves would never commit murder."

...What.

WHAT?

"He's not saying…?!” Morgana choked out.
"Fuck," Shinjiro-san hissed out. "You better hope Niijima wraps this up quickly. And get out as soon as possible."

Somehow Makoto managed to keep her composure. "That comment just now… does the police know of the Phantom Thieves' identities…?"

Akechi shook his head. "Oh no. They haven't gotten that far."

"That cocky little…" Ryuji hissed out.

"However, I've come to my own conclusions of the true identities of the Phantom Thieves."

"He… He could be bluffing," Yusuke said. "He must be!"

But… Yusuke sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

But Akechi's declaration sent the audience in a tizzy.

"He's lying…" Futaba wrapped her arms around herself. "H-He has to be…!"

"Oh?" Akechi asked, turning his head towards Makoto. "You're not going to ask me who they are?"

"Bah." Shinjiro-san scowled. "He's just messing with Niijima now."

Ken gripped the railing. He wished that Akechi would stop toying with Makoto…

"...It may have repercussions on the investigation," Makoto said curtly. "Are you sure you can share that with us?"

"It's more so my personal opinion," Akechi explained. "So it doesn't pose a problem towards the investigation." Then he paused for a moment. "However… there is a possibility that everyone present will hear the truth before the police or media."

"The truth…?" Ken asked.

Makoto looked at a loss for words. But she didn't get a chance to speak, as a phone suddenly went off.

"Ah, it's mine." Akechi reached into his coat's pocket, pulling out his phone. "My apologies, but I can't turn off my phone due to my job." He then turned to look at Makoto. "Would you mind if I step away for about… ten minutes or so?"

Makoto announced that they would be taking a recess of ten minutes. But then… Akechi did something odd. He stepped closer to Makoto, speaking to her quietly.

Makoto seemed to tense up, before stiffly nodding. She then stepped behind the curtains. A moment later, their phones went off.

"We're not out of the woods yet," Ren said with a grimace, as he read the message from Makoto. "Makoto says that Akechi wants to talk with us in the PE faculty office."

"Damn!" Ryuji smacked the railing. "We're dead. Deader than roadkill!"

"Could we just… not go?" Futaba asked.

"Something tells me that Akechi will not let this go," Yusuke said with a grim smile. "We might as
well get this over with."

Ken just sighed, before looking to Shinjiro-san. "...Shinjiro-san, I need you to go back to the apartment. I don't want Akechi to see you and connect you to me."

He just shook his head. "I'll go into the crowd. I'm not gonna ditch you if Akechi's planning on pulling some crap," he said. "Just... good luck with 'im."

They would need it...

"What do you want?"

Makoto couldn't help but feel foolish. Yusuke had broached the idea of Akechi knowing their identities, and she still let Akechi manipulate her.

"Oh, it's simple," Akechi said with a chuckle. "I want to join the Phantom Thieves."

You could hear a pin drop.

He wanted to what?!

"S-So why are you talking to us?" Anne fiddled with one of her pigtails. "It's not like we're the Phantom Thieves...!"

"Oh, give it up, Takamaki-san." Then Akechi's eyes narrowed. "...Or should I call you Panther?"

"How did you find out?" Ren asked.

"The Phantom Thieves... able to transverse another world. This answers too many questions."

"Answer Ren's question, dammit!" Ryuji snapped out, his hand balling into a fist. "How do you know about us?!"

"My, you have quite the guard dog, Amamiya-kun." Akechi smiled that saccharine smile of his. Anne quickly grabbed onto Ryuji's hand just in case he actually tried to sock Akechi in the face. "But to answer your question... I was actually brought into that world not too long ago. I was investigating Okumura Foods Headquarters with Sae-san."

Wait...! When they entered Okumura's Palace... to steal his Treasure...

"W-We were so careful, though...!" Anne squeaked out.

"I was brought into the strange new world," Akechi explained. He then held up his phone, showing the familiar Meta-Nav. "And I saw... all of you."

"No effin' way..." Ryuji breathed out.

"You were intent on taking Okumura's heart... But I couldn't help but overhear the horrible things he said to you, Okumura-san." He then smiled apologetically. "I'm terribly sorry about your father..."

"...Thank you," Haru said stiffly. "But I know I am blessed with wonderful friends... who will support me through anything."

"But as I was observing you all... I was attacked by a black masked Persona user. He was
absolutely terrifying… He was like a dark demon. But for some reason… he attacked me. I was frightened. I couldn't help but think… *I can't die here. I need to determine the truth.*

Ken stiffened at that before his eyes narrowed at Akechi. "What a coincidence," he said flatly. "And I assumed you awakened to a Persona?"

The black masked Persona user… Ken had talked about being attacked by him too. That was… fishy.

"Is that what it's called?" Akechi tilted his head. "That special power?"

"It is…" Morgana said slowly. "Though that isn't very rebellious."

Akechi then blinked and stared. "Did that cat just… talk?"

"Um, yeah. You saw the cartoony cat, right?" Futaba nodded at Morgana. "That's Morgana."

"I… see." Akechi shook his head. "This is strange to wrap my head around." Then he looked at Ren. "But anyhow, I'm here to offer you a deal. I meant what I said… I don't believe you to be the type to be murderers. And the police are on your tails. They're hell bent on apprehending you… and Sae-san most of all, because they're convinced that you're behind the murders."

Makoto bit her lip. Of course she was… She just… didn't realize how deep this would go when she joined the Phantom Thieves… She'd never regret it however. They've changed her in so many positive ways.

Haru just stared, wide eyed. "They're… They're going to treat me as my father's murderer…?"

"Haru…" Futaba scooted over to her, giving her a quick hug.

"I can't overlook such abuse…" Akechi said. "Which is why I wish to strike a deal with you. The justice I uphold cannot allow this farce to continue."

He wanted to work with *them?* Makoto had to fight back a grimace.

"…Justice, huh?" Ken said.

"…What's your condition?" Yusuke asked.

"Ah, you're sharper than I assumed," Akechi commended. "You probably know of Sae-san leading the investigation, correct? The higher ups are… anxious to close this case. She may… do something drastic to please her higher ups."

"Sis…" Makoto sighed, closing her eyes.

What happened to her justice? She had always been so excited to become a prosecutor as a university student. She said she wanted to change things from the inside…

"What of evidence?" Yusuke asked, his voice slightly trembling. "They have no proof!"

"...There's a reason why prosecutors have a 99% chance of victory," Ken said. "Court cases… are often rigged in favor of the prosecution."

"...You can say that again," Ren muttered, a touch of bitterness in his voice.

"Oh?" Akechi tilted his head. "You seem that you have some knowledge on this."
"My guardian's best friend is a police officer," Ken said coolly. "He's seen what prosecutors have done first hand."

"Guardian?" Akechi echoed.

"My mother has been dead for years, my father even longer." Ken's voice grew testy. "My guardian has been looking out for me for years."

"I-I see…" Akechi coughed awkwardly, shuffling his feet. "Forgive me, I didn't mean to pry." Then he looked pointedly at Makoto. "But anyhow, Sae-san may be pushed into fabricating evidence… a confession, if she's pressured enough."

"Make it up…" Makoto said faintly, feeling her heart sink to the pit of her stomach.

What happened to sour Sae so much? To be tempted into fabricating evidence?

"That's bullshit!" Ryuji shouted, hands clenching into fists. "What are we… scapecoats?!"

Yusuke coughed. "...I believe you mean scapegoat, Ryuji."

"Whatever!" Ryuji grumbled out.

"You'll be found guilty if you're caught…" Akechi ignored Ryuji's outburst, "and it'll be treated as a very serious crime."

Makoto winced. She couldn't help but think of her nightmare about Sae discovering the truth and disowning her…

"And I cannot sway the police from this course of action." Akechi looked towards Yusuke. "So I need your assistance. However… in exchange of me turning a blind eye… I request that you disband the Phantom Thieves after this. This is a good deal, no?"

"But Morgana…!" Anne exclaimed.

Anne was… talking about their promise to try and uncover the truth of Morgana. She was right… they couldn't just give up…

"Give up being the Phantom Thieves…?" Futaba asked. "You can't be serious…"

Akechi looked bewildered. "I thought this was a rather good deal…"

"...Give us a couple of days," Ren said, slipping his hands into his pant pockets. "You kinda dumped a lot on us."

"Very well." Akechi nodded. "I will await your answer then." Then he turned back to Makoto. "Shall we return to the panel, then?"

"...Yes.

Though she had a feeling that Akechi would make up some excuse to get away…

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...And she was right. It was so… draining, dealing with the fallout.

After all of that, Makoto found herself walking towards the student council room in a daze.
Akechi… wanted to target Sae's Palace… didn't he? She had hoped desperately that it wouldn't come to this. But… it appeared that Sae… had been pushed to the edge.

Was there something she could have done to stop this? Maybe she should have tried harder to dissuade Sae… then maybe they wouldn't be in this mess.

No… That was just wishful thinking. Someone would be put in charge of the investigation regardless. But…

It didn't make the idea of going into her sister's Palace, seeing visual representation of her sins… anymore palatable.

The sound of the door sliding open snapped her out of her thoughts. Probably a teacher-...Or not. Ken was standing in the doorway.

"...Hey," he greeted her before stepping inside and closing the door behind.

"Hi." Makoto watched him step closer and take a seat next to her.

Before he said anything, Ken reached out and rested his hand on top of hers. "I just…" he wavered for a moment, "...wanted to check up on you," he finished quietly. "Especially since the after party started."

"I'm fine…" Makoto stopped short when Ken shot her a look. "...I could be better," she amended. "I just… don't savor the idea of working with Akechi-kun. He's always… rubbed me the wrong way."

Ken pursed his lips. "...Well, I can't deny that I'm… suspicious of him, with how he abruptly changed his tune. I'm still not entirely happy with him, for what happened with Kaito." He suddenly pulled his hand away, only to grasp her hand resting in her lap. "...I know that things are so uncertain regarding your sister right now. But… you're not alone in this. You have Ren, Anne, Ryuji, Morgana, Yusuke, Futaba, Haru…" He then coughed, suddenly staring down at the floor. "A-And you have me," he murmured. "You'll always have me."

Makoto felt a smile creep onto her face. Despite everything, she did feel lighter at his words. "Ken… thank you."

Ken just squeezed her hand, smiling at her. "Anytime."

She should tell him… now. They were alone. Everyone was at the afterparty so nobody would walk in…

Makoto swallowed hard. She could do this… She could be bold.

"Ken, listen, I… I have something to tell you." When Ken looked at her in concern, it felt like her heart was going to explode. "I…" She swallowed again. "I really, really like you. More than a friend should."

At Ken's sharp inhale, Makoto felt her heart sink. Shock was etched all over his face.

"I know that you'd never like me back." Makoto blinked rapidly. She couldn't cry. Not here. "But… I felt that I was going to explode if I didn't tell you e-especially with Kirijo-san wanting you to go back to Port Island… and… and—I'M SORRY!" She stood up, yanking her hand away. "I'm sorry… j-just forget I said anything…"
She could hear the scraping of the chair as Ken hastily stood up. "Makoto… wait!"

Makoto spun around to face him. "You can't tell me anything that I don't know!" she retorted.

"That is not true," Ken insisted. He suddenly grasped her wrist, gently pulling her closer to him. "Because for one…" he began, suddenly blushing, "I do like you back."

Makoto just stared at him with wide eyes.

"You… You do?" Makoto asked dumbly.

Ken just nodded slowly, his cheeks turning bright red. His cheeks were practically glowing.

"Then… Then why didn't you say anything?"

All this time… he… he liked her back?

"Ah, well…" Ken ducked his head, rubbing the back of his neck. "I figured… I thought you'd prefer someone more like Ren…"

"Ren?" Makoto repeated. "What makes you say that?"

"W-Well, you pretended to date him before!" he protested. "And well… Ren's… Ren."

Makoto wrinkled her nose. "Don't get me wrong, Ren's a great friend but he's just that… a friend. Not to mention that he doesn't know when to quit it with his teasing…" Then she frowned. "How can you miss all the hints I tried to drop?"

"You… did?" Ken looked genuinely confused, especially with how his eyebrows furrowed together, but Makoto couldn't help but feel exasperated.

"The King's Game?" Makoto folded her arms over her chest.

"That was a dare!" he protested, but then his eyebrows knitted together. "Wait… that time in Okumura's Palace… was that… your idea of flirting?"

Makoto felt her face heat up at the reminder of her embarrassing blunder. "W-What else would it be?"

"What else?" Ken repeated incredulously. "What was I supposed to think? 'You fight good'?"

Makoto felt herself blush even harder. Why did he have to remind her of that? "I-I panicked, okay?"

That was when Ken laughed, suddenly smiling wryly. "I guess… I'm a bit more blind than I thought. The girl I wanted…" he suddenly interlocked their fingers together once more all while his smile turned warm, "…wanted me too."

"Is that really a surprise?" Makoto couldn't help but ask.

You had to be blind to see that several girls found him attractive, after all…

Ken just shrugged. "No girl bothered to get to know me," he said, frowning. "They saw the cute athlete… and that was enough in their eyes."

"That's not true," Makoto said, shaking her head. She looked down at their linked hands so she
could gather her thoughts. "If they bothered to get to know you, they'd know that you try your
hardest to look out for people… You've carried hardship since you were young… and you do your
best so that others don't suffer like you did. They're foolish for not seeing how wonderful you
are…" Makoto trailed off, biting her lip.

Why did she keep rambling? She must sound so silly…

But that was when Ken's eyes softened. "I think you're wonderful too." Makoto found herself
blushing at the sincerity in his eyes. "I… feel comfortable when I'm with you. When you're
down… I want nothing more to see you smile. I know that you've had… turmoil over your sister,
but I can't help but admire your loyalty to her still. I… I don't know when exactly I fell for you
but… I like you, Makoto. A lot."

"Ken, I…" The words were stuck in her throat. Makoto swallowed hard. "I really like you," she
confessed. "I… I don't know much about love but I... I can't help but feel that I understand it a bit
more with you…"

Ken suddenly lifted Makoto's chin up with one hand, making her heart hammer hard against her
chest. "May I kiss you, then?"

"Please," Makoto whispered.

It wasn't fireworks or a choir singing, but it was nice. Really nice. She could feel Ken tentatively
place his hands on her waist. She felt her eyes flutter shut as they continued to kiss. They kissed,
slow and gentle, until they were both left breathless.

"Makoto… will you be my girlfriend?" he murmured.

"Yes…" she breathed out, before her smile faltered. "But… I don't know if I'll be a good
girlfriend," she said quietly. "This is all… very new to me."

"Well…" Ken said slowly, "I don't exactly know how to be a boyfriend either…" Then he smiled
at her again. "We'll figure it out together."

"Together," Makoto repeated, her voice barely above a murmur.

She… wanted to kiss him again. She grasped the lapels of his blazer, tugging him down for
another kiss. Their first few kisses had been almost tentative. But this was more exploring. This felt
so… so wonderful… She could see why people enjoyed kissing so much-

"Oi, Ken, are you done—"

They hastily yanked apart, and Makoto felt the blood rushing to her face. For the past couple
months since Makoto had met him, Shinjiro-san's almost constant mood was… grumpy. But shock
was written all over his face now. His jaw was practically on the floor as he stared at them with
bugged out eyes. Then he coughed, hastily shutting his mouth.

"—kissin' Niijima," Shinjiro-san finished. His Adam's apple bobbed for a moment as he swallowed
hard. "You…" He pointed at Ken. "...Are not allowed to make fun of me and Fuuka again. Ever."

Without another word, he turned around and shut the door behind him. Very firmly.

"Oh my god." Makoto pressed a hand against her burning face.

"Shinjiro-san will get over it," Ken said with a wave of his hand. "I can't tell you how many times
I've walked in on him and Fuuka-san…"

Maybe she dodged a bullet with how Sae was completely uninterested in dating. But still… it was so embarrassing. Though Shinjiro-san's… intrusion made her realize something…

"…When should we tell everyone?" she asked quietly.

Ken pursed his lips. "Well… things are crazy right now. Maybe it'd be better to keep it quiet for a few days. We'll tell them… but after things with Akechi have settled a bit."

"I… I'd like that," Makoto smiled at him. "I wouldn't mind having you to myself…" she then laced their fingers together, "even if it's just always for a little while…"

The caller ID said it was Shinjiro calling. Mitsuru couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at that. Was something amiss? Well, she supposed there was only one way to find out...

So, she took the call. "Hello?"

"Mitsuru, you need to get your scientists to invent mind bleach," Shinjiro said flatly.

Mitsuru blinked. Several times.

Mind bleach… She had heard the phrase be tossed around by both Minako and Iori more than once. Usually because they saw something they didn't wish to see.

...And that Amada probably could have used it after a… certain incident.

But… why did Shinjiro want it?

"What makes it so urgent, Shinjiro?" she inquired.

A silence. But then he abruptly broke it with a low growl, coming from the back of his throat. "I may have… walked in on Ken suckin' face with Niijima," he grumbled out.

Mitsuru arched an eyebrow, even though Shinjiro couldn't see. "Is that really all?" she asked dryly.

Though… Amada and Niijima, hm? They were sitting together during the video call, if she remembered correctly… And there was the look on her face, before Niijima came up with her counterargument… Well, this just gave her another reason to get to know the younger girl eventually… Something about her had piqued Mitsuru's attention anyways. Possibly the mention of Niijima being the student council president, much like how Mitsuru was as a third year.

"Don't use that judgmental as fuck tone with me," he retorted.

"You've claimed for years that you couldn't wait for Amada to find a romantic partner so you could get some revenge."

His only retort was his usual "tch".

"But tonight was the panel with Akechi, was it not?" Mitsuru asked. "How did that go?"

There was a long stretch of silence. "Ken gave me a shortend version but… Akechi's insisting on joining the team."

"WHAT?!" Mitsuru's jaw dropped at that, all amusement suddenly fleeing her. "...What does
Amada think?"

Shinjiro scoffed. "Ken trusts him as much as he can throw him," was his blunt response. "He was perfectly clear 'bout that. He's gonna talk to Amamiya. Prolly switch the hideout to LeBlanc, like when they were targeting Sakura's Palace."

"...I see." Mitsuru rubbed her face for a moment. "Please keep me posted, Shinjiro."

"...Yeah. Will do."
We've finally reached the beginning of the Sae arc! I'm really looking forward to this arc, and I hope you are too!

And yes… Ken/Makoto is finally CANON. Took them a year worth of chapters, but they're finally canon. I think I've been teasing this ship for a while, but I hope the slowburn was worth the wait.

But today's a special date… because it's been exactly one year since I've posted the prologue of Ace in the Hole! (On Fanfiction.net, but I posted the AO3 version on the same day, at night.) I'm still dumbfounded by the reception of this fic… We've hit over 500 kudos! Someone even recommended it on TV Tropes. So again, thank you for all of the support! And as you can see, I've commissioned ScruffyTurtles to draw Ken as Ace and he's done a superb job of it!

I also wanted to add that I've posted the PQ2 fic, Persona Q2: The Ace Edition! And again, I want to thank everyone for their support!
The Casino of Envy

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves convene to discuss the topic of Sae Nijima. During all of this, Sojiro finds out the truth of Ren and Futaba's activities.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wednesday, October 26th, 2016

"I still can't believe you yelled that for all of the school to hear," Futaba snickered, grinning at Ren. Ren just grinned back at her. He didn't know what had possessed him to yell, "I've always loved you!", but the look on Anne's face had been just… priceless. Absolutely priceless.

"It offered a good distraction, yeah?" Ren shrugged before pressing his hands against the back of his head.

Though Anne dragging him up to the rooftop was nice too. He would never say no to stealing some time alone with Anne.

"Uh huh." Futaba stared, unimpressed. "Suuuuure. That's totally why you did it."

"I didn't say it was the only reason," Ren quipped with a smirk.

"You act like we've been partying," Morgana grumbled out, before sticking his head out of Ren's bag. "Sheesh, it wouldn't kill you to take this a little more seriously."

Futaba just responded by sticking her tongue out at Morgana. "Oh shush, Morgana!" she huffed out. "It wouldn't kill you to find some entertainment in all this. We haven't forgotten what Akechi is doing…"

"And we're back to LeBlanc again…" Morgana commented. "I do get why Ken's being cautious…" He heaved out a sigh. "…I don't know if we can trust Akechi."

"Can't forget his comment about pancakes back in June," Ren said. "Ken thinks that his story about that black masked Persona-user attacking him was… fishy."

"What do you mean?" Futaba asked.

"Ken told me a little more in depth about his encounter with the guy," Ren said, after glancing around if anyone was lurking about. "He attacked Ken without any prompting. Said some things to Ken that… triggered him to awaken to his Persona again. Sorta."

"Again?" Morgana echoed.

"Yeah, Ken's Persona was a bit different before he got into the Metaverse," Ren explained. "He could use electric skills and apparently he only had the instant-kill light spells from before. But him
forming a 'contract' with Kala-Nemi caused him to develop differently, from the looks of it."

"That really is strange…" Morgana remarked. "But no matter… it's late. We should get Futaba home-"

"But I'm hungry!" Futaba all but whined out. "Let's get Sojiro to make us some curry, Ren!"

"Honestly, why didn't you eat more at the festival then?" Morgana huffed out.

But Futaba completely ignored Morgana, making a beeline for LeBlanc. "Sojiroooooooo!" she called out.

There was something… off. Sojiro was sitting by the bar, and the angle shadowed his face.

Futaba faltered at his silence, before she began to fidget. "S-Sojiro…?"

Then he sat up and the thing he held in his hand made Ren's blood run cold. "I was cleaning up…"

His voice was neutral, but his expression just screamed what the hell is this?

Fuck. Fuck.

"…And I found this," Sojiro finished.

Futaba gasped, taking a quick step backwards.

"This is a calling card…" Sojiro continued, in that eerily calm voice. That was when his eyes narrowed dangerously on the two of them. "…Right? I've read about it online."

"Y-You went into my room without permission?!" Futaba squeaked out.

"I'll apologize as much as you want later," Sojiro said curtly. "So… what is the meaning of this?"

"That's…" Futaba whimpered, before she began to wring her hands.

"Is it really something to get flustered over?" he demanded. Then he bowed his head. "…I knew it. This just isn't some game you're playing." Futaba began to shake as Sojiro continued with his interrogation. "…Why aren't you saying anything?"

"You haven't been letting us," Ren interjected, and the glare Sojiro threw his way was cold enough to make his blood freeze.

"Why did you keep it?!" Morgana hissed out.

"I… I mean…" Futaba continued to wring her hands. "It was memorable…"

"Explain," Sojiro snapped out.

"It's complicated," Ren began.

"Complicated?" Sojiro echoed. "So you can't explain it?"

"Stop putting words in my mouth!" Ren exclaimed. "Dammit, Sojiro, we… we have an explanation, I swear!"

"Ex… plain…" Futaba whimpered out. Ren turned his head to see that Futaba had her arms wrapped around herself. "I…"
"Futaba!" Morgana exclaimed. Then he winced. "If this keeps up… then Futaba will…"

"I'll get to the point," Sojiro said briskly. "Is this a real one? Did they… trigger a change of heart in you?"

That was when Futaba began to sob, tear welling in her eyes before spilling down her cheeks. "Ever since… Mom died… there was no exit…"

That was when Sojiro wavered the moment Futaba said "Mom". So that was how it was, huh… Ren did have a niggling suspicion that when Sojiro had spoken of Futaba's late mother… he had feelings for her.

"I was trapped in a labyrinth of my own heart," she choked out. "I knew I had to leave it but I couldn't do it by myself…" She then pulled off her glasses and began to wipe at her face.

"Futaba…" Sojiro's expression softened. "Sit down… both of you. I should at least listen to what the two of you have to say."

So they sat down, only for Futaba to blurt out: "The Phantom Thieves saved me… from my own messed up heart…" She then leaned forward, gripping the edge of the table. "It's the same as Mom's research… they changed my cognition!"

"Seriously…?" Sojiro sighed, before his lips pressed into a thin line. "Wakaba's research… altering one's cognition. I wondered about it myself too. But still…" He stared down at the table.

"So… you always knew?" Ren asked.

"I thought it was really weird that she wanted to go to the beach all of the sudden," Sojiro admitted. "Even the doctors had thrown in the towel."

Futaba couldn't stifle her sobs again and Ren gently rubbed circles in her back. To his relief, it was soothing her.

"I had just thought… other kids could've been the support she needed. Better than any adult could offer her. But as I watched the tabloid shows, day in and day out… I couldn't help but wonder. Futaba changed so abruptly… It seemed similar to what these Phantom Thieves are doing."

Futaba let out a little gasp. "Wow…"

Sojiro readjusted his glasses, cracking a smile. "I'm still your guardian, you know. I'd never overlook such a drastic change in your behavior."

"Sojiro…" Futaba breathed.

"But still, to think that what the Phantom Thieves have been doing… and Wakaba's research… they're seriously connected—basically the same thing?" He then heaved out a sigh. "…Back in the day, I used to be a government official."

"You were with the government?" Ren said in disbelief.

"My job was to be the bridge between the government and the lab Wakaba worked at. She had quite a resume under her belt… She used to work for the Kirijo Group, you know."

"…We know," Ren said.

"…You do?" Sojiro frowned at that, before shaking his head. "…But anyhow, that's how I got to
know her. One night, we were out drinking and she said something… odd to me. She said… 'I feel I'm going to die soon. In an odd way.' Who wouldn't take that as a joke…?"

"So… Mom knew…?" Futaba asked.

"I just laughed it off." His expression darkened. "But… it happened. Exactly as she said. If I had just listened to her, then maybe she would be still…" He trailed off for a moment, only for his jaw to tighten. "If anything were to happen to you, Futaba, I'd… I'd feel like I've let her down. But there's something I want to ask you…" Ren sat up as Sojiro turned his gaze to him, "judging from your reactions, you knew about this calling card, didn't you? You should've known that a change of heart would have happened to Futaba." Sojiro's eyes then narrowed. "Is there a connection between you and them?"

"Wellll…" Ren lowered his head, rubbing the back of his neck. He couldn't talk his way outta this. "You… You're looking at the leader."

"You're the leader!?!" Sojiro sputtered out. "But then again, now that I think about it, you kept collecting friends who seemed to be connected to the people whose hearts that had been changed." He then rubbed his chin. "I just can't place your friend… the brown haired one, from Port Island."

Ren winced. "He's… the reason why we knew about Futaba's mom working for the Kirijo Group," he admitted. "Ken's acquainted with the Kirijo Group head. I… I know it sounds crazy, but with how we change hearts is by… entering a world represented by someone's cognition."

"You have that power?!" Sojiro inhaled sharply. "The power of Persona?"

"You know about that?" Futaba yelped out.

Sojiro nodded. "The government wanted to keep tabs on the Kirijo Group… and Persona-users in general." Then he shook his head. "What's a kid your age doing, connected to Kirijo like that?"

"Er…" Ren winced before mentally apologizing to Ken. "Well… Ken's actually had his Persona for… seven years."

"And he lived on Port Island during that?" Sojiro demanded. Then he sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead. "Good god… it was during that incident, wasn't it?"

"You… you know about that?" Ren asked.

"He told you?" Sojiro sighed, shaking his head. "I… I don't know if I'm okay with this. Especially you, Futaba."

"Sojiro, please don't tell me to stop!" Futaba abruptly stood up. "B-Becoming a Phantom Thief is one of the best things that has happened to me!"

"Futaba…" Ren breathed.

"I… I have friends! Friends who have stood by me, seen the labyrinth of my heart…" Futaba laid a hand over her heart. "They've seen my Shadow, like Jungian psychology describes! They helped me remember the truth about my mom! And Mom…" Tears pricked at Futaba's eyes. "I… I have to find out the truth! I will make sure that Shido's gonna suffer for what he's done to Mom… No matter what… I swear… I'm going to make sure he regrets even thinking about hurting her! And her research… her life's work! He's going to pay for stealing it away!"

"Holy hell, can you stop dropping bombs on me?" Sojiro moaned out, burying his face in both
hands. "How the hell do you know about Shido?!"

Futaba just laughed nervously. "Um… Ken told us?"

Sojiro dropped his hands so he could stare incredulously at them. "Just how much does this kid know?!"

"He's close to Mitsuru Kirijo," Ren said. "It took him a while for him to trust us with that kind of info, though."

Sojiro just sighed. "…You're really determined, aren't you?"

Futaba nodded furiously. "I can't look away. Now that my vision is clear."

"I can't either." Ren shook his head. "There's no turning back… The ship has sailed, a long time ago."

"I still can't believe it…" Sojiro sighed. "I housed the leader of the Phantom Thieves for months…" He then looked to Futaba. "…But you did help Futaba. I can't overlook that."

"Sojiro…!" Futaba bit her lip.

"…I won't lie, I was wracked with guilt after Wakaba died…" Sojiro said quietly. "I kept asking myself… what if I had done something? My past regrets about Wakaba… they keep gnawing at me in the back of my mind." He then cleared his throat, looking at Futaba. "So… in a way, I took Futaba in as a way… to atone for that."

Futaba shook her head furiously. "It's not your fault, Sojiro."

"And yet, I ran away. But here you are… standing up to people abusing authority." He took off his glasses to rub at his face. "I should be ashamed, really."

"Well… if there were more people to question things… we wouldn't be the Phantom Thieves," Ren said. "We started with Kamoshida because he was waltzing around the school like he owned the damn place… he wanted to rape Anne, all because he wanted her…"

His hands tightened around his knees at that.

"And… nobody knows?" Sojiro asked incredulously.

"There are some people," Ren admitted. Kawakami, Yoshida, Takemi… "Most of them are people who helped me out here and there…"

"But no parents or guardians?" Sojiro asked.

Ren just squirmed in his seat. "Well… there's one…"

Sojiro eyed him. "…Let me guess. It's Ken's guardian, isn't it?"

"We have a winner?" Ren asked weakly.

Sojiro sighed. "Ask him if I can talk to him about all of this… I can't get my head wrapped around this." He then stood up. "Come on, Futaba. Let's go home."

"Aw, but…" Futaba pouted, only for her stomach to start rumbling.
"I'll fix up something for her, and I'll walk her home after all of this," Ren offered.

After a moment, Sojiro nodded. "Thanks. I really appreciate it."

So he left, shutting the door behind him.

Futaba threw herself into a bar seat, letting her head flop down onto the table. "I… I thought my heart was about to explode," Futaba moaned out.

Ren chuckled, before pulling out ingredients from the fridge. "But we managed to talk our way out. That's a huge relief."

"You're telling me…" Futaba grumbled out.

"You're really determined to make Shido fall, aren't you?" Morgana asked.

Understandably, he had stayed quiet during the whole "explanation". Sojiro wouldn't have a freaking clue what Morgana was saying.

Futaba nodded furiously. "Of course! It's not just Mom, though… What he did to Mom was awful… but just look at all the crap he's pulled. He killed Haru's dad all because he was in the way and needed someone to die to blame us… He stopped the few people who could've stopped him two years ago… I want to take him down so that all of the people who have suffered because of his crap… won't have to anymore…"

Ren looked at her in surprise. "Futaba…"

"I… I have had a lot to think about," Futaba confessed. "I thought we were untouchable… It was like I was sitting behind a computer and being Medjed all over again. But… all of this was a wake-up call."

"It has been for all of us," Morgana said solemnly.

Futaba nodded. "And what Inari had been telling me, Morgana, Makoto, and Ken got me thinking… We were so confident that things were going dandy for us because so far it had. We thought it'd get us even more approval. But that's not why we should be Phantom Thieves. I… I know that I'm still not the best person I can be. Talking to strangers still freak me out. But…! I want to! I want to be the one to save people this time!"

Ren smiled at her. "We're with you… all the way."

Futaba grinned back at him, only for her to close her eyes. Then her lips parted, a word slipping out.

"Prometheus…"

"Prometheus?" Morgana asked.

"Prometheus," Futaba repeated, opening her eyes. They were bright with excitement. "That's my new Persona! It changed! Like Anne and Inari!"

"So another one for the books," Ren mused.

So far it's been three of them… He couldn't help but wonder who would be next.

"Rennn! You promised me curry!" Futaba's voice snapped him out of his musings. "Hurry before I
pass out from hunger!"

Ren just chuckled. "Yeah, yeah, just you wait. This curry will knock your socks off, I promise."

**Thursday, October 27th, 2016**

"So… last meeting at Ken's place for a while, huh?" Ryuji flopped onto the larger couch. "Back to LeBlanc, I'm guessin'."

"Pretty much," Ken said. "I don't trust Akechi, despite all of his claims. Not to mention we have a few things around here that could implicate us."

"Like what?" Makoto asked.

"Well, our Evokers for one," Ken answered. Then his hand went into his blazer's pocket, pulling out a bronze badge. He held it up, so everyone could see it. There was a S above two crossed rapiers. "This is the badge of the Shadow Operatives. All members, including the Special Suppression Unit, carry one."

"The… Special Suppression Unit?" Yusuke asked. "What is this exactly?"

"Oh, right, sorry…" Ken shook his head. "It's a division that Mitsuru-san established within the Shadow Operatives. It's like… a back-up squad for emergencies. I was on it along with Yukari-san, Junpei-san, and Shinjiro-san four years ago. But I decided to leave it entirely because I kept trying to focus on the past and it was hindering me."

"Jeez, you must've been a serious fourteen year old," Ryuji grumbled out.

"You talk like he's not serious now," Ren quipped.

Ken huffed at the two of them for a moment, before speaking again. "Anyways, Mitsuru-san gave it back to me when I agreed to the mission." He rolled the badge in between his fingers for a moment. "But since then… they've made it… a bit more important that members carry it."

"What do you mean by that?" Anne asked.

"Mitsuru-san, Akihiko-san, Aigis-san, and Minako-san were kidnapped during the incident where we met the Investigation Team four years ago. It was only luck that we saw that we were taken. So Mitsuru-san decided to have it so that the badges had a chip imbedded inside of it, so we can track a GPS signal."

"She really pulls no stops, doesn't she?" Morgana asked.

Ken nodded before slipping it back into his pocket. So Ken carried that badge on him wherever he went, huh… Ren had no idea. "…Anyhow, Ren and I talked it over during lunch and we've agreed that it's too risky to continue meeting here. So when Akechi asks to meet, and I imagine it will be soon… we will at LeBlanc."

"We could've just discussed this over text, though…." Anne said, her eyebrows scrunching together. "Why call this meeting?"

Makoto coughed. "A-Actually… I have another reason for this. B-Because you see… There's something I need to tell you."
"Whataya mean, Makoto?" Ryuji asked.

"J-Just let me show you." Makoto reached into her bag, her hand trembling for some reason. Ren stared at her. What was Makoto doing? For a moment, her eyes met with Ken's. She then inhaled shakily, drawing out her phone. "Sae Nijima." Her voice was barely audible as she spoke.

"Result found."

Ren felt a pit form in his stomach. No… way…

"That's the Nav!" Haru gasped, her eyes wide. "Mako-chan… then that means…!"

"I know..." Makoto's voice had taken on a timid tone. "I'm so, so sorry... I just... I had hoped that Sis wasn't too far gone... that she could change on her heart on her own. I-I know that you and Yusuke went against your father figures... I should have done the same. E-Especially since Sis was threatening Boss with taking away Futaba from him." She looked over to Futaba, bowing her head. "I'm so sorry, Futaba... I should've spoken up. Probably would have saved you and Boss some grief."

Futaba was silent for what felt like ages. But then she spoke.

"...I get it."

"Y-You do?" Makoto stammered out, her eyes wide with shock.

Futaba slowly nodded. "I could've approached you guys way before than I had," she said, chewing on her bottom lip. "But... I didn't. I was scared... a-and embarrassed about asking for help."

"Futaba..." Makoto said quietly, her voice slightly above a murmur.

"So um...!" Futaba began to wring her hands. "I-I'm still mad at your sister, for threatening Sojiro like that... B-But I can understand why you couldn't speak up about it."

"And besides, everything kept piling up and up," Anne added. "We were worrying about Medjed, then we found out about Shido and then Okumura happened..."

"Furthermore, I can understand why..." Yusuke said quietly. "I know not if your sister is too far gone, as I've never met her... But if it was possible, I would have avoided fighting Sen—Madarame."

Ren winced in sympathy. After all of this time, Yusuke still have conflicted feelings about Madarame.

Haru nodded as well. "Father pushed me into drastic action. He just... would not listen to me and what I wanted... He didn't care that Sugimura was such an awful man. I don't know what your relationship with your sister is like... but I understand. Fighting your family... is not easy."

"...But if your sis's got a Palace, that's gotta be why Akechi's enlisted us," Ryuji said.

"What's he got to gain from all of this, though..." Ren said. "That's what we need to find out."

Anne nodded. "He's definitely up to something. He's been badmouthing us this whole time. He can't just do a complete flip like that..."

"So..." Morgana hopped onto the coffee table, arching his back for a moment. "Futaba. Is it possible to eavesdrop onto Akechi's phone? So we can monitor him for a bit?"
"Hmm…” Futaba chewed on her bottom lip. "I don't know… That's a bit tricky, even for me."

"Modest as always," Yusuke sighed.

"Zip it, Inari!" Futaba glared at him briefly. "But… I would have to bug his phone directly." But then her face lit up, like a metaphorical light bulb went off. "Wait! I've got it!" She began to rub her hands together. "Mwehehe, just you wait.. Akechi won't know what hit him!"

"…Are you planning on telling us, Futaba-chan?" Haru asked.

Futaba just grinned, before pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "Nope! You'll find out soon enough."

"Why am I not surprised?" Ken deadpanned.

"We should make a new chat though," Ryuji said, taking out his phone. "So we can talk without Akechi lookin' at our texts."

He tapped at it for a moment, before all of their phones went off.

"…The Real Phantom Thieves of Hearts?" Anne read alone, an eyebrow raised.

"What?" Ryuji huffed, folding his arms over his chest. "You know it's true!"

"…It works, doesn't it?" Haru offered.

Ryuji just hung his head. "You don't have to say it like you pity me…"

"Well, if the shoe fits…” Morgana began.

"Ugh, shuddup, Morgana!"

"That's enough, you two," Makoto sighed, shaking her head. "But since we seemed to have covered everything… what do you say to going out for dinner tonight?"

"I'm game!" Ryuji exclaimed.

"Sojiro is talking to Shinjiro-san," Ren said. "What do you think, Futaba?"

Futaba's head bobbed, her eyes filled with eagerness. "Let's do it!"

"I'd never say no to having a meal together with my friends," Haru declared. "There's just something about it… don't you agree?"

"I ask for hotpot," Yusuke said. "The weather calls for it, wouldn't you say?"

It was getting chillier. Hotpot really would hit the spot…

"Oooh, yeah, that sounds awesome!" Ryuji nodded vigorously.

"Well, it's not like we have enough food to cook for so many people," Ken said. "Just let me drop my bag in my room."

Makoto followed him with her eyes for a moment, before she cleared her throat. "Um, I actually need to freshen up. I'll be back soon."

Anne watched her leave for the hallway that Ken had disappeared into, frowning a bit. "…Is it me
or are Ken and Makoto acting a little... different?" Anne turned to look at Ren, her blonde brows furrowed together.

"What are you talking about?" Ryuji scoffed. "Makoto's giving Ken goo-goo eyes again. Nothing new." He then smirked in Futaba's direction. "You're so gonna lose."

"...Lose what?" Yusuke asked.

Futaba snickered, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "W ellll... we may have bet on when Ken and Makoto get their act together." Then she pointed at Ryuji. "And you can't talk. You thinking that they'll be taking all the way 'till graduation is just stupid."

"You bet on them?!” Anne demanded before whirling around to glare at Ren. "REN!"

"I mean, aren't you curious when it'll happen?" Ren quickly defended.

"You don't have to bet on it!" Anne hissed between her teeth. "Ugh, I'd expect this from Ryuji-"

"HEY!" Ryuji protested. "What the hell, Anne?!"

"You know it's true, Ryuji," Anne huffed out, shooting him a sharp look. "But seriously... when it happens, it happens."

"It seems like such a... trivial thing to gamble on," Yusuke said.

"...At least it's not hurting anyone?" Haru offered.

Morgana just sighed. "We really should get going if we're going to get to the restaurant before rush hour," he reminded. "Someone should get Ken and Makoto to hurry up."

"You're such a nag sometimes, Morgana," Futaba sighed out.

"I am not!"

Shinjiro had to admit—begrudgingly—that Sakura knew how to brew coffee. His coffee completely blew Chagall Café's out of the water.

But he didn't want to be here, sitting across from Sakura at a booth and nursing a cup of coffee. Waiting for Sakura to demand answers. But this silence was as thick as pea soup. He had to break the ice...

So Shinjiro lowered the cup to the table. "So, you know."

"I do," Sakura said, a certain tightness to his voice, "...Mister Shadow Operative."

Shinjiro snorted. "I help out Mitsuru when she needs me but I'm not a Shadow Op."

"Is Kirijo involved in this, then?" he demanded. "This Phantom Thief business?"

Shinjiro couldn't help but bark out a laugh. "Trust me, if Mitsuru could come here without Shido dangling blackmail over her head, Shido would've been a popsicle ages ago. And I'd be here, watching on the sidelines. With popcorn." He eyed Sakura. "Ken and I moved out here because Shido was stirring up shit, to keep an eye on things. This was a last resort."

"And his solution was to join the Phantom Thieves?" Then Sakura's voice suddenly broke. "He...
He's only a kid. It's not right. How could you just turn a blind eye to all of this?"

Did Sakura just imply what Shinjiro thought he was?

"You think I agreed to this without thinking?" Shinjiro snapped. He could feel his patience wearing thin. "Jumped to the call? *Hell* no."

Sakura just stared at him, his jaw working but nothing came out.

"You think I don't worry?" Shinjiro practically snarled out. "Do you really think I think everything's *fucking* dandy?"

"I-" Sakura began, but Shinjiro didn't let him continue.

"Ken's mine just as much as your daughter is yours." Shinjiro narrowed his eyes at Sakura. "And you probably think Amamiya as yours too. If you *dare* imply that I don't give a shit 'bout Ken's been up to again, I don't care if you've got two decades on me. *I* Will. Kick. Your. Ass."

Sakura's jaw worked again, but this time he seemed to have found his voice. "Has anyone told you that you're very blunt?"

"Many times," Shinjiro said flatly, fighting the urge to roll his eyes.

"...How can you not go crazy out of worry though?" Sakura asked. "Just thinking about it is enough to give me a heart attack. Especially Ren! He's been doing this for half a year!"

"They may be young, but they're not exactly kids anymore," Shinjiro said. "The shit they've been through... stole their innocence. Besides that, I've seen them together. They may argue and fight, but they'll be there for each other thick or thin." Shinjiro raised his cup to his lips, only to grimace at the lukewarm drink. "Have some faith in them."

Silence suddenly stretched out. Shinjiro studied Sakura's face closely, but he couldn't read the older man's face. Well, he wasn't exactly as good as Minako in that department...

And then he spoke.

"First Ren and Futaba try and comfort me, and now I'm having a twenty-something lecturing me." A wry smile suddenly spread across Sakura's face. "I guess... I'll have to trust these kids, then."

Shinjiro then scoffed. "Yeah, like you can stop them."

"Is that a crack about my age?!"


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*Friday, October 28th, 2016*

They were meeting with Akechi today.

Makoto sat in the booth closest to the door with Ken seated beside her. Haru was across from her. Yusuke was lounging against the bench where Haru sat. On the other side, Ren and Anne sat together. Sitting across from them were Ryuji and Futaba.

"...So we're gonna play dumb with 'im, right?" Ryuji asked.

"Essentially, yes." Makoto nodded. "We need to know what Akechi-kun wants, but if we give him
an inkling that we know about Sis's Palace beforehand… he may look at what else we know more closely."

"I think that you can say that you knew, Makoto," Yusuke stated. "It is the truth, after all."

Makoto's heart clenched at that. There wasn't an ounce of malice in Yusuke's words. But it was a reminder that things might have gone south. Futaba might not have forgiven her.

She was already dreading when they actually went to Sae's Palace… She didn't want to see how warped her sister had become. She hadn't been there for Madarame's Palace. But she had seen how hurt Haru had been as they continued to explore Okumura's Palace, as more and more of her father's sins were unveiled.

Ken suddenly slipped his hand into hers, giving it a light squeeze. They were sitting close enough so that nobody would notice that. But it was a quick motion. Makoto inhaled as Ken drew his hand away.

She had to focus on the positive.

"Are you okay, Mako-chan?" Haru asked hesitantly.

"I'm… I'm fine." Makoto tried to smile at her friend. But before she could speak again, the door swung open and in walked Akechi.

"My, what a quaint café," he mused, looking around LeBlanc. "And yet it's so… comfortable. It feels like you could live here."

Ren coughed. "Well, I do."

"You do?" Akechi's eyes widened with shock. "That… That honestly comes off as a surprise."

"I am on probation," Ren said. He tried to sound nonchalant about it, but there was a certain tightness to his voice.

Akechi winced. "Ah… I beg your pardon, but I didn't know of that…"

Makoto pointedly cleared her throat. "Let's not dance around the subject, Akechi-kun." She looked at him squarely in the eyes, but Akechi just stared back, his expression almost… serene. "What exactly do you want from us?"

Akechi straightened up. "…You're aware of Sae-san's behavior, are you not, Niijima-san?"

Makoto's fingers curled around the edge of the table. "Let's not dance around the subject, Akechi-kun." She looked at him squarely in the eyes, but Akechi just stared back, his expression almost… serene. "What exactly do you want from us?"

Akechi winced again, before brushing his bangs out of his eyes. "Ah, forgive me. It's just… Sae-san is more than just a partner to me."

"…So, you've got the hots for her?" Ryuji asked.

Makoto opened her mouth but the only thing that came out was a strangled sound.

Sae… and Akechi? Sae… Sae would never date him!

…Right?
Good god, how could she not know… She felt like a failure of a sister for not knowing Sae's taste in partners, aside from Sae's demands that they'd excel in well… everything.

Akechi let out a nervous laugh. "You misunderstand me. Don't get me wrong, Sae-san is a very beautiful woman. But she is seven years my senior. I just meant that I've grown to care for her."

Makoto let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding. That was a relief.

Akechi then let out a short cough. "But anyhow, I digress. Sae-san has put a bounty of any information she can find on the Phantom Thieves."

"…They're getting desperate," Ren noted, somehow so, so calm. "They must really hate our guts."

"Hate is a strong word," Akechi said.

"But I think Ren is rather accurate." Yusuke's voice was even. "I assume that the police was rather embarrassed of Kaneshiro's fall. Upstaged by us."

"Well… Sae-san did say that you did make us look foolish," Akechi admitted. "And as the months passed by, not to mention with…" He looked hesitantly towards Haru, looking like he was ready to speak but he was afraid of upsetting Haru.

"…My father's death." Haru's voice trembled, but only just slightly. "Please go on, Akechi-kun."

"Thank you." Akechi nodded. "…They're getting extremely desperate to close this case… no matter what. Forced confessions, falsified evidence… you name it."

"Dammit!" Ryuji hissed out, before pounding the table hard enough for it to rattle loudly. "Eff the police! They're all full of crooks! Every last one of them!"

"That's… That's not entirely true, Ryuji…" Ken said with a wince.

"Yeah, yeah, your senpai's a cop," Ryuji grumbled. He didn't seem to be in the mood to be comforted about this subject. "He's like one effin' drop in a barrel!"

"Oh?" Akechi tilted his head. "Who would this be?"

"I don't see how this is relevant," Ken replied coolly. "We're deriving from the subject."

Makoto's hands dropped down to her lap. "Sis…" she murmured, her hand tightening over her knee. "Why would you…?"

"Makoto…" Anne's voice was sad as she looked to her, her eyes filled with sympathy.

"But what do you want us to do, then?" As he spoke, Ken placed his hand over Makoto's, gently rubbing circles onto the top of her hand.

"I've heard many things of Sae-san's actions," Akechi said. "Blackmail… coerced confessions… Lately she's told me a few times that she's determined to win… no matter the cost. So, after I ventured inside the Palace… I grew curious. I entered Sae-san's name in the app and got a hit."

"Yeah… I know a little about how she likes to blackmail," Futaba mumbled out.

Makoto winced.

_Futaba…_
"You're not answering Ken!" Ryuji retorted. "Answer us, Akechi! This is all good and dandy, but this does jack shit unless you tell us what the hell you want us to do about it? Or do you want us to just talk about the issues like how you kept blabbering about how we kept 'disrespecting' justice? While you did shit to punish the real crooks!"

"R-Ryuji…" Morgana mumbled out. "Calm down…"

"Why the hell should we trust you?" Ryuji spat out, his voice filled with bitterness. Makoto hadn't heard him sound so bitter since…

She was at odds with everyone, back in June.

"You're all talk but you never put it into action," Ryuji finished. "You're always justice, justice, justice! I bet you have a high and mighty sense of justice because it's for the good of the people or whatever other crap you've been spouting!"

"Come on, Ryuji…" Anne mumbled out.

"You know it's effin' true, Anne!"

Anne fell silent. She had no rebuttal. But then Akechi spoke once more.

"Allow me to explain… Sae-san's sense of justice has become warped. You see, Sae-san was not always like this. When I met her roughly two years ago… she had told me her aspirations. She was well aware of the criminal justice's reputation, that it's so skewed towards the prosecution. Sae-san desired to change it from the inside."

"…Sounds like someone else I know," Ren said evenly, giving Makoto a meaningful look.

"But… she's going around blackmailing people now," Futaba said. "You're saying her cognition has been distorted? That's why she's been acting the way she has?"

"In a way, yes." Akechi nodded. "Women working in criminal justice have a great disadvantage. There's a reason why the original Detective Prince, Naoto Shirogane, masqueraded as a male years ago. Perhaps Sae-san has grown jaded and frustrated due to this."

"…So we go for her heart, then?" Morgana asked. "Well… it's not the first time we've gone after a family member."

"Ah, you must be referring to Okumura…" Akechi noted, a sad smile coming across his face.

"Not just Haru," Ren said. "Yusuke thought Madarame as a father…"

Makoto just stared down. "I…" She then bit her lip. "…So Sis's sense of justice has become warped," she said. "Or has she lost it completely?"

"I know not," Akechi admitted. "I just know that Sae-san's heart… it must be changed. For everyone's sakes." Then he looked over to Ryuji. "…You challenged me on my views of justice."

He then shifted his weight, so he wasn't leaning against the counter anymore, now standing upright. "It's simple, really. A man… utterly despicable had wronged me… and my mother. It had led to her premature death. I absolutely despise that man and people of his ilk. My contempt of such people… that fuels my justice."

Ryuji was silent. Akechi had… shocked him into silence.
"You have accomplished a miracle, Akechi," Yusuke intoned. "You've silenced Ryuji."

Futaba nodded furiously. "Wow, that's pretty amazing, Akechi!"

Ryuji then snapped back to reality, whipping his head back and forth so to glare at the two of them. "Ugh, shuddup, both of you…!"

Futaba just responded by sticking her tongue at him.

"But an awful adult…” Haru mused. "I had no idea you had to deal with such a thing."

Akechi just smiled sadly. "I know the media believes that I live a charmed life… but it's far from the case." Then he coughed. "But anyhow, this arrangement will also protect Sae-san," Akechi continued. "For… she is in danger."

"Danger…?” Ken asked. "What do you mean?"

"It's simple, really." Makoto fought the urge to grimace at his words. Why did Akechi always have to say something like that? He sounded so… arrogant when doing so. "You see, the culprit… will most likely target her. A mental shutdown. And then it would be pinned onto the Phantom Thieves, for they would've acted out of 'desperation'."

Even though she contemplated it before… hearing it on Akechi's lips made her heart clench. She squeezed her eyes shut. She could not cry. She could not. Ken's hand slid over hers, gently rubbing circles on the top of her hand. Makoto inhaled.

"I… I see," she whispered.

"Do you have to say it so… so…!" Anne stood up from her seat, glaring at Akechi. "God, for someone who people gush over for being so polite, you have no tact!"

Akechi winced. "Forgive me, Niijima-san, but you must understand the severity of this situation. If we take Sae-san's heart… she will both come to her senses and she'll be protected from a mental shutdown. It is a good deal… is it not?"

"I… I don't know…" Makoto mumbled out.

"Come now, don't you want to protect your sister, Niijima-san?" Akechi pressed, stepping forward. "I know you care for her a great deal."

"It… It's not that simple," Makoto said sharply. "We jumped the gun with Okumura and he paid for our mistake with his life. Do you blame us for trying to think on it first?" She then looked towards her friends. "…What do you think, Ren? You are our leader, after all…"

Ren was silent for a moment, twirling a finger around one of his curls. Then he rose to his feet to look at all of them. "I don't know if your sister is still capable of reformation, Makoto," he said flatly. "She's not shy of trying to force people's hand by blackmail. And well…" His calm smile suddenly turned brittle, his eyes turning stony. "…I'm an example of how prosecutors can screw people up so easily."

"Ren-kun…" Haru said softly, twisting around to look at him.

"I am grateful for coming here. I wouldn't have met all of you if it hadn't. But damn…" Ren shook his head. "It's messed up. Really messed up."
Morgana coughed. "...What were you getting at, Ren?"

"Huh?" Ren blinked, shaking his head. "Sorry. I got sidetracked." Ryuji and Futaba started to snicker at Ren's admission. "Hey, don't forget I'm the leader!" he huffed out.

"A dorky leader," Futaba quipped through her snickers.

"HEY!" Ren protested.

"Futaba, that's enough," Ken sighed out, shaking his head as laughter bubbled from both Ryuji and Anne. They were undeterred, even as Ren glowered at the both of them. He fell back into his seat, pouting like a little child even as Anne leaned in, quickly pecking his cheek.

"Killjoy!" Futaba called out, which just made Ken roll his eyes.

"But anyways..." Ren interjected. "Akechi's right. We'll be able to protect your sister from a mental shutdown, get her off our backs... The pros really outweigh the cons. It's really a win-win situation."

"Except for Morgana..." Anne said softly. "We... We need to find out why he's stuck in this form."

"Lady Anne..." Morgana sighed. "I appreciate your concern, but... when Ren lays it out like that, I can't deny it. We need to join forces with Akechi."

"I must concur, as well," Yusuke said. "This is our best option, and perhaps we'd be saving other people from Makoto's sister. If she's so intent on securing wins... then perhaps she has..."

"...Wait, are you saying that she basically sent innocent people to jail?!" Ryuji yelped out.

Akechi winced. "...Unfortunately, that is a high possibility." Then he shook his head, his eyes landing on Ren. "...Though, I must commend you for your... words. You certainly have a silver tongue. And a way with your friends."

Something flashed in Akechi's eyes. And maybe she was imagining it but... it almost sounded like there was a tightness in his voice.

He then pulled out his phone from his jacket pocket, staring down the screen. "Might we be able to go inside the Palace today?" he asked. "I would like to see for it myself..."

"We should really do it tomorrow," Ren said. "For one, we need time to get to where Niijima's Palace is. And it's getting late..."

Akechi sighed softly. "Well... I have to concur with that," he admitted. "So, tomorrow we will meet at the courthouse. I believe that's the most likely spot for Sae-san's Palace to form."

Makoto stood up. "If that's all, please excuse me," she said flatly.

She made it halfway to the station when a voice called out to her. "Mako-chan! Please wait!" She turned to see a panting Haru skid to a stop right in front of her. She pressed a hand against her chest as she caught her breath. "I'm... glad I caught you..."

"I'm fine, Haru..." Makoto said quietly.

"You're not," she persisted. "Mako-chan, we... we're friends, aren't we? I just... I just wanted to let you know that I'm here for you... like you and everyone else did for me. Let me return the favor..."
Seeing her earnest expression hurt. How could she accept things so easily…? Her, Yusuke, and Futaba…

"I don't understand…" Makoto said quietly.

"Don't understand what, Mako-chan?" Haru looked at her quizzically, tilting her head slightly.

"You… You accepted that you had to fight your father. That his sins were just unacceptable," she murmured. "Yusuke as well. And you still worry about me… I… I…"

I don't really deserve it.

"Mako-chan…" Haru's eyes softened. "I can't speak for Yusuke-kun, but I would've given anything so that my hand was not forced. That I did not have to fight Father. In the last few years, our relationship has soured but… I still have so many good memories of him. He was the only parent I've had, for most of my life." She suddenly grabbed onto Makoto's hand. "...I understand your conflict," she said softly. "I had to be reassured by Yusuke-kun that this was the right course of action, after we carved our path to the Treasure." She then gave Makoto a gentle smile, before pressing her free hand against her chest again. "...It's okay, Mako-chan. I understand."

Makoto bit her lip. "...It's not fair that you lost your father after all of that," she said softly. "It's really not. Especially since you wanted to make amends with him so badly."

"...That's why this is important to me," Haru said. "It may be too late for me and Father but it's not for you and your sister."

"Haru…"

Makoto's heart swelled as she looked at her friend. Haru was truly kindhearted. She couldn't think of anything else to say except… "...Thank you, Haru."

"Anytime, Mako-chan."

"Things have really escalated… haven't they?"

Shinjiro let out a weary sigh, before rubbing his face. He then looked back to Fuuka, her teal eyes filled with concern. "...Yeah. That's putting it lightly, Fuuka."

Fuuka bit her lip, suddenly silent. "What… What do you think he wants?"

"Nothing good, that's for sure," Shinjiro said flatly. "Ken and Amamiya agreed that it'd probably be better if they acted like LeBlanc was their meet-up spot. Akechi's entire story is fishy. Pretty damn close to what happened to Ken when he first found the Metaverse."

"...But Akechi… working for Shido?" Fuuka said slowly, before chewing on her bottom lip again. "Or maybe we're jumping to conclusions… He's just… so unexpected, being a detective."

Shinjiro just scoffed. "It's not like this is the first time it's happened. There's Adachi, remember?"

"That is true," Fuuka agreed.

"But look… Fuuka…" Shinjiro said slowly. "I was thinking…"

"...About what?" she asked.
Shinjiro sighed heavily. "I know you've been visiting like once a month…" he said quietly. "And I do miss you like hell when you're not here. But I don't think it's a good idea for you to do that anymore. With all this shit coming out, Shido purposefully trapping the kids… Akechi may be workin' for him… I dunno if it's safe for you to come to Tokyo anymore."

If Shido ever got ahold of Fuuka… he'd sic Aeneas on the bastard. And then punch him in the face for good measure.

"Oh," Fuuka said faintly, before her face fell. "I see… I… I can see your point…"

Shinjiro grimaced. "I… er… sorry 'bout this, Fuuka…"

"Don't apologize, Shinji," Fuuka suddenly spoke sharply, staring sternly at him. (Well as sternly as Fuuka can muster.) "I won't lie… it is disappointing," she admitted, before her eyes softened. "But you're just concerned about my safety." Then she winced. "…Besides, I'm pretty sure that my boss hates me for all of the time I've asked off. Maybe this is for the best…"

"He doesn't know who exactly he hired. You're worth of ten of his other employees."

Fuuka laughed softly. "That's sweet of you to say, Shinji, but… it's not true. I have a long way to go. I've only been in the workforce for a year, after all. Or even compared to Futaba-chan."

"Yeah, well, Sakura is sorta one in a million." Shinjiro rolled his eyes. "Then again, I could say that of all of the Phantom Thieves…"

"Speaking of that…" Fuuka cocked her head. "…Mitsuru-senpai's schedule cleared up enough that she was able to get dinner with everyone today… Ken-kun is dating Makoto-chan now?"

Shinjiro just groaned. He really wished that he could erase the image from his mind. "Walked in on them suckin' face… he grumbled out.

Fuuka bit her lip, looking like she was holding back a laugh. "I see."

"Stop laughing." Shinjiro glowered at her.

"Your reaction is just very funny, Shinji," Fuuka giggled, her teal eyes now sparkling. "Have you gotten to talk to the two of them since then?"

"Well…" Shinjiro-san hesitated for a moment. "…I was thinking of askin' Ken to invite her over sometime. Y'know, for dinner."

"I think that's a wonderful idea," Fuuka said with a smile. "It'd be nice to get to know Makoto-chan, wouldn't it? Since, um… Ken-kun can't exactly get to know Makoto-chan's sister right now…"

"Lucky Ken," Shinjiro said under his breath.

"You've met her, then?" Fuuka asked, even as she shot Shinjiro a look for his small crack.

"Yeah and she's… something." Shinjiro grimaced. "But still, can't hold that over Niijima… Ken really likes her."

Fuuka just giggled. "I'm glad that Ken-kun's found someone. Though I can't imagine Junpei-kun was happy to find out that he lost the bet he had with Minako-chan."
Shinjiro just rolled his eyes. "Iori losing a bet to Minako? You act like it's something that doesn't happen every day."

"Speaking of Minako-chan… she's really curious about Makoto-chan."

"Of course she is." Shinjiro scoffed. "Maybe I should prepare Ken's will, then," Shinjiro said dryly. "He's definitely gonna to die of embarrassment once Minako can get ahold of Nijima."

"Minako-chan's not that bad."

Shinjiro stared at her.

"…Okay, she can be pretty bad," Fuuka relented. "So, when do you think you'll invite her over?"

Shinjiro then shrugged. "I guess I could ask Ken to invite her tomorrow night," he said. "Ken said that they were meeting with Akechi again tomorrow, so they can crack the code of Nijima's Palace. Ken can bring her over after they were done with all of that."

Fuuka just nodded, smiling. "That sounds good to me."

…Though, he'd better make Ken help him with dinner. Because he really did not want to see them suckin' face again. He really wished that mind bleach existed.

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**Sunday, October 29th, 2016**

"I rarely get to see Sae-san directly but…" Akechi trailed off for a moment. "…I think I've figured out her course of action." Akechi seemed to pause dramatically. "On the twentieth, an investigation will be done at Shujin Academy, as well as the Sakura residence."

"No!" Futaba's hands clenched into fists. "Y-You can't be serious!"

"She has looked into Sojiro-san before…" Ken said quietly.

Makoto just stared down at the ground silently. She had gone completely rigid. Ken sighed quietly to himself. He wished he could take her hand or something… Comfort her… somehow.

"But that means our time limit is November twentieth…" Yusuke said through pursed lips. "Roughly three weeks."

"However… Sae-san will be pulling no stops," Akechi continued. "This has led me to believe that she won't have enough manpower until the twentieth."

…Manpower. That word made the situation more… real?

"We'll take your word for it, Akechi," Ren spoke up, before pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Let's just focus on what we're here to do… infiltrating the Palace."

"I can't believe how late it is…" Anne said. "It took us ages to get here…"

"Which is why we should make haste." Akechi reached into his pocket, pulling out his state-of-the-art phone. "Shall we-"

Futaba suddenly gasped. "No way…!"
Akechi blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

Futaba suddenly jumped, snatching Akechi's phone out of his hands. "This is the model I wanted!" she gushed, her eyes shining as she lovingly stared down at the device. "You're so lucky!"

Anne then coughed. "Uhh, sorry about this, it's just…"

"It's okay." Akechi flashed her a quick smile even as Futaba exclaimed over Akechi's phone in the background. "…Sae-san told me the gist."

Makoto then looked up. "Oh, Akechi-kun, maybe we should exchange contact now? I added you to the group chat, but it'd be best if you have everyone's phone numbers, in case you need to contact just one of us.

"Maybe I can—" Akechi tried to reach for his phone but Futaba just danced out of the way. Even though Futaba was much older, Ken was reminded of how the twins would hold on tight when they wanted to play with a phone.

"...I'll message you everyone's numbers later," Makoto said with a sigh.

"Futaba-chan is certainly… unique," Haru said, lightly giggling.

"You can say that again," Yusuke sighed, shaking his head.

Though Ken noticed Morgana's eyes were affixed onto Futaba. Hmm. Was there more than what met the eye, then?

"Mmhm, you can say that again," Akechi said with a sigh. "I just hope I'm not out of a phone…"

But then Futaba stepped forward. "But man, you've got it all… good looks, state-of-the-art phone… talk about cheating."

"Um…" Akechi blinked at Futaba uncertainly.

"She's saying you're a catch," Ryuji said, before making a long pause. He then scratched the back of his head. "…At least, I think that's what it is."

"But anyways, now that's settled…" Ken folded his arms over his chest. "…We do need to figure out the keywords of Niijima-san's Palace."

Makoto closed her eyes, clasp her hands behind her. She then let out a soft hum. "Sis has called the courthouse… a place of competition where she must always win," she stated, before opening her eyes.

"…No surprise there," Ren said. "With how aggressive she's been… and I haven't even seen her in the courthouse."

"It does sound like Sae-san," Akechi agreed. "Ever since I've met her… she's fought tooth and nail to be the best… so that she may prevail."

"A competition is a match of some sort…" Yusuke said. "Perhaps a martial-arts ring?"

"Well, Sis does know kickboxing…" Makoto trailed off.

"Jeez, and with how tall she is?" Ren winced. "She must kick some serious ass."
"Well, she is Makoto's sis," Ryuji snickered.

"Come on, boys, save the banter for later!" Anne chided, before pulling out her phone. "Let's plug it in… Sae Niijima… Courthouse… Martial Arts Ring?"

"Conditions have not been met."

"How about an arena then?" Haru suggested. "Or a stadium?"

Annnd another negative.

"There are other competitions where fighting is not involved," Akechi said. "I feel that is the case here."

Futaba perked up. "It's gotta be gambling, then!"

"Racetrack?" Ryuji suggested. "Oh, maybe pachinko!"

"Does that even count as gambling…?" Ken asked.

"It better!" Ryuji huffed. "You have any idea how much money I used to blow at the arcade on those?!"

Gambling… There had to be something they had missed.

"You played cards at the school trip," Morgana said. "What was that game called…?"

"Blackjack," Ren supplied.

"Don't forget poker," Anne chimed in.

Wait a minute…

"It's a casino," he and Makoto said in unison, only to stare at each other for a moment. They then quickly whipped their heads away.

"Candidate found."

"Ah, you got it!" Haru clapped her hands together. "Good job, Mako-chan, Ken-kun!"


Makoto just winced. "…Let's just go inside, already."

"Sheesh, someone's impatient today." Futaba clicked her tongue.

But they slipped into the Metaverse. They were forced to sneak to the actual Palace, though. The casino was bright and flashy, almost blinding their eyes with the light.

"How odd…" Akechi mused. " Everywhere else seems to be a normal cityscape."

"Look at that…" Yusuke pointed over to the building next to the casino.

"Looks like a police station to me," Ren said.

