Makoto's Story

by ArtofLupin

Summary

Makoto lives for boundaries and rules.

These were her code and religion until she meets an eccentric group of outsiders who teach her something more substantial, justice.

Starting out as an average third year at Shujin Academy, she soon faces more adversity than most people do throughout their entire lives.

Everything she believed in is challenged as she faces teachers who exploit their power, corrupt bureaucrats, and a force that is capable of destroying reality by harnessing the power of an unseen world.

Join Makoto as she learns and experiences friendship, heartache, loss, betrayl, love, and redemption.

Who knows? She may even steal your heart.

Notes

This is the first installment in a series I've dedicated to telling Makoto Nijima's side of the story in the events that take place through Persona 5. It's been a ton of fun to explore the everyday life, turned adventure of a life time, of one of my favorite characters in the game!
This series will loosely follow the plot of Persona, but I will be throwing a healthy batch of head cannon and my own narrative. So if that's your thing, please join me as we see the world of Persona through the eyes of the Queen herself!

I hope you have fun with it and any constructive feedback is appreciated!

I would like to stay off the bat that I'm a dumb American and have very little knowledge of Japanese culture. I will do my very best to honor the amazing culture, and the games creators and in no way mean to white-wash any of it. I apologize in advance for any ignorance that may come across.

** If you find that you dig my writing, good news, I write for a living! Check out my professional page at markmcinturff.com to see what else I've written! **

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**
A Day in the Life

Chapter Summary

Makoto is a third-year student at the prestigious Shujin Academy. We join her on an average day of life, working her fingers to the bone, in the student council room. After all her fellow board members go home for the day, she's left alone once again to try and solve the impossible task of planning the upcoming student festival.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 1: A Day in the Life

I placed the papers back on the table and rubbed my sore eyes.

‘No matter how many times I run the numbers, the board simply hasn’t given me the funds I need to pull this off…’

Lifting my face from my hands I gave a tentative glance to the clock.

‘Five thirty already? I’ve been at this for hours, but there is still so much to be done.’ I drew in a deep breath ‘I hate to complain to the school board. They have lent a great deal of trust to me. Trusting me to be able to budget and plan this year’s up-coming student festival for the school. I just wish they had given me a little more to work with here…’

I grouped my scattered papers together, stacked them nicely and placed them neatly back in my bag. ‘I guess I’m just going to have to come back in again this Sunday to try to figure this out. Though I still don’t know what use it would be. I’ve been working on this every day for the past two weeks. I’m afraid I may end disappointing principal Kobayakawa and the whole school at this rate.’

My bag in hand, I stood and slid the chair back in its place. ‘I simply can’t let that happen. I knew, going in, becoming school president wasn’t going to be an easy task. I’ll just have to double my efforts tomorrow morning.’

I shut and locked the door to the student council office behind me. The school hallway was barren. Not a student or teacher in sight. Most of the hall lights were off and the only source of illumination was coming from the dwindling sun through the large bay windows overlooking the courtyard. It’s not like I was unaccustomed to being the only one left in the school. It was just part of the routine at this point. Get to school early, hold meetings, go to class, check in on clubs, have a meeting with principal Kobayakawa, continue planning for the festival, and now, go home to get my studying done. I won’t say it’s been particularly easy since I became a third year here at Shujin Academy, but it’s all a part of ‘growing up’ as Sae told me.

How could I complain about my workload when my sister has not only come up against all expectations of her as an unmarried woman in the male-dominated work environment that is the SUI office but has blazed a path for me. Not only did she graduate at the top of her class in law school, but she was even invited to be a prosecutor for the special investigations department. Becoming the first woman to do so. I’ve learned so much from her and would be privileged to live up to being even a fraction of what she is.

“Well hey there miss school president!” A man’s voice called to me. I looked towards the source and found the school’s volleyball coach, Mr. Kamoshida, was walking in my direction from further down the hallway. Probably fresh from the team practice considering the time of day.

“What has you at the school this late hour Nijijima? Classes ended a few hours ago.” He grinned and rubbed the back of his head “Probably up to some student council business eh?”

I gave a smile back and a slight bow “Good evening Mr. Kamoshida. Yes, sir, the council has needed me to stay a little later after school to help organize the student festival that is coming up in a couple of months.”

“You are already working on that thing?” he let out a slight chuckle “You big brained students
never cease to amaze me! Showing such initiative and dedication will surely be in your favor when it comes to college applications.”

“Thank you, sir. We are certainly trying our best to provide the best experience for our fellow students here at Shujin!”

“Well, I’m sure it will show when the time comes” He shifted his weight to the opposite leg and crossed his arms “You know Makoto, we could really use someone with your talents on the girls’ volleyball team.” Mr. Kamoshida suggested “Now I know you have a lot on your plate at the moment, but we are holding tryouts for next semester’s team soon”

I clutched my bag “Thank you for the offer sir, but I’m not really the athletic type-”

“Nonsense! Volleyball is more than just raw physical skill. It’s all about strategy. Having the ability to out-think as well as outmaneuver your opponent.” He mimed serving a volleyball “Strength means nothing without the ability to read the opponents weaknesses” Kamoshida spiked his imaginary ball “then exploiting that weakness to gain victory!” He dusted off his hands and smiled widely “And I think you’re just the girl to give us that much-needed edge! Besides, I can tell from just looking at you. You have quite the physic. I’m sure your body is capable of more than you give it credit for!”

My shoulders tightened “That’s very kind of you to say, sir. But as you did point out earlier, I do have quite a lot on my plate at the moment-”

He crossed his arms once again “Oh! No need to make a decision now! Just promise me you’ll think about it. I can assure you, you’ll be one of my first picks if you try out! I know you wouldn’t need another letter of recommendation from a teacher, but one more certainly couldn’t hurt.”

I nodded “It’s a very tempting and generous offer sir. I will certainly give it a great deal of thought when the time comes.”

He shot me a knowing grin “Now, we talked about this, no need for the sir stuff ok? Just call me Suguru. And hopefully soon, coach!”

“Yes si-, sorry, Suguru. I will do well to remember in the future” I faced the door that left the hallway “Well, I should be going or I’ll miss my train.”

He gestured to the door “Oh of course! Sorry for keeping you! Have a good rest of your day Makoto. See you tomorrow.”

I nodded in return “You as well!” and pulled open the door and hastily walked through. I watched the door slowly close behind me and took a breath. I could feel my palms moist with sweat. ‘Now now Makoto. You’re being ridiculous.’ I assured myself ‘You know they are all just rumors. We were simply having a friendly conversation, nothing more.’ I gave myself a moment to recompose. Once I had my legs back underneath myself, I made my way out of the front hall and towards the subway station.

**

The apartment looked the same as I left it that morning when I left for school. I examined the clock on the wall ‘Hmm. Sis should have been home by now.’ Locking the door behind me I placed my
I pulled out a Tupperware of leftover homemade ramen I made earlier in the week. Being sure to make plenty and to portion out some for Sae as well. She works so hard and she’s kind enough to house me at her apartment after all. The least I could do is make her a meal. However, when I opened up the fridge I saw her container of ramen still full and untouched after sitting there for days.

‘Come to think of it’ I silently considered to myself ‘when was the last time I saw her home?’ I poured the last of my soup into a pot and let it heat back up on the stove top. ‘Maybe I should just shoot her a text and make sure she’s fine…’

I tapped my phone’s screen back to life and opened up the messenger app. ‘Evening Sis. Sorry to bother you. I know you must be hard at work at the office. Just haven’t heard from you in a while and wanted to make sure you were well. Please let me know if I can do anything to help!’

The ramen had already started to steam, so I took a bowl from a nearby cupboard and set my place at the table. I pulled my seat up and let the aroma of the warm soup fill my lungs. It still smelt delicious. In this batch, I played with the ratio of chili sauce to broth. It absolutely paid off.

After a few spoonfuls, I noticed just how quiet it was in the house. I wasn’t particularly sure why it stood out to me just then of all times. Ever since Sae let me move in with her, it’s always kind of been like this. The apartment was beautiful. Matching cream-colored sofas in the living room. Lovely gray and black colored curtains. Even a couple of potted ferns and lilies to brighten the room a little. And under a stunningly hand carved coffee table laid a gorgeous ornate rug.

Sae’s apartment certainly didn’t lack a sense of taste. When she moved in she even hired an interior decorator to give the place its distinct style and character. It gave off a sort of beautiful minimalistic feel.

Still, I had to admit, it lacked warmth. Can’t say I’ve ever complete felt comfortable in it. Though it was a near art piece, it still felt hollow somehow.

The stillness was putting me on edge so I clicked on the tv in the living room a listened while I ate. The large screen popped to life and the SNN breaking news logo streaked across the screen.

‘Experts are still baffled as to what caused the trains to crash earlier this April. The subway’s conductor had cleared all tests for narcotics, or any substances of any kind, in his system. Even after extensive interrogation, he still cannot recall why he would have sent his train speeding down the track, far over recommended speeds, causing the massive crash into Shibuya station, killing dozens and injuring even more.’ A reporter announced

‘Oh right, that train crash that happened earlier in the school year. It was fortunate it was on a Sunday or Shujin students very easily could have been on that train or at the station.’ I stirred the noodles while listening to the broadcaster continue.

‘The conductor is still awaiting his court date to face a judge over whether the matter is to be considered criminal neglect or manslaughter.’ Another reporter chimed in ‘Now why isn’t he just being thrown in jail for murder? He wasn’t under any sort drug as you said, then he had to have been in a clear state of mind when he killed all those people’
‘Many have asked the same.’ The first reporter retorted ‘However, after the incident, it was confirmed by a doctor at the scene that the conductor had had a seizure of some sort behind the wheel. He was said to be foaming at the mouth and his eyes rolled to the back of his head. He was said to be lucky to recover from such an accident.’

I clicked the tv back off and sighed “I really don’t feel like hearing about train accidents right now” I murmured to myself while getting up. I grabbed my school bag and sat back down at the dinner table. Undid the latch and brought out my notes from the day. Segregating the binders and papers into separate piles by classes, I cracked open the first.

Before starting I grouped a few noodles together and chomped down on a mouth full. My stomach growled with desire for more. “Hmm. Forgot how long ago lunch was. Guess my stomach didn’t.” I rubbed my tired eyes and got to work on my homework ‘Ok. Question one: according to the philosopher Plato, the soul is composed of appetite, spirit and what else?’

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @ArtofLupin**
The Transfer Student

Chapter Summary

Makoto was hoping to get a little bit of peace and quiet from her normally crazy busy life at the school library. When the source of, sure to be many, future headaches comes crashing into her life. In a very literal way...

Chapter Notes

This is the second installment in a series I've dedicated to telling Makoto Nijima's side of the story in the events that take place through Persona 5. It's been a ton of fun to explore the everyday life, turned adventure of a lifetime, of one of my favorite characters in the game! This series will loosely follow the plot of Persona, but I will be throwing a healthy batch of headcanon and my own narrative. So if that's your thing, please join me as we see the world of Persona through the eyes of the Queen herself!

I hope you have fun with it and any constructive feedback is appreciated!

**Additional note: I decided to name the Protagonist from the game 'Ren Kurusu'. Of course, his canon name was first Akira Kurasu then later changed to Ren Amamiya, but I decided to combine them because I'm an insane person. Have fun with this week's story!**
Chapter 2: The Transfer Student

Our little school library had become something of a sanctuary to me. There was always a regular group of students that would study after school. Half the time usually to gossip in hushed whispers with friends, but not many past that. Especially since so many books these days are only being published digitally, there just hasn’t been too much of a demand for old dusty tombs.

Kind of a shame really. I’ve found nothing that really compares to the excitement of finding a long-hunted book in an expansive library. But seems most don't share feelings.

I can’t complain too much though. With the lack of students, I always get to sit at my favorite desk. It faces a window but not directly, so I don’t get distracted when I work. If I need a break from looking at a page of hastily written notes, however, I can still gaze outside till I regain my stamina to dig back in. It's also under the only ‘good’ light in the library. I don’t like to flex my power as student body president too much, but I may have gotten the maintenance man to install an
especially bright lamp over my desk.

The day was fairly ordinary. In fact, I was knee-deep in researching for my history paper covering the Meiji Restoration. When my focus was broken by a terse tone coming from the student managing the library’s front desk, Hana. I glanced over my shoulder and saw her speaking to a student I didn’t immediately recognize. It was pretty unlike her to get frustrated with a student. She was typically a pretty carefree girl.

“M-maybe you should just go.” More fear showing in her voice this time then anger “You’re making the other students uncomfortable.”

The boy she was talking to seemed unperturbed by her statement. Like he was somehow expecting this sort of reaction from her. He honestly just looked tired.

It was hard to place why Hana seemed so unnerved by this guy. He was pretty stocky and thin. Didn’t really seem to have an aggressive demeanor. Shaggy black hair and wore a regulation Shujin uniform. Looked like any other student.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to worry anyone.” He sounded genuinely apologetic. “I just want to grab something to read on the subway home.”

She crossed her arms “Fine, but please, make it quick. No one here wants any trouble and I won't hesitate to call the librarian.”

The boy nodded his head in acknowledgment. Hands in his pockets he walked to the other side of the library.

He walked by my table and I got a glance at his face. Big glasses and frizzy hair covered most of it, but I caught a glimpse of his eyes. They didn’t belong to some sort of trouble maker or thug. They were kind. He looked more lonely than anything.

Once he disappeared behind a bookshelf I heard some girls speaking in hushed tones at another desk “That’s him? The transfer? He doesn’t look like much…” said one girl in a ponytail

“Don’t let his looks fool you. It’s always the unassuming ones you have to look out for.” her friend responded

“I don’t know. He actually looks kind of cute…”

“Stop!” The friend protested in a louder, but still hushed, tone “You know why he transferred right?”

Ponytail shook her head

“Assault.” The friend stated flatly. Answering her own question. “Rumor has it he attacked a grown man. Completely out of nowhere. From what I heard, he was high on some drug and went crazy.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. He's bad news.”

“But why would someone like that end up here?”

The friend shrugged “I don’t know.” Both glanced at the bookshelf the transfer disappeared behind
“All I know is I'm not walking anywhere by myself anymore.”

“It’s not like we had enough on our plates. With all these crazy hard classes and homework.” Ponytail exasperated “NOW we have to worry about getting killed?!”

‘Oh right, the new transfer’ I thought ‘I did hear something about him. That was the rumor. He supposedly attacked someone. Apparently from out of nowhere. No one from his home town thought him capable of it. His old school was so appalled they expelled him, and Shujin was the only place that would take him.’

I returned my attention to my work ‘Just as long as he keeps to himself, we won’t have any issues.’

Just as I was getting my focus back on my research, something big collapsed into my desk. I let out a surprised *EEEP!* Watching, helplessly, as my papers got flung into the air and flutter all around the room like confetti.

My hands clasped to my mouth out of shock when I looked at what had happened to the table. My precious desk had been crumpled and overturned to one side. The cause of all this calamity laid fallen, flush-faced, on the downed table. The transfer.

“Oh my god! I’m sorry-I’m sorry-I’m sorry!” A terrified first-year boy exclaimed at the transfer.

The transfer held his hands in front of his chest, trying to show the student he meant no harm “No no! Please, It was my fault, I wasn’t looking where I was going and I bumped into you!” His face was flush in embarrassed.

But the first year heard none of it “P-P-Please sir! Don’t beat me up! I-I-It won’t happen again!” the boy cried

“B-Beat you up? I-“ The transfer was cut off in his reply

“What is going on here!” The librarian, Miss. Okamoto blared out. “This is not the gym! This is not how we act here!”

Miss. Okamoto was a large woman. Stood taller than most teachers and was built so dense she looked like she could give the best athlete in the school a run for their money in a ring. Everyone knew not to cross Miss. Okamoto especially in her library. A student once dropped their books on a desk causing a sizable smacking sound. Miss. Okamoto chewed the student out so loudly it could be heard from the courtyard. The library was on the third floor…

She had been around longer at Shujin that most of the teachers and she was not afraid to use a meter stick for more than measuring.

She turned her laser-like stare first the crying first year, then to the transfer student still on the floor. “You! What is your name?”

“Ren- Ren Kurusu ma'am!” his voice shook

“You’re that transfer student we’ve been warned about aren’t you? Hardly a week into your first semester here and you’ve already started a fight huh?” She tapped a meter stick menacingly in one hand

“F-Fight? No! Nothing like that! I simply wasn’t looking where I was going, bumped into that guy and lost my balance.” Ren Kurusu explained
“That sort of backtalk may have worked wherever you came from, but you're in my library now. You were made well aware of your conditions here. One screw up and you're in juvy.”

She reached down and wrapped a meaty fist around his arm “Come with me you ingrate. Let's go have a chat with principal Kobayakawa and see how he feels about your little stunt.”

I collected myself and cleared my throat “Miss Okamoto?”

She turned her hateful glare towards me. Still maintaining her grip on the transfer “What is it Niijima?”

“I saw the whole thing, ma'am.” I explained coolly “It went just as Kurusu said. He was busy looking at his book, not paying attention, and bumped into the first year. Causing him to trip and-”

I gestured to my table “fall right on my desk. It could have happened to anyone.”