"It is," Makoto confirmed. "I'd recognize that anywhere."
"I had no idea they were right next to each other..." Haru breathed.

"It does make sense," Ken said. "Transporting the accused to the courthouse... It'd be easier if the station is closer."

"I suppose you're right on that," Morgana said. "Still... a police station... never a good sight for a Phantom Thief."

"Our attire hasn't changed, though..." Akechi mused. "Does that mean Sae-san doesn't see us as a threat yet?"

"...You seem to have picked up fast," Ryuji said, staring at Akechi.

Akechi let out a nervous chuckle. "Forgive me, this is just my observations..."

"Correct observations," Ren said. "Kudos to you, Akechi."

"Why thank you."

"Maybe when we step inside the actual Palace, we'll transform," Morgana said. "You know that I always transform when I enter the Metaverse, so the rules don't apply to me."

Makoto then cast her gaze towards Akechi. "...Though that reminds me, we do need a codename for him."

"A name for myself..." Akechi let out a thoughtful hum. "What about all of you?"

"Well, I'm called Joker," Ren said.

"Joker?" Akechi asked, tilting his head. "Why is that?"

"Well, it's because he's like our trump card," Morgana said. "His ability to adapt... change... it's part of why he's our leader!"

"Yeah, he's amazing," Anne agreed, smiling at Ren.

"I see..." Akechi pursed his lips, before his face suddenly lit up. "Aha! I have it!" Then he smiled proudly. "I want to be called Ace."

...Well, this was awkward. Ken couldn't help but fidget a little. He looked so proud too...

"Well, Akechi-" Ren began.

"Allow me to explain!" Akechi interrupted, holding up a hand. "I have been called an ace detective, after all. And the ace playing card... it can be the highest or lowest of the card deck. The joker and ace... we'll be a perfect team!"

Maybe Akechi should be an actor instead of a detective. That was... really dramatic.

...Even if it bordered arrogance.

Ryuji scoffed. "Someone's got his head up his a-"

"Ryuji, that's enough," Makoto quickly reprimanded, before she turned to Akechi. "I'm sorry, Akechi-kun, but you can't have Ace as your codename."
"Oh?" Akechi's brow furrowed at that. "Why is that?"

"It's kinda taken already," Morgana said, before pointing at Ken. Ken just gave an awkward little wave. "And he's been Ace for months now. You need a different codename."

"Oh." Akechi seemed to… deflate. "I see. That's a pity." He then seemed to study Ken. "May I ask why you have the codename Ace, though?"

Crap. How could he talk his way out of this? He didn't want Akechi to ask questions on why he was experienced with Personas and Shadows.

"Well, it's obvious once you get a second look," Ren said silkily. He looked like he was smothering a smile. "You see, Ken's talented in many departments. He's smart, athletic, and he can even cook. He even tied with Makoto in the last two exams." He then suddenly smirked. "The only part he's a bit iffy on is his experience with g—ywch!"

"Reeeeen…" Anne said through gritted teeth as she yanked harder on Ren's ear. "That's enough."

"Thank you, Anne," Ken said dryly before staring flatly at Ren. It was hard to ignore the way Makoto fidgeted nervously at Ren's words, though. And how Futaba was snickering at said fidgeting. "Moving on…"

"It's difficult to decide on when we have not even seen the costume in question…" Yusuke sighed.

"I see…" Akechi said. "So you used your outfit as a basis for the codename?"

"Yes, several of us decided on our codenames based on our appearance." Haru nodded. "Like you saw Anne-chan… her outfit resembles a cat so she goes by Panther."

"Oh, that does explain a lot." Akechi then rubbed his chin before letting out a thoughtful hum. "How about… Karusu, then? For raven."

"Are your clothes all black then?" Yusuke asked, raising an eyebrow.

"The reverse, actually," Akechi stated. "If our codenames are to hide our identities… wouldn't that be better?"

"That makes no sense," Futaba said bluntly before she jabbed a finger in Akechi's direction. "And besides, if you saw us in action, you have to know that we all have English codenames!"

"Raven, then?" Akechi suggested.

Anne let out a nervous giggle. "I don't think I'd be able to take that seriously… There's a superhero in a show I really liked watching as a kid. Her name was Raven." She then tilted her head. "If you want a bird that's black all over… why not go with Crow?"

"Crow…" Akechi tested it, before nodding. "How fitting. Crows have a reputation of being intelligent and adaptable, you know. It suits me perfectly, does it not?"

"…Ugh," Ryuji grumbled to himself, looking away with a huff.

Ugh was right… Should he remind Akechi that crows were also symbols of bad luck?

"So we're settled, then?" Morgana asked. "You will be known as Crow in the Metaverse."

"Got it." Akechi nodded. "Shall we head inside, then?"
Lively music seemed to echo from inside of the casino, but it did nothing to calm down Makoto's nerves.

"All right, so today I'm gonna go with…" Ren scanned from between them. "Well, Makoto's a given." He chewed on his lip for a moment. "Morgana. And… Akechi."

"Understood," Akechi said firmly.

"…Let's do this," Makoto said.

So Ren led them up the rooftop, as their usual method of entry. She just… never expected Sae's Palace to be so… so colorful.

"I must say…" Akechi panted out, "I did not expect this to be so tiring."

"Oh, quit your complaining," Ryuji huffed. "You think this is bad? Just wait until a Shadow blindsides ya."

"That may be but…" Akechi trailed off. "…Don't you feel restricted by your school uniforms?"

"It's not too bad," Ken stated, before he eyed Akechi. (Well, given how he used to run around in a school uniform while fighting Shadows, of course he'd find this easy.) "…But I suppose running and climbing in a peacoat isn't the most comfortable thing to do."

"Well, we are here at least," Yusuke interjected. "Let's get inside."

Ren nodded. "Yeah, we've got work to do."

So he opened the door and they slipped inside. The moment they stepped foot inside, the familiar blue flames flared up, engulfing their clothes. They were left in their Phantom Thief outfits.

"So it appears we are now viewed as a threat." Akechi looked down at his gloved hands.

"…Dude, are you really gonna be wearing that outfit?" Ryuji asked.

"It's just what he views as a rebel," Morgana stated.

"A rebel—" Ryuji scoffed. "He looks like he belongs in a marching band! And what's with that mask?!!"

"Uhhh, I think it's more of a fairytale prince," Anne said. "He kinda reminds me of Prince Charming from Destiny's version of Cinderella."

"It looks stupid," Ryuji declared. "That's not gonna help 'im blend in!"

"…Did you really just say that to Panther?" Futaba asked.

"Well… still! I think he looks dumb." He then looked at Ken. "I mean, at least Ace wears black!"

"Please don't drag me into this," Ken sighed.

"Even if he looks a little like Tuxedo Mask," Ren quipped, his usual grin on his face. "Though he could really use a rose."

Ken glowered at him for the crack. "The joke wasn't funny the first or second time, you know."
"Third time's the charm then!" Ren just smirked as Ken's indignant glare intensified.

Makoto coughed. "You look fine in the costume, Ace."

Ken faltered at that, a blush rising in his cheeks. "I… er… thank you," he stammered out, before his blush intensified as Ryuji and Futaba both started to snicker.

Though comparing Ken to Akechi, they… both had a princely look to them. Though their outfits were near flips of each other. Ken wore more black with splashes of white and orange, while Akechi wore white with embellishments of gold and red.

Though she really did prefer Ken's outfit. Ken looked really good in it. He may wear a blazer due to their school uniform, but there was something about Ken's Phantom Thief outfit that was so… dashing.

"…mental image of a person who sticks to the justice."

Wait, Akechi was speaking? Makoto quickly looked back to Akechi. Though out of the corner of her eye, she could see Ren smirking knowingly.

"Well, I think your mask is more apt to piercing than sticking…" Haru said, before she looked down to the crowd. "But that aside, the people down there look completely normal."

"But you saw the flashy signs, Noir," Futaba said. "We're definitely in a casino. This is Nijima's Palace."

"Ah, that's right, we should get Crow up to speed on cognitive beings," Yusuke said.

Ren nodded. "Yeah, that's right. So basically, cognitive beings are like… well, they're how the Palace ruler views people." He winced. "Like Kamoshida viewed Anne as well…"

"A hussy," Anne said flatly, all while scowling. "Who only existed to be Kamoshida's little cheerleader."

"Not to mention how Okumura viewed Noir…" Yusuke said darkly.

"Jeez, you're gonna throw 'im off with all those fancy terms…" Ryuji said.

Akechi let out a hum. "So, what you're saying is that… since these people look like normal people… Sae-san's view of others is surprisingly undistorted."

"You got it?" Morgana asked. "Color me impressed…"

Makoto frowned. That was… fast. Makoto's eyes traveled back to Ken, whose eyes were narrowed. He was also frowning slightly. He thought something was up… didn't he?

"But considering what I see… I find it hard to believe that this is not an ordinary casino," Akechi said. "How curious…"

"But not all cognitions are normal," Yusuke stated. "We had to fight the cognition of Futaba's mother in her Palace—"

"You had a Palace?!" Akechi gasped out, whipping his head towards Futaba.

Futaba pushed up her goggles, revealing a sour expression. "…Yeah," she said quietly. "People manipulated me into thinking that Mom killed herself because she hated me so much. I was stuck
in a labyrinth of my own heart."

"They… They did what?" Akechi said faintly. "I… I knew of your mother being dead but I… I didn't realize it was that horrible. I… I'm so, so sorry."

Akechi was… awfully shaken by this. But why? Then again, Akechi had only his mother in his life, if she recalled correctly. But still… something nagged at Makoto. That didn't feel like the whole story.

"It's fine, Crow," Futaba said. "Everyone saved me from myself."

Ken coughed. ". . .But as Fox was saying, we fought Futaba's cognition of Isshiki-san in her Palace. We also fought a cognitive self of Noir's fiancé as well as Okumura's cognition of Noir herself. And we should be careful. Not everything is what meets the eye."

". . .I wonder if Sis has any cognitive beings herself, though," Makoto murmured.

It could be anyone… Maybe Sae's boss, the SIU director. Akechi. Herself. Maybe even…

Their father.

She remembered envying Futaba for getting to say goodbye to her mother. Her father was suddenly ripped away from her too… She longed for the chance to say goodbye.

". . .Queen, don't," Haru murmured. Her voice was soft, but there was an urgency to it. "Try to focus on what's important."

". . .You're right," Makoto sighed. "It's not… right to focus on that."

"But is this what you have to go through every time?" Akechi asked, turning to Ren.

Ren nodded. "Yeah. Are you ready, Akechi?"

"I am somewhat nervous…" Akechi admitted. "But I want to rise up to the challenge."

"Just don't slow us down," Morgana told him. "Everyone plays their part in the heists."

"I will not allow that to happen," Akechi declared, pressing a hand to his chest. "I will prove myself vital to the operation, just you wait…!"

Makoto exhaled quietly, before her hand clenched into a fist. She couldn't explain it but his tone just… irked her. Ken caught her gaze before quickly rolling his eyes.

But then a movement caught her eye. Haru was twirling her index finger near her temple, before looking towards Akechi and then away. Since Akechi was looking straight at Ren, he wasn't noticing Haru's gestures. Makoto had to bite her lip so she wouldn't start laughing.

Morgana looked at the two of them sharply for a moment, before speaking. "But anyways, we should head inside. We're here to infiltrate, not talk, after all!"

"We do have our work cut out…" Yusuke mused. "We need to cut a path to the Treasure… and we need time to deliver the calling card to Niijima."

"So the calling card is a necessary step?!!" Akechi gasped, unexpectedly pumping his fist. "I just thought it was for show!"
"…Yeah, it is," Ren said. "But come on, Mona's right. Let's do this!"

So they took off, jumping from ledge to ledge. They were blocked from using the door they had found, but Ren looked back and forth before running to the wall and crouching. "Vent time, guys," he announced.

"Well, I think math class is a huge pain in the ass," Ryuji said with a smirk.

"Isn't it always?" Ren quipped before diving inside.

"I didn't expect us to do this at all," Akechi gasped. "I must say… it's impressive that you caught sight of that, Joker… Just how did you do that?"

"Trade secret," Ren said, a grin in his voice. "Sorry, can't tell ya."

Akechi looked like he wanted to protested but Ken nudged him in the side, signaling him to enter the vent.

It took them a while to pop out of the other side, but then Sae's voice cut through the air.

"Welcome. Come on out, petty thieves."

"She can see us?!" Ryuji yelped. "Oracle, you didn't sense her?!"

"Hey, I'm not in scanning mode right now!" Futaba retorted.

"You're after the Treasure, are you not?" Sae asked, breezing past their bickering. "Come on down, and I will tell you where it is."

Makoto squinted. Sae was wearing… a black dress. And a big hat.

"That's an obvious trap!" Morgana shook his head. "We're not gonna fall for that!"

Sae then chuckled. "It's not a lie. I want to do this fair and square."

"…There's gotta be some catch," Ken said with a frown.

"You're not going to run, are you?" Sae called up to them.

Ren gritted his teeth. "I guess… we can't really run," he sighed.

So they jumped down and approached Sae, who was flanked by two security guards.

And Sae's Shadow… she looked… er, interesting.

Bold, black eyeliner circled her bright gold eyes. The big hat on her head had bright yellow roses, with a couple of playing cards tucked into the large blooms. And the dress… Sae usually dressed so conservatively. But the dress she wore had a sheer cover, with the cut showing off her cleavage.

"The Treasure is located on the Manager's Floor, at the highest point of the building."

Like Ken said, there had to be a catch…

"But why are you telling us this?" Makoto asked.

"It's as I said before…" Sae shrugged elegantly. "I wish to go about this in the fairest manner possible."
Lies. Makoto's stomach clenched, just looking at her sister's Shadow. She wanted to protest—say something—but the words were stuck in her throat.

She wanted to ask: What changed? How could you spit on Dad's ideals so much? Do you even care about Dad anymore? She had so many questions and yet… she couldn't voice any of them.

Sae continued, "First, I ask that you come up to my location. We will continue this there…"

Then she snapped her fingers, making herself and the guards disappear.

Ryuji ran over to the railing, and they quickly joined him. Ryuji swore under his breath as he leaned over. "Dammit, that's cheating!" he shouted as the elevator ascended to the next floor.

"That's enough, Skull," Akechi said. "We must give chase."

"I do feel that something's up though…" Ren said before he heaved out a sigh. He rubbed his face for a moment. "But I guess we have no choice."

They hurried down the stairs and Ryuji pressed the button to go up.

"Authentication required. Please insert your member's card."

"Are you for real?!" Ryuji growled out before furiously jabbing at the button.

The automated voice kept playing again and again, before Ken grabbed his wrist. "…I don't think that will work, Skull," he said dryly before releasing Ryuji's wrist.

"Then what the hell are we supposed to do then?!" Ryuji cried out, before banging the glass door with a fist.

"Hmm…" Akechi rubbed his chin. "Casinos usually have a membership system called a player's club. Some locations are limited, based on your rank. Perhaps it is the same here."

"Where can we get such a membership then?" Haru asked.

"Something tells me it's not that simple…" Yusuke said. "…As it always is."

But then a Shadow suddenly stepped out, making Haru yelp.

"Annnnd here we go," Ren drawled out. He drew his dagger from his belt, tossing it in the air and deftly catching it by the hilt.

"It really won't be easy for us," Akechi mused.

"She must be challenging us… to challenge the security to make it to her," Yusuke stated. He then shook his head. "Bah. I should've known…"

The Shadow then transformed into well… a bipedal leopard, a sword in each hand.

"No need to worry," Akechi spoke up, staring at the Shadow. "I do need to prove myself to you all, don't I?"

"Are you sure you're going to be okay?" Ren asked. "We do things as a team, after all."

"Persona!" Futaba called out, summoning her Persona. But a gasp caught her attention.
Makoto turned around to see Futaba disappear into a glowing orb, rainbow flames flickering around it. "Oracle, your Persona!" she gasped out.

"Hehe!" Futaba chuckled. "Prometheus and I have your back!"

"Hah." Akechi smiled confidently. "Your aid is appreciated, but not need. Just watch." He then stepped forward, tearing off his mask. "Take them down, Robin Hood!"

His Persona leapt forward at Akechi's command, swinging his bow to send it crashing against the Shadow's head. The force was strong enough to make the Shadow crumple to the ground.

Ren let out a low whistle. "Damn, impressive." He then looked towards Makoto and Morgana. "Let's destroy him!"

They lunged forward and decimated the Shadow. Morgana then whipped around, giving Akechi a little nod. "Not bad for your first bout."

"And I'm capable of much more," Akechi said with a pleased smile.

"Is modesty part of the list?" Ken muttered under his breath.

"I beg your pardon, Ace?" Akechi asked.

"One victory is all well and good," Ken said dryly, "but you can get too cocky. I assume that you want to go after more Shadows?"

"Well..."

"Ace is right. We'll get ambushed and worn down too easily," Ren said.

"...Very well." Akechi gave a little nod. "I'll follow your lead then. Let's call it a day."

With winter rapidly approaching, it was getting dark faster. So it was nearly pitch black when Makoto and Ken made it back to his place.

She... didn't know what to think about Sae's Shadow. But she knew that it was going to get worse...

Fair and square... Except she didn't intend to... did she? Not with how she wasn't above to falsifying evidence to get the conviction she needed... Not when she so desperately wanted to capture the Phantom Thieves. No matter what the cost.

Ken was just inserting the key into the lock when he suddenly turned slightly. His hand stilled, and he turned to look at her. He didn't speak, just silently stepping forward and hugging her close.

Makoto curled into his embrace, before mumbling out, "I'm sorry..."

"Don't apologize," Ken murmured to her, suddenly cupping her cheek. His thumb brushed against her cheekbone for a moment. "I... I know it's difficult. I saw how hard it was for Haru to see her father's Shadow. And I know you look up to Niijima-san."

"There's so much I want to ask her," Makoto mumbled out as he lowered his hand. "What... What happened to her? I used to admire her so much. Her drive to change things from within... She wanted to punish criminals. And now she... I don't even know. I'm afraid of how she'd react to me being part of the Phantom Thieves."
Ken sighed quietly at that, suddenly smiling sadly at her. "Makoto…"

"I've accepted that she needs to be stopped," Makoto said. She swallowed the lump forming in her throat. "But... god. I don't want her to have gone off the edge. I want to believe that there's still good in her heart. That she still believes in justice... I didn't want it to have to end like this..."

"Futaba changed her heart for the better," Ken said. "Maybe there's hope for Niijima-san still. I don't know. I don't really know your sister that well..."

Though she would have to fix that... eventually. She would have to tell Sae that she was dating Ken at some point but... not now. She didn't even know how Sae would react to that kind of news, if she was being honest.

Makoto gave him a tiny smile. "Thank you, Ken."

Ken shrugged. "I really didn't do anything."

"You're there for me... that's more than enough."

Makoto then pushed herself on her toes, looping her arms around his neck and kissing him.

One of his hands slowly went to her waist, while the other cradled the back of her head. Makoto had to admit that she didn't really see why people enjoyed kissing so much but she... she understood now. His touch felt so good and she didn't want it to end. Maybe she could see why people enjoyed open-mouthed kisses so much-

But then the sound of someone clearing their throat pulled Makoto back to reality. Makoto pulled back to see that Shinjiro-san was staring at them, looking as flustered as she'd ever seen him. No... his expression was more... are you kidding me?

Makoto then let out a nervous chuckle, even as her face flushed at being caught. Again. "H-Hello, Shinjiro-san." Then she cursed to herself for her voice suddenly cracking. She hastily took a couple steps away from Ken. "We... um... we were just..."

"You're one to talk," Ken grumbled under his breath.

Shinjiro-san glowered at him. "Are you really gonna start this? Now?"

"Let's see..." Ken began to tick off his fingers. "I've walked in on you and Fuuka-san on the couch countless times. And the time you burned dinner because you two were... occupied with each other." Ken then gave his guardian a flat-eyed stare. "...Do I have to go on?"

"I've walked in on you two twice already," Shinjiro-san fired back. They really could go forever, couldn't they? "You've been together for half a week."

"Ah, um..." Makoto cleared her throat. "I-Is there a reason why you left the apartment?"

"Yeah." Shinjiro-san rolled his eyes. "Because someone had texted me that they were entering the building and I was wondering what was holding you two up."

"...Oh," Ken muttered.

"Yeah. Oh," Shinjiro-san repeated snarkily. Then he sighed. "...Just come inside," he grumbled
"It's getting pretty late and I'm guessing you haven't eaten since lunchtime."

"We had a lot going on today," Ken defended.

"Yeah, yeah…" Shinjiro-san huffed, turning so he can head back inside. "Though I guess I should be glad that neither of you have fainted from lack of food."

Ken rolled his eyes at him, before he slipped his hand into Makoto's. "Sorry about this," he muttered. "Shinjiro-san has a tendency to, well…"

"It's okay." Makoto then squeezed his hand. "…I don't mind."

She really didn't… She was a little nervous about talking to Shinjiro-san almost one on one, but the bickering between him and Ken… alleviated things a bit. Hopefully… this dinner would help her keep her mind off of her sister's Palace.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the wait! I got Fire Emblem 3 Houses at launch, and it ate into a lot of my free time. The PQ2 fic is more streamlined (and shorter) which is why it was updated earlier this month. Things also went a bit slowly, because I was working on a couple of Ann Takamaki Week pieces.

And the little joke about Akechi wanting the Ace codename… It's actually a bit of an inside joke with my friend angelrin89. You see, she has a lot of good ideas of tweaking Akechi's writing. And one of them is that his codename is Ace, and some of her reasoning is brought up by Akechi in this chapter.

But I hope this nice and long chapter made up for the wait!
The Plan

Chapter Summary

Futaba planting the bug on Akechi’s phone bears fruit, revealing that he and Shido are plotting to kill Ren. So in turn, the Phantom Thieves hatch a plan to prevent this, all while throwing Shido off their scent.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: there's a mild sex scene in this chapter. It's not explicit, but I thought I throw out a warning in case you're not comfortable with those kind of scenes. If you want to skip it all together, I suggest you check out the version on fanfiction.net.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Monday, October 31st, 2016

“They suspect nothing, Shido-san.”

Shido eyed Goro carefully. “So they’re really fooled, aren’t they?”

Goro nodded firmly. “Yes. They’ve let me join their ranks without much resistance.”

Shido scoffed in response to Goro’s answer. “They truly are children, aren’t they?” he asked, twirling a pen in between his fingers. “What a bunch of gullible fools.” Then he met Goro’s gaze. “…So tell me about the leader.”

“His name is Ren Amamiya,” Goro answered, pausing at Shido’s… perplexed expression. “A second year attending Shujin Academy. He is under the custody of Sojiro Sakura, and is on probation. For how long, I’m not sure… But it appears he must’ve committed a serious crime to be put on probation.”

“Or just your typical delinquent,” Shido scoffed, unimpressed. “Is there any other standouts?”

“Well…” Goro hesitated for a moment. He hadn’t missed the way Amada looked at him suspiciously during his story. “There’s… Ken Amada.”

Shido stilled for a moment, but then he narrowed his eyes at Goro. “Don’t just stand there and gawk,” he said acidly. “Tell me about him.”

“Well… he’s a transfer student from what I’ve garnered,” Goro explained. “From Port Island especially…”

“Port Island…” Shido repeated, his hand closing around the pen he had been toying with before he hissed out, “Kirijo. This is her doing.”
Goro frowned. “The incident from 2009? Surely he wasn’t involved… We were both children then.”

Goro had done his best to look into his information, but it was frustratingly veiled. The most he had been able to dig up was that he had been under the guardianship of a man named Shinjiro Aragaki since 2012.

“Don’t let him fool you, Akechi,” Shido said silkily. “Kirijo was a mere child of eight when she awakened to her power, according to my sources. It’s possible that he may have been involved then. Kirijo despises me.” He then scoffed, not bothering to hide his disdain. “That woman should just stick to what women do best.”

“Of course, Shido-san.” Goro plastered on a pleasant smile even though what he really wanted to do was take the gun in his pocket and shoot him in the face. But he couldn’t… he needed his revenge.

And of course Shido would think that. He wouldn’t have tossed his mother like yesterday’s trash if he didn’t think otherwise.

“But anyhow, keep tabs on Amada,” Shido continued. “We have no concrete proof yet… but I want that to change.”

Goro bowed his head. “I will, sir.”

There was something about him that… nagged at Goro anyways.

“Now then…” Shido steepled his fingers, looking straight into Goro’s eyes. “Let’s talk about how we’re going to cripple those thieves once and for all.”

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**Tuesday, November 1st, 2016**

Futaba had called for a meeting. Ren couldn’t help but be surprised that she found something *that* fast. It had been what… three… four days since she planted the bug?

“How bad is it?” Ren looked towards Futaba.

Futaba swallowed hard, before pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “…Just listen,” she said. She then fiddled with her laptop for a moment before a recording began to play.

“So you’re sure that you have their trust?”

Ren froze at that voice. It tugged at his memory. But… why?

Anne gently touched his wrist, snapping him back to reality. Right. He had to focus…

“I fed them a sob story about being wronged by authority, just like them,” Akechi scoffed. “They fell for it, hook, line, and sinker. They don’t suspect a thing.”

“Maybe we should’ve named him Rat, instead of Crow,” Ryuji hissed, only to be quickly hushed by Makoto.

“So the plan will go as planned,” Shido said. “The Phantom Thieves will follow their usual routine. But instead of them escaping to safety… we’ll ambush them.”
“Indeed,” Akechi agreed. “I’ll make up something… so they’ll confront Sae-san on the nineteenth. And your men will be mobilized, so we can corner them.”

“Once we eliminate the leader… the Phantom Thieves will be easy pickings.”

…Well, shit. He’d knew that Akechi was up to something but… Akechi and Shido wanted to kill him.

“…Eliminate?” Haru whispered. “I… I thought it was bad but…!”

Anne’s hand slid down to take Ren’s hand, her grip tight. Ren quickly squeezed back, to reassure his girlfriend that he was still here.

“So how will you do it?”

Akechi hummed. “Let me see… how about we say that he stole the guard’s gun and committed suicide? Too prideful to remain in captivity… So better die with some pride before he’s properly interrogated.”

“He’s one to talk about pride,” Yusuke said lowly.

“Very well. Do not fail me, Akechi.”

“Do not worry, Shido-san. I have a particular room I’ve got in mind. The incredibly small interrogation room. Public security questioning will occur on the first day… and with that room, my task will be simple.”

“And what about the guard stationed there? There will be questions for him. Questions he might not be able to answer without arousing suspicion. Is he on our payroll?”

“Yes, the guard will be one of ours. I’ll take him out, do not fret. And thus, the dangerous criminal responsible for the mass mental shutdowns shall end his own life. When he does, you will become a great hero who saved Japan from evil. As will I, of course.”

“You worry about sealing the deal for now instead of fantasizing of being seen as a hero. Don’t you dare screw this up or you’ll suffer the consequences.”

“Don’t you worry, Shido-san. This plan is foolproof.”

Then the recording went dead.

Ren just stared. He should have known that there was a catch. Akechi’s deal… it was too convenient. Not to mention his fishy behavior.

There were too many things that added up. He was the culprit.

“I want him… to pay for this,” Ren growled out. “He’s scum! Utterly despicable!” He drew his hand out of Anne’s so he could ball both into fists.

“You’re not the only one…” Futaba said flatly. “If he’s the culprit… he killed Mom. I… I…” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I want him to pay for everything he’s done ,” she hissed out.

“And he killed Father’s Shadow, right after we defeated him,” Haru added. She squeezed her eyes shut, her shoulders trembling. “He… He took away the chance I had to fix things with Father…” She then opened her eyes, revealing them to be devoid of Haru’s usual warmth. “I won’t forgive him for this.”
“Futaba, Haru, you both need to calm down,” Ken warned. “We can’t be impulsive with this.”

The unspoken words hung in the air: We can’t afford to this time.

“I… I’m sorry, Ken-kun, but I…!” Haru then stopped short, before she bowed her head. “…You’re right. We… We need to focus on how to save Ren-kun.”

“Just how are we going to fool Akechi.” Yusuke then swallowed hard. “Not to mention Shido…”

“Okay, we need to look at the facts,” Makoto said slowly. “It seems that Akechi is going to ambush us… which means he’ll bring in a police force from reality.”

“…Is that even possible though?” Anne asked tentatively.

“Non-Persona users have been brought into the Metaverse countless times,” Morgana stated. “Of course, all of you awakened, but there’s no rule that you have the… what’s the word…”

“We always called it the potential,” Ken said.

“Right, the potential,” Morgana said with a nod. “You don’t necessarily need the potential. But anyhow, the bottom line is that Akechi and Shido are looking to corner us.”

“He’s a disgrace to the Detective Prince name,” Yusuke said, his bottom lip curling in disgust. “Not to mention how he’s been working with Makoto’s older sister and yet he’s…”

“A crazy murderous maniac?” Ryuji offered.

“Aptly put, Ryuji,” Yusuke chuckled out, but it was… halfhearted.

“But we need a way to get both Akechi and Shido off of our backs,” Anne said, before she crossed her legs. “Or else they’ll keep coming after us…” She then gulped. “…But Ren especially.”

Ren swallowed hard. He tried to joke around, to put his friends at ease. But this time? He had nothing. Death… seemed to be staring at him, right in the face. And it was terrifying.

Holy hell, how did Minato-san accept that he was dying so easily? He didn’t want to die. Murdered by Akechi, of all ways to go… Not to mention Shido said that they were going to target everyone else… Panic was welling up inside of him. He had nothing—what were they going to do?!

Hifumi still easily trumped him at shogi. He was no chessmaster. He… He was doomed, wasn’t he?

“The police station…” Futaba murmured.

“…What?” Morgana asked.

“The police station is part of Makoto’s sister’s Palace,” Futaba said, a spark suddenly lighting up in her eyes. “Remember how Yusuke pointed out that there were different buildings aside from the casino, that looked completely ordinary. And Makoto confirmed it.”

“Okay, but how does that help us?” Ryuji asked impatiently. “Breaking Ren out is totally doable for us, but that doesn’t help us with Shido breathin’ down our necks!”

Futaba scowled at him, hopping to her feet and jabbing her index finger in Ryuji’s face. “Let me finish!” She then began pacing back and forth. “Just think about it…” she said. “Makoto brought up cognitive selves that her sister conjured up. What if… we tricked Akechi into shooting a
“Can Ren be considered a cognitive Ren-kun?” Haru echoed.

“We need to figure out what interrogation room Akechi is talking about,” Makoto said. “And… plant the cognitive Ren, so to speak?”

Futaba nodded furiously, her purple eyes growing bright with excitement. “Yeah! Akechi will think he’s killed Ren, but it’s really the cognitive self!”

“Wait, wait, wait, back up, Futaba,” Ken interjected. “They’ll be dragging Ren to the real world for this.”

“You underestimate me, Ken!” Futaba made a face at him. She then pulled her phone out of her parka’s pocket. “Look, I can activate the Nav remotely. Been experimenting a bit—”

“Of course you have,” Yusuke sighed.

“Shush, Inari!” Futaba grumbled out. “And then I just… need some kind of signal so I know when to drag Akechi to the Metaverse!”

“Maybe…” Ken pursed his lips, doubt written all over his face.

“I think it’s a good plan,” Haru said.

“…We would need Makoto’s sister to show Ren’s phone,” Yusuke said. “Furthermore, if this is to work, we can’t steal her Treasure. But we need to fool Akechi in that we are…”

“Okay, so we gotta make a decoy then,” Ryuji said. “Makoto, you think you can make somethin’ like that?”

Makoto bit her lip. “I think… I have an idea on what would work,” she said. “A briefcase… with something inside.”

“…But there is a catch with this, isn’t it?” Morgana asked.

Futaba winced. “Ren… you know already, don’t you?”

“I need to be captured by the police… don’t I?” Ren said quietly.

“Ren, NO!” Anne leapt to her feet, her blue eyes wide with panic. “You… You can’t be serious…!”

Ren then looked between all of his friends, before he looked to Anne. “It won’t be easy,” he admitted. “This plan… is crazily risky. But if we can pull this off, then this may be just what we need to pull the wool over Shido’s eyes. It’ll protect not just me… but all of you.” He then drew a deep breath. “…I’m in.”

Anne looked like she wanted to protest some more, but she just plopped back down into her seat, her eyes becoming listless.

“Okay, we need to determine the interrogation room, then,” Futaba said. “Should we all just go in tomorrow then?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Haru answered. “Shido may have eyes everywhere. If we continue to meet together like this… Shido may think it suspicious.”
“So a small group, then,” Ren said.

“I can check,” Makoto said quietly. “Who wants to join me?”

“I can,” Ken answered.

“Me too!” Haru chimed in.

“So the senpai, huh?” Ryuji tried to crack a smile, but it was too bright. “What do ya think, RenRen?”

Ren nodded. “That sounds good to me too. Makoto, Ken, Haru—just report your findings over the group chat. That sound good, everyone?”

His answer were several solemn nods.

Ren then stood up. “Good. Dismissed, everyone.”

Everyone slowly trickled out. Even Morgana, after Anne murmured something to him. Morgana then ran down the stairs, calling for Futaba to wait for him.

But Anne remained seated, her rosebud lips puckered in a melancholy frown.

Ren winced, before walking up to stand behind Anne. He brushed one pigtail out of the way, caressing her shoulder. He hoped that it could comfort her, even just a little.

“Look, Anne, I—”

“I don’t like this plan, Ren,” Anne said. “The idea of it failing terrifies me.” She then abruptly stood up to face him, tears sparkling in her eyes. She then suddenly latched onto him, burying her face against his shoulder. “I can’t lose you,” she sobbed out. “I can’t. You mean so much to me…”

Ren’s hands slid to her waist, hugging her close. “Anne, I’m sorry,” he murmured, taking a moment to inhale her sweet scent. “I’m sorry that I can’t guarantee anything.” He then tilted her chin up before kissing her. “But I’m gonna do my best when my part comes. I want to come back to you. I don’t want to leave you and everyone.”

“Ren…” Anne choked out, only for her expression to suddenly steel. She then pushed herself up to her toes, kissing him fiercely.

Ren held her close, kissing her just as fiercely. All of his senses drunk in Anne. Somewhere along the way, they stumbled over to his bed. Anne straddled his hips, tugging down his turtleneck’s collar so his throat was exposed.

“Anne.” Ren grabbed onto her wrist. “Wait—we may… uh… go a bit too far…”

Anne’s eyes then softened, and she slid away from him. She tucked her legs underneath her. “Ren… I’m ready,” she said seriously. “We’ve been dating for nearly three months… I love you. And… this kinda was a wake-up call. I want to experience everything with you…”

“Are you sure?” Ren pressed. “I don’t want to rush you into anything.”

Anne shook her head fiercely. “You’re not.” Then she looked at him pleadingly. “Ren… please,” she whispered. “I know we haven’t really talked about it but… I really want this.” She then bit her lip. “I… I want you.”
Ren then scooted closer to her, leaning in for a kiss. His teeth grazed against her bottom lip, drawing a breathy little moan from her.

“I hope you’re ready then, my lady,” he murmured, silently thanking Ken for buying condoms for him. Ken had been adamant that Ren take them, before emphasizing that he had no excuse for unprotected sex now.

“I am,” Anne murmured back, desire burning blue fire in her eyes.

Ren carefully unbound her pigtails, letting her hair fall in waves. Anne’s hands slid themselves in his hair, tugging as they leaned in for a kiss again. He slowly pushed Anne down onto the bed, before Ren moved down to press light kisses along her jawline and then nipping down her throat.

They spent a long time just exploring, gradually peeling their clothes off of each other. He wanted to burn the memory in his mind, Anne’s breathy I love you, all the little sounds she was making, how her bare skin felt underneath his hands…

He had never slept with someone before, his only ‘experience’ being sex scenes from movies and overhearing other boys bragging about scoring. But he thought that he was doing something right with how Anne gasped out his name. And… well. He discovered that he was into getting his hair pulled. A lot. He let Anne set the pace… he didn’t want to do anything that made her uncomfortable. And the way Anne touched him… simply made his skin burn. Her hands trailed a blaze everywhere she touched.

“Ren… no hickeys,” Anne gasped out, squirming underneath him as he nibbled at the juncture where her jaw met her neck. He had discovered a long time ago that it was a sensitive spot for her. “I have a shoot in a couple days…”

Ren just pulled away, smirking at her. “Well…” he drawled out, “I suppose I’ll have to leave them where nobody will look.” He then gave her bare breast a squeeze. “Like here, perhaps?”

“Ohh, just you wait, mister…” Anne groused out. “I’ll get you for this…”

“I don’t see you complaining, my lady,” Ren snickered, before replacing his hand with his mouth.

She certainly didn’t complain after that. And he thought that it felt nice to touch her breasts without any clothes in the way… But using his mouth beat that, hands down.

…Though Anne wasn’t lying when she swore that she would get revenge. Ren was used to being in charge, but damn, it was hot when Anne took initiative. Hecate may be her Persona now, but Carmen clearly left a mark on his girlfriend’s soul.

It seemed like ages before he ripped open the condom, but it felt so worth it. There was no need to rush. Their pace was slow at first, but gradually sped up. She was more than able to keep up with him, her hips rising up to meet his thrusts.

But after they finished their lovemaking, Anne quickly fell asleep. But not Ren. As happy as he was to share this moment with Anne, all he had found out today loomed over his head. He still was scared that the plan may not work. So much depended on this plan.

Ren drew Anne close to him, inhaling her sweet scent for a moment before kissing her on the temple. Sometimes it felt surreal that he had only know Anne for roughly half a year. His coming to Tokyo really felt like a lifetime ago.

This plan… it was risky. He couldn’t deny it. But he was going to do his damn best to make sure it
did succeed.

“This idea is rather risky.”

Shinjiro huffed at her, giving Mitsuru his almost trademark flat-eyed stare. “You don’t have to tell me twice, Mitsuru,” he retorted.

Mitsuru stifled the urge to roll her eyes at him, before she lounged against the back of her chair. She crossed her legs, before brushing a stubborn strand of hair out of her eyes. “…So, I assume that you asked Amada that you’d be the one to tell me because you have an idea to… tackle this issue.”

Shinjiro just gave a little smirk in response. “This was what I was thinking… the biggest part that bugs me is how they’re relying on Niijima to accept the phone from Amamiya. And Sakura would then use the phone to drag Akechi into the Metaverse. And I dunno if they can really rely on her.”

“You speak as if you’re well acquainted with Sae Niijima,” Mitsuru remarked, arching an eyebrow at him.

Shinjiro just scoffed. “Just the couple times I’ve talked with her are enough,” he groused, folding his arms over his chest. “She’s a real piece of work.” Then a smirk formed on his face. “Reminds me a little bit of how you were a total prissy princess when we first met.”

Mitsuru felt her face flush. “I may not have held myself with as much decorum as I should’ve… but you’re one to talk,” she retorted. “You were picking fights with Akihiko left and right!” She then inhaled, to try and calm herself down. Shinjiro truly had a talent in knowing which buttons to press. “…So, what’s this idea of yours?”

“I thought… why not have someone else drag Akechi into the Metaverse?” Shinjiro said simply.

Mitsuru’s eyes narrowed. “…And who would that be that someone?”

Shinjiro just snorted. “We know a couple Persona-users in the force,” he said nonchalantly—well, as nonchalantly as Shinjiro could pull off. “Take your pick.”

Mitsuru pursed her lips. Akihiko or Satonaka… “Well, we have until the twentieth,” she said finally. “I’m not sure if I’m comfortable with asking Akihiko, though. Minako would only be weeks away from her due date.” She then tapped her chin. “…Well, I suppose I could bring the idea to Akihiko and Minako. No promises on that…” She then exhaled. “…Though there’s Satonaka as well. I can pull some strings, so Satonaka will be able to slip away.” But then she frowned. “…Though I wish there was a way for us to monitor this,” she muttered out.

“There is,” Shinjiro said.

“Oh?”

“Kujikawa’s having a concert on the eighteenth,” he stated. “Thanks to Sakura’s hacking, we know that Shido and Akechi are planning on springing the trap on the nineteenth. That means Amamiya will be taken into custody on that day. We can hide Kujikawa in a more secluded area, and she can be mission control from a distance.”

Well… colored her impressed. “You’ve certainly put some thought into it.”

Shinjiro just responded with a shrug. “Kinda have to, with the stakes we’re dealin’ with.”
She wished that he was wrong. That he could afford to be wrong... But they couldn’t be complacent. They had to stay involved. Not with the lives of the Phantom Thieves at stake.

Wednesday, November 2nd, 2016

Haru wasn’t quite sure what she was expecting but the police station was just so... plain. Gray walls. Identical doors...

“What do you think, Queen?” Haru asked, turning to face her friend. “You’ve mentioned that you visited your sister here before...”

Makoto just gave a little nod, before folding her arms over her chest. “It definitely looks exactly the same to me...” she trailed off for a moment, before she shook her head. “...I remember getting rather lost, when I brought Sis a bento lunch.” She then grimaced. “...She has a bad habit of forgetting to eat lunch. If you let her, she’ll eat a granola bar for her lunch. So, I would make lunch for her so she would get the proper nutrition.”

It was Ken’s turn to grimace. “...She sound like Shinjiro-san’s anti-thesis,” he muttered, absentmindedly fiddling with one of his gloves. “We still need to track down that interrogation room.”

“It’d be in a dead end, wouldn’t it?” Haru asked.

Makoto just pursed her lips. “…I assume so,” she said with a little frown. “But I think we should check every room, just in case. We don’t want to loop around, because of an assumption.”

“Let’s split up, then,” Ken suggested. “We can cover more ground that way.”

Makoto nodded. “That sounds like a good plan.”

They all chose a nearby room. The room Haru chose was an office. It was all very... bureaucratic. Very standard. A desk, files neatly stacked on top... A bookcase, filled with law books. Not even a framed picture to hint who this office belonged to.

That was one off the list, at least...

Haru then stepped out of the room, just in time to see Ken disappear into the room Makoto went into. Haru couldn’t help but frowned. Maybe he was checking up on Makoto?

Would it be... awkward to enter the room? Should she wait for them?

“...this is definitely Sis’s office.” Makoto’s voice floated from inside.

“I see,” Haru heard Ken say.

“There’s one difference, though...” Makoto said. “There... There’s a picture of us with Dad here...”

Panic spiked inside of Haru. She shouldn’t be eavesdropping! It was wrong! Haru wrung her hands for a moment, before she took a deep breath. She quickly knocked on the door. “Um, Queen?” she called, before turning the doorknob. “Ace? I’m coming in...”

She then pushed the door open, only to see Ken take a hasty step away from Makoto. They had been... standing awfully close to each other... Haru quickly shook her head. She was... imagining
things. She turned her attention to Makoto, who was clutching a picture frame so tightly that her knuckles were nearly white.

“Queen?” she asked.

Makoto pursed her lips together. “…This is my sister’s office,” she said quietly, before she stared down at the picture frame in her hands. “But… I found one difference.”

Wordlessly, she extended her hand. A silent invitation for Haru to take it. So she gently took it, looking down at the wooden picture frame.

To the left, stood Nijijima-san. She looked like she was in her early twenties. Her silver hair was tied up in a high ponytail. Her smile was reserved, but her eyes… they told a different story. They shone with pride and accomplishment. Haru had noticed that there was almost an air of exhaustion to the real life Nijijima-san.

In the center was a man with Makoto’s dark brown hair, cut neatly. His eyes were brown—which made Haru unsure where Nijijima-san had inherited her reddish brown eyes. But then again, genetics could be strange sometimes… He beamed at the camera, pride radiating from him.

And to his right was Makoto. She was… fourteen? Fifteen? Definitely in junior high. Her hair was slightly longer back then, a dark blue headband pushing her bangs out of her face. She looked more… lighthearted. Haru had to wonder what exactly happened to cause Makoto to change in demeanor.

“…This was during Sis’s graduation from law school,” Makoto said softly. “Just a few months before… before Dad died.”

Haru bit her lip. “…I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

Makoto squeezed her eyes shut. “I just want her back.” Her voice suddenly broke, and she seemed like on the verge of tears. “I… I’m s-sorry. It’s one little thing and I just had to be set off…”

“Don’t degrade yourself.” Ken suddenly grasped Makoto’s wrist, his gaze gentle as he looked at her. Haru couldn’t help but fidget a little bit. “There’s nothing wrong with feeling upset over this.”

Why didn’t they just… do something about it? At least she had a reason for not speaking up about her crush. Ren was happy with Anne… and sometimes it was hard to see Ren casually flirting with Anne. But they were happy together… and that was the important part.

But Ken and Makoto did not have that excuse. Maybe she should take a leaf out of the movies’ books… Haru wasn’t a big fan of romance movies (it had no substance), but locking a couple in a room should work, right?

“…But why is it here?” Makoto asked quietly. “I visited Sis right before the Sunday before the festival, to ask Akechi-kun if he could come be the guest speaker. Sis doesn’t have this picture in her office in reality…”

“Maybe…” Haru began tentatively, “…it’s on her mind then.”

“What do you mean by that?” Makoto asked.

Haru traced the frame with her index finger. “Your father was a police officer, right?” At Makoto’s nod, she continued. “He strongly believed in justice… Maybe your sister knows, deep in her heart, that she shouldn’t be doing this. Abusing and twisting the law… manipulating the evidence, so it’s
in her favor. Maybe she still remembers what she wanted, when she became a prosecutor in the first place.”

Makoto pressed her lips together until it formed a thin line. “I… I hope you’re right.”

But that was when footsteps sounded. Haru’s heart thudded hard as she exchanged panicked expressions with her friends. Just who was here?!

Then the person appeared in the doorway. It… It was Goro Akechi.

“Akechi-kun?!” Makoto gasped out. “Wh… What are you doing here?”

There was something… off. Akechi-kun was wearing his tan peacoat. He wasn’t Crow.

“Oh, Niijima-san.” His smile wasn’t his usual charismatic smile. It seemed more… genuine. “I didn’t know you were visiting. Are you here to bring Sae-san a bento lunch today?”

“Yes!” Makoto blurted out, enthusiastically nodding. “H-Have you seen Sis? I er… haven’t seen her anywhere.”

“Unfortunately, no,” he answered, shaking his head. (Akechi-kun couldn’t be this gullible…) “I was hoping that she would be here but…” He heaved out a sigh, a small frown forming on his face. “…Sae-san has been in and out so much. She’s really been running herself ragged.”

“It’s the Phantom Thieves case,” Ken stated. “She really is keen on finding them.”

“It’s not that simple, Amada-kun,” Akechi-kun stated. “I’m not privy to everything but… I get the feeling that Sae-san must succeed… or there will be consequences.”

“Consequences…?” Haru asked.

Akechi shook his head. “Again, I don’t know everything. But I can’t help but worry…” Then he flashed Makoto a charming smile. “At least she has a kind sister to look after her.”

…Huh? Where did this come from?

“I… ah… thank you…?” Makoto asked slowly. She looked almost… bewildered by his words. “It’s nothing, really…”

Makoto’s discomfort was… palpable. Haru couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable herself. Haru quickly averted her eyes, before her eyes landed on Ken. Her friend had his arms folded over his chest as he scowled rather darkly at Akechi-kun.

“Oh, please don’t downgrade it, Niijima-san,” he said. “I’m especially envious when Sae-san receives a bento lunch from you. I would love to receive a handmade lunch from you.”

Was… Ken’s eye twitching? She wasn’t imagining it, was she? Though Haru couldn’t help but feel a bit… unsettled by what Akechi-kun was implying. Because well… usually a family member would do that…

”It’s nothing special, really,” Makoto protested. Her stance was completely rigid. “I know that I could improve my cooking so much…”

“It still would be nice to receive it from you,” Akechi-kun said, flashing Makoto yet another smile. He then took Makoto’s hand, even though she was still rather stiff. “Though perhaps I could settle for a d-“
“You keep your hands off her!”

There was a flash of black, and the next thing Haru knew, Akechi-kun was lying flat on the ground, out cold. There was a growing welt on his face where Ken had punched him.

Without another word, Ken then stormed off, his cape almost swishing angrily behind him. Haru looked down at the unconscious Akechi-kun. At least that solved one thing… Though er… that didn’t answer a whole lot…

“Queen… what was that about?” Haru ventured.

“His behavior…” Makoto frowned. “I think… he must be Sis’s cognition of Akechi-kun.”

Haru’s eyes widened. “She truly views Akechi-kun as that…?”

Makoto then sighed, closing her eyes. “Well… sometimes I think that Sis prefers his company to mine. I can’t tell you how many times she’s called me, saying that I should just eat by myself. Because Akechi-kun wants sushi for dinner or the case was too important and she and Akechi-kun really needed to look over this.”

“Mako-chan…” Haru said quietly.

Though his behavior towards Makoto… did Niijima-san hope that they would end up together?

“It’s fine. I’m more concerned about what he said, regarding about Sis’s worry of there being a consequence for failure…” Makoto then bit her lip, before shaking her head. “…I’m going to check up on Ace,” she said.

“Oh, let me come with you, then—” Haru began.

“Just let me talk to him first,” Makoto said. “It’s okay… It’ll be quick.”

Without another word, she then left to go find Ken. Haru frowned. No… it didn’t feel right. She had to check up on them… Especially since she was pretty sure that Ken had punched the cognitive Akechi-kun for getting too comfortable with Makoto out of jealousy.

So she left the room, searching for wherever Ken had went. Her search took her down another corridor. She found that the door was left slightly ajar, so she quietly pushed it open to see that Ken and Makoto were in a room that was definitely not an office.

“T’m fine,” Ken said tersely.

“You’re not,” Makoto insisted, grabbing him by the shoulder. “You… You….” She trailed off for a moment. “…Wait a minute. Are you jealous?”

…Huh? The way Makoto was talking, it was like…

Ken stiffened at that. “I’m not…” he mumbled out. Makoto then narrowed her eyes, before punching him in the shoulder. The force was strong enough to send him stumbling a few steps. “Ow!” He massaged his shoulder for a moment. “What was that for?!?”

“You think I’d ever go for Akechi-kun?” The distaste was clear in Makoto’s voice. “He’s degrading, rude behind a mask of politeness, not to mention arrogant.” She then stepped closer to Ken. “How do you think I feel about the girls?” she added quietly.

“…You know I don’t like the girls’ attention.”
Makoto gave a small huff, folding her arms over her chest. “And I wouldn’t like something similar from Akechi-kun.” Then she lowered her arms. “Make me forget the way he touched me.”

Ken then looked to her, before he pushed up Makoto’s mask so it rested on her forehead. Then he lowered his head to kiss her. Makoto’s fingers slid through his hair as he drew her closer, hands on her waist. What… How long has this been going on?!

Then a strangled sound reached her ears. It took Haru a moment that it came from her. She immediately clamped a hand over her mouth, but… it was too late.

They instantly yanked apart, both of their heads whipping towards her direction.

“I… um,” Haru stammered out, before she stepped closer to the two of them, “I know you said not to follow—and are you really together?!”

That was when they blushed, their sheepish smiles being the only answer Haru needed.

Haru beamed at them before catching them both in a hug. “I’m so happy for the both of you,” she said, before she smiled knowingly at Makoto. “So much for just being friends, hmm?”

“That… That was before I realized it!” Makoto’s blush deepened at that.

Haru giggled for a moment, before she frowned at them. “…But why the secret?”

They exchanged a look, before Ken rubbed the back of his neck. “Well…” he said slowly, “it’s not like we intended to keep it a secret forever… Just until things calmed down with Akechi.”

“Oh,” Haru said quietly. “So how long have you been together, then?”

“Um, a week,” Makoto answered.

“That’s not as long as I thought,” Haru admitted. “Though…”

“Though…?” Ken repeated warily.

“After we find the interrogation room, I’m calling a meeting,” she announced. “You’re telling everyone else!”

They both immediately paled at that.

“S-So soon…?” Makoto stammered out.

“Yes.” Haru folded her arms over her chest, raising an eyebrow. “Is that a problem?”

 “…Of course not, Noir.”

“So… what’s this meeting for?” Ryuji asked. “I thought you were just gonna confirm if we’re all good over text? Right, Ren?” He turned his head to see Ren was absentmindedly playing with Anne’s hair. Ryuji groaned. “Helloooo? Are you back on Earth yet?”

“Huh?” Ren snapped to attention. “You say something, Ryuji?”

Futaba just burst out laughing at the chagrined expression on Ryuji’s face.

…Sometimes he swore that he needed a spray bottle for the two of them.
“Sorry, buddy, it’s just been… a long day, you know?” Ren shrugged weakly. “Hearing the gossip about us…”

“At least our class doesn’t join in on the gossip,” Anne offered.

“Uh huh, that’s why you were getting all cuddly in front of us!” Ryuji retorted.

“Ahem!” Haru cleared her throat, before looking pointedly at both Ken and Makoto. “Ken-kun and Mako-chan have something to tell you, though.”

Ken coughed into his hand. “It’s just… well—”

“Ken and I… have been dating for about a week,” Makoto blurted out.

There was a silence. For about ten seconds. And then—

“HA!” Futaba crowed, jumping to her feet. There was a victorious grin on her face as she held out her hand expectantly. “I win! Pay up, suckers! So much for me losing, right?!”

Somehow, Ken was not surprised. His girlfriend, on the other hand…

“You… You bet on us?” Her face skipped turning pink, jumping right to bright crimson. “This… This is just unbelievable!”

“I’m not,” Ken deadpanned.

“WHAT?!” Makoto whipped around to face him, incredulity written all over her face. “They… They bet on us, Ken!”

Ken just shrugged. “Maybe I’ve been desensitized, then. Junpei-san and Minako-san would bet over everything under the sun…” He then grimaced for a moment. “They even bet over whether or not I would find a girlfriend by the time I graduated from junior high. Junpei-san was sure that he’d win…”

Now that had been embarrassing.

“Good thing that he lost that bet, huh, Makoto?” Ren called out, his typical smirk on his face.

“Did… Did you really see it all coming?” Makoto asked.

“Uh, duh,” Futaba said flatly. “You were always giving Ken heart eyes. Ken was just too dumb to see it.”

“Hey!” Ken protested.

“Well… Ken-kun… you have to admit that you were rather dense about Mako-chan’s affections,” Haru said delicately. “It wasn’t like she was subtle about it.”

“Haru!” Makoto gasped.

“Well, it’s not like Haru’s lying…” Anne trailed off.

“You all are horrible,” Makoto grumbled out.

Ryuji snickered. “Well, I may be three thousand yen poorer—”
“You bet three thousand yen over this?!”

Ken made a mental note to never tell Makoto about some of the crazy bets Minako-san and Junpei has made over the years. Makoto would probably get a stroke.

“—but I’m happy for ya!” Ryuji said hastily, before flashing them a thumbs up. “It’s ‘bout time!”

“A fine match,” Yusuke declared. “But I must ask that I—”

“No,” he and Makoto chorused, their voices firm.

“What?!” Yusuke sputtered. “But you didn’t even hear me out!”

“We don’t have to,” Ken said flatly. “You wanted to paint us like Adam or Eve, didn’t you?”

“That’s—” Yusuke’s jaw dropped, before his eyes seemed to bug out of his head, “—how did you know?!”

“It’s not like you’re subtle about this kind of thing, Yusuke,” Morgana grumbled out.

That was when the door opened, and Shinjiro-san stepped inside. “Sheesh, you’re making a huge ruckus,” he grumbled out. “What’s going on?”

His friends called out various greetings, before Anne said, “Ken and Makoto were just telling us that they’re dating now. Did you know yet?”

Shinjiro-san just snorted. “Didn’t have to be told,” he grumbled out. “Walked in on them suckin’ face already. Twice.”

“Twice?!” Ryuji burst out laughing. “In just a week?!”

“Oh my…” Haru started to giggle, though at least she had the grace to try and muffle her giggles by holding a hand to her mouth.

“Great… there are two now,” Morgana grumbled out.

“Can’t keep your hands to yourself, huh?” Ren smirked. “Wouldn’t have pegged you two to be like that.”

“You… You of all people can not say that!” Makoto protested.

“Shinjiro-saaaaan…” Ken groaned out, dragging his hands down his now burning face. “Why.”

Shinjiro-san’s only response was to smirk. “Payback’s a bitch, Ken.”

Sunday, November 20th, 2016

Amamiya was getting close to wrapping up his story. Sae wasn’t sure if she believed his fantastical story. Amamiya may be drugged and he seemed utterly convinced in his story… but it was just so… so bizarre. Sae still struggled with wrapping her mind around it. And the idea that there were other groups of “Persona-users” was even more ludicrous. Especially the fact that Mitsuru Kirijo supposedly led a secret government unit staffed by these so-called Persona users.

But then Amamiya seemed to space out, his dark eyes glazing over. Sae snapped her fingers in
front of his face, making him flinch. “Hey… are you still with me?” she asked, before crossing her
arms. “You entered my Palace. What happened after that?”

Amamiya blinked slowly. He pressed his forehead. “…Don’t remember why…” he slurred out.
Once again, Sae cursed the fact that those fools drugged him. It wasn’t enough to just inject him
once. No, they injected him five bloody times. “…But we had a meeting on the second.”

“What was it about?” Sae pressed.

“Haru was… excited,” Ren said. “She caught Makoto and Ken… making out. They finally got
their crap together.”

It took Sae a moment to digest what exactly Amamiya had said.

Makoto and that Amada boy… they were what?! Makoto was far too young for that kind of
relationship! And Aragaki… he-

Wait. That was months ago. And according to Amamiya, Amada and Aragaki had moved out to
Tokyo in June. She had met Amada in August. And since then, three months would have passed…
sufficient time for Makoto to develop feelings for the boy. Had she really been so neglectful that
she wouldn’t notice her little sister having romantic feelings for someone?

Sae gritted her teeth for a moment, before she clutched at the edge of the table. “Tell me everything
you know,” she demanded. “How long have they been together?!"

Amamiya just blinked at her, as if he didn’t comprehend. “Er… A few weeks? I did just say that
this happened on the second…”

A few weeks… so Makoto hasn’t been sneaking around her for months at least. But still…! How
could Makoto not tell her?

“Would you have cared?” Amamiya’s eyes suddenly focused on her. “If she came to you and told
you about this?”

“I…” Sae’s voice suddenly caught in her throat.

Why couldn’t she answer? Of course, she would have! Makoto was her little sister, her flesh and
blood. Her only remaining family. She remembered holding Makoto as a newborn. Their mother
had been sleeping, completely spent from labor. But their father had crouched in front of Sae,
before he said something.

“You’re a big sister now. You’ll always look out for her, won’t you?"

Sae swallowed hard. Except… she hadn’t. She didn’t realize that Makoto had been a Phantom
Thief for months. Five months. Nearly half a year. And now… she apparently was in a romantic
relationship with someone for weeks.

…Though she wasn’t sure what kind of person this boy was, especially with that rude guardian of
his…

“I… need answers.” Sae stood up. She had to speak to Makoto about this, she needed a
confirmation—

“…Aren’t you forgetting something?” Amamiya asked, tilting his head. “What happened to
interrogating me?”
Sae gritted her teeth. Blast it… he was right. Especially since the clock was ticking. She forced herself to sit. She’d deal with this new… tidbit later.

“…Fine. Continue with your story.”

Thursday, November 3rd, 2016

“More and more paperwork…” Ken grumbled out, before running his fingers through his hair. “I swear the faculty just loves to dump their work on you.”

Makoto just laughed softly, giving her boyfriend an amused look. “You didn’t have to accompany me today, you know. You could have gone home after school.”

Ken shrugged. “Between schoolwork and our… extracurricular activities… I should take the time I can get with you.”

Makoto couldn’t help but blush. While there was no denying how charismatic Ren was, she couldn’t help but prefer Ken’s thoughtfulness. It was just… sweet.

“…Flatterer,” she managed to mumble out, turning her head away so Ken wouldn’t see her blushing like a lovestruck schoolgirl.

“Just speaking the truth,” Ken said, almost nonchalantly, before he turned her face back to look at him. Then he leaned in for a short, yet sweet kiss.

But then Makoto pulled him in for another kiss. Every time Ken kissed her… she felt so warm. He seemed to wait for her to set the pace. Though she couldn’t help but wonder it would be like to sit in his lap while kissing him-

Then two piercing sounds interrupted their session. Oh, for the love of…

“I thought Ren said that we’re not going to the Palace today,” Ken grumbled out, reaching into his pocket to pull out his phone. “I asked him earlier this morning, when I ran into him at the train station…”

“Well, you know Ren,” Makoto sighed. “He usually takes at least a week before we go into a Palace…”

And while she understood why Ren did that, she couldn’t help but feel especially antsy this time. They had over two weeks to tackle Sae’s Palace…

But she couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow as she read the text message, which happened to be from Ryuji. “It’s Ryuji… He says that we shouldn’t be sitting on our hands?” She shook her head, chuckling quietly. “…Somehow, I feel that those aren’t Ryuji’s words.”

“Most likely Morgana,” Ken summarized, before he reached for his bag. “We’re pretty much done here, aren’t we? We better get going before we get bombarded with text messages.”

After Makoto slipped the finished paperwork into a folder and slipped it in her bag—she’d take care of the last bit at home tonight—she stood up. Then Ken took her hand.

Makoto’s fingers curled around Ken’s palm as they walked out of the school. Holding Ken’s hand felt… nice. She remembered that it had felt… awkward holding Ren’s hand, during their stint of
fake dating. But it was completely different when she held Ken’s hand.

She then let out a soft sigh, looking up at her boyfriend. “This is nice,” she said softly. “Things have been really crazy since well…” She heaved out a sigh. “…Akechi-kun joined us.”

Ken’s grip just tightened at that. The plan… she couldn’t help but second guess it. Was it good enough? It had to. Ren would die if they failed…

“But then again…” Ken said suddenly, “…things are always crazy for us.”

“…Can’t argue against that.” But Makoto’s lips quirked up in a smile. She appreciated him trying to change the subject a bit. She needed to have faith. If she didn’t believe in the plan, they would be doomed to fail. “Sometimes I can’t believe the reason you moved out here was because you wanted to keep tabs on the Phantom Thieves.”

Ken rolled his eyes at her, giving a small huff. “Look at who’s talking. You weren’t exactly on good terms with everyone when I first moved out here.”

Makoto just looked at him with an embarrassed blush on her cheeks. He just had to remind her. She knew that he said it all jest, but still…! “You…”

“Are absolutely correct?” Ken asked, raising an eyebrow. She didn’t know if she wanted to smack it off or shut him up with a kiss. “Why yes, yes I am.” Makoto let go of his hand, before socking his shoulder lightly. “Ow.” Ken rubbed his shoulder, but Makoto knew perfectly well that it didn’t hurt him.

“Ren’s really a bad influence on you,” she grumbled with a shake of her head. “And don’t even pretend that hurt. I barely hit you.”

“I’ve seen what you can do when you’re trying.” Ken gave her an amused smile. “Even when you’re not trying, you hit hard.”

It was Makoto’s turn to huff. “Oh hush.”

But they fell into a companionable silence. Makoto didn’t mind though. His company was enough. Though Ken pulled out his phone, texting someone—Shinjiro-san, she presumed.

“Texting Shinjiro-san?” she asked. They were meeting up, after all.

Ken let out an affirmative hum before giving a small nod. Then he pocketed his phone. “He wants to know if you want to come over for dinner tonight.”

“Oh…” Makoto’s eyes widened for a moment. “I’d love to.”

“I’ll let him know,” Ken said with a smile. But then his brow suddenly furrowed, a thoughtful expression on his face.

Makoto couldn’t help but frown. Was something wrong?

“…Hey, Makoto?” he asked.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Nothing’s wrong.” He gave her a small smile. “I just…” he trailed off for a moment. “I was wondering if Ren doesn’t call us to go into the Palace on Sunday… do you want to do something together? Just the two of us?”
“Oh!” Makoto’s eyes widened. That made perfect sense now that she thought about it... “Ohhh…” Then she blushed, before fingerling the hem of her skirt. Their first date...! That was exciting to think about, even though Makoto couldn’t help but feel a little nervous at the same time... “I’d love to...” She smiled at him shyly. “But what were you thinking...? Like, dinner and a movie?”

“Ah...” Ken’s eyebrows furrowed together.

Makoto couldn’t help but feel a spike of panic. That was the typical date set-up, wasn’t it? Or maybe it was just... too boring? She should’ve suggested something more interesting-

“That sounds nice but...” Ken said slowly. “I was thinking... Seaside Park.”

Makoto blinked at him. “Seaside Park...” she repeated.

Did he remember their discussion at Destinyland? That was awfully sweet of him.

Ken frowned. “W-Well, if you don’t feel up to it, your suggestion is-“

“Nonono!” Makoto blurted out, waving her hands back and forth for a moment. “F-Forget I said dinner and a movie! I don’t even know what’s even airing right now!” She then coughed, all while blushing furiously. There were people staring at them... She was practically shouting, after all. “I-I mean, that sounds great.”

Ken smiled gently at her. “I’m glad.”

Makoto then cleared her throat, an embarrassed flush still burning in her cheeks, before looking towards the train station, which was in sight. “We should probably get going... see what exactly Morgana has in mind for us.”

What a long day... Makoto didn’t know why she felt so spent. She even ended up sleeping on the train.

“Makoto, this is our stop.” Ken was shaking her awake.

Makoto blinked her eyes open. “I... I’m awake.”

“I can see that,” Ken chuckled, before taking her hand. His grip then tightened on her hand as they squeezed their way out so they wouldn’t get separated.

“Sorry for being so tired,” Makoto stifled a yawn. “I just... This bout in Mementos was so... exhausting.”

“Don’t feel bad,” Ken reassured. “Mementos is tiring. Though spending so much time in Tartarus sometimes made you sick. At least Mementos doesn’t have that.”

Makoto wrinkled her nose. “Tartarus really seems rough.”

“Oh, you don’t have to tell me,” Ken said. “It had nearly three hundred floors.”

Makoto cringed. “I hope Mementos doesn’t have nearly as many floors.”

Ken huffed out a laugh. “You don’t have to tell me twice.”

They then entered the lobby. It took a couple of minutes for the elevator to reach the bottom floor. Once they were inside, Makoto leaned her head against Ken’s shoulder. He ran his fingers through
her hair, the sensation drawing out a pleased hum from Makoto.

The elevator eventually pulled to a stop, before the doors slid open. Makoto straightened up once they did, following her boyfriend to the door. Ken opened the door after a moment of fishing through his bag for the key.

“Shinjiro-san, I’m home,” he called out, before he toed off his shoes. Makoto slipped off her boots, neatly setting them by the door.

“Hey,” Shinjiro-san called back, though his attention was on the stove. “Good timing. Dinner will be done in a few.”

“I’ll make tea, then,” Ken said.

Again, Makoto was struck with the domesticity. Last time she was over for dinner, Shinjiro-san had dragged Ken into helping him with dinner. They bickered, Shinjiro-san griped about how he caught them in the hallway, and yet Makoto could sense the affection underlining his gruff attitude.

Makoto couldn’t remember the last time she had gotten a home cooked meal by someone else, before she had met Ken. Dad did his best, but he could only manage the most basic meals.

Makoto then shook her head. She was a guest. She should try and offer some help…

“If you wanna.” Shinjiro-san then pointed to a drawer. “Plates are in the cabinet above. If you’re not feeling up for tea, we’ve got juice in the fridge.”

“No, tea’s fine,” Makoto answered.

And as Shinjiro-san promised, dinner was served within a few minutes. Just smelling it made Makoto’s stomach rumble. She had no idea what Shinjiro-san did to make his food taste and smell so good. He really was capable of magic in the kitchen.

“So…” Shinjiro-san looked between them. “…You two look like crap. Was it that bad today?”

“Thanks, Shinjiro-san,” Ken huffed out before rolling his eyes at his guardian. Then Ken blew at his tea, before taking a careful sip. “Mementos is Mementos, I suppose. It’s tiring. It felt like we stayed there for the longest time.”

Makoto nodded. “It was just… rough today.” She then lifted a morsel of food to her lips. “Though I suppose it’s a relief to handle that cheating Shadow…”

It was… odd, speaking of fighting Shadows with someone else aside from her friends. While Sojiro now knew of Ren and Futaba being Phantom Thieves, she doubted that either of her friends brought it up and discussed it with him.

Shinjiro-san snorted. “Fighting Shadows will always kick your ass. Dunno why Mitsuru and Minako wanna do it as part of their job.”

Makoto’s brow furrowed together for a moment. Ken had explained what the Shadow Operatives were, but she was still confused about some things…

Ken then paused in eating, looking at her. “…Is something the matter, Makoto?”
“Oh no, it’s nothing wrong!” Makoto waved her hand. “It’s just… well, the way Shinjiro-san’s talking makes it sound like he’s not a Shadow Operative.”

“I’m not,” Shinjiro-san answered. “Outta all of us, only Minako and Aigis are full timers. Mitsuru’s got the Kirijo Group to worry about, so she usually defers leadership to Minako. Aki, Takeba, and Iori are part of the reserve team, since they rather focus on their jobs and in Takeba’s case, her kids. I guess Ken could be considered a reserve too with this mission.”

Makoto blinked. “…Not you and Fuuka-san?”

“Fuuka-san still helps out,” Ken said. “She’s the reason why we knew of the Shadow activity in the first place.”

Shinjiro-san nodded. “Yeah, Mitsuru asked her to do scans, after Kamoshida confessed.”

Fuuka-san… sounded really powerful, regarding her scanning capabilities. Tokyo was rather far away from Port Island. She couldn’t help but wonder how Futaba compared to her two older counterparts.

“But what about you, Shinjiro-san?” Makoto couldn’t help but ask.

Shinjiro was about to take a bite of food, but he put down his chopsticks at Makoto’s question. “I’ll help out if I’m needed, but I don’t go chasing after that kind of life. Feels more like an old part of my life.”

Would… she ever feel that way about being a Phantom Thief? Would she look at it as a closed chapter when she was older? The thought… unsettled her. She just… loved being a Phantom Thief. It brought her freedom.

“…But anyways, enough on that.” Shinjiro-san looked straight at Makoto. “…Ken’s mentioned to me that you wanna be a cop.”

Makoto gave a little nod. “That’s right… I was thinking about how corrupt the system is. And I… I want to change that. I don’t want to live in a society where it’s the norm for the police force to look away.”

Shinjiro-san’s expression then… shifted. It was more neutral before but now… he almost looked… impressed?

“Well, color me impressed… You really wanna change things, huh?” Then his expression darkened. “…Unlike a certain someone I can name.”

“Shinjiro-san…” Ken began, exasperation edging in his voice.

Makoto winced. “…Sis really hasn’t left a good impression, has she?” she asked quietly.

Shinjiro-san just grunted. “You can say that again,” he deadpanned. “Has Ken told you that Aki’s a police officer too?”

Makoto blinked before turning to Ken. “That’s Akihiko-san, right?”

Ken nodded. “Yeah, that’s Akihiko-san.”

Shinjiro-san then snorted. “Though sometimes it’s weird thinkin’ about it… He used to tussle with punks all the time for…” He wavered for a moment. “…For bullyin’ someone who didn’t deserve
“And like you didn’t jump into said fights,” Ken said wryly.

Makoto found herself relaxing, listening to Ken banter with Shinjiro-san. She learned things that Ken had never spoke of, like how Shinjiro-san and Akihiko-san had grown up together in the same orphanage. Or how Akihiko-san traveled the world for two years after graduating from high school. Makoto was almost sorry to have to go back to her apartment. While Shinjiro-san still referred her by her surname, Makoto couldn’t help but notice he wasn’t as surly as before.

Maybe one day… she and Sae would be able to have a family dinner like this.

Chapter End Notes

Shinji and Mitsuru are hatching their own plan, just in case Ren is not able to convince Sae. I promise that there will be a good reason for the extra players to be present on the nineteenth.

Some of you may recognize the scene with Ken and Makoto on November 3rd. That is indeed the scene in the PQ2 fic’s prologue. I felt I needed to acknowledge it at least.

And the moment where Ken gets jealous of cognitive!Akechi hitting on Makoto is inspired by the ahem… argument between Akihiko and Ken if you romance both as Minako. While I don’t approve of the cheating route or dating Ken, it IS rather funny and I wanted to give a little shoutout to it.
Whims of Fate

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves begin to infiltrate Sae's Palace, but Sae isn't willing to let their job be an easy one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Friday, November 4th, 2016

"What should we do today?" Morgana asked, peeking out of Ren's bag to peer at him.

Ren just shook his head. "Well, we're definitely not gonna to go to the Palace today," he stated. "I'm still kinda tired from our exploration yesterday."

Morgana made a face. "…Okay, I do get that." He then sighed. "Mementos really felt… odd, yesterday. I wonder why that is…"

"Mementos is just weird, period," Ren grumbled out.

Maybe he could check if Haru was free today… So he climbed up the couple flights of stairs to access the roof. But when he opened the door to take a peek, it looked like she wasn't there…

"Ren?"

He turned to see it was Ken. "Oh, hey, Ken," he greeted. "What's up?"

"It's just… uh… well…" Ken seemed to found the ground fascinating all of the sudden. "I was just… I was just wondering how likely it would be for us to go to the Palace on Sunday."

Ren tilted his head. "Oh?" Ren couldn't help but cackle to himself as Ken predictably stiffened. Ken really made it too easy. "Got plans on Sunday?"

Ken then glowered at him, even as his cheeks burned red. "Fine, I want to take Makoto out on our first date on Sunday. Are you happy now?"

"That's fine," Ren laughed. "I think tomorrow would be good for Palace exploration, then. Though…" He gave his friend a sly smile. "You should get Makoto flowers. Girls love flowers."

Ken then huffed, before staring at Ren flatly. "What, you want me to get her roses? That's more Anne's thing, isn't it?"

Ren smothered a grin, before responding, "Oh, I was thinking a cactus flower, actually."

Sometimes, he couldn't help but think that learning hanakotoba while he was working at the flower shop was worth it. Definitely worth it.

"A cactus flower…?" Ken narrowed his eyes before pulling out his phone. After a moment of
staring down at his phone, he then flushed crimson. "REN!"

Ren couldn't stop laughing even after Ken swatted the back of his head. "Your face," he snickered out. "I should take a picture of it!"

"Shut up," he grumbled out before huffing again.

Morgana just sighed. "You're really impossible sometimes, Ren."

"Love you too," Ren said with a smirk. "But anyways, you want to hang out today? I was hoping that Haru would be able to hang out, but she's not around. We haven't gotten to hang out in like, a month."

Ken just rolled his eyes at Ren. "Depends, are you gonna continue being…" Ken trailed off, before waving a hand towards all of Ren.

Ren raised an eyebrow. "You just gestured to all of me."

"Gee, I wonder why," Ken deadpanned.

"Okay, okay, I get it," Ren laughed, holding up his hands. "I promise no more teasing you about Makoto this afternoon. Good enough for you?"

"I suppose," he grumbled out. "What do you even have in mind?"

"How about Central Street?" Ren suggested. "I've been wanting to check up on Taihodo's stock… see if there's any new books in."

"Sounds good," Ken agreed, before raising an eyebrow at Ren. "Though, I'm surprised that you would go out of your way to buy books like that."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" Ren grumbled at him. "I read!"

"You seem more the type to play video games over choosing to read a book."

"Hey, I'm a multi-faceted person!" Ren pressed a hand to his chest, before giving Ken a little frown. "I have many talents and many hobbies!"

Ken then snorted, before rolling his eyes at Ren. "Yeah, and being modest is one of them," he deadpanned.

"Hey, it's confidence," Ren protested.

Ken then huffed out a laugh, before a smile tugged at the lips. "Okay, Mr. Confidence… lead the way, then."

They headed off for Central Street. The bookstore turned out to be a bust, though. Ren had bought a copy of the books available already.

"So, what do you want to do then?" Ren asked. "Sorry about that…"

"It's not a big deal." Ken then let out a thoughtful hum. "Well, maybe we can go to the arcade—"

"Do you really waste your time like this all the time, Ken?"

The cheerful mood just… evaporated away. Ken's smile melted away, before he stiffened.
The speaker was a middle-aged man, silver hair streaking through his light brown hair. Light brown hair… that matched Ken's hair color.

"Are you going to just gawk or are you going to greet me?" he asked sharply. "Hmph. I see that he's been as bad of an influence I thought he would."

Ken just tensed at that. "...Hello, Uncle," he said curtly. "What brings you here to Tokyo?"

"Uncle?!" Ren repeated.

Though… he was kinda bugged with how Ken was… talking. While Ken would never speak as casually as Ryuji, it seemed like he was trying to be as polite as possible with this… uncle.

"I'm here on a business trip," he answered coolly. He then looked up and down at the two of them, before his lips tightened. "And why exactly are you here?" he asked. "Attending Shujin Academy… a school of ill reputation… Let me guess… it must be because Aragaki can't afford to pay for Gekkoukan. Tell me, has he gotten a real job in the past four years or does he still insist on taking on menial jobs?"

Whoa, whoa, whoa—what?!

"Why do you have always to drag Shinjiro-san into this?" Ken asked, his voice suddenly shaky. "There's nothing wrong with what he does… He's good at it…"

His uncle scowled. "Well, excuse me for wanting you to do better. You're the only one to carry the surname Amada. I don't even know why you keep on trying to defend Aragaki. You're wasting your breath."

Oh jeez. He was one of those people, obsessed with the family name. Ren bet that he only had daughters, with the way he was lecturing Ken...

"You seem to hold an awfully big grudge against Shinjiro-san." Ren did his best to keep his voice light. Seriously, what was his problem? "I've met him several times, you know. He may not be the most… genial guy, but you're acting like he's a crook or something."

Ken's uncle then narrowed his eyes. He looked pretty unimpressed. "...So says a nobody," he said flatly. "I can tell by just looking at you… you're nothing special."

Damn, he was judgmental as hell. At least he was used to be dissed like that. Though honestly, being called a nobody was being nice. Some people were still convinced he was a crazy violent delinquent. Though Ken had a different stance on it…

"Leave Ren out of this!" Ken exclaimed, frustration edging in his voice. "Why… Why do you always insist on doing this…?"

"Is it a crime now to want you to have a good future? Wasting your time like this… What good will it do for your future? You should be studying or doing something productive."

"Hey, Ken's future is perfectly fine!" Ren defended, before he glared at Ken's uncle. He was seriously being a huge asshole. "He's on the top of the class… He also works with the student council president with student council duties. He's got plenty of accomplishments under his belt."

"That's nothing special," he said flatly. But he then shook his head. "...You know, Hikari was always so proud of you. She adored you. But now… I'm not so sure."
Something in Ken seemed to snap before he scowled fiercely. "Shut up! Don't you dare drag Mom into this! Don't act like you know her! You never gave a crap about her!"

...Oh shit. Ken's uncle had pushed a button he shouldn't have.

"Don't you dare raise your voice at me—"

"I'll do what I want to!" Ken spat out. "You didn't give a crap before Mom died. You don't get to waltz up to me, insult Shinjiro-san, insult my friend like this. You wonder why I always defend Shinjiro-san?! Because he's always looked out for me. He always cared... even when I didn't deserve it. But you..." Ken was shaking again, but this time from anger. Anger smoldered in his eyes as he glowered at his uncle. "You always just did the bare minimum!"

"You—"

"—need to get going?" Ren cut in, before flashing an innocent smile. "Why yes, yes, we do." Then he turned to Ken. "Right, Ken?"

Ken nodded before shooting his uncle another dirty look. "Yeah, let's get out of here."

"Don't you dare walk away from me!" Ken's uncle shouted after them.

"Too bad, we are!" Ren called over his shoulder, before flashing him a cheeky smile. "See ya!"

They ended up ducking into the beef bowl restaurant. Let him try and make a scene in a restaurant.

"You want to order something?" he asked his friend.

Ken sighed before rubbing his face. "...Might as well if we're going to stay here."

They ordered and after watching the chaos for a few minutes (working at this shop was hands down the worst job he had taken), they were handed their food. They managed to snag two spots together.

"So... your uncle is a piece of work," Ren said.

"He's... really my father's cousin," Ken sighed out. "He shares my surname, but he has only daughters so..."

Ren scoffed. "That's real rich of him, then." He took a bite of his food before he spoke again. "...I'm sorry, though. You know it's not true. And it was low of him to bring up your mom."

"...They didn't care after my dad died." Ken's voice was hollow. "They were willing to sit aside for years. Let my mom work so hard. I don't even know how she remained so... positive about the situation. She always had a smile and hug for me. But when she died, my uncle comes in, 'helping' me out of the good of his heart. And when he heard that Shinjiro-san wanted to become my guardian, he got all indignant like he raised me... Like he said... he only did the bare minimum."

"He's a real snob," Ren said. "You shouldn't listen to him. He's spewing nothing but crap. Shinjiro-san probably doesn't give a shit. You shouldn't, either."

Ken looked down at his meal before taking a bite of food. "...Frankly, I hardly consider him family." He then shrugged. "Mom was the only member of my family who ever loved me... Everyone else saw me as nothing but an obligation." Then he smiled sadly. "...Though I wish I could do something about Shinjiro-san."
"What do you mean?"

"Did you really think that Shinjiro-san would be content with working for someone forever?" Ken asked, before he took another bite of food. "Mitsuru-san has asked him to be her personal chef, but he put it pretty plainly."

Ren snorted. He probably said: *Hell no.* Though what Ken was saying left him curious…

"…Then what does he want to do, then?" Ren asked, raising an eyebrow.

"He wants to open his own restaurant," Ken said. "More… comfort food? Dishes that remind you of home. Shinjiro-san hates fancy food. He says that there's no point in adding 'frills' like that."

Ren snorted. "Sojiro says the same, when I try to do latte art."

"Yeah, Minako-san says he's no fun when he complains about that…" Then Ken bit his lip. "But opening a business is so expensive… and he has me to worry about."

Ren raised an eyebrow. "…I mean, it's not like he's friends with a wealthy CEO…"

Ken snorted. "Mitsuru-san has offered. Several times. She'd buy him a building if he'd let her."

Ren laughed. "Maybe Haru would have better luck, yeah?"

"Ren, don't be ridiculous." Ken shook his head, an exasperated smile tugging at his lips. "It's fine… I'll be graduating soon. Shinjiro-san won't have to worry about me after that…" He then reached for his drink, taking a sip. "…I do want to prove my uncle wrong, though. Just because Shinjiro-san isn't interested in being a businessman doesn't mean that he's a lazy no-gooder."

"Besides, if he wanted a say in what you were doing, maybe he should've been more involved in your life." Ren shrugged. "Far as I'm concerned, your uncle's just loaded with shit." He grinned as Ken cracked a genuine smile. "And I believe in you. I think you can accomplish anything you set your mind to."

"…Heh." Ken closed his eyes for a moment. "Thanks, Ren. I appreciate it."

But he was honestly worried. The way Ken put it made it seem like he felt that was nothing but a burden to Shinjiro-san. And it was exactly the opposite. He would have to figure out… something. He just… had a feeling that Ken would not be assured unless Shinjiro-san told him. Hmm…

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**RANK UP! Adjustment Confidant has reached Rank 8.**

**Endure: Chance to withstand an otherwise fatal attack with 1 HP remaining.**

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*Saturday, November 5th, 2016*

"So, what's the plan?" Morgana turned to look at Ren. "We need a card key to access the elevator…"

"Yeah, we can't move on unless we find one." Ryuji then scoffed, before he began to scowl rather fiercely. "She wants to play it fair, huh? What a bunch of bull."

Makoto… had no argument. Though what Sae's cognitive Akechi had said… lingered in her mind.
What made Sae believe that she needed to succeed in this case? She wished that Sae felt comfortable enough to confide into her… But then again, if Sae felt she could… maybe she wouldn't even have a Palace in the first place.

"Yes, it's very unlikely that we'll be able to find a member's card lying around in the hall…" Akechi mused.

"Well, that's pretty obvious," Futaba muttered.

"So, I suppose that we'll have to explore then." Ken glanced towards Ren. "There has to be a backroom of sorts. We may have better luck there."

"Wait, what makes you think that?" Anne asked with a frown.

"Well, we always did find something when exploring…" Ken explained with a sheepish smile. 

"…Heh, you're actually on the right track, Ace." Akechi chuckled. "However, let's get to the backroom, before I explain."

"...Why not just tell us now?" Haru asked.

"I hate to admit it, but I think Crow's right," Morgana admitted. "We do need to get our mission started, after all."

"If you think that's the right course of action," Yusuke sighed. "So… who will you take with you today, Joker?"

Ren let out a thoughtful hum. "…Let's go with Queen, Crow, and Mona for now."

Makoto stepped forward, along with Akechi and Morgana. Ren then proceeded to lead them down the path they took, where they encountered Sae. But then he looped around, leading them to a backroom.

"Okay, Crow, what's your idea?" Ren asked.

"We look for a customer data terminal," Akechi stated. "After all… we do have a hacker with us, don't we?"

"Oh yeah, you've gotta register and pay for that kind of crap…" Ryuji said. "I guess it makes sense…"

"Indeed." Akechi smiled proudly. "Now shall we get going?"

At Ren's nod, they took off. It was a maze… Though Makoto's attention was drawn to all of the graffiti. Papers were plastered everywhere, with phrases such as: SUCCESS and WINNER TAKES ALL boldly written in spray paint.

They eventually came across a door. But bars blocked their way.

"It appears we need another keycard to continue," Yusuke commented, tapping onto the lock mechanism besides the door.

"Ugh, not again…" Anne groaned before she hung her head. "It was such a pain in Okumura's Palace…"

"Hopefully the search won't be so long this time…" Haru said.
"Well, complaining about it won't solve anything." Morgana gave a little impatient hop. "Joker, let's get to searching."

Their search led them to discover an intimidating Shadow. The aura... it was incredible.

Ryuji let out a quiet whistle. "Damn, that's a seriously scary Shadow..."

"I don't need to be Oracle to know that's a tough one..." Anne said softly.

"He's obviously guarding something..." Ren said slowly. "So, let's get him!"

He started to dash forward, but Ken grabbed him by the back of his coat. "Hold it, Joker," he said flatly. "Look at where the Shadow is standing. I think we can try and find a route so we sneak up on the Shadow."

Ren pouted briefly. "You're no fun sometimes..."

"We don't know what kind of Shadow we're dealing with," Morgana pointed out. "Every advantage we can get would work to our benefit."

"Fiiiine," Ren grumbled out. "We'll do it the slow way."

Ken just rolled his eyes in response. "You'll thank me later."

It took some exploring, but Ren led them to a vent—earning a comment from Akechi: do you do this a lot? They crept around for a little bit, but they managed to loop back, finding themselves facing the back of the Shadow.

Ren then darted forward, leaping onto the Shadow's back. He tore off the mask with ease, before jumping backwards.

"I'll never get used to that," Akechi remarked as he ran forward along with Makoto and Morgana.

"You better get used to it, then!" Ren called out to him. "It's how we do things here!"

"Enough banter, Joker!" Morgana chided. "Focus!"

These Shadows were... bizarre. Their skins were green, with wispy lavender hair cascading down. A similarly colored wrap was around their shoulders. They both wielded a sword that Makoto couldn't put a name to.

"Mona, watch out!" Ken warned. "They have an electricity affinity."

"Ugh, of course they do," Ren grumbled. "Any idea on a weakness then?"

"Ice... or wind?" Ken suggested tentatively.

Ren nodded. "Gotcha." He then turned to look at the active party. "What are you waiting for? Let's get them!"

"Charge, Johanna!" Makoto ripped off her mask, feeling Johanna appear underneath her. Johanna glowed bright blue for a moment before a nuclear blast tore forward, slamming into both Shadows.

Despite what Ken had guessed to be their weaknesses... Makoto couldn't help but feel a bit frustrated that she hadn't struck at their weakness. At least it was just normal damage, she supposed...
Though, she was concerned for Morgana, if Ken was right about the Shadows' affinity… She hoped that Ren had something up his sleeve…

"Scathach!" Ren shouted.

The blast of wind knocked one Shadow to the ground but the other one managed to dodge, so the still standing Shadow struck.

Bolts of lightning sparked to life, hurtling towards them.

But then there was a howl of wind, before the gale clashed with the bolts of lightning, throwing them off course. Makoto had to duck so she wouldn't be hit by the lightning.

"Joker, what are you—GAH!"

Makoto whipped her head to see that Ren had snatched up Morgana, chucking him towards Ken. Ken had to spring forward in order to make sure Morgana didn't hit the ground.

"Really, Joker?!" Ken snapped at him before he set Morgana back on the ground.

"Skull, you're in!" Ren called, ignoring Ken. "Stick to physical attacks!"

"Uhh… okay?" Ryuji said.

"That's one way to do it…?" Haru giggled weakly.

Though Makoto caught sight of Akechi looking curiously at Ren. He looked almost… baffled. Then he shook his head. "Now, Robin!" he ordered.

Robin Hood pulled his bow, and an arrow of light formed. It struck the Shadow that had managed to dodge Ren's attack before.

"Whip 'em, Persona!" Ryuji shouted, and Captain Kidd jabbed several times with his mast.

"Heh, not bad, Skull," Akechi chuckled. "I'm impressed."

"Focus, Crow!" Futaba reprimanded. "Joker, heads up, this Shadow's got fire attacks too! Keep that in mind with your bazillion Personas! So don't let them target your weakness!"

"Your… what?" Akechi gasped. "You have more than one Persona?!!"

"Oh yeah, that's kinda Joker's thing." Makoto could hear the shrug in Futaba's voice. "But anyways, enough chitchat! Let's see… you guys need a power up!"

Red light shimmered around them, and Makoto could feel the familiar strength surging through her.

They went all out, unleashing spells (or in Ryuji's case, physical attacks), and the Shadows eventually fell. This yielded their prize, a key card.

"Annnd here we go." Ren stooped down, picking up the key card and holding it up in triumph. "This will give us some more access!"

"I… I don't understand," Akechi said faintly. "You… You have more than one Persona, Joker?"

"Yeah, like Oracle said, Joker's got a gazillion." Ryuji snorted.
"I don't have a gazillion," Ren huffed as he pocketed the card key. "Okay, I know I have a lot, but you're way exaggerating, Skull."

"Oh yeah?" Ryuji folded his arms over his chest. "How many do you have then?"

Ren opened his mouth, only to shut it. He then narrowed his eyes. "...I don't know."

"So, you've got a gazillion!" Ryuji said triumphantly.

"I'm telling you, it's not that much!" Ren argued.

"Prove it, then!"

"Are you serious, Skull?!"

"That's enough, boys!" Anne chided, hands on her hips. "We shouldn't really stand around bickering like this, you know! We could get ambushed by a Shadow!"

They grumbled out in unison, "Fiiiiine."

"Our leader and his right-hand man, everyone," Ken deadpanned.

Haru just giggled. "Come now, Ace, it just shows how close they are!"

Akechi coughed. "Though I must say… I am impressed with how you managed to divert the lightning attack, Joker. You're rather good with thinking on your feet, aren't you? A good characteristic for a leader."

That look in his eye…it unsettled Makoto. But before Makoto could put her finger on what kind of emotion it was… it had disappeared. His expression was replaced by his typical saccharine smile.

"...I suppose so." Yusuke frowned in confusion. "But Panther *is* right, we should get going..."

They managed to find their way to the database as Akechi suggested. Though Ken had been slightly amused that Futaba's choice in a fake name, Shinji Nakonohara. But with the member card in hand, they managed to gain access to the elevator. Unfortunately, they were still limited from the High Limitss Floor...

They stepped through the doors onto the Members' Floor. It very much looked like a ritzy casino, with all the slot machines. Playing cards seemed to rain down like confetti. But that wasn't what caught her attention.

Sae's Shadow stepped towards them, flanked by bodyguards once more.

"Sis…?" she asked.

"Ohh, so you wanna settle this right now, huh?" Ryuji asked. Then he cracked his knuckles. "Well, bring it on!"

"Skull, you know we can't do that…" Yusuke said lowly.

Sae then scoffed, shaking her head. "Do not speak to me as if we are equals." She looked Ryuji up and down, disgust curling her lip. "...I am the manager of this casino, as well as its number one player. At the moment, you lack the qualifications to fight me."
"You're the one cheating your way to wins," Ren said boldly. "And you know how the saying goes… cheaters never prosper. How can you take pride in wins that you had to cheat your way to?"

"Hmph, you're just saying that you're too weak to face me on," Sae said coldly. "As if I didn't know that. You're nowhere near my level."

Makoto winced. It never came out of Sae's mouth, she has been compared to Sae… countless times. She really felt that she was far beneath Sae's level…

"She's a snotty little…" Ryuji growled out.

"…She truly looks down on us," Yusuke commented.

Sae then flipped her hair, placing a hand on her hip. "I had to win time and time again, to earn respect. My number one rank. If you wish to face me…" She gave a little smirk. "…You must continue to win, as well. Can you do that?"

"How condescending…" The distaste in Ken's voice was clear. "Are you challenging us or patronizing us?"

"These are my rules." Sae shrugged. "If you want to face me… you must adhere to my rules."

"But what do you mean by continuing to win?" Haru asked tentatively.

"So… you're asking us to play in the casino," Akechi stated.

"Correct." Sae gave a little nod. "Do you have the confidence to win?"

"We might rip out the rug underneath you if you're not careful." Makoto tried her best to sound confident. Besting her sister… would it even be possible? And there had to be some kind of catch. Gambling always had a trick to it… "Don't underestimate us."

Sae chuckled, but there was no humor to her laugh. "I don't expect much from you… but I will be waiting."

Then there was a bright flash. They whipped around to see Sae ascending to the higher floor in the elevator.

Morgana folded his little arms over his chest. "…She really is different than our other opponents. She'd rather scheme than fight us with brute force."

"…Not that I'd want to fight Sae-san with brute force." Akechi let out a nervous chuckle. "I have seen her fight off a would-be mugger. I almost pitied him with how she managed to kick him right in the face…"

"But we should focus on the issue at hand…" Yusuke stated, before he folded his arms over his chest. "How are we going to gamble our win to the top?"

"Um… I have no experience with this…" Haru said softly, looking at everyone nervously.

Anne approached the slots, uncertainty in her voice as she spoke. "…I've never done anything like this either… Can we really do this? What about you guys?"

"Do you count blackjack?" Ren shrugged.

"That hardly counts." Ryuji shook his head.
Ken sighed. "The closest is watching Junpei-san lose his money to Minako-san in poker."

"Who would those be?" Akechi asked.

"Ah..." Ken winced. "...Just my senpai back on Port Island."

"We really don't have time to waste though..." Ren said.

"No need to worry..." Akechi flashed a smile. "Just follow my lead."

Makoto raised an eyebrow. "You know how to do this?"

"I do, Queen." He nodded. "I'm well informed on what it takes to win. I will ensure that victory is mine."

...Hmph. Did he have to be so arrogant about it? And Sae really thought she'd be attracted enough to date Akechi? She didn't think so.

"But we must hurry... I do want to change Sae-san's heart as soon as possible." Akechi then looked towards her. "I know we haven't always gotten along. But... I know you care about Sae-san deeply. I do, as well... I don't want her to keep continuing like this. She wasn't always like this..."

Makoto couldn't help but feel taken aback. Did... Did he really care for Sae? She didn't know. She hated that she was questioning this. He was aiming to kill Ren. She shouldn't empathize with him.

"She's just... become distorted," Makoto said quietly. "She used to believe so strongly in justice. She became a prosecutor because she wanted to change things from the inside. She had heard from Dad how skewed things were for the defense... She had hoped to change that."

"...What changed her then?" Ren asked.

"I...I believe it's connected to our father's death." Makoto closed her eyes. She still could recall Dad's funeral, how Sae was so curt with everyone trying to extend condolences. If she remembered right, Sae would get especially testy when someone tried to reiterate that he was such a brave man and a wonderful police officer. "Sis tried to take on the burden all by herself. Trying to earn a living for us both, earn a promotion in a male oriented society... and uphold justice all at the same time."

"It's no wonder that she has changed so much then." Anne's voice was soft with sympathy. "She lost sight of why she pursued justice to begin with."

Maybe she... wasn't so different. After all, it wasn't so long ago that she was just listening to her higher ups.

Ren coughed. "...We really should get moving though."

"But we should review the situation first," Anne stated. "We basically need to win... But how much do we have to win?"

"We'll have to increase our rank," Ken said. "In order to gain access to the next floor..."

"We need a new member's card to unlock our way to the high limits floor..." Futaba said. "Maybe we can walk around and ask? Uh...! I'll be support! As usual!"

Ren smirked at her. "Don't worry. We've got this."
Ren led them to the cashier, his features shadowy. It was a bit… unsettling to look into his red eyes.

"Ah, welcome. We've been informed of your coming. The manager is quite eager for you to show off what you have. A gift for you… one thousand coins."

What… What did this mean?

"Uh… thanks." Ren looked unsettled but he slid the card to the cashier.

"Are you seriously giving us these for free?" Anne sputtered out.

"Maybe it's a show of confidence," Akechi mused, resting a hand on his chin. "She truly has no intention in losing…"

"Now, to the left, we have our dice games… and to the right we have the slots," the cashier continued to explain, ignoring Akechi's speculations. "However, we recommend the dice game to beginners. And furthermore, you may exchange your coins for prizes."

"What kind of prizes?" Haru asked.

"Well, our most desired prize is a member's card, that will grant you access to the high limits floor."

"Ah…!" Futaba gasped. "We need that!"

"It'll cost you fifty thousand coins."

"Fifty… thousand?!" Ryuji yelped. "That's crazy! How are we gonna pull that shit off?"

"Ah… I see," Akechi looked towards Ren. "She wants us to obtain that card by winning coins in the casino."

"We also allow for you to borrow as many coins as you have."

"I don't believe that is prudent…" Yusuke said.

"Yeah, I agree." Ken nodded. "There has to be some catch…"

"Let's head to the dice game," Morgana suggested. "We might as well get started."

"Wait," Akechi interjected. "I have something I'd like to discuss…"

He motioned for them to step away from the cashier.

"I believe that these games are rigged," he stated.

"I mean, it is a casino," Ren said. "I'd be shocked if it wasn't."

"Keep in mind that this is Nijima-san's cognition of the courthouse," Ken said. "Where she was rather particular about scoring wins."

"Most prosecutors are," Ren mumbled out.

But it was hard to miss the bitterness in his voice.

"Joker…" Anne said quietly, grabbing onto his hand. "But still, if Queen's sister is so determined
to win, how are we going to…?!"

"We can't afford to lose," Yusuke stated firmly. "If we don't win… then all of us…"

"It won't happen," Ren cut in, his grip on Anne's hand tightened. "I'll make sure of it. Come on, we're burning sunlight."

So they headed off to the dice games. But every time Ren attempted to predict the sum of the three dice, it ended up in a loss.

"It appears my thought was correct," Akechi said. Apparently, he was ignoring that Ren had pointed out that already. Makoto had to hold her tongue so she couldn't bring it up. Let Akechi think he was so smart for this rather obvious observation. "It is rigged…"

"So what are we gonna do, cheat back?" Ryuji scoffed.

"You're actually not on the wrong track, Skull." Akechi smiled thinly. "We need to disable whatever is rigging the game. There must be some kind of control room that determines this."

"That's a good way to handle it," Morgana agreed. "Joker, let's try and find a way to find this control room!"

After some searching, Ren found another vent.

"Here we go again…" Akechi sighed. "I never would've thought I'd do this kind of thing…"

"It is very James Bond, isn't it?" Anne giggled. "Though the movies always made the vents roomier than they really are…"

But the vent led them to a backroom of sorts. They had to sneak through the halls, fighting Shadows, but their search eventually bore fruit. They found the control room, with a Shadow at the panel.

When they confronted the Shadow, it transformed into a skeletal like creature. Fortunately, it was weak to bless magic, so when Akechi attacked with Robin Hood, he knocked down the Shadow. Personally, Makoto was grateful that this fight was on the easier side… It made everything simpler.

…She could've gone without Akechi's gloating, though.

"It really was fortunate that I was in the active team right now, is it not?" Akechi asked.

"…Ugh," Futaba grumbled out.

"Ace has bless attacks too, Crow," Yusuke said.

"A-Ah…" Akechi faltered at that. "Oh, but does he have curse attacks? Robin Hood has those."

"No, but he's got gun attacks," Ryuji said. "And he can heal up just as well as Mona."

…Not to mention that Ken was more modest. Ugh. She wished Ren had put Ken on the team, but no, they had to pretend that everything was fine with Akechi.

Ken coughed. "…Thanks for the vote of confidence but… shouldn't we check and see if we can win now?"
"Actually…" Akechi began. "I was thinking that we could… cheat back."

"What do you mean by that?" Haru asked.

"Sae-san is intent on winning by cheating… We've gotten this far. Why not have the odds in our favor?"

"Hmm… you have a point, Crow," Ren admitted. "Oracle, can you handle this?"

Futaba just grinned at him, flashing a peace sign. "Just leave it to me!"

Dealing with the slots worked similarly. They had to hack into the terminals. It took some looping around, and fighting through Shadows (as usual). But once they hacked into the systems, they earned enough coins.

But when they turned around to head towards the elevator… the figure standing in front made Makoto stop dead in her tracks.

"It can't be…!" Haru breathed out.

"You have got to be kidding…" Ken muttered.

"Dad…!" Makoto choked out. "You… You're here?!

It was… Sae's cognition of their father. He looked exactly like he had the day he had died. Well… save for his outfit. He was dressed in a black suit and tie.

"Dad?!" Ryuji repeated. "Then that's…?"

"It must be Nijima's cognition of him," Morgana said grimly.

"What a clever trick," Sae bit out.

"We merely followed your rules," Ren called out, a smirk in his voice.

"Hmph. I am the manager of the casino, and the rules dictate that I am the victor!"

"Sae-san really is becoming desperate… She is at the end of her wits." Akechi muttered. "…In this world and the real one."

"I believe that our guests will be leaving now," Sae announced.

Then the cognitive version of Dad advanced. "Yes… they're nothing but trouble. Nothing but lowly crooks… thieves." His eyes hardened as he smacked the police baton in his hand. "I will eliminate them… as I have with everyone else."

Then he lunged forward.

"Queen, Crow, Mona, spread out!" Ren shouted, before tearing off his mask. "Red Rider!"

A red horseback figure appeared with a flash. He divebombed at Cognitive Dad, making him reel back. Morgana fired as quickly as he could, the rain of pellets forcing him to keep his distance. But then he let out a frustrated growl, charging through and completely ignored the pellets that Morgana fired at him. He raised his baton and brought it down, sending Morgana flying backwards.
"Mona!" Futaba cried out. "Hang on…!"

Prometheus flashed brightly before Makoto could feel the familiar warm sensation filling her veins.

"Dammit…" Ren hissed out. "Mona, switch out! Ace, you're in!"

She just… couldn't comprehend all of this. So… Sae really had their father in the back of her mind after all…?

"Queen, heads up!" Futaba shouted.

There was a sudden clang as Ken pushed himself in front of her, intercepting the blow with the shaft of his spear. She had to snap out of this! This wasn't Dad… just Sae's warped version of him.

Ken was straining underneath the force of the cognitive self's weight. Makoto skirted around him, jabbing for his side. This diverted his attention enough for Ken to get the upper hand and knock his weapon away.

"You think that'll stop me?" he growled out, glaring at Ken. "I'll take you down… No matter the cost!"

"We won't make that easy!" Ren shouted, as he charged forward. "Okuninishi!"

Ken grabbed onto her arm and pulled her backwards as a blast of fire forced the cognitive self on the defense. Then Akechi summoned Robin Hood, which nocked an arrow. The tip glowed bright purple as the Persona let the arrow fly, striking the ground and then exploding like a bomb. The almighty attack sent him flying.

Makoto summoned Johanna, her Persona's engine roaring in her ears as she blasted forward. She rammed into the cognitive self, sending him reeling.

But he managed to catch his balance just in time. Then a dark, shadowy aura surrounded him.

…Oh no.

A straw doll appeared before her.

Makoto hated Mudoon, more so than Hamaon. She hated how it flooded her senses, surrounding her with darkness until she blacked out. She could only watch, paralyzed as it—

Makoto was suddenly shoved to the ground.

"Ace, what are you doing?!" Futaba screeched.

Ken was slumped to the ground, panting. He swayed a little but… he was still okay. The relief that flooded her was swiftly replaced by rage as the cognitive self charged towards Ken.

She scrambled to her feet before she ran forward. His movements seemed to slow down before her eyes. She reached out and grabbed his wrist. She pivoted on her feet, flipping him over her shoulder.

"Nice, Queen!" Futaba crowed out.

"You really think that can take me down?" He staggered to his feet, a cocky smile on his face even as he swayed back and forth.
She couldn't help but feel angry… This wasn't her father, the man she admired so much and aspired to be like. He was arrogant, too confident in his ability in being able to take them down.

"I don't think… I know," Ren said. "White Rider!"

White Rider appeared, before slamming down on the ground. The ground shook violently. Makoto then turned to check up on Ken, but he was fairly healed up. He must have healed himself while she was distracted with fighting the cognitive self.

"I can't believe you did that," Makoto complained with a huff. "I'm not the one weak to curse attacks!"

"I would rather it be me than you."

Makoto narrowed her eyes before punching her boyfriend's shoulder. "Don't you dare do that again," she warned before turning back to the battle.

"Lemme give you a boost!" Futaba chimed in. "Speed up!"

The boost in agility was a welcome change. Makoto summoned Johanna once more, unleashing another nuclear spell. Ren then swooped in, summoning a rainbow snake-like Persona. A purple light suddenly surrounded the cognitive self, weakening its defenses.

"Kala-Nemi!"

"Robin Hood!"

An arrow glowing with shadowy energy was wrapped around Kala-Nemi’s blast of light, both slamming into him, right in the chest. That was the final blow they needed, as the cognitive self of her father disappeared.

"…How pathetic. He's just as weak as he was in life. Foolish, cocky… the list goes on."

Makoto tensed up at the voice. "Sis!" she cried out. "You can't mean that!"

She was begging… Please… oh, please don't let Sae hate their father…

"Hmph. Take it as you will." The coldness in Sae's voice just made Makoto's heart sink. "Though the idea that you still think of yourselves as my equals is so… pathetic. You're nothing but losers."

"What was that?!” Ryuji growled out, and she turned to see that Ryuji's hands were now fists. "We've been playing by your rules! Don't throw a hissy fit because you don't like it turned on ya!"

Sae laughed. "Criminal trials are nothing but a gamble to be won, and us prosecutors arrange the gambling table."

"It's honestly… sad to see how she sees things," Ken muttered.

"Losses are unacceptable! We must win, even if it's due to false charges!"

"A… Are you serious, Sis?" Makoto managed to choke out. But when she got no reply, her hands tightened into fists. "Answer me, dammit!" she cried out, unable to stop her voice from cracking.

"Mako-chan…" Haru called out to her sadly.

"Don't think such a petty trick will allow you to defeat me. I may have to acknowledge your skills,
if you make it to the manager's floor, however."

"May, huh?" Ren raised an eyebrow.

No amount of joking from Ren would distract Makoto from what Sae was saying. Why… Why couldn't she listen?! Her voice just fell to deaf ears.

"Sae-san… why?" Akechi asked. "This… This isn't the real you… Viewing trials that could give the defendant the death penalty… a gamble? No… I can't believe this."


"…You don't have to say it, Fox," Anne said sadly.

"We have to stop her!" Makoto exclaimed. "Quickly!"

"Calm down, Queen," Ren said. "We'll save her… together."

"We all feel the same way, Queen," Haru said. When Makoto turned to look at her friend, she was smiling gently. "We will save her. I swear it…"

Ken then moved to stand next to her, taking her hand. "…We're all with you," he murmured, before squeezing her hand.

Makoto took a deep breath. "…Thank you," she whispered out.

Ren then stepped forward, scanning the card. Then a mechanical voice spoke. "Authentication complete. The following floors are now available: the standard floor, the member's floor, and the high limit's floor."

"…Still no manager's floor, huh?" Anne mused.

"Maybe it's the one after the high limits," Ken suggested.

"Actually, I can sense only one floor above us," Futaba corrected. "Maybe it's like… a VIP area."

"Hmm…" Yusuke then shook his head. "…We're wasting time. Let us go!"

They boarded the elevator and rode up to the high limits floor. But they were greeted by an unwelcome sight. A wooden door and fence.

"Outta the way," Ryuji demanded, glaring at another shadowy cashier/dealer.

"Beyond this point is the high limits floor," he said calmly. "Do you have a reservation?"

"Whaddya mean, reservation?!" Ryuji cried out.

"Okayyy, amp it down, Skull." Ren put a hand on Ryuji's shoulder. He then sighed. "…Okay, Mona, what kind of requirement do you think this is?"

"It must be related to Niijima's cognition somehow…" Morgana said. "Queen, Crow? Any ideas?"

"Sae-san needs to think of us being able to enter…" Akechi said slowly. "So this floor must be the equivalent of… only authorized personnel are given access to."
"What would that equate in the real world?" Ken asked.

"As the courtroom, I assume," he stated. "Not many people would sit in on trials, as you can probably guess."

"You really are picking up on the rules of the cognitive world," Morgana said. "Color me impressed."

"Heh." Akechi's smile was bashful. "My thanks."

"That aside…" Haru said softly. "…How are we going to get inside the courtroom?"
Futaba then pointed to Ryuji. "Ryuji, go piss off the police!"

"Hell no!" he yelped out. "Are you crazy, Oracle?!"

"Pretty sure there's another way, Oracle." Though Ren had a few chuckles at Ryuji's expense.

"Sitting in on a trial that my sister would be attending," Makoto stated. "That should do it." Then she rubbed her chin. "Though we would need to know her schedule."

"Leave that to me," Akechi interjected. "I am Sae-san's partner after all. I would be privy to that kind of information."

"So… I guess we'll have to head back," Anne stated.

"Our hands are pretty tied until Nijijima-san's cognition is changed," Ken agreed. "Though I imagine the real work will begin once we're inside…"

"Yeah, no kidding." Ryuji grimaced. "Joker barely swapped out the team today. Man, and I was hoping to whale on some more Shadows today… Could've used some stress relief."

Ren just chuckled at him. "I'll be sure to put you on the team next time then, Skull."

"Sweet!"

Morgana huffed before rolling his eyes at Ryuji. "Let's head back, then!"

They made their way back to the entrance, before activating the app so they could leave. Makoto felt a wave of exhaustion hit her… and it wasn't just from the usual fatigue from visiting a Palace. Sae… her views on Dad… Was her sense of justice truly gone?

"…Hey."

She looked up to see that it was Ken. "Hi," she answered back before taking his hand.

"Listen, Makoto…" he began, "I understand if you don't want to go out like we talked about before, after what we saw today…"

"No." Makoto squeezed his hand. "I… I think I need this more than ever."

Ken smiled at her. "If that's what you want."

"I do…" she trailed off, only to find herself blushing at how Haru was looking at the two of them.
She couldn't help but feel a bit… exposed. They were just holding hands but… how much had Haru overheard?

"…What's wrong?" Ken frowned quizzically.

"Hello, Ken-kun!" Haru said. "Mind if I borrow Mako-chan for a little bit?"

And without waiting for Ken's reply, she grabbed Makoto by the wrist and dragged her away.

"Are you really going out on your first date with Ken-kun tomorrow?!" Haru's eyes brightened. "How exciting!"

"I... ah..." Makoto ducked her head, feeling herself blush again. "Y-Yes... I, um... probably should look for something nicer to wear for that..."

"Oh, if you're worried about that..." Haru frowned. "Anne-chan! Can you come over here, please?"

"What's up?" Anne asked as she approached the two of them.

"Mako-chan is going on her first date with Ken-kun," Haru explained. "You always dress so nicely... Do you think you have a good idea on what she should wear?"

Anne tapped her chin, before her blue eyes brightened. "Actually, I do! My parents have made various styles of clothes... We have them back at the apartment. I think I know just would look nice on you too!" She then hooked her arm into Makoto's. "Want to sleep over tonight? I can help you get ready tomorrow, if you want!"

Makoto blushed, smiling shyly at Anne. "That would be great."

"It's settled, then!" Anne giggled. "Haru, do you want to join us? While Makoto's off on her date with Ken, we could binge movies! Oooh, and sweets!"

Haru giggled. "That sounds so much fun! It could be a girl's night! And morning after, I suppose."

Panic immediately spiked through Makoto. "D-Don't tell Futaba!" she squeaked out. "She... She'll...!"

"What, she'll hack your phone and see if she can get a picture of you two kissing?" Anne snickered, nudging Makoto in the side. "Though, I thought you would be used to be this kind of thing already. Shinjiro-san says he's walked in on you two already—"

"Anne!"

"And how do you think I discovered them?" Haru chimed in, before starting to giggle.

"Haru!" Makoto protested. "It's just... I-I didn't think you'd follow after me...!"

"Oh my god, you two are terrible!" Anne joined Haru in giggling.

"You're the ones who are terrible..." Makoto grumbled out. "I'm going to say goodnight to Ken before we go..."

"Oh, so you can kiss him goodnight?" Anne asked innocently.

Makoto sputtered at Anne and Haru started giggling again. It looked like Ren had really rubbed onto Anne... Sometimes she wondered why she wanted friends...
It was another slow night. Shinjiro hated those nights because they always were so damn tiring. He nodded off way too easily. Shinjiro straightened up as the door opened. But in stumbled Niijima, looking tired and miserable.

"Okay… what do you want now?" Shinjiro grumbled out.

"Nothing from you," Niijima snapped out before all but throwing herself in the seat. "I just want a hard drink."

Shinjiro still disliked the woman. Didn't matter that Ken was dating her little sister. Though the way she said struck a chord in him. He could still recall how his body refused to forget about he killed Ken's mom. How he kept coming back to the spot where she died.

"Drinking won't help you forget," Shinjiro stated. "Though maybe it would've helped if you didn't accept a nearly impossible case."

"Don't you dare lecture me," she hissed out, glowering at Shinjiro. But Shinjiro just looked calmly back at her. "I'm doing my best. I'm doing all that I can!"

"Are you?" Shinjiro asked evenly. "Will it be worth it, Niijima?"

"What… What are you talking about?"

"Are you even happy where you are?" Shinjiro asked. "I know someone personally who loves his job as a cop…" Anger flared in her eyes when he said 'cop' but Shinjiro didn't give a flying crap. He knew that Ken worried about what would happen if Niijima remained set in her ways.

He didn't like Niijima. Not one whit. But he cared about Ken and well… his girlfriend was growing on him.

"What about you? Can you claim that you like being a prosecutor still? Doesn't even have to be love."

"I…" She swallowed hard.

"Your old man was a cop," he said. "I'm assuming that justice was connected to it, yeah?"

Niijima inhaled sharply. "Don't you dare lecture me," she repeated, though her voice was definitely… weaker this time.

"Why?" Shinjiro raised an eyebrow.

Because he was right?

"I… I'm doing this for good," Niijima said. "The Phantom Thieves are menaces… They need to be stopped."

Shinjiro eyed her, before he closed his eyes. "…Heh."

"What's so damn funny?!" she demanded, glaring at him. (She didn't even compare to Mitsuru, and even then, Mitsuru wasn't even that scary.)

"You sound like you're trying to convince yourself," Shinjiro said evenly before he eyed Niijima. "Am I wrong?"
"I…” Niijima faltered before her expression hardened. "You know nothing, Aragaki," she hissed out.

"Then educate me," Shinjiro deadpanned.

"You… You'd never understand the circumstances." Niijima then shook her head. "I… I need to get back to work," she muttered out, tucking her hair behind her ear.

Not understanding the circumstances, huh? If only Niijima had a clue about just how close he was tied to this case. Though… Shinjiro couldn't help but notice the doubt in Niijima's eyes…

Maybe there was hope for her, after all.

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Sunday, November 6th, 2016

The outfit Anne had in mind for Makoto was a navy-blue trench coat dress, with two rows of three silver buttons fastening it shut, and the skirt flaring out due to the black petticoat attached. It was elegant, which was Makoto's preference when it came to clothes, but with an extra flare of femininity. It was something she had never considered wearing but… maybe stepping out of her comfort zone more often would be good.

"Ah!" Anne's eyes gleamed with excitement. "I knew it'd look great on you, Makoto!"

"You look very pretty, Mako-chan," Haru agreed with a smile.

Makoto flushed before tucking her hair behind her ear. "T-Thank you." Then she looked towards Anne. "Um, what did you wear to your first date with Ren?"

Anne giggled. "Well, technically our first real date was in Hawaii. And you've seen that swimsuit."

"What do you mean by real?" Haru asked.

"Oh, uh…” Anne let out a nervous laugh. "Ren and I started dating in August but uh… he was helping out Makoto with a little favor… So, we had to wait another month before going public." Then she coughed, shuffling her feet for a moment. "But anyways, shoes! What size are you, Makoto?"

"Oh, um, twenty-three."

Makoto couldn't help but feel relieved that Anne had changed the subject. This subject was just… embarrassing to discuss.

"Ooh, perfect!" Anne cheered. "You can just borrow one of my gazillion pairs of shoes, then… Uh…” She then looked towards her closet, giving a small gulp before glancing towards Makoto. "Just… don't give me a lecture about this."

"What are you—" Haru began in confusion.

Anne then threw open her closet, before she dragged Haru backwards so the two of them wouldn't be buried by the clothes avalanche.

"O-Oh, I see…” Haru stared, wide-eyed. "That's… a lot of clothes."

Makoto just sighed before she pinched the bridge of her nose. "…Anne, I'm coming over another
time to help you clean up this mess."

Anne just let out a nervous laugh. "I-I appreciate it."

Then Makoto blinked, her eyes focusing on a very familiar shirt hung up in her closet. "Wait a minute… is that Ren's shirt?!

It looked eerily close to the shirt that Ren had worn on days off in the summer…

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Anne exclaimed, nervously twirling her hair. When Makoto stared at her incredulously, she started to fidget. "O-Okay, maybee…"

She had no comment.

"But anyways, here's the shoes I wanted to show you!" Anne snatched up a nice pair of black knee-high leather boots before practically shoving them at Makoto. "Come on, try it on!"

"I feel like a model," Makoto mumbled out before she sat down on the loveseat to pull on the boots.

Anne giggled. "Oh, trust me, this is nothing."

She finished zipping up the boots for standing. There was a slight heel, but it was about the same as the heels she wore as Queen.

"Oooh, you look so pretty, Mako-chan!" Haru exclaimed, clapping her hands lightly.

"Are you comfortable, though?" Anne asked, frowning in concern. "I know that I picked out all of this… but do you like wearing it?"

Makoto nodded. "I am. It's… different but… I've been staying in my comfort zone for too long. Wearing something a bit different than what I usually would is… nice."

"Where are you going?" Haru asked, perching herself on the edge of Anne's bed.

"Seaside Park," she answered. "I mentioned to him once that I would like to go there, and when we talked about it a few days ago… he brought it up again."

"Aww, that's sweet." Anne smiled.

"…Anne?" Makoto whispered.

"What's the matter?" She frowned.

"I'm… I'm a little nervous," she confessed, before biting her lip. "I've never gone out on a date… How did you…?"

"You know… Ren is my first boyfriend," Anne stated. But then she smiled. "The point of a date is to have fun with whoever you're going out with. Don't try and overthink it."

"Is it more of a don't think… feel kind of situation?" Haru asked.

Anne blinked. "…I didn't know you watched Bruce Lee, Haru."

Haru giggled. "I watched it because Mako-chan recommended it."
"They're very well-made movies!" Makoto protested. "It's well directed, the choreography is good, and…!"

Anne giggled. "You don't have to explain yourself, Makoto. You like what you like."

That was when the doorbell rang, causing Anne and Haru to grin at her. She was then all but pushed out of Anne's room. Makoto shot her two friends a quick glare (who just cheerfully waved back at her) before going to answer the door.

"Hey, Mako—" Ken's expression suddenly turned dumbfounded, his eyes bugging out and his mouth hanging open.

Makoto took the moment to look at what her boyfriend was wearing. He was wearing a black trench coat that he wore open over a beige turtleneck, paired with black jeans and a pair of white and orange canvas tops. An orange scarf was wrapped snugly around his neck.

Ken then gulped. "Y-You look really pretty, Makoto." He then tugged at the collar of his jacket, blushing a little. "Maybe I should've dressed a bit nicer."

"No, you look fine! Great!" Makoto blurted out. She then coughed, before she noticed the basket hanging off his arm. "What's the basket for?"

"Oh, um… I thought it'd be nice if we could have a picnic for lunch," Ken answered.

Oh. Of course. Makoto couldn't help but feel a little foolish. What else would he be carrying a basket for?

"I-I mean if you want, I'd be more than happy to take you to a restaurant," Ken said hastily. "I just thought—!"

Makoto leaned up, kissing his cheek. It was very effective in cutting him off. "It's a sweet thought," she said sincerely. "I'd love to. Um… should we get going?"

"Have fun, you two~!" Anne called out sweetly, just as Ken took her hand.

Sometimes she wondered if having Anne and Haru helping her get ready was worth the teasing…

Since Mitsuru-senpai had told her about the plan, and Shinji's idea to have a back-up in case Amamiya-kun failed… Minako couldn't help but think that… more hands-on deck would be better.

"I think you should go to Tokyo on the nineteenth, Aki."

Aki blinked, in the middle of pouring his coffee. Then he seemed to snap out of it, setting down the coffee pot. "Mina…"

"I know what you're going to say, Aki…" Minako rested her hand on her abdomen. As if she knew her daddy was thinking about her, their daughter started to kick. "…I know you aren't comfortable with leaving me. But I still have a few more weeks before I have our baby. Chie-chan is a wonderful cop in the making, but… I don't know." She wrapped her arms around herself. "…Something's telling me that this operation could change things. A lot."

"But Mina…"

"If it'll make you feel better, I can ask Fuuka-chan or Aigis to stay with me, if you don't like the idea of me handling the twins alone." She walked up to her husband, pressing her hand against his
"Please, Aki… There's a lot at stake here…"

"I…" Aki heaved out a sigh, his hand curling around her wrist. "…I left you once before."

"It was not just you," Minako gently reminded. "I was grieving too. We both had lost part of ourselves after Minato died and the Dark Hour was eliminated. We needed time to figure ourselves out." She slid her hand out of Aki's grasp, before she pushed herself up on her toes, kissing his cheek. "You're like a boomerang," she joked lightly. "I know that you'll come back to me."

Aki just chuckled before bending down to kiss her brow. "You're so stubborn," he sighed out, affection filling his voice.

"Ha!" Minako poked him in the chest, making him jump. Minako snickered a little at his reaction. He was always so sensitive there. "You're one to talk!"

"Are you sure that you want me to go?" Aki asked. "I trust Chie, she can get the job done."

"I am," Minako said firmly. "Besides, I bet she'll be thrilled to see her master again in person."

Aki just huffed out a laugh, an embarrassed blush dusting his cheeks pink. "If only I could deal with Shido myself…"

"Aki…" she scolded. "We have to do this subtly."

"I know, I know…" Aki then shook his head. "I just feel so… impatient. I wish that we could just deal with Shido."

"You just want to punch him."

"What, and you don't?" Aki fired back. "Especially with what Shido threatened to do with Aigis and Labrys?"

"…Okay, you have a point there," Minako grumbled out. "I wish we could just watch Mitsuru-senpai kick his ass…"

"I'd pay good money for that," Aki chuckled. "But we'll have to just wait and see."

"Wait and see what?"

They both jumped to see that Kaito was up. (Miyuki was much like Minato, in that she really liked sleeping in.)

"Uhh…" Aki gulped. "A m-movie?"

"Oh. What kind of movie?"

"P-Pach-Saw," Aki stuttered out.

"Oh." Kaito frowned. "Never heard of it. Tell me if it's good, Uncle Aki!"

"…I'll do that, Kaito." Aki rubbed the back of his neck. "So… who's hungry?"

"Me!" Kaito cheered, jumping up and down.

"Someone's happy today," Minako remarked.
"We're gonna see everyone tonight!" Kaito said cheerfully. "I can't wait!"

Minako ruffled his hair. "Hehe, if you're that excited, maybe we can video call Yukari-chan tonight, then. Or Shinji and Ken-kun."

"Yay!" Kaito jumped up and down. "Can we really?!"

"Of course we can, kiddo." Aki smiled down at him. "Why don't you run off and play? I'll get started on breakfast."

Minako waited for Kaito to run off before turning to her husband with a grin. "Pach-Saw, Aki?" Minako couldn't help but tease, nudging him in the side. "Really?"

"…Quiet, you."

To get to Seaside Park, you could either take the train—as per most locations in Tokyo—or you could take a water bus. They decided that it would be more interesting to take the water bus.

They took the train to Asakusa and caught the water bus. Even though she had lived in Tokyo all her life, it was a completely new look of her hometown. There was a breeze, but a pleasant one.

Despite the name, Seaside Park was more of a waterfront. You weren't allowed to swim in Tokyo Bay, but you were allowed to participate in other activities, such as paddle boarding and windsurfing.

It was a little past one by the time they had stepped off the water bus, so they went to find a spot on the lawn so they could eat the food that Ken had brought with him.

Ken had essentially packed a bento box lunch. Though the sausage he had made was something that Makoto had never eaten before. It had a… sweetness to it. But somehow the flavors blended together so well that it made the sausage delicious.

"What is this?" she asked. "I've never had this before…"

"It's called nem nuong," Ken said. "It's a Vietnamese dish. Shinjiro-san has put them in both spring rolls or just on top of vermicelli noodles."

"It's delicious." Makoto took another bite of it. "All of it." Then she faltered when she noticed that Ken was… staring at her.

"S-Sorry!" he stammered out. "It's just… you look so nice today…"

Makoto smoothed down her skirt before looking back to her boyfriend. "Um, would you prefer if I wore clothes more like this then?"

She had never thought that her sense of fashion was plain, but now that she thought about it… Anne was very fashionable, befitting the daughter of two fashion designers. And Haru always dressed so elegantly and beautifully… Even Futaba's style made her different.

"No," Ken said. "You blew me away today but… there's nothing wrong with the clothes you usually wear." Then he suddenly blushed. "…You're beautiful just the way you are."

Ken thought… she was beautiful?

Makoto quickly ducked her head, before she tucked her hair behind her ear. "W-Well, I probably
would have been lost if Haru hadn't stepped in and asked Anne to help me get ready…"

That was when Ken snorted. "I didn't get nearly as much help earlier today…"

"What do you mean?"

"Well…" Pink suddenly tinged Ken's cheeks. "I really did not know what to wear for today… Shinjiro-san walked in on me digging through my closet and he just gave me this look. His what the hell are you doing look." He then mimicked Shinjiro-san's voice at the last part, but it was such a change from Ken's usual voice that Makoto couldn't help but giggle a little bit.

"W-Well… I think you look really nice…" Makoto said. Then she let her eyes travel to the Ferris Wheel in the distance. "I never realized how tall the Ferris Wheel is… It's supposed to be one hundred and fifteen meters high. I wonder how long the ride will be then…"

Ugh! Why was she babbling about ridiculous trivia like that?! At least Ken didn't seem to mind. "Do you want to wait until it's closer to nighttime before riding it?" Ken asked. "It's supposed to look really nice with it all lit up."

"What do you have in mind, then?" Makoto asked. "That would be a few hours away, wouldn't it? I'd love to walk on the beach but… I don't think my shoes are the best for this."

"Well… from what I've heard…" Ken said slowly, "there's a mall nearby. Fuuka-san's birthday is next month, so I would like to start looking for a gift for her…"

Oh… birthdays… It just occurred to her that she didn't know when Ken's birthday was. Didn't that make her a… not very good girlfriend?

"…When is yours?"

"Huh?"

"When is your birthday?" Makoto clarified.

"Oh…" Ken blinked at her for a moment, before answering. "June twenty-fourth."

Makoto's mouth dropped. "W-Wait a minute, we had known each other by then. Why didn't you say anything?!"

Ken just raised an eyebrow at her. "I had moved only a couple weeks back then."

"Still! You should have told me!"

"Oh, yeah?" Ken then huffed. "What about you, then?"

"You were still living on Port Island back then," Makoto retorted. "My birthday is April twenty-third."

"Wait a minute… you're older than me?!!" Ken sputtered out.

"Just by two months!" Makoto protested. "Is this a problem?"

"No, it's just…" Ken then pressed a hand to his face, a chuckle suddenly escaping him. "…I'm being a bit ridiculous about this, aren't I?"
"Well… I suppose I overreacted a little bit too," Makoto admitted. "We did talk back then… but we really didn't know each very well back then."

It had been a little under five months since they had met. Back then she had felt so isolated, adrift in her uncertainty. But now… she had good friends and a… boyfriend now. Due to what Sae had told her, she never really… looked for a potential romantic partner. Despite all of the uncertainty with dealing with Sae's Palace and Akechi… she felt so, so happy.

She then took Ken's hand. "…I'll just have to make your next birthday a good one, then."

Ken then squeezed her hand, smiling the smile that never failed in making her heart race. "…I have to do the same, then."

After they finished eating, they packed up and headed off to find the mall. As they walked, they saw the replica of the Statue of Liberty, as well as a life-sized Gundam robot.

Though calling it just a mall was majorly underestimating it. Palette Town, as the name implied, was like a town of the likes of Chinatown.

"Oh wow…" Makoto breathed, looking from one place to the next. "Do… you even know where to start?"

"From what I remember from the site…" Ken said, "the main points are Venus Fort, the Mega Web Toyota Showcase, and the Universal Design Showcase. Though the last would probably be more Yusuke's scene."

"The Toyota Showcase… that shows off all the state-of-the-art cars Toyota has been working on, right?" Makoto asked.

"Something like that." Ken nodded. "Want to check it out later? It's not quite a motorcycle showcase but…"

"Oh, stop!" Makoto huffed. "I don't even have a motorcycle license."

"Really?" Ken raised an eyebrow. "Maybe you should look into that, at least."

Makoto just shot him an exasperated look. "I don't even have a bike."

"You could always do it for the experience," Ken pointed out.

"Hmm… maybe." Makoto then raised an eyebrow. "Would you ride with me?"

"Well…" Ken found himself blushing, and his face only grew hotter at the triumphant look on Makoto's face. "I wouldn't say no if you asked…"

It took them a few minutes to find Venus Fort. They couldn't help but gawk a little once they had stepped inside. The interior was… Italian? It seemed like they had stepped into the Renaissance era, with all the décor. It was topped off with the ceiling, painted to resemble a sky.

"It's so beautiful…" Makoto sighed. "It kinda brings home that I haven't gotten to explore much, even though I've lived here my whole life…"

"We could always see these things together." Ken couldn't help but wince. Damn, that was cheesy. He could practically see Shinjiro-san's judgmental look.
But Makoto squeezed his hand. "I'd like that."

Venus Fort had three floors, so they had a lot to see. God, he didn't even know where to start…

"What do you usually get Fuuka-san for her birthday?" Makoto asked.

"Well… a mix of things," Ken admitted. "Fuuka-san loves technology, but she also loves cooking… I've bought her cookbooks before. I've also gotten her games that she's been eyeing, but she's been budgeting for necessities."

"She and Futaba must get along pretty well…" Makoto mused.

"Well, I've only seen them interact one time," Ken said. "But Futaba seems to open up to her more easily compared to most people."

Makoto's expression softened at that. "I'm glad… though Fuuka-san is a kind woman. I would be surprised to hear otherwise. Especially since they have a lot in common." Makoto then let out a hum. "…Maybe you can get her a set of headphones? People use those for online gaming, right?"

Ken just snorted. "Sure, but she'll just take it apart and improve it. She fixed Minato-san and Minako-san's headphones and they both swore that she made them twice as better." Then he shook his head. "…But anyways, we don't have to just look for potential gifts for Fuuka-san. If you want to look in a shop, we should go in."

"Oh… in that case…" Makoto pointed with her free hand. "Can we look in this shop, then?"

A hobby store, huh… Makoto ended up wandering away from him at one point, but Ken didn't mind. They didn't have to be joined at the hip, after all. Since this hobby store carried some games, he checked to see if there was anything that Fuuka-san would like. It seemed like there was nothing, though…

He went to see if Makoto was ready to leave, he caught sight of her looking at a motorcycle model. She looked almost… enraptured with it. Ken had to stifle a smile. Maybe when she got to meet Mitsuru-san in person, they would have a lot to talk about it. But hmm… she seemed to really like it…

When Ken approached her, Makoto turned to face him. "Oh, Ken. Did you see anything you want to get?"

"Depends."

Makoto blinked owlishly at him. "…What do you mean?"

Ken gestured to the model. "Do you like it?"

"I… well… it's very nice…" Makoto mumbled out. "But it's most likely far too expensive…"

"Excuse me." Ken waved over an employee. "How much is that model?"