She narrowed her gaze on me “Are you certain? You know who this is don’t you?” Kurusu shot me a panicked look

I gave a disarming smile and replied with confidence “The only thing the transfer is guilty of is being a bit clumsy.”

Okamoto looked at Kurusu then to the first year “Is that what happened?”

The student, with a fixed gaze at me as if asking for approval, simply nodded

“She stood back up and gave all the assembled students who had been watching the scene unfold a glowering look “Either get back to work or get out! The show is over!”

The students terrified they would be her new prey, dispersed as quickly as the assembled.

I took a breath and turned my attention back to my poor destroyed desk. I saw Kurusu, on hands and knees, collecting all my fallen papers off the floor. I joined him on the ground and picked up what he missed.

“Why did you step in like that?” He whispered to me under the tables “I know you didn’t see what happened.”

I examined his face again. His glasses were disheveled but I could see a stern expression behind them as he scanned the floor for anything he may have missed.

I shook my head “I don’t know anything about you Kurusu, but one thing I do know is that everyone deserves a second chance.” I paused “A fair second chance”

We both stood up and he handed me my papers. Our eyes met and he flashed me a smile. The first smile I’ve seen him wear during this whole encounter “Thank you. Niijima right?”

“Makoto Niijima. I’m the student body president.” I wagged a finger at him “Screw up again and I'll be the first to hear about it” I said. Only half-jokingly.

He chuckled “I’ll be on my best behavior than” His laugh was warm and wholesome.
I examined his book that I found while scouring the floor “Les Miserables huh?” I handed it back to him 

“Yeah. Been meaning to read it for a while” the took the book and placed it in his bag. 

“Well be careful with it. It’s one of my favorites.” I warned him “Let me know what you think” 

He nodded and grinned “I’ll do that!” He bent down again and placed my desk right way up. 

“Well,” He jiggled the, now, loose leg “other than that, looks like it will still stand for another day. Sorry about all that” 

“Just try not to destroy any more school property okay?” I stated. Crossing my arms disapprovingly while looking over the damage 

He stood up straight “Yes ma’am” with that he swung his bag to his shoulder and made his way towards the exit “I’ll see you around Nijjima!” 

I gave a small wave back “Behave yourself Kurusu!” 

The door closed behind him and I placed a single finger to my cheek in thought ‘This guy may still be trouble, but I have a hard time thinking he's going to be attacking anyone anytime soon.’ 

**Photo Credit: Khytal (https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**
The Volleyball Rally

Chapter Summary

What seemed like would be a typical volleyball rally is interrupted when a student gets seriously injured during the game. Makoto feels uneasy, realizing that she appears to be the only one who cared...

Chapter Notes

This is the third installment in a series I've dedicated to telling Makoto Nijima's side of the story in the events that take place through Persona 5. It's been a ton of fun to explore the everyday life, turned adventure of a lifetime, of one of my favorite characters in the game! This series will loosely follow the plot of Persona, but I will be throwing in a healthy batch of headcanon and my own narrative. So if that's your thing, please join me as we see the world of Persona through the eyes of the Queen herself!

I hope you have fun with it and any constructive feedback is appreciated!

**Additional note: I decided to name the Protagonist from the game 'Ren Kurusu'. Of course, his canon name was first Akira Kurusu then later changed to Ren Amamiya, but I decided to combine them because I'm an insane person. Have fun with this week's story!**
Ch. 3 The Volleyball Rally

Upon leaving Principal Kobayakawa’s office after our morning meeting, I saw that the school had, once again sprung back to life.

Often I am the first student here because of my presidential duties. In fact so early that the school has even had to trust me with a key to let myself in since its possible that no one may have even arrived yet to let me in.

Principal Kobayakawa seemed to be in a particularly good mood that morning. He was very excited for the volleyball rally that was taking place later in the day here at Shujin. We discussed logistics in the beginning, but in the latter half seemed all Principal Kobayakawa really wanted to talk about was how lucky we were to have Mr. Kamoshida lead us to victory. There were a few more pressing things I was hoping to discuss with him that morning, but I supposed that it could wait till tomorrow. I didn't want to ruin his enthusiasm.
Walking up the stairs to reach my first class of the day, I saw that Kurusu student hanging out with another second year, Ryuji Sakamoto.

Sakamoto had a bit of a reputation around Shujin. He used to be part of the track and field team. Was pretty good from what I heard too. Then he picked a fight with the new PE coach, Mr. Kamoshida. The rumor was that Sakamoto swung a fist at him and, in my opinion, an overzealous retribution, Mr. Kamoshida struck back in self-defense, breaking Sakamoto’s leg. The disbanding of the track team was quick to follow after the incident.

I could understand Mr. Kamoshida, in self-defense, maybe trying to restrain Sakamoto till he calmed down perhaps. But it’s not the easiest thing in the world to break a leg if you are merely trying to stop a fist. Breaking a student’s leg seemed like the sort of thing you would have to go out of your way to do.

Ever since the accident, Sakamoto changed. He started playing the rebel. He ceased following the dress code, stopped dying his hair to the school’s regulated black, leaving it blonde. Not to mention his general demeanor took a complete 180-degree shift. He became needlessly vulgar in conversation if he said anything at all. He had taken to being nothing but disrespectful to the teachers, especially Mr. Kamoshida, and, from what I heard, his grades have plummeted. I can’t say I blame him for being angry, but still, what happened happened. I’d hate to let one accident ruin my chances to go to a decent college.

Sakamoto and Kurusu seemed engaged in a serious conversation of some sort. I wasn’t close enough to hear specifics. I hopped that Kurusu knew better than to associate himself the school delinquent. He should have been very aware of line he was toeing. Especially after the library incident. I wondered at that moment if I should have intervened after all. If he was planning on intermingling with the riff-raff of the school regardless, maybe I should have saved everyone the headache and just let him be expelled.

I made a mental note of the situation and continued my way to the third year floor.

* 

Mr. Komashida thought it would be a fun idea this year's rally to have the teachers playing against the entirety of the school's volleyball team. When I first heard the idea, I thought that meant he may have been playing alongside his team against the teachers. Since he was their coach. I was a little shocked to see him playing against his own team. Seemed a little unfair since he knew all their plays and tactics... because he was the one that made them up.

Not to mention he was an Olympic gold medalist in men’s volleyball. Our team may have been good, but there was no way they could have kept up with someone like their own coach. That was made abundantly clear after one student, by the name of Yuuki Mishima, got seriously injured during the match.

I was sitting on the bleachers with my fellow third years when it happened. The match was going as predicted. The teachers were crushing the students hand over fist. When Mr. Kamoshida got a hold of the ball, instead of the student team trying to stop him from scoring, they would scatter and tried to avoid his signature spike at all costs.

After the first few points scored, you could feel the energy drain from the room. The sound of cheers and applause pretty quickly gave way to just the sound of sneakers squeaking on the court. Many but a select few of hardcore Kamoshida fan girls had entirely checked out. Circles of girls gathered and started making plans about what they wanted to do after school. A couple of boys playing a mock game of dodge ball with a couple of extra volleyballs on a barren part of the court.
It was pretty clear after a while Mr. Kamoshida just wanted to perform a one-man show for the school. Had to say it was difficult not pulling out a book and checking out myself.

All that changed when a loud crack resonated through the entire gym. Everyone paused and sought out the source of the sound. We all witnessed a particularly powerful spike from Kamoshida land square on Yuuki Mishima’s face. Knocking him cold to the ground. The room stood silent for a minute. A few stood up to try and get a better look.

“Is he ok?” a girl near me whispered to her friend

“He looks dead” Someone responded

“That was a pretty powerful hit…”

Mr. Kamoshida lifted a portion of the net and walked towards the wounded student. After a moment of evaluation, he called for help to get him to the nurse. A couple of students ran up and supporting Mishima by the arms, carried him out of the gym and to the nurse's office.

Then, as if nothing happened, Komashida grew a big grin and shouted “Alright everybody! Let’s get back to the game huh?”. With that, he ran back to his side and proceeded to serve the ball before the student team was even ready.

What bothered me even more, is that everyone seemed to drop the accident just as quickly. Girls went back to their gossip, and the boys went back to playing their game in the corner.

‘I… guess he ok?’ I thought. I didn’t want to cause people to alarm needlessly, but that did look like a hell of a hit. And Mishima was a pretty scrawny guy…

I narrowed my gaze at Mr. Komashida who was committed to continuing the humiliation of his own team. He kept on with glee and, what seemed like, not even a second thought about what had just occurred.

I would never claim to know better than a teacher. He was the one who evaluated Mishima after all, and he would have known what to look for if the student was seriously hurt. If Kamoshida deemed him okay enough to continue on, then I guess it would be ok. But there was always something that didn’t sit right with me about that man. Rumors are hardly ever right, but even lies had some glimmer of truth to them for them to be believable. I also knew entertaining such conspiratorial thoughts was a bad idea. It was best if I just put such notions to rest and focus on what was important. My fellow students and college.

Besides, I knew that the school wouldn’t have hired someone if they were some sort of monster. I just had to trust that the system, and the adults behind it, had our best interests at heart.

**Photo Credit: Khytal (https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**
The Accident

Chapter Summary

A typical morning at Shujin is shattered after a student has a horrible accident.

Chapter Notes

This is the fourth installment in a series I've dedicated to telling Makoto Niijima's side of the story in the events that take place through Persona 5. It's been a ton of fun to explore the everyday life, turned adventure of a lifetime, of one of my favorite characters in the game! This series will loosely follow the plot of Persona, but I will be throwing in a healthy batch of headcanon and my own narrative. So if that's your thing, please join me as we see the world of Persona through the eyes of the Queen herself!

I hope you have fun with it and any constructive feedback is appreciated!

*This week is a little heavy. If self-harm or suicide is a trigger for you, it might be best to skip this one.*
Ch. 4 The Accident

When I hear stories of tragedy that people suffer or witness, it’s like their brain takes a snapshot of that moment. They can recall that point in time with such clarity they feel like they are living it out again in real time. Remembering every horrific detail all at once.

A lot has happened since that morning on April 15th, but I can't help but recall it like it only happened yesterday. Even though I wish more than anything else to be able to forget it, or to pretend like it was merely a bad dream.

That morning seemed like any other.

The sun was shining. The usual students loitered outside the school gate until the very last bell indicating the school day had begun.
We were in the middle of our first class of the day, advanced English. It wasn’t my favorite class, but I still worked hard to keep my attention on the teacher. I usually had a cheat for this class to help me pay attention. Our regular teacher, Mr. Ishii, always wore this strange blazer. It had these crazy geometrical shapes and lines all over it. He also had a terrible habit with speaking with this hand.

So I found that whenever my mind would start to wander, I could refocus by trying to see what images I could make out from the shapes on his blazer. That way I was always looking forward and at the teacher. And whenever he started lecturing on something particularly important he would wave his arms around enthusiastically. Breaking me out of my daze and made me make sure I had whatever he was saying written down.

Unfortunately for me, on that day we had a substitute who wore regular clothes but was somehow just as dull. I hate to admit it, but no matter how hard I tried to focus, or look for one interesting thing on his blazer, my eyes glazed over.

My desk was close to the window, and as the sun rose during class, the sunlight rested on me. In combination with the, less than compelling, lecture and the warm sun coating my face, I started to feel a little hazy. The weight of the early morning wake up call was weighing heavy on my eyelids. The sub’s soft voice and the gentle ticking from the wall clock above were pulling me into a sleepy stupor.

“Oh my god! What is she doing!” The girl seated in front of me shouted.

I lurched back in my seat. I hadn’t even noticed my eyes had been closed.

“E-Excuse me?” The teacher stammered

I rubbed my eyes and tried to recalibrate to the sudden energy in the room. A chorus of squeaks sounded from chairs being moved as dozens of students ran towards my side of the room.

“What is she doing up there!?” A boy yelled

“Who is that?” someone asked

I couldn’t get out of my chair. Everyone had crowded around me pinning me to the wall of windows at my other side.

“Please sit back down! We are in the middle of class!” The sub tried yelling over the hysteria

“Dude! Dude! I think she’s going to jump!” Another boy cried

“Jump?” I muttered to myself and jerked my head to join them looking down at the courtyard.

I saw a student, I couldn’t recognize who, standing on the edge of a rooftop of a third-floor building. She was clinging to the chain-linked fence behind her and looking towards the ground. Stood so still.

I placed a hand on the window. ‘J-Jump?’ Was all my brain could muster

“Someone go do something!” A girl screamed.

The teacher joined all of us at the window “My god-” he muttered

“I’m on my way!” One boy stated with authority and rushed out of the room with his friend.
But there was no time for anyone to do anything. Without any hesitation the girl on the roof simply… let go.

She swan dived down without any kind of hesitation. She almost looked like she was relieved…

I clasped my hands to my mouth to hold in my scream. My ears started ringing. I couldn’t hear anyone else. All I could see was that poor girl… just… lying there. On the grassy knoll in the courtyard. Unmoving.

My mind went blank.

Moments later a mob of students rushed the scene. All of them leaving a large semicircle around her.

‘I-Is s-she…’

I couldn’t stop staring. My heart pounded in my chest. I felt sick.

‘This can’t’ My brain searched vigorously for anyone strand of thought to cling to. ‘This can’t be happening. This isn’t real.’

Teachers were on the scene now. Trying to corral students back to class. Many students had their phones out to take pictures of the girl.

Then bright lights started flashing from an approaching ambulance. EMT’s rushed out and placed her on a stretcher. I saw that they were shouting, but my ears still refused to open.

A blonde girl pushed her way through the crowd. She was weeping.

The girl said something and the EMT’s loaded her up with the jumper. Then, just as quickly as it arrived, the ambulance sped away.

Though there was nothing there now, and the students had started filling out. I couldn’t stop staring at the patch of grass where the girl landed.

Where morning droplets of dew once sat was now replaced with a small pool of blood glistening in the morning sunlight.

‘This can’t be happening…’ Hot tears rolled down my cheeks ‘This can’t be happening…’

**Photo Credit: khytal (https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**
Chapter Summary

Makoto continues to struggle with the attempted suicide at the school and turns to her older sister for advice.

Chapter Notes

This is the fifth installment in a series I've dedicated to telling Makoto Nijima's side of the story in the events that take place through Persona 5. It's been a ton of fun to explore the everyday life, turned adventure of a lifetime, of one of my favorite characters in the game! This series will loosely follow the plot of Persona, but I will be throwing in a healthy batch of headcanon and my own narrative. So if that's your thing, please join me as we see the world of Persona through the eyes of the Queen herself!

** If you find that you dig my writing, good news, I write for a living! Check out my professional page at markmcinturff.com to see what else I've written! **
Chapter 5: Grief

I didn’t stay after school that day. I couldn’t.

I have a hard time putting to words what I felt after school that day. Witnessing someone attempt suicide. A student.

I later found out her name was Suzui. She was a star player on the girl’s volleyball team and a very gifted student. What drives someone with such a bright future to do something like that? To cast it all away so thoughtlessly?

Maybe things weren’t as they seemed on the surface with that girl. The blond girl that went with her when the ambulance arrived I found out was Ann Takamaki. A girl with questionable character,
and another subject of Shujin’s rumor mill. The word is that she has been sleeping around with teachers in exchange for favor with them.

Wasn’t too hard for me to believe. Takamaki was a girl of exceptional beauty. Long beautiful blonde hair and a perfect figure. She was even a quarter American and spoke near perfect English. Hard for any boy, maybe even a teacher, to resist the advances of. Her latest target apparently being Mr. Kamoshida. Guess she didn’t feel like working hard in P.E.

I’m not afraid to say I detest girls like Takamaki. It’s girls like her that make life for women like my sister and myself so much harder. The type that encourages the idea that the only way for a woman to advance in the world is to sleep with their male bosses and not on merit alone. Maybe this Suzui girl got caught up in Takamaki’s scandalous affairs and couldn’t live with her actions? Saw no other way out but suicide…

The subway home was crowded and loud as usual, but my thoughts felt even louder. All I could see was Suzui’s motionless body lying in the courtyard. Blood pooling around her. Her determined gaze and unflinching stance, as she held onto the chain-linked fence on the roof, was fixed in my mind. She knew what she was doing. To her, she merely had a task that needed to be fulfilled.

‘What drives someone to do something like that?’ Was all I could ask myself ‘Why put in all that effort and time into honing your craft and ability, given all the chances in the world, to just throw it away? Seems… seems selfish…’

I grasped tightly around my bag. I knew it was wrong to think such a thing about someone who is lucky to be alive. I tried to bury that line of thinking, but I could feel it prodding that the back of my head.

I looked around the busy train car. Despite us all being in such close proximity, like me, everyone in that car was in their own little world. A couple of people were chatting away in the corner, but most were listening to something on their headphones. A group of girls sat on a bench laughing. I recognized their uniforms as Shujin.

‘These girls saw what happened today. Yet here they are. Just laughing. Like what happened meant nothing’ I felt anger boiling in my depths. I thought of all the students rushing to the courtyard to record and gawk at the aftermath. Like it was some sort of show.

‘What is wrong with these people?’ I thought loudly ‘A girl attempted suicide and all you can do is stand there?! Just move on with life as if nothing happened?’