That was when it seemed to click for Makoto. "W-Wait, you aren't going to…?!"

"That'll be ten thousand yen," the employee answered. "Are you still interested in it?"

"I am," Ken answered with a nod.

"But Ken…!" Makoto began to protest. "That's too much money…!"
"I can afford it," Ken replied.

The employee just chuckled, looking very amused. "Very well. I can ring it up for you, then."

Just a couple minutes later, they were walking out of the store with the bag dangling from Makoto's wrist. "I can't believe you just spent ten thousand yen on me..." Makoto mumbled out. "You didn't even bat an eye..."

"I can afford it, Makoto," Ken reassured her. "And you do like it, don't you?"

And she deserved to be spoiled a little... Especially with what she was going through.

"I..." Makoto sighed before giving a little nod. "If you're sure..." Then she sighed, glancing at him. "...You're really setting the bar high, aren't you?"

"Since when is this a competition?" Ken raised an eyebrow at her.

Makoto huffed, but then her expression became thoughtful. "Though... it does need to be assembled... Do you want to help me put it together some time?"

"Sounds good to me." Ken smiled at her. "So... where to, next?"

They spent a couple hours at the mall, browsing through the various shops. They hadn't found anything for Fuuka-san, but at least he had a good month and a half... He'd find something.

After that, they stopped by the Toyota Showcase. It was practically like a car amusement park. Too bad that you needed a license to give one of the cars a try. Judging from the way Makoto looked at the cars, Ken had to guess that she wanted to try driving them.

By the time they stepped out, it was already dark. Though that was a given, since Daylight Savings started earlier today. But Makoto had eyes for only the Ferris Wheel.

"It's so pretty..." she breathed out.

...Though it couldn't compare to Makoto.

...Dear god, and he used to make fun of how Junpei-san, Akihiko-san, and Shinjiro-san all had their sappy moments with Chidori-san, Minako-san, and Fuuka-san. Though he didn't mind it completely...

"Do you want to ride it?" Ken asked.

"Can we?" Makoto asked. When Ken nodded, she grasped his hand and tugged him towards the line.

The line surprisingly was short, so it wasn't long until they were allowed to board a gondola.

Makoto almost looked like a little child, with how she gazed out of the window. It was... endearing, but it made him curious.

"...Have you never been inside a Ferris Wheel?" Ken asked.

"H-Huh?" Makoto snapped out of it, turning to him. She then flushed scarlet. "I-I'm sorry! B-But... um, yes... Like I mentioned before... my family didn't really have the time to go to amusement parks..."
"Hey, there's nothing wrong with that." Ken took her hand.

"I still shouldn't be ignoring you..." Makoto smiled sheepishly, before she scooted closer to him. "S-Should we do something... like a couple would?"

...Oh.

"Is that what you want?" Ken asked.

"Would I bring it up if that wasn't the case?"

Well. That was all the invitation he needed. He pulled her closer, slipping his arms around her waist before pressing his lips to hers. Makoto slid her arms around his neck, before beginning to play with his hair. He wasn't fond of others mussing up his hair but when Makoto touched his hair, it felt... nice.

But when they broke apart, a soft chuckle escaped Makoto.

"What is it?" he couldn't help but ask.

"Well... I was just thinking. Kissing in a Ferris Wheel... That's a pretty typical couple activity. I just... thought I'd never partake in this. At least not for a long time... Sis always told me that I needed to focus on my studies. Finding a boyfriend could come later..." Then a smile crept onto her face, even as her cheeks turned rosy pink. "...I'm glad that I was wrong about that."

Ken could feel his face warm up. "...I'm glad that I came to Tokyo," he said. "So, I could meet you..."

Makoto's cheeks darkened to red. "How can you say that with a straight face? It's just so... cliché."

"You're the one whose face is as red as a tomato," Ken countered.

"You're not far behind!" Makoto protested.

They couldn't help but laugh. And to think that he had a near meltdown this morning... (Shinjirosan had been utterly unamused by his reaction.)

But then Makoto scooted closer to Ken, resting her head against his shoulder with a content sigh. "I really needed this..." she murmured.

"Your sister..." Ken said quietly.

"...Yeah." Makoto smiled halfheartedly. "I just... don't know what to feel. Seeing how Sis viewed Dad... I just feel so shaken about this whole thing. I want to believe that Sis isn't too gone. I want her to change her heart... I don't know if I can appeal to her sense of justice still. But I still want to try... I have everyone supporting me. And... I know I have you..."

Ken leaned in, kissing her forehead. "...You'll always have me, I promise."

Makoto just smiled up at him. "I know."

Chapter End Notes
A lot happened in this chapter! I skimmed over the slots section during the Palace exploration, because I felt finding the member’s card and getting to the control room was good enough to cover this part of the Palace exploration. I also hinted that Makoto and Sae’s father would have a cognitive self in this, with the previous visit to the Palace and during the section where Ken, Makoto, and Haru were scoping out the police station in the Metaverse. Don’t expect that to be the last of him!

And Akechi… I don’t think in canon there are really any hints that he cared for Sae. I wanted to hint towards that more. I also wanted to touch up on more of his reaction to Ren being a Wild Card, given Akechi’s obsession to be seen as special.

I did some research on Seaside Park just to check I had the right details. The places that Ken mentions do exist in Odaiba irl, where Seaside Park is located. Maybe I put a little too much research in their date but it was pretty cool to read up on it!

And I want to thank my good friend, angelrin89, for betaing this chapter!
A Little Breather

Chapter Summary

After the first exploration of Sae's Palace, the Phantom Thieves take some time to relax... and to plan for a certain someone's birthday. Meanwhile, Chie is visited by a couple of old friends and are asked a favor...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Monday, November 7th, 2016

"Come on, Futaba, it'll be good for you!"

"No!" Futaba shook her head vigorously. "Why put yourself through so much pain?!"

Futaba had always hated exercising. She was always the last to finish her laps in gym. And yet Ryuji and Ken wanted her to put herself through that again?! No thank you. Following everyone in the Palaces was enough for her, thank you.

"It's a good burn, though!" Ryuji insisted. "It'll be fun! Let us show you!"

"There's nothing that will convince me to go exercising with you," Futaba said flatly.

"Nothing, huh?" Ken raised an eyebrow. "I thought you might say something like that…"

"Using your trump card, huh?" Ryuji nudged Ken in the side with a grin. "Ready to see Futaba eat her words?"

Ken just rolled his eyes at Ryuji, before producing a poster tube. He then popped it open, unfurling the poster inside.

Futaba's eyes bugged out. It was a poster of the latest incarnation of Feathermen… A fully autographed poster.

"How did you get your hands on this?!!" Futaba cried out.

Ken just raised an eyebrow, looking amused. "Do you really have to ask?"

"Neeeeerd," Ryuji teased, elbowing Ken in the side which just made Ken roll his eyes in response.

"You're giving it to me?!" Futaba exclaimed but Ken quickly held it over her head, out of reach.

Cheater. Why did everyone but Haru have to be annoyingly taller than her?! And even then Haru was nearly half a head taller.

"Not so fast," Ken said. "I will give it to you… if you agree to come to the gym with Ryuji and me today."
Futaba grumbled to herself. Ken was playing dirty… But still, a completely autographed poster! She couldn't pass this up! She had to have it!

"Fiiiine," she huffed before pointing at the boys. "I'm not gonna enjoy it though!"

"We'll see 'bout that!" Ryuji said with a wide grin. "Come on, onto the Protein Lovers Gym!"

After Futaba picked out an exercising outfit, they dragged her to Shibuya, paid six thousand yen for the three of them (that could have covered the cost of a game but no, apparently they had to exercise).

"Okay, Futaba, let's start with a light jog on the treadmill!" Ryuji said with a grin. "It'll be a nice warm-up!"

"Can't we do the bikes?" Futaba couldn't help but whine. "That's sitting still!"

"Futaba, it's a miracle that you haven't been lagging in the Metaverse runs," Ken said sternly, folding his arms over his chest. "We may have a situation where we need to get away as soon as we can, and you could be in trouble if you're not fast enough."

"I'm not that bad!" Futaba grumbled out.

Ryuji and Ken just exchanged a skeptical look.

"HEY! I saw that!" Futaba puffed out her cheeks. "Ugh, you guys suck."

"Prove us wrong, then," Ryuji challenged. "You can go toe to toe with the best hackers and doing a simple warm-up will scare you off?!"

"Fiiiine," Futaba groaned out before she climbed the treadmill.

"You're lucky that you've never been in a sports club, y'know," Ryuji said. "Some of the drills… they were just brutal."

"I remember those sprinting drills when I first joined the soccer club," Ken mused. "Felt like my legs were going to fall off…"

"You're not helping." Futaba grumbled out.

"Hey, we're saying that you have it easy compared to what we had to deal with!" Ryuji huffed.

"We'll focus on building up your stamina today," Ken said, his tone taking the air of a teacher. "So, I want you to keep up a jog for five minutes. I don't care how slow you feel you're going. It's just important that you don't stop or start walking."

"Okay, Coach." Futaba huffed out.

"Where'd ya even learn this?" Ryuji asked as Futaba turned on the treadmill.

"Just listening in on Junpei-san, I guess." Ken said sheepishly. "He coaches a junior league baseball team, along with his job as a gym teacher. He taught me how to play baseball back in junior high. He really loves his job."

"Huh…never thought of it like that." Ryuji sounded...thoughtful, that was weird, "That does seem pretty cool when you put it like that!"
"Futaba, more jogging," Ken suddenly said, his voice sharp. "You can listen and jog at the same time."

"Slave driver." Futaba grumbled.

Ken huffed. "I heard that."

"You were supposed to!"

They did a little bit of everything. Futaba felt so tired… and her muscles were burning. But at the same time… she also… felt good? Weird.

"Are we done now?" Futaba asked.

"Not yet." Ryuji grinned before reaching into his pocket. He pulled out some scotch tape and a crumpled photo of Akechi.

"…Is there a reason why you've got a picture of Akechi in your pocket?"

"Not for the reason you're thinking!" Ryuji retorted. "It's for the punching bag!"

"Ryuji…" Ken sighed out.

"He just… pisses me off!" Ryuji hissed out. "I'd find him annoying enough even without his whole 'The Phantom Thieves are evil and just as bad as crooks' attitude, but what he's planning with Ren…" He scowled. "I can't exactly punch the real Akechi so this will do."

She could see where Ryuji was coming from. They've been stressing over this operation (and the fact that a lot of the plan was riding on her abilities was so reassuring). While everyone liked to treat her like she was their kid sister, Ren always did look out for her. The idea of Akechi killing him... just made her sick to her stomach.

"Lemme at 'im, too!" Futaba exclaimed before her hands balled into fists.

Ken just pressed a hand to his forehead. "You both can be so impossible, I'll have you know."

"Noted!" Futaba smiled cheekily.

"Don't break it or we'll have to compensate them," Ken grumbled out as they watched Ryuji whale on the punching bag. "Has Makoto been teaching you aikido or something?"

Ryuji just snickered before he gave one last punch, making the punching bag swing violently. "Nah! I'm pretty sure Makoto would be nitpicking at my technique if she was here." He then turned to look at Futaba. "Wanna give it a go, Futaba?"

"Yeah!" Futaba nodded. She let Ryuji step away, before she took his spot. She balled her fists, eyeing the punching bag. "Here it goes!" Then she swung her fist. "Ouch!" she yelped, as her hand started to throb with pain.

"Let me see." Ken gingerly took her hand, before he sighed softly. "This isn't like a pillow, you know."

"I didn't think it was," Futaba said sulkily. Ken glanced around cautiously before his hand began to glow blue. Warmth infused her hand and when Ken pulled his hand away, Futaba could feel the pain disappearing. She flexed her hand for a moment before she looked to Ken. "Thanks."
"No problem." Ken then looked to Ryuji. "What do you say about getting a snack at the diner? I think Futaba's done for the day."

"The poster!" Futaba exclaimed, clenching both of her hands into fists. "Gimmegimmegimme—!"

"Okay, okay, calm down!" Ken sighed, shaking his head.

"I think you've created a monster, Ken," Ryuji commented.

Ken just rolled his eyes in response. "Haha, you're hilarious, Ryuji."

"Don't be mad because I'm just sayin' the truth!"

But they got out of the gym, heading for the diner.

"Y'know, RenRen always said this is a good place to study," Ryuji commented, not looking up from the menu. "Dunno why."

"It's quiet, I suppose." Ken shrugged. "And he can order something to eat or drink to keep up his energy."

"Still weird..." Ryuji grumbled to himself. "But anyways...I did have fun today."

"It was...nice," Futaba grumbled out. "But—!"

"Okay, okay, calm down!" Ken sighed, shaking his head.

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"It was...nice," Futaba grumbled out. "But—!"

"Oh, all right." Ken huffed, shooting Futaba an exasperated look. He then reached under the table, retrieving the poster tube. "You've got a one-track mind. I hope you know that."

Futaba stuck her tongue at him before she snatched the poster from him. "You know you love us."

"Hm." Ken then took a sip of his water but he didn't deny it.

"This was nice, y'know." Ryuji then heaved out a sigh, making Futaba and Ken look at him. "I just...I dunno. Stressing out 'bout Makoto's sis was getting to me." Then he scowled. "I don't even know why Makoto thinks that she's any better than the other ones we've faced."

"Ryuji..." Ken said quietly.

"I mean...! She tried to effing blackmail Boss. And all those lives she had to have wrecked, all 'cause she needed to win." Ryuji suddenly gripped the edge of the table. "I guess...I just don't get it," he said quietly. "Why Yusuke, Haru, and Makoto care so much." He then laughed, but it was flat. "I guess... I'm a shitty person... ain't I?"

"D-Don't say that!" Futaba blurted. "I... I get it." She closed her eyes. "My uncle..." she mumbled out. "He was awful to me. Sojiro probably would've been fine to let him to take care of me... if he actually did."

"Exactly!" Ryuji's eyes suddenly lowered to the table. "My old man... He was honestly super shitty. He made my mom cry so many times... He'd get pissed off and take it out on me and my mom. If he came back, said he was sorry... I could never forgive him. He's an asshole! And... he probably pales in comparison to Madarame or Okumura." He just shook his head, giving a rueful smile. "I guess Yusuke, Haru, and Makoto are just more mature than me."

"Don't say that, Ryuji," Ken said sharply. "There are some people that aren't worth forgiveness. They're nothing but scum. I know... it's complicated. But don't degrade yourself, because you've
seen how conflicted Yusuke and Haru felt about facing their abusive father figures or seeing how Makoto feels about her older sister."

"You're not stupid for not wanting to forgive him," Futaba said. "I would never forgive my uncle..."

Ryuji then cracked his usual smile.

"Heh... thanks guys." Then he shook his head. "I get family being important to some people but... ugh. My mom's the only family member who's ever given two shits 'bout me."

Yeah... that was pretty much the same for her. She had believed that Mom had hated her for so long but... it wasn't the truth. Mom loved her. Although, she couldn't help but wonder if Akechi was the one responsible for killing her. If that was the case...

She would never forgive Akechi.

"Well... truth be told," Ken began, "My personal feelings align with yours, Ryuji. I can understand why Makoto feels the way she does..." Ken just sighed before he shrugged. "But like you, Mom was the only one who ever really cared about me."

"Maybe we should make a 'I Have A Shitty Dad' club?" Ryuji weakly joked.

"Heh." Ken closed his eyes for a moment. "But my point is that you shouldn't feel bad or guilty that you don't want to forgive your dad, should the chance present itself."

Ryuji rubbed the back of his neck. "Thanks, Ken. I guess... I needed to hear a little pep talk."

Ken's cheeks suddenly colored. "T-That was nothing."

"Aw, you don't have to feel embarrassed!" Futaba snickered at him.

A new voice interjected into the conversation.

"Might I join you?"

"A-Akechi?!" Ryuji sputtered out, staring at him. "What are you doing here?!"

"The same reason as you, I suppose," Akechi remarked, all while smiling amusedly.

Futaba was so glad that she was sitting next to Ryuji. Speaking of Ryuji, Ken gave him a quick warning look before sliding closer to the wall to accommodate Akechi.

"So, I take it that you have been exercising?" Akechi asked. "Though I must say, I would never think you would partake in that, Futaba-san."

"Yeah, well..." Futaba scrunched up her face, shooting Ken a look. "Someone dangled a fully autographed poster of Feathermen Rangers over my head!"

"Oh yes, how dare I make you do something that's good for you," Ken deadpanned.

"And you ended up enjoying yourself!" Ryuji huffed out. "You can't deny it!"

Futaba just turned and flicked him in the forehead.

"WHATCHA DO THAT FOR?!!"
"Inside voice, Ryuji..." Ken sighed out, pressing a hand to his forehead.

"What inside voice?" Futaba quipped.

"Aw, shuddup..." Ryuji folded his arms over his chest, before proceeding to sulk.

"You all are so lively." Akechi laughed quietly, holding a hand over his mouth. "I must say... you are quite the fan of Feathermen Rangers, aren't you, Futaba-san?"

"Well... yeah." Futaba bit her lower lip. "Victory especially. It kinda... gave me something to look forward when I...I wasn't at the highest point of my life. The opening line of the intro always stuck with me. 'Death must not be needlessly feared... But it must not be needlessly wanted, either. So, face it and fight, Feathermen!' It was... one of the things that made me happy after Mom died."

Akechi was frozen for a moment. He looked...shaken. Some emotion flashed in his eyes before he closed them for a moment.

Then he pressed his lips together. "T-That's understandable. I...I'm sorry that your mother's death had...shaken you so much." He then coughed. "T-Though, it's good that you're taking some time to enjoy yourself now. I've discovered the date when Sae-san will be sitting in during court: next Monday."

The topic of Sae made Ryuji's face sour. He wasn't quite scowling but...the disapproval on his face was clear as day. And well, it's not like Futaba disagreed with Ryuji.

Akechi winced. "You... really don't like Sae-san, do you?"

"No shit, Sherlock," Ryuji spat out. "Like I get it. She's Makoto's sis. And your partner. But she's done all the shitty stuff that I hate about the police! Manipulating shit, throwing innocent people under the bus!" He then slammed his fist on the table, making the glasses rattle. "It pisses me off! And I bet that she would've condemned Ren if she was the one prosecuting his case!"

"And there's what she tried to do with Sojiro... she would've ruined his life," Futaba mumbled out.

A... weird look crossed Ken's face. "Well... Shinjiro-san did tell me something..."

Ryuji looked shocked; Futaba had to admit she also was surprised.

"Why would Shinjiro-san run into her?!" Ryuji demanded. "Tell us, Ken!"

"Okay, okay, calm down!" Ken hissed. "It's not as big as you would think. But she came into the bar that Shinjiro-san works at. She looked kinda stressed with the case. And... Shinjiro-san asked her if this was all worth it. And... Niijima-san couldn't answer."

"So, she's got a conscience, huh...?" Futaba asked. Then she mumbled out, "That's a surprise."

Ken just sighed. Well, she wasn't the one dating Makoto. Ken had a bias as Makoto's boyfriend. Unless Sae proved that she regretted threatening Sojiro...Futaba wasn't ready to forgive her.

"Well...I can understand your... gripes with the police," Akechi admitted. "And people in power, in general. As they say...power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Akechi seemed to hesitate for a moment.

"May I... share something... about me?"
"Nobody's stopping ya." Ryuji shrugged. "You like talking about yourself on TV, so I guess real life isn't any different."

"How you jest, Ryuji-san." Akechi laughed, but it sounded so... fake. "Thank you..." Akechi then inhaled. "As I told you a few months ago, I was born out of wedlock. My mother...she had been a fresh graduate out of university. But... in her field, it wasn't the easiest to find a job straight out of university. So, she found a job so she could support herself while she tried to get a job that she did want. She worked as a secretary for an upcoming politician."

Then a bitter look crossed his face. It honestly... was a bit unnerving. She was so used to the princely media darling.

"He knew just how to manipulate her," Akechi continued. "He whispered things in her ear...things she wanted to hear. You see, she had a sister who was fortunate to find love in high school. After university, her sister's boyfriend proposed to her and they married soon after. They were quite in love...and my mother craved the same love. But he...he would never give it to her. She told him that she was pregnant...and what did he do? He threw her away like trash..."

"What the hell?" Ryuji choked out. "That...really effed up."

She never really knew her dad. But Mom...she didn't really care. Maybe...it was a blessing that Mom marched to her own beat, as Sojiro sometimes put it.

"Another politician who only cares about himself..." Ken rubbed his forehead. "Politics seem to breed that type."

"Another?" Akechi questioned.

"Uh..." Ryuji grimaced. "It really should be on Ren to tell ya but...you did share some pretty heavy shit 'bout your family. But you know that Ren's on probation for a year, yeah?"

"Ren was just walking home when he came across some politician trying to force himself on a woman." Futaba huffed. "And he got screwed over so badly for it...!"

Akechi inhaled sharply. "Is that really the case?"

"I mean, Ryuji's many things but he's not a liar!"

"What's that supposed to mean?!" Ryuji demanded.

"But that's why Ren's a bit... bitter towards prosecutors," Ken said quietly. "Because how his court case was honestly just a farce."

"It's so effed up how he got screwed over this." Ryuji muttered.

"Power..." Futaba said quietly. "That's all it comes down to."

"Yes," Akechi agreed. "If only we could take him down."

Futaba gulped. The way Akechi's eyes burned... it scared her a little. Something told her...that Akechi wasn't referring to the politician that messed with Ren.

"Might I join you for a bit?"

Ken had to bite back a sigh. Honestly, while his backstory wasn't... what he had expected, Ken
was not particularly interested in spending more time with Akechi than he had to. But there was no polite way to say no in this situation. Sometimes he wished he could be more blunt like Shinjiro-san.

Ryuji had taken Futaba home, leaving him with Akechi.

"I suppose," Ken answered.

"How is Niijima-san?" Akechi abruptly asked.

"Why do you ask?" Ken asked, glancing towards Akechi.

Akechi winced, before he let out a heavy sigh.

"I… I know that Niijima-san is not the biggest fan of me," He said, "But… as I told her before… we do have a common ground—we both care about Sae-san. And I've only known Sae-san for two years. I can only imagine how she felt, seeing how…warped Sae-san has become."

"You're…more attached to her than I would think," Ken said slowly. "She is just your co-worker, isn't she?"

"Well… she is my coworker, yes," Akechi agreed. "But when we met… she was a bit skeptical. After all, there aren't many sixteen year old detectives running around. But… she slowly let me in. Back then, she still believed in justice somewhat. She spoke of wanting to reform the system and that… resounded with me, in a way. The justice system… it lets the downtrodden slip through the cracks. And well… she treated me kindly. Kinder than most adults have."

Was he lying? The fact that he claimed that the black masked Persona-user attacked him, and in response, Akechi had awakened to his Persona still nagged at him. He didn't know if he could trust Akechi.

"Ken-san... if I may ask." Akechi said quietly. "You've mentioned this guardian of yours before… am I correct in assuming that he's not a blood relative?"

"He's not," Ken answered. "Shinjiro-san was... well, he was a third-year attending Gekkoukan High when we met. But... he felt that the life I led wasn't healthy."

"Your..." Akechi's brow furrowed, "Life? Just what do you mean?"

Ken sighed. It was only fair—he did share a lot about his family. "Back then, I was under the custody of my father's cousin, but it was really in name. He paid the bills but I probably could've fallen in a ditch for all he cared…"

"I'm sorry about that." Akechi's eyes widened at that. "After losing your parents."

Ken shrugged. "I never really knew my dad. My parents got a divorce when I was practically a baby."

"Oh..." Akechi said lamely. "But...he didn't involve himself in your life after the divorce?"

"Well..." Ken grimaced. "It's all gossip but… apparently my parents' first real conflict was over… whether or not they were ready to be parents." He shrugged. "I don't know if it's true. Gossip can be full of gibberish."

Akechi just frowned quizzically. "It doesn't... bother you?"
Ken shrugged. "My mom always loved me. She tried to make the best of things, even if it was rough. And there were a couple hard years, after Mom died but... after I met my senpai... they gave me love. They helped me heal after my mom's death."

"You are..." Akechi swallowed hard, "Quite fortunate."

Did he look angry? Or would a better word be... bitter? But the look in his eye disappeared within a blink of an eye.

"I know I am," Ken said. "I'm very grateful to them."

"But—" Akechi hesitated for a moment, before he swallowed hard. He looked down to the ground. "I never apologized for what happened... with Takeba-san's son. I spoke carelessly."

Ken just looked at him warily. "Why bring this up now?"

Akechi looked up, a weak smile on his face.

"Well I suppose it was on my mind, with bringing up my father. Takeba-san has fortitude, for choosing to bear bastard children when she was... eighteen? And I assume the father just... deserted her."

"No," Ken snapped out.

"No?" he parroted back.

"No," Ken repeated. "Yukari-san's boyfriend... he was a good person. He loved Yukari-san very much... but something happened and..." Ken squeezed his eyes shut. "...His death was a tragedy," he finished quietly as he opened his eyes. "He lost his parents at a young age due to a tragic accident and... he would never abandon a child of his. Never."

Besides that, Minato-san would've had Minako-san to contend with.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize you held him in high regard." Akechi murmured, making Ken look at him. "I just thought—" He then coughed. "I suppose I'm just jumping to conclusions. Though that being said, Takeba-san's children are... fortunate."

When Ken raised an eyebrow at that, he was quick to add more.

"They have their mother still, after all. And she is fortunate enough to have a well-paying job, being an actress." A sad smile then formed on his lips. "But as I was saying... I spoke heedlessly. I... I found out just how bastards were viewed in society when I was about... seven?" He closed his eyes for a moment. "Rumors spread... the children learned to avoid me because I was a bastard. I... I... recall my mother asking what a bastard was. She didn't say anything. She just hugged me and wept."

"Akechi... I'm sorry."

He didn't know what else to say. He used to hate that phrase, often used after someone found out that he was an orphan. But sometimes all you could do was offer sympathy.

Akechi smiled weakly. "I just wish...she hadn't died with so much pain and torment. If only he had —" He then shook his head, closing his eyes for a moment. "No. Wishes... they're useless."

"Akechi-san?" Ken questioned.
"Ah, forgive me, Ken-san." Akechi forced a smile. "I've wasted enough of your time. You should get going. Your guardian must be worried for you."

Then he walked away. Ken just stared in bewilderment at Akechi's retreating back.

What was that about?

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Tuesday, November 8th, 2016

From the little comments Anne has made to Ren here and there, Ren could guess that she hasn't had a birthday party in the longest time. Oh, her parents called to wish her a happy birthday. Shiho always made sure to get her an awesome birthday present. But to Ren...that simply wasn't enough.

This year was going to be different. They had a group of friends. Anne's seventeenth birthday was going to be a good one if Ren had anything to say about it. And besides...he had missed so many of his friends' birthdays already. He wasn't going to do it yet another time.

Not to mention that everyone deserved to have some fun after all of the stress they've had to deal with lately. A much needed distraction from Nijima's Palace. And well. The fact that Shido and Akechi both wanted him dead. But he did have to invite Akechi into this. Couldn't look like he didn't trust Akechi.

Earlier this morning, he had sent a text to everyone (except for Anne of course) to meet him in the attic of LeBlanc to discuss this.

"What is this about, Ren?" Morgana tilted his head at Ren. "And I noticed you didn't message Lady Anne about this meeting."

"That's because I don't want her to find out. Because you see..." Ren then paused for dramatic effect, earning him an eye roll from a certain someone. "It'll be Anne's birthday in four days."

"Oh!" Haru's eyes brightened. "You want to throw her a birthday party, don't you?" She then giggled, pressing a hand to her cheek. "That's so sweet of you, Ren-kun."

Akechi cleared his throat. "I understand that Anne-san has been your paramour for a while but—"

"What's a paramour?" Ryuji interrupted, cutting Akechi off.

"It means love interest," Makoto clarified.

"Though it is usually used to describe a lover of a married person," Ken said dryly, shooting Akechi a look. "Which Anne is most certainly not."

"Dude, you gotta show off your vocab or somethin'?" Ryuji grumbled out.

Ken just rolled his eyes. Ren couldn't help but chuckle.

"Well, I'm not opposed to this," Yusuke stated. "We have been stressed since well..." he trailed off, before pursing his lips. "...For weeks."

"Since Father died," Haru said before she smiled faintly at Yusuke. "It's okay, Yusuke-kun..."

Ren noticed something curious from the corner of his eye as he noticed Akechi shifting where he stood. He turned to glance at him better (albeit discreetly). Was that a look of guilt in Akechi's
eyes? He was looking at everything else but Haru too.

"I'm down!" Futaba cried, before her shoulders suddenly hunched over. "Nggh...I don't have a birthday present ready for her though."

"It's okay, Futaba, we can go shopping for a birthday present together," Makoto reassured before patting the younger girl's shoulder. "How does that sound?"

Futaba's eyes lit up before she nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah! Thanks, Makoto!"

"And...I was wondering if I could ask a favor of you." She said hesitantly.

"Hm? What's up?" Futaba quirked a brow at her.

"Not here!" Makoto hastily blurted out. "We can talk about it later."

Huh. What was that about?

"Can we even pull this off though?" Morgana asked. "Lady Anne does deserve a nice party but...there are only four days before Lady Anne's birthday..."

"We can." Ren firmly nodded. "We've pulled off the impossible before. We've got this in the bag!"

"So...what do we have to cover?" Yusuke asked. "I must confess, I'm not too acquainted with the process."

"Food's a must!" Ryuji exclaimed. "Hey, Ken! You should totally ask Shinjiro-san if he can give us a hand!"

"Well...I can try," Ken said slowly, looking rather unsure. "Shinjiro-san does get tired out from his job though, so I'm not sure. Though if Shinjiro-san can't, I can cook." Then he added in a mutter, "Never would hear the end of it if Shinjiro-san ever found out that there was only junk food."

"I could always make it a catering job," Haru mused. "Oh! I'd like to give baking a try. I can make the cake! Birthday parties always need a cake!"

For some reason, Ken paled. He looked...nervous as he swallowed hard.

"Er... Haru?"

"Hm?" Haru tilted her head. "Is something the matter, Ken-kun?"

"You know how to read a cookbook, right?" Ken asked.

Haru just blinked. "Yes?"

Why was Ken suddenly paranoid? Maybe he should pry the story out of Ken sometime...

"But man, Shinjiro-san's such an awesome cook," Ryuji said with a grin. "Dude, I haven't had his cooking in ages! It'd be awesome if you could get him to cook for us!"

"If he does agree, we should invite him to the party!" Haru said.

Morgana scrunched up his face. "Something tells me that he'll say no."

"I'll try to convince him," Ken said hesitantly.
Ren quirked an eyebrow at his friend. "Is he really that much of a grump?"

Ken just huffed. "It's like pulling teeth." Then he paused. "...Well, if you're not Fuuka-san."

Ryuji snickered. "He really is whipped."

"I still do not understand that phrase..." Yusuke stated with a frown.

"...You don't need to, Yusuke," Ken said dryly.

"Ahem!" Makoto cleared her throat, before looking towards Ren. "I suppose the rest of us should handle decorating." Makoto mused.

"I ask that I be put in charge," Yusuke announced, pointedly ignoring Futaba's scoff and eyeroll. "My eye for aesthetic is unparalleled, after all."

"Well... most of you, yes." Ren looked towards his best friend. "But I have something else in mind for you, Ryuji."

"Come on, dude. Spit it out!" Ryuji said impatiently.

Ren then grinned.

"Patience is a virtue," He teased.

"RenRen!"

"That's my name, don't wear it out," Ren quipped, before smirking at the chagrined look on Ryuji's face.

"Okay, basically, I talked to Shiho a few days ago. Turns out that she was planning to surprise Anne with a visit for her birthday. So, I invited her to the party. But since I think she's most familiar with you, I figured that you'd be the best choice to go get her at the train station and bring her here."

"Didn't you visit her the most with Anne?" Makoto asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well..." Ren smiled sheepishly. "Someone's gotta distract her while everyone sets up, right?"

"Oh sure." Futaba nodded before making kissing noises. "And you can get all gross and mushy with her."

"Hey!" Ren protested. "We're not that bad!"

"Uh-huh," Ken said dryly. "Sure."

"Hey, your track record isn't exactly squeaky clean!" Ren's retorted, "You can't talk!"

Ken could only glower at him.

"Do I want to know?" Akechi tilted his head as both Ken and Makoto predictably reddened.

Ren smothered the urge to smirk. They really made it too easy.

Haru clapped her hands to get everyone's attention.

"So! What should we do for decorations? And what type of cake?" She asked.
Chie was exhausted. She loved what she was working towards, becoming a police officer so she can protect people—but sometimes the training at the police academy was just brutal. Some days she felt as wiped out as the day she had awakened to Tomoe.

She had managed to start to doze off when she found herself being shaken awake. "Satonaka! Wake up!"

"Huh?" She blinked blearily up at her fellow trainee, one of the few women who was studying at the academy. "Is it time for dinner?"

She huffed, rolling her eyes. "Not quite. The original Detective Prince is here to see you."

"Naoto-kun?!" Chie yelped out, abruptly sitting up. "For what?!"

"I just said that she's here to see you." She then poked Chie in the forehead. "Might wanna wake a bit before you go see her."

Chie waved her aside with a nervous laugh. "Yeah, yeah, I'll wash my face. Thanks for letting me know about Naoto-kun."

After she went to the bathroom to splash some water on her face, she went to go find Naoto. Her friend was leaning against the wall, though she was surrounded by some of Chie's classmates.

"Hey, clear off!" Chie shouted, immediately breaking into a sprint. She then skidded to a stop, frowning at them. "Jeez, can't you let her breathe?!

This earned her some grumbles but they scattered, leaving Chie alone with her old friend.

"Hello, Chie-senpai," Naoto greeted, a faint smile forming on her lips. "It's lovely to see you again."

"Hey, none of that!" Chie shook her head. "Come here!"

She didn't wait for Naoto to reply before grabbing Naoto in a tight hug.

"O-Oh!" Naoto's expression was flustered when Chie pulled away. Then she coughed, color rushing into her cheeks. "Um...shall we? We could go to the restaurant you always rave about."

Chie couldn't help but giggle. Ah, Naoto. She was better at interacting with others than compared to when Chie first met her, but she'd never jump for a hug like Rise would.

Though… what did Naoto want so much secrecy? Though she definitely wouldn't say no to beef bowls!

The restaurant was a short walk from the academy, which was part of why Chie liked going there. Since it was a weekday, it wasn't as busy as it could've been. Though to her surprise, there was someone waiting for them…

"Kanji-kun!" Chie beamed at him. "You're here too?!"
"Hey, Chie-senpai!" Kanji greeted her, a wide smile on his face. "How are ya?"

"Awesome. Can't wait to get outta here, though! How are your classes coming along?"

"The kids are so damn smart," he said. "You should've seen what Kaya-chan made the other day…!"

Naoto just smiled fondly at Kanji as Kanji continued to gush about his students.

"It's crazy how fast they learn!" Kanji exclaimed.

But before Chie could reply, the host called out, "Table for three! For Tatsumi-san?"

"Ah, that's us," Naoto said.

The three of them stepped forward and they were seated near the back of the restaurant. However, Naoto seemed more interested in looking through the menu first.

Chie watched Naoto flick through the menu, her dark blue eyes scanning the contents. She was as proper as ever, her posture perfect. Kanji definitely knew what was up, with how his eyes darted over to Naoto every five seconds. Then she suddenly set down her menu.

"So, Chie-senpai, tell me." Naoto looked at her squarely in the eyes. "You've been kept in the loop about the Phantom Thieves, haven't you?"

Chie let out a weak chuckle. "I-I mean you kinda have to be living under a rock to not know."

"That's not what I'm referring to, Chie-senpai."

Chie pursed her lips.

"Okay. I'll give." She then leaned forward. "They seemed like good kids from what you described." Then she winced. "Sorry I couldn't come back to Inaba to meet them."

"That's not your fault, Chie-senpai," Kanji said. "I mean, this is pretty damn important."

"Just a few more months," Chie sighed out before rubbing her forehead. "I really can't wait to get out of here."

Naoto just smiled at her. "I look forward to the day where you and I can work together in a professional setting, Chie-senpai."

"Hehe…" Chie scratched her cheek. "I dunno if I can keep up with you, Naoto-kun."

"Hey, don't put yourself down!" Kanji scolded. "I mean, Naoto's pretty much a genius—"

"Kanji-kun!" Naoto's cheeks suddenly reddened. "You're exaggerating!"

"It's true, Naoto!" Kanji argued, before turning back to Chie. "But anyways, don't put yourself down. You made some pretty sharp deductions back when we were in high school."

"Your intuition is truly something else," Naoto added.

"Thanks." Chie smiled sheepishly for a moment but then she leaned in close. "But what's this about the Phantom Thieves?"
Chie personally thought they were pretty cool. She could see why people were skeptical of them. But… tracking down crooks, not relenting until they saw said crooks in jail. She had to admit that the idea appealed to her. Though she was surprised to find out that Ken had joined them. Chie didn't get along with him like Ken did with Kanji and Naoto, but she liked the younger boy, even though he was so serious.

Naoto began, "Well—"

"Shido's going for their heads," Kanji interrupted.

"Kanji-kun!" Naoto gave Kanji an exasperated look.

Kanji huffed. "Stop pussyfooting around, Naoto! We'll take forever to get the freakin' point at the rate you're setting!"

Naoto just sighed softly. "Well… I suppose you're right."

"Slow down and back up! Can you please fill in some lines?!" Chie cried out.

Naoto sighed then began to explain that the Phantom Thieves were set up to target Medjed and Okumura. And this was all a set-up for Shido to remove a growing threat. It was… despicable.

"And Akechi turned out to be a total phony." Kanji's face scrunched up in disgust. "I knew he couldn't compare to Naoto but… this is beyond even Adachi."

Akechi, huh…? Well, she knew that so many girls went gaga for him. It was weird to hear for her though, since he was still a high school student. There was always something that rubbed her wrong too. Maybe… it was how theatrical he was, talking about how he would catch criminals.

Now, there was nothing wrong with being theatrical. She was close friends with Rise, after all. But still…she couldn't help but feel that he made justice out as a joke.

"He's planning on murdering Ren-kun. He fed them a story about how he was wronged, but when they steal Sae Nijima's Treasure…they'll be ambushed and Ren-kun will be taken captive," Naoto explained. She then frowned. "Though I must admit, there always was something that nagged at me about Akechi. His 'deductions' always felt nonsensical to me."

Chie nodded. "And he always seems…intent on putting on a show. Like a big flashy distraction." She then grimaced. "Did you guys…come to ask for help or something? What can I do?"

Kanji smirked. "Well, the Phantom Thieves came up with a plan but Shinjiro-san feels it rides too much on Ren convincing Nijima to trust him. So… the Shadow Operatives want you to join in a back-up plan."

"Back-up?"

"Rise-san will be your support," Naoto stated. "You, Chie-senpai, would fit into this plan… disguised as one of Shido's police officers. Rise-san also suggested that she do a little bit of touch-up… so your facial features are masked during the infiltration."

This was unbelievable… but still, a life was on the line. And who knew if Shido would be satisfied with the death of one? Wouldn't he go after all of them?

No. She wouldn't allow it. After all, she wanted to become a police officer to protect people. There was no way that she could say no.
Chie looked at her friends. "Count me in."

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Saturday, November 12th, 2016

"So, birthday girl, care to join me for lunch today?"

Anne just raised an eyebrow.

"Depends on what the lunch is, I guess." She said playfully.

Ren gasped, "You wounded me, milady! Nothing but the best for you!"

"Well, there was the time you winged the recipe for Boss's curry and fed it to me."

"That was one time."

"And this is another one time too." Anne said teasingly.

"Oh, just you wait. It'll knock your socks off." Ren promised.

"I'll be the judge of it, not you," Anne shot back.

"So, you will grace me with your presence today?" Ren caught her hand, lifting it so he could lightly kiss the back of it. "I would be honored."

"You're such a dork sometimes!" Anne couldn't help but giggle.

"But I'm your dork, riiight?" Ren drawled out.

"And don't you forget it." Anne quipped.

Ren just grinned at her in response.

"Never, my lady."

"Though you know, my birthday isn't that special," Anne commented.

"Of course it is!" Ren exclaimed. "It was the day you were born after all. Practically a holiday!"

"Forever a drama queen," Anne teased. "So, where are we going to eat?"

"The roof," Ren answered. When Anne looked at him in surprise, he quickly added, "It's okay. Makoto gave me permission."

Anne giggled, "That brings me back."

She sighed out as they headed out of the classroom. Ren carried one of those tiered bento boxes. He really did go out today, didn't he?

Back then it had been just the two of them, Ryuji, and Morgana… planning their heist against Kamoshida. It was really weird looking back to a time before that. Back when Shiho was her only friend. Back when she felt so lonely.

"Hey, you're talking like it happened years ago." Ren gave her a playful smile as they ascended the flight of stairs, leading them to the third floor. "That was barely half a year ago."
"Still, a lot has happened," Anne replied. "We started up the Phantom Thieves… we've made so many friends."

"You started dating someone who is quite devilishly handsome." Ren finished, before flashing a smirk her way.

Anne smacked his shoulder but she was unable to stop herself from laughing. Ren was playing up his arrogance to amuse her anyways.

"Ego, Ren."

"You know you love me."

"And it is quite a trial," Anne said sarcastically.

Ren just held his hand over his mouth, his eyes twinkling with humor.

"My, my, the lady has quite a sharp tongue."

Anne huffed, before rolling her eyes at him. "And you have a silver tongue, smooth talker."

"Smooth talking isn't the only thing I can do with my mouth. Shall I demonstrate?" Ren smirked wickedly as Anne found herself blushing like crazy.

"R-Ren!"

"I was just thinking of kissing you." Ren sounded scandalized. "What were you thinking?"

"You're awful," Anne grumbled out, still feeling the heat in her cheeks.

Ren just smirked at her before kissing her quickly. "Am I?"

"At this rate we're never going to get to eat lunch, you know," Anne pointed out.

But she didn't mind entirely. Ever since they had the plan, they had been up to their eyeballs with work and school. She hadn't been able to have any alone time with him and well… it was her birthday. If it was any day that she indulged herself, it'd be today, right?

A grin just broke across his face. "I'm fine with it. Are you?"

Anne reached up and grabbed him by both lapels of his blazer, pulling him down and kissing shortly but fiercely. She pulled back, raising an eyebrow.

"That good enough for an answer?"

Ren just raised an eyebrow back at her, but then he smiled. "More than enough, my lady."

As soon as school got out, Ryuji made a beeline for the train station. Ren had texted him, saying that he'd be distracting Anne for about an hour or so. Suzui had gotten the okay from her parents to skip the afternoon classes so she could ride the train to Tokyo.

Though finding her in this crowd would probably be a pain in the ass. Black hair didn't exactly stand out around here.

"Sakamoto-kun!"
As if thinking about her summoned her, Ryuji turned to see that Suzui was waving at him. She then pushed her way to him.

"Suzui!" Ryuji greeted, before looking at her up and down for a moment. He let out a low whistle. "Damn, the countryside did ya good."

She looked… really happy. She was smiling so much and she practically radiated confidence. He was glad that she was healing from the shit that Kamoshida had done to her. Suzui really just got caught in the crossfire, a way for Kamoshida to get to Anne.

But he was rotting in jail. And Suzui seemed happier, just from looking at her.

But Suzui huffed, raising an eyebrow. "I see you haven't changed at all, Sakamoto-kun."

"W-Wha?" It then hit Ryuji that it might look like he was hitting on her. "N-No, I was just saying you look great! I-I'm not hitting on ya! U-Uh, not that you..."

Then he realized that Suzui was laughing.

"Calm down, Sakamoto-kun, I was just teasing." Her brown eyes were twinkling now. "Shall we?"

"Y-Yeah!" Ryuji rubbed the back of his neck. "We're holding the party at LeBlanc where—"

"Amamiya-kun lives," Suzui finished. She then smiled sheepishly. "Anne's told me a lot about Amamiya-kun. Like it's kinda ridiculous how she didn't notice that she had a crush on him."

"She's pretty crazy about RenRen," Ryuji laughed. "You should've seen the look on her face when he basically said 'yeah, I like you'."

But then Suzui's expression grew serious. "He treats her right, doesn't she?"

"Yeah!" Ryuji nodded. "Totally! She's got him whipped, I'll tell ya. And sometimes they just can't keep their hands off of each other!"

Suzui nodded, a smile curving at her lips.

"I'm glad. Because if Amamiya-kun ever hurts her…" Her face suddenly hardened, making Ryuji gulp a little, "He's dead meat."

Damn…He didn't expect Ren to get this kinda threat, with Anne's parents being constantly abroad. Wait, did they even know about Anne and Ren?

Ryuji coughed. "So how have you been doing, Suzui?"

"Me?" Suzui blinked before shrugging. "Nothing special, really… I've made some friends. My school's nice." She shrugged. "Usual school stuff."

"No volleyball club?"

Suzui winced. "No… I don't think I'm ready to go back yet."

"When you're ready, you should totally go for it. Your school's team would be lucky to have ya! Anne mentioned that you wanted to wreck Kamoshida's record as an Olympic champ. You can totally do it!"

Suzui smiled. "Thank you, Sakamoto-kun. I appreciate it."
"Any time, Suzui."

"Shiho." When Ryuji blinked at her in surprise, she continued. "It really was a shame you and I never talked that much, especially because our best friends are dating."

Ryuji just shrugged, "It's cool. I mean we're talking now."

"Mm, I suppose but..." she trailed off for a moment, looking serious. "I never got the chance to thank you."

"Huh? For what?"

"Anne told me how angry you were after finding out what Kamoshida... did to me."

Ryuji fell silent after that for a couple of seconds. This wasn't exactly a topic you wanted to dive into casually. He awkwardly cleared his throat, trying to think of what best way to approach it. Not exactly like it was his strong suit.

"Ah, I didn't do much just... it's cool. I mean anyone should be mad. You deserve better... but uh... anyways... I mean since our best friends are going out, let's not be so formal and shit. You should call me Ryuji then." Ryuji grinned at her. "But anyways, let's get ya to LeBlanc! You're in for a real treat, I'm telling ya. You remember Ken?"

"He transferred here in June, didn't he?" Shiho asked.

"Yeah. His guardian practically catered the party. He's an amazing cook! It's better than most of the restaurants out here!"

"That's a tall order," Shiho remarked as they stepped inside the train.

"You'll see!" Ryuji grinned at her. They managed to snag some seats together. "Boss—Ren's guardian—makes some pretty damn good curry too!"

"Not coffee?" Shiho raised an eyebrow.

Ryuji grumbled to himself. "I don't like coffee. It tastes so bitter and... gross. Soda all the way!"

"You sound like a little kid, you know." Shiho teased.

"Yeah, yeah, so Anne tells me." Ryuji huffed out.

The rest of the train ride passed by with Ryuji asking Shiho questions about her school. And Ryuji was more than happy to give Shiho the full story on how exactly Ren and Anne got together.

"Annd here we are! LeBlanc!"

"Wow." Shiho's eyes went wide. "It's... smaller than I would've thought."

"Dunno what you were expecting, Shiho." Ryuji then grabbed the doorknob, pulling it open. "Hey, look who I brought!" he called out.

He then stepped inside as Shiho followed after.

"Hey there, kid." Sojiro said to Ryuji but then turned to notice Shiho, he gave her a small smile. "You're Shiho-chan, right?"
"It's nice to meet you." Shiho quickly bowed before turning everyone else with a smile. "It's nice to see you all again… and well, meet a few of you."

"A pleasure, Suzui-san." Yusuke bowed. "Anne has spoken highly of you."

"Likewise, Shiho-chan." Haru then blinked. "That's okay with you, right?"

"Of course, Senpai," Shiho reassured before her eyes fell onto Akechi. "Wow. Anne really is friends with the famous Detective Prince now."

"As Yusuke-san has said, it's a pleasure, Suzui-san." Akechi swept a bow as well, but it seemed more for… show than politeness. "I'm glad to see that you have become much… happier away from Tokyo."

"Thank you, Akechi-san." Shiho smiled, though Ryuji noticed it was more polite. Her real smile was a lot nicer.

"Oh, and this is Futaba!" Ryuji introduced, gesturing to her. "She's Boss's daughter!"

Futaba looked like she wanted to say something but then she let out a quiet whimper. She then latched onto Ken's arm; her eyes wide. Probably because Ren wasn't around.

"Oh, Futaba-chan, it's okay!" Haru soothed, rubbing Futaba's arm. "Shiho-chan is Anne-chan's best friend… there's no need to be scared!"

"Suzui-san is perfectly nice," Ken added before untangling himself from Futaba's grip.

"Girls clinging onto you… what a shocker." Shinjiro-san deadpanned.

Ken glared at his guardian. "Shinjiro-san, do you have to put it so… so weird?"

Shinjiro-san just snorted. "But am I lying?"

"I… you…" Ken then huffed, a slight blush in his cheeks. "…Shut up."

"There wasn't much to do," Makoto said. "We set up the decorations, we have the food, the cake—"

Shinjiro-san and Ken both winced at that, making Makoto glare at them.

"Are you going to tell me what has you so hesitant?"

"You don't want to know," They droned in unison.

"It'll be fine!" Makoto huffed. "Haru worked hard on the cake! But anyways, as I was saying… we do have everything ready. We just need Ren to bring Anne here."

"Sweet, that means I can get a helping of—OW!" Ryuji glared at Shinjiro-san as he rubbed the back of his head. "Why'd you hit me?!"

"He got me too." Futaba huffed out.

"Shinjiro-san, please don't hit my friends," Ken deadpanned. "They're not Akihiko-san."

"Not my fault that they want to stick their hands into the food," Shinjiro-san grumbled. "Aki, Minako, and Iori may act like little kids but they don't stick their hands in the serving platter."
"Guess he never lets you lick the spoon, huh?" Shiho asked teasingly.

"Not a chance," Shinjiro-san deadpanned before he shot Ken a look. "Remind me again why you convinced me to come again?"

"But you deserve it, Shinjiro-san!" Haru spoke up, her hands clasped together. "You were kind enough to agree to cook for us, after all!"

"Wha…?!" Shinjiro-san froze, pink creeping into his cheeks. Then he coughed, quickly looking away. "It was nothing, Okumura."

Yusuke tilted his head. "Why are you flustered?"

"Shuddup, I'm not embarrassed!" Shinjiro-san quickly fired back, fiercely glaring at Yusuke but as usual Yusuke didn't even bat an eye.

"Riiight…" Ken drawled out, giving his guardian a doubtful look. "And you'll give up on lecturing Akihiko-san on his diet too."

Shinjiro-san looked like he wanted to retort but Haru then spoke up again.

"I was actually thinking that since this is essentially a catering job, I should pay you!"

"It's a birthday party!" Shinjiro-san argued. "It's practically nothing!"

"People hire caterers for birthday parties," Haru pointed out. "And if your cooking is as good as I've been told… you really should be paid for this."

"Big parties!" he emphasized. "This is nothing!" Shinjiro-san then whipped around to face Ken. "What the fuck did you tell her?!!"

"Hey, Ken didn't say anything like that!" Futaba jumped in. "We were just talking about it!"

"Are they usually like this?" Shiho whispered to Ryuji.

Ryuji just turned to her with a grin. "Yeah, we can get pretty crazy, huh?"

"It's lively at least," she giggled.

"Hmm… I'd say fifteen thousand yen would suffice for your services." Haru was already pulling out her wallet, opening it up. "It'll more than cover the costs…"

"F-Fifteen thousand?!" Shinjiro-san's eyes practically bugged out. "Are you crazy, Okumura?!!"

"There's no need for you to be insulting because Haru shocked you," Yusuke stated with a frown.

"To be fair, it is rather… unexpected," Akechi stated.

"There's no fucking way I can accept this, Okumura!" Shinjiro-san protested. "I've cooked too many times for get-togethers to start getting paid for this!"

"I assume that you never asked for payment from Mitsuru-san…" Makoto mused.

"She's tried," Ken deadpanned. "Several times."

But then Haru's face fell.
"B-But...you've worked so hard..." she said softly, "It's only fair that you get something out of it."

"You the type to make ladies upset?" Sojiro called to Shinjiro-san, eyebrow raised. "Didn't think you were."

"Okay, fine!" He snapped out. "Just... stop giving me those teary eyes!"

"Of course!" Haru brightened immediately before handing Shinjiro-san a wad of yen bills.

"Are you serious?" Shinjiro-san grumbled before he stuffed them in the pocket of his coat.

"No takebacks. Right, Haru?" Ryuji called out.

"None at all!" Haru confirmed cheerfully, nodding furiously enough that her curls bounced up and down.

"Honestly..." Makoto sighed, shaking her head. "I'm sure that you could've persuaded him in another way."

"Whatever works, right?" Shiho commented with a laugh.

Ken looked amused as he looked at the grumbling Shinjiro-san.

"Guess you're soft for a certain type of girl, huh?"

This earned Ken a scowl. "Don't know what you're talking about, Ken."

"Uh huh. I'm sure." Ken then scoffed. "You really suck at hiding it, Shinjiro-san."

"Isn't that a bit...impolite to act in such a way?" Akechi frowned at Ken. "You are speaking to your guardian, after all."

"Huh?" Ryuji raised an eyebrow. "What are ya talking about?"

"You...you're talking back to Aragaki-san," Akechi said slowly. "Isn't that...disrespectful?"

Shinjiro-san just shrugged. "Ken knows that if he gives me shit, I can give him it back."

"O-Oh, I see." Akechi then coughed. "Though I must say, you are rather...young to be a guardian, are you not?"

"Yeah, and what's your point?" Shinjiro-san deadpanned. "I don't see how that's your business, Akechi."

"Forgive me but the only situation similar to yours is Sae-san and Nijima-san and I know that they're sisters...I was just curious about yours."

"I don't care to share my business so don't poke your nose into it," Shinjiro-san said flatly.

"Shinjiro-san!" Ken exclaimed.

"Blunt as ever, I see." Sojiro said dryly.

"I'm just telling you how I see it," Shinjiro-san huffed.

Ryuji's phone suddenly buzzed.
Message From: RenRen

[RenRen]: We're getting off the train to Yongen rn

[RenRen]: Everything's ready, yeah?

Ryuji shoved his phone in his pocket. "Kill the lights! Ren's coming with Anne!"

"Huh, that's weird. Why is LeBlanc closed?"

Ren winked at her before pushing the door open. "I may have asked Sojiro to close the shop down for the day."

"Oh, you didn't have to do that." Anne trailed off, frowning.

Why was it dark? Then the lights flashed on.

"SURPRISE!"

Anne just stared, her jaw dropping open. "A-Are you serious?!"

Ren just grinned at her. "Happy birthday, Anne."

"Yeah, happy birthday!" Futaba cheered, bolting towards her and giving her a tight hug.

Then a familiar voice called out, "Happy birthday, Anne!"

The world seemed to freeze.

"S-Shiho?" Anne stammered out.

Shiho just smiled brightly at her. Her real smile. Anne hadn't seen it in forever. "Did you really think I'd forget your birthday?"

"SHIHO!"

Anne lunged for her best friend, grabbing her in a tight hug.

"Hey yourself." Shiho chuckled out.

"You seriously took the train all the way to Tokyo?!!"

"Well, I didn't take a plane." Shiho quipped, before her eyes softened. "I missed you, Anne."

"Shiho…" Anne sniffled out. "I've missed you so much too!"

"I've seen some of your photoshoots too!" Shiho said. "You look amazing."

"Thank you, I—"

Anne felt her face redden as her stomach growled. Loudly.

"You didn't eat after school, I'm guessing." Sojiro gave her a wry smile.

"I knew there was going to be a lot of food, is that a crime?" Ren defended.
"I should've known something was up when you wouldn't let me get a crepe…" Anne grumbled out. "And you kept going on and on about me deserving nothing but the best today."

"Well, you do." Ren said.

"Do they always do this?" Shiho stage whispered.

"You have no idea," Ryuji grumbled out.

"Hey, I heard that!" Anne cried out.

"Well… we're kinda guilty of that." Ren admitted.

"Ren!"

"You two are just… impossible," Makoto sighed, shaking her head.

But they eventually settled down and sat down to eat. Shiho paused as she took a bite. She then swallowed.

"Okay, Ryuji-kun, I see what you're talking about."

"See?!" Ryuji's face broke into a grin. "What did I tell you?!"

"I stand corrected." Shiho smiled before taking another bite.

"Mm, it really is delicious!" Haru sighed. "Oh, I should've given you some more money, Shinjiro-san."

"Don't even think about it," Shinjiro-san said flatly.

"It's a miracle that you got him to accept some money to begin with," Ken muttered.

Ren shot him an amused look. "Are we going to get an explanation?"

"There's not much to tell," Yusuke stated. "Haru wished to pay Aragaki-san. When he refused, she was upset by it and Aragaki-san told her to just give him the money."

"Why are you making me out as a pussy?!" Shinjiro-san demanded.

"I mean…that's kinda what happened," Ken said dryly.

Shinjiro-san just glowered at him but as usual, Ken didn't even blink. "Shut up, Ken."

"What a great retort, Shinjiro-san."

"Ken, be nice," Makoto chided, nudging him in the side.

For some reason, Akechi caught Anne's eye. He was looking at both Ken and Shinjiro-san. And he was… frowning for some reason.

Did the way Ken spoke to Shinjiro-san bother him so much? Anne was used to the way they bickered but… maybe it looked different to an outsider? No… her intuition told Anne that it wasn't so simple. But she couldn't quite put her finger on what it was exactly.

When they finished eating, Sojiro then pulled out a beautifully crafted cake from the refrigerator. White frosting was expertly spread across, with various roses placed on top. In the center was a
small red cat decoration. Though Ken and Shinjiro-san looked at the cake uncertainly, like they were expecting it to explode or something.

Makoto crossed her arms over her chest, leveling an annoyed stare at both Ken and Shinjiro-san. "Are you planning on telling us what exactly has you paranoid?"

"No…" They grumbled out in unison.

"Ahh, I can't wait to try it!" Anne beamed.

"I hope you like it, Anne-chan." Haru beamed back. "It took me three tries to get just right…"

"Aw, you didn't have to put in that much effort!"

But Sojiro lit the candles and everyone sang happy birthday. Looking at all the faces around her… Anne couldn't help but feel her heart swell up with happiness.

Last year, she had been utterly miserable. But now…she had so many wonderful friends and well…Ren. Although she did wish they didn't have Akechi looming over their heads.

"Make a wish, Lady Anne!" Morgana exclaimed.

*Please let Ren survive the plan*, she prayed before leaning over and blowing out the candles.

After that, Shinjiro-san took over and cut up the cake to serve it to everyone. And the cake was so good! The cream was whipped to perfect, the delicious strawberry flavor flooding her mouth with every bite. And the cake's texture…it was divine. Anne was in nirvana.

"Are you going to start purring?" Ren teased her lightly.

Anne weakly swatted at him. "Shush. You've got Morgana for that."

"Lady Anne!" Morgana cried out. "That… That's just unfair."

"Then what's this, huh?" Anne asked teasingly, before beginning to tickle Morgana under his chin.

"Nggh, stop that, Lady Anne!" Morgana cried out before squirming away.

"I heard purring," Ryuji snickered out.

"Your cat sure sounds indignant, Amamiya-kun." Shiho quirked an eyebrow at Ren. "And right after she—"

"She?!" Morgana practically squawked out.

"Morgana's a boy, actually," Ren corrected, shooting him a stern look.

"Oops, sorry." Shiho giggled weakly.

"What do you expect from a name like *Morgana,*" Shinjiro-san deadpanned.

Morgana glared as Ryuji started to snicker at Shinjiro's comment.

"Grrrr! Shut up, Ryuji!"

"How about we do presents now?" Makoto quickly interjected, shooting Ryuji a look.
Knowing her, Makoto probably suggested it because she was afraid Ryuji would start arguing with Morgana. In front of Sojiro and Shiho. All in all, a good call.

"Me first, me first!" Futaba cried out, before snatching up a thinly wrapped present. "Happy birthday, Anne!"

"Aw, thanks, Futaba!"

Anne accepted the package, eagerly tearing into it, revealing…

"Whoa!" Ryuji exclaimed. "Ain't that the new Pusemon game?!"

"Wait a second…” Ken frowned. "I thought it was coming out next week."

Futaba just cackled. "Don't underestimate me, Ken."

"Oh, good grief," Shinjiro-san groaned.

Ken sent Makoto an exasperated look. "Weren't you accompanying her?"

"You do realize you said that in front of Akechi, yes?" Yusuke raised an eyebrow at Futaba.

Akechi just laughed. "Come now, I don't see a harm to it. You did pay for it, yes?"

"Duh! I'm not a thief." Futaba held Ren's gaze and he had to bite his lip so he wouldn't start laughing.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Shiho tilted her head.

"Well, RenRen did steal Anne's heart," Ryuji snickered.

"RYUJI!" Anne cried out, feeling her face burn.

Ren certainly didn't help. He just grinned.

"Guilty as charged."

Shinjiro-san just grimaced. "That was awful."

"You kids…" Sojiro sighed out.

"You really do sound old when you say stuff like that, Sojiro." Futaba snickered.

"Hey, watch it, Futaba!"

"But anyways, you like portable consoles a lot, right?" Futaba asked eagerly. "I thought it'd be fun if we played together!" Then she hesitated, her shoulders hunching over. "Uh… if you're not too busy…"

Anne gathered her in a hug, making her squeak. "I'd love to play with you, Futaba. Thank you!"

"Lady Anne, you probably should select the next present," Morgana suggested.

Ryuji gave her a set of workout clothes—somehow, they were nice. And to add to that, Ken gave her a recipe book that he had hand bound, filled with recipes for sweet substitutions. And then Haru gave her a box filled with assorted premium chocolates, which made Ken shoot her an exasperated look. Makoto gave her a pair of aikido gloves, with the offer of teaching her some of
the martial art. Akechi had purchased her a scarf, though Anne had to admit that it was welcome. Ever since she had awakened to Carmen, Anne felt the cold more. Shiho had made her a scrapbook, and somehow had gotten ahold of pictures of her and her friends. And Yusuke had given her…

"Oh… wow," Anne breathed out.

It was a painting of her and Ren. They stood before a reflection of water, but in the water's reflection, you could see an image of Joker and Panther.

"How long have you been working on this, Yusuke-kun?" Haru asked. "It's simply exquisite."

"I can't accept this as just a present…!" Anne protested.

"You can and you will," Yusuke stated. "I… I know that I haven't always acted so courteous to you, Anne. But you were the first to understand my feelings of… Madarame. You started the chain reaction. You've always been so kind and understanding. This is simply my thanks to you… and you are part of the reason why I've realized the true meaning of art."

"I… I am?" Anne asked dumbly.

"Yes, do you not recall? Ren described you as his ideal of beauty. And the way you described the Sayuri. It truly opened my eyes."

"Wow, Anne, he's a keeper," Shiho teased, nudging her in the side.

"So please… accept this as my humble thanks," Yusuke stated.

"This is anything but humble…" Morgana grumbled out.

"It really is a beautiful painting," Makoto offered. "You should hang it in your room."

"Okay…" Anne then looked to Yusuke, mentally vowing to herself that she would make it up to Yusuke… somehow. "Thank you, Yusuke. It really is beautiful."

"Now you're making me look bad, Yusuke." Ren reached into his pocket, drawing a slender white box. "But… here you go, Anne." He gave her a tender smile. "I know I've said it a million times today but… happy birthday."

Anne took the box, opening it to reveal a gold necklace with a sakura pendant. The petals were a paler pink gemstone, while the center was a brighter pink, almost magenta gemstone. Dangling at the bottom was a smaller golden sakura blossom.

"Uh…" Ryuji scratched the top of his head, "shouldn't you have gotten a rose necklace? It's kinda Anne's thing."

"Well… when I was looking for something to get you, I wanted to get you something that would remind me of the day we met." Ren explained. "Do you remember, Anne? The sakura trees were in full bloom, but with the rain, they were raining petals like crazy. When you noticed me, you reached out and pulled out a petal from my hair. And then… you smiled at me."

"You remember that kind of detail?" Shiho raised an eyebrow. "That's impressive, Amamiya-kun."

"Meeting Anne… really changed my world." Then Ren jerked his head towards Sojiro. "Especially since he was such a jackass to me when I first came here."
"Hey!" Sojiro glared at him. "Sheesh, can you blame me though? I didn't know what to expect!"

"I believe the first reaction would be... being polite?" Ken quipped.

"It's okay, you can say 'not bein' an asshole'," Ryuji snorted out.

"Your treatment of me really was different than the rest of the students at Shujin, Ken," Ren laughed.

"Do they truly treat you badly?" Akechi asked with a frown.

"They still think I'm a crazy delinquent so..." Akechi looked shocked. "How can you be so blasé about their poor opinion of you?"

She guessed it came as a shock, since Akechi was once again the media darling.

"Their opinion doesn't matter. I know whose opinions do." Ren answered simply. But then he looked towards Anne. "But anyways. I just wanted to give you a reminder of the day we first met. You really mean so much to me, Anne."

"Ren-kun..." Haru's voice was filled with awe. "That... that's so thoughtful. And romantic..."

It really was. She was... speechless.

"Ren, I..." Anne quickly rubbed at her eyes. She then said softly, "This... this means a lot. More than I can ever say."

She then held out the box and gave him a small smile.

"Will you put it on me?"

He gave her a nod with a gentle smile in return. Ren fastened the necklace around her neck, before brushing her hair away from her neck.

"Beautiful," Ren breathed out, which only made Anne blush.

"Okay this is definitely getting too mushy for me," Shinjiro-san deadpanned. "Sheesh. And I thought Aki could get gross."

Sojiro snorted. "Anything you'd like to do now though?"

"Video games!" Futaba cried out. "I brought my M64 so let's play Nario Party!"

"Sounds good to me!" Anne said with a grin. "Though that's really retro," she couldn't help but comment.

"Hey, that's a classic!" Futaba argued.

"Can we really manage it with so many people?" Haru wondered aloud.

"We'll take turns," Ren said with a wink. "So, how about it, Akechi? Ready to be schooled?"

Akechi just smiled thinly. "Do not think I'll go down so easily."

"Might as well crack open a bottle while these kids go wild," Sojiro laughed. "Care to join me, Aragaki?"
"Yeah, I could use a drink. Too much craziness here," Shinjiro-san deadpanned.

"You know you love us, Shinjiro-san!" Ren called out to him.

Shinjiro-san just gave him an annoyed look. "Just go and play your video games."

The party lasted until evening. They played video games, card games, board games… Anne couldn't think of the last time she had just spent time with her friends and had fun. There was Destinyland but… that had been ruined so easily.

Though speaking of that, she was honestly a little glad that Akechi got called by the police department and he was forced to leave early.

"Hey."

Anne looked up to see Shiho settle next to her in the booth seat with a cup of coffee.

"Hi."

Shiho smiled slightly.

"You really do seem happy, Anne," She commented. "When I left, I felt awful but…I should've known I was leaving you in good hands."

She sounded almost wistful…sad. Did she…think that Anne had replaced her?

"You will forever be my best friend, Shiho." Anne turned and gave her a sideways hug. "I'm happy with my friends. They can be weird sometimes, but…I wouldn't trade them for the world. But you are still my first friend. Nobody will ever replace you."

She didn't think she could ever express how much Shiho meant to her.

"Aw, Anne…" Shiho then nudged her in the ribs. "You can be so sappy sometimes."

"Shut up!" Anne cried out, feeling her cheeks warm. "I'm trying to be sentimental here!"

"Sentimental, huh?" Shiho mused. "Fancy vocabulary. Has Amamiya-kun been tutoring you?"

"S-Shut up," Anne grumbled out.

"He treats you well, though, doesn't he?" Shiho's expression was serious. "If not, I'm afraid I'll have to kill him. I'll get him with a volleyball to the face and then…"

"Jeez, are you seriously going to give Ren the shovel talk?!"

"Nothing but the best for my best friend," Shiho quipped.

"Sheesh…" But Anne straightened up. "But to answer your question, Ren is an amazing boyfriend. He makes me feel beautiful, inside and out."

"You really are, Anne." Shiho then seemed to hesitate. "Hey, do you know why I came up to you that day?"

"Because you really thought my painting sucked?" Anne asked.

"Well…there was that," Shiho said with a giggle before she sipped at her coffee. "But I was
curious. You seemed so lonely, but you bore the weight of gossip. You carried on. So, I wanted to get to know you. The way we first started talking wasn't the best icebreaker, but it helped us becoming friends. So I never regretted it. Getting to know you... it really was the best thing that could've happened to me." Then she smiled. "So... happy birthday, Anne. I'm glad that you were born."

"Shiho..." Anne sniffled out before hastily wiping at her eyes. "Why do I always cry with you around?"

"Hehe. They're happy tears, at least," Shiho commented, even as she fished out a handkerchief and handing it to Anne to dab her eyes with. But then her dark eyes suddenly sparkled with mischief. "So... how far have you gone with Amamiya-kun?"

"S-Shiho?!"

Shiho smiled mischievously. "Ryuji-kun told me all about how you two got together."

"He did what?! RYUJI!"

"Someone say my name?" Ryuji poked his head from the attic. He then paled as he got a better look at Anne. "Uh... Anne?"

"You...YOU...!" Anne fumed, jumping to her feet and slamming her hands on the table. "Don't you have anything better to tell Shiho?!

Just...ugh! Seriously?! Was he planning on blabbing it to more people?!

"Hey, she asked and I answered!" Ryuji cried. "It's not my fault that you were completely blind to how Ren had the hots for you."

"Annnnd I think you've said enough," Ken said dryly, his head appearing as well. "Come on, we were packing up anyways."

"Grr..." Anne plopped down, unable to stop herself from pouting as Ryuji hastily disappeared. "It's not like you've been embarrassed about how you started dating Makoto..."

"Shinjiro-san's already embarrassed me about it. To both you and my senpai." Ken just rolled his eyes, before cracking a wry smile. "You'll live, Anne."

"Jerk..." Anne muttered under her breath.

Shiho just patted her shoulder. "Aw, it's okay, Anne. It's cute in a way."

"Of course you say that." Anne folded her arms over her chest. "You don't have a potential boyfriend waiting for you back at your new school."

"Well..." Shiho hesitated. "Not right now. I don't think I'm ready to jump into the dating game just yet." Then she abruptly stood up. "But speaking of dating... I'd totally get it if you want to spend some time cozying up with Amamiya-kun. We can spend the day together before my train leaves tomorrow evening."

"What do you think we're gonna do?"

Shiho just gave her a little smirk. "Oh? Should I ask him?"

"No! Of course not!" Anne shouted. "There's nothing to know, okay?!!"
"Sure, Anne." Shiho's skeptical tone and expression said it all. "But I'm okay to stay at your place, right?"

"Of course, of course!" Then Anne's shoulders hunched over. "Um... you really don't mind if I...?"

Shiho snickered at her.

"Of course." She then winked before standing up. "I'll catch you later, Anne."

She thanked Sojiro for the coffee before heading for the door. The rest of her friends trickled down, the games all packed up.

"Today was wonderful," Yusuke announced, before bowing at Sojiro. "Thank you for your kind hospitality, Boss."

"And thank you for the wonderful food, Shinjiro-san," Haru chimed in. "It really was delicious! I actually feel—"

Shinjiro-san gave her a flat stare. "No."

"Jeez, why are you so resistant?" Futaba grumbled out.

"It's not worth the money Okumura wants to give me," Shinjiro-san said. "It's not like the stuff you find in a five-star restaurant!"

"You hate the five-star restaurant fare," Ken pointed out.

"That's not the point!"

"But anyways..." Yusuke cleared his throat. "We really must be going. I believe we've overspent our stay. Again, thank you Boss. And to you, Shinjiro-san."

"Yeah, it really was great!" Ryuji chimed in. "Man, I can't believe that we ate everything."

"I can, with that bottomless pit you call a stomach," Morgana snickered out.

"Ugh, shuddup, Morgana!"

Ken then turned to help Shinjiro-san to pack up, but Makoto grabbed him by the sleeve. "Um, actually... Ken, can we talk real quick? In private?"

"Mwehehe..." Futaba suddenly snickered, watching them step outside of the café. "So she's giving it to him, huh?"

Haru tilted her head. "Give what?"

"Makoto felt that she should've given Ken something for his birthday since he bought her an expensive gift during their first date," Futaba explained. "She had a gift idea but she needed my help to do some adjustments."

"What kind of adjustments, may I ask?" Yusuke asked.

"Just messing with the watch mechanics so they'll vibrate if the other of the set is close enough. I was able to manage to get the signal to half a kilometer, but Makoto wanted it done as soon as possible."
Sojiro then cleared his throat. "But since the party's over, I think I'm going to just close shop." He gave Ren a smarmy grin, and Ren just shrugged helplessly back at him. "Come on, Futaba."

Futaba nodded. "Let's bring Morgana with us. I don't think you wanna be in here tonight, Mona."

Morgana sighed and grumbled out, "Yeah you're right."

Ryuji, Yusuke, and Haru followed suit, and once Ken and Makoto came back, they left with Shinjiro-san. Leaving her alone with Ren.

"Hey." Ren took a seat next to her.

Anne leaned her head against Ren's shoulder, letting out a content sigh. "Hi."

"Good birthday?" Ren asked, sliding his arm around her waist.

"You didn't have to make a big deal out of you, you know," Anne told him. "You organized the whole thing, didn't you?"

"I did," Ren insisted. "Birthdays are important and we're going to do this for Haru to when her birthday rolls around next month. And well…I know that you had pretty lonely birthdays growing up."

"Oh, Ren…" Anne sighed out. "You know I'll really have to do something special for your birthday next year. Eighteen's a big year in a lot of countries too."

"Really? That feels kinda weird."

"Not really. You're eighteen when you finish high school and then head off to university. You step away from your parents and start being independent." Anne then winked at Ren. "So, just wait until next May! I'll knock your socks off!"

"Heh." Ren closed his eyes for a moment, an amused smile spreading across his face. "I'll be the judge of that."

"Though…it was nice," She admitted. "Today was… really fun. It was a nice break after stressing over the plan and Akechi-kun so much… you know?"

Ren just looked at her sadly. Guilt was clear in his eyes.

"Sorry I just… Damn!" Anne squeezed her eyes shut. "Why?! I want to hate him for what he's doing, for being so gleeful about the idea of killing you." A tear slid down her cheek. "I hate that we have to rely on this plan that could have us slip somewhere and we're toast and y-you'll…"

"Anne. It's okay to be scared." Ren reached up, brushing a tear from her eye. "Honestly I'm a little bit too," he admitted. "And… I'm angry at Akechi for all this. He said what he told us was a sob story but I can't help but wonder if there's a grain of truth in it. Being angry at injustices… that I can understand. But he chose his path. I won't forgive him for this."

Anne bit her lip. When Ren put it that way, it sounded so simple. But…Anne couldn't help but feel that she was being silly.

"It's stupid," Anne muttered out, "We're not even done with Makoto's sister's palace and I'm already such a mess…I don't know if I can just walk away and let you be captured… I'm… I'm not strong enough."
"You are anything but weak, Anne," Ren said seriously. He drew her to him, pressing a light kiss to her forehead. "You were strong, even under Kamoshida's thumb. And once you awakened to Carmen…" He let out a low whistle. "And there's how you always hold us together where we're losing our shit." He then shook his head. "Honestly… you kept me sane after the fallout with Okumura."

"Ren that's nothing, I…"

"It is," Ren contradicted. "To me, especially. You may underestimate yourself, but I never will… your support means everything to me, Anne. And I don't intend to break my promise."

Anne giggled weakly. "You really do know how to make a girl feel special, you know."

Ren then smirked. "I know."

"Ego!"

"Though… I really do owe you the last part of your birthday present."

"S-Seriously?" Anne sputtered out. "Ren, you organized a birthday party for me, you got me a beautiful necklace… what else do you have up your sleeve?!"

He really did not make things fair.

"It's your seventeenth birthday," Ren stated, before he cracked a grin. "So, I owe you seventeen kisses."

"Are you serious?" Anne couldn't hold back a laugh.

"Completely." Ren was still grinning. Then he leaned in close, giving her another forehead kiss. "That's one." Then one cheek. "Two." The other cheek. "Three…"

Anne giggled. "You're such a dork, I swear…"

"You know you love me," Ren snickered at her. "Now, come here. I owe you fourteen more kisses."

Chapter End Notes

Annnd finally done! I apologize for the wait. This chapter was giving me a really hard time and it went through a couple of rewrites, and then midterm season hit.

The updates may slow down a bit for a while.

Though onto some points of the chapter… I really do think the lack of Futaba and Akechi interacting was a missed opportunity. I also wanted to go into more of Akechi's backstory because I feel we didn't get enough of it in canon. Anne's birthday party was more for fluff, but I also wanted to cover more of how both Ren and Anne feel about the upcoming operation. And I wanted to love on Anne some more. I really do adore her.

But next chapter will wrap up Sae's Palace! I'm debating on having another chapter
after it dedicated to the preparations leading up to the heist, but we'll see. Either way, I'm really looking forward to writing taking Sae's Treasure!

And on the topic of Scramble: it looks better than i thought because i told myself i wouldn't get it due to me losing interest fast with Hyrule Warriors and Fire Emblem Warriors. On the subject of a possible fic on it, maybe. But it probably wouldn't happen until I'm done with the main fic and at least halfway done with the PQ2 fic.

And once again, thank you to my good friend, angelrin89 for betaing this chapter! Though it's funny, we got to talking about our ideas for Akechi’s backstory while I was working on this chapter and a LOT of our ideas coincided with each other. I suppose great minds think alike lol. But anyways, enough babbling from me. I hope you enjoyed the chapter!
Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves explore the second half of Sae's Palace. As they outmaneuver Sae's mechanisms, Akechi's feelings of resentment and jealousy continue to fester.

Sunday, November 13th, 2016

There was a slight chill hanging in the air, but Ren was far from cold. Ren pulled Anne closer to him, burying his nose into her hair with a content sigh.

"Mm…" Anne stirred, before slowly blinking her eyes open and said sleepily. "Good morning, Ren."

"Morning." Ren brushed aside her hair so he could drop a kiss on her bare shoulder. "How does it feel like to be seventeen and a day old?"

Anne just rolled her eyes at him before lightly pushing him away. She poked him in the cheek.

"Down boy. You can hear the customers too, can't you?" she said with a smirk.

"Fiiine…" Ren sighed out before giving her a quick kiss.

"Even if the shop had no customers right now, I don't think Boss would be happy to hear us, anyways," Anne quipped before she rolled out of bed.

Ren watched her with half-lidded eyes as she dressed. It was almost like a reverse strip tease. He pondered on what to do today as Anne slipped on her undergarments. Maybe he'd check around and see if he'll bump into anyone.

"Any big plans with Shiho?" he asked as she shimmied into her tights.

Anne let out a thoughtful hum, as she slid on her black undershirt.

"Probably getting a crepe. Maybe we'll go to Inokashira Park, I don't know. We might just wing it," she said with a small smile as she slipped on her varsity jacket and zipped it up.

"Sometimes those are the best hang outs," Ren commented.

Anne then picked up his boxers and threw it at his face. He sputtered as he pulled them off.

"What was that for?!" he complained.

"For just lounging in bed and giving me bedroom eyes," Anne huffed out as she began to pull her hair into her trademark twin pigtails. "Don't think I don't see you, mister."
Ren just cracked a grin.

"It's not my fault that you're so breathtakingly beautiful that I can't keep my eyes off of you for a second."

"Jeez!" Anne huffed even as her cheeks started to redden.

She was just too cute when he teased her.

"How do you say those things with such a straight face?!"

"Trade secret, I'm afraid." He said with a wink.

"Fine, keep your secrets then." Anne said dryly, before she narrowed her eyes at Ren, "And get dressed already!"

Ren just cracked a grin before pulling on his boxers.

"Methinks the lady doth protest much." He chuckled.

She huffed. "Methinks the lady will smack the gentleman if he doesn't stop being a little shit."

After Ren got dressed, they took turns to freshen up in the bathroom. And then they came out and sat at the bar. Fortunately, the customers they had heard earlier had left.

"So, how strong coffee do you need today?" Sojiro asked, giving the two of them a knowing grin.

"Get your head out of the gutter," Ren drawled out. "It looks like you're being a little too curious."

Anne just nudged him in the ribs and said, "Like you wouldn't be the same way?"

"Would not!" Ren protested.

Anne gave him a flat look. "The bet, Ren."

"What bet?" Sojiro asked as he poured them coffee.

Anne narrowed her eyes, pointed a finger at him, and said, "This guy, Futaba, and Ryuji decided to bet on Ken and Makoto's love life. I'm surprised that Makoto didn't kick your asses for that."

Ren picked up the cup, giving it a blow before taking a sip, "Probably since Ken kinda shrugged it off."

He sighed in delight, savoring the taste. Perfectly blended, sweet and most importantly…delicious coffee. He could never comprehend how he went all his life not appreciating it until now.

It was nice, just drinking coffee with Anne. A comfortable, quiet moment before they were quite literally thrown into the lion's den. And as always, the coffee paired perfectly with the curry. He shared a plate with Anne, since she was planning to go out and eat with Shiho later.

"Hey, Ren," Sojiro suddenly interjected. "You want to pick up Morgana before you run off with whatever you're planning to do today?"

He winced, realizing he almost forgot about that. At least Morgana seemed to pick up on that they wanted alone time. It really was a good thing that he went with Futaba last night.
"Yeah, I'll do that," Ren answered.

Ren gulped down the rest of his coffee, which caused Sojiro to make a face at him. (Probably because he wasn't "savoring" the taste.)

Then he leaned over, kissing Anne on the cheek. "Have fun with Shiho today. Say hi for me."

"I will." Anne kissed his cheek too before she hopped off the bar seat and flashed him her trademark sweet smile. "Bye, Ren. I'll see you tomorrow at school."

Ren grinned at her. "I look forward to it, my lady."

Anne blew him last kiss, before she headed for the door.

"You're a complete sap with her," Sojiro stated after a moment, all while giving Ren an amused smile.

"What of it?" Ren raised an eyebrow.

"I'm just saying." Sojiro was grinning knowingly. "So. things are going pretty well, huh?"

"Yeah, you can definitely say that." Ren gave him a grin as well.

He knew he was smiling goofily, but Ren didn't really care. He jumped to the ground.

"But anyways, I'm off, Sojiro. See ya."

After he grabbed his bag from upstairs, he headed to Sojiro's house to pick up Morgana. And since they were due a Palace run tomorrow, he decided to do a little bit of restocking first. Could never be too careful.

First stop was Tae's clinic, of course, since it was right here in Yongen-jaya. He restocked up the medicine they were particularly low on. Thankfully that wasn't too bad on his wallet.

Second stop was Iwai's shop. Ren made a mental note to bring the loot to Iwai sometime, because...damn. Between him and Tae, Ren was surprised that he wasn't flat-out broke. And he didn't even buy weapons. Just guns. Weapons could wait until after they secured an infiltration route.

Well except for Akechi. No point in getting weapons for someone that was just going to stab you in the back.

But now his errands were done, Ren couldn't help but wonder what to do.

He was in Shibuya. Maybe he could see if Ken was down to hang out with him today. While they got to have fun at Anne's birthday party, some down time just the two of them sounded good to Ren right now.

Ren took out his phone to text Ken, to see if he was open to the idea. It was Sunday after all, and he could have plans with Makoto.

Message Sent: Ken

[Ren]: This is the FBI, open up

[Ken]: ...Really Ren?
[Ren]: Can I come over? I'm in Shibuya rn

[Ken]: So I'm just an afterthought now, huh?

[Ren]: Excuse u, I hold my friends very dearly I'll have you know

[Ken]: Uh-huh

[Ren]: So can I?

[Ken]: I'm rolling my eyes at you, just so you know

[Ren]: Welllll?

[Ken]: Yes, you can come over

[Ren]: Sweet, see you in a few!

It was nice that Ken's house didn't blend in the crowd. It was kinda weird thinking that it used to be their headquarters. For one mission, but still, LeBlanc was more discrete. Though Ren couldn't help but notice that the crowd was busy, even for Tokyo.

But Ken was waiting for him near the entrance.

"Hey." Ren greeted.

"Hey." Ken just raised an eyebrow, before he gave an amused smile. "Doing some shopping, I see."

Ren shrugged. "We need to be prepared tomorrow."

"Do you want to drop your things off up at the penthouse before we figure out what we want to do?" Ken asked. "If you hang around long enough, I'm sure Shinjiro-san wouldn't mind you sticking around for dinner."

"Why don't you just ask him?"

"Well, there is texting," Ken said, already fishing out his phone. "Shinjiro-san's shopping for groceries right now."

"That can't take too long, at least," Ren pointed out.

Ken smiled wryly. "If he doesn't get into an argument with the butcher about the freshness of the meat. There's a reason why he usually goes alone."

"Damn, he's picky." Ren shook his head. "But anyways, that sounds good to me. Let's head up."

They rode up the elevator to the penthouse. After Ken unlocked the door. Ren dropped his bag on the couch and Morgana climbed out.

"We have a little cream left—I think," Ken muttered, already heading for the kitchen. "Do you want some, Morgana?"

Morgana practically purred out, "Yes!"

Ken then got out a dish, poured it out for Morgana and let him at it.
"Wanna just go and blow some stress at the arcade? Gun About is great for that." Ren suggested, "Our plans were kinda blown with your class-A jerk of an uncle last time anyways."

"That would be nice." Ken admitted. "Want to go now?"

But when Ken opened the door, someone was standing on the other side. And it wasn't Shinjiro-san.

Well… speak of the devil.

The color drained out of Ken's face completely, "U-Uncle? What are you—"

"I did some digging…" Ken's uncle cut him off. "And imagine my shock when I discovered that this was where you resided. Why have you gone to Tokyo to begin with? It's cheaper to live in Port Island. Aragaki would have no reason to move you out here."

"I..." Ken's expression then hardened. "That's none of your business, Uncle."

"Of course, it's my business!" he snapped out. "You're a member of my family—"

"Family this, family that…" Ken muttered, a dark scowl on his face. "Is that all you care about?"

"There's his reputation," Ren offered.

"Thank you, Ren," Ken said dryly.

"Don't give me that backtalk!" He then scowled, folding his arms over his chest as he said accusatorily, "Kirijo-san gave you this place to live in, didn't she? Why does she favor him so?! Aragaki has done nothing to earn this."

"You don't know anything about Shinjiro-san!" Ken immediately snapped back. "You told me that I was throwing away my life already when I said I didn't want to be under your care anymore! Why put so much energy into this?!"

Ken's uncle's expression hardened. "When did you become such a brat?"

Anger surged through Ren. His attitude was really starting to piss him off.

"You don't even care about him! Don't you dare talk to him like that!" Ren snapped.

"Of course I do!" The older man shouted, "Watch your tongue and show some respect!"

"I show respect to people who earn it," Ren retorted, shooting him a fierce glare. "And you've done exactly the opposite."

"What the fuck is going on here?"

Ken paled at the new arrival. "S-Shinjiro-san…"

"Aragaki!" Ken's uncle spat out.

"Oh, it's you." Shinjiro-san didn't even bat an eye, choosing to look at Ken instead, "Ken, didn't I tell you to take out the trash while I was gone?"

Damn… that was cold.
"E-Excuse me?" he sputtered out. "I see that you haven't learned any manners since the last time we met, Aragaki."

Shinjiro-san just raised an eyebrow, before letting out a snort.

He then mimicked Ken's uncle's tone, "And I see that you still have a stick up your a—"

"Must you be so uncouth?!" he snapped out, glowering at Shinjiro-san.

"How 'bout you not be an asshole then?" Shinjiro-san then retorted, just folding his arms over his chest.

"You—!"

"You need to get the fuck out of here?" Shinjiro-san deadpanned, before giving a firm nod, "Yeah, you do."

"You cannot force me," he spat out.

"Can I?" Shinjiro-san then drawled out, before he drew out his phone from his trench coat pocket. "I guess you won't care if I call Mitsuru then, and tell her that you're harassing Ken. She'll love that, especially with the way she dressed you down for how you treated Ken to begin with."

"You—you can't keep pulling her out as your trump card," he growled out. "Just because she helped you with that court case—"

"You didn't give a flying shit about Ken," Shinjiro-san practically snarled out, his eyes burning with anger. "I ain't perfect but who the fuck just leaves an elementary school aged kid in a dorm like you did?!!"

"And the life you give him is any better?! He goes to Shujin Academy, a school where the principal let a heinous rapist run amok! You give him a terrible example and you're nothing but a lazy—"

"Leave him alone!" Ken's voice cracked at the last part. "You know nothing, Uncle! You weren't there when Mom died. You didn't care about my well-being. You didn't care one wit. Not before Mom died and not after. You go on and on about how Shinjiro-san is a terrible person, but he took a bullet for me. He's taught me things that you can't learn from a book. He saved me in more than one way and I won't have you just waltz in and insult him... you... you piece of shit!"

Ren actually raised an eyebrow at that, as did Shinjiro-san.

"But—"

"I don't want to hear it!" Ken snarled out, "Get lost! If I have to see your sorry face ever again. I will go to Mitsuru-san about getting a restraining order. I'm sick of you and your attitude. I don't ever want to see you again! Goodbye Uncle!"

"Fine." Ken's uncle stiffened. "I hope your choices don't come back and bite you."

There was a silence after he turned and left, but Shinjiro-san broke it.

"Holy shit, you actually swore at your jackass of an uncle." Shinjiro-san then stepped inside, kicking the door shut. He dumped the grocery bags on the coffee table. "Color me surprised."
"Uh... sorry..." Ken scratched his cheek, looking rather sheepish. "I just got mad."

Shinjiro-san just smirked at Ken before ruffling his hair, despite Ken's protests. "Well, I can't exactly give you crap for that. I'd be a huge hypocrite."

"Shinjiro-san..." He groaned out, his hands immediately flying up to pat down his hair. "Ugh, why does everyone like messing with my hair?"

"Dunno why you complain." Ren shrugged. "It feels nice when Anne plays with my hair."

"That's a little different, Ren," Ken deadpanned.

Ren just cracked a grin. "Just saying."

Although this was a good time to address Ken's issues.

"Hey, can I ask you a question, Shinjiro-san?" Ren interjected.

He just got a raised eyebrow in reply. "Yeah?"

"Is Ken a burden to you?" Ren asked.

"Ren?!!" Ken sputtered out.

"What kind of question is that?" Shinjiro-san demanded.

"Answer the question," Ren pressed.

"Ren..." Ken hissed out, even swatting at his left arm.

Shinjiro-san shot Ken a look. "What's this about?"

"Nothing—"

"It's not nothing, Ken," Ren said seriously as he cut him off.

Ken had always looked out for them, and now it was his chance to look out for Ken. This opportunity had been unexpected, but he was not letting it go.

"I..." Ken then swallowed hard as Ren continued to stare at him expectantly. He started to mumble out, "It's just... I kinda... I'm holding you back. From pursuing what you really want in life and—"

Shinjiro-san thumped him hard on the head.

"Ow!" Ken yelped before he rubbed the spot Shinjiro-san hit him. "What was that for?!"

"For getting that kind of idea in your head, you moron." He then huffed, shaking his head, "You think that I secretly gripe and groan about having to take care of you?"

He looked Ken straight in the eye. That got Ken to stand up straighter.

"Ken, I wanted to be your guardian. I always have. If I could, I would've taken you in right after graduation. And then Mitsuru got into the shit with the government and things got delayed. Mitsuru wouldn't have agreed to help me get custody if I wasn't one hundred percent sure."

"But—" Ken began but got cut off.
"I'm twenty-five, not fifty," Shinjiro-san retorted. "I have time to pursue what I really want. Plenty of it. And besides that, you gave me your mom's old engagement ring."

"That's not much—"

"Don't I get to decide that?" Shinjiro-san interrupted. But his expression softened. "But my point is that... you mean a lot to me, Ken. You're probably gonna make me go gray before I turn thirty, but all of it has been worth it. I started lookin' out for you because I felt guilty 'bout taking your mom away from you. As a way of atonement. But that stopped being the reason. A long time ago."

"Why didn't you..." Ken then stopped short, before he added softly, "You never said anything."

"Ken, I'm not Mitsuru," he deadpanned.

Shinjiro-san then cleared his throat.

"I'm always gonna be shit with words. And you may have a bigger vocab than me, but you kinda suck at this too. Just know this, you'll never be a problem to me. And if you think that I'll just leave you be after you graduate from high school, you've got another thing coming."

Ken looked speechless, before he coughed, "I—uhh—thank you..."

Shinjiro-san cleared his throat as well, before tugging at the collar of his jacket. Ren snorted. Both of them could be so awkward.

"So—umm—any plans with Amamiya?" Shinjiro-san asked.

"We were going to the arcade, but..." Ken sighed, "I don't really feel like it anymore."

"Wanna just hang out here then?" Ren asked.

"We could stream something on my laptop," Ken suggested.

"I'm cool with that."

"I'll leave you to that then." Then he paused for a moment. "Oh, and Amamiya?"

Ren tilted his head, "Yeah?"

"You tell anyone, and I mean anyone—!" Shinjiro-san glared at him, pointing a finger at him, "You're dead meat and I swear nobody will ever find the body."

Ren just cracked a grin, "There's nothing wrong with telling Ken how much you love him—"

"Shut up, Amamiya!" Shinjiro-san growled out. "Don't think I won't punch your face in—"

"And that's our cue to go." Ken sighed before grabbing Ren's arm and dragging him to his bedroom.

Ren had never been inside of Ken's bedroom. He had kinda thought that Ken's room would be more minimalist. Ken kept his room tidy, but he had a bunch of Feathermen Ranger memorabilia. More pictures of SEES and a framed picture of a younger Ken and his mother, with a beach as a backdrop. A bookshelf was pushed against the wall, crammed with both literature and manga.

"You must think I was being stupid."
"Not stupid." Ren corrected, "Short-sighted, maybe, but not stupid."

"Heh." Ken shook his head before a small smile crept onto his face. "It's kinda ridiculous how happy it makes me feel."

"It's not ridiculous." Ren insisted before leaning against the door, looking at his friend, "So, still intent on sticking to law as a career?"

"Hmm..."

Ren quirked an eyebrow at Ken, "That's not an answer, you know."

"I don't really know yet." Ken admitted, only for him to smile. "But that's okay. There's no sense in rushing into it. And I know you'll have my back, whatever I choose."

Ren just cracked a grin. "Always, Ken."

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**RANK UP! Adjustment Confidant has reached Rank 9.**

**Protect: Chance to protect Ren from an otherwise fatal attack.**

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**Monday, November 14th, 2016**

Makoto really hoped that Akechi's hypothesis worked. After school, they went straight for the courthouse. And now they were seating themselves near the front, so Sae would have a clear view of them.

They were forced to sit in three rows, since the rows were divided into four. Futaba and Akechi took the front. She, Ken, Ren, and Anne sat in the middle; while Ryuji, Yusuke, and Haru sat behind.

"So, this is a courthouse." Haru said softly, her voice almost awed.

"Mm..." Akechi nodded, "Though I suppose it's understandable that you're looking about like this. Not many teenagers know what a courthouse looks like."

"I can't help but tense up," Yusuke muttered, rubbing his arm. "I would shudder, thinking about what it'd be like to take the stand... as a defendant."

"Yeah, no kidding," Ren stated with a bitter frown, as his eyes wandering towards the stand. He must be thinking of when he stood there, as a defendant.

"Ren..." Anne said softly, resting a hand on his arm.

"So that's your sis. Right, Makoto?" Futaba asked, pointing to where Sae sat. "She's overflowing with the aura of a capable woman."

Makoto just smiled slightly.

"Mm-hm." She then pursed her lips, "I hope this works."

Ken quietly took her hand, giving it a light squeeze. Makoto squeezed his hand back in return,
giving her boyfriend a slight smile to show that she was grateful.

"Don't you have faith in me, Nijijima-san?" Akechi sighed out.

Makoto wanted to say how she really felt but then Ken gave her a quick warning look. Fortunately, Akechi was sitting in the front so he couldn't see her expression. Makoto pursed her lips together for a moment to compose herself before speaking.

"You have been right so far, Akechi-kun." Makoto stated, even though the words were almost like bile to her.

Ryuji cleared his throat, "By the way, what's this trial about?"

"The defendant is a politician accused of embezzlement," Akechi answered.

Ryuji just rolled his eyes. "Dude, layman terms for people who don't spend a gazillion hours studying."

"Oh... it's that case," Ken said slowly. "I read about it in the news. He was using government funds for his own personal use."

"Yeah, I read about it in a magazine!" Futaba nodded vigorously. "He took his mistress on vacation so they could soak in some fancy hot springs! Talk about selfish."

"I see, he was consumed by greed, even though he was quite wealthy," Haru stated, then she sighed quietly. "Much like Father..."

"Haru..." Yusuke sighed out. "You don't have to sit in on this if it dredges up painful memories."

"Yeah, you can step out." Anne nodded with agreement, "Maybe if Nijijima-san sees us as a group, it'll be enough—"

"No, I'll be fine," Haru said firmly, but you could hear the smile in her voice, "Thank you, though."

"But man, if he's filthy rich like most politicians," Ryuji suddenly interjected, "Why does he gotta steal money like that?"

"Politicians just... like to take what they see. They see it and they decide it's theirs," Ren said in distaste. "I've been hanging around a former politician and he's probably like... the one exception."

He must have been talking about Yoshida-san. How Ren networked all these allies in such a short amount of time, she'll never know. But he was wise to not name drop him, not with Akechi around.

Ken sighed. "There will always be greedy people, I suppose. They're a large breed, especially amongst the elite."

"Hey, this is a bit weird but..." Anne hesitated for a moment. "What about the Phantom Thief case?"

"Yes, it's a bit odd since she's in charge of that," Haru agreed. "Can she really afford to sit in another case like this? I assume that she has her hands full with the Phantom Thief case."

"She was assigned this case before she was appointed to the Phantom Thieves case," Akechi explained. "Normally, another prosecutor would be assigned to her old case but... Sae-san is a bit of a perfectionist. If I may theorize, she may just view this as another opportunity for victory."
Makoto's hand wrapped itself tighter around Ken's.

"She always has been a perfectionist," she murmured.

"She sounds a bit like a certain someone I know," Ken mused. "She has to be nagged at to take a break sometimes." Then he paused. "...Or forcibly dragged."

He was probably referring to Mitsuru-san. Though they did have to be careful about what Ken mentioned around Akechi.

"But just how are we going to get her attention?" Yusuke questioned.

Makoto sighed, "I sent her a message right after school but I guess she didn't read it."

Like always...

"But if she didn't read it, she might not look for us," Anne bit her lip. "All of this will be meaningless unless her cognition is changed."

"I thought being optimistic was your thing?" Ken questioned.

"I know but..." Anne winced. "Sorry, I just... I'm kinda nervous. We have to change her cognition. We need to get her attention somehow."

"Ryuji, make a scene!" Futaba demanded.

"Hell no!" Ryuji cried out. "Are you nuts?! Do you want us to get kicked outta here?!

"Ryuji, you kinda are making a scene now," Morgana said through gritted teeth, poking his head out of Ren's bag.

"Shh..." Ren shushed, before quickly pushing Morgana back into his schoolbag, but not without eliciting a yelp from Morgana. "You're not here, remember?"

"Guys..." Ken said quietly before he abruptly withdrew his hand away from Makoto's. "Look."

Sae was staring at them in shock. Then she seemed to mutter to herself, shaking her head. She looked down to the desk, her lips pursed.

"So... that's it, huh?" Ryuji asked.

"We'll be good now. right?" Anne said in a hushed voice.

"Yeah, we'll be allowed into the High Limits thingamajig now," Morgana piped up. "So let's wait out the trial and we'll head back into the Palace!"

The trial didn't last long. Sae was just relentless. The defense attorney put up a good fight but he was just no match for Sae. Not even an hour had passed before the judge pronounced the defendant guilty.

"Holy crap, she's scary," Futaba whimpered out, shrinking into her seat. "I don't want to ever face her here."

"Guess it's not just girls with Personas who are scary." Ryuji sighed, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Yes, Sae-san is quite formidable," Akechi agreed. "Not that I expect anything less from her... but
now that we're finished here, shall we?"

They got up and headed for the door. Makoto couldn't help but sigh as she turned to look back at Sae. She didn't even seem to notice that they were leaving.

"Your sister was really surprised to see us, isn't she?" Ken murmured to Makoto.

Makoto exhaled through her nose.

"And yet somehow I'm not," she muttered, before rubbing her forehead, "Come on, we should—"

"Makoto, wait!"

Makoto froze at the sound of Sae's voice, before slowly turning to face her.

"Hi, Sis." She clasped her hands behind her back. "I guess you didn't read my message."

"Message?" Sae took out her phone, before her eyes lit up in recognition. "Oh, I see."

She pocketed her phone, but she still looked bewildered.

"I don't understand…" Sae trailed off with a frown. "You've never expressed interest in watching any of my court cases."

Makoto pursed her lips. "There's a first time for everything, isn't it?"

Sae narrowed her eyes, "Makoto, is there something you're hiding from me?"

Makoto tried not to wince. Quite the loaded question that was.

"It's nothing like that, Niijima-san," Ken suddenly interjected. "You see, I've been considering pursuing law as a career and everyone knows how talented of a prosecutor you are. Everyone else just came for...moral support."

"Mm…" Sae looked skeptical but somehow Ken wasn't breaking a sweat. He wasn't even batting an eye. "And what path are you thinking of taking, Amada-kun?"

Ken didn't even bat an eye, "Defense attorney."

He looked so calm and confident. It was... attractive. Wait, she shouldn't be thinking about that now... especially with her sister right there.

"Oh?" Sae's voice remained neutral but something flickered in her eyes. "Why would that be?"

"Because somebody needs to take the side of the downtrodden," Ken answered.

"Hm..." Sae pursed her lips before placing a hand on her hip. "Rather optimistic of you. And a tad naïve, I might add."

Ken didn't look offended. Instead, he looked thoughtful. That was odd.

"So I've been told by a certain someone close to me," Ken said dryly.

"E-Excuse me?" Sae sputtered out.

"Ah..." Makoto cleared her throat. "Something the matter, Sis?"
"No, it's just—" Sae shook her head, running a hand through her hair before letting out a great sigh, "No, it's nothing."

"Congratulations with this case, Nijima-san." Ken said as he was smiling politely but there was a glint in his eyes. "Though I suppose it's not a surprise with that record of yours."

Without another word, he opened the door and stepped through.

"Bye, Sis." Makoto said quietly, "Um, will I see you at home tonight?"

Sae winced and brushed a strand of hair out of her face, "I'm sorry, Makoto but I... I have a lot of work to handle still. Especially since I insisted on this case remain mine. You'll be fine on your own tonight, won't you?"

She didn't expect any other answer.

"Of course, Sis."

Makoto gave her a one last wave before stepping outside.

Further down the hall, Ken was leaning against the wall.

"Not the best way to say hello to her," Ken muttered out, rubbing his face.

"You were nervous?" Makoto asked incredulously. "It looked like you were even breaking a sweat back there."

Ken just smiled halfheartedly. "Well, I have more than one reason to be nervous. It is the first time talking her after we've started dating."

"...Oh," Makoto said lamely, before she cleared her throat. "Well if it helps... I get a little bit nervous around Shinjiro-san still. Sometimes I feel like he barely tolerates me."

"Nah, Shinjiro-san likes you."

"H-He does?" Makoto couldn't help but feel taken aback by Ken's statement. She gave a small frown. "He has a funny way of showing it. He still calls me by my surname."

Sometimes it was weird thinking there was a time where Makoto had called Ken "Amada-kun" and he called her "Nijima-san".

"And he calls Junpei-san and Yukari-san by their surnames still." Ken gave her a small smile. "And there was a time he called Mitsuru-san by her surname too."

"Really? Haven't they known each other since high school?"

"They have." Ken confirmed, "It wasn't until after Shinjiro-san's... coma that he dropped the pretenses."

"Because he had a brush with death?" Makoto guessed.

"No, it's not that." Ken shook his head. "When he fell into a coma after what happened, Mitsuru-san didn't lose hope. She demanded that the scientists try and find a cure to the effects of the Persona suppressant drugs he was taking, as the side effects... they were slowly killing him. The incident turned out to give them enough time to figure out a cure. When Shinjiro-san found out, he said it was a waste of time. But he stopped calling her 'Kirijo' and switched to Mitsuru."
"Hm… I need to save his life somehow. Good to know."

Ken snorted. "If it makes you feel better, he likes you better than Junpei-san. And Rise-san."

"Really?"

Ken just raised an eyebrow. "Do I really have to elaborate why she irritates him?"

"...Oh."

"Unfortunately for him, she and Fuuka-san hit it off almost immediately after they got to have a proper conversation with each other."

Makoto couldn't help but laugh. "Poor Shinjiro-san. Though speaking of him, you alluded to him back there to set off Sis, didn't you?"

Ken just shrugged. "I figured that Shinjiro-san irritated your sister. He has a talent for that."

"It certainly worked." Then she gave her boyfriend a side glance. "You do realize that we'll have our hands full after all of this, dealing with… telling Sis."

"Oh, god. Let's not talk about that. Not with all the crap we've been dealing with." Ken grimaced then shook his head. "Come on, let's go catch up with the others before Ren, Ryuji, and Futaba start betting over what we've been up to or something."

"They really are unbelievable," Makoto muttered, shaking her head.

So they headed for outside, where everyone else was waiting for them.

"Finally!" Morgana grumbled. "Please tell me you weren't—"

"We weren't engaged in that activity, Morgana," Ken said dryly. "Niijima-san wanted to talk to Makoto."

Haru's eyes widened in horror. "W-What did she say?"

"Just about why we're here," Makoto said. "Ken fed her a story that he was interested in law so he wanted to watch a trial."

"Not a half-bad lie," Futaba mused, before giving him a thumbs up. "Good job!"

"Futaba!" Makoto exclaimed, shooting their youngest member an exasperated look.

"Hey, I'm complimenting him!"

Ren snickered at them.

"Okay, okay, enough already." Then he pulled his phone, his thumb hovering over the Nav. "Ready to get to work?"

"All right, the door's gone!"

For a moment, the area grew hazy, showing an image of the courtroom. Makoto couldn't help but feel relieved that it worked.

"So this is what cognition control looks like," Akechi said, wide-eyed.
"Dude, if you're shocked by this still, you're in for a world of hurt," Ryuji huffed out.

"Ha-ha, it's just so much to take in," Akechi explained.

Makoto had to repress the urge to roll her eyes. Couldn't have the liar know they were onto him.

"But anyways..." Yusuke spoke up. "Joker, there's a counter up ahead. Shall we investigate?"

"One second, Fox." Ren held up a hand. "I need to pick out the team for today."

Their leader rubbed his chin as he did a once-over the whole group.

"Well, I did promise Skull a slot for today. Queen, you up for it today? Since I used you a lot last time?"

"I'm ready." Makoto nodded firmly. "At your command, Joker."

"And... Panther," Ren decided. "Ready, everyone?"

They approached the counter; Makoto couldn't help but notice the sign above. It flashed "VICTORY OR DEFEAT".

"Welcome to the High Limits Floor, a proverbial gambling paradise," the dealer greeted. "First off, we would like to extend a welcome gift to you. Your card, please?"

Ren drew out the card, sliding it to him.

"A gift of one thousand coins to you." The dealer slid it back to Ren. "Use it well."

"Awesome!" Anne cheered, pumping her fist. "That's one thousand less coins we have to earn!"

"Only one thousand, though?" Futaba huffed. "There's like... ten of us. You should've given ten thousand to be fair! What a cheapskate."

The dealer then gave a bow. "My apologies, but the welcome gift can only be applied once."

"Of course there's a rule 'bout that," Ryuji grumbled out.

"At least it's... something?" Haru offered, "A little is better than nothing, and remember that we had to earn fifty thousand to get here!"

"Thank you for your gratitude," the dealer said. "And to add to that, here is a map to this floor."

"Just like that?" Morgana cocked his head. "Well, I won't complain about any freebies we get here."

"Let's cut to the chase," Makoto stated. "We need the member's card from your prizes. The one to access the manager's floor."

He chuckled, "Well, we do have prizes, but I'm afraid that is not one."

"Whaddya mean by that?!" Ryuji hissed, before slamming his hands on the counter.

Makoto couldn't help but cringe.

He started to shout. "How in the goddamn hell are we gonna get on the manager's floor then?!"
"Skull, inside voice," Ken sighed out. "You don't have to yell."

"You'll have your answer if you look. It's just above the flight of stairs." He gestured to the side, pointing to the stairs to the right.

And there was another flight of stairs to the left. Both conjoined to the floor above.

"Past the door you'll see what I mean."

"This sounds suspicious." Futaba mumbled out.

"Yes, but we need to look into it." Ken said before looking to Ren, "Let's go, Joker."

Ren led them up the stairs and they went through the door. They came across a golden... scale?

"That... looks like a bridge," Yusuke said uncertainly.

"I dunno, man. It looks more like a scale," Ryuji said, scratching the back of his head. "Fits with the whole courthouse, yeah?"

"Or maybe it's... both?" Anne suggested tentatively, twirling a finger around one of her pigtails, "I mean, the dealer said this was the way to the manager's floor..."

"Oracle, can you tell us about anything beyond this?" Ken asked, turning to face Futaba. "I can see that there's an area beyond it but—"

"Gimme a sec, Ace." Futaba summoned Prometheus, disappearing into the orb. "Hmm... oh yeah, I can sense the Treasure on the other side."

"That fits what the dealer told us anyhow," Akechi stated. "But what to do to lower the bridge?"

"There's a machine over there." Haru pointed. "Let's check it out!"

"Hmm—there's a card slot." Ren commented before taking out the card. He scanned it, and then an automated voice spoke.

"Member card authenticated. The required number of coins to activate the Bridge of Judgement is 100,000 coins."

"O-One hundred—" Futaba stammered out.

"T-THOUSAND?!!" Anne finished for her, her mouth dropping open. "Just how are we going to collect that many?!!"

"It's clear that she doesn't want us to pass." Morgana huffed out, "She keeps throwing up roadblocks. It's honestly ridiculous."

"Hey, why don't we cheat again?" Ryuji asked, "It worked for us before. Twice. Maybe Queen could jump past the bridge and she can lower it from the other side for us or somethin'?"

"I could... try," Makoto said.

Because getting one hundred thousand coins... just how could they manage that?

"Hold on—" Ken began to protest.
"I'll be fine Ace." Makoto cut him off, placing a hand on his arm, "It can't hurt to try. One hundred thousand coins...that was two times the amount we had to get to reach here."

Ken didn't look happy about it but at least he didn't protest. Her friends gave her a wide berth as Makoto summoned Johanna.

"Good luck, Queen!" Haru exclaimed.

Makoto gave her a smile in thanks, before she revved the engines. She shot forward before she kicked forward. For a moment, she was flying through the air. But then a translucent blue wall flashed in front of her eyes. It glowed a brighter blue before a force threw her backwards.

"QUEEN!" She heard her friends cry out.

Makoto just squeezed her eyes shut, bracing for the impact.

She was suddenly snatched out of the air. When she opened her eyes, she saw that Ken was the one who had caught her, now holding her bridal style.

"Do I have to even say it?" Ken asked dryly.

Makoto huffed, before reaching out to smack his arm. "No."

"I don't know why you're complaining, Ace." Ren was smirking. "You get to hold Queen all cl—OW!"

"Joker, that's enough." Anne said flatly, all while tugging on Ren's ear. "Stop teasing them."

"But it's true—ow! Panther!" He whined.

Ken just rolled his eyes.

"You're really impossible sometimes," Ken grumbled out, before setting Makoto on her feet. "You'd do the same for Panther."

"Would you, Joker?" Anne elbowed him in the side, having let go of his ear. "Ace did look very dashing back there."

"It was very romantic." Haru giggled, "Ace just swooped in to catch you, Queen."

"That's—" Makoto cleared her throat, fidgeting for a moment.

She wasn't ready to freely talk about her relationship with Ken yet. Not in front of their friends. And glancing at her boyfriend, Makoto could see that it flustered him as well.

"S-So, we definitely need to get one hundred thousand coins to pass through."

"Was worth a shot." Ryuji grumbled out, then he shuffled his feet for a moment, before clearing his throat, "Uh, sorry 'bout suggesting that, though. Was dumb of me and you almost got hurt because of it."

"Skull, you were just trying to help." Makoto reassured, "You're not stupid, And as you stated, this kind of method did work before."

"Did you really think you could beat me with such a petty trick?" Her sister's distorted voice rang out before a chuckle sounded, "There will no shortcuts to earning your way to me."
"She really is mocking us." Yusuke huffed out.

"Okay, so...I guess we just play Niijima's games," Morgana grumbled out.

"They do seem to be at a higher stake, these games." Akechi stated, "Perhaps it may not be as hopeless as we think. We just need to double our efforts."

"I hope you are correct, Crow." Yusuke sighed out, rubbing his face.

"Don't you trust me?"

Ken gave Makoto a side-eyed glance before looking back to Akechi and Makoto had to cough so she wouldn't start laughing.

"You haven't led us astray so far," Yusuke admitted.

"Anyways, time's a wasting," Ren said, dusting off his hands, "Let's get started!"

Ren once again took the lead. They eventually came across a game called the House of Darkness. She had a bad feeling about that name.

She could handle Ryuji's class's haunted house because well, they didn't have the means to do an effective haunted house. But this, this was different.

Makoto began to read the rules aloud so to distract herself. "In this game, you will attempt to escape a pitch-black maze."

She hated being right this time. She quickly shook her head and began to read again.

"But in order to escape, you must locate the owner's treasure first. The treasure holds the key to escape. You must bring the treasure to the exit in order to claim your prize."

Sae's treasure…?

"Treasure?" Morgana asked.

"Obviously not the treasure we're looking for, a Palace can't have two of them. It's probably just some trick to get out of this maze." Ren theorized.

"It probably still is symbolized by something that Sae-san holds important, being that this is a product of cognition as you all explained." Akechi rubbed his chin, "I wonder what it could be."

"Do you have any idea what that would be, Queen?" Haru asked.

"It would definitely be easier if we knew what we were looking for." Yusuke agreed.

Makoto frowned as she started to wrack her mind. She honestly couldn't think of anything.

"I can't think of anything." Makoto sighed, shaking her head. "Sorry..."

"I wonder if we could use a torch or some sort." Yusuke mused aloud, "Panther can use Hecate to light it."

Futaba pointed at Ken. "Ace, give Panther your spear!"

"Um—yeah, that's not happening," Ken said flatly. "We're not setting my spear on fire."
"Do you know how much that cost?" Ren grumbled out. "It was far from cheap."

"Joker, we may have to rely on your eyes then," Morgana said, planting his paws on his hips. "You've always been good at finding the right route."

"No pressure there," Ren said with a nervous laugh, "But I'll do my best."

They went inside, only to be met by an attendant. "Welcome to the House of Darkness, our puzzling labyrinth in the dark."

"That's kinda redundant," Ryuji grumbled out.

"Um... why are you out here like this?" Anne asked nervously, "Are you here for a fight?"

"No, of course not." The attendant shook his head. "You are valued participants after all."

"Participants?" Ken echoed. "What are you talking about?"

"You see, the rules on the high limits floor are different compared to the rest of our fine casino."

The attendant began to explain. "VIPs are allowed to send substitutes into our challenges. Think of it as a horse race, but the participants are the horses."

"But... we don't have any," Anne said.

The attendant then nodded. "Yes, which is why you are the participants."

"I wouldn't like to be on the sidelines anyways!" Ryuji interjected. "Just watching would be freakin' boring!"

"For once, I agree with Skull!" Morgana added.

"What was that?" Ryuji glared at Morgana.

"Then this all pans out for you," the attendant stated, thankfully breaking up the fight. He had no mouth, but it felt to Makoto that he was smiling. "Do you need me to clarify any rules?"

"No, we got the message crystal clear from reading the rules," Haru said.

"Can we get a clue to the treasure?" Yusuke asked.

This just earned him a laugh. "I'm afraid that I cannot fulfill that request. But best of luck to you."

"Of course we get no hint," Morgana grumbled out before he lifted his chin. "But fine! We'll beat this game! Just wait and see!"

He chuckled, "I look forward to seeing your attempts."

"Hey, I know that Inari said that he wanted a torch but we do have two light users." Futaba said in a hushed voice, "Wanna try it out once we're inside?"

Ken shrugged. "It's worth a shot, I guess. Crow?"

"Hmm—we should take any advantage we can get." Akechi stated, before pursing his lips for a moment, and then he nodded, "Let's do it."

They stepped inside and they were enveloped in darkness.
Panic immediately spiked through Makoto. But then she felt someone take her hand. A familiar squeeze.

"You okay?" Ken whispered to her.

"Queen?" Haru said tentatively.

She realized that her friends were looking at her, as well. But it wasn't judging. She wasn't the same weak girl, who just blindly followed orders. She had friends who cared and loved her. She didn't have to be afraid to walk in the dark. Not when she was walking with them.

Makoto nodded. "I'm okay. S-Sorry, I just...I've never been good in the dark."

"Well you know that I'm not the greatest with the dark either," Ken said. "But anyways, I believe that we were going to test something?"

"Shall we, Ace?" Akechi asked.

"Yeah." Ken nodded.

He stepped away from Makoto, his hand slipping out of hers.

He paused momentarily, before Ken cried out, "Kala-Nemi!"

"Robin Hood!"

There was a flash of light, illuminating the area for a moment.

Futaba suddenly gasped. "Ack! Did you see that?!"

"See what? I was totally blinded!" Ryuji complained.

"Sorry about that," Ken quickly apologized.

"But what did you see, Oracle?" Morgana asked.

"Shadows everywhere! Nangh... should've known that it wouldn't be easy."

"So, to summarize: we have to walk around in the dark, find something that we don't even know what it is, and avoiding Shadows," Yusuke said flatly. "Am I correct?"

"That about sums it up, Fox," Ren quipped.

"Ugh—why did Fox have to be right about this?" Anne whined out.

"Stop complaining, guys," Ken scolded. "Just standing around complaining won't win us this game."

"We can't even use those light spells," Futaba lamented.

"Hmm... I wouldn't say that, Oracle," Morgana said. "Maybe we can use this to our advantage, Joker, if you're feeling particularly lost, have Ace or Crow light up the area for you. It might help us out if we need to find a vent to continue our way."

"That's a wonderful idea, Mona-chan!" Haru exclaimed, giving a light clap of her hands. "You're so smart!"
"Hehe, of course." Morgana said smugly.

"Ugh—don't butter him up, Noir." Ryuji grumbled out, "He's probably as puffed up as a peacock right now."

"Grrr—shut up, Skull!" Morgana retorted.

"Ha, so I'm right?" Ryuji smirked.

"SHUT UP!"

"I'm putting them in time-out if they don't stop soon," Ken said sarcastically.

Makoto couldn't help but laugh. The pure exasperation in Ken's voice was just... amusing.

"At your lead, Joker," Akechi said.

"Yeah," Ren replied. "Follow me, guys!"

They slowly crept through the maze; Ren would sneak up on Shadows. They would defeat them. But Makoto had no idea what this treasure of Sae's was.

"Ugh... nothing." Futaba groaned out.

"And you can't sense anything, Oracle?" Akechi pressed.

"I just sense Shadows," Futaba grumbled out.

"Hey, there's a door here," Ren said, "Let's see..."

But the room was still pitch black.

"I guess this is a dead end," Haru sighed out.

"Hello? Who's there?"

That voice...

"Whataya want?!" Ryuji snapped out, ready to fight a Shadow at a moment's notice.

"S-Sorry, I just..." The high-pitched, almost childish voice trembled for a moment. "I haven't heard new voices in a long time."

"Are you lost?" Anne asked.

"U-Um, no. I live here. Kinda."

"Wait, are you a Shadow?!" Morgana demanded.

"A Shadow?" The voice turned confused. "Um...I'm a human. I have a big sister. And my dad. But they're both so busy. I wish I could see them."

No... no way. This couldn't be...

This felt like a... a joke.

"Have you ever thought about leaving?" Makoto asked.
She had to remain calm. She couldn't freak out over this.

"Leaving? But my big sister always says the world is dangerous. I need to study hard so I can handle it."

"Study?" Ken asked, "What's your name?"

There was a moment of silence.

"Makoto. Makoto Niijima."

"WHAT?!" Anne screeched out.

"Panther, shhh!" Morgana hushed.

Ken sighed, "But I see now, Niijima-san's cognition of Queen is the treasure the rules are referring to."

"I can't believe this," Makoto mumbled out.

"Umm—what are you guys talking about?" The cognition of herself sounded uncertain.

"But hey Makoto-chan," Anne said. "The world isn't so scary. Not when you're with people you can trust. Don't you want to see it?"

"Mm... it does sound nice. I don't like being in the dark. It's... kinda scary."

"Then come with us, then." Anne's voice turned coaxing. "We'll show you the way, okay?"

"Okay!" she happily agreed. "Oh, hang on...I wanna take this thing my big sister gave me! I want to see it in the light!"

That...was naïve. Very naïve. She honestly didn't know how to take this. When she had thought that Sae would have a cognition of her, she didn't really think that it would actually happen.

She was just so young and hopelessly naïve. Did Sae really just see her as just a little child?

At least she wasn't frightened by the fights with the Shadows. She almost seemed enthralled with them.

"You like seeing us beat up Shadows, huh?" Ryuji asked after one intense fight.

"Yeah! It's cool! My dad used to show me a lot of yakuza movies! My sister doesn't like it though, she says it's too violent. She says I should only use violence to protect myself."

"You like yakuza movies?" Ken whispered.

"I just do, okay?" Makoto whispered.

Ken just laughed, 'I'm not judging. Just surprised. Maybe we can watch one together sometime."

"I'd like that," Makoto murmured.

"Can I come?!" The cognition blurted out.

"Cockblocked by yourself." Futaba stage whispered.
"Huh?"

"Please let us be near the end." Ken groaned out.

Fortunately, Ken's wish came true. They found the exit, but it was locked.

"Hey, can I borrow your sister's gift for a moment?" Ren asked and then said, "I think it's our ticket outside."

"I'll get it back, right?" the little girl asked nervously.

"Of course, I promise." There was a rustle as the cognition of herself handed it over. "Now let's see... aha!"

There was a click and Ren pushed the door open.

Light flooded her sight, allowing Makoto to look at the cognition of herself. She looked about seven or eight. Of course. Why did Sae see her a child...?

"Aww, she's so cute!" Anne cooed.

"Simply adorable!" Haru added.

"I just want to pinch her cheeks!" Futaba declared.

"Nooo!" The cognition of herself quickly ducked behind Ken, even using his cape to wrap herself into it. "No pinching!"

Ken just stared flatly at their female friends. He clearly wasn't amused in the slightest.

"What?" Futaba huffed, "We can't help it!"

"Anyways..." Ren cleared his throat before kneeling down, "I believe I owe you something."

Sae's gift turned out to be some kind of locket. Sae's cognition of herself unraveled herself from Ken's cape. She then took it, almost reverently, and stared hard at it.

"That's a picture of Mom." She said softly.

"So, family's been on Sae-san's mind," Akechi said before he let out a soft sigh. "Though I can relate, in a way."

Makoto wasn't sure to make of that comment. But it was hard to tell what was a truth or a lie with Goro Akechi.

"But we're out!" Ryuji said with a grin, "Let's claim our prize!"

"I don't know..." Ken trailed off, a troubled expression on his face, "I can't help but feel that there's something more to this."

"Hey." Ren pointed at Ken. "No jinxing."

Ken just huffed, staring flatly at Ren. "I'm just saying. Keep your guard up, Joker."

They continued forward, heading down the hallway. They managed to loop back to the entrance, where the attendant was waiting for them.
“What?!” He gasped out. "That's impossible! How did you...?"

"Oh shut up, you asshole,” Ryuji snarled out. "We won! Now cough up our reward!"

"No, you're not allowed to pass! Not with Lady Sae's treasure!"

"B-But I wanted to go with them!” The cognition protested.

Of course, the attendant didn't listen. He transformed into a... snake? And he wasn't alone. Two blonde women accompanied him, decked out in medieval armor and wielding a sword.

"Joker, I'd avoid electricity attacks if I were you!” Ken warned.

"Damn!” Ren hissed out, "Fox, wait for my signal and switch out with Skull! Until then, stick to physical attacks, Skull!"

"Understood, Joker!” Yusuke shouted.

"Ha!"

Blue shimmered around the snake Shadow for a moment, leaving behind a glowing aura.

"Is that...Mind Charge?” Ken asked.

"Uh...my readings are giving me 'Concentrate', Ace.” Futaba piped up, "Either way, it's not good. It's a huge buff for magic spells!”

"That's so not fair!” Anne groaned out.

"Good thing Mona ain't in right now.” Ryuji quipped.

It was better to be safe than sorry. Makoto summoned Johanna, racing by her friends. A purple mist escaped Johanna's exhaust pipe, surrounding them and raising their defenses.

Ren seemed to have a similar idea.

"Kushinada-Hime!” He cried out.

An elegant Persona with two green combs adorning her head appeared. Red light shimmered around them, causing power to surge through their veins.

Then one of the blonde Shadows raised her sword. An almighty spell began to form.

"Ah shoot—take cover!” Futaba shouted.

The almighty spell exploded, the force throwing them all back.

"Oooh, you'll pay for that!” Anne summoned her Persona. "Dance, Hecate!”

Fireballs flared to life, knocking down the two blonde Shadows.

"Nice, Panther!” Futaba exclaimed, "That's two of them down! Come on, pass the baton!”

"Get 'em, Skull!” Anne exclaimed, slapping Ryuji's hand.

"Captain Kidd!”
The force slammed into all three Shadows, and Ren quickly cut in.

"Pazuzu!"

The new Persona's eyes flashed a dark purple. The two blonde Shadows started to cower in fear.

"Fox, you're in!" Ren barked out.

"Kamu Susano-o!" Yusuke shouted, "Take this!

Due to Anne having powerful fire attacks, they were able to eliminate the lackeys with ease. And they essentially ganged up on the last Shadow. With that strategy, the Shadow quickly fell.

"Damn, that was annoying," Ren muttered.

"He really seemed surprised that we made it out," Haru stated.

"Perhaps he was counting on us not being able to convince her to come with us," Yusuke mused. "But anyhow, we are done here."

"Are you okay?" Anne turned to Sae's cognition of Makoto.

"Yeah!" Her eyes were wide. "You guys were so cool!"

"And to top it off, we're now ten thousand coins richer." Ren announced with a smirk, waving the card at them.

"One step closer!" Morgana declared, even giving a hop of excitement. "Come on, let's find the next game—"

"You're going?" The cognition blurted out, looking dismayed.

"I'm sorry," Ren apologized. "But we have something we have to do. I hope you understand."

"Something to do...?" Then the cognition's expression grew determined, "Let me help! Umm... I can make you drinks. To keep your energy up! My sister likes it when I do that for her!"

Oh, right. There was a time where she would 'mix' drinks for Sae. She'd barge into Sae's room, holding a cup. She would make juices from carrots, spinach. She really had no idea how Sae would choke them down.

"Thanks, kiddo." Ryuji ruffled her hair. "Be good, yeah? And keep out of trouble!"

"You too!"

But as they left, Makoto could only think of Sae's cognition of her.

"I don't know why you're so shocked, Queen," Akechi suddenly drawled out.

He was hanging back to speak to Makoto, as everyone else but him and Ken were heading for the exit. He wasn't quite smirking but he was pretty close.

"You do have your moments even now," He stated.

"Crow..." There was an edge to Ken's voice now, and he narrowed his eyes at Akechi.

"You do go around, shouting 'Fists of Justice' after destroying Shadows, after all," Akechi said
innocently.

That little...! Would it look bad if she punched him? It wouldn't hurt... much.

"Crow, that's enough." Ken said sharply, "You're one to talk, with your laser sword and gun. There's nothing wrong with Makoto having fun with this."

"I suppose." Akechi then tilted his head. "I'm just saying that you do have your childish moments, Queen."

"Thank you for your eternal wisdom, Crow." Makoto said flatly, "I'll catch up in a moment."

Thankfully Akechi followed after the others while Ken hung back with her.

"Don't say it, Ace." Makoto muttered.

Ken didn't say anything, he just waited patiently.

"He just... ughhh!" Makoto pushed up her mask, rubbing at her eyes and then muttered out, "He really gets under my skin."

"I'm sure you're not the only one." Ken stated, "You know that Skull can't stand him."

Makoto frowned, "Is what I do... really childish?"

And she still loved Bunchimaru... She thought it wasn't something to be embarrassed of but she was wrong.

"I think you forget that you're dating someone who's a huge fan of Feathermen Rangers. You like what you like. Don't let Akechi shame you into stopping." Ken huffed, then he took her hand, lightly kissing her knuckles. "You're fine, just the way you are."

Makoto felt herself blushing again. Even though her hands were covered with gloves, the slight brush was enough to send a jolt through her.

"Well..." She then cleared her throat; she really had to stop blushing like a lovestruck schoolgirl. "Maybe you can show me why you like Feathermen Rangers so much sometime?"

Ken's face then lit up, his smile making Makoto feel warm.

"I'd like that," he said softly. "Though we probably should catch up with the others before Joker starts giving us crap."

Makoto grimaced. "You're right. Let's go."

They then hurried for the exit, though Makoto couldn't help but wonder what else was in store for them.

Goro was really struggling to keep the facade up. Every time he looked at Amamiya, he could feel a flare of frustration.

After Amada and Sakamoto's words on Amamiya's probation, he had dug into Amamiya's record. The politician that ruined Amamiya's life, it struck Goro as very Shido thing to do. It had taken some snooping around but he managed to discover many things.
One was that his life before Tokyo was essentially in shambles. He had been expelled from his school. And from what he could discern, his parents were ashamed of him and essentially just packed him up and dumped him onto Sojiro Sakura. He had no semblance of a social life, save for this ragtag group of thieves.

He didn't give a shit that people were frightened of him, thought of him as a violent criminal. He was almost carefree when he said that their opinions didn't matter and he knew whose opinions did.

What a load of bullshit.

Why the hell was Amamiya so special? How could he pick up the pieces and just... move on?!

He didn't give a shit that Shido ruined his life. He managed to find a group of friends, so loyal to him. He even managed to win the heart of a beautiful girl. He had no desire for Takamaki, but he had to admit that the girl was quite the beauty and it was obvious that she all but worshipped her boyfriend.

And to rub salt in the wound, Amamiya had Goro beat in the one thing that the ace detective thought made him special.

He had multiple Personas. He had caught glimpses of the Phantom Thieves here and there even before he had officially met them at the TV studio. Even heard that cat talk. But he had no idea just how large of a repertoire Amamiya had.

Sakamoto had phrased it as Amamiya having a 'gazillion' Personas. He managed to talk to the Shadows. Persuade them to join him! A nobody—attic trash—was able to pull this off.

And Goro couldn't. Why was he so damn special? And the fact that Amamiya's friends were slavishly devoted to him... it made him sick, just thinking about it.

Then Goro's eyes happened to drift over to Amada. He felt yet another stab of jealousy.

 Damn him. Why did he have to be so lucky? His guardian, Aragaki, was in his mid-twenties. And judging from Amada and Aragaki's behavior, Amada had been under his custody for years now.

Amada didn't have to worry about angering Aragaki and getting kicked to the curb. Hell, Amada purposely needled the older man. Aragaki wanted to take care of him.

And Amada's father may have not wanted to be a father, but Amada had the blessing of legitimacy. He may have lost his mother early in life, but he had countless blessings dropped into his lap.

And just what had he done to deserve it? It wasn't fair! Goro had tried his hardest to endear himself to the foster families who took him in but they all treated him like crap. If he remembered correctly, it was only a matter of months before he was dumped back onto the orphanage.

The fact that he could feel Robin Hood and Loki both resonating with Amada's Persona only contributed to his irritation.

"Excuse me?" The dealer approached the group, "A word, please?"

"What's the matter?" Amamiya asked.

"The manager would like to speak to you in the manager's room." He stated, "You'll find it right by the Battle Arena. And do hurry. The matter is urgent."
"Sis... would like to speak to us?" Niijima frowned before pursing her lips. "I wonder what that's about…"

"Only one way to find out, I suppose," Amada said, absentmindedly running his fingers down the shaft of his spear before glancing at Amamiya. "Come on, Joker. Let's get going."

"Something's gotta be up, though," Morgana muttered out. "Stay on your toes!"

"When am I ever not careful?" Amamiya scoffed.

Dead silence. And then, an awkward cough from Kitagawa.

"Um, never," Sakura stated.