I had half a mind to walk over to the girls and give them a piece of my mind when a sudden wave of guilt washed over me. ‘But, wasn’t I just thinking ill of her? Calling her selfish? I didn’t even know her…’

I leaned on the train wall ‘I’m the student president. I have a responsibility to help my fellow students, and one of them just tried to kill themselves on school property.’

I placed my head against the cold metal of the train wall. ‘I’m just so confused… I don’t know what to think. I… I just want… I want someone to tell me how to make all of this go away.’ I clutched my bag tightly to my chest and tried to push the dark thoughts away.

*  

I watched the rain droplets race down the window pane. The way water moved on flat surfaces always interested me. How the droplet didn’t just go straight down. It sort of zigzags on its path in
a jerky motion. Running down quickly then suddenly stopping. Running again then staying.

Watching the rain outside reminded me of when I was a little, and Dad was still around, he, Sae and I would go on occasional trips out of town in Dad’s little car. If we were driving in the rain, Sae, who was a third year in high school at the time, and I would sit in the back and watch the little water droplets race across the windows. They went a lot faster in the car of course because we were moving so quickly on the highway, so we made a game out of it to pass the time. We would both pick a droplet and would see which one was the fastest.

Sae was good at making little games like that to pass the time with me. I missed those days. Whenever I was sad, I liked to look back at those more innocent times we shared. They always brought a smile to my face. The days before Dad’s accident.

My daydreaming was broken by an insistent tapping sound. When I look towards the source, I saw that I had unconsciously been tapping my pencil on my homework. Something I habitually did whenever I zoned out. It was a little joke I had with myself that, that habit what helped me pay attention in class.

Whenever I would check out in class when I was younger, my tapping would become so loud that it not only distracted the students around me but even the teacher.

I heard the front door open and slam from down the hallway.

“Makoto? You home?” I heard a familiar voice call out.

I smiled and rushed to greet the visitor.

“Hey, Sae! Oh- oh, Sae you forgot your umbrella at home didn’t you?”

She was completely soaked. Her tailor-made black suit dripped water all over the doorway, and her beautiful long gray hair was plaster to her head.

She placed her work bag on the kitchen counter “Yeah” she said with a sigh “I probably would have made it before the rain if that stupid kid Akechi didn’t talk my ear off outside the office. Causing me to miss my train. Then I had to take a cab that could only take me so far in all the traffic.”

I grabbed a couple of towels from the linen closet and handed one to Sae “Then as soon as I got out of the cab the rain just started coming down in buckets.” She opened up her briefcase “Well, at least everything in here is still dry.”

Noticing my proposed towel, she took it with a small “Thanks” and began drying her hair.

“That sounds like a rough day. I’m sorry sis. Would you like a cup of tea or anything? Something warm might help.” I suggested

“That would be great. Thank you, Makoto.” She walked down the hallway to her room.

I filled the tea kettle with water. While waiting for the water to come to a boil, I went ahead on mopped the rest of the water remaining in the foyer.

“How was school?” Sae asked from the other room

“It was… well…”
“What?” She asked again

“Oh, sorry it was um.” I paused “It wasn’t such a good day for me either sis.” I said a little louder so she could hear.

With a fresh change of clothes, Sae returned to the kitchen. Towel wrapped around her hair. “Sorry to hear that. Not a bad report card or something was it?”

“N-no -” I was cut off

“Because you know that college recruiters will be looking at your grades very closely this year. You may have gotten away with some leniency in second year but not anymore.” Sae explained. Only half paying attention while she rifled through the mail.

“No. No issues with grades I mean.”

“Good” She stated looking at one envelope in particular

“So, I need your advice.” Just then the kettle started whistling “Oh, let me go get that.”

I rushed over and poured two mugs full of hot water over some tea leaves to steep. One in each hand I placed Sae’s on the counter next to her. She didn’t seem to notice.

“Anyway, um.”

She looked up at me from the letter “Hmm? What is it Makoto? You need to speak if you want to be heard.”

“Right. Sorry. There was an accident at school.”

“Accident?” She gave me her attention for the first time that evening “Are you alright? What happened?”

“I’m fine. There was this girl, her name was Suzui, she was a second year, she jumped off the roof of the school and,” I looked for the words “She tried to kill herself, sis.”

Sae furrowed her brow “That awful. I’m sorry you had to see that Makoto” she placed the papers back on the counter “Stress does things to people. Especially with midterms not long off. She probably got overwhelmed and overreacted a bit.”

‘Just overreacted a bit?’ I thought ‘She jumped off a roof.’

Sae placed a hand on my shoulder and looked me in the eyes “Makoto if you are ever feeling overwhelmed. You know I’m always here to talk to right?”

I nodded

“Good” She got up from the counter “It’s been a long day, I think I’m going to take a bath and head to bed.”

“Good night Makoto. Be sure to get in some studying tonight ok?” I heard the bathroom door close, and the tub faucet begin to run.

I stood motionless staring where she had been just a moment ago “But... I’m feeling overwhelmed right now sis...” I felt the tears trying to force their way out again. I forced them back and looking back at the counter realized that Sae hadn’t even touched her tea.
A couple of weeks had passed since the incident, and I tried my best to keep things ‘business as usual.’ Several students had asked me about my opinion on Suzui’s “accident” the teachers told us to call it. All I could say to them was that it was unfortunate and to be sure to tell a teacher if they felt overwhelmed.

I knew it was a lame statement, and I could tell the students thought the same from the look on their face after I said it. Afterward, I was sure to make a hasty exit before they had the chance to give followup questions. I did my best to merely bury it and move on. Which became easier once a fellow council member came barging into the student council office one morning.

A couple of other students and I were getting our belongings together to get to class when Yuuto, our treasurer, came bursting through the door. Waving a paper in the air and raving about something incoherently.

After a few attempts of calming him down had failed I eventually just yelled “HEY! Yuuto, you’re talking way to fast and not making any sense.”

He finally snapped out of it and focused on me “He-here! Just read this!” and shoved the index card shaped piece of paper in my face. I snatched it from him and read:

“Sir Suguru Kamoshida, the utter bastard of lust, we know how shitty you are, and that you put your twisted desires on students that can’t fight back. That’s why we have decided to steal away those desires and make you confess your sins. This will be done tomorrow, so we hope you will be ready.

From, the Phantom Thieves of Hearts”

“The Phantom Thieves of Hearts?” I asked, “What the hell is that?”

**Photo Credit: khytal (https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

** If you find that you dig my writing, good news, I write for a living! Check out my professional page at markmcinturff.com to see what else I've written! **
Interlude 1

Chapter Summary

Makoto wakes up in a mysterious place. Finding herself captive and alone...

Chapter Notes

Still a part of my ongoing series, Makoto's Story, but had a little something different this week. These interludes aren't chapters per-say and are by far the most headcanony out of what I'm going to write. I don't want to say too much about what interludes are going to entail but could be described as more of a guide to the metaplot for Makoto.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Interlude

I woke up screaming at the top of my lungs.

My shrieks echoed all around me.

I was screaming, but I didn’t know why.

Felt… so strange. Groggy, like I just woke up from a nightmare or something.

I was covered in sweat. ‘Must have been one hell of a dream. Whatever it was.’

When things started coming back into focus, I realized, I had no idea where I was.

The room was pitch black. The darkness had a certain weight and density to it. Felt like being in a
thick soup.

I was seated on a hard stone floor, back against a wall. I tried getting up but found that I was heavily restrained. Wrapped, cocoon like, in so many layers of chains I couldn’t see my body beneath. The iron bindings weighed heavily on my chest making it hard to breathe.

As much tried to wriggle free or even get an inch of room, the chains held firm.

“H-Hey! Is anyone out there?!” I cried

I couldn’t feel my limbs.

“What’s going on here?! Someone? Anyone!” I yelled some more. It was all I could do.

I thought that maybe If I could sway back and forth, then I would fall to my side and free my legs somehow.

I attempted to shift my weight from one side to the other and found even that was no use. Chains were not only keeping me to the floor, but the wall as well. In fact, chains seemed to appear from every direction to keep me in place.

“Help! Someone answer me please!” Panic and adrenaline pumped through me

“I don’t belong here!” the only answer were my echos sounding down a corridor I couldn’t even see.

I wiggled and writhed some more, but all it did was rattle my restraints.

“I think… that’s when it happened” A dry, raspy voice muttered.

I looked toward the source and saw a man with crossed arms dressed in black leather with a long red scarf leaning on a wall. He somehow stood out against the rest of the darkness.

‘There was no one here a minute ago. Where did he come from?” I thought

“Who are you?” my voice trembled

He shifted suddenly. As if he didn’t know someone was in the room with him “Huh? You finally up princess?” said the raspy voice

“S-Show yourself!” I demanded

The dark clad man took a step away from the wall. Allowing me to see him in better detail. I discovered his head had no skin or eyes! It was just a bleached skull.

My eyes widened in horror.

We just stared at each other. At least I think he was looking at me.

Maintaining eye contact, he brought a cigarette to his mouth with a gloved hand and took a long drag.

Smoke rose from his crooked teeth and hallow eye sockets.

He exhaled what was left of the smoke towards me. Causing me to cough.
“Well, kid. Looks like you fucked us.”

I shook my head again in disbelief and closed my eyes tight “I have to be dreaming. This is just a nightmare” I muttered to myself “I just need to wake up…”

“A little too late for that” the skull chuckled “You’re wide awake.”

“Shut it!” I spat “You’re not real, and neither is this horrible place!”

He dropped the cigarette and stomped it out. “Believe what you want, kid, but this is more real than anything you’ve experienced before.”

I wriggled in my bindings more. Throwing my weight around trying to get something to give.

“You can keep that up all day girly but you ain’t moving.”

“Then help me!”

He shook his head “That ain’t how it works.”

“Damn you! Are you just going to stand there then?”

He took a knee and lowered himself to my level “You got to get yourself out.”

“You just said I couldn’t. You’re not making sense!”

“Don’t go blaming me, sweetheart! You decided to wake up, and now you need to deal with the consequences. It’s not like I asked to be in this mess!” His voice raised in intensity “You wanted to wake up and know! You wanted the power!”

“What? What could I have done to get here?!”

He pointed a finger at me “You read the note they left for that dumb-fuck teacher didn’t you?”

I blinked in recollection “Y-yeah? The one at the school? What about it?”

“Then you got involved, didn’t you? You just had to know more. Got yourself involved in something way bigger than yourself for the sake of, what was it, helping people?”

“I-”

“So you did just that. You woke up and got us involved in this shit.”

“P-Please, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He grabbed my chains and pulled my face close to his “Damn Niijima!” he shouted and shook me “You need to remember! Remember why! Or we are all dead for good!”

Tears welled in my eyes “I’m trying! I- I don’t understand!”

My vision started to get hazy again, and I felt light-headed. Before I knew it, all had returned to black.
Chapter End Notes

** If you find that you dig my writing, good news, I write for a living! Check out my professional page at markmcinturff.com to see what else I’ve written! **
The Confession

Chapter Summary

Happenings at the Shujin take an even greater turn for the worst when a strange card appears. Claiming that group that calls themselves 'The Phantom Thieves of Hearts' can steal the heart of a teacher. What is even more bizarre, is that they may have actually done it...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Chapter 7: The Confession

I read over the scrap of paper once again. “This reads like a child wrote this,” I recited flatly.

This didn’t comfort Yuuto in the slightest “M-Mr. Kamoshida saw it and looked like he was gonna kill someone!”

I returned my attention to the panicking treasurer “Where is he now?”

“He stormed off to his office… I think.”
“Yuuto, I need you to be certain about this,” I instructed, “did Kamoshida take anyone to his office with him?”

His panic turned to confusion “W-Why would you ask something like that?”

“Just answer me please” an uncharacteristically commanding tone rang in my voice.

It wasn’t that I believed much of anything on the note, but Kamoshida has been acting suspect lately. I still remembered what happened during the volleyball rally. If that was just an accident, I didn’t want to know what he was capable of in a fit of rage.

“No. No, I don’t think he took anyone…”

“Good” I nodded and continued my examination of the note. The opposite side of the card held a nasty little face that featured bulging round eyes, a toothy grin and a top hat affixed on its head to complete the monstrosity.

“Was this the only one?” I asked slipping the note into my bag so I could discuss it with Principal Kobayakawa later.

Yuuto simply shook his head and started walking out of the office “You better follow me Niijima.”

The rest of the council and I followed him down to the front hall where we found dozens upon dozens of these nasty little cards were littered all over the floor and coated the school’s event board.

“What is the meaning of all this?” Mika, the girl’s representative on the student council, asked while smacking on a stick of gum.

I picked up a fresh card from the floor and examined it. Same creepy little man on the back.

“From what I heard it was just like this when everyone got in this morning” Yuuto explained.

“That can’t be” I protested “I was here early this morning and I definitely would have noticed all these cards.”

“So what does that mean?” Mika chimed.

“I usually arrive a little before the faculty gets in, and the doors remain locked while the teachers get ready for the day. Since I highly doubt a teacher would do something like this, that means a student must have gotten here when the school just opened for the day but before everyone else arrived. We could ask around and see if any teacher noticed a student arriving significantly earlier than normal.”

“Smart!” Yuuto exclaimed in agreement “I can do that after school if you’d like Miss. Niijima!”

“Yeah,” I rubbed the back of my neck. Yuuto was very committed to his station as treasurer but wasn’t particularly good at any of his duties. He got distracted easily. It was typical for him to leave budget forms half finished and that’s if he got around to them at all. Truthfully, he only had the position because no one else wanted it. But, since being president, I have yet to see him miss a board meeting.

“I think I’ll handle this one Yuuto. You’ve already gone above and beyond today.”

He blushed “T-Thanks! That means a lot coming from you!”
“Anyway,” Mika interjected “So you got this Nijima? I would help, but I’ve got some stuff to do after school so…”

“Of course. Don’t worry about it, Mika” I looked around to my fellow student council members “Well, it is still a school day so we better-”

Before I could even finish, I saw that they had already started walking away together. I overheard Mika and another member making plans with each other for after school in hushed tones.

‘R-Right’ I sighed and looked back at the note ‘What kind of prank is this? And why? Who were these Phantom Thieves of Hearts?’

* 

After school, I interviewed the teachers and faculty that I saw early that morning and got nowhere. Seemed that the student responsible got in and out without a trace. I tried to talk with Principal Kobayakawa that evening, but the school secretary said he had been on the phone all afternoon and that it would better to just try again tomorrow.

I took the opportunity to do a little research. I looked up these ‘Phantom Thieves’ online to see if there had been any other reports on them. Maybe this was some sort of viral gag students were pulling on teachers to see them freak out, but came up empty-handed. No matter how I put in the name “Phantom Thieves,” “Phantom Thieves of Hearts,” “Heart Thieves” only things that came up were online pickup artists trying to give me advice on how to pick up girls.

Giving up the search I laid in my bed and stared blankly at the ceiling.

‘What could these student’s hope to accomplish with this? When they are eventually found out, they are only going to be expelled.’ My mind wandered in circles over the logic of the whole thing.

‘If they had something against Kamoshida, wouldn’t it be more efficient to simply talk with the Principal? Or if they really did want to be nasty, and they did truly have the proof they claim, why not post that around the school instead of a poorly written note?’

The more I thought about it, the less sense it made. All I could dream about that night was that cartoon’s gross grin. There was just something about it. Other than the obvious. It’s just when I thought about that card, something perked up in the back of my head. A little voice maybe or memory. Whatever it was I couldn’t quite make out …

I woke up that morning with my textbook resting on my face and lose leaf notes scattered around me. Clicking my phone display to life, I saw that I had slept through my alarm and was going to be late for school! Getting up I noticed I had never even changed out my uniform from yesterday and my hair was sticking up on one end. “Great… first time late for school all because of a dumb card…”

* 

When I finally got to school, I found that I had completely missed my first two classes and my morning meeting with Principal Kobayakawa. After apologizing profusely to my teachers, I insisted on staying late and cleaning up the classroom to atone for my tardiness. They told me it wasn’t necessary, but I felt terrible.

After scrubbing both rooms desks thoroughly, I washed up and made my way towards the front office with hopes that Kobayakawa was still around. However, after leaving the washroom, I found that I was once again the last one in the building. Examining a nearby wall clock, I saw that the time
was already five-thirty.

‘Well… I guess there is tomorrow morning…’ I thought after an exasperated sigh

I picked my bag up from the student council office and locked the door behind me. Making my way down the hallway, I remembered something ‘Wait. Five-Thirty? Isn’t that the time the volleyball team finishes practice?’

I stopped immediately and listened for any other footsteps or noises ‘If Mr. Kamoshida is still angry, I’d really rather not be alone with him.’

As I stood statue like a single bead of sweat rolled down my spine. I didn’t make a noise or even breath as to betray my position.

But I heard nothing except for the faint ticking of the wall clock. What was even more strange, I didn’t even hear the clatter of the volleyball team gathering up their belongings to go home.

My body relaxed with the realization that I was, indeed, alone.

Out of curiosity I made my way to the gym and found it deserted with the lights off. Seemed like it hadn’t even been used that day.

‘Strange…’ was all I could think. ‘I need to be sure to talk with the Principal tomorrow and get some answers.’