"Yeah, dude." Sakamoto shook his head. "Reckless is like, your middle name."

"Okumura's Palace," Takamaki said flatly, before flipping one of her pigtails over her shoulder. "You jumping on the manager robot's back so you could fry his system."

"You can't deny it got results," Amamiya protested.

"Still very reckless of you, Joker." Okumura said.

"And it brought down the wrath of Panther on your head." Kitagawa shuddered. "Mona is correct in cautioning you."

"I see how it is." Amamiya huffed, then he gave Goro a sideways glance. "Well, at least Crow isn't betraying me."

If only he knew...

"Joker, stop being a drama queen," Amada droned.

"Make me!" Amamiya snarked childishly.

"Let's see..." Amada pointedly patted down his clothes, his expression turning perplexed. "Did I bring duct tape with me today?"

"Oh, what a pity. I had some in my schoolbag." Niijima sighed out, her hand on her cheek. "Oh well, that won't help us now."

Sakura burst out laughing at Amamiya who didn't seem too impressed with their jokes.

"You brought this out of them, Joker." She snickered.

"You guys suck." He rolled his eyes.

How annoying...

Goro pointedly cleared his throat. "Shall we get going and see what Sae-san wants? We are wasting time."

"Okay, okay." Amamiya grumbled, "Anything to make these guys to stop mocking me."

"Oh I see how it is." There was an obnoxious grin on Sakamoto's face now. "You can dish it out but you can't take it."
"We're going now!" Amamiya announced, "Let's go!"

Goro bit back the urge to glare at them all. They wasted so much time. Goro sworn that he could've finished clearing this Palace in half of the time. So much time wasted on bickering and cracking jokes. It only served to get on his last nerve.

"Welcome to the manager's room." Sae-san greeted, lounging against the chair she sat in.

The manager's room was more like a room where you played poker in. To add to it, there was a deck of cards spread on the table in front of Sae-san. A single chair was opposite of her.

The only thing missing was a pile of chips.

"Do we get to finally face the number one player herself?" Goro feigned surprise before rubbing his chin. "We're honored."

"I won't do as you wish anymore," she spat out, glaring daggers at all of them. Then she gestured to the cards, "This is my territory. This will be what we play."

"Draw poker," Goro said.

"Now, who will face me?"

"I can't do it." Okumura stated, shaking her head.

"I definitely can't as well." Kitagawa seconded, "I just think about winning..."

"Same," Sakura mumbled out.

"Maybe I can—" Takamaki began.

"Uhh—yeah, no," Sakamoto said flatly. "This takes acting. And brains. Two things you lack."

"Hello pot." Takamaki pointed at him, all the while scowling. "Meet kettle."

"Hey!"

"You just walked into that, Skull," Amada murmured. "Though I've been told that I don't have the best poker face, so I don't think I'd be a good candidate."

Morgana shook his head, "My hands can't reach the cards."

"Let me do this." Niijima declared, "I'll handle this."

"I understand how you feel." Goro stated, somehow managing to keep his expression neutral as he put a hand on her shoulder. "But you shouldn't. She knows all too well how you think. But at the same time, that disqualifies me as well. Joker...it's up to you."

"No pressure here," Amamiya said dryly, but then his expression grew determined. "But I will win!"

He was always so sure of himself. It nearly bordered arrogance, it was so vexing.

"We'll be counting on ya!" Sakamoto encouraged.

"Confidence is unnecessary," Sakura stated. "This is a game of luck."
"Don't get too cocky, Joker," Amada warned.

"Okay, okay, sheesh..." Amamiya grumbled out, "You don't have to kill my vibe."

"Good luck, Joker." Goro said neutrally, giving him a nod and then he looked to Sae-san once more. "May the best player win."

"Oh, I intend to." She drawled out, only for her game face to appear. "Now then, there will be no need for chips in this game. This match will be decided on the poker hands we both hold. If you can win against me, even once, I will admit my defeat."

"What's she acting all cocky for?" Sakamoto grumbled out.

"She wishes to break our will," Kitagawa stated.

"Make her eat her words, Joker!" Takamaki exclaimed, her hands clenched. "I'll be rooting for you!"

"Now let us begin."

The two players drew their cards.

"Wait are you for real?!" Sakamoto hissed out, peering over Amamiya's shoulder.

"This is great!" Sakura said, "This is one strong hand!"

"Hm..." Amada was looking towards Sae-san, who was smirking widely.

"Hm?!" Sakura tugged on his sleeve, "Don't be cynical, Ace! She's obviously acting overly cocky!"

"We'll see," he said neutrally.

"Quiet," Niijima shushed them.

"I'll exchange four cards," Sae-san announced, much to everyone's surprise. "Will you?"

Amamiya shook his head, "I will keep mine."

"Come on, Joker!" Okumura whispered.

Ugh... they were really all cheerleaders for Amamiya.

"Four of a kind," Amamiya said confidently, spreading his cards for Sae-san to see.

"Straight flush." Sae-san said smugly.

"We lost..." Goro murmured.

"Don't worry." Okumura soothed, "We'll get her the next time!"

"Don't count on it," Sae-san growled out.

Sae-san was obviously cheating. And they had to get out of here, so they could finish the infiltration route. Securing treasures was such an irksome hassle. The thieves would be more productive if they just eliminated the source of the troubles instead of wasting so much time with this Treasure and calling card nonsense. But these people didn't seem to understand how to be efficient.
However, an idea struck Goro.

"Are you ready to lose once again?"

"Do not worry." Goro stated, patting Amamiya's shoulder. He took the opportunity to slip a royal flush into Amamiya's sleeve.

Amamiya just blinked up at him. Subtle recognition flashed in his eyes, thankfully he was discreet about it. He's not as hopeless as the rest of his teammates it seems.

"Thanks, Crow." Then he smiled ruefully. "It seems I need some luck on my side."

"Not even all the luck in the world will be enough to best me." Sae-san boasted, "Now, shall we —?"

"One moment, please." Goro interjected, "Please allow me to be the dealer this time. It is unfair for one of the players to be the dealer. You will need a good explanation if you wish to deny me that."

"Hmph." Sae-san narrowed her eyes before she crossed her legs. "Very well."

He then picked up Morgana, earning an indignant yelp, "Hey, what are you doing?!"

"It's a well-known notion that black cats are considered unlucky." He mused, "However, some people believe that they actually bring good luck. I wonder... which side of the coin do you represent?"

"Wha...?"

Goro then quickly whispered the plan to Morgana before drawing out his own deck of cards. But he made sure that his movements weren't as stealthy as usual, so Sae-san would catch sight of him.

"However, you must use the cards I've prepared," Sae-san said firmly, her golden eyes glinting. "That, I will not budge on. You will have to discard the deck in your hand."

"So, you saw through my plan?" Goro sighed, crafting disappointment on his face, "How unfortunate."

"Uh-oh." Sakamoto gulped, "We're toast."

"Stay calm," Niijima insisted.

"We can't exploit any weaknesses..." Kitagawa muttered.

"Crap hand too," Sakura groaned out.

Now it was time to put his plan in action. He asked Sae-san to swap in a different player, and she allowed it. She was so cocky. She didn't notice that his "slip-up" was merely a red herring.

Morgana took his spot on Amamiya's lap. Perfect... now, all that was left, was for Amamiya to slip Morgana the royal flush.

"Four of a kind." Sae-san said smugly, "And what of you?"

"Arrogance isn't a good look on you, Sae-san." Goro said silkily, "Well, Mona?"

Morgana just chuckled, cracking a wide grin.
"Uh—what's with that cocky look?" Sakamoto asked suspiciously.

"It looks like I'm quite the lucky cat!" he gloated. "Royal. Flush."

"WHAT?!" Sae-san screeched out, blasting all of their ears. "That's impossible! You had a terrible hand!"

"What happened to that terrible hand?" Amada asked.

"HOW?!"

"We seriously won?" Takamaki asked.

"How could I...?" Sae-san then let out a growl, before slamming the cards on the table. "This is unforgivable!"

She then glared at Amamiya, who just stared back calmly. He didn't even bat an eye, as if he was the one to come with this plan... such impudence.

"Let's take this elsewhere. I'll beat you in another game," the Shadow hissed.

"I look forward to it." Amamiya said cheekily.

"Grr... don't be so damn cocky." She spat out, "You got lucky this time."

"What happened to luck wouldn't help us win?" he asked innocently.

If looks could kill, Amamiya would be six feet under. While as amusing as that sounded, he'd be out of a job if that was the case.

She then gritted her teeth, before snapping her fingers. There was a flash of light and then she was gone.

"What just happened?" Niijima asked.

Morgana then proceeded to explain Goro's plan. The teenage detective couldn't help but smile smugly. Of course it was a brilliant plan.

"Damn." Sakamoto shook his head. "Who knew a squeaky-clean detective would know how to cheat like that?"

"Heh, it really has nothing to do with my profession." Goro stated. "After all, poker is simply an acting game. Misleading your opponent. It's simply a matter of who is the best actor."

And that was why he was an excellent poker player. Because nobody knew what his true intentions were. Not Shido. Not Amamiya. And most certainly not any of his foolish followers.

Goro allowed his eyes to linger on Amamiya. This was one thing where Goro had the edge. He would always be one step ahead of him.

They had finally earned enough coins for the bridge. The Battle Arena had been rough, but Ren had managed to beat them. Though hearing his friends cheer him on had definitely given Ren motivation to fight harder.

Though he wished that Ryuji hadn't tried to climb the fence, after he realized that the attendant had
lied. He appreciated the sentiment and all, but Ryuji didn't deserve getting fried like that. And Ryuji *resisted* electricity.

"Authenticating member's card." Ren couldn't help but tap his foot impatiently, "The required number of coins to activate the Bridge of Judgement is 100,000 coins."

"Yeah, yeah, we know that!" Ryuji snapped out, thumping his fist against the top of the machine. "Just let us through already!"

But that was when the mechanical voice was replaced by a familiar voice. "You have done well, to earn all of those coins."

"That's...?!" Makoto gasped out, "Sis?!"

"I never expected you to come this far. I have to commend you for your vigorous efforts. However, you will *never* step foot in the manager's floor. Not if I have anything to say about it. From this moment forward, the number of coins for the bridge will increase to one million coins!"

"One million?!" Haru gasped, "But that's—"

"She's just going to continuously move the goalpost." Ken said grimly.

"That's not fair!" Futaba protested, "You can't give us an impossible task like that!"

"Ah, so you finally realize it," Shadow Nijima drawled out. "That is the point. Your task will forever be impossible! Hence I will forever be victorious."

Ryuji just growled, "Winning ain't everything, y'know! There's more important stuff you've gotta worry about!"

"You could really use a hobby," Ren said flatly. "Like... I dunno, knitting, singing? There's gotta be a better way to handle your pent-up energy."

"Silence!" she snarled out. "No amount of whining or mockery will force me to yield! *I will* stand the victor! As it stands, you need one million coins to pass. You merely have a tenth of it."

"Do we now?" Akechi suddenly stepped forward, "I beg to differ, Sae-san."

"What?" She hissed, "What trick do you have up your sleeve *now*?!!"

"How do you have a million coins?" Anne asked.

"Do we remember that we were allowed to borrow as many coins as we have on our card?" Akechi asked.

"But that would only put us at two hundred thousand..." Haru said.

"Let me finish, Noir." Akechi closed his eyes for a moment, a pleased smile touching his lips, "For example, borrowing ten thousand coins; it would've given twenty thousand coins, instead of ten thousand coins. And then at the battle arena, it would increase to four hundred sixty thousand."

"You're speaking hypothetically, though." Makoto stated, "That's not what happened."

"Unless..." Yusuke trailed off, his eyes narrowed, "That's not the case."

Akechi just smiled thinly before producing a card, "That would be correct."
Ken's eyes widened, "You never threw away the card after Oracle told you to."

"Yes, I assume that Sae-san would have some trick up her sleeve. After all, I've seen her tenacity with my own eyes. Victory would literally have to be pried out of her hands."

"You may act smug, Akechi-kun, but you can't do simple math." Shadow Nijima growled out, "One hundred thousand and four hundred sixty thousand equals five hundred sixty thousand! You're still short!"

"Ah, but what if I borrowed the maximum amount a second time?" Akechi countered, "That would mean I have nine hundred twenty thousand and Joker has one hundred thousand and I believe...that would give us well over one million coins. Even after paying back the original ten thousand coins. We have enough coins for your Bridge of Judgement."

"B-But what about the coins we borrowed?" Ryuji protested, "We can't pay that back!"

"Skull's right." Yusuke stated, "That's a hefty amount of debt we've incurred."

Akechi just shook his head. "We will deal with Sae-san soon enough. We don't need to worry about the debt."

"Not something I'd expect you to say, Crow," Ken commented.

"Oh?" Akechi tilted his head, "I suppose I'm learning a bit from you all, skirting the edges around the system."

"We don't go around incurring debt!" Morgana protested.

Futaba shook her head, "Man, I think we're corrupting our goody two shoes detective."

At some point all his friends deserve to win an Academy Award for their acting.

"We should make haste, though." Yusuke met Ren's eyes. "Before she changes her mind."

"Yeah." Ren quickly scanned the card again.

The machine asked him if he wanted to activate the bridge and he hastily selected yes. Countless blue coins poured onto the right scale, balancing the two scales. Then it spun, revealing the bridge. It had lowered, the bridge fitting in place so they could cross.

"Yes!" Anne cheered, pumping her fist, "Let's go!"

And so they did, running across the bridge and into the manager's floor, where the Treasure was waiting for them.

"We've made it!" Morgana exclaimed. "This will be the place where we steal Nijima's Treasure!"

"Sis... soon." Makoto whispered.

"Nijima-san..." Akechi said sympathetically, putting a hand on her arm.

Makoto didn't respond, just pulling her arm away and then folding her arms over her chest.

"How uncouth of you, to just barge into here!" Shadow Nijima's voice suddenly rang out, "Elegance is required for victory as well, you know!"
"I don't think you can claim being elegant, after insisting that you'll win at all costs, no matter what you do," Ken said dryly.

"Not to mention your huge hissy fit after we beat you in the poker game!" Ryuji added.

"You destroyed countless lives." Yusuke continued, "Have you no guilt for that?!"

"Hmph... you just mean to distract me. It appears that my games haven't satiated you."

"Of course she ignores the question," Ryuji grumbled.

"She will not acknowledge her faults." Akechi stated, "But that will soon change, will it not?"

"I hope so." Makoto sighed out.

"You may have succeeded in besting me in my games, but not anymore! I will triumph over you in this next game, a game of life and death! No matter who I face, I will not lose!"

"Again, a hobby would do you wonders!" Ren called out.

"Silence! You're just like the others." Then a pause. "No, you actually have the courage to mock me to my face at least."

"Sis..." Makoto's voice suddenly cracked. looking down on the ground, "I never knew. Why didn't you ever tell me about this?"

"Queen..." Ken's voice was soft with sympathy.

"We should take her Treasure as soon as possible, Joker." Anne said determinedly, "This can't go on any longer!"

"Yeah, the sooner the better!" Ryuji added.

"I have to disagree." Akechi stated, "I believe we should wait until right before the time limit."

"You wish to take her Treasure, on the nineteenth?" Ken asked.

"May I ask why?" Yusuke asked, "Joker does take some time to gather supplies, I must admit, but... to set the date like that... that is pushing it too close. I'm not comfortable with such a suggestion."

"Sae-san is a realist." Akechi stated, "Even if she does believe in the Phantom Thieves...I doubt she knows of your method of how you steal hearts. She may expect that she will become a target."

"Well, yeah." Ren shrugged, "Somehow I don't think she'd be into fantastical stories. Honestly, I'm surprised that you accepted it so easily."

"I cannot deny what I see with my own eyes." Akechi said.

Oh and definitely among other reasons, Ren's quite sure.

"But you're saying that since she's expecting this." Haru ventured, "The calling card's effect would be moot?"

Sounded like bullshit but okay.

"What do you think, Queen?" Ryuji asked, "I mean... she's your sis. Do you think Crow's got a
"Honestly I can't claim that I know Sis anymore." Makoto said somberly, "After witnessing all of this, it really feels that we're strangers."

Yusuke and Haru both looked down, suddenly finding the floor fascinating. Anne just looked at Makoto with sad eyes, her lip quivering ever so slightly.

Ren cleared his throat. It was up to him to get his friends back on track, "So, we'll meet on the eighteenth, to confirm the calling card."

He wanted to say more, to try and comfort Makoto, but Akechi interrupted.

"Yes, I believe that's the best course of action." Akechi stated, "And the Treasure will form once the calling card is sent?"

Morgana nodded, "Yeah, once Niijima is aware of the danger, the Treasure will take form."

"What will it look like?" The detective inquired.

"It depends on the person." Anne explained, "Kamoshida thought of himself as the king of the school, so his took on the form of a big fancy crown in the Metaverse. And when we got to the real world, it turned into his Olympic medal."

"Madarame's took on the form of the true Sayuri." Yusuke added, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Kaneshiro's was fake money." Makoto said.

"My Treasure was...me." Futaba said lamely.

"And Father's took on the form of a spaceship model kit." Haru explained, "It was one that he wanted as a young child."

"I see, I see..." Akechi nodded, "A wide variant, from the looks of it."

"We'll just have to wait and see what Niijima-san's Treasure looks like." Ken stated, "It's the fourteenth...so we only have four days until we need to send the calling card."

"Mm...it appears that the Treasure represents the beginning of the ruler's aspirations."

"Fox, do you have the calling card ready?" Morgana asked.

"Yes, I began to create it during the wait for the court case." Yusuke said, "I'll have it ready for the eighteenth, I promise."

"Five days." Makoto said solemnly. "It feels so close and yet so far away..."

Ren caught Makoto's eye and she gave a little nod, so little so that Akechi wouldn't notice.

The last step of their plan still needed to be completed. Makoto just needed to create the fake Treasure and then they would plant it in the Palace.

"So you've cleared the Palace, yeah?"
After they left the Palace, Ken had invited her over to have dinner at his place. Makoto happily accepted the invitation, but Makoto figured that she could create the fake Treasure while they were at it. They stopped by her apartment to grab a few things before going to Ken's.

"Yeah." Ken answered, "Akechi fed us a lie about why we can't take the Treasure beforehand."

Shinjiro-san grunted, "And how half-assed was it?"

"It was... a decent lie," Makoto admitted. "Maybe if we weren't assuming that he was such a liar, we may have been fooled."

"Wouldn't be surprised if he practiced the lines in front of a mirror," Ken muttered under his breath.

"Mm..."

Makoto then turned the page of the album she had brought. She was looking for a specific photo. Then she scowled, catching sight of a picture of herself at around eight.

"Are you still upset about what Niijima-san's cognition of you was?" Ken asked.

"Just a little," Makoto mumbled out.

"Niijima had a cognition of you?" Shinjiro-san asked, surprise filling his face.

Makoto made a frustrated sound, "She did and she sees me as nothing but a child! It's embarrassing! She doesn't take me seriously. And of all things... she put the cognition of me in the dark!"

"I wouldn't say that, Niijima."

Makoto just frowned, "What do you mean?"

"Take Ken for an example," Shinjiro-san glanced towards Ken, "He can tell you how much Mitsuru, Takeba, Minako, and Fuuka still baby him."

"Hey, why are you dragging me into this?!" Ken demanded indignantly, glaring at his guardian.

"Shuddup Ken, it's to cheer up your girlfriend," he retorted.

This only drew out grumbling from Ken. Shinjiro-san then looked back to Makoto.

"I know that you don't really appreciate this. But your sister is like seven years older, yeah? She probably remembers the day you were born. She can't really help it."

"I can't believe you're defending her," Ken said in disbelief.

"Don't sound so shocked." Shinjiro-san snapped at him.

"Well..." Makoto placed a hand on her cheek, looking Shinjiro-san right in the eyes. "I suppose you know the feeling, don't you, Shinjiro-san?"

Shinjiro-san immediately started to sputter. It just got worse as Ken started to laugh.

"Shuddup! That's the last time I try and cheer you up!" He snarled then grabbed a pillow, smacking Ken with it. "And this is all your fault, ain't it?"
"I'm sure Ren carries some of the blame," Ken quipped.

Makoto just smiled. She felt a little better now. She picked up the album once more, in order to search for the picture she had in mind for the decoy.

"That's the picture that we found in the police station," Ken noted.

"Mm-hm." Makoto had to wiggle it so that she could pull it out.

Did someone put two pictures in this sleeve?

"I think it'd be fitting and it would be enough to fool Akechi-kun should he ask to see the Treasure."

She managed to pull it out, and her suspicion was right as another picture floated to the floor.

Shinjiro-san picked it up, only for him to stop short. He then squinted at the picture.

"Shinjiro-san?" Ken asked hesitantly. "Is something the matter?"

"Ken, wanna explain this?"

Shinjiro-san held up the picture. The picture was of two children. One was her at around five and the other was...

"Is that me?!" Ken sputtered out. his head whipping to look at her, "We look..."

"Five." Makoto finished, "And the woman who we're sleeping on, that's..."

"That's my mom." Ken looked just as bewildered as her, "I...what?"

"Why were you even in Tokyo?" Makoto asked.

Ken's eyebrows furrowed together, "My maternal grandparents' funeral. But that doesn't—"

Ken suddenly grew still. his eyes becoming wide.

"No... I remember now. I wanted to go to the park after that long train ride. Mom took me to the park so I'd stop complaining. I ended up wandering away from her and I couldn't find her."

Makoto gasped as the memory suddenly hit her, "And I was with Dad when we found you crying."

She remembered; her mother wanted more family outings as her illness started to take its toll on her. She wanted more good memories.

"After your dad helped me find Mom...we played together." Ken continued.

And when it was time to go home, she didn't want to lose her new friend. But their parents managed to soothe them. And as Dad was carrying her away, Ken had called out to her.

"We'll see each other again, right?"

"Yeah! And we'll go to school together and have lots of fun!"

"I-I can't believe it." Makoto shook her head before looking at her boyfriend. "I wasn't serious when I said that we could've met each other the first time you came to Tokyo."
"Me either." Ken huffed out a laugh, only for his expression to grow somber, "Though, that must have been the only positive thing that happened during that trip, from what I remember."

"Your grandparents' funeral?" Shinjiro-san guessed.

"Not just that." Ken sighed out, "My mom, she had a twin sister. She never explained it to me, but something...bad happened with her sister. It drove a wedge between her and the rest of the family. Mom paid for her sister to come to Tokyo, but..."

"But?" Makoto prompted.

"I don't really know." Ken admitted then his eyes hardened as he explained, "My memories are kinda foggy with that. I remember Mom got two hotel rooms for me, her, her sister, and her son. She had a son around my age...I think we were watching Neo Feathermen on TV, when all this yelling started to happen. I mainly remember that my aunt's yelling really upset Mom. We ended up leaving the hotel because of it. And honestly? I don't want to remember the exact details. It was the first time... I saw my mom cry."

"She wanted to make amends after losing her parents... didn't she?" Makoto guessed.

Ken nodded solemnly.

"That's my guess..." He then heaved out a sigh. "But I guess some bonds are just too fractured to mend. Mom never spoke of her after that."

"It must have been devastating." Makoto said softly, "On top of her parents dying, for her sister to just walk out on her."

She could really feel for Ken's mother. Makoto just prayed that would not be the case for her and Sae. But maybe that was why Ken's mother died protecting him. She would rather die than lose another member of her family.

"Is she even alive?" Makoto asked, "Your aunt, I mean."

"I don't know. She was alive back when Mom died, but the courts ruled that she wasn't fit to take me in for some reason." Ken said quietly, but then his expression soured, "So custody of me was passed to the next of kin, my father's cousin. Not that I care to see either of them."

"You don't need 'em, Ken." Shinjiro-san stated.

Ken just gave him a little smile, "I know."

Shinjiro-san then cleared his throat, looking a bit flustered, "I... gotta start fixing dinner. Just stay here and relax, yeah?"

Makoto then placed the photo in the briefcase, before shutting it. She looked down at it and suddenly felt a wave of anxiety. She didn't know if she could do this.

"It will work."

Ken slid his hand over hers. Makoto then bit her lip.

"If this plan is to work...we can't change her heart." She said softly.

"You've believed in your sister this whole time." He said quietly. "You believed that she could change without us stealing her Treasure. She was led down the wrong path...but I think you can
help her find her way back."

Makoto felt a small smile come onto her face, "You really have too much faith in me."

"I have just the right amount," Ken returned. "But stressing about this isn't healthy, Makoto. We have a few more days before hell breaks loose. Let's try and enjoy it."

"I suppose." Makoto then rested her head on his shoulder. "Do you want to watch some Feathermen, then?"

Ken just let out a thoughtful hum before he slid an arm around her waist, "I actually have something else in mind for us to watch."

Makoto then sat up, raising an eyebrow at him, "And what would that be?"

Ken huffed out a laugh, "So Makoto, tell me...have you ever watched Kamen Driver?"

"Better run away when you still can, Niijima." Shinjiro-san called out, "Run before he can drag you into tokusatsu hell...then again...it's a show that won't encourage ya to start making out."

"S-Shinjiro-san!" Ken's face immediately reddened.

Makoto felt her own face warm up.

"I-It's not like that, okay?!" Ken sputtered.

"That's what they all say," Shinjiro-san drawled out.

Ken opened his mouth to retort but Makoto quickly pressed her index finger against his lips to quickly shush him.

"I think Kamen Driver sounds great. I'd love to try it out, Ken."

They still needed to complete the final preparations for the heist...but Ken was right. They should enjoy what time they had before everything went insane.

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JOAN OF ARC

**History:** Nicknamed the Maid of Orleans. Joan of Arc is considered a heroine of France for her role during the Lancastrian phase of the Hundred Years' War and was made a Roman Catholic saint. Joan claimed to have received visions of the archangel Michael, Saint Margaret, and Saint Catherine of Alexandria instructing her to support Charles VII and recover France from English domination late in the Hundred Years' War. The unanointed King Charles VII sent Joan to the Siege of Orléans as part of a relief army. She gained prominence after the siege was lifted only nine days later. Several additional swift victories led to Charles VII's consecration at Reims.

**Level:** 53

**Affinity:** Bless, Almighty, Physical

**Blocks:** Bless

**Resists:** Electricity, Ice
**Weakness:** Fire

** Spells:** Revolution (innate), Megidola (innate), Kouga (innate), Makouga (level 54), Deathbound (level 56)

Chapter End Notes

The mini-boss fight with the House of Darkness is accompanied by two Shadows. This Shadow is Joan of Arc. It is a bit of a reference to ScruffyTurtle's Adult Confidant AU. Sae's Persona is Jeanne d'Arc. The skillset and affinities have just been tweaked to befit her higher level.

And as for cognitive Makoto. My friend and beta, angelrin89, had the idea of more... benign cognitions within the Palaces. One of her ideas was a cognitive Makoto, who's like Quasimodo/Rapunzel, locked into a room filled with books, that she will be incorporating into her fic that she's eventually going to publish. I tweaked her idea. incorporating it in the darkness maze. (Because would you really want to read a section where the Phantom Thieves just stumble around in the dark?) And with how Makoto wants to help Sae, I thought it'd be a cute idea for cognitive Makoto to offer drinks to the party after clearing the darkness maze as a way to restore their SP slightly. Speaking of my wonderful beta, a big shoutout to her for making the Akechi's POV even better. Her little tweaks and embellishments made the section so much better.

The poker scene is also not my own creation. There was apparently a cut out scene with Shadow Sae confronting them and challenging them to a game, I just embellished it a bit.

I also headcanon that Ken's a general tokusatsu fan. Feathermen Rangers is just his absolute favorite. But more importantly... the scene with the photograph album. I teased the idea of Ken and Makoto meeting as kids in Chapter 15, the chapter after Futaba's awakening, but it's more to connect Ken's mom's situation with her twin sister and Makoto & Sae's relationship. And of course, adding another hint to what I've been hinting throughout the story.

And... we're almost at the casino heist! We will have a chapter dedicated to the preparations for the heist for Chapter 37 and Chapter 38 will be the actual heist! I'm really excited to write the heist, for more than one reason.

I've also been asked about Royal a couple times, probably since it was released nearly two weeks ago. I just want to reiterate that the concept of this fic was conceived with the vanilla version of P5 in mind. While I had posted the prologue on July 30th 2018. I've been planning this fic since late 2017. When Royal was announced, I was in the middle of the Okumura arc. It would've been rather forced to just insert Kasumi, especially since we didn't know much of her. I also would think it would be unfair to the readers who are waiting for the western release to suddenly drop Royal spoilers into the fic.

But anyways, enough rambling! I hope you enjoyed this chapter, guys!
Let The Dice Fly High

Chapter Summary

The final preparations before the casino heist.

Chapter Notes

Another pre-sex scene in this chapter. If you're not fond of that kind of content, please read the version on fanfiction.net.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wednesday, November 16th, 2016

"Rise-chan, you haven't explained on why you want to stay in Tokyo for so long."

Rise just blinked at Inoue-san, allowing a sugary smile to come across her face. Inoue-san sometimes acted more of a father figure to her than her actual dad, but there was just no way that she could explain the real reason. Inoue-san would probably think that she had hit her head or something, anyhow.

"Tokyo is a big city, Inoue-san," Rise stated, letting herself pout for a moment. She let out a gusty sigh, placing a hand on her chest. "I have a few friends who will be in town at the end of the week. Is it a crime to want to catch up with them? And I haven't seen Chie-senpai in person since she graduated from Yasogami three years ago. This is an opportunity that won't come by often."

His brows remained creased, still somewhat bothered.

She tilted her head. "Is it really too much to ask?"

"W-Well... I have to admit that your launch into a proper pop star has been an even bigger success than we thought." Inoue-san heaved out a sigh, then he cracked a proud smile, before giving a small nod. "Alright, you have until the twentieth, and then it's back to work!"

"That's all I ask, Inoue-san!" Rise said cheerfully before playfully blowing him a kiss.

"You're too much sometimes, Rise-chan!" Inoue-san just laughed heartily, shaking his head; but his voice was full of warmth, not exasperation. "Sometimes I wonder how Narukami-kun deals with you."

"Aw, Senpai knows that he's the only one who has my heart!" Rise giggled before wiggling her fingers at Inoue-san. "But I'll see you soon, Inoue-san!"

The walk back to the apartment was shorter than Rise expected. She didn't stay there a whole lot,
but it was her home away from Inaba.

She had barely flopped onto her bed, when her phone began to buzz.

*Group Chat: The Investigation Team*

[Chie-senpai]: Heyyy guys! Are you down for a group video chat?

[Naoto-kun]: What's the occasion?

[Chie-senpai]: I just thought it'd be nice, y'know?

[Chie-senpai]: It's been 4ever since we've been able to get together as a group!

Rise immediately typed out a reply saying yes. She beamed as her friends all agreed. She then grabbed her laptop, booting it up.

Chie-senpai started the call, and one by one, her friends appeared on the screen.

"Hey guys!" Chie-senpai said brightly.

Yu just closed his eyes but had a small smile on his lips.

"It's been a while since we've all been together," her boyfriend said.

"Yeah, sorry, we were prettys close with a full out reunion in September." Yosuke-senpai just winced.

"YOSUKE YOU RUINED IT!" Teddie all but wailed out, pouting at his adoptive brother.

"Oh, shut it, Ted!" Yosuke-senpai retorted. "I wanted to come but school was kicking my ass! I'm not a genius like my partner here, dammit!"

"Yeah, Yosuke-senpai's got a point there," Kanji snorted out.

"Hey, are you calling me dumb?!" Yosuke-senpai protested.

"Jeez, we seriously going there already?" Chie-senpai shook her head, a small laugh escaping her. "Typical Yosuke. You haven't changed a single bit."

"Yeah, feeling the love, Chie," he huffed out with a roll of his eyes. "I'm guessing that you're kicking the asses of your male classmates. Just like in high school."

"Oh, shut it!" Chie-senpai practically growled out. "That only happened to you!"

"So, I have special treatment?" Yosuke-senpai winked at her, a lopsided smile on his face. "Good to know, Chie."

"Oh my, what is this…. is Yosuke trying to score?!" Teddie gasped out.

Both Yosuke-senpai and Chie-senpai's faces reddened.

"SHUT IT TEDDIE!" they shouted in unison.

Some of the group couldn't help but chuckle at their expense. Yukiko-senpai however scowled.

"When are we going to drop this scoring business?!" she demanded.
Rise never did understand why the "scoring" comments that was a running gag in their group always seemed to upset Yukiko-senpai. There was clearly a story there but she forbidden anyone to elaborate. Rise suspected it was embarrassing and probably had something to do with her senpai’s shadow.

"Probably... never?" Yu offered.

Despite Yukiko-senpai having a fire-based Persona, she had one icy cold stare. One that she directed at Yu.

Naoto cleared her throat. "So anyways... when will you get to Tokyo, Chie-senpai?"

"Oh yeah!" Rise perked up at that, giving Chie-senpai a big smile. "I can't wait to see you, Chie-senpai!"

Chie-senpai nodded vigorously.

"Me too! So, Master is gonna take a train. Mitsuru-san is providing a car so we'll drive to Tokyo together. He'll drop me off at Rise-chan's place, and he'll stay at Shinjiro-san and Ken-kun's place." She blinked before scratching her cheek. "Er—it's Mitsuru-san's place really, isn't it?"

Yu flicked his hand before shaking his head.

"Semantics... not really important." His expression grew solemn, a small frown coming across his face. "It's really happening."

"Yeah, no pressure..." Kanji muttered out, frowning. "That Amamiya dude seems like a good kid. He doesn't deserve to get killed cause he's an obstacle to that asshole politician."

"Ugh! I wish I could sentence Shido to several kicks in the face!" Chie-senpai huffed.

Yukiko-senpai narrowed her eyes. "I think he deserves one of your famous galactic punts, after what he's put Mitsuru-san and everyone else through."

"You know you can't," Naoto chided. "For one thing that would be assaulting a politician. But more importantly, there's a reason why the Phantom Thieves came up with this plan to begin with. They need Shido off their tails."

"Is Shinjiro-san joining you?" Yukiko-senpai asked.

Rise shook her head. "He said that he'll be there during the operation, but mostly to make sure nobody gets too close while I'm guiding Chie-senpai and Akihiko-san."

"It's kinda weird since Gakky had this idea in the first place!" Teddie chimed in.

"He could not be participating at all," Yu stated with a shrug.

"We will need to figure out how to slip into the ranks though." Chie wrapped an arm around her torso, rubbing it with her free hand. "And that's not even the hardest part."

"Hey, what happened to your endless optimism?" Yosuke-senpai huffed, a stern look on his face. "You'll kick ass, just like usual, Chie."

Then he winked.

"Don't think... feel, remember?"
Chie-senpai scoffed, rolling her eyes.

"Well in this situation, I do need to think a bit." Then a tiny smile crept onto her face. "But... thanks, Yosuke."

Rise had to fight the smile creeping onto her face. She had always assumed that there had been a spark between her two senpai, but nothing really came out of it. But maybe they would just be slow about it... like a certain couple of her friends.

"Oooh, I can feel the love tonight!" Teddie teased.

Then they both reddened again before yelling in unison, "TEDDIE!"

"Anyways... moving on..." Yu sighed as he scratched his left cheek.

"You know—I'm surprised that Fuuka-san isn't coming as well. Didn't the Shadow Operatives talk about how she could teleport them out of Tartarus with her powers?" Yukiko-senpai inquired.

Rise wore a crooked frown on her face.

"Fuuka-chan told me that Shinjiro-san said that it'd be better for her to stay on Port Island until this whole thing blows over." She scowled. "I'm going to have words with him, you know. He had two chances to propose to Fuuka-chan but nooo, he's dragging his feet!"

Yu just chuckled, a smirk coming across his face. "Take it easy on him, Rise."

"We'll see." The singer glowered.

"Maybe I should warn him," Kanji snorted out.

"But that aside—" Yosuke-senpai interjected. "Ken's showing you this... Mentos, yeah? In case you need your Personas."

"Mementos, Yosuke-senpai." Naoto corrected.

"Eh, close enough." He shrugged.

Chie-senpai rolled her eyes at Yosuke-senpai.

"But yeah, that's the plan," the tomboy said, then she tilted her head as she continued, "But I've gotta say, I'm pretty curious to see how it'll look. According to Ken-kun, it's got its similarities to Tartarus. And we never got to get a look at Tartarus, so I think that'll be cool."

"I'm more curious about Ken-kun's costume," Rise giggled out, pressing a hand to her cheek. "He acted so embarrassed. It was just adorable."

"Don't torment him too much, Rise-chan," Yukiko-senpai said lightly.

"It's not my fault that he embarrasses more easily than Kanji," the singer teased.

"H-Hey, what's that supposed to mean?!" Kanji sputtered out, his cheeks slightly flushed.

Rise stuck out her tongue.

"Is an impersonation needed?" she asked innocently.
Kanji scowled at her. "Ugh—shuddup, Rise!"

"Anymore chaos you plan on unleashing, Rise-chan?" Chie-senpai rolled her eyes again.

"Well..." Rise smiled slyly. "I may have promised Minako-san some pictures of Makoto-chan. Minako-san's very curious about her."

"Poor Ken-kun." Yukiko-senpai giggled.

"Sheesh, you're probably gonna scare the poor girl off at that rate," Yosuke-senpai snorted.

"And before KenKen can score!" Teddie shook his head. "That's just mean, Rise-chan."

"Teddie..." Yukiko-senpai growled out.

"Enough, enough," Yu snickered, holding up placating hands. "Remember that Yukiko can easily get her hands on you, Teddie."

"But you'll protect me, won't you, Sensei?!" Teddie whined.

"Depends on how angry Yukiko is..." Yu quipped, only for his expression to grow serious. "But you'll be careful, won't you? This isn't a game."

Yukiko-senpai nodded. "Mm-hm. There is a reason why we've steered clear of Tokyo for these past couple years. Even Naoto-kun!"

Naoto sighed as she crossed her arms. "Not that they really want me to solve their cases. They have Goro Akechi."

"Yukiko, Yu-kun..." Chie-senpai said softly, before her expression grew serious as well. "Yeah, of course we'll be careful!"

"Don't you worry, Yu-senpai!" Rise nodded. "We won't get caught."

Yosuke-senpai cleared his throat, grabbing the group's attention.

"C'mon, guys, cheer up! It's been a while since we've been able to talk in a group like this. Let's not get down 'bout this," he said.

"Wow, that was actually pretty smart of you, Yosuke," Chie-senpai said lightly, her eyes twinkling.

"HEY!" He looked indignant, then coughed awkwardly. "So, what's going on in Inaba?"

"Oh! Me! Me!" Teddie cried out; and without waiting for the go ahead, he blurted out, "Nana-chan has a crush!"

"WHAT?!" Yu blurted out.

"Aw, Senpai, you know this isn't the first time," Rise giggled. "First you, then Ken-kun."

"Don't remind me..." Yu grumbled out.

But with that, their conversation turned much more light-hearted. Rise couldn't help but feel happy. She would forever treasure the year she spent in Inaba. It had brought her so many dear friends. But they had to return to their lives, and end the call.
Rise closed the laptop before she concentrated. She held out her palm. A tarot card flickered to life, surrounding by blue flames. She closed her hand over it.

They had spent two years, wringing their hands, as Shido continued to wreak havoc for his power grab. This was their chance to change this.

They couldn't fail. They had to ensure Ren's survival.

"I want to tell everyone about the reinforcements," Amada stated, much to Mitsuru's surprise.

"Are you sure about this, Amada?" she asked.

Amada nodded firmly. "I am. It just doesn't feel right to hide it. I don't want any secrets."

Mitsuru pursed her lips. Amada did pose a good point. She had hidden the truth from her friends once. And that had been such a mistake. This may be to ensure the Phantom Thieves' protection but now that she thought about it...it wouldn't do to hide this.

"Very well Amada," she conceded with a small nod, "I admit that you pose a good point. You have my permission. When Akihiko and Satonaka arrive to Tokyo tomorrow, you should call a meeting so they can meet Akihiko and Satonaka. But are all the preparations complete?"

"Practically... Makoto made the fake treasure and she's planted it. We're just counting down the last few days until we send the calling card. That'll be on the eighteenth. And then on the nineteenth, we'll confront Niijima-san's Shadow," Amada replied.

"Very soon then," Mitsuru commented. "And you'll be bringing Akihiko, Satonaka, and Kujikawa into the Metaverse tomorrow, I assume?"

Amada grimaced for some reason.

"That's the plan. Though there's a rule about us not entering the Metaverse alone, so everyone may insist on coming," he explained.

Mitsuru just raised an eyebrow at Amada's expression, but she decided not to comment on it. Then she cleared her throat.

"I'll let you go then." She smiled gently. "Best of luck, Amada."

Amada just flashed her a smile in return.

"Thanks, Mitsuru-san. I'll talk to you soon." He nodded.

She then checked her phone after the call ended. Minako had asked to have a group dinner before Akihiko departed for Tokyo tomorrow. They had agreed to meet at Akihiko and Minako's house at six. It was still a good hour before she could depart.

Mitsuru sighed, before turning back to her paperwork. Sometimes she swore that was all she did as the CEO. Her phone suddenly rang. She pulled it out, glancing at the screen. She raised an eyebrow at the caller ID.

"Hello, Nanjo-san," Mitsuru greeted, before lounging against her seat. "What can I do for you today?"

Kei Nanjo... the head of the Nanjo Group, which the Kirijo Group had branched off from. Shortly
after she established the Shadow Operatives, they had crossed paths. He easily agreed to joining, even bringing in some of his old comrades into the fray.

Although she still remembered how put-out he was when she refused to give him the number one. Honestly, he could be so arrogant. He was a good man but he was definitely overstepping there.

"Kirijo." Nanjo's voice was cordial, but Mitsuru could detect a hint of irritation in his voice. "When you informed me that you were sending one of your inner circles to Tokyo, I was not aware that it was the child."

Mitsuru sighed, "It was to protect Amada. The less people who know, the less danger he'll be in."

Nanjo exhaled gustily. "I thought the point of the Shadow Operatives was so high school students would never have to step up to the plate."

"You think I have a choice in this?" Mitsuru didn't care if she sounded waspish. "You think I liked the idea of it? Especially after Amada decided to leave the organization until after he graduated from high school?"

"Then why—"

"We knew nothing about the Phantom Thieves, that's why!" Mitsuru snapped out. "The hints pointed to them being high school students. And...it ended up helping Amada in the long run."

"Just what are you talking about?" he questioned.

"It doesn't matter," Mitsuru said curtly.

Nanjo sighed once again. "And Shido?"

Mitsuru tapped her fingers impatiently against the desk. "We're in the process of eliminating the targets on the Phantom Thieves' backs."

"W-What?" Nanjo's voice was incredulous. "Are you planning on clarifying, Kirijo? What on earth are you planning? Shido has been threatening you for the last two years."

"It's not what I'm planning," Mitsuru replied coolly. "The Phantom Thieves have concocted a plan to pull the wool over Shido's eyes. If they can pull it off—"

"If? How could you let them be such a loose cannon!?" he interjected.

"They've been pushed into a corner," Mitsuru retorted.

She then took in a deep breath. Her nerves have been on edge for so long. She could feel her patience waning. But she didn't have to take it out on Nanjo.

"Promise me that you will not speak of this to another soul," she warned. "We must keep this under wraps."

After a long pause, the man let out a sigh.

"I promise. Now go on," Nanjo said coolly.

Mitsuru then proceeded to explain the plan.

"But Shinjiro was concerned so we came up with a backup plan. Insurance, so to speak."
"As he should. And Amada did not think of this before?"

"Do not speak of Amada like that, Nanjo," Mitsuru snapped. "He's perfectly capable. He's proven himself many times over. Without him, we would have been left in the dark about the Phantom Thieves. And in return, the Phantom Thieves would not know of Shido to begin with."

"I suppose I will have to trust your judgment, Kirijo. But still—I have a bad feeling about this. Masayoshi Shido is not someone to be trifled with. He will do anything to claw his way to power."

Nanjo let out a small grumble.

"That's why the extra forces are being sent," Mitsuru answered. "It is to ensure so that Amamiya isn't murdered in cold blood."

Nanjo let out a weary sigh.

"I hope this gamble pays off in the end. We cannot allow Shido to win."

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*Thursday, November 17th, 2016*

"So... this is the place, Master?" Chie asked.

Akihiko nodded, looking up and down at the building in question.

"Yeah, this definitely looks like a place owned by Mitsuru."

Shinji wasn't kidding though. His best friend had griped so much about it, complaining that it was over the top. At the time, Akihiko had thought Shinji was just being his usual self when Mitsuru helped him out but this time...nope.

However, he should call his wife. He had promised that he would once he and Chie made it to Tokyo.

"Hey, can I call Mina before we go up?" Akihiko asked. "I want to let her know that we made it."

"Oh!" Chie's eyes widened for a moment before she nodded vigorously. "Yeah, go ahead!"

Akihiko flashed her a smile in thanks before pulling out his phone. Mina almost immediately picked up.

"Aki?"

"Hey." Akihiko smiled slightly. "Chie and I made it to Tokyo."

"Oh, that's great!" There was some shuffling in the background, "A bit later than the ETA you texted me at the last pit stop, though."

Akihiko grimaced before running a hand through his hair.

"Yeah, traffic in Tokyo is insane. I forgot how bad it was. Remember when we all came down for Fuuka's graduation?"

"It wasn't that long ago, Aki." Mina was quiet for a moment. "You'll be careful, won't you? If you're caught..."
Akihiko’s grip on his phone tightened.

"I’ll be careful, Mina. I promise," he said seriously.

"Sorry..." Mina's voice was suddenly watery. "T-The hormones, y'know?"

"Mina..."

A lump suddenly formed in Akihiko’s throat. He then swallowed hard.

"I'll come back to you and our baby. Soon, I promise. But how are you feeling?" he inquired with concern.

"Tired!" Mina answered immediately. "I'm so ready to get this baby out of me. I'm as big as a whale and I still have a few weeks to go!"

"You still look beautiful," Akihiko said with a slight smile. "Aigis is taking good care of you, right? Making sure that the twins aren't giving you trouble?"

"Of course she is." Mina giggled. "Do you remember how she followed Minato's cue and threatened you as well?"

Akihiko suppressed the urge to cringe. "I try not to."

"Wuss."

He could practically see the playful smile on Mina's face.

"It's not my fault that Aigis is protective of your entire family," he retorted.

"CHIE-SENPAI!"

Akihiko nearly dropped his phone.

Rise came charging out of nowhere, all but tackling Chie with a tight hug.

"Oof!"

After the initial shock, Chie let out a joyful laugh. She hugged the other woman back.

"Hey, Rise-chan!"

Rise must be trying to blend in. There was something off about her face. And her hair was tied up in a high ponytail.

"Rise-chan?" Mina asked with a laugh.

"Lucky guess, right?" Akihiko snorted with a smile. "But I guess I should go, Mina. Business...I'll talk to you tonight, okay?"

"Okay. I love you, Aki."

"Love you too, Mina. Bye." He smiled.

After Mina said her own goodbye, Akihiko hung up and walked up to the two women.

"You know, it really is weird to see you without any make-up," Chie said.
Rise just giggled, winking at her.

"But a good disguise, isn't it? You look great though, Chie-senpai! You look so cute with a ponytail!"

"Hehe... thanks." Chie fidgeted for a moment, twirling the end of her ponytail around her finger, "I just thought a different look would be good, you know?"

"Oh, totally!" Rise nodded enthusiastically.

"We should get up to the penthouse before we get attention," Akihiko reminded them.

"Oh, right!" Chie smiled sheepishly. "Sorry about that, Master."

They made their way up to the top and Akihiko knocked. A moment later, the door swung open, revealing Shinji.

"Hey, Shinji," Akihiko greeted. "How are—ACK!"

Rise shoved him to the side, stalking forward with a predatory gleam in her eyes.

"Shinjiro-san~" she sang out. "You know what I'm going to say, aren't you?"

"Oh, here we go," Chie sighed, pressing a hand against her forehead. "Rise-chan, it's not really your business—"

"Fuck off, Kujikawa. I don't see how that's any of your business," Shinji said flatly, glowering at Rise.

Rise just tutted as she wagged her right index finger at Shinji.

"How rude! Do you really kiss Fuuka-chan with that mouth?" Then she put her hands on her hips, "And it is my business because Fuuka-chan is a good friend! Three months! You've had three months to propose, now that you have a ring—"

"Shoot me now," Shinji groaned out.

He hoped that Ken would get here soon, so that he wouldn't have to stop Shinji from killing Rise.

Chie let out a nervous laugh.

"So..." She shifted her weight to her other foot, clasping her hands behind her back. "When's Ken-kun getting here?"

"And the rest of his friends?" Akihiko asked.

Chie turned to Akihiko with surprise written all over her face.

"Wait, he's bringing them?" Chie squawked out.

"Yeah, Ken wouldn't budge on that," Shinji stated. "He could admit that the plan's not perfect. But he refused to let us sneak around the Phantom Thieves. Mitsuru agreed about it too. I'm surprised that she didn't tell you, Aki."

Akihiko rubbed his forehead. "She must've forgotten. She's been kinda stressed."
"Well... I can't say I disagree," Rise stated. "They still don't trust us one hundred percent, do they?"

"Sakamoto's mindset is pretty much 'fuck the police'," Shinji said flatly.

Akihiko rubbed his forehead again before glancing over at Chie.

"This will be fun," he said dryly.

"Oh relax!" Rise huffed, crossing her arms. "They were fine with Naoto-kun, despite them not really being fans of Goro Akechi."

Shinji huffed before rolling his eyes.

"Come on, get inside. I'll make you some food. Especially since Aki and Satonaka have been driving for so long."

Chie perked up at that. "Yes! It's been so long since I've had your cooking, Shinjiro-san!"

Ken lead the group on the sidewalk, heading towards his and Shinjiro-san's temporary home.

"So, who's exactly here?" Ryuji asked.

Ken glanced towards him.

"Well, there's two of them. Chie Satonaka is one of the two Investigation Team members you haven't met yet. She's training to be a police officer," he explained.

Ryuji grimaced. "Another cop?"

"Chie Satonaka... that name sounds familiar for some reason," Makoto murmured, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Oh I know! She was on a TV special a couple months ago! The police academy she's attending is supposed to be the cream of the crop! They talked about her kung fu skills! I also heard that they were planning on doing a follow-up on police officers!" Futaba exclaimed.

"But if she's in the Investigation Team..." Yusuke trailed off for a moment. "She can't be that much older than us, correct?"

"She's twenty-two. Chie-san was Yu-san's classmate," Ken replied, then glanced towards Anne. "I think you'd like her, Anne. You have similar outlooks on life."

"Is that so?" Anne tilted her head before smiling. "I look forward to meeting her then."

Ryuji still looked a bit ambivalent, but he was finally starting to relax a bit. The others seemed to relax a bit more quickly than him, as expected.

"And what about the other, Ken-kun?" Haru inquired.

"That would be Akihiko-san," Ken answered as they entered the building, "He's Shinjiro-san's best friend, as I've mentioned before. Though, I am surprised that he came here to begin with."

"And why is that?" Morgana asked.

"Well you see, he's married to Minako-san. She'll be having their baby in a few weeks—"
"Wait, what?" Haru frowned as they stepped inside the elevator. "You never mentioned that before, Ken-kun!"

"What was I supposed to say? 'By the way everyone, my senpais are having a baby?' Or something like that?" Ken shrugged.

"Yeah, exactly," Futaba teased.

Ken rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"I'll remember that for next time," he deadpanned.

Ken shot a quick sideways glance at Ren. He'd been oddly quiet this whole time. He hoped Ren wasn't nervous about meeting Chie-san and Akihiko-san. Not that it wouldn't be understandable considering his circumstances. But he hoped at least his new friends would come to trust them as he did.

Ken then unzipped his bag, rummaging for his keys. He vaguely registered the elevator door open just as he managed to fish it out.

"GIVE IT BACK, KUJIKAWA!"

"That was Shinjiro-san, right?" Anne asked.

"Oh boy..." Ken sighed, "We better get inside before Shinjiro-san attempts to murder Rise-san."

Just what mischief was Rise-san up to this time? He hastily unlocked the door.

"I'm home—"

"Oh, Ken-kun!" Rise-san skidded to a stop. "And everyone else!"

There was a twinkle in her eyes that didn't sit well with Ken.

"Rise-san, what did you—" Makoto began.

"Oh nothing!" Rise-san waved off Makoto.

She was hiding something behind her back with her other hand.

"Wait, what are you holding?" Anne asked.

Ken marched over to the singer and quickly snatched the object she was hiding. A familiar velvet box now was in his hand. He frowned with exasperation.

"Really, Rise-san?"

Rise-san flashed her trademark puppy dog pout.

"Aw, you're no fun," she whined. But then she giggled all while winking. "But I hear that you're the one who gave that to Shinjiro-san in the first place. If only he would actually propose!"

Shinjiro-san stomped up to them, looking rather miffed.

"That's none of your fuckin' business," he growled out.

Shinjiro-san snatched the box from Ken, stuffing it into his pocket.
"Hey, good timing, Ken," Akihiko-san said with a grin, approaching them. As usual, he had to ruffle his hair. Ken quickly deflected Akihiko-san's hand.

"Why are all of you so obsessed with touching my hair?" he grumbled out. Before Akihiko-san could respond, Chie-san quickly clapped her hands, getting everyone's attention.

"So...should we get down to business?"

Akihiko-san nodded.

"Let's start with introductions first," he suggested, his eyes flickering towards Ren. Shinjiro-san just scoffed under his breath, rolling his eyes in Akihiko-san's direction.

"Way to be subtle, Aki," he grumbled under his breath.

His friends all introduced themselves, and then Chie-san and Akihiko-san gave their introductions.

"So now that we all know each other..." Rise-san then winked at Ken once again. "Finally got a girl, huh?"

Ken felt his face redden.

"Rise-san!" He exclaimed.

"You should've seen him figure out what to wear for his first date with Nijiijima," Shinjiro-san muttered.

"Oh?" Ren quirked an eyebrow. "Care to elaborate?"

"We're here to have a meeting!" Ken snapped. "Not to go into depth about—"

"Your love life?" Ren supplied with that annoying grin of his.

"Aw, we're not?" Rise-san pressed a hand against her cheek. "Too bad."

Ken felt a bit relieved however, despite the teasing at his expense. Other than introducing himself, this was the first time Ren spoke. Perhaps he had nothing to worry about.

"Just be glad that Minako-san isn't here, Ken-kun," Chie-san quipped.

"Mina is pretty keen on meeting you, Makoto," Akihiko-san agreed.

"To embarrass Ken or to interrogate Makoto?" Futaba asked playfully.

"I'd say both, actually." Akihiko shrugged with a small smirk.

"Great, where's the nearest hole to crawl into?" Ken muttered out.

He heard Ren snort next to him.

"And you call me dramatic?" he snarked.

"You beat Ken, hands down." Ryuji joked, "It ain't even a competition, RenRen."
Anne nudged Ren and Ryuji in their sides. Ren just smirked at his girlfriend while he rubbed his side. Ryuji quietly complained to himself as he rubbed his side.

"Come on, we're getting seriously off topic," Anne pointed out.

"Right." Akihiko-san cleared his throat. "Your plan's good. This isn't meant to be an insult towards you, I promise..."

"Do you have something else in mind?" Haru asked.

"We're not changing your plan. Just offering backup," Akihiko responded.

"Your plan rides on tricking that Akechi," Chie-san stated. "And we don't know if Sae Niijima will know what to do if you hand her your phone, Ren-kun. Or if you'll even succeed in persuading her to help you. We will be monitoring things and we will interfere if needed—get Akechi into the Metaverse if Niijima can't. We also need to consider how to sneak you out if you do succeed. Rise-chan will be integral to that part. She'll guide us out of the police station. She can sense ordinary people, so she'll be able to warn us about incoming people."

"Crap, we just assumed we'd get Makoto's sis to help with that part." Ryuji gulped.

"If you succeed in convincing her to help you. That's a huge gamble. And even if that all pans out, what if something happens and both she and you are in danger?" Akihiko-san asked as he looked directly at Ren.

Ren had an unreadable expression, but Ken did notice his posture became stiffer.

"But you would need the app for your suggestion to work, wouldn't you?" Morgana asked.

"Oh." Akihiko-san blinked. "This must be the talking cat we heard about."

"I AM NOT A CAT!" Morgana yowled. "How many times do I have to say that?!"

"What is he saying now?" Shinjiro-san grumbled.

Futaba snickered, "He's saying he wants fatty tuna!"

"That's not what I said!" Morgana protested, before adding sheepishly, "Though I wouldn't say no to fatty tuna."

Ken rolled his eyes. "Morgana is just saying that he's not a cat. And... he was asking about how you were planning on acquiring the app."

"Well, that's easy," Rise-san said. "Ken-kun can just take us inside, right?"

"No, not just Ken," Ren said sternly. "We made a pact when Morgana introduced us to Mementos. No one goes in solo or even no more than less than four of us. Mementos is dangerous."

"Really?" Akihiko-san scratched his head. "Minato and Mina would take us to Tartarus, even if a couple of people had plans."

Rise-san didn't seem too concerned.

"So what if it's dangerous? Not like any of us haven't dealt with dangerous supernatural stuff before."
Ken had to admit, she did have a point there.

Ryuji shook his head. "Well this ain't your Tartarus or that TV world or whatever. It's Mementos."

"Ryuji is right. I know you all are experienced Persona users, but other than Ken, none of you have been in the Metaverse. Even Ken struggled a bit when he first appeared there," Makoto agreed.

"Yeah, I mean kids who excel with the highest grades in high school can still go to college and struggle to get good grades. We don't doubt your experience, but you're all big fish in a new pond. You can't expect everything to be the same," Futaba chimed in.

And Ken had to admit they all had good points too.

"We agreed to this as a group and I don't see why we should break that pact," Ren declared, and his tone made it clear there was no room for arguments.

Rise-san frowned but didn't protest further. Akihiko-san and Chie-san gave each other a slight nod. Shinjiro-san was surprisingly quiet during this whole debate.

"I guess that means you'll be taking us to Mementos then," Chie-san said. "Let's get going!"

Morgana sighed before looking to Ken. "Care to do the honors, Ken?"

"Gladly." Ken nodded.

He could feel the older Persona-users' curious looks as he dug out his phone.

"Mementos..." He spoke into the app. "Beginning navigation."

Akihiko was glad that there was no falling like with the TV world. He couldn't help but look around curiously.

Ken wasn't kidding when he said it was a subway. His gaze happened to fall on Ken as he seemed to... transform. Blue fire engulfed his school uniform, replacing his Shujin jacket with a familiar looking blazer. Gold circles fastened a black cape to his shoulders. A white dress shirt and an orange vest.

"Have you ever seen this, Shinji?" Akihiko whispered to his best friend.

"Nope. Looks a little like the Gekkoukan uniform," Shinji replied after shaking his head.

"Huh, you're right." Akihiko rubbed his chin. "Wonder if that's because Ken always fought Shadows in his school uniform before."

"Are you two done psychoanalyzing my outfit?" Ken asked, a testy edge to his voice.

Shinji just gave him a smirk. "Definitely fits you, Ken."

Pink edged around Ken's mask. Ken quickly looked away.

"Shut up, Shinjiro-san."

"I don't see why you're embarrassed, Ken-kun. You look just adorable. If only my phone worked
right now!" Rise clasped her hands together; then a devious grin appeared on her face as she looked at Makoto. "And I didn't know that was your preference, Ken-kun."

"Preference?" Makoto questioned. "What are you implying?"

Ren just smirked. "Oh, just that he's into—"


"What are you going to do?" Ren taunted with a smirk.

Okay, he could see why Ren reminded Shinji of Mina. He definitely had that devious air to him. Kinda made sense, though. Yu reminded Akihiko an awful lot of Minato.

"I could always add hot sauce to your coffee," Ken deadpanned.

"I beg your pardon?" Yusuke asked, only to be cut off by Ren's gasp.

The dark-haired boy looked just scandalized.

"Ace... why would you taint coffee like that?! Good luck convincing Sojiro to ever allow you into his café after you defile his coffee like that!"

Akihiko couldn't tell if Ren was being over dramatic on purpose or if he did take coffee that seriously. If he really was anything like Minako, then it could go either way.

"Maybe because you won't stop being a jerk!" Ken said childishly.

Akihiko had to fight back the urge to laugh. It was always amusing when Ken dropped being so serious and let his juvenile instincts take hold.

"Play nice, boys!" Anne chided, before poking Ren's side. "And stop picking on Ace, Joker."

"Did you hear what he said to me?" Ren whined even more dramatically. "Save me, Panther!"

Yep, he was definitely being over dramatic on purpose. He'd seen Mina do this routine more than once.

"You asked for it and you know it!" Ken practically was pouting.

Makoto elbowed Ken in the side.

"That's enough," she chided, even though her face was a bit pink at what Rise had insinuated. "And should you really argue with Joker in front of your senpai like this?"

Ken just snorted before looking pointedly at Akihiko and Shinji.

"I wouldn't get in a fist fight with Joker."

"I'd so win anyways," Ren said haughtily, pressing a hand against his chest.

"Someone's being over confident," Yusuke remarked.

"Et tu, Fox?" Ren glared at Yusuke.

"I mean you use daggers while Ace use spears." Futaba piped up, "I can't pick up a spear. So by default, Ace is probably physically stronger."
"In your case, that's because you have no upper strength whatsoever, Oracle," Yusuke said blandly.

"You're one to talk, Inari!" Futaba huffed as she stomped her foot.

"How many times have I told you to cease with that nickname?" Yusuke complained.

"Okay, enough. Let's play nice, everyone," Ken exclaimed, even as a smile tugged at his lips.

Akihiko remained silent during all the immature bickering. He slid closer to Shinji.

"Is this what you were talking about?" he whispered. "Why they're good for Ken?"

"Use your brain, dumbass," Shinji hissed back at him.

He could see what Shinji was talking about. Ken had made an effort to befriend other kids. He had been especially close to two members of the soccer team. But he probably couldn't open himself fully because he had to hide such a big part of him.

And Ken would always be a member of SEES, but he really was like the collective younger brother. They had their own lives to lead. But with the Phantom Thieves, he had both. Friends his age, friends who understood what he went through.

And... a girlfriend.

Akihiko glanced towards Makoto. He wasn't quite sure of what to make of her. Both Ken and Shinji talked a little about Makoto aspired to become a police officer to try and change the system from the inside. Though judging for the brass knuckles she wore on her hands... it might be interesting to try and spar with her some time. Though he probably should do that when Shinji was out of earshot.

"Hey uhh..." Chie looked bewildered. "Why are you using those weird names? Like Joker, Ace, Fox, Oracle—"

"That's because we use codenames!"

The high-pitched voice was completely unfamiliar. Akihiko looked around, bewildered.

"Down here!"

"A demon cat?!" Chie yelped, grabbing onto Rise's arm for a moment. Then her expression grew determined. "Come on, Haraedo-no-Okami…!"

"Chie-san, wait!" Ken cried out, holding up his hands. "It's just Morgana!"

Shinji frowned before looking up and down at the cartoonish cat. He looked completely unimpressed.

"I'm not sure what I was imagining ya to sound like but... this ain't it."

"Hmph! How rude!" Morgana glared at Shinji. "But as I was saying, we use codenames! For example, I'm Mona! And he's Joker."

"Codenames?" Chie echoed. "That's a new thing."

"Yeah, you didn't exactly mention that, Ken," Akihiko remarked.
Ken toyed with his glove as he sighed.

"Didn't think it was an important detail," he mumbled out.

"But you're Ace, huh?" Rise tilted her head. "It suits you."

"A-Anyway—!" Ken coughed into his hand. "Rise-san needs to see if she can summon."

Rise blinked before straightening up.

"Right!" She smiled brightly. "But I've been practicing! I can summon in the real world, so this should be easy peasy!"

"Wait... for real?" Ryuji cried out, wide-eyed. "You can summon in the real world?!"

"Most of us can." Akihiko nodded. "At least out of everyone in SEES."

"How is that even possible?" Yusuke asked.

Akihiko frowned as he tried to think of how to explain this.

"Well... a Persona-user usually requires a 'medium' to summon. For us, it was Evokers." Then he gestured to Rise and Chie. "For the Investigation Team, it manifested as tarot cards that they had to shatter with their weapon. Though in Rise's case, she was able to do it with just her mind. And for you, it's your mask."

"But the medium is sort of a crutch." Shinji picked up the explanation. "It just makes it easier to summon. You need to be able to connect with your Persona and focus. It takes a great deal of concentration, and it'll tucker you out a lot more than using a medium. It'll take ya years to master the ability. Most of us outta SEES got the hang of it ages ago."

Akihiko then held out his hand, concentrating. He felt the usual tingle that came with him channeling electricity through his hand.

"Whoa!" Ryuji yelped, eyes wide. "That's so cool! I wanna do that!"

"That's like when Ace uses his healing powers in the real world," Makoto commented. "Yeah, it's taken a lot of practice, but it is pretty useful once you've nailed it." Akihiko closed his fist.

Anne turned away from Akihiko to glance at Chie.

"Are you there yet, Chie-san?" Anne asked.

Chie just shook her head, smiling ruefully.

"Not quite, I'm afraid. Though honestly it's been like, four years, since I've been out in the field."

"What about you, Ace?" Futaba asked. "I mean, you can heal in the real world."

Ken ducked his head, rubbing the back of his neck. "I'm afraid that I can't."

"Hey, what you can do is pretty cool already!" Ryuji quickly interjected.

"Thanks, Skull." Ken smiled ruefully. "But it just means that I have quite a bit to go still."
Haru cleared her throat, catching their attention.

"Do you want to summon just to check though, Rise-san?" Haru looked at Rise in concern. "Since this is a new environment."

"Oh... good idea." Rise nodded.

"Stand back, guys. Rise-chan's Persona needs a lot of space." Chie warned.

Rise closed her eyes for a moment, holding out her hand. A blue tarot card shimmered to life, before spinning above Rise's palm. It shattered into a million pieces before a tall elegant figure appeared above Rise, fitting a red visor over her eyes. Planets spun around them.

"Holy crap!" Futaba gasped.

"And I thought Necronomicon was something else." Ren commented.

"Wow, this place is huge!" Rise gasped. "We have at least forty—no, maybe fifty floors! And they're a lot bigger than in the TV world. And these Shadows' readings...I've never encountered them before."

"You can sense all that?" Haru's eyes widened in shock. "That's incredible!"

Rise dismissed her Persona.

"Hmm, it's not quite a clear picture." She gave a little frown, before a sigh escaped her. "I bet if Fuuka-chan was here, she'd be able to tell us more."

"Aw, Rise-chan..." Chie shook her head, before she placed a hand on Rise's shoulder. "You know, you're a great scanner too! Not to mention how your Persona can fight too! Nobody can boast of that!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Futaba cried, "Your Persona can what?!"

"Oh... that's right." Ken rubbed the back of his head. "Rise-san never mentioned that before."

Rise giggled, clasping her hands behind her back.

"Yep, Kouzeon has a different form! She can fight in that form. The form was born out of my resolve to be able to protect my friends."

"I can't do that though," Futaba said softly.

Rise then approached her, placing a hand on Futaba's shoulder.

"But you can do things I can't do," she said kindly. "Ken-kun—ah, Ace—mentioned something about you being able to turn the tides if the Shadows get a drop on you. I can't do that. And Fuuka-chan can't—and she can scan for Shadows super far away! We've all got our talents and weaknesses. Don't make the same mistake as me, okay?"

Futaba bit her lip before giving a little nod, "Okay."

"Though I gotta say..." Akihiko began. "I'm kinda curious about what Mementos looks like from the inside. Mind if we——"

"We're not prepared for a Mementos run," Ken cut him off. "You guys don't even have weapons!"
"You're such an idiot, Aki," Shinji deadpanned.

"Shut up, Shinji!"

After they left Mementos, everyone went their separate ways. Though Ken made a point in getting Makoto out of there as soon as possible. He didn't want Rise-san to start teasing them again. He was really not looking forward to when he had to introduce Makoto to Junpei-san and Minako-san.

When he entered the penthouse once more, Shinjiro-san was setting up his laptop.

"Video call with everyone." He answered Ken's unspoken question. "Minako called and said that everyone's free."

Akihiko-san nodded as he adjusted the webcam.

"I know you've talked to Mitsuru recently but it would be nice to talk to everyone. It's been ages since we've been able to do that." Then he squinted at the webcam. "Gimme a sec—aha! Here we go! Shinji, go ahead and plug in your laptop."

Shinjiro-san nodded. The TV then flickered on, showing a split screen.

"Hey guys!" Minako-san greeted cheerfully, waving at them.

"Haven't seen your faces in a while, Shinjiro-san, Ken!" Junpei-san added with a cheeky smile.

Yukari-san sighed, "That's what you have to say, Junpei?"

"Hey, just trying to break the ice here!" Junpei-san quickly defended.

Fuuka-san just giggled softly. "But anyway... how's everything?"

"Oh, you know... trying not to get my friend killed—just the usual." Ken deadpanned.

"You met the Phantom Thieves today, I assume?" Mitsuru-san inquired.

Akihiko-san nodded. "Yeah, they all seem pretty nice kids actually—"

"Wait, wait, wait." Minako-san held up a hand. "Aki... you met Makoto-chan and you didn't put me on the phone?!"

Ken groaned. At the rate this was going, he was never going to introduce Makoto to the others.

"Priorities, Minako." Yukari-san sighed, shaking her head.

"It's a priority for me!"

"A-Anyways, where are the twins?" Ken stammered out.

"I believe Ken-san is attempting to deflect," Aigis-san stated.

"Aigis-san!" he protested.

"Can't blame us for being curious, Ken," Junpei-san snickered. "You wouldn't give any girl a second look and then Mako-tan comes along and steals your heart."

"Iori, that was a lame joke," Shinjiro-san deadpanned.
"HEY!" He protested.

Chidori-san just giggled from behind Junpei-san.

"I thought it was funny," she said with a soft smile.

"And that's all that matters!" Junpei-san smiled goofily.

Fuuka smiled at their exchange while she shook her head. Her expression then changed to that of concern.

"Another two days though." Fuuka-san asked quietly, "Do you feel ready...?"

Ken sighed but he still nodded.

"As ready as we can be. We'll discuss the calling card tomorrow, so to give Akechi the illusion that we're showing him how we go about it." Then he pursed his lips, "I hope giving the calling card to Niijima-san won't be so hard on Makoto, though," he added quietly.

He was really worried for her. Haru may have loved her father, but Makoto had aspired to be like her sister.

"I can't imagine how she feels, being forced to fight against her sister." Aigis-san then looked down, her expression pensive. "But my sister might."

"All you can do is be there for her, Ken-kun," Chidori-san sighed. Then she said gently, "And I imagine everyone else will be there to support her too."

"Have more faith in her." Akihiko-san suddenly spoke up, "She's resolved to save her sister. I can understand how she feels."

"Aki..." Minako-san breathed out.

"I'm okay, Mina. Gives me more motivation to see this succeed, yeah?" Akihiko-san smiled half-heartedly.

"That's correct." Mitsuru-san said with a firm nod before inquiring, "And after this... you will pursue Shido?"

Ken sighed, running his right hand through his hair.

"Yes. I don't know how we'll figure out the keywords to his Palace, but we have to take down Shido. Before it's too late."

"I've heard talk of him lately," Shinjiro-san said suddenly, then he scoffed. "Saying that he's got the right idea about this country. What a load of bullshit."

Mitsuru-san spoke up suddenly. "Nanjo spoke with me yesterday. Amada, please take caution. You may have backup in Akihiko and Satonaka, but the plan also rides on you fooling Shido into thinking that the Phantom Thieves will be neutralized with the death of Amamiya."

Ken grimaced. He tried not to think of it but... Mitsuru-san was right.

"I know, Mitsuru-san... believe me, I know what's exactly at stake."

"You're being too uptight, Mitsuru-senpai. I know I didn't get to talk to your friends all that much,
Ken-kun… but you are a close-knit group from what I've seen. You'll do whatever it takes to make sure that Ren-kun makes it out okay,” Yukari-san said with encouragement.

"What's this?” Junpei-san gasped, clutching at his chest. "Yuka-tan being positive?"

"Junpei…” Chidori began, only to be cut off.

"Oh, shut up, Junpei!” Yukari scowled at him. "Just wait until I get back to Port Island!"

"You two never will stop bickering, huh?” Shinjiro-san commented.

"You're one to talk, Shinjiro-san,” Ken said dryly.

Minako-san clapped her hands three times, very loudly, to get everyone's attention. It also was to defuse any senseless bickering.

"Anyways… don't worry, Mitsuru-senpai! They've got this in the bag! Akechi won't know what hit him!” she exclaimed.

Goro abruptly sneezed. Was someone talking about him behind his back? Not that it mattered. He wiped his nose with a tissue in his pocket, discarding the trash in a small bin by the door as he walked into Shido's office.

"You wished to see me, Shido-san?"

Shido turned to face Goro, remaining seated at his desk.

"Yes, that's right," he said with an unreadable expression.

Goro just tilted his head.

"And why would that be? I assure you that the preparations are complete.” He allowed a small smirk come across his face. "The Phantom Thieves won't know what hit them. Before the night ends, Amamiya will be in police custody."

"And you will bring my men into that place a day before, correct?"

"Correct, I don't think it'd be wise to do it right before I'm supposed to met with Amamiya and his lackeys.” The young detective nodded.

"Fine." Shido then steepled his fingers together, resting his chin on them. "We will soon bring those pathetic thieves to heel."

"Which is nothing more than what they deserve, Shido-san.” Goro allowed his TV smile to appear on his face. "Amamiya had best savor these last couple days."

"Once he's dead, the rest will be easy pickings.” Shido nodded, a smug smile on his face.

Shido was so arrogant that it was aggravating. He and Amamiya—they were cut from the same cloth. So cocky and thinking they were untouchable just because of a little taste of power.

"And we will deal with Kirijo soon after,” Goro stated.

"Hm."
"Something else on your mind, Shido-san?" Goro raised an eyebrow.

"Don't be impertinent," Shido snapped, he plucked a manila folder lying on the desk. "This will answer your question."

Goro frowned but he took it from Shido. He flipped it open, revealing a koseki, or a Japanese family record. To be specific… his old family record. When he had come to Shido, offering his services, he had asked for one boon. He wanted new records. He wanted a new life, starting with a new name. He had kept his first name, but he had chosen Akechi, to fit the detective persona he had begun to cultivate. He’d be like Kogoro Akechi, the Japanese Sherlock Holmes.

He started to skim through the list.

*Eiji Himura—born on February 18th, 1950, died on August 20th, 2003*

  - *Married Kiyomi Ikeda in 1971*

*Kiyomi Himura—born on September 7th, 1951, died on August 20th, 2003*

  - *Married Eiji Himura in 1971*

*Tsukiko Himura—born on August 31st, 1973, died on January 10th, 2008*

  - *Had one son: Goro Himura*

*Hikari Himura—born on August 31st, 1973, died on October 4th, 2007*

  - *Married Kazuhiro Amada in 1996*

Goro felt himself halt in his tracks after skimming the list over.

Amada?!

"I…” Goro blinked. "Is this really true?"

"It is." Shido smirked. "Are you sure that you've never met in the past?"

Goro racked his brain. It had to be impossible! There was simply no way—wait. The first time he had ever set foot in Tokyo…

"Don't let go of my hand, Goro."

"Okay, Mama."

Goro had never been in Tokyo. And it was much nicer than where they lived. Not that he'd ever say it to Mama. His mama worked so hard and she was usually really tired. But she always had a smile and a hug for Goro.

He just wished her eyes weren't so sad all the time.

"Mama?" Goro bit his lip. "Can I ask you a question?"

"What's the matter, sweetheart?"

"Why are we here?"
His mama pulled him in a less busy area before crouching in front of Goro.

"My sister asked if we could come see her." But Mama's lips twisted, like when she was unhappy but didn't want to say it because she didn't want to be rude. "But I can guess what she wants."

Goro blinked. "You have a sister, Mama?"

Goro's only family was his mama. He didn't have a papa, unlike most kids, for some reason. Mama always got sad when he started to ask, so Goro had learned to not talk about it.

"I do." Mama gave a small nod. "And she has a son your age—your cousin."

"But how come you never talked about her?"

Mama's lips formed a thin line.

"We... got into a fight a long time ago, before you were born."

"A fight? Why don't you two just say sorry, then?" Goro asked.

His mama sighed before a sad smile formed on her lips.

"It's a bit more complicated than that, sweetheart."

"Oh. Okay."

She smiled slightly before leaning down to kiss Goro's forehead.

"Come on, sweetheart. We shouldn't waste any more time."

They started walking again. She took him to a fancy building. Mama spoke to someone behind the desk and she led him to a door. Goro didn't understand why Mama didn't open the door, instead pressing a button. And then there was a ding and the door opened. She pushed another button and then suddenly they were going up.

When it stopped moving, Mama took Goro's hand once again. She led him to another door. She took a deep breath before knocking.

"One moment!" some lady called out.

Then the door opened, revealing a lady who looked an awful lot like Mama. She had the same brown hair and reddish-brown eyes as both he and Mama did. Her bangs were like Mama's too. But she wore her hair in a side ponytail, though. While Mama wore her hair down.

"Suki... it's nice to see you."

Suki? He scrunched up his nose in confusion. Mama's name was Tsukiko, not Suki.

"Hikari," Mama said stiffly, her voice oddly cold. "You look well."

She then sighed; her coldness slightly melted away. Then she looked back to Goro, her eyes softening.

"Goro, this is my sister, Hikari." She gestured to the lady. "Hikari, this is my son, Goro."

"He looks very much like you," Mama's sister said softly before crouching to Goro's level; she
smiled at him. "Hi, Goro-kun. It's nice to meet you."

"Um… hi." Goro quickly hid behind Mama's leg.

She had a pretty smile and she looked like Mama, but Goro didn't do well with strangers.

"Please, come in," Mama's sister said, rising to her feet.

She then stepped aside so Goro and his mama could come into the room and she looked down at Goro.

"Goro-kun, my son Ken is watching Feathermen Rangers. Would you like to join him?"

"Can I, Mama?" Goro asked eagerly.

He loved that show. But he wasn't able to watch much, since Mama couldn't afford cable. She did her best to borrow DVDs from the library though.

Mama gave a little frown. "Well… I suppose I don't see the harm. He is your cousin, after all."

"Cousin?" Goro echoed.

"Hikari is my sister," Mama said. "And Ken-kun is her son, so he's your cousin."

"Oh."

Goro couldn't help but think that having more family would be nice. He hoped that Mama and Mama's sister would make up. Mama needed friends… she looked so lonely and sad sometimes.

Ken was his age. He had brown hair like Goro, with the same bangs as Mama and her sister. He had regular brown eyes instead of reddish brown, though.

He turned his attention from the TV, blinking at Mama and Goro. "U-Um… hello."

Mama's sister just smiled, her eyes becoming warm. She then picked up the remote, turning off the TV.

"Ken, do you remember what I told you yesterday?" she asked.

He tilted his head a bit, a small frown on his face, "That your sister is coming, right?"

"That's right." Mama's sister's smile turned pleased before she began to stroke his hair. "This is my sister, Tsukiko. And her son, Goro-kun."

Now she was calling her Tsukiko instead of Suki? Well at least she got the name right this time.

"It's nice to meet you," he said politely, only to turn to his mama. "But Mommy, are we doing anything today? Could I play with Makoto-chan again?"

"Oh, Ken…" Mama's sister sighed. "I don't know where Makoto-chan's family lives."

Ken's expression fell.

"Oh, okay. Sorry, Mommy."

"It's okay, honey."
Mama cleared her throat. "It's nice to meet you, Ken-kun."

Ken just blinked at her and shyly said, "Hello…"

"Aunt Suki," Mama cut in. "Hikari used to call me Suki when we were young."

Oh… so that's why she called her Suki earlier.

"Suki…" Mama's sister whispered.

Goro was confused. She almost looked like she wanted to cry, but she was smiling. Mama sighed before tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"We… We have a lot to talk about, Hikari," she said quietly.

"We do." She nodded. "I booked the conjoined room for you and Goro-kun. We can talk there."

After their mamas left, Ken patted the spot next to him. After Goro climbed onto the bed, Ken spoke.

"Do you like Feathermen Rangers?" Ken asked. "Or do you wanna watch something e—"

"No!" Goro cried out, shaking his head furiously. "I love that show!"

Ken's face lit up.

"It's my favorite! Red Hawk's the best!" he gushed.

"He's cool," Goro said, giving a small nod. "But I like Feather Horned Owl the best."

Ken nodded in agreement.

"They're all cool," his cousin said, before making a face of disgust. "But it's really gross when Pink Argus and Red Hawk kiss."

"That's definitely the worst part of the show," Goro agreed before plopping on the bed. "I wish that Mama could get cable so I could watch it more!"

"You don't?!" Ken gasped, his eyes growing wide as saucers. "I can't imagine not having cable!"

"Nope." Goro ducked his head. "I-Is that weird?"

"I dunno. I haven't gotten to play with a lot of kids," Ken admitted, his expression then brightening. "But I got to play with someone yesterday! Mommy and me met Makoto-chan in the park. She was fun to play with."

Goro recoiled. A girl? Wasn't this cousin of his aware of the dangers?

"Don't girls have cooties?"

"Do they? I dunno... but Makoto-chan was really nice."

Goro wrinkled his nose. "You seem to really like her. Do you like-like her? Like the way Red Hawk and Pink Argus do?"

"Ew!" Ken shuddered, looking disgusted. "Why would I kiss Makoto-chan?! That's just weird!"
"If you say so." Goro snatched up the remote, clicking the button to turn on the TV.

They sat there, watching the episode with bated breath. Goro didn't quite understand what was going on but he always loved watching the Feathermen Rangers in action! He'd love to have special powers like the Rangers.

But the episode ended, switching to commercials. A commercial showed the Feathermen R action figures, and Ken pointed at the screen.

"I've got Red Hawk!" he said. "Do you have any, Goro?"

Goro shook his head.

"I'd love to but… Mommy says she can't afford it…"

Ken bit his lip. He looked sad. His expression quickly changed as his eyes lit up.

"I know! I brought him with me! Let me get him and you can play with it for now!" his cousin offered.

"Really?!!" His jaw dropped.

Ken nodded.

"Mommy says we gotta share and it's not fair that you can't have one on your own… gimme a sec!"

He jumped off the bed before grabbing a suitcase. He began to dig through it. He was mumbling something under his breath. It was a good five minutes before he looked up again.

"I can't find it." Ken frowned, biting his lip. Then his expression brightened. "But I bet Mommy knows where it is! I'll go ask her!"

"Are you sure?" Goro asked. "I think our mamas were talking…"

"How long can they talk though?" Ken shook his head. "It'll be fine! Come on!"

He followed Ken to the door but before either of them could reach for the doorknob, Mama spoke.

"I came here to see you," Mama snapped. "Not to say goodbye to them."

"What?! You're not coming to the funeral?"

"Why should I?! They betrayed me! All but threw me to the streets!"

"Suki… I know this is asking a lot. But… don't you want to say goodbye at least? I know that things between you and Mom and Dad did not go well last time you spoke but… we were happy once."

"No, Hikari. You know what I have to do to support myself and Goro?"


"I had to whore myself out."

Hole? What was Mama talking about?
"I have to let my clients do what they want with my body. And I had to do it with a smile. If they wanted to have their way with me afterwards… how can I say no? Money is money, after all."

"S-Suki, I didn't know—"

"That's your problem, Hikari!" Mama snapped, before adding bitterly, "You always were the lucky one."

"Wh-What? What are you talking about?"

"You were always the favorite! Mom and Dad never had anything to complain about with you! Not to mention how life has favored you!"

"How am I lucky?!" Mama's sister suddenly snapped.

"Oh, I don't know—maybe because you found Kazuhiro when we were just juniors in high school? It was like a fairy tale romance."

"A fairy tale?" Mama's sister then sighed. "Kaz and I… we divorced for a few reasons. I still love him, but… we just were not meant to be."

"You still got love."

Mama sounded…angry. And tired at the same time, somehow.

But there was a long silence.

"I…I warned you, Suki." Mama's sister's voice cracked. "I knew that he was abusing you. He told you what you wanted to hear. He just was manipulating you and once he got what he wanted…"

"Shut up, Hikari!" Mama shouted. "I've heard that crap from you a hundred times! And you expect me to go along with all this. Expect me to pretend that I've actually given a thought to Mom and Dad after these years. They disowned me! Hung me up to dry! They couldn't bear to have a daughter who got knocked up! They wanted me to get an abortion! They wanted me to kill my baby!"

"What's knocked up?" Ken whispered.

"I dunno…" Goro whispered back. "I've only heard of knocking on a door…"

And what was that about killing? His grandparents had wanted him dead?

"I never agreed—"

"You let them cut me off!" Mama's voice suddenly cracked. "T-That hurts, Hikari. We had been together for so long—since before birth—and you just watched."

"That's not true! I begged and pleaded with them not to! I tried to get you, Mom, and Dad to agree to just talk but you all refused! I wanted you to talk to me but you wouldn't let me get a word in! What was I supposed to do? It felt like a miracle that you agreed to come! Suki, please, I don't want you to keep all this anger in. I want us to be sisters again! Let our sons know each other!"

"So, you're saying I shouldn't be angry?!" Mama snapped. "After all they did to me! At least you were sympathetic to my situation, even if you kept trying to lecture me!"

"I-I'm not saying—" She then cut herself off. "Suki, please, all I want is for us to be a family
again…"

"SHUT UP HIKARI!" Mama shouted at the top of her lungs. "God, I can't stand your attitude! You're *always* making some kind of excuse for them! You just have to be the dutiful daughter! What about *me*?! I'm your twin sister!"

"I love you, Suki, why don't you believe me?!

Mama's voice suddenly became cold and quiet, like when she was really angry.

"That makes one of us."

A choked sound came from her sister. "W-What?"

"You always called me naïve for loving *him*. And maybe I was. A little. But you… I can't stand your attitude! You never knew what it was like—"

"Kaz and I divorced when Ken was two and he died less than a year after!"

"You think that compares to how I've had to work myself to the bone and how I had to become a whore just to survive?!"

"I didn't say it was! I'm just saying that my life is not perfect! I'm not 'favored' like you say!"

"You don't get it, Hikari! You never understood how I feel!"

"Help me understand then," Mama's sister begged. "Please Suki. Don't push me away…"

"No. It was obviously a mistake to come here," Mama said, her voice unusually cold. "Goodbye, Hikari."

"No! Suki, please—"

"Let go of me! Can't you get it through your thick skull?! You're lying to yourself when you claim to love me. At least I'm not deluding myself!"

"W-What are you saying?"

Mama made a frustrated sound.

"Do I have to spell it out?! I'm saying that I HATE YOU!" she screamed.

There was a dead silence. Then a sniffle.

"Okay. I get it, Tsukiko." Another sniffle. "But remember this. I love you. And I always will. I'm sorry for not being there for you when you needed me. I really am. I failed you as a sister. I had hoped to fix that mistake today, but… I see that's not going to happen. I hope you and Goro-kun have a happy life."

Goro looked at Ken and they scrambled back to the bed. The door opened and Mama's sister walked out.

There were tears in Mama's sister's eyes. Why was she crying? She was a grown up!

"Mommy?" Ken ran up to her, hugging her leg. He begged, "D-Don't cry!"
"Ken…"
She picked him up, hugging him close. She smiled, but her eyes still looked so sad.

"H-How about we go to the park for a bit, hmm?"

"You mean I can't watch Neo Feathermen with Goro? Mommy, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, sweetie. It's… It's nothing."

Goro didn't want to listen anymore. He ran in to see Mama.

Mama sat on the bed; her eyes were dull as she stared outside the window.

"Mama?" Goro whispered, tugging at her sleeve.

"Goro..." she breathed out.

She reached for him, pulling him into her lap. Goro let her cuddle him for a moment before speaking.

"Mama…" he said quietly. "What happened?"

"It's a long story, sweetie."

"We have time, Mama."

Mama's arms tightened around Goro. "My mom and dad… they died."

Goro tilted his head, looking up at his mama.

"Died?" he repeated.

Mama winced before brushing her bangs out of her eyes. "It means they went to sleep. Forever. They're gone… forever."

"Oh." But then he frowned. "But what's that have to do about what you were talking 'bout to your sister?"

Mama sighed.

"Before you were born, my parents made me… very sad. They were upset with something I decided to do. They didn't want me in the family anymore."

"What did they say?"

She squeezed her eyes tightly and she seemed to tremble. "That's not important."

"But your sister looked so sad," Goro said faintly. "D-Do you really hate her?"

"I said something I didn't mean," Mama whispered, as she clutched Goro tighter. "I was so angry at Hikari."

"You don't hate her?" When she gave a little nod, Goro suggested, "Why not just say sorry then?"

Mama's bottom lip trembled, before she buried her face in Goro's hair. He felt something wet fall into his hair.
"I just wish it was that simple, sweetheart. I really do... I think... it's too late. Something broke today—and I don't think I can fix it."

Four years later, Goro was working on his homework at the kitchen table when the doorbell rang. Goro set down his pencil before he went to open the door.

"Is this the Himura residence?"

Goro frowned. "Uh... yeah?"

Who are you? was on the tip of Goro's tongue

"Yes..." the man stressed with a frown. "Young man, is your mother home? Tsukiko Himura?"

"D-Do you want to be alone with her? I'll find her and get out of the house."

Goro fought the urge to sigh. Where could he go now? Maybe he could check for some change and take the train to the library?

"What are you—" The man sighed, as a weird expression came onto his face. "Never mind. Yes, I'd like to speak with your mother but you don't need to leave the house."

"Okay." Goro shifted on his feet uneasily. "Y-You can sit on the couch. Um... who should I tell her who it is?"

His face seemed to scrunch up, but he gave a little nod before sitting on the edge of the couch. "My name is Isao Amada."

Goro gave a little nod to acknowledge the man's statement. He then shut the door before heading for his mom's room.

Mom was curled on her side, clutching a pillow to her chest. Goro felt guilty for doing this, but he didn't think the man would be happy if he came out and told him that Mom was sleeping.

Goro crept up to Mom, before poking her cheek.

"Mom?" He whispered.

"Mm..." Mom slowly blinked her eyes open before she rubbed at her eyes. "Goro?"

"Hi Mom." Goro then bit his lip. "A man named Isao Amada is here to see you."

"Isao? I see..." His mom sat up immediately.

"Mom?"

"It's nothing, sweetheart." Mom leaned forward to kiss his forehead. "Let me freshen up and I'll go talk to him. But after you tell Amada-san that I'm coming, go to your room."

"Huh? Why?" Goro tilted his head. "Who is that man, Mom?"

"Nobody you need to concern yourself with," Mom said firmly all while running her fingers through her hair. "Goro, go do your homework in your room. I mean it. This is probably a conversation for adults."
Goro bowed his head.
"If you say so, Mom."

He headed downstairs to talk to the man once more.

"Mom will be down in a sec," he said.

"And just what was the woman doing?"

Goro recognized that tone. His teachers often used that tone with him. They talked him down, assuming that he was so stupid. Goro decided that he didn't like this man.

"Calm down, Amada-san," Mom said sharply. She folded her arms over her chest. "Come into the kitchen. We'll talk there."

"Very well."

He stood up, his mouth twisting as he took a good look at Mom.

Goro ducked into the hallway, but once he heard the adults seat themselves in the kitchen, he darted forward. He had to know why Mom didn't seem to like him.

"I haven't seen you since Hikari married Kazuhiro," Mom said flatly. "What do you want?"

"Hikari's dead."

"WHAT?!!" Mom then coughed. "What do you mean she's dead?"

"It was an accident. A drunk driver lost control of his vehicle and he hit the house. Hikari was protecting Ken from the looks of it."

"I…" Mom coughed again. "When's the funeral?"

"It already happened. It was a quick and quiet affair. The head of the Kirijo Group himself paid for all the expenses."

"You… You buried my sister and didn't bother to contact me before?!"

"And why should I cater to you? You're a disgrace. You can barely take care of yourself. And what kind of future will your son have? Oh wait." He let out a short laugh. "He won't have one because he's a bastard."

"You leave Goro out of this!" Mom snapped. "He's a smart boy, he'll be fine—"

"You ruined him because of your choices. I'm glad that I have gained custody of Ken. He won't be ruined by a woman of loose morals."

Morals? But Mom wasn't a bad person. Why was this man saying she was?

"I…no…" Mom then let out a little sob, then a sniffle. "That's not true… Are you going to take in Ken-kun then?"

"No, he will be attending Gekkoukan's elementary branch. He will be placed in a dormitory."

"You—what?! Hika—Hikari isn't even cold in the ground and you don't even think to console
him?! He needs affection more than anything! How dare you!"

"That is all I have to say to you. I thought you deserved this courtesy at least."

The horrible man finally left.

There was silence. And then a sniffle. And then more. Mom…was crying.

"He's right… isn't he?" Mom's voice suddenly broke. "Have I doomed Goro?"

Goro wanted to run in and hug Mom. It didn't matter that he was practically a grown up now. She really sounded like she needed a hug. But Goro remained rooted on the spot. He could not let Mom know that he had been listening in.

He was broken from his thoughts when he heard her choking back a sob.

"Hika… I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I was a terrible sister. I-I never hated you. I was just angry at the situation and how you seemed to have it better. A-And now… you're dead. I can't tell you that I'm sorry for that day. Or how I love you." Goro heard Mom let out a wail. "I didn't even get to say goodbye! I can't even help your son!"

Goro sank to the ground. He couldn't imagine losing his mother so suddenly. He felt tears roll down his cheeks.

"There's so many things I didn't say… and I'm so sorry…" Mom said as she continued to weep.

Mom had committed suicide just a few months later. He remembered that during the last months of her life, she had been… so miserable. She tried to act cheerful to him, but she couldn't hide the redness in her eyes. And when she had killed herself, she had left him a note. Apologizing to him. For ruining his life. And so his life was turned upside down.

This was just unbelievable. As if he didn't need any more proof that some higher being hated him.

He remembered asking Amada: Have we met before? Before, he had been amused by how Amada did not recognize him as the Persona-user he had fought. But they really had met before.

Was this some kind of sick joke? Ever since his mom died, Goro had longed for some kind of family. But he remembered what the courts had said.

*No immediate family. He will have to go into the foster system.*

And now he had family. Family who absolutely despised him.

Goro was not a fool. He could see that Amada disliked him. He hid it better than Sakamoto—but that was not difficult. Goro could see the disdain in Amada's eyes every time Goro looked at him.

And Amada… he didn't care about his situation.

His father did not want to be a father, much like Shido. Shido had tossed his mom to the curb for a reason, after all. Amada's mother—Goro's aunt—was dead. And he couldn't help but suspect now that not all was what it seemed with Amada's mother's death.

And yet, he got love. His senpai gave him love apparently. And he didn't even earn it! Goro had always tried his best to win affection from his old foster families. But they refused to give it to him. They viewed him as just trash. He was always dumped back onto the orphanage. It was a hellish
Some people had all the luck. Even some bastards. Takeba's bastards came to mind. Oh poor them. They lived the pampered lives of a celebrity's children. Nobody aside his mom had ever comforted him when he realized just how difficult a life of a bastard was. It was infuriating—maddening, even.

But even then, Amada was a fool. A naïve fool. How could anyone believe in justice with this kind of society? Perhaps life has coddled him far too much.

But then it hit Goro. Why had Shido brought this up to begin with?

He gave Shido a sharp look.

"May I ask why you are telling me this, Shido-san?"

Shido just chuckled darkly, before a malicious smile spread across his face.

"Listen closely, Akechi. Because I know just how to ensure that Kirijo never sticks her nose in my business ever again."

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Friday, November 18th, 2016

"LeBlanc is really empty today," Haru observed before seating herself.

"More coffee for us, at least?" Anne joked.

Makoto sighed quietly, folding her arms over her chest. She had to hide how her hands were shaking.

"But ain't LeBlanc usually empty?" Ryuji interjected. "This is no surprise."

"Ryuji, don't be rude. Or I'll tell Boss you're slandering him and LeBlanc," Ren teased.

"Dude?!" Ryuji sputtered out.

"We're all witnesses," Futaba jested with a mischievous smile. "You can't back out of it now."

"Enough picking on Ryuji. Let's cut to the chase." Ken sighed.

"Yes, we should discuss how exactly to deliver the calling card to Mako-chan's sister." Haru nodded.

"Considering how big the hype's been getting…" Anne trailed off for a moment with a frown. "She'd prolly think it's a prank, wouldn't she?"

"Why not let me handle it?" Akechi suggested, "I can put it on Sae-san's desk at the office. People wouldn't suspect that I'm up to something. We are partners, after all."

"That's not a good idea," Ren said. "If you look at the pattern of how we sent the calling card, we are always careful so that the calling card won't be traced back to us."

"Oh?" Akechi tilted his head.
Morgana nodded, "That's right. With Kamoshida, Ryuji plastered it all over the bulletin board, so it could've been any student."

"And we sent the calling card at Madarame's gallery." Yusuke added.

"Ryuji and I placed countless copies all over Shibuya so that it would catch Kaneshiro's men's eyes." Makoto added.

"And while our target was Medjed, we stole Futaba's Treasure…so we hand delivered it to her." Ken explained.

"I see..." Akechi bowed his head. "Heh. I really am inexperienced with this, aren't I?"

"Yeah, like we didn't know that..." Ryuji grumbled under his breath. Then he spoke louder: "But we still gotta figure this out. Or else we won't be able to steal Makoto's sis's Treasure."

"Let me do it. I'll make sure to bring in the mail. I can claim to Sis that I found the calling card in the mailbox." Makoto said firmly.

"But Makoto..." Futaba bit her lip. "That's still kinda risky... what if your sister doesn't buy it?"

"I know it is, Futaba," Makoto replied seriously. "But we all have to take risks for this heist to succeed."

In more ways than one. Even with the backup they had, Makoto couldn't help but worry about all this. She didn't want Sae to become a target. She didn't want Ren to die. But she had to face it all with a smile.

They all had a part in this—and this was hers.

"Have faith in her," Ren suddenly interjected. "She's hardly a newbie when it comes to danger."

Anne was still frowning but she nodded. "Yeah! Good luck, Makoto."

"We will leave it to you, then," Akechi said thoughtfully. "Thank you for agreeing to this. Though... I will need to step up my game as well, then."

"It's not a competition, you know." Ken said dryly.

"Forgive me," Akechi bowed his head. "I just feel this way since this is Sae-san we're talking about. She's very important to me."

She held back the urge to glare at him. Sometimes she wondered if Akechi could keep track of all his lies. He seemed genuine, but Makoto couldn't help but be doubtful of what he said. After all, he claimed to string them all along with a 'sob story' to Shido.

"Our last heist," Morgana said quietly. "It feels...surreal, if I'm being honest."

"I must confess that it's strange," Yusuke stated, folding his arms over his chest. "I've only been a Phantom Thief for scarcely more than six months. And yet... it feels like such an important part of my identity now."

"You're telling me." Ryuji heaved out a sigh. "It's just kinda great to... cut loose, y'know?"

"There is no feeling like it," Ren stated, closing his eyes for a moment.
"But you did promise that you would give it up," Akechi interjected. "In exchange for my aid."

"Like you could've done this on your own," Ryuji grumbled.

"Ryuji, that's enough." Ken sighed. "Akechi-san did fulfill his end of the bargain...so we must do the same. It is the honorable thing to do."

Honor... Akechi probably didn't even know the meaning of that.

"Thank you, Ken-san," Akechi said.

"But anyways..." Ren cleared his throat. "We'll meet up at LeBlanc at around six tomorrow evening. Then we'll head for the courthouse."

"Later than usual." Ken commented. "We stole Futaba's Treasure in the afternoon."

"And Father's, as soon as we could get to the headquarters after school." Haru added.

"We have to keep in mind about the people around." Ren reminded. "But anyways—get some rest, all of you."

"That's right!" Morgana seconded. "We need everyone at our best to—"

A phone suddenly rang.

"Ah, excuse me." Akechi then pulled out his phone. "Hello, this is Goro Akechi speaking."

Akechi then frowned.

"Ah, I see. It's really that urgent?" He sighed and gave a nod, "I understand. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Police station?" Ren asked.

"Yes, unfortunately." Akechi nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow evening."

Even after the door slammed shut, it was silent. It seemed... finalized. The heist was really happening.

Haru broke the silence.

"Where do you think Akechi-kun's going? That felt like..." She trailed off with a frown.

"It does feel awfully convenient." Ken remarked, before shaking his head. "But no matter. It lets us talk in private."

Ryuji's face scrunched up in disgust.

"But to answer Haru's question..." he said, "if I gotta guess—prollly to go run off to his boss and brag 'bout how everything's set."

"Everything's all set on our end, isn't it?" Morgana asked. "The Treasure's been planted."

"Mm." Makoto nodded. "I stepped inside the Palace a couple days ago to plant it."

"Makoto..." Futaba said quietly.
Makoto gave her a tiny smile in thanks. She appreciated that Futaba supported her, even with her personal feelings about Sae.

"We're all stocked up on medicine and weapons." Ren then added, "And it just so happens that it cost an arm and leg so I had to cut corners somewhere. How unfortunate for Akechi."

"Someone's feeling petty," Anne teased lightly, nudging him in the side.

"Considering he's setting me up, I think my pettiness is warranted," Ren said haughtily.

They all heard a shaky sigh come from Haru.

"I'm nervous," Haru confessed, before pressing a hand against her chest. "I know that we've done all we can so we have the upper hand. And we even have Ken-kun's senpai helping. But…"

"They're here to make sure the plan succeeds. We still have to do our part," Ken stated.

This earned some uneasy looks. This was risky—she could not deny that. However, this was their best shot.

"We cannot drop our guard, even for a second. The end goal is for Ren's capture and then…" Yusuke trailed off grimly.

Anne bit her lip, looking down. Makoto tried not to wince. She really wished it didn't have come to this. She couldn't even begin to imagine how Anne would feel, having to allow her boyfriend to endanger himself like this.

"Let's not end on this on a sour note," Haru said gently before forcing a smile as she held up her tea cup. "Here's to us!"

"I'd drink to that!" Ryuji laughed.

"Nobody in this room can legally drink for another two years at the very least," Morgana grumbled out.

Ryuji glared at him. "Don't ruin the moment."

"Hey. How are ya holding up?"

Ren just smiled ruefully at Ryuji.

"Doing as well as I could, I guess."

Ryuji sighed, "This plan better work…we can't lose ya, RenRen."

"Since when are you a pessimist?" Morgana asked.

"I can't be nervous?" Ryuji demanded.

"When did I say that?" Morgana huffed out.

"That's enough, boys!" Anne chided, hands on her hips. Then she glanced at every one last of them. "But you know… it's been a while since it's just been the four of us."

Anne clasped both hands behind her back as she sighed, staring at the wall.
"This won't be the end, Lady Anne. We still need to take down Shido after this," Morgana said seriously.

"And get to the bottom of Mementos. We need to find out what exactly happened to you," Ren reminded with a smile.

"Ren…" The feline looked quite touched but shook it off and coughed. "Though Lady Anne is right—it has been a while. It's felt so long since we started the Phantom Thieves."

"Almost exactly seven months since we decided that we had to take down Kamoshida," she replied with a fond smile.

"Yeah." Ren closed his eyes. "But I wouldn't trade it for the world."

"Someone's feelin' corny." Ryuji slung an arm around Ren, but there was a big grin on Ryuji's face. "But this heist has gotta be our biggest one! Let's make it count!"

"Which means that you have to get your rest tonight!" Morgana said. "No staying up!"

"You see what I have to put up with?" Ren gestured to Morgana.

"Excuse me?!!" Morgana sputtered. "How dare I be concerned about your health?"

"Once it hit nine o'clock, doesn't matter what I'm doing, 'Aren't you tired today? Let's go to sleep already. Please…" Ren sighed.

"I do not sound like that!" Morgana squawked.

Ryuji and Anne both burst into laughter. Ryuji even keeled over, his arms wrapped around his stomach.

"Care to enlighten me then?" Ren tilted his head with a smirk.

"It's just—well—you need sleep okay?! Who knows what kind of habits you'd get into if it wasn't for me! You'd probably be drinking liters and liters of coffee!" Morgana exclaimed.

"I would not!" Ren protested.

"I dunno Ren. We may need to sign you up for CAA—Coffee Addict Anonymous." Anne teased.

Anne started to giggle and Ryuji joined her in chuckling at Ren's expense.

"This is the last time I'm ever making either of you coffee," Ren huffed.

Anne just blew him a kiss.

"You sure about that?" she asked with a wink.

"Ugh, you two are so gross." Ryuji said as he scrunched up his nose.

Morgana shook his head and gave a little sigh.

"I hope Makoto will be okay, though."

"Yusuke told me that he and Haru had some plans to drop by her apartment and check up on her in person," Ryuji stated. "I think outta all of us, they'd understand what she's feelin'."
Anne nodded vigorously.
"Definitely. But I'm gonna text her though. I can't imagine what it'd be like. My parents aren't always there but... they aren't warped like Madarame, Okumura, and Nijima were."

"It's not fun," Ryuji said flatly.
Ren sighed, "Ryuji..."

"But this ain't about me. This is about ensuring you'll make it out, buddy. That's the most important thing."
Ren couldn't help but crack a smile at that comment. He truly was lucky to have friends like them.

"I've been talking about our escape routes with Futaba," Morgana said. "She said it might be better to split into three groups. We don't know if Shido's men will try to go for us... Ren's gonna draw their eyes, but can't be too careful."

"I don't know about that..." Anne trailed off with a frown. "Wouldn't it be better if we stayed in one group?"

Ren frowned. That wouldn't work at all. Ryuji however beat him to it.

"That's not being stealthy though. And we don't exactly blend in the crowd," his best friend pointed out.

Ren winced as another thought came to him. He hoped that none of Shido's men would go after his friends. Hopefully they'd be satisfied just chasing after him.

"I'll just have to do some kind of crazy stunt to draw their attention, then," Ren stated. "The point is for me to get caught anyways."

"Don't joke about that!" Anne quickly snapped.

Her eyes suddenly glassy. Her hands were clenched tightly and a slight tremor ran through her body.

"Ren, this isn't a game. You could die!" she added in a whisper.

Ren cringed inwardly. He wasn't actually treating the situation like a game. He just wanted to lighten the mood. It was apparent that was a bad joke and it did nothing to lighten the mood.

"I'm sorry, Anne," he quickly apologized. "I was just trying ease some tensions; I know how serious this is. I promise I'm not taking this lightly."

"Ren, you've gotta be careful." Ryuji was extremely serious. "We can't lose ya."

His best friend's phone then went off. Ryuji checked it and glanced up at the rest of them.

"Bet my ma's been wondering how much longer I'll be 'til I get home." He then pocketed his phone. "I should head back now. Don't wanna worry her."

Morgana then looked to Anne and then at Ren. He cleared his throat.

"I'll stay with Futaba tonight. Let's head out together, Ryuji," he stated.
"Yeah of course. I'll take ya to Futaba and Boss before I head home."

Ren watched the two of them leave, before he sighed. He looked towards his girlfriend.

"I really am sorry..." he apologized again.

"Promise me that you won't do anything too reckless, Ren." Anne pleaded, suddenly clasping one of his hands in both of hers. "I'm worried enough already."

Ren sighed again before his hand slid against her cheek. "I promised you that I would come back to you. I don't intend to break it."

He then embraced her.

"You've had too many people leave you," he murmured as Anne rested her head against his chest. "And I don't intend on adding to it. I swear I'll make it out there alive. I won't let them break me."

"Ren..."

Anne looked like she was at a loss for words. Then she grabbed his blazer with both hands and dragged him down for a searing kiss. Ren's hands slid down to her waist, holding her close. Anne ran her fingers through his hair, giving one of his curls a small tug.

When they came up for air, Anne spoke. "I want to stay with you tonight."

"Oh?"

Anne rolled her eyes. "Well... I wouldn't say no to that. But I really just want you to hold me. I don't want to be alone. Not tonight."

He understood how she felt. And he would gladly accommodate. But a thought crossed his mind that caused Ren to raise an eyebrow.

"If you're going to sleep over, what are you going to sleep in, then?"

"Still mulling through my options," Anne gave him a playful smile. "I do have my tights and my undershirt. I'd be plenty warm since we'd be cuddling. Or I could steal some of your clothes. Wearing your boyfriend's clothes is supposed to be very comfortable. Or..." She winked. "I could always do what I did the night of my birthday."

"So many options... shall I convince you of doing my favorite option?" Ren said with a grin.

"Can you?" Anne challenged with a smirk.

"Shall I start the persuasion then?" He wiggled both his brows teasingly.

Anne's expression just screamed bring it.

Ren just grinned before he tugged Anne up the stairs and onto his bed. He then lowered his head to kiss her, all while fumbling for her hair ties. Anne kept herself busy, though, as she pushed his blazer off his shoulders.

"You better not lose more hair ties," Anne warned. "I don't have an infinite number of them, you know!"

Ren just winked at her. "You'll improvise."
Anne rolled her eyes at him. "Come here."

She slid her arms around his neck and kissed him fiercely. Every touch still left him breathless. He hoped that if he and Anne stayed together further down the road, she would never stop leaving him breathless. Sometimes he wondered how he managed to luck out and win Anne's heart.

"We really shouldn't stay up all night, though," Anne whispered, pressing her forehead against his. "Morgana's right—we do need our rest."

"Ah, my lady..." Ren smirked. "There's so much we can do in an hour or two..."

"Ohhh?" Anne drawled out.

"Want me to show you?" he asked before removing his glasses and setting it aside.

"Pffft, if you can keep up with me," she scoffed.

Anne then flipped them so she was on top, entangling them into the sheets. Her expression grew soft, as she cupped his jaw with one hand. "I love you," she said earnestly.

"I love you too," Ren said. "So much, Anne."

"I'll be waiting for you," Anne whispered. "So... come back to me."

"I always will," Ren vowed. "I swear it."

Ren slipped off Anne's blazer and hoodie first, tossing them to the floor. Anne just shivered due to the cold air. Ren just pulled her into his lap completely, wrapping his arms around her waist.

"Better warm you up," he said huskily.

He pressed kisses down her neck, nipping and sucking slowly at her skin all while caressing her soft skin. A soft moan escaped her as he continued to tease her.

He personally found it more fun to go slowly than to go from zero to one hundred. Seeing the look on Anne's face... was a turn on.

Anne then gave him a small push before grabbing at his turtleneck with both hands, tugging and pulling it over his head.

She ran her hands all over his chest before leaning forward and peppering light feathery kisses along his jawline. She slowly worked her way down his throat, her light kisses turning into sucks and nips. As always, her touch left a blaze. He felt... so warm even though it was actually freezing in the attic.

Ren groaned, fisting the sheets as Anne kissed the center of his collarbone. She then shifted in his lap, purposefully brushing against him.

“You’re a little devil,” he groaned out.

“I guess that you’re rubbing off on me,” Anne said with a cheeky smile.

Ren found that he had no retort for her. So instead he went to tug down her leggings. God, he loved her leggings. They hugged her slim, slender legs perfectly. But he loved looking at her bare legs more.
“So... is this a confirmation that you’re a leg man?” Anne asked jokingly.

“Nah.” Ren smirked at her. “I’m an Anne Takamaki kind of guy. I love every last inch of her.”

“Such a charmer,” Anne sighed before winking. “Good thing that I’m a Ren Amamiya kind of girl.”

Ren then flipped them so he was on top once more, before he cupped her face. He kissed her hungrily and Anne eagerly kissed him back, running her fingers through his curls.

He ran a hand down her back before finally brushing his fingers against her bra. It took a couple tries but he managed to undo her bra.

Anne then shifted upwards so he could pull it off of her.

“Yep.” Ren smirked before he gave her a squeeze. “Here’s another part I love.”

“You’re such a dork,” Anne said teasingly, her hands on his hips, her thumb rubbing lazy circles.

“Ahh, but I’m your dork.”

Ren then pushed her down, losing himself in her. He really did not want this to be their last moment together. He wanted many, many more...

"Madame Sae Nijima, a great sinner of jealousy."

Makoto bowed her head, biting her lip, as Sae continued to read the calling card aloud.

"You have lost yourself amidst your obsession with success. For its sake, you are willing to promote injustice as justice. From… the Phantom Thieves of Hearts.” Sae then looked to Makoto, her lips barely more than a thin line. "Just where did you find this, Makoto?"

"I found it in our mailbox," Makoto said, hesitantly meeting Sae's eyes. "They... They know where we live."

"I see." Sae's expression hardened. "To think that they would have the audacity to send me one!"

She crushed the calling card, crumpling it into a ball.

"They brand me a criminal and plan to change my heart!" she spat out, her voice dripping with venom. "How hypocritical of them! They're the crooks, not me! What absolute nonsense! They only care about disposing of those who are an inconvenience for them!"

And yet... her Palace had shown that was how Sae viewed her opponents. To hear Sae deride the Phantom Thieves was like a stab to Makoto's heart. Ren would have to reveal the truth to Sae eventually. She did not know how Sae would react to that kind of news and she hated it.

"Fine..." Sae dropped the calling card on the coffee table, her hands both forming fists. "I'll just have to catch them first! They won't brainwash me! They won't!"

Makoto tried not to wince, looking down at her lap. This was her chance to dig for some information...

"And when you do... you'll be interrogating them, won't you?"
Sae looked at her sharply. "I wouldn't think you'd approve of this, Makoto. You had thought, months ago, that Dad would approve of them."

"Well, I…" Makoto's mouth was suddenly dry. She swallowed hard. "I realized that you're right. Dad is dead. His opinion would not matter."

She prayed that Dad would forgive her for saying such things.

"And things have changed. I see things differently now."

Sae then sighed before running a hand through her hair. "Well, you're right. It'll be a top security interrogation room. Underground."

Yes! That meant their gambit was correct. Makoto had to fight to keep her face neutral.

"Unfortunately…" Sae brushed her bangs out of her face before rising to her feet, "my time will be limited. But I will do whatever it takes to make them divulge their secrets!"

She then walked for the door, only to pause as she passed Makoto.

"But…" Sae shook her head, resting her hand on top of the sofa. "Let's not focus on all the negatives."

"Sis…?"

"Makoto, I know that I haven't had the opportunity to spend time with you as an older sister should." Sae looked down to her. "I was thinking… after this case has been resolved—we should go on a trip to the hot springs. Just the two of us. I'm sure with this case, I would be able to secure the time off. How does that sound?"

"Sis…" Makoto swallowed hard before she grabbed for Sae's hand. "P-Please remember that I'm always on your side!" she blurted out. "I won't let anyone hurt you! I-I promise!"

Sae was silent for a moment. She looked perplexed, only for her to smile softly. "You've always been a strange one, Makoto."

But then Sae's free hand settled on top of Makoto's head, gently stroking it.

"But I really wouldn't trade you for anyone in the world."

Sae gave her one last smile, before bidding her good night. She had to head back to the office. And she planned to inform her superior about the calling card.

Once the door closed, Makoto leaned against the sofa, suddenly trembling. Everything was set now. Sae was on guard, allowing her Treasure to form. Makoto couldn't help but wonder what her Treasure was exactly.

Her hands… they wouldn't stop shaking. Makoto squeezed her eyes shut, before curling her hands into fists. So much was riding on this. Would it be all for naught? The idea of watching from the sidelines, helpless once again, terrified her. So much.

Her phone started to buzz. Makoto's eyes widened as she saw just what it was.

Messages… from all her friends.

[Haru Okumura]: Mako-chan… don't lose faith. It won't be a repeat of Father. I swear it.
[Ryuji Sakamoto]: i won't lie

[Ryuji Sakamoto]: i'm not your sis's biggest fan

[Ryuji Sakamoto]: but i'll support ya all the way, i swear it

[Anne Takamaki]: Makoto… are you okay? I know this has been hard on you. I can't imagine how you feel… But I'm here for you okay? Always.

[Ren Amamiya]: I know this has been crazily stressful. But don't lose heart

[Ren Amamiya]: And… if you need to talk about it, I'm just a phone call away.

[Ren Amamiya]: I'll hear you out, even if I don't… think too highly of prosecutors

[Futaba Sakura]: I'm not so good with words. But if you need to talk about anything… I'll try to listen.

[Ken Amada]: Makoto… have faith. You believe that your sister still has a sense of justice. But… you need to believe in yourself, as well. You're much stronger than you give yourself credit for.

[Yusuke Kitagawa]: I know you must feel terribly conflicted about this, Makoto. Facing a loved one… is not easy. Believe me… I know. But do not forgot that you aren't alone. We stand together.

She wasn't alone. She had her friends to lean on, even if some of them did not have a high opinion of Sae. She was not the same girl she was five months ago. She was no longer adrift, unsure in what she wanted to pursue. She had friends—incredibly loyal friends. She knew that she would fight for justice—fight tooth and nail for it. She would show Sae what true justice was.

Makoto felt a sudden peace wash over her. She felt calm… and confident. She was ready to show Sae what she was made of.

_Thou art I… and I am thou. Thine resolve hast transformed me… and hast given me a new form. I am…_

"Anat," Makoto breathed out.

She could feel it. Johanna had taken on a new form. She felt… stronger.

Then she heard sudden knocking. Makoto couldn't help but frown. Could Sae have forgotten her keys? That was oddly careless of her, but she did have a lot on her mind. She got up from the couch to answer the door.

Makoto’s eyes widened. "Haru? Yusuke?"

"Hello, Mako-chan." Haru smiled hesitantly at her. "U-Um, Yusuke-kun and I were just—"

"We were concerned about you," Yusuke finished for her. "I know we could have called you but…"

"It just felt impersonal to just call," Haru added. "I—I hope you don't mind."

Haru really thought that Makoto would mind? It was so kind of them to do this.

Makoto couldn't help but smile at her two friends. "Not at all," she told them. "Why don't you come in? I can make you some tea."
"Some tea would be lovely, Mako-chan," Haru said with a smile. "Yusuke-kun?"

"I won't say no," Yusuke chuckled.

Makoto stepped aside, letting her friends remove their shoes before she ushered them to the living room. She let them settle down on the couch together before she headed for the kitchen. She started the kettle before she rummaged around for some snacks. It was past dinner time but she did have to be a good host. Besides that, Yusuke's stomach seemed to be a bottomless pit. She doubted that Yusuke would turn down free food.

Though she had to wonder if Yusuke and Haru had a similar conversation before they went to steal Okumura's Treasure. After all, Yusuke had been so worried for Haru before. A part of Makoto wished that she had reached to Haru before too…

The tea kettle started to whistle, making Makoto jump. She poured out the boiling water into three cups. She then assembled the mugs and plate of snacks onto a tray and carried it out. She set it on the coffee table.

Haru then clasped her hands together in her lap as Makoto sat down. "How are you feeling, Mako-chan?" she asked tentatively.

"I still feel incredibly nervous," Makoto confessed, placing a hand on her chest.

"Why am I hearing a but in that?" Yusuke asked before selecting a mug and taking a careful sip.

"I want to believe in Sis," Makoto said quietly. She took her own mug of tea, blowing on it before drinking. "She admitted to me in a way that she was neglecting me… Maybe it's not too late for us. And I know everyone's supporting me, even if they don't like Sis. Mishima-kun changed his heart, all on his own. I will help Sis change her heart. I want her to see that this is not the path she should follow."

"Think nothing of it," Yusuke dismissed. "We are your friends, after all. And I must admit… your situation does hit a little close to home."

"What about you, Yusuke-kun?" Haru asked gently.

Pain flashed in Yusuke's eyes for a moment. He was all tensed up. But then he took in a shuddering breath.

"I felt… incredibly anxious, I must confess. Madarame was the only parent I could remember. I called him Sensei but… I saw him as my father. I remember sitting in his lap as he sat in front of an easel. He guided my hand while teaching me the various techniques of art. I remember aspiring to be just like him."

A mirthless laugh escaped him.

"What a joke," he added sadly.

"Yusuke…" Makoto swallowed hard.

Yusuke had never shared anything like this before.

"Yusuke-kun, you're worth ten—no, a hundred—Madarames!" Haru said fiercely, her grasp on her own mug tightening. "You're kind and intelligent and your art is phenomenal! Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."
"Haru's right. You're a wonderful friend, Yusuke. And strong. I can't imagine what it was like for you to go through all that," Makoto seconded.

"Mm-hm, Yusuke-kun was the one who pushed for the two of us to come see you." Haru said.

Yusuke's cheeks tinged a slight pink.

"You're exaggerating, Haru. Besides, I know how much saving Nijima-san means to you…"

Makoto flashed Yusuke a small smile before she turned to Haru.

"Haru…" Makoto began tentatively. "Just how are you doing?"

Haru closed her eyes for a moment.

"I would be lying if I said that I'm ready to move on from Father's death. But… I have things to do. I want his killer to be brought to justice. I can't mope around and wallow in my grief. That won't solve anything. I know I have my friends. There are things for me to do. And you and Nijima-san—you two still have a chance. I want to make it happen. No matter what."

"Y-You…" Makoto hastily wiped at her wet eyes. "You're so kind, Haru…"

Haru let out a nervous giggle.

"I think you're the one exaggerating, Mako-chan."

"I have to agree with Makoto, Haru," Yusuke declared. "You are both strong and kind."

Haru blushed at the compliment before quickly composing herself.

"But…I'm glad that you feel confident about this, Mako-chan. To be honest, I was a bit worried." She admitted.

"Thank you. Your support means a lot to me. All of you…" Makoto smiled.

"It's nothing, Makoto. That's what friends are for, no?" Yusuke replied after shaking his head.

"Of course." Makoto nodded, then said, "And um… if you ever need to talk about Madarame—Yusuke, I'd be happy to listen."

Yusuke blinked before giving a small nod.

"Thank you, Makoto." Then he pulled out his phone, a thoughtful frown appeared on his face. "But we best get going. The trains will stop running soon and I really should escort Haru back first."

"That's not necessary, Yusuke-kun!" Haru protested.

"Nonsense. It's the chivalrous thing to do," Yusuke insisted.

Makoto couldn't help but smile to herself as the two of them bickered lightly. Perhaps there was something brewing between the two of them. They would be sweet together.

Not to mention, it'd give Ren and Futaba a new target. She silently chuckled to herself at that thought.

She saw Yusuke and Haru to the door. The door closed with a soft click. Makoto let her eyes drift
over to the family picture that hung on the wall. Their last family portrait, before her mom had died.

Dad's death day was tomorrow. But she couldn't visit his grave. Not with how crazy tomorrow was going to be. Dad would understand, right?

Makoto's phone suddenly went off. She answered the call without checking the ID.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Makoto."

"Oh! Ken…" Makoto tucked a strand behind her ear. "Is something the matter?"

"No, nothing like that…" He trailed off a moment. "I just wanted to check up on you. I would've visited you in person but Shinjiro-san said that you'd be fine and that I 'shouldn't run to your side all the damn time'."

Makoto couldn't help but giggle softly.

"You're really terrible at imitating his voice, you know." She teased.

"So…?" Ken prompted.

"I'm fine, Ken." She said softly. "Everyone… they messaged me. We'll face Sis together and we'll make sure that Ren gets out there alive. Especially since Akihiko-san and Chie-san are backing us up…I know that we shouldn't be cocky but I feel confident about tomorrow. We will succeed."

"I'm glad. But I was thinking...we will be meeting up at six in Leblanc. We would have a few hours in between that and school ending. You should go visit your parents' graves. Tomorrow is the day your dad died, right?"

Makoto's grip on her phone tightened.

"You remember?" She breathed out.

"Of course I do," Ken answered as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "You remembered the day my mom died."

"I-I didn't expect…" She trailed off for a moment, "But we probably have preparations to do."

"Ren has the equipment covered. We have the fake Treasure planted. There's nothing huge that we have to take care of." A soft sigh, as he said gently, "Makoto…I think it would be good for you. Especially since your sister has veered so far from her previous goal and ideals. Ideals that your father taught you."

Makoto bit her lip.

"Okay," She whispered. "Will you come with me?"

Ken was quiet for a moment.

"If you want me to."

"I do."
"I will then." He promised. "I'll see you tomorrow at school, then. Good night, Makoto."

"Good night, Ken."

Chapter End Notes

And the preparations for the heist are finally complete! This really did turn out to be a long chapter, though. It just kept running away from me! But at least I'm making up for the longer wait! But anyways! Next chapter will cover the heist and the escape from the Palace. I'm really looking forward to covering it!

Many of you have correctly predicted that Ken and Akechi are cousins (genetically half-brothers, since their moms are twin sisters). I dropped several hints to this—noting their physical resemblance several times, mentioning Ken's mom has an estranged twin sister, while noting that Ken has a strong resemblance to her. Ken's mother is also mentioned to have Akechi's coloring. Akechi also mentions that his mother had a twin sister. Fun fact: Ken and Akechi canonically have the same blood type—AB.

I know that several people are fans of the theory that Ken is Shido's son (especially amongst my reader base), but I'm personally not a fan of the concept. The game mentions that Akechi has a striking resemblance to his mother, so it doesn't make sense for his and Ken's physical resemblance to be explained by Shido being their father.

And some trivia! Ken's mother's name is Hikari. Hikari means light. Akechi's mother's name is Tsukiko, which means moon child. I chose Tsukiko specifically, since light is associated with day and naturally moon is associated with night.

But Akechi talks about how he wanted new personal records when he approached Shido in his narrative. Part of it is because I think Ken would've questioned things if his mother's maiden name is Akechi. Especially since people keep mentioning that he looks like Akechi. Another reason is that I can see Akechi wanting a new identity and styling himself after the Japanese Sherlock Holmes.

I also like to thank my friend, turtledeen for helping me out with the Kei Nanjo cameo! I've alluded to the P1/P2 characters before and I thought I'd use this to answer how the Shadow Ops are acquainted with them. And as usual, big shoutout to my beta, angelrin89! She actually pulled an all nighter to get this edited so many thanks to her!

And lastly, I mentioned this during my last update for the PQ2 fic but… Ace in the Hole has a TV Tropes page! I've linked in the summary so take a look!. Shoutout to hirowriter for creating it in the first place! Feel free to edit and add to it, as you see fit!
Chapter Summary

The casino heist has arrived.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Saturday, November 19th, 2016

Once the final school bell had rung, the group chat had been hit with a flurry of messages from her friends. Makoto forced herself to slip her phone into her skirt's pocket, looking to her boyfriend.

"Ready to go, Makoto?" he asked.

At her nod, they picked up their bags and headed to the train.

"Hey... I didn't really think to ask what food your parents liked," Ken said quietly. "But maybe we could stop by a bakery to offer them something?"

"That sounds like a good idea." Makoto nodded. "There's one by the apartment that we used to go to a lot. Dad would swear by their matcha cheesecake. We could get a slice or two. And maybe we should stop by a flower shop."

"There's the one that Ren used to work for," Ken said thoughtfully. "What flowers did you have in mind?"

"Well, white chrysanthemums are a given." Makoto answered.

Ken nodded. "Of course."

White chrysanthemums traditionally symbolized grief and were the most common flower seen at funerals. Though her mom also favored a different flower.

"And if possible, I'd like to get some pink peonies," Makoto continued. "It was Mom's favorite flower, according to Dad and Sis. When we visited her grave back when Dad was alive, he would always buy her a bouquet of them."

"We can do that," Ken said, before he rubbed his chin. "So... bakery first and then we'll stop by the underground mall for flowers."

Makoto just smiled. "That sounds like a good plan."

She then took his hand, giving him a slight smile as he rubbed the back of her hand. The train ride was pleasant, since it was surprisingly empty for a Saturday afternoon. She couldn't help but wonder what everyone else was up to. She wouldn't be surprised if Ren and Anne were stealing some time together before the operation.

However, she couldn't imagine what it was like... having to watch your boyfriend endanger
himself like that. Makoto let her eyes linger on Ken for a moment. She sighed. She hoped that she never would have to go through that.

But unlike the train, the bakery was packed. But luckily, they managed to get a couple slices of matcha cheesecake. After Makoto paid, they walked to the underground mall.

"I don't think I've ever been inside here." Ken admitted as he glanced around.

"Well, it's not like the stores here would interest you." Makoto chuckled, only for her eyes to land on a sign. "Oh, here we are."

"Welcome!" The owner greeted them with a bright, friendly smile. "How may I help you?"

"A bouquet of white chrysanthemums, please," Makoto requested. "And would you happen to have any pink peonies on hand?"

"Let's see..." she said while she turned around to check. She hummed a little tune as she checked through her inventory.

"Look at that! We have both. I was a bit afraid that we wouldn't, since we were running low after a woman stopped by yesterday. She wanted a bouquet of pink peonies as well."

"Thank you." Makoto said before she took a quick glance of the other flowers. They really were lovely.

"Your flowers are beautiful, by the way." Makoto complimented then asked, "Our friend used to work here, actually. Do you remember Ren Amamiya? He said he really enjoyed his work here."

"Oh, Ren-kun?" She perked up at that. "He was wonderful! Shame he had to go; he went all out! Did you know that he studied hanakotoba for this job?"

Ken's expression soured for some reason. "I'm well aware."

Makoto blinked in confusion at that. What had Ren done now?

"But anyways, let me whip up the bouquets!" The owner said, "One moment, please!"

She expertly arranged the chrysanthemums in an artful bouquet, and then the peonies. She then tied a white ribbon around the chrysanthemum bouquet and a pink ribbon for the peonies.

"Let's see... that will be a thousand yen for the chrysanthemums and two thousand yen for the peonies... so that'll be three thousand yen all together." She announced.

Ken pulled out his wallet before Makoto could even blink, fishing out a pair of two-thousand-yen bills.

"Ken!" she hissed at him.

Ken raised an eyebrow at her. "What?"

"You—you don't have to pay!"

Ken didn't look fazed.
"You paid for the cake."

"This is a lot more than the cake!"

Makoto reached for the yen bills but unfortunately, he was half a head taller than her. And he had long arms. He easily handed the bills off to the owner, even as Makoto glared at him.

The owner's lips twitched, as if she was trying not to laugh.

"Miss, I wouldn't complain about having a generous boyfriend," she said with a bemused smile.

"Yeah, you shouldn't complain," Ken agreed.

He wasn't quite smirking but it didn't stop Makoto from wanting to wipe that expression off his face.

Makoto smacked his arm in response, before narrowing her eyes at him.

"Shush, you."

She would have to make it up to him. Maybe make him lunch? But would that impress him after Shinjiro-san's cooking? Maybe she should insist on footing the bill for their next date. They hadn't gone out another date yet, after all.

They took the train again, to the district where the graveyard was. Makoto gripped Ken's hand with her free hand as they slowly picked through the graves.

But they finally came across the Niijima family grave. Makoto had vague memories of her mother's funeral. Her father had both of their names carved into the grave after Mom died, with his name painted red, as tradition dictated.

_Hideo Niijima_

_Masami Niijima_

Something struck Makoto as odd, though. She had packed some cloths as well as extra water bottles to clean the grave. But the grave looked like it was recently cleaned. Someone had left a bouquet of pink peonies, as well. Makoto lightly touched the delicate pink petals.

Had Sae visited recently?

No, that was ridiculous. Her sister was far too busy.

Something brushed against her arm.

"Makoto, are you okay?" Ken asked quietly.

"I… I was just thinking."

Makoto then looked to the grave. She wished she had packed some incense… She set down the bouquets of flowers and then the on the grave before speaking.

"Umm… hi Dad, hi Mom." She said softly, "I'm sorry that I haven't visited in a while. Things have been really crazy these past few months."

She looked down at the photograph of Dad.
"S-Sometimes I wonder what you'd think, Dad. Of the Phantom Thieves. I like to think that you would approve of them, with how strongly you felt about justice. I would hope so since I am one." She then let in a shuddering breath, "Sis and I actually got into a fight over this. Sis got so angry over it."

She closed her eyes for a moment as she tried to breathe more slowly.

"But joining the Phantom Thieves was one of the best things I could have done," Makoto admitted quietly. "I stopped blindly following orders. I have friends now."

Ken squeezed her hand as he gave her a soft, gentle smile.

"T-This is Ken," she introduced. "We've been dating for a few weeks now but he's become really important to me. I-I think you would like him. Both of you. You actually met him, Dad. A long time ago."

She then let out a short laugh.

"I haven't told Sis about him yet, though. I just... I'm not sure what she'll even think."

Makoto had a niggling suspicion that Sae would be displeased with it. Sae always drummed it in her that studies were a top priority. But she couldn't see how it was a bad thing. She had seen how happy Ren and Anne were in a relationship. And being with Ken...just made her so happy. He gave her a reason to smile, even when her doubts and worries gnawed at her mind.

How could something like that be a bad thing?