*

I was sure to come in early the next day. Showered, rested and ready to get to the bottom of things. As soon as I got in, I made a b-line to the front office and asked the secretary if Principal Kobayakawa was in yet.

“He’s not available Niijima. He’s having a meeting with the rest of the faculty about how to handle the address to the student body later this morning.”

“Address to the student body?” I asked with surprise “I was not made aware of a student-wide address.”

The secretary lowered the paper she was reading and shot me a glare “Well, maybe if you weren’t playing hooky yesterday Miss. Niijima, you wouldn’t have missed your meeting with the Principal, and you would know about it. Our actions have consequences, young lady, and you best remember that.”

I looked down with shame ‘I get I was late… but it was only one morning…’

“Of course. I apologize” I gave her a slight bow

“Don’t apologize to me, missy. Tell that to your principal later when he's not busy.” She snapped her paper back open.

“Yes ma’am” I bowed again and made my way out.

True to her word, as soon as the rest of the students showed up for school, everyone was herded into the gym for an assembly. Not knowing what else to do, I followed suit. It was a strange feeling being so out of the loop with the school’s happenings like I was then.

Once the gym was filled with equally confused students, Principal Kobayakawa took the stage.
Without much grandiose, he began “Let’s begin this morning’s assembly.”

“As you all know, a tragic event took place the other day. Thankfully, we have been informed that she has pulled through, but it will take time until she recovers. Everyone here has a bright future ahead. I implore that you rethink the importance of life and-”

A sudden door slam interrupted his speech.

“Mr. Kamoshida! What’s the-?”

Everyone turned their attention towards Mr. Kamoshida, who had just entered through a side door.

“I… have been reborn. That is why I will confess everything to you all.” he muttered

Dark rings circled his eyes, and his ordinarily crisp white shirt was covered with stains. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days.

Kamoshida made his way towards the stage, students parted the way to let him through. He reeked of stale alcohol.

I heard students all around me talking to each other in hushed tones.

“What happened to Mr. Kamoshida?”

“Does this have something to do with the volleyball team?”

Kamoshida addressed the crowd.

“I have repeatedly done things that were… unbecoming of a teacher. Verbally abusing students… physically abusing my team, and… sexually harassing female students. I am the reason why Shiho Suzui tried to kill herself.”

The crowd gasped

“I thought of this school as my own castle… there were even students that I sentenced to expulsion, simply because I didn’t like them… I will, of course, atone for my sins. I am truly sorry for putting innocent youths through such horrible acts…”

‘Oh my God’ I watched, beside myself ‘Was… Is he really capable of such acts? I felt off about him, and there were rumors, but I just thought…’

“I am an arrogant, shallow and shameful person.” he continued “No, I’m worse than that. I will take responsibility and kill myself for it!”

The students’ chatter grew louder.

“Is that how you broke your arm? Did he hit you?!” One student cried to another

“Did he say he was gonna kill himself?”

“Was that Phantom thing for real? Did they steal his heart?”

“Mr. Kamoshida! Please get off the stage!” Principal Kobayakawa interjected

“Everyone! Return to class!” A teacher yelled with no effect
“Don’t run you bastard!” A girl’s voice echoed above the rest. I turned and saw Ann Takamaki shouting with righteous anger. “Shiho’s still alive even after all the things that made her want to die! You have no right to run from this!”

Kamoshida looked to his accusor “You’re right… you’re absolutely right. I should be punished under the law and atone from my crimes. I did horrible things to Takamaki, as well. In return for giving Suzui a position on the team… I tried to force her into having relations.”

“What?! For a position on the team?” I heard a boy exclaim

“As of today, I will resign from my position as an instructor and turn myself in. Someone, please call the police!” With this Kamoshida slumped over and wept.

“Is this for real?” A boy asked

“What a sick bastard.”

“This morning’s assembly is over! Go back to your classes immediately!” Another teacher yelled over the confusion

‘It… was all true? A teacher forced himself on a student?’ I asked myself

I’m not sure what feeling washed over me at that moment or why I did what I did, but I started making my way towards the stage. Pushing students out of my way. I didn’t know what I was planning to do when I got there, but I shoved my way through the crowd like I was on some sort of mission.

However, my march was stopped by a particularly dense herd of students being ushered out by teachers. The last thing I saw before being forced out was the flashing of blue and red lights outside the gym doors.

**Photo Credit: khytal (https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

**If you find that you dig my writing, good news, I write for a living! Check out my professional page at markmcinturff.com to see what else I’ve written! **
"I regained consciousness and met another strange figure. This one seems different from the man with the skull. She was kind and gave me a little information, but she echoed what the man said and told me to remember. Remember what? Why won't they just release me? Am I doomed to die in this hole?"
Interlude 2

[M]

I started to feel the earth beneath me again.

Feeling returned to my aching limbs.

I knew I was awake, but couldn’t bring myself to open my eyes again. I knew I was still in that horrible room, but maybe if I didn’t admit its existence, it would go away.

I let my head hang, and my chin rested on my cold metal bindings.

‘I don’t want to still be in this room…I don’t want to look up and still be in that room’ My thoughts echoed in my head pathetically.

A soft, warm hand grazed my cheek “It’s ok if you’re tired.” A sweet voice greeted my ears

My eyes shot open with horror expecting the skull figure to be back. Instead, I was eye to eye with a beautiful woman.

Her eyes were a soft full blue. They reminded me of the waters in a clear tropical ocean. Her skin, a mocha brown color. Flawless other than strange white tattoos on her head and cheeks. She was an oasis of color in what was otherwise a decrepit pit of blackness.

The woman patted my hair gently “You’ve been through more than any could imagine Makoto. It’s ok to rest if you need it.” Her voice was smooth like honey.

“Who are you? What happened to the skull guy?” my voice shook from weakness.

“I am you, and you are me. Do you still not remember?” She looked a little hurt

Afraid I was going to lose my only ally I attempted to make amends “I’m sorry. I… can’t really remember much of anything.”

She smiled warmly “That’s ok if you don’t remember me yet. I look a little different from how you know me anyway.” She pulled out a goblet “Drink this. For your strength” She pressed the gold goblet to my lips, and I did as she asked.

The goblet was filled to the brim with cool refreshing water. I hadn’t realized how dehydrated I was until I drank the cup dry.

She pulled the empty goblet away and tucked it back into her cloak. When she pulled away from my face, I saw that her arms were covered in pale and gold feathers.

“What are you?” I stared at her form in amazement.

She noticed my gawking and chuckled “You truly don’t remember do you?” She folded her legs beneath herself and explained “As I said, I am you. But before we met, I was known by a different name. The closest word I can think of in your language is the name Isis.”

“Isis? Isn’t that an Egyptian god?” I asked

She shrugged “Maybe. I’ve been around a long time Makoto. I can’t remember all the names and
positions I’ve been given.”

She folded her hands gently together neatly on her ornately dressed lap. The charms on her elaborate headdress clicked and chimed with the movement of her head.

“You asked about the skull man from earlier yes?”

I nodded “Who was that guy?”

“As I, he to has gone by many names and has taken many forms. I am unaware of his full background, but I know he went by the name Hell Rider for a time.” She sighed and rubbed her temples “As to where he may be, I’m not certain. Believe me when I say we are better off away from him.”

I recalled his horrifying hollow eye sockets and crooked teeth. “Is he trying to kill me? Is that why I’m here?”

“Kill you?” she giggled “No Makoto. Trust me when I say killing you is the last thing he wants to do.”

“Then why is he here? Why am I here?” my frustration grew with my confusion “What the hell is this place and why won’t you let me out?!”

Isis’s beautiful ocean eyes sparkled with tears “Sweet girl. It just doesn't work that way.”

My head went limp again, and I laid my chin back on the cold restraints, defeated.

Isis’s soft hand gingerly took my chin and lifted it back up to meet her gaze. “You are doing well Makoto. The key to your salvation is to remember why. Dig deeply within your soul and mind. For all our sakes, you must remember Makoto.”

Her sweet voice sounded further and further away as I did what she told me. I tried to remember. Remember why.
Investigation

Chapter Summary

Principal Kobayakowa forces the impossible task of uncovering and bringing down the terrorist group the "Phantom Thieves of Hearts" on his student President, Makoto. Now coming to her wit's end due to recent events, so follows up on the one lead she has...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 9: Investigation

A couple of days had passed since Kamoshida’s confession, and the school was still ablaze with discussions about the event. Seems that many of the students finally found the courage to come forward and talk about what happened behind closed doors with Kamoshida. I doubted there was a single person not affected by that monster.

Everyone had their own way of coping with the news. Few girls walked by themselves during that time. They were always in a group or had their boyfriends nearby. A few were even pulled out of Shujin by their parents. A few students were in denial. Claiming that there was no way the things
Kamoshida did were possible.

Without much surprise the volleyball team was the most affected. The school brought in a counselor to have a group therapy session with the team every morning. Seemed to help. They were happy to have each other for support.

As for myself, I just sort of existed. I felt aimless. Not that I had been close to Mr. Kamoshida in any official capacity, but just now knowing what all that man got away with for years made me furious. I wasn’t sure what to make of all of it.

During my lunch period, I was summoned to Principal Kobayakawa’s office. We hadn’t met for a few days, so I was a little surprised by his sudden need to talk.

“Ahh Niijma, please enter, will you? And be sure to close that door behind you.” Principal Kobayakowa instructed in a cheery tone.

I did as my principal instructed and stood at attention.

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

The chair squeaked under his weight as he leaned back and placed his hands together over his sizable stomach. He took a moment to gather his thoughts.

“I assume you remember the, um, events that transpired the other day with Mr. Kamoshida don’t you?” His voice maintained its uplifting beat.

“Yes, sir. It was terrible what happened to all those students for so long.” I tried to keep my demeanor level and professional, but my voice cracked slightly having to exhume the recently buried thoughts surrounding the event.

He nodded “Yes. Yes indeed. However, do you remember those calling cards that appeared just before it happened?”

I blinked in recollection “Oh yes!” I reached into my back and took out the mentioned card that held the nasty little man on the opposite side. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about this.” I handed it to him, and he glanced over it.

“Yes, this is the one,” He placed it on his desk “I need your help with this Niijima.”

“Of course sir,” I took the card back and place it in my bag again “How can I help?”

Kobyakowa leaned back in his chair again and resumed his relaxed pose. “I need you to discover the identity of these Phantom Thieves and bring them down.”

My face scrunched from confusion.

This mysterious group brought a grown man to his knees and drove him to contemplate suicide. Did my Principal really want a third-year girl to bring something that was capable of that down?

“Um, sir, you want me to take down these Phantom Thieves of Hearts? By myself?”

“Is that a problem?” His easy-going manner suddenly disappeared and a more authoritarian tone taking its place.

“I… Forgive me, sir. It just seems this is a task best left to the police, don’t you think?”
He leaned forward in his seat and placed his elbows on the desk, hands clasped together. “Don’t you care about your student body Niijima?”

“Yes, sir. Of course, I do.” I responded

“Then you know they have been through quite enough. Do you really think a bunch of officers coming through here, harassing these clearly distributed students, with questions would good for them right now? The volleyball team is barely keeping it together as is.”

“Y-Yes but-”

“Makoto Niijima,” he interrupted “We had your older sister Sae here at one point, didn’t we? Isn’t she a high profile prosecutor these days? She’s proving herself worthy of her station, and she surely has some grand ambitions for the future doesn't she?” He explained offhandedly

“That’s correct sir.”

“She’s in a pretty delicate situation right now is she not? Seeing that she's a recent member of the team. I hear she is the only woman as well.”

I nodded. Curious as to where he was going.

“I have connections Niijima. Connections that can help certain people or make them permanent fixtures of the mailroom staff. Connections that can help certain students achieve their dreams by helping them get into a good college or send them down a, let's say, less than ideal life.” he said coolly

“Do we understand each other Miss Niijima?”

I felt my pulse quicken ‘Was he really capable of all that? Could he really crash my sister’s career into the ground before it really even started? Stop me from getting into a good education?’

I swallowed “Yes sir. I understand perfectly. I will seek out these Phantom Thieves.”

He nodded “Good.” the chime returning to his voice as he leaned back once again.

“I expect daily updates, Niijima. And I’m sure I don’t need to mention that you handle this with the upmost discretion.”

I nodded “Of course sir.”

“Alright,” He pulled out his cell phone “That's all I need from you. Please see yourself out. I need to make a phone call.”

I gave a bow and left his office. Feeling like I was about to be sick.

* 

While making my way towards my final class of the day, my head still spun from my conversation that morning. I was unable to finish lunch and what I did manage to get down came right back up. I spent the rest of my lunch period in the girl's bathroom. Causing me to be late to my next class.

I had to find these Phantom Thieves and fast. But I had no idea where to even start.

Rounding the corner, I heard a couple of girls talking nearby.
“So you read that calling card from the other day right?” a girl with long hair asked her shorter friend.

“Yeah! It was scary! Do you think those ghost thieves took Mr. Kamoshida’s heart or whatever?”

At the mention of the Phantom Thieves and ducked back behind the corner and sharpened my hearing

The long-haired girl chuckled “I don’t know about ghost thieves doing anything, but I think I know of a couple of boys who did.”

“Oh?” asked the other girl

“I heard that Ryuji Sakamoto and that creepy transfer kid Kurusu threatened his life.” The long-haired girl whispered

“What?” Short girl exasperated

“Yeah! Apparently, Mr. Kamoshida threatened to expel them, and they told them they were gonna kill him or something.”

“Do you believe that?”

“You know Sakamoto’s reputation. He’s already tried to punch Kamoshida once before. Not to mention that Kurusu kid as a record for assault. Is it that hard to believe?”

I crouched down in my hiding spot ‘I had almost forgotten about Kurusu and Sakamoto. They both have histories of violence. But were they capable of doing what they did to Kamoshida?’

“Miss Nijima!” a cross-armed teacher shouted above me “What are you doing? Get moving to class, or you will be late again.”

I looked up at my accuser and back down at my own position. “Oh! Yes sorry! I had to tie my shoe.” I said mock tying my laces.

The teacher looked confused “But your shoes don’t have laces…”

I shot back up “Well I don’t want to be late! Off I go!” and sped my way down the hallway to class.

* 

As soon as the last bell rang, ending school, I bolted out of my classroom and made my way towards the second year classrooms. ‘Kurusu and Sakamoto are the only leads I have as to who would want to hurt Kamoshida. Maybe I can tail them and see if they truly are the type to threaten a teacher’s life.’

Making my way up I saw Ruiji Sakamoto standing at the top of the stairs looking at his phone. With my back against the wall, I pulled out a textbook and held it in front of my face. Watching him over the top of the book.

“Hey man” Sakamoto greeted Kurusu as he walked up

“Hey” he responded flatly

“How you holding up?” Ryuji asked
“I’m fine. You?”

He sighed “I’m alright” He looked up the stairs and back to Ren “Ready to head up?”

Ren Kurusu nodded, and they climbed the stairs together.

Tossing my book back in my bag I begin my hunt. Giving enough distance between myself and them as to not look suspicious, but not too far to where I couldn’t see Ryuji’s short blonde hair in the crowded hallway.

They rounded a corner at the top of the stairs and walked through the heavy door to the roof.

‘What could they be doing up there?’ I thought ‘The roof is banned to students’

I made my way up the stairs and listened to the door.

“Did we do the right thing?” I heard a muffled Ryuiji say “That whole thing was pretty intense.”

“Uh, yeah we did” A different, more high pitched voice retorted

“Yeah, your right. He was a total shell of himself man. It was crazy.”

“He got what he deserved. Shiho is avenged and that all that matters.” the high pitch voice said solemnly

“You feeling bad for the guy Ryuji?” asked Ren

“Hell no!” shouted Ryuji “Just kind of surprised it worked!”

Then I heard a cluster of meows. ‘Do… They have a cat up there?’

“Screw you, Morgana!” Ryuji bursted out suddenly

‘Who is Morgana? Is that another student?’ I asked myself

“How is Shiho holding up Ann?” Ren asked

“She's doing better. She's going into rehab soon. When she’s better, her parents are gonna transfer to a different school.” Ann replied

“That sucks.” Ryuji stated “Shes all you got around here right?”

“Yeah… but it’s not like I can blame her.”

“I know what will get your mind off it. Let's find our next target! It’s got to be someone big, so more people will know about us!”

‘Next target? They are going to threaten more people?’ I had heard enough. I took a deep breath and threw open the doors.

The three students were gathered together in a corner seated on old desks and chairs. Their gaze fixed on me, eyes wide.

“The roof is off limits to students you know. Been one too many accidents up here” I stated with authority

Ryuji rolled his eyes and reclined back in his chair. Feet propped up on a desk. “What does Miss
School President want with us huh?”

“Let’s see” I took inventory of the students in front of me “the trouble maker, girl of rumor and,” my eyes fell on Ren Kurusu “The infamous transfer student. What could you three be plotting together?”

“What does it matter to you?” Ryuji spat

Ignoring him, I continued pressing my advantage from catching them off guard “You got to know Kamoshida pretty well didn’t you?” I asked Ren

He shrugged “Not really. Had his class but that was about it.”