"Niijima-san," Ken spoke up. They both inched closer together.

"I... I care about your daughter so much. I think you would be proud of her. She's beautiful and strong and she just cares. So much. She wants to follow in your footsteps, Niijima-san, and become the police commissioner of Tokyo. And I think she's more than capable of doing it. I believe that she can do anything she sets her mind to." He spoke softly.

Makoto couldn't help but blush at his words. Ken often reassured her, but he did not voice his thoughts of her often.

"T-That's right. I want to help build a society where true justice is enforced." Makoto said, "You remember how Sis said the same? But...I'm afraid she lost her way. I swear I won't, though."

Then she swallowed hard.

"S-Sis..." Makoto murmured. "I-I don't know what happened. But she's lost her sense of justice. I want to remind her though. You remember her dream, don't you, Dad? She wanted to change the system from within. Give the accused a voice, since the justice system is so skewed towards the prosecution."

She then reached out, tracing the kanji of her family name.

"I won't let her continue down the path she's taken," she vowed. "I'll ensure it, I swear. I know she's still in there. I just need to remind her that her sense of justice is still there. Just you watch."

Makoto finally smiled, after finishing her declaration. She then pressed a light kiss against her
"I love you," she whispered, swallowing down the lump in her throat, "I-I'll make you proud, I promise."

Makoto wasn't sure what happened. But then a sudden breeze blew through, tickling her cheek. Makoto could have sworn she heard whispered through the air, "You already have."

She stilled for a moment. Was it...?

Makoto then shook her head. "Ken, let's go… We should start to head to LeBlanc."

Ken looked like he wanted to say something, but he slowly nodded.

"Okay."

They then started to walk away but then Ken looked to her.

"Hey. How are you feeling?"

"I just... don't want to be proven wrong." Makoto mumbled out, "I have to restore Sis's faith."

"And you will."

Ken suddenly pulled her into an embrace.

"I meant what I said. You set too many limitations on yourself, Makoto. You are capable. You're strong—stronger than you give yourself credit for."

Makoto looked to him. Then she pushed herself up on her toes, giving him a brief kiss.

"Thank you, Ken," she said softly. "And... thank you for pushing for this. I think I did need to tell my parents. Not just about Sis. But everything..."

Ken just smiled at her. "Any time, Makoto."

The trek to LeBlanc was pleasant. At least... until they saw Akechi by the door. Makoto had to fight off the urge to grimace.

"Cutting it rather close, aren't you?"

Irritation flared inside of Makoto the moment she heard Akechi's aggravating voice. But Ken quickly shot her a warning look.

"I could say the same of you, Akechi-san," Ken said, his voice cool yet polite.

"With Sae-san receiving the call card, it was hectic at the precinct to say the very least." Akechi then shook his head. "Now of course it's none of my business what you do in private. But—"

"We weren't on a date!" Makoto snapped.

The nerve of him! Of course they knew how important this day was. How dare he imply otherwise!

"We were visiting my parents." Makoto then clarified before Akechi could say more.

She didn't know what it was about Akechi. He always managed to set her temper on edge.
Akechi's face became ashen, his expression becoming remorseful.

"Ah… that's right. It's around that time, isn't it?"

"What are you alluding to?" Ken asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Sae-san mentioned to me that your father died in November. She even took me there to visit once during our investigations."

Sae did that? Makoto immediately thought to the peonies that she had found on the grave. Makoto's heart gave a painful squeeze. Could her suspicions be true?

"Though I do have to envy you." Akechi stated.

"Envy?" Makoto repeated.

What was he talking about now?

Akechi just smiled sadly.

"I'm well aware that your father's death was a tragedy. But… your father was a good man. A hero." He let out a sigh. "My father… is the exact opposite."

Then his expression darkened.

"Such a despicable man. Despite being lauded by his peers… he's nothing but trash."

He spat out the last word. His tone turned so vehement… so hateful. It was honestly startling.

"We could change his heart, you know," Ken spoke up. "We could continue working together."

Something flashed in Akechi's eyes. But then he smiled that TV smile of his.

"Ah, you flatter me, Ken-san, but I must decline. We had a deal, yes? And society must stop relying on 'saviors' so much."

Sometimes Makoto couldn't believe Ken's acting. But then again, he had to be discreet when keeping tabs on them when he first came to Tokyo.

"Right..." Ken said finally. "That is disappointing, Akechi-san, but we will respect your wishes."

"Thank you, Ken-san." Akechi flashed him a smile. "I'll see you inside."

"You're unbelievable, you know," Makoto murmured to him once the door slammed shut behind Akechi.

"Gotta keep up the masquerade, right?" Ken muttered.

He then leaned down, giving her a quick kiss.

"Are you ready?"

"As ready as I will be." Makoto sighed. "Let's go."

"The day has come. Are you prepared?" Haru asked.
"More than ready, Haru," Ren said confidently. "We've got this in the bag."

"Don't be so cocky, Ren-san," Akechi remarked. "If we become too arrogant...it might just lead to our downfall."

Makoto just narrowed her eyes at Akechi.

"So saith the hypocrite," she thought to herself.

"Don't be a killjoy, Akechi," Ryuji grumbled out.

"But anyways..." Ken quickly interjected. "Your sister got the calling card, okay, Makoto?"

Makoto nodded.

"I heard her read it aloud, as well. Very poetic words, Yusuke," she complimented.

"I try." Yusuke simply nodded.

"Hey, Makoto, are you...?" Futaba said as she began to fidget.

"I'm okay, Futaba, I promise. I appreciate your concern, though," Makoto reassured their youngest member, giving her a tiny smile.

"Let's give it our all. There's too much riding on this! It's no longer just our reputations!" Anne said.

"Yeah, our lives are at stake here, too!" Ryuji added.

"I am not afraid," Makoto stated. "I will save my sister. No matter what!"

"So much has happened since I formed the team with Ren, Ryuji, and Lady Anne..." Morgana shook his head. "But that just means we have to give it our all! Especially since we've formed a pretty formidable team!"

Out of the corner of Makoto's eye, she spotted Ken surreptitiously tapping out a message on his phone. Makoto assumed that it was to let the older Persona-users know that they were going in, to fight Sae.

"But anyways! This is our last heist! Ren, give us the signal!" Morgana looked up at their leader.

Ren slowly stood up, a smile creeping onto his face.

"Guys, let's do this! It's showtime!" Ren exclaimed.

They then headed off for the courthouse, quickly slipping into the Metaverse. They made a beeline for the treasure, but the moment they stepped into the room where the Treasure was…

"What happened to the Treasure?!" Ryuji cried out.

Sae's voice then rang out.

"It seems you have come, just as I've planned."

"Don't act all cocky! We've outsmarted you before!" Anne shouted.

"But why did she say 'as planned'?" Morgana questioned.
Yusuke inquired, "Was the Treasure's placement just...bait?"

"It was placed in an easily reachable spot, now that I think about it," Ken said slowly.

"This is just another set-up?!" Haru gasped.

Haru's grip on her axe tightened.

"Why—why does there always have to be a set-up?" Haru lamented.

"Noir, please calm down. Sae-san may have tricked us but... we will emerge victorious." Akechi stated.

"First off, allow me to compliment you," Sae's Shadow remarked through the speakers. "I never expected you would be able to make it so far."

"Save your breath. Where's the Treasure?!" Futaba huffed.

But then a roulette on the wall suddenly spun, disappearing to reveal another route. They heard Sae's laughter echo throughout the room.

"Come... we shall put an end to this, once and for all."

"She's challenging us..." Ken muttered. "What does she have up her sleeve this time?"

No, it was more mockery. Just what was Sae's Shadow planning for them?

"Only one way to find out!" Ryuji cracked his knuckles. "Get ready to kick some ass!"

"Skull's right, let's go!" Morgana seconded.

Futaba then knelt down, feeling Morgana's forehead with a quizzical frown.

"Huh. No fever. I thought you were sick, with how you're agreeing with Skull," Futaba snickered.

"HEY!" Both Morgana and Ryuji squawked indignantly, drawing out a few laughs.

Ren snickered at the chagrined expression on Morgana's face.

"Anyways! Enough comments from the peanut gallery! Let's go!" Ren commanded.

They headed up the path, entering yet another elevator. It took them to a completely different area. Makoto wanted to survey the area, but the large television flickered to life, showing the face of Sae's Shadow.

"What kind of game will it be this time? No matter what tricks you have... we will emerge victorious." Akechi called out.

Her sister's Shadow then scoffed.

"You're making a grave mistake, if you think you have me cornered. I only guided you because it will allow me to fight you to my heart's content."

Then she narrowed her eyes.

"You think you know how to claw your way to victory? Don't make me laugh! I've had to do this since day one. My coworkers and superiors looked at me and just saw a pretty girl. They refused to
take me seriously! The only way I earned their respect was fighting tooth and nail for victory!” she hissed.

"So that's how she became distorted. Crow mentioned that she had noble intentions originally and yet…” Yusuke murmured.

Ken muttered, "Unfortunately, that happens a lot to women who work for criminal justice."

"She sounds a lot like Father," Haru said sadly.

"Father..." Sae echoed, before her lips formed a thin line. "When my father died in the line of duty, I hated his killer. With all my heart."

"Sis! I found out who killed him! It was Kaneshiro!” Makoto called out to her.

"Queen… she can't hear you. Not now," Anne said gently.

"I'm hearing a but in this anyways." Ren muttered, his attention on Sae and not the two girls next to him.

Sae's lip suddenly curled in disgust.

"Dying to uphold justice sounds virtuous. But what about the ones left to clean up the mess? Damn him… damn him!"

Her hands curled into fists.

"Can you imagine the hardships I had to face?! What do most people in their early twenties do? They get drunk! They do incredibly stupid things! But me? I had to take on so many burdens. I wasn't even allowed to mourn my father, because I had all these responsibilities foisted onto me!"

"I…I don't know what to say," Anne mumbled out.

Morgana sighed, his ears drooping. "Although I guess it's kinda understandable but…"

Akechi just sighed. "I had truly thought your intentions were more noble than that, Sae-san."

"She's lost control…" Futaba sighed with pity.

"That's putting it lightly." Ren then shook his head. "But no matter, we'll help her see the light!"

"Justice cannot yield to evil! I must win! No matter what!" Sae's Shadow shouted.


Ryuji's eyes were wide, "Yeah, no kidding!"

"Silence!" Sae snapped.

She glared hard at all the Phantom Thieves.

"All we need to do is to determine who's right… is battle," Sae declared.

Kouzeon swept through the area, stretching out as far as her signal could reach. Rise could detect the fuzzy auras that signaled people who were not Persona-users. There was an insane amount of them.

"Shido is really going all out," Rise stated.

She dismissed Kouzeon. She placed her hands on her hips, a frown forming on her face.

"This is like a small army."

Chie-senpai bit her lip, bouncing lightly on her feet. It was her way of fidgeting—a nervous tic.

"I hope they'll be okay," she said warily.

"Have faith in them, Chie," Akihiko-san said. "They've dealt with strong foes before."

"Don't get so cocky, Aki..." Shinjiro-san deadpanned.

"Who said anything about that?!" Akihiko-san barked back.

"Now, now... play nice, boys!" Rise teased.

"Come on, don't joke around like this," Chie-senpai chided. "We have to be alert! We have to make sure that Ren-kun makes it okay."

"You don't have to tell me twice," Shinjiro-san grumbled out, before looking over to Rise. "Kujikawa, can you figure out what's going on with Niijima's Shadow now?"

Rise held up a finger. "One sec."

She summoned Kouzeon again. She honed on Ken's signal, since his was the most familiar to her.

"It doesn't seem that they're battling yet," Rise murmured before she concentrated harder.

She could pick up little snippets of the conversation if she concentrated hard enough. It seemed like... Niijima's Shadow was challenging them now?

"This is so weird..." Rise mumbled to herself.

"Whatcha talking about, Rise-chan?" Chie-senpai asked.

"Well..." Rise trailed off for a moment; she needed it to gather her thoughts. "You remember how the Shadow self took on a form that resembled the host at first? Then it went berserk when the person denied their Shadow. Niijima's Shadow is giving me a reading like before the pre-berserk phase."

"Huh? Well... maybe the Shadows here just take on a humanoid form, then?" Chie-senpai theorized.

"That's not it," the two men said in unison.

Shinjiro-san then clarified, "Ken's reported that Kaneshiro took on a form of a humanoid fly. The case of Sakura was different, but they fought Sakura's cognition of Isshiki, which took the form of a sphinx."

"Maybe... she wants to play with them at first," Rise suggested.
"Given what Ken's mentioned about Nijima's Palace..." Akihiko-san frowned. "That would make a *lot* of sense."

Akihiko-san then let out a little grumble.

"I hate having to wait around like this," he complained, crossing his arms over his chest.

Shinjiro-san snorted, rolling his eyes at his best friend.

"You'll get your share of the action soon enough. Don't be so impatient, Aki."

---

A roulette wheel. It was too fitting with the Palace.

"A clash of brute strength is simply uncalled for on this stage," Sae's Shadow stated.

Makoto tensed up. Sae had made her appearance. Sae then smiled but it was devoid of warmth. It was smug, oozed confidence.

"Just what is her plan?" Yusuke asked.

"I wish I knew," Akechi murmured.

Ryuji then let out a frustrated growl, taking a few menacing steps towards Sae.

"No more coins or messing around!"

His arm then swiped through the air.

He declared, "We ain't following your damn rules!"

Sae just chuckled, her golden eyes glinting with amusement.

"Oh, you will. There is no room for negotiation. You will know... soon enough."

Then her image flickered, showing a brutish monster.

Makoto's eyes widened, taking a step backwards. "What was that?!"

"Now come at me!" Sae goaded with a smirk.

Makoto felt her chest squeeze in anxiety. She was so much worse than Makoto had thought. What had happened?

"Gladly!" Ren exclaimed, before pointing at Sae. "Let's take her out!"

Sae just sneered, "I'd like to see you *try.*"

"Be on your guard, everyone!" Morgana warned.

"Okay, let's do it! I'll back you guys up... no matter what!" Futaba shouted.

"Let's do this fair and square!" Sae declared.

"Sis! Stop lying to yourself, please!" Makoto cried out.

"What are you talking about?" Sae asked, then hissed, "I'm not lying to myself! You Phantom
Thieves initiate your own justice...this is mine! If you think that I will take it easy because you're my little sister...you're even more foolish than I thought!"

Makoto's eyes widened at that.

"I..." Makoto's voice was shaky.

"Silence!" Haru's voice was usually so gentle, but it was as sharp as a blade now.

She stalked forward, pointing her axe at Sae.

"You really have no idea, do you? What it means to watch someone you love deeply become merely a shadow of themselves?" she questioned.

Sae scowled, before spitting out, "Don't think to lecture me!"

"You really don't know how Queen feels. How much she's wanted to save you. You keep underestimating her," Ken added.

"Yes, that's right..." Akechi was suddenly standing right next to Makoto. "We'll save her... together!"

Makoto gave a numb nod before turning her eyes towards Sae. She could do this. She felt strangely calm about this.

"What's the matter? You may have the support from your friends...but you'll still always be useless!" taunted the Shadow.

"That's where you're wrong, Sis... I challenge you, because I know this is not what you want! Hollow victories, chasing after promotions—and for what? Are you happy where you are?"

Makoto then shook her head before placing a hand over her chest.

"I don't believe you are. I remember how you used to be. You were more than my big sister... you were closer to being my mom, because I can barely remember our real mother. I want you back, Sis! And I'll do whatever it takes to do it! I won't stand aside and let you make this mistake! I know that you're better than me in several ways. You were always a prodigy. It seemed everything I could do, you did better. Some people saw me as nothing more than your little sister. But I won't lose here! I refuse! I'll show you, Sis, that I'm not some useless little girl!"

"Pretty words—but I don't believe you can back up those words." Sae spat out.

"Just watch!" Makoto shouted.

She then lifted her hand, tearing off her mask.

"CHARGE, ANAT!"

Her new Persona appeared with a flash, eliciting a few gasps from her friends. But she couldn't help but notice that Ken just gave her a smile, like it was no surprise to him. Makoto quickly shook her head—she had to focus! She then pointed at Sae. Anat raised a hand.

A powerful nuclear blast bloomed to life, throwing Sae backwards.

This seemed to be the cue that her friends needed.
Morgana leapt through the air, slashing with his scimitar. He then jumped backwards, allowing Yusuke to cut in with a sweep of his katana. Milady's psy attack then lifted her to the air, making Sae easy pickings for Captain Kidd.

But before anyone else could strike, Sae hauled herself to her feet, before snapping her fingers.

"One against so many... let's even the odds, shall we?"

The roulette then began to spin.

"What the...?!" Futaba cried out.

"Now, let us play a game of roulette. The stakes will be... our lives. You may play safely, but the rewards will be unimpressive. Or you could risk it, and claim high rewards."

Then Sae flicked her hair over her shoulder.

"Of course, acts of violence are forbidden here. One must follow the rules."

Futaba made a frustrated sound then exclaimed, "We already told you that we're not playing by your rules anymore!"

Sae just shrugged in response.

"That's fine by me... such troublesome people will face the penalty."

"Just what is she talking about?" Ken asked.

"I don't know..." Ren then grimaced. "But I sure don't want to find out."

"We'll just have to tread carefully. Be careful, Joker!" Makoto said.

"The roulette though..." Futaba trailed off for a moment—you could hear the frown in her voice. "What are we supposed to do?"

"If I were to guess... we should be predicting where the ball should fall," Yusuke said.

Ryuji huffed. "Sorta like that dice game..."

Makoto had a bad feeling about this. Sae had cheated so many times during the Palace. Why should this be any different?

"Joker, we can't—"

"We have to go along with it for now," Morgana said grimly before flicking his gaze up at Prometheus. "Oracle, try and see if you can analyze anything!"

"Will do!" Futaba interjected.

"What will you bet? Are you going to go with a safer bet with smaller rewards or a high-risk bet with higher rewards?" Sae taunted.

"We'll do a safer bet." Ren then frowned, his eyebrows furrowing together. "I bet that it'll end on a... red number."

The roulette then began to slow down, a ball appearing out of nowhere. It seemed to stop at a red
number, earning cheers from Haru, Ryuji, and Anne—only for it to drop into a black number at the very last moment.

"Wha…?!” Futaba sputtered. "Is this for real?!”

"That's utterly ridiculous!” Yusuke protested.

"Oh, what a shame you lost. Perhaps you'll have better luck next time," Sae said mockingly.

Makoto suddenly felt the energy drain out of her. She gasped, before pressing a hand against her forehead. It felt like when the Shadows drained part of her lifeforce out of her, to restore damage. The damage they had managed to inflict onto Sae was completely reversed.

"You cheating little…!” Ryuji growled.

Enraged, the former track star charged at her blindly.

"Skull, NO!” Futaba shrieked.

But Ryuji didn't listen, swinging his bat at Sae. But a barrier suddenly appeared, reflecting the damage back onto Ryuji. The recoil was strong enough to send him reeling back, falling backwards.

"SKULL!” Ren shouted before whipping towards Morgana, "Dammit, Mona—"

"On it!” Morgana interrupted.

The cat sprinted over to Ryuji. He immediately summoned Zorro to cast Diaharan.

"You asked for it,” Sae said carelessly, before giving a shrug. "You broke the rules, thus—you'll be penalized. Those who cannot follow rules are not to be tolerated. That is simply how society works."

Sae really felt that way? Makoto felt sick to her stomach.

"You're the cheater!” Ryuji seethed, hauling himself to his feet.

"Skull, don't move so fast! I'm not done with you!” Morgana scolded.

"This isn't working,” Ren muttered as everyone else crowded close to him.

"We have to figure out something, though! Did any of you figure out anything?” Haru inquired.

"The ball seemed to float over a red number. For a moment but... at the last moment, it rolled to black. Isn't that suspicious?” Ken said quietly.

"That must be part of the trick!” Yusuke exclaimed. "But... we can't just accuse her."

Akechi rubbed his chin, "So, we'll catch her in the act. After all, she is a lawyer. Blind accusations are powerless in court unless you have evidence."

"But... what is the trick? Do any of you guys have an idea…? I'm stumped." Anne asked tentatively.

"It seemed to float.” Ren repeated Ken's words. "Like… a glass lid or something."
"Ah! That makes perfect sense!" Haru's eyes went wide.

"This is what we'll do." Ren lowered his voice. "We'll keep up the act but Ace, we need you to snipe the glass lid at the right moment. Oracle, when the time comes... you'll give her hell. We'll distract her—now, go!"

"Are you ready to bet?" Sae called out to them.

"Hold your horses! After what happened, I have to think over this carefully," Ren exclaimed.

Ren was really milking his dramatic tendencies. At least it was distracting Sae. Using her peripheral vision, Makoto could see Ken climb up the edge before he hid behind one of the large golden pots. She hoped that Sae didn't catch him. She doubted that she'd take kindly to the plan.

Sae tapped her foot impatiently. "We don't have all day. Society waits for no one."

"Fine, fine..." Ren sighed gustily, shaking his head. "So pushy. I'm feeling lucky. How about we go with the ball landing between... one to twelve?"

"After that kind of blunder?" Sae just chuckled, a confident smirk appearing on her face. "Well, let's find out!"

At the snap of Sae's fingers, the roulette began to spin. Makoto couldn't help but tense up; it took all of her willpower not to look at where Ken was hiding. Eventually the roulette then slowed down. There was the sound of a bullet being fired. A moment later, glass shattered and the ball fell onto the slot that read 11.

"Wha... WHAT?!"

Sae actually staggered back, shock written all over her face. Then she suddenly fell to her knees.

"Gotcha!" Futaba crowed. "Everyone!"

They surrounded Sae, before pointed their guns at her. Then Futaba spoke again.

"What was that about playing fair and square, huh?! You were totally cheating! Like always! You're nothing but a spoiled brat, throwing a temper tantrum when it just so happens that you're on the losing end!" Futaba demanded.

Sae let out a frustrated growl, her shoulders shaking with anger.

Ken looked nervously at Sae. "Uh, Oracle, you might want to calm d—"

"No way, Ace! I'm just getting warmed up! You know why you cheat? It's because you're weak. You degrade us, insult us, calling us losers. But who's the real loser?! You can't even lose with grace. You're just a wimp! Something who can't ever win unless she cheats her way to it! And to hell if you hurt innocent people because of it! You disgust me!" Futaba spat out.

"Shut up... SHUT UP! SHUT UPPP!" Sae screeched, managing to push herself up slightly.

Then a dark aura flared around her for a moment. What Sae was wearing... it was definitely different. She resembled an almost demonic knight, decked out in black spiked armor. Instead of a hand, she had a rocket launcher. In her other hand, she held a red sword.

"Sis?!" Makoto cried out.
Yusuke took an uncertain step backwards. "What on earth?"

"That moment before then..." Makoto murmured. "It wasn't my imagination."

Ken added, "I was wondering about that. After from what we've faced before."

Sae then let out a demonic screech, making them all wince.

"Cheating? Unfair?! SILENCE! This is my world!"

"Annnnd she's lost her marbles." Ren said dryly.

Ryuji grumbled out, "More like Queen's temper runs in the family."

Makoto shot him a flat look. "I'm right here, you know."

"If you want a fair fight... then I'll give it to you!" Sae spat out, ignoring their little banter. "To hell with this game!"

Then she slammed down her sword.

"But I think that with so many adversaries, I require a partner of my own!"

"Bring it on!" Futaba shouted. "We'll take you down, no matter what! No matter what big guns you whip out!"

But a pool of black formed, a familiar figure emerging from it. His appearance contrasted with Sae's, as he was decked out in his police uniform once more. But he wielded some kind of high-tech tonfa, instead of the police baton from before.

Makoto just bit her lip. Not again...

"Sae-san... your father again?" Akechi asked.

"Silence, crooks!" he barked out, before his grip on his tonfas tightened, "I will bring you to justice! Your victory from before...nothing but a fluke!"

He then pointed at Sae. A blue forcefield suddenly sprung up around her.

"Oracle, what was that?" Ren demanded before looking towards Prometheus.

"A barrier. I don't see any weak spots...you'll probably have to take him down before Nijima!" Futaba reported.

"Well that's just great," Ren deadpanned.

"Be on your guard, everyone! He's most likely stronger than before!" Haru exclaimed.

"You don't have to tell us twice," Ken quipped.

Ryuji hefted his weapon onto his shoulder. "Let's kick some ass!"

"I couldn't have said it better, Skull!" Ren said with a grin.

Morgana summoned a gust of air, launching him into the air. He then slashed down with his scimitar. The cognition of Dad quickly blocked with his tonfa. But then Ryuji cut in, swinging his bat at his kneecaps. The blow downed him, making him fall to one knee with a grunt.
"Skull, Mona, get back!" Haru shouted before she tore off her mask. "Milady!"

Ryuji and Morgana scrambled out of the way as Milady fired away.

"I don't see why you think you have the moral high ground," Sae spat out. "As long as you win… it doesn't matter what methods you use. Don't you have the same philosophy?"

"Hell no!" Ryuji snapped.

"Don't you dare compare the two of us!" Yusuke added furiously, a fierce glower on his face. "We're not cheating and manipulating our way to victory!"

"We only change hearts to help people! People who were helpless in their situation!" Makoto exclaimed.

Sae just would not acknowledge her actions. She was deflecting. Makoto gritted her teeth. She had to get to Sae… she had to.

"Nothing but excuses! I will take you down!" vowed the cognition. "No matter what! You're nothing but disgusting criminals! You control the hearts of others to achieve your own goals!"

"Everyone, they won't back down!" Ren barked out. "And either will we! Go all out!"

"You're so arrogant," the cognition spat out. "This will not be like before. Lady Sae and I will emerge victorious!"

"You're one to talk about arrogance!" Akechi called out. "Robin Hood!"

But the cognition of her dad charged forward, dodging Robin Hood's Megidola spell with ease. There was a resounding crack as Akechi was struck hard in the face. The force was strong enough to send Akechi stumbling to the ground. Then he seemed to twist the handle of his tonfa. It seemed to transform before their eyes, before he aimed it at Akechi.

A gunshot rang out.

Akechi rolled to the side, clutching his arm as his face contorted with pain. Red spread from his shoulder, staining the snowy white fabric.

But before the cognition of her dad could make another move, he was cut off by a barrage of bullets, courtesy of both Ken and Haru. He jumped backwards to dodge the attack, but Makoto was ready for him.

"Charge, Anat!" she exclaimed, tearing off her mask.

The nuclear spell's blast caught him off guard. Then Ken darted forward, jabbing forward. But as the cognition moved to block the strike, Ken suddenly swung his spear upwards, whapping him hard in the face.

Ken then quipped, "They never protect the face."

The cognition of Dad growled.

"You…!"

He was abruptly cut off by Captain Kidd crashing against him. Mona then somersaulted off of Captain Kidd, a burst of wind flaring to life. Yusuke and Anne then proceeded to launch their own
attacks—fierce strikes from Kamu Susano-o and an inferno from Hecate.

But that left… she whipped around to see her boyfriend carefully helping up Akechi.

"I—" Akechi then stopped short. "Thank you. I didn't expect you to come to my rescue."

"Like I was going to just stand there and let him shoot you down," Ken muttered. "But you need to be less cocky. What's the saying? Pride cometh before one's fall?"

Akechi just quirked an eyebrow, "Some sources say it's 'pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.'"

"Same thing," Ken huffed with a roll of his eyes.

Makoto spoke up, "He's strong. It does make sense, though… Sis could never beat Dad in a spar before he died."

"Queen."

Makoto turned her head to look at Akechi.

"Your father taught you aikido, did he not? I can see it in his stance."

Makoto slowly nodded.

Ken's eyes lit up in recognition. "Ah, I see what you mean. That means you know his fighting style the best out of all of us, right?"

"What?! That's—Dad was at a much higher level than me! I can't beat him! There's simply no way!" Makoto shook her head in protest.

"Have you not heard of the phrase 'the student surpasses the master'?" Akechi asked. "You can, Niijima-san. Or was your speech to Sae-san nothing but mindless boasting?"

"No… it wasn't," she uttered quietly.

"You can do it, Queen."

"Queen."

"You can do it, Queen." Ken smiled at her for a moment, before he glanced up at Prometheus. "Oracle, do you have any data on him?"

"Hmm… his specs lean towards being a glass cannon."

"Ugh, I mean he's fast and strong, stupid! But he'll probably drop like a rock if you get a good punch in," Futaba explained.

Akechi winced. "I can definitely attest to the strong part."

"Speaking of that…"

"That's not necessary, you should reserve your strength for something graver—"

"Graver than a shot to the shoulder? Last time I checked that's pretty grave. Didn't think you were the reckless type, Crow," Ken replied.
"But it's just a scratch. I've dealt with worse; I can assure you," Akechi stated.

Ken made a frustrated sound. "Quit being so stubborn."

"Why do you care so much?" he suddenly asked, only to trail off with. "I thought…"

Ken blew his bangs out of his face.

"You really think I wouldn't care? After you got shot? I would think after working together for the past few weeks, you'd know I'm not heartless," Ken said before frowning.

Akechi's lips suddenly quirked into a smile. A genuine one, not that saccharine smile he saved for TV broadcasts.

"You deride me for being stubborn but you are quite stubborn yourself, Ace," Akechi quipped.

"Takes one to know one," Makoto said wearily.

"I suppose," Akechi said haltingly.

"Queen!" Futaba abruptly called out to her. "I think I've got something. Break his stance, and he'll come crashing down."

Makoto swallowed hard.

"Easier said than done, Oracle."

She then sighed, looking towards the cognition of her father. She was one of the faster people on the team. But Makoto couldn't help but feel doubtful.

"I know, I know. But you can do it, Queen! I know you can!" Futaba encouraged.

At least she had a vote of confidence.

But just how could she get a hit in? Her eyes then drifted over to Sae. She needed to do it though. They had to properly confront Sae.

"Queen, what's the plan?" Ren asked.

"I need to get in close. But can you get him on the defensive?" Makoto asked.

She hated having to make up plans on the fly, but she really had no choice here.

Ren just nodded, giving her a thumbs up.

"Sounds like a good plan!"

"Joker, this is hardly a plan."

"Sometimes you gotta think on your feet. We'll find a way to take him down, don't worry, Queen."

Makoto sighed, "I hope you're right, Joker."

"We could use some help though, Oracle!" Ren called up to Futaba.

"Needy, needy... but here I go! Speed up!" Futaba exclaimed.
Green light shimmered around them, and Makoto could feel a lightness in her limbs now.

"Follow my lead, everyone!" Ren shouted, before tearing off his mask. "Seth!"

The dragon Ren summoned divebombed at the cognition of her dad, which he easily dodged by jumping backwards.

Her other friends struck. Hecate's flames intertwined with the bullets produced by Milady. Captain Kidd and Kamu Susano-o's powerful strikes caused tremors in the ground, but the cognition of her dad stood firm. Morgana had to swap from unleashing powerful gusts of wind to healing up everyone. Futaba hovered above their heads, occasionally healing them or offering them some kind of power up.

Futaba's advice echoed in her mind. *Break his stance.*

But how? Makoto found herself hovering at the edges.

Ren suddenly charged forward, shooting with his pistol. The cognition of her dad just narrowed his eyes before he lunged for Ren. But then Ken cut in, blocking the blow with his spear. The cognition pressed forward, but Ken suddenly jerked his arm up, sending the tonfa flying.

Light suddenly flared, making the cognition cry out. He stumbled backwards before he threw an arm over his eyes.

"Queen, now!" Akechi shouted.

Makoto darted forward, sweeping with her leg. The cognition was sent crashing down.

"Fox! Noir! You'll help me out, won't you?" She exclaimed, turning to look at her friends.

"Do you need to ask?" Yusuke questioned with a near scoff.

"Of course, Queen!" Haru just smiled.

"Y-You cannot..." the cognition said weakly, struggling to sit up.

"Watch us! MILADY!" Haru charged forward.

Milady's psychic spell lifted the cognition in the air.

"KAMU SUSANO-O!"

Kamu Susano-o slashed through the air several times, which the cognition was helpless to dodge.

"Goodbye, Dad," Makoto whispered.

Milady dropped the psychic spell. Makoto tore off her mask.

"ANAT!" she cried out.

The cognition of her dad barely hit the ground when the nuclear spell exploded.

The blue shield finally disappeared.

"What?! But how?" Sae screeched.

They all stared Sae's shadow down. Akechi just smirked at her.
"Are you finally ready to face us head on?" Akechi scoffed.

"You keep on underestimat'in' us! That's your biggest mistake!" Ryuji huffed.

Anne added, "No more hiding!"

"Fine, I'll crush you myself!" Sae growled.

"Bring it on! We'll take you on!" Ren goaded with a smirk.

Sae's response was to unleash a barrage of bullets from her rocket launcher, forcing them to scatter.

"You just don't understand—what I've had to do... to just survive! Nobody understands—!"

Makoto closed her eyes. Why hadn't Sae just talked to her? She would've listened. Maybe Sae wouldn't have turned out so warped if she had some support.

Then Sae suddenly shook her head, before charging forward. She swung wildly at Ren, but Haru quickly threw up a shield. She let out a sharp cry, stumbling backwards. But in the last moment, she caught herself. Ren took a moment to summon Kushinada-Hime, who lifted her arms. Red light shimmered around all of them, strengthening them.

Makoto couldn't focus on the past though; she had to focus on the present and the future. Sae would never feel this way again. Not if she had anything to say about it.

Morgana summoned Zorro, who whipped up a fierce gale. But Sae held fast, digging in her heels. She then charged forward.

"Kamu Susano-o!" Yusuke shouted.

A thin layer of ice suddenly appeared on the ground, causing Sae to slip and fall.

"Nice, Fox!" Futaba cheered.

Sae let out a frustrated growl, before digging her sword into the ice and using her sword as a crutch.

Several arrows of light cut through the air, a few digging into her thigh.

And yet, Makoto couldn't help but hesitate at joining the fray.

"Queen, you gotta snap out of this!"

Makoto jumped at the sound of Futaba's voice.

"I know this is not easy. But you've gotta! Your sis won't see sense any other way!"

Was there no other way though? They didn't have to fight Mishima.

Makoto shook her head. She had to just take the plunge. This was for Sae's own good.

"Stop looking at me like that! You—you're no longer my little sister! You're my enemy!" Sae snarled.

Ken suddenly darted in between them, blocking Sae's blow with the shaft of his spear. He turned slightly, catching Makoto's eye. Then he gave a hard shove, before swinging his spear at Sae's
knees. Ken jumped to the side just as Anat appeared. The nuclear spell sent Sae sprawling.

"Nice move," Ken murmured.

"It only happened because you gave me an opening," Makoto muttered.

What was she going to do? It felt like no matter what, Sae would hold fast. That was just the type of person Sae was: stubborn and strong.

The battle seemed to drag on and on. And even though Sae was taking on nine enemies, she managed to keep up. Morgana and Ken had to keep switching from unleashing attacks to heal up everyone. It didn't matter how many brutal attacks from Ryuji and Yusuke. Or the amount of gun attacks from Haru and Ken. Or the variety of spells that Ren flung at her, or the powerful flames that Anne produced. She even withstood almighty spells from Akechi.

But Ren got a lucky shot, knocking Sae down to one knee.

"I'm... not done yet..." She breathed out.

Makoto ran forward.

"Sis! Please listen to me!"

Sae let out a frustrated growl before staggering to her feet.

"Why, so you can preach at me about how righteous you are and how wrong I am?! What does my little sister know?!"

"No, Sis!" Makoto shook her head fervently. "I told you before, I will always be on your side! No matter what! I'm doing this because I love you."

Sae seemed to falter, before shaking her head again.

She then hissed out, "Don't lie to me!"

She started to charge towards Makoto, only to be cut off by Hecate bombarding Sae with several fireballs.

"But it's true, Sis! I meant what I said before. I only want you back, Sis," Makoto begged.

"Well, keep wishing!" Sae snarled out before giving Hecate a swipe of her sword.

"You compared your actions to what we do before," Makoto continued.

She was forced to jump backwards as Sae launched another attack with her rocket launcher. Makoto coughed as black smoke began to pour out due to the rocket striking the ground.

"There's nothing wrong with exposing truths that otherwise would've been protected by the law!" Makoto persisted. "That's what we aim to do! We want to punish criminals who are protected by the system!"

Sae seemed to freeze at that, allowing Captain Kidd to sweep in with a fierce attack. With a burst of wind, Morgana leapt off Captain Kidd and slashed down.

"Remember how you felt when you first decided you wanted to be a prosecutor? Don't you remember the look on Dad's face when you told him your goal?"
She clutched her chest, silently praying that her words would reach her. She didn't want her words to fall on deaf ears.

"Stop dredging up the past! I'm not who I used to be!" Sae shouted.

Bolts of lightning stopped Sae in her tracks, courtesy of Ren. Kamu Susano-o then swept in, knocking Sae off her feet.

"You told me that you wanted to provide defendants a fighting chance!" Akechi called out to her, "Because nobody else could help them. Sae-san, do you still feel that way? Or do you just care about tallying up wins now?"

"You wanted to reform the system...just like we do!" Makoto continued, "Please try to remember, Sis! I know you still have your justice. Not this twisted sense of it... I know it's still in there!"

"I..." Sae suddenly let out a pained groan, struggling to her feet. "I don't know..."

A black aura suddenly surrounded her. When it faded away, it revealed Sae's original form.

"Sis!" Makoto cried out, racing over to her sister's side.

She dropped to her knees in front of Sae, grabbing Sae's hands. They were clammy and cold to the touch, but Makoto didn't care.

"Makoto..." Sae whispered. "I... I don't know what to believe."

"Sis, listen to me," Makoto said, giving Sae's hands a tight squeeze. "I mean every word I said. I know that you still have a sense of justice. You just lost your way, because of how Dad's death thrust you in a role that you just weren't ready for."

Makoto felt hot tears sting at her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Sis...I'm so sorry. I didn't know the pain you were going through. I was too wrapped up in my own grief and then wanting to do you proud. You always seemed so strong. You seemed so smart and capable. I didn't know what you were going through." She bowed her head then added shakily, "F-Forgive me..."

She had to reach out to Sae. Somehow...

"I lost my sense of justice too," Makoto said softly. "I turned away from the truth, because I wanted to please the higher ups so badly. But I learned that's no way to live. To willingly blind yourself. You... You understand that, do you, Sis?"

"I..."

"I want you to be able to lean on me too, Sis. In the real world... let's talk this out."

Ryuji suddenly cleared his throat, a sheepish smile on his face as he held up the briefcase that Makoto had planted.

"Uhh... Fox and I got the Treasure."

"Good job, Skull!" Morgana complimented.

Akechi smiled, looking pleased.
"We just need to make our escape," Akechi stated. "Sae-san will be safe from any attempts on her life now. She won't be able to have a mental shutdown."

Then his eyes flickered to Ren.

"Though I must say, this deal we've made… has been quite the experience. I still can't believe that I, a detective, have been working alongside the infamous Phantom Thieves."

Ryuji huffed. "Yeah, yeah…"

"We could always continue," Morgana piped up.

"No, none of that." Akechi smiled thinly. "Ace tried that earlier today. We made a promise, no?"

"Was worth a try…" Anne gave a weak giggle.

"Now, we just need to get out of here. We still need to actually **steal** Niijima-san's Treasure." Then Ken looked to Makoto. "Queen?"

Makoto swallowed hard before she shakily stood up.

"Yes, I know. Let's go—"

Futaba suddenly gasped.

"G-Guys! This is bad. **Really** bad!"

It was time.

---

It was showtime. Ren schooled his expression to be neutral as Futaba suddenly stiffened.

She then pressed both hands to her temples, concentrating.

"G-Guys!" She squeaked out, then bit her lip, "This is bad. **Really** bad!"

"What's wrong, Oracle?" Ken asked.

Ryuji demanded, "Yeah seriously, what's going on?!!"

"Enemies ahead! Lots and lots of them! Shadows and… humans?! How did they get here?" Futaba reported.

Futaba then sucked in a breath.

"This is bad… I can sense the Shadows getting all riled up!"

"W-What?" Haru's eyes widened. "But how...?"

"And why are all the Shadows all agitated?" Makoto inquired, before she shook her head. "Never mind that. Our priority is to escape from here."

"We have had some... interesting escapes, but none like this," Yusuke stated.

Ryuji just grimaced. "But with all these people crawling around... This won't be easy."

"Let me be a distraction," Ren spoke up before surveying his friends. "I can lead them off. You
guys can get to safety and I'll rendezvous with you. The usual spot, yeah?"

"What?! B-But Joker, that's too dangerous—!" Anne squeaked out.

For someone who wasn't the best actress, Anne was definitely bringing her A-game. Her big blue eyes were the size of dinner plates, suddenly glassy. Both her bottom lip and hands trembled.

"Believe in him, Panther," Ryuji said firmly. "This guy has wigged his way outta impossible situations time and time again. He'll come back to us, yeah?"

Ryuji's eyes then met Ren's as he handed over the fake Treasure.

"Of course, I will," Ren said firmly.

Ken sighed, "Don't do anything too reckless."

Morgana then huffed out a laugh.

"You might as well ask him to give up coffee. Or go to bed on time."

"You wound me, both of you!" Ren teased.

"They're just speaking the truth," Yusuke quipped with a fond smile.

"Joker… please be careful. We can't lose you," Makoto cautioned.

"Same goes for all of you. You've become important to me. All of you," Ren said seriously.

He then reached into his pockets, pulling out several smoke bombs.

"Break into three groups. Mona, you're in charge of Group A. Skull and Panther, you'll be with him. Queen, you'll lead Group B. You've got Fox and Noir with you. And Group C… Ace, you lead. You'll take Crow and Oracle with you."

These were the last of his smoke bombs. Thankfully Kawakami had scrounged him up some free time today so he could craft these. But it'd be worth it if it got his friends out of a scrape. His conversation with Ryuji and Anne yesterday still burned in his mind. If they were chased by Shido's men, maybe this will help them get a quick getaway.

The atmosphere was heavy. This was it. His friends all looked at him solemnly, worry clear in their eyes.

Anne then looked at him sternly.

"Joker, if you don't come back to us, I'll never forgive you!"

Determination burned in her eyes. Despite what Anne said, he didn't always know what to say. But hey, actions spoke louder than words.

He grabbed her by the shoulders, drawing a squeak from her. He then captured her lips, giving her a quick, yet intense kiss. For a moment, he just focused on the girl in his arms. It was nice but unfortunately, they had more important things to take care of.

He released Anne from his embrace. Her expression was dreamy, her eyes slightly glazed and a pink flush to her cheeks.
He winked at her. "That's a promise, my lady."

Then he turned on his heel and ran.

Truth be told, Ren didn't really know where he was going. Thank goodness for Futaba. He didn't know what he'd do without her. She navigated him to the main area of the casino.

Ren fought the urge to smirk. Time to have some fun.

The crowd murmured uncertainly as he leapt back and forth. Ren suddenly stopped, watching the men in black push their way through. Shido was really pulling the big guns, wasn't he? Ren allowed a smirk to curve at his lips.

"Looking for me?" Ren called out, waggling the fake Treasure to add the effect. "Wow, you guys are simply terrible at your jobs!"

"It's him! Get him!" one man shouted.

"Gotta ran faster than that to catch me, boys!" Ren taunted, before allowing another smirk to appear across his face.

He gave a jaunty little wave. Because hey, he might as well have fun with this.

"See ya!"

He then hightailed it out of there. Over Futaba's comm, his friends offered their commentary.

"Excellent work, Joker," Morgana complimented him. "Quite a show you gave them."

"They'll be out for blood, though. Did you really have to challenge them like that? That's just asking for trouble." Ken sighed.

"Don't be such a killjoy, Ace," Ryuji groaned.

Ken quickly retorted with, "Excuse me for being cautious."

Makoto chided, "That's enough, both of you."

"But Mona's right! You were great out there, Joker!" Anne cheered.

"Only you could do that, Joker." Yusuke then added, "Skull can only dream of pulling that kind of feat."

"Oh, shuddup Inari!" Ryuji snapped.

Haru just laughed. "Someone's feeling lively today."

"Enough, enough." Akechi laughed. "We need to slip off to the rendezvous, remember? I'd hate to keep Joker waiting!"

Whatever you say, traitor. At least Ren didn't have to smother the urge to scowl.

"I'll meet you guys there. See you soon! Focus on meeting up outside!" Ren promised.

"There he is!" came a shout.

"And this is the part where I run," Ren muttered under his breath.
"Really, Joker? You make the lamest jokes sometimes." Futaba snorted.

"Uh, excuse me, but I'm a comedy genius," Ren huffed as he made a dash for freedom. "My name's Joker after all."

"That's very debatable," Ken snarked.

Ren could practically see him shaking his head.

Ren retorted, "You're the last person to critique my jokes, you don't have a sense of humor."

"Now is really not the time for this!" Makoto scoffed.

He made it to a balcony, only to be cut off by a group of Shadows.

"Take 'em down, Joker!" Anne cheered.

He smirked, feeling a surge of confidence. He couldn't let his girlfriend down after all.

He leapt forward, his fingers already grasping on the edges of the Shadow's mask. He tore it off, revealing a Shadow he's never seen before.

It was almost like a bull… robot? Weird. But then again, he's fought some really weird Shadows. Ren didn't think anything could beat that demon on a toilet or weird dick slime Shadow they had fought at Kamoshida's Palace.

Fire suddenly shot out of his eyes and Ren had to jump backwards. Ren reached up to tear off his mask, only for a voice to echo in his mind.

"Have you forgotten me?"

Wait…

Arsène?

You have done well these past few months, channeling your furious power. Now use that power… to defeat the enemies before you! Call my name... and my power will be yours to command once more!

"ARSÈNE!" Ren shouted.

Arsène appeared with a flash. Ren couldn't help but grin. Yeah, it was time to kick some Shadow ass.

Arsène was strong. Much stronger. He used powerful curse spells, was able to block the Shadows' attacks by shielding himself with his wings… It wasn't long before the Shadows fell.

He couldn't believe it. It was as his Persona had promised. But Arsene felt stronger somehow. How? Ren wasn't entirely sure. But he had a feeling that he'd find out. Very soon.

Arsène suddenly appeared before him.

"Your fate… will soon be determined. Recall everything. Remember the bonds you've forged with your friends."

His friends' faces flashed in his minds. Yes… he had faith in them. Not just his fellow partners-in-
crime. All of his Confidants.

"If you are fated to continue beyond this point... then we surely will meet again."

He was going to survive. He'd make Nijijima believe in him.

"Hello? Are you just gonna stand there, gawking?"

"Hey, I'm allowed to rest a little, aren't I? Where to now, Oracle?" Ren asked.

"Uhh—the door in front of you?"

"Someone's feeling snarky today," Ren quipped, but he ran for the door.

He had to duck and sneak around Shido's men. But it was all too easy for him, with how he's honed these skills for months now.

"So... where to now, Oracle?" Ren asked as he burst through the door.

Nothing.

Ren frowned, before cautiously speaking.

"Oracle?"

No answer. _Crap._

It must be because of them dodging Shido's men. Damn. Ren really hoped that she and Ken were okay.

What if Anne had been right?

No... he couldn't worry about that. Not now, he had to focus on the mission right now, and he had no navigator. Time to fall back to his default plan: winging it.

Shido really wasn't pulling any of the stops when it came to this operation. It hammered in how desperate he was to take them down.

Ken sighed, looking back in the direction of where they had come from. He really hoped that Ren would be okay.

"This is really insane," Anne muttered, hugging herself for a moment.

Ryuji shook his head, "Yeah, no kidding!"

"Come on, guys, no bickering." Morgana's voice took the air of a stern teacher. "We have to get to the meeting point! Joker's waiting for us!"

Sometimes it amazed him how much of an act he and his friends were putting up.

Ken forced himself to look at Morgana. "Right. We'll meet you there."

Ryuji flashed them all a big grin before giving a quick salute.

"See ya on the other side!"
The original Phantom Thieves then took off, tearing down the path. Ken found his eyes drifting to his girlfriend, who was looking back to where they had fought Nijima-san. A soft sigh escaped her lips.

Haru nudged Makoto in the side.

"Queen?"

"I… I'm fine." Makoto closed her eyes for a moment. "I just hoped that I reached out to Sis…"

"I'm sure you did, Queen." Yusuke sighed.

Ken grabbed her by the arm.

"Queen, have faith in yourself. What you said to your sister...came from your heart. If she isn't too far gone, as you believe, your words should reach her."

"But don't forget that we still have things to do," Akechi stated.

Ken shot him an irritated glare. That was really not helping.

But then Makoto looked to him, her expression unreadable. She didn't say anything. Instead she grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket, pulling him down for a kiss. Ken's hands moved up to cradle her face.

For a moment the world seemed to fade away. The stress and worry over this past month just...melted away. Then Makoto suddenly broke off the kiss.

"You're right, Ace," she said softly before she suddenly coughed. "And you, Crow."

But then she smiled. Makoto really did have a beautiful smile. Especially when she felt confident.

"So… I'll see you soon. Keep Oracle out of trouble!"

"Hey!" Futaba puffed up in anger. "What's that supposed to mean?!"

"You could not do this when I have a sketchpad in hand?" Yusuke complained. "How inconsiderate of you."

Makoto rolled her eyes, before grabbing onto Yusuke's sleeve.

"Come on, let's get going already."

Ken coughed before glancing to Futaba and Akechi.

"Jeez, Queen really pulled a shoujo move on you back there," Futaba teased. "You're speechless."

Ken rolled his eyes.

"Moving on. You need to keep an eye on Joker."

"But—"

"Oracle." He shot her a glare.

Futaba huffed before pouting for a moment.
"You're no fun."

Akechi just chuckled, "I believe Queen thinks otherwise."

Ken just groaned, "Oh great... you too."

Akechi just smiled innocently.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Ace," he lightly teased.

"Ugh..." Ken grumbled.

Even Akechi delighted in teasing him... wonderful.

But they headed off. Unfortunately, they had to stop ever so often so that Futaba could communicate with Ren. Especially with how he ended up having to fight a Shadow at one point.

"So this is Arsène, huh?" Futaba clenched her hands into fists, "His power level... it's over eight thousand!"

Akechi stared blankly. "I... do not understand."

"Um—hello? Have you never watched Phoenix Ball Z?"

"I cannot say I have," he said sheepishly.

"You uncultured swine!" Futaba gasped.

"Come on, we got to go. You can scold Crow for not watching that show later. How far are we?" Ken chided.

"Hmm..." Futaba pressed both hands against her temples. "I'd say about...two thirds?"

Akechi straightened up. "Shall we get going then—"

The loud sound of pounding footsteps cut him off.

It was a group of ten men. One of the men pressed a finger against his ear.

"This is Sector Four. We've located the secondary target."

What... target?

Ken quickly shook his head.

He couldn't worry about that now! They had to get out. Now.

"Secondary target?" Futaba asked numbly.

"No time for that, move!" Ken said sharply.

"But what about Joker?! He's counting on me!" Futaba protested.

Akechi interjected. "He's known for working on the fly. We must get to safety!"

"We can't take any chances! Come on!" Ken agreed.
"Stop! Or we'll shoot!" One man shouted.

"What I wouldn't give for Noir to be here..." Futaba moaned out/ "I know we can't really be busting our Personas with them but why not shoot at them?"

"I'd rather not," Ken said.

He preferred to use Kala-Nemi's gun attacks over shooting his gun. And even when they fought Strega, it was still different... they were rogue Persona-users; besides that, they had used their Personas to fight against Strega, not their weapons. But these guys... they were just humans.

"It's best not to. We may be held liable by the law if we attack them," Akechi seconded.

"Oh sure, but they can shoot at us," Futaba griped.

Ken just grabbed her arm and dragged her along with him. They ran for god knew how long. Ken honestly wished that Ren had given them a Goho-M instead of a smoke bomb...

"Up there!" Akechi pointed above. "Perhaps we can find one of those vents our leader seems so fond of climbing through..."

Ken nodded, "Good idea."

Then he pulled out one of the smoke bombs that Ren gave him and threw it in the direction of the men.

The moment it struck the ground, black smoke began to pour out. It was chaos—men shouting in disarray, a couple of stray bullets. Ken grabbed Futaba by the hand, before giving her a boost.

This wasn't good. This was not good. Futaba already was exhausted, panting and sweating.

"I can... find an escape route." Futaba gasped out, "We just gotta get far enough."

Akechi frowned. "I hope Joker is all right."

Out of the corner of Ken's eye, he saw the men pointing their guns at them. Without thinking, he shoved both Futaba and Akechi to the ground. Most of the bullets just ricocheted off the wall, bouncing away from them. But one managed to nick his shoulder.

Ken sunk to his knees, biting down on his lower lip so not to scream.

Futaba scrambled to her feet.

"Ace!"

Ken grimaced, before concentrating to heal his shoulder.

"I'm fine," he lied as he tried not to grimace.

God, and Shinjiro-san took two bullets head on. One right in the chest. How did he do it?

"C-Come on, we gotta get moving..." Ken said.

But the men still gave chase. And even now, Ken couldn't decide just which of them they were after. A part of Ken wanted to use the second smoke bomb, but he couldn't help but hesitate. They didn't know how close they were to the exit. Futaba can't pinpoint the meet-up place like this...
"This isn't good," Akechi said grimly, turning his head to look at the men. "We must come up with a strategy and fast."

"No duh!" Futaba snapped out.

Ken looked over his shoulder and then back to his companions.

"There's so many of them… and they have one target, apparently..." he mumbled out.

"Allow me to act as a diversion, then. Just think of it as thanks for earlier," Akechi stated as he cracked a smile.

"Did you fall and hit your head, Crow?!" Ken had to stop and stare in disbelief.

Akechi just tilted his head. "Ah, I didn't know you cared so much, Ace."

"You realize that this will just encourage you to be shot at more right?" he questioned the high school detective.

What was his angle? Did Akechi even know about this? And if he managed to lead off the men, this meant that there would be less of a chance of success of whoever the target was being captured.

Or maybe Shido hadn't even told him about this.

"That's fine. You two need to get to safety. Get in contact with Joker." Akechi cracked a wry smile. "Hopefully he's not too lost without you, Oracle."

Without waiting for Ken or Futaba to say anything else, he turned on his heel and ran towards the men.

Something inside of Ken rebelled against just letting Akechi running off like that. He had felt hollow when Takaya had died… maybe that was it.

"Wait, Crow!"

The moment Akechi whipped around to face him, Ken threw him the remaining smoke bomb; he barely managed to catch it. Akechi looked to him in surprise.

"Don't do anything stupid," Ken added.

Determination filled Akechi's face.

"Likewise, to you."

"Ace..." Futaba turned her head to look at Ken. "Why did you do that?"

"Let me get back to you on that when I figure that out." Ken sighed.

Futaba just snorted.

"You're unbelievable. For someone who's such a grump sometimes, you can also be too nice for your own good..." she quipped.

Ken opened his mouth to reply, only to shut it when they heard a shout, "Don't let them out of your sight!"
"Uh-oh... come on, Oracle!"

He quickly looked over his shoulder. Three men. Akechi must have managed to get the attention of the majority of them, then.

Some more gunshots. Ken managed to dodge, but Futaba wasn't so lucky. Her pained scream rattled in Ken's ears. He whipped around to see Futaba on the ground, whimpering as she clutched her shoulder.

"Oracle!"

"One wrong move and she dies."

One man stalked forward, pointing a gun right at Ken's chest. His heart started to hammer hard against his chest. His eyes darted to Futaba, with the other two men pointing their guns at her.

"Drop your weapons. Now."

One man stepped forward, yanking Futaba up by her hair, which made her yelp.

No, no, no… Ken's legs almost gave way.

"Do I have to repeat myself or are you truly stupid?" the man said coldly.

Ken squeezed his eyes shut for a moment before he dropped his spear. Then he reached for the gun holster and drew out his gun. It joined his spear.

"What do you want?"

He had to stall for time. Maybe if he talked, it could provide a distraction big enough for Futaba to break free. His eyes darted to Futaba once more. She was shaking.

Of course she was scared! God, how could he be so stupid? Why hadn't he made sure that Futaba was in front of him?! Maybe then, he could've shielded Futaba at least.

"It's not what we want," the third man sneered. "We're just following orders."

Of course. But why? What did Shido want?

"I didn't think she'd be such a pipsqueak, though," her captor remarked, his tone almost idle as if he was discussing the weather.

Ken wanted to summon Kala-Nemi so badly, sic his Persona on these men, but he couldn't. One wrong move and Futaba could pay dearly for it. Not to mention these guys were still humans. One wrong move and he could kill them. They may work for Shido, but that didn't mean he had any right to play as executioner.

"She's the one feeding the damn thieves their info, though," the first man stated. "And according to our sources…the daughter of Wakaba Isshiki."

Ken felt his heart freeze after hearing that. They recognized Futaba. That was definitely not good.

Futaba's captor smirked. "Who knows what she knows about cognitive psience. Not to mention, the actual Phantom Thieves."

The very thought of Futaba being in vicinity of Shido made him ill. Shido was absolutely ruthless.
What if… Futaba couldn't tell him anything that he wanted to hear? What would happen then? Was… Was she the second target those men mentioned?

"Ace, run… please run! Meet up with the others!" Futaba begged.

"No! I'm not abandoning you!" Ken snapped.

The what ifs were running in his mind. He would not let someone get hurt for the sake of his safety. Never again. It happened twice already. Not to mention that Futaba was essential for the plan to work. They needed this plan to work. Ren's life was on the line too.

"Please." Ken's voice cracked as he dropped to his knees. He then pleaded, "Let her go. She's only fifteen—"

He didn't care if he looked pathetic. He just needed Futaba to be safe.

"No sell. Want to try again?" one of the men mocked.

Ken bit his lip. It was worth a shot, but...obviously the chances of that working were slim. Incredibly slim.

What could he do?! He had to get Futaba out of there. She was the one who needed to get to safety. But then an idea suddenly struck Ken, like a bolt of lightning.

It was reckless. Ken could not deny that. But what else could he do? Two lives. No, even more, possibly. Shido might not be satisfied. He could go after everyone else. All their lives over his…. this was the only way.

Ken drew a shaky breath, before he squared his shoulders. It took all his willpower to speak the next three words.

"Take me instead."

"Both men in black and cops from the look of it," Chie observed. "Hmm… I think I'll have to blend in at wherever they're taking Ren-kun."

"It's not far. Remember what Ken-kun told us? The police station is right by the courthouse," Rise piped up.

"Well, that makes it a bit easier for us," Akihiko said before he straightened up. "But… I guess it'll be just be me here then."

"Aki, wait."

Akihiko stopped at Shinjiro's words, and he turned to look at him. "Yeah, Shinji?"

"Don't do anythin' stupid," Shinji said finally. "We haven't been sneaking around for months for you to mess it up and get caught."

"Um, what's this we? Hasn't it been just Ken-kun?" Rise asked teasingly.

Shinjiro glowered at her; Rise really knew how to push his buttons. He should speak up before Rise annoyed Shinji further.

Akihiko just grinned at his best friend. "Yeah, I'll be careful, don't worry."
He then took off, slipping into the crowd. With the chaos, it was too easy to blend in.

"The targets are slippery…" one man grumbled.

"We just need to apprehend the two main targets. Our intel gave us pretty concise information. The one with black curly hair. And the brown-haired kid in black."

A pit formed in Akihiko's stomach.

Shit. Shitshitshit—

Why didn't they realize this before?! Shido wanted to neutralize all of the threats. And taking Ken as a hostage… would give Shido leverage against Mitsuru!

Dammit… what should he do? What can he do? He was supposed to help Ren but the idea of Ken being in danger made Akihiko feel ill.


"W-What?" Akihiko lowered his voice. "Rise—"

"Ken-kun and Futaba-chan are in danger," Rise said bluntly. "They've been cornered by Shido's men. Shinjiro-san is on his way, but you're definitely closer to Ken-kun and Futaba-chan. You have to go. NOW!"

Oh god. Oh god. Akihiko felt sick to his stomach.

"Stop floundering around, Aki!" Shinji snapped at him over Rise's comm. "I know what we planned, but that bastard Shido pulled a fast one on us. We gotta move and fast!"

"You're right." Akihiko muttered before he took a peek around the corner. "Rise, I need directions."

He hoped he wasn't too late…

"Take me instead."

W-What?! What was Ken saying?!

"Ohhh?" Her captor drawled out, "Why would we do that?"

Ken didn't bat an eye, as he laid a hand over his chest.

"I'm the second-in-command. It's only natural, since I have the most experience out of everyone."

He spoke so evenly, his expression neutral. Futaba just stared at him in horror.

What was he—no! He couldn't be serious…

"Ace—NO!" Futaba shook her head desperately. "What are you doing?! He's lying!"

"Quiet, girl!" one of the men snarled.

Her captor studied Ken, his gaze scrutinizing.

"And you would just come willingly?"
Ken narrowed his eyes.

"Let Oracle go. Let her walk out of here, unharmed, and I will go with you."

Her captor looked at his cohorts, "What do you think?"

"That should guarantee the Phantom Thieves' fall," one man mused. "They wouldn't dare to rise again if both leader and the second-in-command are taken out of the picture."

No, no, no… This couldn't be happening! This was a nightmare. Futaba wanted to scream. She wanted to cry. Ken was basically agreeing to be dragged to Shido for who knows what! Ken had done his best to hide his ties to the Shadow Operatives from Akechi but... he was doing this to protect her. Because they needed her to save Ren.

The thought was enough to make Futaba want to cry.

"You don't want him, take me instead!" Futaba begged.

Ken snapped, "Oracle, quiet!"

She wanted to scream. At him. Her life was not worth more than his! So why was he so easily giving himself up?!

This was a common thing. The hero trading himself to protect a loved one. But she never wanted to happen in real life.

"Very well, we accept your deal."

Futaba was suddenly thrown to the ground.

"We'll even let you say goodbye."

Ken dropped down to Futaba's level, carefully helping her up.

"Ace…why? You—" Futaba choked out.

"Shh—it'll be okay." Ken's voice was impossibly gentle, before he smoothed her hair out of her face.

Then his hand settled on top of her shoulder, concentrating to heal her. Futaba could not be soothed by that. Not when her stomach was churning like a whirlpool.

Why did Ken give himself up so easily?!

"No, it won't!" Futaba cried out, hot tears pricking at her eyes. "Why are you lying to me?! Do you realize what will happen?!!"

Her chest felt tight; it was so hard to breathe…

Please… someone come save us! She internally begged.

Ken's expression faltered at that.

"I have an… inkling," he said softly.

"Why…" Futaba sniffled. "Why did you this?"
Ken pulled her close for a hug. Futaba clung to him. Ken was not a huggy kind of person. The most affection he had shown her was him patting her head.

"You should know the answer already," he whispered to her.

Right… because she was instrumental to the plan.

Futaba was suddenly torn away from Ken.

Nonono—

"Time's up."

One man grabbed Ken by the collar, hauling Ken to his feet.

"Say good night, brat," he drawled out, a malicious smile on his face.

Futaba suddenly noticed a syringe in his hand. He then plunged the syringe into Ken's neck. The drug was fast acting. The man released Ken's collar. Ken then collapsed to the ground, blue flames flaring around him. His Metaverse costume was replaced by Ken's school uniform.

"P-Please…" Futaba suddenly found her voice. "D-Don't do this."

The second man sneered, "What a pathetic little girl."

The last man added, "Consider yourself lucky, girly. Your friend here demanded safe passage for you, and well…what kind of people would we be if we broke our promise?"

"No—please! Don't take him away!" Futaba begged.

She didn't care if she sounded pathetic.

The man just smirked.

"Orders are orders. And we can't come emptyhanded," he chuckled. "Our benefactor would have our heads."

At his statement, the realization hit Futaba like a pile of rocks.

"You… wanted him from the start." Futaba croaked out.

Oh god, oh god, it was a bluff. It was a bluff. And it was all her fault.

It took a moment for Futaba to push past the haze of panic. Ken… they took him.

"No... NO! Bring him back! PLEASE!" she cried out, to no avail.

Futaba tore off her goggles, throwing it aside. Tears scalded her cheeks.

"Ace… Ken… I'm sorry," she sobbed out as she curled into a ball. She pressed a face against her knees. "I'M SORRY! I…I…"

She wasn't strong enough. She wasn't fast enough, like Ken had warned her just a few weeks ago.

Why couldn't she have powers like Rise-san? To fight? Maybe then they wouldn't have gotten caught. She should have found a way to escape. It was her job to navigate.
She had managed to turn the tides countless times. Why had this been any different?

A broken sob escaped her.

Just a few months ago, she had thought that she was the one responsible for Mom's death. But it turned out to be a lie fabricated by Shido's men. But this?

Nothing could resolve her from this guilt. She'd be responsible for whatever happened to Ken. And she couldn't even imagine what Shido had planned for him.

Her tears just wouldn't stop coming.

So Futaba just buried her face in her hands and wept.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to emphasize that Sae was not too far gone, so Makoto was able to talk her down.

Papa Niijima's weapons were inspired by Juna Crawford in Trails of Cold Steel III. Her tonfas had two modes: Striker and Gunner. Striker Mode had her use tonfas in a traditional manner, while Gunner had her tonfas be able to shoot.

Additionally, the DBZ ref. It originally was 8000, not 9000. The Ocean dub changed it. Speaking of refs, does anyone recognize where I got the chapter title?

So… the cliffhanger. As I started outlining Sae's arc, it occurred to me that Ken shouldn't get away without a personal confrontation with Shido. The older Persona-users' involvement was not a complete red herring. Chie and Rise will be helping out Ren. But Akihiko and Shinji? Well, that's another story.

And please bear with me with the slower updates. I have plans to write for a few shipping weeks (AkiHam/Shuan/YusuHaru/Shuyuka), which are coming up in a few months. But I swear I won't give up on this fic. It's my baby, and I intend to finish it.

Lastly, I've set up a tumblr for this fic! Find it here!

Some people have been messaging me on fanfiction.net but I'm terrible at replying, which I apologize for. I'll be posting fanart I've commissioned and some silly memes I've made. Feel free to ask me questions on there!

Speaking of fanart, I've commissioned two pieces since last update!

One is of Ken/Makoto. You can find it here.

The other is of Ken and an AU Akechi. Specifically, my beta Erin's AU! It's in the works still but it's really amazing! I look forward to the day she publishes it! You can find it here.

EDIT: My beta's AU is now up! Find it here.

(Also it's my birthday! Sooo reviews are much appreciated! :D)
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!