“What are you getting at exactly?” Asked Ann, grinding her teeth from sheer anger.

Out of the three, Ren was the most collected. He must have been the mastermind.

I didn’t know much, so I tried to throw something believable out there to try to slip him up. “I heard that Mr. Kamoshida started the rumors about you. Told everyone about your reason for transferring here because he couldn’t stand having a student with a criminal around.” I narrowed my gaze “Don’t you hate him for that?” I gave a coy smile to sell the bluff

Ren’s eye twitched slightly, and he gave a faint smile. I had something.

“What the hell is this! You accusing us of somethin?!” Ryuji lowered his chair and looked as if he was ready to pounce.

‘Try it Sakamoto and see what happens’ I thought

However, I realized humiliating Ryuji in a fight in front of his friends wouldn’t get me any closer to the truth, so I tried a different tactic.

“I don’t mean to offend” backing off slightly “Many students are shaken up by what happened, and these rumors about the calling card aren’t helping.”

I pulled out the card again and showed them “Did you see these the day before Kamoshida’s episode in the gym?”

Ann bit her lip and made a momentary glance at Ryuji before returning her increasingly venomous gaze at me “Since when did you care about stuff like this anyway?”

Ryuji put his feet back up on the desk and crossed his arms. “We done here?”

His arrogance got to me “At least understand my position! Being forced to deal with this-this horseplay!” My blood boiled

Ann’s face contorted with confusion “Horseplay?”

I shot a piercing look at Ren. He just continued to grin. Unaffected ‘What is with this guy?’

‘Collect yourself Niijima. Don’t let them get to you.’

I cleared my throat and straightened my posture “I will be sending out a notice to remind all students that the roof is off limits and dangerous, and anyone found up here will be suspended. I’m sorry for interrupting you.” I stated flatly and made my way back to the stairwell.
The doors slammed behind me. “What a bitch…” I heard Ann’s voice mutter faintly from the roof.

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you’ve enjoyed this installment of Makoto’s Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
Desperate for information, Makoto begins following her suspects around town in hopes of gathering data. Focusing primarily on who she believes is the mastermind behind the whole operation, Ren Kurusu.
Chapter 10: Profiling the Mastermind

The train’s overhead intercom crackled to life.

A robotic voice chimed “TIME: 8:00 AM. YOUR HOURLY NEWS UPDATE,” followed by a prerecorded SSN news broadcasters voice “The investigation into the alleged abusing and sexual misconduct at a local school, Shujin Academy, continues on. A week ago a gym teacher a Shujin, Suguru Kamoshida, turned himself into the authorities after confessing to his alleged crimes during a school assembly. What authorities found even stranger was that Mr. Kamoshida seemed to have a sudden change of heart supposedly caused by a small group of thugs that call themselves ‘The Phantom Thieves of Hearts.’ A few days prior to his confession dozens of calling cards were
scattered throughout Shujin Academy claiming that these ‘Phantom Thieves’ intended to ‘seal the
teacher's heart.’ Authorities are still unclear on the connection and-

‘Sounds like even the authorities are having a hard time piecing together the whole thing.’ I thought, looking out the window of the subway ‘How does anyone, especially three teenagers, do what they did?’

It had been a few days since my confrontation with the trio of trouble makers. I was without a
doubt they had something to do with Kamoshida’s meltdown, but the problem was figuring out
how they did it. I needed data.

I remembered when Dad was still around, he would occasionally go on stakeouts with his police
partner. They would watch a building for hours, or even days, to gather enough information to
bring in their man.

I may not have the training my Father did, but I had my wits. Which seemed more than enough to
handle these three. They barely kept it together when I cornered them on the rooftop.

So in the days to follow my life was consumed by Takamaki, Sakamoto and Kurusu’s everyday
life, but was a little disappointed to find how dull they were exactly.

The three hardly did anything out of the ordinary, let alone criminal, after school. They would
occasionally meet up at their new hangout spot at the subway station’s access way, but that was
about it.

Sakamoto was always either at the gym or running laps around the school. Takamaki hung around
the underground mall browsing clothes or at home. The only one who seemed to have any sort of
variety in their schedule was Ren Kurusu.

Some days he headed immediately to central street to visit some airsoft gun store. Others he would
spend hours just researching in the school library. I once caught him entering some seedy alley
clinic and didn’t leave till well into the evening. It was hard to pin down what sort of guy this
Kurusu was, but it was clear to me he was up to something.

I decided to dedicate my day off to following Ren around town and gathering data. I needed to get
into the head of the mysterious mastermind of the Phantom Thieves if I ever wanted a hope of
bringing them to justice.

Thanks to one of my prior days' of info gathering, I found that he lived in the attic of a certain Cafe
Leblanc. So I begin my day having the cafe’s curry and coffee special. I had to admit, Sojiro, the
cafe’s owner, was a master at his job.

While having my breakfast, I watched him converse with his dedicated group of regulars over their
lives, kids and exchanged a number of coffee facts with them. He seemed like a kind-hearted man,
and that he took great pride in his work. Made me wonder why someone like this would want to
house a criminal.

After my breakfast, and a couple of coffees later, I found that hours had passed. I kept a book with
me to conceal my face, but after a while, I ended up doing more reading than surveillance. I don’t
know what he was doing in that attic, but I heard sounds of a mallet hitting wood, duct tape being
ripped off a roll, and quite a few agitated meows from a cat.

The warm cafe and a belly full of food made me want to settle in for a nap when the sound of
squeaking stairs shot me back awake.
“Well, morning sunshine.” Sojiro mocked the emerging teen. “Was wondering when you were going to get your lazy carcass out of bed.”

Seeing Ren, I slapped a magazine against my face to conceal my identity.

“Morning Boss.” Ren greeted his guardian absentmindedly. Clearly more focused on getting his coffee then conversing with Sojiro.

“I heard all the racket you were causing up there. I know I’m letting you live up there, but you better not be wrecking my attic.” Sojiro said crossly

“It was nothing like that,” Ren answered in a dismissive tone, pouring coffee into a thermos. “I was just cleaning up a bit and got up to making some arts and crafts.”

“Arts and crafts?” Sojiro paused a moment “Whatever, just don’t be getting into anything illegal up there.”

“Where will you be at today?” He asked while Ren took a sip of his fresh coffee.

“Probably downtown at the mall. Wanted to do a little shopping.”

“Alright. I don’t care how late you stay out, but if you miss school tomorrow your butt is as good as gone, hear me?”

Ren nodded and made his way past my booth and out the front entrance.

“That your kid?” a smartly dressed patron asked

Sojiro chuckled “Thank God no. I’m just doing a favor for his parents and watching over him while he attends school at Shujin.”

“Shujin?” The man asked, “Isn’t that where that one teacher got arrested recently?”

“What teacher?” Sojiro asked half interested while washing a few dishes.

I quickly gathered my belongings and made my way out the door to catch up with Ren.

By the time I got outside, I found that the streets were slam-packed full of people and Ren had vanished entirely.

‘Damn. Well, he said he was headed to the mall,’ I recalled ‘Hopefully he doesn't make any lengthy detours, and I can just catch him there.’ Luckily I caught a train just as it was leaving and stalked out the crowded mall.

He was nowhere to be found. Figuring I was just early I found a bench overlooking the train arrivals and waited.

About an hour of waiting later, I had finished the book I brought and now was seriously starting to get bored.

‘Did this guy get lost or what?’ I stood up and browsed a nearby magazine stand.

A voice crackled over the intercom “Now arriving: 1:30 Shibuya.”

My ears perked up ‘That should be his train. Finally...’ I scanned the crowd of arrivals and saw Ren walking up the stairs leading out of the station and into the mall.
Worried I would lose him again, I ran after him.

Desperate for information, I observed closely and took thorough notes in hopes of cracking this deviant's mind.

1:35 - Entered the music shop and browsed for about 20 minutes. Had a conversation with the guy behind the desk. Left around 2:00.

2:03 - Entered the general store and bought a candy bar

2:10 - Browsed a nicknack store for a minute but was immediately kicked out for having food

2:23 - Went above ground and walked to the central street arcade.

2:30 - Started playing some shooting game with a loud mouth kid.

3:00 - Lost 6 times against kid but continues to play

3:30 - Now lost 15 times against the kid

4:12 - Score is now 30 kid, Ren 0. Starting to wonder when this is going to end.

4:19 - Ren continues to lose but asks for one last game.

4:45 - Ren FINALLY leaves having scored 45 kid, Ren -1. He borrowed a couple of tokens from the kid to keep playing, so I counted it as a loss on his score.

4:56 - Re-entered the subway station and browsed some magazines

‘This is ridiculous’ I sat at the same bench I did earlier that day. My face propped up by my hands with some magazine I found earlier sandwiched inbetween. Still maintaining some effort to continue to conceal my identity.

‘Did I hear them right on the roof? Am I certain this guy is the leader of the illustrious Phantom Thieves of Hearts? The gang that could bring a grown man to weep like a small child in front of an entire school?’

I groaned. ‘The only thing I’ve found out this whole time is that Ren can’t hit the side of a barn with a laser gun in a stupid video game.’

All of a sudden I felt a piece paper being wedged between my forehead and the magazine.

“Huh?” I looked up and saw Ren staring directly at me, only a couple of meeters away, sipping on a pink smoothy.

I stared at him wide-eyed. Speechless.

He paused from drinking momentarily “Hi Makoto” He chirped and resumed sipping his straw.

I continued my flustered stare. Feeling the blood rush to my ears and cheeks from embarrassment.

“So how was your Sunday?” He asked

“I… Um…” I lifted my magazine in the air and waved it around frantically like I was trying to shoo away a fly “Great! Was just catching up on some light reading!” I said shrilly followed by nervous laughter.
He turned his head sideways and read the cover out loud “20-minute workouts for the hot guy” he read “Interesting. Do you normally read upside down too?”

I turned the cover towards me and saw shirtless buff men winking at me with the tops of their head pointed towards the ground.

“Right. I’ve been looking for new workout routines and…” Lacking for any sort of plausible explanation for any of this an eternity of silence went by only broken by Ren’s continued slurping of his smoothy.

He gestured to a paper that had fallen into my lap “Well, I figured I would make your job a little easier next time, so I wrote my schedule down for next week for you.”

I examined the paper, and sure enough, it was a thorough time table of his school schedule and after-school appointments. Times numbered and dates organized.

“Why would I want this? Can’t I happen to be at the mall the same time you are?”

“Yeah” He looked down his empty cup of smoothy in hopes to scrounge up a little more “You know Sojiro only ever has regulars at the cafe right?”

I blinked wide-eyed

“Places like that, anyone new, and under the age of forty, tend to stand out a little.”

“I, well um, wouldn’t know that would I?”

He chuckled and made his way towards the waiting train “I’ll see you tomorrow Niijima!” he shouted waving at me from behind.

I looked down, face still hot from embarrassment “Shit…”

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
Chapter Summary

After composing herself from her embracing encounter with Ren Kurusu, Makoto re-doubles her efforts in her investigation of the Phantom Thieves. During which she finds that her three suspects have made a mysterious new friend. But it may be too little too late. For Principal Kobayakawa's patience is running awful thin due to Makoto's lack of results...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 11: Seven Years Bad Luck

I took a few days off from my investigation work following the humiliating encounter I had with Ren. It was foolish of me to discount the prows of the leader of a terrorist organization, and my, possible, oversight of the clientele that frequent Cafe Leblanc, could have, contributed.

After about a week of composing myself and planning, I resumed my surveillance. This time taking more precautions. I couldn’t let him get the upper hand again.

Gathering all my know-how of detective work from Dad and knowledge of the law from Sae, I got to work.
I constructed a spreadsheet for my three prime suspects and made it a priority to follow one a day after school.

Monday - Ren, Tuesday - Ryuji, Wednesday - Ren, Thursday - Ann, Friday - Ren, Saturday - Sunday - Ren

Obviously, they knew what I looked like so I raided Sae’s closet and took a change of clothes with me to school. After the last bell, I would change and follow my intended target for the day.

Their habits and routines were now mine. To understand how these three did what they did, I had to uncover every last detail of their lives. I needed answers by any means necessary.

Weeks went by before anything of interest happened. I noticed they started spending a lot more time at their hang out in the subway station with a mysterious new blue haired boy.

His hair was longer than most boys, slender build, seemed about our age and wore an unfamiliar school uniform. It took some digging, but I eventually found a copy of his school file.

Yusuke Kitagawa

- Date of birth: January 28th, 2000
- Mother deceased, Guardian Ichiryusai Madarame
- Occupation: full-time student at Kosei High. (A magnet school for the arts)

ADDITIONAL NOTES: Post Kosei High Acceptance Interview Final Evaluation. Date: April 9th, 2012

I have found that Mr. Kitagawa has aloof tendencies and prefers isolation. May have something to do with being separated from his mother at such a young age. Thankfully he has a kind-hearted guardian in Mr. Madarame who has helped his charge to blossom in his artistic potential.

I declare him mentally fit to be accepted into Kosei High.

- Dr. Watanabe, Clinical Psychologist

Interesting read but didn’t give me much. ‘Why would this art student from a random art school be hanging out with these three? Was he a part of the initial attack on Kamoshida?’

Even with doubling down on my research efforts few things seemed to any sense. I knew that they were responsible, but I still had nothing to show for it. And Principal Kobayakawa was losing his patience.

One morning, during class, Kobayakawa summoned me to his office. I knew what it was going to be about. Same thing every meeting had been about for the past month…

“Any news on the Phantom Thieves?” My principal asked eagerly awaiting good news.

“Nothing to report today sir,” I replied flatly. Weeks ago I would have never have talked to an authority figure so snidely, but I couldn’t help it after a while. Being asked to give daily updates on the impossible hardly breed enthusiasm.

He sighed deeply and clasped his hands together on his desk. “I’m tired of hearing about your lack of progress Nijima. Have you forgotten what’s at stake here?”
I shook my head ashamedly. It was hard to forget that failure to unmask the Phantom Thieves meant putting Sae’s and my future in jeopardy.

“Of course not sir. I’ve narrowed down the suspect list, but I need evidence.”

There was a pause as he contemplated. Possibly to think up a new angle to “motivate” me. I took the opportunity to ask a question of my own.

“Principal Kobayakawa, did you know about Mr. Kamoshida? What he was up to?”

I saw him go wide-eyed with shock. First time I ever saw him not in total control of a conversation. He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. He rested his forehead on his propped up hands.

“Sir!” I shouted in disgust

“Why are you asking questions like that for, Niijima?” he shot back “This conversation does not involve Mr. Kamoshida or his despicable actions. We are discussing a possible terrorist group being organized by our very students!” He stood up, hands flat on the desk, murder in his eyes. He reminded me of Ryuji back on the rooftop days earlier. I had hit a nerve, and he was ready to pounce.

“We need these criminals to not be our students, do you or do you not understand that Makoto Niijima?!” He shouted

I recoiled slightly but maintained my footing “I understand sir.” I said lowly, close to a growl

“Do you? Because I don’t see how irrelevant questions like that help you in your investigation.”

I could feel my face contort in disgust “I assure you, sir, I understand fully” I gave a bow “My apologies.”

“Good. Now get out of my office.” He pointed to the door, staring daggers at me.

I did as told. Slamming the door behind me.

*

Principal Kobayakawa didn’t summon me back to his office after our argument. It gave me some time to reevaluate my motivation for the whole investigation.

I felt betrayed. The school that I loved so much, and gave so much of myself too, had abandoned me. Teachers beating and molesting students, the principal that I had seen as a mentor was a bystander to horrific crimes, even the student body who I dedicated the past few years too seemed to despise me. I’ve done nothing but try to help them, and they see me as nothing but a teacher’s pet and a nuisance.

I felt disgusted with myself.

Washing up before dinner, I took a long hard look at myself in the mirror. I hated what I saw.

My stupid red eyes that no one else ever had. Gross looking short brown hair. The bags under my eyes. I was repugnant.

The image of Ann Takamaki flashed in my mind's eye. “Long cascading blonde hair, deep blue eyes, flawless skin. She was gorgeous. No wonder she had friends, and I didn’t.” I murmured to my
reflection

“No wonder she got asked out, and I didn’t. No wonder she has never had to work a day in her
damn life, and I have to work my fingers to the bone. Study long sleepless nights for a test. Because
I have to actually work at getting into college.

I have to work to have a hope of a decent future.” I started shouting. Balling up a fist “A future that
can be so easily taken away by a grotesque pig that calls himself a principal! No one likes me. My
own sister doesn’t even notice me. No one has ever loved me and no one ever will! AND ITS ALL
BECAUSE SHE IS SO PRETTY AND IM JUST A DISGUSTING, WORTHLESS, GREASY
HAIRED BITCH!!”

*SMASH*

My fist connected with the mirror sending glass flying all over the sink and floor.

I saw half my face in a dangling shard of mirror. The angry eyes staring back at me scared me.

Blood ran down my fist and arm. Tears ran down my cheeks.

I retracted my arm and fell to my knees. Pieces of mirror stuck in my knuckles. My legs went
numb, causing me to collapse at one side and onto on the floor. I clutched my knees to my chest
and wept.

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are
interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
"This dream, or whatever it is, doesn't look like it's going to end anytime soon. These two spirits seem to be preoccupied with squabbling with each other to set me free. They remind me of two other people I know... or used to know... but who? Why can't I remember anything? Why is all coming back so slowly? When can I finally go home?!!"
Interlude: 3

[LM]

A harsh cackle echoed nearby. When I opened my eyes I saw a familiar face, or at least a place where a face should be.

The skeleton man named Hell Biker had reappeared. He was bent over with laughter, holding one hand to the wall for support.
“Heh-heh-heh, boy kido! Just when I was starting to forget why I made that deal with you, you go and remind me of how much of a hot mess you really are!”

My formerly held fear for him had been overwhelmed by a stronger sense of annoyance. “What, about any of this, are you finding funny exactly?

“Heh-heh no need to get testy.” He straightened himself out ”Just glad to see you are actually capable of having some real emotion and aren't a total drone.”

“Excuse me?” I argued

“Such…” he clenched his gloved fist in the air dramatically, clearly not listening “Anger…”

He brought himself down to eye level with me on the floor. A strong stench of burnt rubber filled my nose “There is real power in fury kid.” he patted me on the head derisively “Now if only you could take that energy from smashing mirrors to something a little more constructive. Like some good old fashioned killin’.” he chimed with a hope-filled grin

“Why are you back?” A commanding voice sounded from the other side of the room

Biker dropped his head to his chest and let out an audible groan. “Don’t look now, kid. Looks like the queen bee has made a come back” he whispered to me.

He stood back up and swiveled on the spot cartoonishly. “Sorry chick. We have a strict no bird policy here.” He addressed the source of the voice.

Isis emerged from the shadows, feathered arms crossed. Her beautiful eyes spelled murder.

“What are you doing back here, Biker?”

“Funny, I was about to ask you the same, you’re highness.” he curtsied mockingly “I assumed we had ditched the more, how can I put this delicately, pain in the ass traits.”

Isis approached Biker and waved a finger “None speak to me in such a manner. Especially a crass, disgusting piece of trash such as you.” she spat in his face

Biker cackled again “You’re right highness. I am a piece of trash! At least I’m willing to admit it.” He took out his revolver from a holster “Here, let me help you out and take out the garbage. Least I could do” He swiftly brought the gun to his head and fired.

*Bang*

Fragments of skull blew out the other side cannon like, and he dropped to the floor motionless.

“Oh my God!” I yelled, “Did he just do that?!”

Isis stood, unmoved. She glanced down at me, arms still folded “Just wait a moment. This is his foolish idea of a joke.”

A few seconds later Bikers body shot back up to a standing position, and the skull fragments rocketed back into place. He laughed a hoarse laugh that echoed throughout the black chamber.

“Hehehe!” He slapped his boney knee “Did you see the look on her face?!” He pointed at me and cackled

“Did he just do that?” He asked mimicking my voice.
Isis narrows her eyes at him “She recalls one of the lowest points in her life, and you make fun?”

Biker wiped a nonexistent tear from his eye socket “What? It happened already! I live in the present baby! Not the past. Besides, at least I can now remember she actually has a pair.” He pulls out a pack of cigarettes and plucks one out.

Isis slaps the box out of his hands “You are not helping our situation. You never do!”

He shrugs. “What? Do you want me to cry too?” a small flame lights on the tip of his finger and he ignites the cigarette in his mouth “Not my style babe. I get the shit done. Not whine about it.”

Isis scoffs and sits next to me on the floor “How are you Makoto? You have been very brave. Digging up those memories, while part of the process, can’t be pleasant.” She stroked my head sweetly

Biker takes a long drag of his cigarette “Fucking broads” he mumbles

Isis's hand extends in his direction and a massive bolt of lightning blasts from her arm piercing Biker in the chest.

He laughs once more “Ut-oh! Looks like I got her angry! Hahaha!” His haunting laughter continued as a beating heart is ripped out from his chest and into Isis’s extended hand. Biker falls, once again, face first onto the hard stone floor.

Isis crushes the heart in her hand, and it instantly turns to ash. I watch it, horrified.

“I’m sorry Makoto.” She examined Biker’s motionless body “I wish I could say I killed him, but he’ll be back soon enough.”

I rolled my head back and closed my eyes “I just want to go home…”

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
Goro Akechi, Ace Boy Detective

Chapter Summary

Seemingly unable to escape from the topic of the Phantom Thieves, Makoto finds out that they had managed to do it again. Later she encounters a boy who is a self-proclaimed detective and has his own take on the actions of the Thieves.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 13: Goro Akechi, Ace Boy Detective

It’s hard not to get lost in a good story, and that was exactly what I needed right then. To get lost and be rid of the world for a time.

So that night I planned to do just that. After completing my research paper on the Meiji Restoration for class, I had grown a real interest in the period. It was a time of significant change in both the economy and society for the entire nation. An attempt to “catch-up” with the rest of the world. I wondered how people dealt with something like that over 100 years ago.

My History teacher suggested I picked up a copy of Kokoro by Natsume Soseki. He had read it in
college and thought it was exactly what I was looking for.

I curled up on one of the couches in Sae’s living room and let the words take me to a time long ago.

It was short-lived, however, when a few moments later Sae bursts through the front door yelling at someone over the phone.

“I’m tired of hearing your excuses! This is the second time it's happened, and there can’t be third. If this continues, it’s not only my butt on the line but yours too. So I’d suggest you get your act together and don’t call me again until you have a REAL update.” She slammed her phone on the kitchen table along with her bag.

For once I had actually wished Sae would have stayed at the office.

“Everything ok sis?” I asked marking my place in the book. I knew there was no way I was going to get back to it tonight with Sae being in a mood.

“Yes,” she forcibly rubbed her temples “My team is just incompetent is all. I assume you heard the news?”

I shook my head. I had actually been actively avoiding the news for the past few days. I had enough on my plate at the moment and didn’t need to hear more about tragic news stories or about updates on the upcoming elections.

Sae filled a cup with water and laid on the opposing coach from mine. “Those Phantom Thieves have done it again.” she said with resignation in her voice “Still no leads. Still, no idea how they did it. Nothing.”

My stomach knotted at her mention of the Phantom Thieves. They had been responsible for all the recent turmoil in my life. The thought of those three and their mysterious friend causing more hysteria made me want to ram my head through a wall. Even worse was that Sae and her fellow investigators still had no clue as to how they were doing it.

“That's awful, who did they target this time?”

“An artist named Ichiryusai Madarame.”

‘Ichiryusai Madarame…’ The name echoed in my mind ‘Why did that name sound so familiar?’

“An artist? Why would they target an artist?”

“It’s hard to tell, but if his confession was a truthful one, he was a real piece of work.”

“He confessed?”

Sae took another gulp of water “He did. Yesterday he held a press conference following the final day of his art exhibition. He raved about how he was stealing his student’s art. He leached off their ideas and sold their creations for a profit under his own name. When he was done with them, he would toss them on the street like garbage.” Sae paused a moment “He wept like a little boy and was begging for forgiveness. It was kind of hard to watch.” She looked at her glass of water and got up “I need something a little stronger.”

“My gosh! That's terrible. Was it real? Did he really do those things?”
Sae rifled through a few cupboards and brought back a glass of her favorite bourbon. “We are still digging, but it looks like he was telling the truth.”

My eyes turn towards the floor “How can people be capable of such things?”

‘As much as I hated the Phantom Thieves of hearts and what they have done to my life if they were taking down people like this artist and Kamoshida, where they really bad guys?’

I shook my head again ‘Of course they are Makoto,’ I thought ‘The law existed for a reason. There are systems in place to take down people like that. A group of obnoxious teens can’t claim to know better than the law.’

Sae unconsciously tapped her finger on her glass “If these thieves really do exist, how do they do it?” she lost herself in thought a moment “I wonder what I could do if I had the power to bring people down like they have.” she murmured

Her eyes wandered back to me “Hey” she pointed to my bandaged hand “what happened to you?”

I covered my wounded knuckles under a blanket “Yes, well, you noticed the bathroom mirror is missing, yes?”

“That bathroom mirror is missing?”

I forgot how little she was home. She probably didn’t have a chance to even see the damage since the accident.

“Oh, yes, there was a little, um, incident the other night.” I considered my options carefully before proceeding “You see I-”

“When were you planning to tell me about that? Since I would need to be the one to pay to replace it, I would rather know about it then have to find out myself. You understand don’t you?”

I nodded, not meeting her gaze “My apologies. I just wasn’t sure when you were going to be home, and I didn’t want to bother at work-”

“Its fine Makoto just,” Sae leaned her head back and covered her eyes with her hand “Whatever. It’s fine. Just let me know in the future ok?”

“Of course,” I said in small voice.

Sae got up and drained her bourbon “I’m going to go out for a bit. I need to clear my head” She grabbed her bag “Be sure not to stay up too late ok?” she said over her shoulder, closing the door behind her.

I collected myself in the reclaimed stillness of the room for a moment. Feeling the continued painful throbbing from my wound, I decided that it was time to change my bandages. Once in the bathroom, I started peeling off the layers of gauze soaked in dried blood from the initial binding. The wound itself was still puffy and red, but at least the bleeding had stopped. My fingers were stiff and hard to bend.

I washed out the wound again, trying to ignore the intense stinging from the soap, and applied fresh bandages.

Not feeling much in the mood to read anymore I clicked on the TV. A late night talk show appeared before me. A man and woman were talking with some long auburn haired boy in a brown
blazer. He looked about my age.

“Well, I don’t know all that, but I know they don’t call me boy detective for nothing.” The boy says, and the crowd goes nuts. The camera panned over the audience, and I noticed it was solely made up of Shujin students.

“Hmm,” I said out loud “There must have been some field trip I was unaware of.” Since Kamoshida’s meltdown, I hadn’t had much time to pay attention to the happenings of the school.

The female host chuckles “Oh Akechi, you are Japan’s greatest treasure without a doubt!”

Akechi shakes his head “Oh not at all!” he chuckles a warm laugh. His voice and demeanor were sweet and inviting. It was clear this was not his first time on TV or in front of a crowd.

“I’m just an average high school boy-”

“An average high school boy who also happens to be an ace detective!” Shouted the male host enthusiastically

A couple of girls scream with excitement. “I love you Akechi!” a girl yells to the stage

“Oh good lord.” I lean against the arm of the couch “He's just a dude. I’m sure he puts on this pants one leg at a time like anyone else. Still, a boy detective. What does that even mean?” I contemplated a moment “Akechi. Didn’t Sae mention that he liked to hang around her office all the time?” I pulled out my phone and did some light research while the show continued on in the background.

I found his website and read the brief bio “Goro Akechi, high schooler, and ace detective.” I scanned the rest of the extensive information “Looks like he helps the police with criminal cases, and he has supposedly found every criminal he has ever sought after… interesting.”

“As much of pleasure as it is having you on Akechi,” The male host explained, “we did have another motive of bringing you down here today.”

“Oh?” he asks boyishly

“I am sure you are aware of the recent confession from Mr. Madarame.”

Akechi nodded “It was quite the spectacle.”

“Apparently, these fabled Phantom Thieves of Hearts are responsible for, forgive my pun, his change of heart. Police reports tell us that a calling card with their name on it was delivered to Mr. Madarame earlier that day.” A picture of the card popped up on the screen

I was reminded of the one addressed to Kamoshida. Seems like they had upgraded from the nasty little man with bulging eyes and pointed teeth. Their new logo was far more stylized with a red and black interchanging rippling color pattern for the background, and a top-hat and bandit mask with one flaming eye positioned in the center. I had to admit, It was pretty sleek.

“Considering your position as an ace detective,” the man continued on “we wanted to know what your opinion was on the Phantom Thieves. Do they exist? Do they truly have the power to steal hearts?”

Akechi fingers rested on his chin as he contemplated “Well, of course, I believe they are real.”
“Really?” the female host asked

“Obviously they are real. Just like Santa Clause and the Easter bunny.”

The crowd and the hosts go wild with laughter.

Akechi waited for the excitement to calm back down and continued “But in all seriousness, if these Thieves did actually exist, and they held the power to change people’s will, I would find that rather disturbing myself.”

“Truly? Seems like this group only targets the bad guys. A perverted teacher, a thieving artist…” The woman explained

“I’m not arguing that these men deserved to be brought into the light, but vigilante justice is not real justice. We have a system in place for a reason. Criminals are to be brought to trial and judged according to the severity of their crimes. No one is above the law, especially these Phantom Thieves of Hearts.”

“So what do you suggest then?”

“I think if these thieves are as honorable as they seem to have people think, they should turn themselves in and be held in a court of law.”

The crowd gasps

“Then you think they are more criminal then robin-hood type heroes?” Asks the male host

Akechi chuckled “I like comic books and movies as much as the next guy, but unfortunately superheroes don’t exist. This is reality, and anyone acting like the law doesn’t apply to them, like the Phantom Thieves, are no better than the criminals they supposedly bring in.”

The mass of students chatter momentarily then applaud.

“Well there you have it folks!” the man yells over the applause “For the remainder of the show we would like to invite the crowd to ask Mr. Akechi a few questions.” A woman with a headset starts walking around the aisle holding a wireless microphone.

“Let's see here” the host browses the sea of raised hands “How about you there, with the glasses and frizzy hair.”

The woman walks over to the boy seated boy. He has his hands in front of him and shaking his head. “I-I didn’t have my hand up!” The mic faintly picks up his protest.

I squint my eyes at the screen “Ren Kurusu?”

The woman eventually pushed the microphone into his chest, forcing him to take it and he stands to address the stage.

“Young man,” the host addresses Ren “What is your stance on the Phantom Thieves of Hearts? Are they the heroes we need in times of such scandal and depict, or are they just another group of thugs that need to be brought to justice?”

“Well,” Ren rubs the back of his neck “I don’t know about all that. But what I can say is that it seems like these Phantom Thieves have done more to help ordinary people than the cops ever did.”

The crowd chatter again, a few boo.
Akechi leans forward in his chair and examines Ren over “Is that so?” Akechi asks “You view this terrorism as a more effective means of justice than the law?”

Ren squares his footing and meets Akechi’s gaze “I’ll answer your question with another” He adjusts his glasses “When do you think to police would have gotten around to uncovering Madarame’s thievery or Kamoshida’s vicious assaults if the Phantom Thieves never showed up?”

The crowd goes suddenly silent, and they turn their gaze from Ren to the stage. Waiting breathlessly for Akechi’s reply.

Akechi leans back in his chair and giggles “I have to admit, that is an excellent point! When would have the police, if ever, uncover these men’s despicable actions? In fact, I would like to talk to you more after the show. You seem to have some interesting thoughts on this matter.”

“Yes indeed!” The male host chimes in “Looks like that is all the time we have, but we would like to thank Mr. Akechi for joining us once again and be sure to tune in next-”

I click the power button on the remote and watch the screen fade to black.

‘When would have the police found out about Kamoshida? I was there and I hardly even knew what was happening.’

I recalled what Sae said earlier ago about Madarame “if his confession was a truthful one, he was a real piece of work.”

“He raved about how he was stealing his student’s art. He leached off their ideas and sold their creations for a profit under his own name. When he was done with them, he would toss them on the street like garbage.”

“The Phantom Thieves did it again.”

“We still don’t know how they did it…”

Thinking about it made that strange tingle return to the back of my head. Along with a slight sense of unease, like I had forgotten something.

Shaking off the uncomfortable feeling, I clutched the couch pillow to my chest and contemplated “Maybe not it’s Phantom Thieves who are on the wrong side of the law,” I considered out loud “Maybe it's me…”

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!
Crossroads

Chapter Summary

A student finds themselves in danger and turns to Makoto for help. Later, Makoto finally gets the evidence she's been searching for to put away the Phantom Thieves for good, but now finds that she is more conflicted about their efforts than ever before.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 14: Crossroads

When approaching my locker to get my books for my next class, I noticed a folded piece of notebook paper wedged in the locker door. I plucked it from its precarious position and read the hastily scrawled note

“Niijima. Please meet me in the student council office after school. I need help.”

‘Defiantly not the procedure for setting up an appointment’ I thought, ‘but I could use a break from following those three around.’
So I did as the note requested and went to the office after school. To my surprise, someone was already there. A thin second-year boy with a bowl cut was seated at the table with his face in his hands.

I knock on the open door to get his attention “Hi,”

The boy sprung to his feet from shock “I’m not! I-” He saw me and took a breath “Oh, its just you. Thank God.”

“Um, did you leave me this?” I held up the note between my index and middle finger

The boy nodded emphatically

“Well you know it's not the correct way to schedule an appointment with the student body president,” I closed the door behind me and took a seat “But you are clearly in distress so I can make an exception this time.”

The boy still stood, staring at me. Sweating profusely.

I gestured to the seat across from me “Won’t you sit please and tell me what the problem seems to be.” I chimed and offered a disarming smile

“W-W-What happened to your hand?” he pointed to my bandaged right hand. His voice dropped to a whisper “They didn’t get you too did they?”

“Get me? No, no one got me. I just burned my hand is all.”

“Oh” The boy placed his face back in his hands

I was already a little freaked out by the boy’s erratic behavior, with the addition of an ominous ‘they’ I couldn’t help but to worry where this was heading exactly.

“Ok, let's start with your name.” I maintained my friendly demeanor

“Touma Tanaka” He muttered through his hands

“Ok, Touma, what seems to be the problem?”

He swallowed hard and met my eyes for the first time “Before I tell you, you have to promise me you won’t tell my parents or any teachers.”

“I can’t promise that Touma if you or someone else is in serious danger, I would have to tell someone,” I explained

He groaned “Ok fine. But hear me out first.” He collected his thoughts “I did something bad Niijima.”

“Well, I think that's a matter of perspective. Why don't you just go ahead and tell me-”

“I’m being blackmailed for smuggling drugs.” He spat out and hid his face again

“Oh-” I stated flatly, my shock obvious. I thought he was going to confess to cheating on a test or that he vandalized a locker or something.

“They offered me an easy job that paid a lot of money and who wouldn’t take something like that? So I agreed, and they told me to be at this certain bench on central street in Shibuya later that day. I
did as they asked and some guy gave me a small brown package. Told me to take it across town to a friend of his. I took the box to some weird looking bar, and the guy there took it gave me a ton of money. Like more than I’ve ever held!” He locked eyes with me again. This time tears welling in his eyes.

“I didn’t know Niijima! You have to believe me, I didn’t!” He started shouting hysterically

“Touma,” I said gently “Touma look at me please.”

He did as I asked, tears streaming from his face “I need you to breathe for me ok? In and out.”

As instructed he took several deep breaths and calmed down. I offered a box of tissues, and he wiped his nose.

“Ok, now tell me, what happened after they gave you the money.”

“Well,” he blew his nose loudly and shoved the tissue in his pocket “Well I spent the next few days taking my friends to the arcade and asked a couple of girls to the movies… Then a week later, I was checking the mail at home and found a letter addressed to me. When I opened it…” his eyes started watering again

“Touma, what did the note say?”

“It had a picture… of me giving the guy the box and another picture with the boxed open, and there was a bunch of bags of white stuff…” He blew his nose again “There was a letter with it that said if I didn’t p-pay a m-million Yen by the end of the month… they would show the pictures to the cops… I don’t have that much money Niijima! I don’t even have any of the money they gave me left!”

He started wailing again “I don’t know what to do! My parents don’t have that kind of money! I’m going to go to jail! I didn’t know I didn’t know!”

“Hey” I tried to keep my voice level and calm “Touma, it’s ok. You will be fine.”

His crying subsided for a moment “How do you know?”

“Because you’re not alone in this anymore ok? Now you got me to help you out.”

His eyes brightened “You have that kind of money?”

“Well, no. Of course not, but I can help you think of a way out of this.”

He repeatedly shook his head “No Niijima! You don’t understand! These guys are the mob! We can’t stand up against them! They will k-kill me!”

Touma jumped to his feet, knocking his chair to the ground.

“Touma-”

“I-I-I have to get out of here! I have to-” he threw open the door and sprinted down the hallway.

I got up to see where he went but by the time I got to the door he was long gone. Leaving a trail of confused students in his wake.

“Oh, Touma…” I whispered
I straightened the chairs and cleaned the office before locking it up for the day.

‘The mob targeting Shujin students? This was bad. I don’t blame him for being scared. How do you take something like that on? I can only imagine.’

*

Making my way downstairs to go home, I caught a glimpse of Ryuji walking down the hallway to the courtyard. He was hunched over with fists clenched. Curious as to where he was going with such anger, I followed.

Taking cover behind some bushes, I watched him meet up with Ren at the vending machines.

“Hey” Ren greeted his friend while munching on a candy bar

“Hey? Hey is all you have to say after all that?” Ryuji spat

Ren paused mid-bite “After what?”

“After we just got our name drug through the mud man!” Ryuji slammed his fist against a vending machine “What does that stupid Akechi even know about justice or anything?!!”

The assaulted vending machine coughed up a can of coke.

“You want that?” Ren points at the can

Ryuji, eyeing the same coke, pauses mid-rant “Yeah, kinda” He picks it up and pops the top.

While they took their time enjoying their snack, I took the opportunity to pull out my phone and record them.

“Look” Ryuji paused to drain his drink “All I’m sayin is, if someone else could have helped those people, we wouldn’t be doing stuff as the Phantom Thieves to begin with!”

I had to bite my tongue so I wouldn’t squeal with glee. ‘Oh my God, he just admitted to being a Phantom Thief! And I have it recorded! What else are they going to admit to? Oh my gosh, this is to perfect.’

*Belch*

“My bad” Ryuji mutters “Probably shouldn’t have chugged that huh?”

“You’re being way too loud.” Ann joins them and punches Ryuji in the arm while munching on her own food.

“OW!” he holds his arm dramatically “What the hell?!” His pain seems to quickly subside once he notices her bag of chips “Hey, can I have one?”

She turns the bag over “Sorry, all gone.”

Ren extends his mostly eaten candy bar to Ryuji.

Ryuji face distorts with disgust “Dude… no.”

Ren simply shrugs and finishes up his snack.
“Guys,” Ann’s jovial tone takes a turn “I’ve been wondering… will we be ok if we keep doing this? The Phantom Thieves I mean?”

“What do you mean?” Ren asks

“Just after that Akechi thing the other day, and the students don’t really know what to think of us, I…” She looks to the ground lost in thought.

‘I got what I need, now to rub it in their face some’ I think deviously.

I get up from my hiding spot and round the corner.

“Well well,” I stride up to them confidently “Looks like you all are having fun.”

“Ugh…” Ryuji growled “You snooping around again? We already told you, we don’t know nothing!”

“Why are you so certain I’m here to question you?” I flashed him a coy smile “Guilty conscience perhaps? You know, as your student president, my ears are always open to my fellow students.”

“You really are meant for that job aren’t you?” Ann crossed her arms

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“You are just a teacher’s pet whose hungry for a good recommendation. No one would want your pointless job otherwise.”

“Excuse me?”

“You knew about Kamoshida didn’t you?” She asked coolly

“O-Of course not! He was an excellent teacher and a prized member of the staff. Until recently that is…”

Ann gave a fake chuckle “Spoken like a true a lap dog. Of course, you would take the teachers side. Even if they were a rapist.”

Her words stuck deep, but two could play at that game “Well what about you? Why didn’t you help your friend? You two were far closer than I ever was.”

She looked to the floor.

‘That got her’ I thought, feeling satisfied

“There was… nothing I could do.”

“At least there are people like the Phantom Thieves out there.” Ryuji chimed in “At least they do something to help. More then, someone, I know.” He stared daggers at me

“I-” I had a loss for words. He was right. What they did may have been wrong and manipulative, but it was more then I did. Or the school. Or anyone.

“Just be sure to be on time to class.” I walked away not willing to meet their distasteful glances.

Once outside the school gate, I crouched down in a nearby ally.
“He’s right” I mumbled “At least they did something. But what could I have done?”

I traced a pattern in a nearby patch of dirt “Everywhere I look it seems like the adults fail me and everyone around me. Does the law even mean anything if it defends teachers who assault and rape students?”

I look to the cloudy sky “What do I do? What can I even believe in anymore? Could it be true that justice is truly in the hands of these Phantom Thieves?” I drew in a deep breath

“It’s true Dad. I wish you were here.”

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: [https://khytal.tumblr.com/](https://khytal.tumblr.com/))

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto’s Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6
Chapter Summary

After multiple attempts, Makoto is unable to reach Touma and worries for his safety. Akechi makes a surprise visit to Shujin and forces Makoto to face an uncomfortable truth. Deciding to finally take matters into her own hands, Makoto confronts Ren with her new found evidence.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 15: A Matter of Justice

I tried reaching out to Touma several times via web chat to check up on him. After leaving several messages and voicemails, he still refused to talk to me. I figured it was just as well. It’s not like I had a plan to help free himself of the mob’s clutches. I thought about going to the police on his behalf, but I doubted they would listen to me. It was so aggravating to know all I could do was watch as his life fell apart.

Then there was the matter of the recording I had of both Ryuji and Ann admitting they were Phantom Thieves. At the time I thought I had finally, after all this time and effort, got the proof I
needed to put away the notorious Thieves and get principal Kobayakawa off my back. But now that I had the evidence I had been so fixated on, I felt more conflicted than before.

Nothing had a clear answer. Seemed like all my work to help my peers and bring justice to those who saw themselves above the law, was crumbling all around me, and there was nothing I could do about it.

These questions weighed heavily on my mind when a certain boy detective cornered me at Shujin one morning.

“Excuse me” I heard a soft voice call to me in the hallway. “You’re Sae Niijima’s younger sister I presume?”

I turned and saw Goro Akechi, ace detective. Not on the TV this time but alive and in the flesh. Star-struck was the furthest feeling I had at that particular moment.

“Afternoon Akechi. Why are you here at Shujin?” I tried to keep cordial.

“Well, to see you! If you have a moment to spare, I have a couple of questions for you.” He requested in an annoyingly chipper tone.

“Anything to help the boy detective,” I said with a forced smile “I’m guessing this is about the Phantom Thieves?”

“Ah! Just as perceptive as your sister it seems! Yes, your principal told me that you were looking into them and was hoping to compare notes with you.” he pulled out a notebook “Now, we are up to two attacks accredited to the Thieves. I wanted to ask you, have you noticed anything in common between the two attacks?”

Instead of answering him outright, I decided to ask a question of my own. I wasn’t going to just let this guy take credit for all my work when the Phantom Thieves get turned in after all. “Interesting. You publicly criticize the Phantom Thieves, yet for some reason, you don’t doubt their existence.”

“So you saw me on TV the other day.” He chuckled his boyish laugh “Well, the details on both attacks seem to make a lot more sense when thought of them as being real.”

“But why the sudden interest? You clearly know my sister, did she put you up to this?”

“No. It’s just a coincidence that we both happen to be pursuing them.”

I furrowed my brow “Why do I get the feeling you’re enjoying this?”

He smiled widely “Of course I am Niijima.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Phantom Thieves are just that, thieves! They leave calling cards and steal people’s hearts! And no one knows how they do it! How could I not be excited to be the one to bring them to justice? Speaking as a servant of the law, it’s hard not to see them as my rival after all. Villains to be brought to justice by the, soon to be world renowned, ace boy detective.” he explains

“Such high self-esteem,” I stated sarcastically “but I suppose having random girls declaring their love for you on TV encourages that sort of thinking. So they are evil, and you’re just, is that about right?”
“Compared to the type of people who manipulate the will of others as they see fit, yes. Besides, I’m only using my natural talent at deduction and wit to help serve the world around me. Don’t you claim to do the same?”

If I was honest with myself at that moment, no. The only reason I had even started my investigation into the Phantom Thieves was to get on the principal’s good side. When I stopped and considered it, I hadn’t once thought about Kamoshida’s victims, and they were all around me. I didn’t even think about what would happen to the Thieves once it turned them in. Their lives would be over. Especially Ren who already had a record, and he had been nothing but kind to me.

Those three were the only ones to care enough about the little people to do something about it. And there I was, chasing them to the ends of the earth just so a man who could care less about me would pat me on the head.

I never thought about how my actions were affecting those around me, or that I could have been potentially getting rid of the only three people that tried to help those in need. I was… even worse than Akechi.

“-” my shame refused to let another word leave my lips

“Oh,” Akechi put away his notebook “I see now that you’re just another one of the good girl pushover types. That’s fine, the world is filled with sheep, and that is just a fact of life I suppose. Unfortunately, that means you will be of no use to me.” He pulls out his phone “Now if you will excuse me, I have an investigation to tend to. Say hi to your sister for me!” He smiled and made his way towards the exit as if nothing happened.

I stood, mouth agape ‘S-Sheep?’

* *

There was a knock at the student council office door.

“Yes?” I chimed “Come in.”

Ren Kurusu cracked the door open “You wanted to see me Nijima?” he asked

“Ah yes, Ren. Won’t you sit down please?”

He closed the door behind him and took the seat across from me at the table.

Enough was enough. It was time to tackle this problem head-on.

I folded my hands neatly in front of myself and started “Ok Ren, lets cut to the chase. You and your friends are the Phantom Thieves of Hearts aren’t you?”

Ren remained stone like and silent in his seat.

“Not going to answer that?” I preserve my professional demeanor. I suspected the silent treatment “You know, keeping silent is just as bad as confessing, but I suppose why would you admit to such a claim?”

I pull out my phone and place it on the desk in front of him “I would like you to turn your attention to this video if you please.” I click the play button and Ren and Ryuji appear on the screen.

The camera zooms in on a disgruntled looking Ryuji “Look, all I’m sayin is, if someone else could
Ren’s eyes widen. “There’s more” I fast forward a few seconds causing Ann to appear.

“Guys,” Ann starts “I’ve been wondering… will we be ok if we keep doing this? The Phantom Thieves I mean?”

“What do you mean?” Ren asks

“Just after that Akechi thing the other day, and the students don’t really know what to think of us I…”

Ren’s face spelled everything I had hoped for. I had him.

I clicked the pause button on the final frame and gave him a minute to stew in his unveiling. A cluster of high pitched mews sounded from somewhere in the room.

Choosing to ignore the strange noises I pressed on. “Now, what could all that mean I wonder?”

Ren composed himself before meeting my gaze “No idea” he muttered

I chuckle “You think this doesn’t prove anything, do you? But I can’t help but wonder what the police might think if they saw this.” I gestured to the phone

Clasping my hands once again, I lean towards him “I’ll tell you what, if you confess, I’ll leave this between us.”

His phone starts ringing. “It’s fine. You can answer it” He pulls the phone out of his pocket, and before he hits the button to answer I raise my finger “On speakerphone.”

He picks up the call.

“Hey, buddy!” Ryuji’s voice blasts from the tiny speaker “You takin a leak or somethin? Let’s meet in our usual spot for our Phantom Thieves meeting.”

Ren hammers the end call button, but the damage had already been done.

“Wow,” I say without thinking “How have you three managed to keep going this long?”

Ren pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs.

I stand and grab my bag “Take me to them.”

* *

Ren took me to their meeting spot at subway access tunnel. All present including the mysterious new blue haired boy.

Ann was the first to notice my approach with Ren “What the hell?” She nudged Ryuji who was sitting on the floor playing with his phone

“Huh? Is he here? Took him long…” then he too noticed me “Oh shit.”

“Um Ren, who is this?” the boy asked

I stand opposite of the group and address them by name “Ryuji Sakamoto, Ann Takamaki and” my
eyes land on the blue-haired boy “Yusuke Kitagawa I presume? Current student of Kosei High School for the arts and former apprentice to Ichiryusai Madarame.”

‘I knew the name Madarame sounded familiar.’ I thought

“Well clearly you have done your homework,” his voice was smooth and silky “however, I believe I am at a loss. You are?”

“Makoto Niijima, Student body president of Shujin academy,” I pointed in their general direction, “and you all are the notorious Phantom Thieves of Hearts.”

“You got any proof to back up that bogus statement?” Ann growled through her teeth

“Of course” and pull out the recording.

Silence falls over the group.

Yusuke breaks the silence first “What do you want?”

“Clearly someone put her up to this.” Ann spat with fist clenched “The adults are so quick to tear down the people actually making a difference, and yet they conveniently turn a blind to people like Kamoshida.”

She shot me an intense look “You know they’re just using you right? Once they are done with you, they will throw you to the side like the rest of us. The only difference between you and us is that we realize it and you are either too stubborn or too thickheaded to see the truth!”

Her words stung. “I-I know.”

“What?”

“That’s why I need to verify what you do is indeed justice. I need you to steal someone’s heart. Prove to me what you do is morally sound and I’ll delete the video.”

“Who?” Yusuke speaks up

“So you don’t deny your ability?” I ask him

Yusuke blinks and looks to Ren who simply shrugs

I continue “Meet me on the roof tomorrow after school, and we can discuss in detail. This place isn’t exactly private.”

“Well, someone took our ‘private’ spot from us,” Ryuji said crossly

“I’ll see you all tomorrow on the roof. That’s assuming you four accept my offer.” I turn and walk away

“You are such a dumb-ass” I hear Ann murmur behind me

“Hey! You blabbed too!” Ryuji argues
**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
A Deal Is Made

Chapter Summary

Makoto and her longtime adversaries strike up a deal, but things at home get even worse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 16: A Deal is Made

The large metal to the roof flew open

“Helloooo!” Ryuji called out “You here Miss President?”

“Not so loud!” I called back from my hiding spot on the roof. “I was starting to wonder if you all would show.”

“It’s not like we had a choice.” Ann shot back. Taking a seat on a nearby desk.
“Where’s Yusuke?”

“We told him to meet us later. Would have been too much hassle trying to sneak him into a school he doesn’t attend.” Ren explained

“Fair enough” I waited for them to get settled and continued “It has come to my attention that Shujin students have become the prime targets of a number of phishing schemes.”

“Phishing schemes?” Ryuji asks

“Yes. Recently a student, who will remain anonymous, approached me asking for my help. He was terrified, and I was able to get little information from him before he ran off. Apparently, there have been men working Central Street in Shibuya promising Shujin students quick and easy cash by smuggling packages around the city. Little do the victims know that they are acting as drug mules and are later blackmailed for transporting narcotics.”

“Woah. That’s intense” Ryuji chimed again.

“After performing a job the victim receives a letter addressed to them in the mail. The envelope contains pictures of the victim transporting the drugs along with a threatening letter that instructs them to pay a certain amount of money by the end of a month, or the photos will be leaked to the police. If the victim refuses, their family and their very lives are threatened. My anonymous source believes the mob to be involved.”

“Woh-woh-woh” Ann stands up “The mob? You’re asking us to take on THE mob?”

“No, I don’t.”

“That’s it? That’s all you got?” Ryuji argues

“Do you have a name for the person’s heart you want us to steal?” He asks

“Did you even listen to what she said?!” Ann yells “The freaking mob Ren!”

“No, I don’t.”

“That’s it? That’s all you got?” Ryuji argues

“Are you telling me the illustrious Phantom Thieves of Hearts can’t handle it? Should I just save everyone some time and go ahead and turn my video into the authorities?” I mocked

Ryuji growls

Ren looks to his team and back at me “We’ll do it.”

“You can’t be serious” Ann throws her hands up in disgust

“Great. You have three weeks to steal the boss’s heart. That’s how long my source has until his deadline to pay the ransom is due.”

I pull out a scrap of paper from my bag and write my number on it “If you have any further questions, here is my number.” I hand it off to Ren “I expect regular updates on your progress.”

He nods “Consider it done.”
Dinner was often filled with silence these days. Except for occasional clinking of silverware and glasses, conversation was few and far between. I was tired of Sae turning every conversation into my schooling, and she was tired of discussing the various cases she was working on. Silence had become our compromise.

But my life had become so twisted and complicated the past few weeks that I needed someone to talk to, and though our relationship had become fairly strained recently, I knew I could always talk to Sae about anything.

“I’ve been thinking about the Phantom Thieves a lot lately. I couldn’t help but wonder if Dad…” I halted mid-sentence, realizing that bringing up the Phantom Thieves and Dad were possibly the worst two topics to have brought up.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have-“

“No, it’s ok. Continue your thought.” Sae took another sip from her bourbon

“I just wonder if Dad would be on their side… is all.”

Sae slammed her glass on the table “The only reason you have time to think such ridiculous thoughts is because you depend on someone else.”

“I didn’t mean-“

“You do nothing, and you are provided for.” She spat venomously “Don’t you get that I don’t have time for that sort of thinking? Would Dad agree with them? I don’t care! He died upholding some bullshit sense of righteousness.”

“Sae, please-“

“When are you going to grow up, Makoto? Life isn’t some game of cops and robbers. We’re in a shitty situation, and all you can think about is what Dad would consider “justice?” As things stand right now, you’re are useless to me! All you do is eat away at my finances, my sanity and my life!” She screamed

“S-Sae-“

“Sorry” her chest heaved “That was uncalled for. I’m just tired…” She stood up and grabbed her bag “I’ll be eating out from now on. Please don’t bother waiting up for me.” She closed the front door gently behind herself.

I felt paralyzed. My body was shaking and without feeling. My mind empty. All I could do was stare at my sister’s vacated chair. A familiar tightness set in my chest. I spent the next few hours in the bathroom sick before finally crawling into bed for another sleepless night.

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes
Hi all!

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6
Useless

Chapter Summary

In a vain attempt to prove her worth, Makoto may not have only put her future in jeopardy, but her very life...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
A week later I decided to pick up a few groceries at the underground mall before I headed home after school. On my way to catch the train home I caught a glimpse the four Phantom Thieves having a meeting at their usual spot in the access tunnel.

Ren was true to his word and had been giving me nightly updates since our arrangement, and they still had a couple more weeks until their deadline. So I had no particular reason to engage with them, but I still felt some sort of longing too.
By then, I had been ousted by every group that had ever been a part of and never felt more alone. It was sad to admit, but the Phantom Thieves, the very four students I was blackmailing, were the closest thing I had to friends.

“Good afternoon.” I greeted them

“Ugh, perfect” Ryuji rolled his eyes and continued messing with his phone

“What do you want?” Ann asked disdainfully

“Nothing in particular. I just saw you four here. How is your investigation going? Can I assist in any way?”

She let out a contemptuous laugh “You want to help us? Look, you may be student body president, but when it comes to what we do, you’re useless.”

Sae’s voice echoed in my mind ‘Right now you’re useless to me!’

“Useless?” I echoed

‘Useless!’

‘Useless!!’

‘USELESS!’

“To be quite frank, yes.” Yusuke agreed

Ren rubbed the back of his neck “I don’t know. Maybe she can help look into this Kaneshiro guy—”

“Yeah! Maybe she can find him and stalk him for a while! She’s had so much practice on us she’s practically an expert” Ann continued to taunt

Now I could hear Akechi’s voice ring in my ears ‘I can see now that you’re just the good girl pushover type. That’s fine, the world is filled with sheep, and that is just a fact of life I suppose.’

‘Good girl pushover type.’

‘pushover type.’

‘USELESS!!’

I felt something deep in my soul snapped.

“I’m no pushover, and I’m not useless damn it…” I muttered

“What was that?” Ryuji questioned, finally gaining interest in the conversation

I made hard eye contact with Ann “So you want to get in contact with this Kaneshiro? Is that what you need to bring him down?”

She stumbled over her words “I-Uh” clearly caught off guard by my sudden shift in tone.

I turned my laser-like focus to Ren “Well? Do you?”

“Well, yeah, but what do you intend to do?” he asked
“Wait here and watch your phone.” I turned and ran up the access tunnel to street level

“Hey! Niijima! What are you doing?!” Ren shouted after me.

I checked my watch “Late afternoon, but they should still be around.” I looked around and saw that Central Street was still packed with Shujin students. I scanned the crowd for any shady looking characters.

A group of young men with strange tattoos were gathered together smoking in a nearby alley. I dialed Ren’s phone number, and he picked up immediately “I want you to record this phone call. I’m going to keep the call going in my pocket so you can hear what’s going on.”

“Wait!” He yelled. I quickly turned the volume down on my phone, so I couldn’t hear his protests and approached the group of thugs.

“Hey!” I shouted to them “You guys know Kaneshiro?”

They look to each other then back at me “What the hell you doing here kid? Get the fuck out of here,” an unusually large man steps up to me.

I square my footing and look the large man directly in the eyes “I want a meeting with your boss” I command

“What’s with this chick?” One thug asks another “We don’t know what you’re talking about, brat. Now fuck off!”

“I know who you all are and I know what you’re doing here. You’re blackmailing students, and I have proof that I’m sure the police will find very interesting.”

“She’s bluffing,” The large man told the others

“Hang on” A skinny thug with a nasally little voice instructed, “You want to meet Konishero huh?” He pulls out a phone and dials a number. “Heh-heh, we got a good one here. Boss will love her. Pull the car around.”

Moments later a black town car with tinted windows rolled up the alley. The large thug opens the back door “Get in.”

“Are you taking me to Kaneshiro?”

“He said,” another thug shoved me “get in the freaking car!” and got in behind me.

“Where are we going?” I asked the driver

“A fresh one eh?” The driver said to the man next to me

“I said, where are we going?!” I demanded from the man

“Oh, a feisty one! Want to take the long way and have some fun with her?”

“No can do. You know the rules. We can’t do anything if Kaneshiro decides to make her a customer.”

“Are you bone heads deaf?”

The skinny thug to my right pulls out a pistol and places it against my temple “Do you ever shut
My pulse quickens. The severity of my situation became suddenly clear. These guys were no joke.

I sat back in my seat, and the man lowered his gun. The windows were to heavily tinted to look outside and get a gauge of where we were headed. Instead, I tried to listen and memorize every stop, turn and bump we hit for later.

* 

When we reached our destination, and the big one placed a thick cloth bag over my head “No peaking, or there will be consequences, understand?”

He leans me forward and zip-ties my hands behind my back.

“Get moving princess,” I hear the car door open, and the smaller man shoves me outside the door. The large man catches me and yanks me in a direction, causing me to stumble. However, he didn’t wait for me to get on my feet. Instead, he drug me across the asphalt, tearing my leggings and scratching up my right leg.

He threw open a door and wave of thumping club music washed over us.

“Boss!” The big man yells “Hey Boss, we got that chick we told you about.”

“Huh?” a smooth voice chimes over the music “Oh right, that. Cut the music!”

The pounding beats finally stop, and I’m dropped to the ground.

“This is the bag she had with her, Boss.”

“Anything interesting?” The Boss replied. Sounding much more interested in getting back to his party then dealing with me.

“She goes to Shujin, like the others, and looks like she's the student body president according to this ID badge.”

“We nabbed the president eh? Could prove to be useful. What does she look like?”

The bag is suddenly and yanked from my head. My eyes strained from the sudden light.

“She's not to bad. One of the better ones. We've been getting a lot of ugoes lately.”

As my eyes blinked into focus, I saw a round man dressed in black pants and button-up shirt with a blue sport coat. His hair was slicked back hair and oily looking. He reclined on a leather couch smoking a cigar with a beautiful blonde woman wrapped around his arm.

“What's this?” The large man bent down and picked up my phone off the floor.

‘Crap. It must have fallen out of my pocket when they dropped me.’ I panicked

“Looks like she's been on the phone the entire time. The caller ID says Ren Kurusu.”

“Let me see that,” The thug hands the boss my phone.

“You’re Kaneshiro I presume?” I asked
“In the flesh baby, and what’s this all about?” He investigated my phone “This your boyfriend or something?”

The thug with the shrill voice grabbed me by the hair and hoisted me up like a fish. “What do you say, boss? It’s been a little while since me, and the boys had some fun and let loose. Would be good for morale.”

He looks me over “and she’s just my type! Young and stupid.” He licked my cheek and grabbed my breast.

I felt the sensation of fire ants crawling all over my body. My veins turned to ice as I realized what was about to happen. I rather they had shot me in the car.

“P-Please… Stop…” I wimpier, horrified.

Kaneshiro, still occupied by my phone, casually draws a gold plated pistol from his suit pocket and points it at the thug.

“Cut out the shit.” He instructed nonchalantly “You know the rule, I break them in. Besides, I don’t know if I want to make her a customer or not. Having the school president in my pocket could prove valuable.”

The man dropped me back to the ground like an unwanted bag of garbage, and I just laid there. Motionless. Paralyzed by fear.

“What am I doing? Why did I do this? Sae, Akechi, all of them are right. I am useless. I just get in the way. I… deserve this.’ I close my eyes. I accept my fate.

The door to the club slams open “Makoto! Makoto are you in here!!” I hear a familiar voice yelled.

“Ren?” I mutter.

“Oh, what the hell is this? Were you dumb-asses followed?” Kaneshiro asked. Showing emotion for the first time.

I heard a large group of footsteps run in my direction.

“What did you do to her?!” I heard Ryuji demand.

I turned my head towards them. The large thug stood between the group of angry teens and me.

“Well, this is just inconvenient. I dare say, I’m actually starting to get mad.” Kaneshiro looks at the woman on his arm.

“How much did you say that bag you wanted was?”

“Three million.” replied with doe eyes

Kaneshiro pops open a silver briefcase that laid on the table in front of him and hands her a stack of bills. “There, it’s on me.”

“What the hell is this about?” Ann spits.

Ignoring her, the mob boss pulled out his phone and snapped a picture of the group of teens. He then turns it around to show the group the photo.
“Well, will you look at this. Looks to me like I see a group of underage teenagers in a club they
don’t belong, surrounded by empty bottles of beer, and, what's that?” He voiced a mocking tone of
concern “Well shoot! Looks like I got some drugs in the frame of this lovely photo too! Clumsy
me!”

He places the phone back in his pocket and reclines back in the couch “Here’s the deal. I don’t like
to be stressed. I go out of my way to avoid stress. But when four brats barge into MY place of
business, it stresses me out. And when I get stressed out, there is only one cure for it. To spend
money.”

He lights up a fresh cigar and takes a long drag “Now,” He blows the smoke into the faces of the
group “Looks to me I’m short a cool three mil now. I don’t like to be short. It’s not good business.
So this is where you all come in. I’ll give you brats till the end of the month to come up with the
three million you cost me, or your lovely group shot will get turned into the police.”

“You can’t be serious.” Ryuji retorted

“Normally I give new customers a full month the pay off their debt to me, but considering how
many of you there are, and how much you’ve pissed me off, I think two weeks is more than fair.”

“Fine, but she comes with us,” Ren demanded

“You’re not exactly in the position to negotiate kid.” Kaneshiro chuckled to himself

The boss stands, cigar hanging from his mouth, and picks me up by the collar of my shirt. He
draws me close to his face and inhales deeply. “Hmm, not bad,” and tosses me at the group's feet

“You can take her. I’ll be seeing her again real soon anyhow. Either you five dumb-asses will pay
me the money owed, or” He points to me on the floor “she does. A body like that will earn it’s
keep in no time.”

Ren takes out a pocket knife and undoes my bindings. He whispered in my ear “Did they do
anything to you?” Holding back tears I shake my head

Kaneshiro addressed his guards “Let them go. They’ve got a lot of begging to do.”

Ren threw one of my arms over his shoulder “Hey, get her other side,” he instructs Ryuji.

With the help of the two boys, we make our way out of the building.

“You’re all fucking animals!” Ann shouts at the mob boss

“Keep talking sweet cheeks, you’ll be next” He returns.

*

“It’s fine. I can walk from here” I instruct the boys once we get back to the main road

“If you’re sure” Ryuji replies as they gently lower me to my feet

“I don’t know where to begin. I am so, so sorry. I can’t believe my stupidity.”

“You should have seen this coming” Yusuke explained

I nodded my head. Not daring to meet any of their faces.
“What’s done is done,” Ryuji replies

“This is going to blow back on my sis too.”

“Sis?” Ann asks

“Yes, my older sister. She's a prosecutor in the attorney's office and a much more honorable and hard working woman than me. We lost our Dad three years ago and since the burden of my care has fallen on her. All I do is weigh her down.”

I cross my arms and close my eyes, “And it looks like I pay back her kindness by destroying everything she has worked so hard for. All in just one night.”

“Is that why you did all this? To prove yourself to her?” Yusuke asks

“I just wanted to prove I’m useful and not a parasite.”

“Aren’t you being kind of hard on yourself?” Ryuji proposed

“I owe each and every one of you an apology. I have been awful to you, and I didn’t deserve your help.” I looked to Ann “Especially you.”

“Me?” Ann asks surprised

“The school protected Kamoshida. I heard the rumors and had my suspicions, but I couldn’t… No. I could have done something. I could have tried to do something about it and just didn’t bother.”

“People like me are the scum of the earth.” I lowered my head and closed my eyes tears rolled down my cheeks

“I’m” my breath shakes “I’m so sorry. I-” I feel her gentle hand on my shoulder

“Real scum don’t admit it.” She explained

“What?”

“Like you said before, I didn’t do anything either.” She paused “Remember, Kamoshida is the one to blame here. He was the arrogant, selfish, disgusting pig. Not you.” She wrapped her arms around me “It’s ok Makoto. It’s not your fault.”

“T-Takmaki…” I wept into her shoulder.

Suddenly I feel another set of arms wrap around me and another. I open my eyes and see they had all encircled me in a sizable group hug.

We stayed there for a while. Illuminated by the streetlight above and surrounded by the warm summer night air.

All silent except for me. There was no judgment or shame. They merely held me and let me cry.

“You don’t belong anywhere either do you?” Yusuke asked handing me a tissue sometime later

“Me either?” I wiped my face “Look, I’ve drug you guys into this mess far enough. I’ll get the money together somehow. Just drop it. Please.”

“No way” Ren argued
“We aren’t letting you face this alone” Ryuji agreed “Besides, he has that picture of all of us. If that gets leaked, we’re screwed too. Hmm, if only we could get into that freakin bank…”

A shrill meow sounded from nearby

“Ryuji!” Yusuke spat

“Bank? Wait… was that a cat?” I looked around for a stray

Another meow sounds

“Key in?” Ann asks “Isn’t that risky?”

“Um, guys? Who are you talking to and where is this cat I keep hearing?”

“She risked her life” Yusuke continued, ignoring my questions “She deserves to know.”

“Know what? Can someone answer me please?”

Ren looks to his team who nods in return.

“You want to know how we do what we do right?” Ren asks me

“Well yeah,” I reply curious as to where this is headed

He grins and pulls out his phone. “This is how,” He taps a button and the world around us shifts and rearranges as if physics and reality were merely a suggestion.

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: [https://khytal.tumblr.com/](https://khytal.tumblr.com/))**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you’ve enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
Welcome to the Metaverse

Chapter Summary

Welcome to a world where motivations are places, feelings are weapons and nightmares are reality.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 18: Welcome to the Metaverse

Black and red ripples emitted from Ren’s phone. Waves of color bounced off objects and climbed the surrounding buildings. Before my very eyes, the world rearranged. Even the sky turned from blue to a vibrant red.

“What’s happening?! How are you doing this?!”

I looked back at my companions and saw that they too had changed!

Ren’s school uniform was replaced with a long black coat, vest, pants, and pointed leather boots.
His hands bore crimson gloves, and, what was an even bolder fashion choice, he wore a white and black mask that covered his eyes.

“Welcome to the Metaverse,” The masked man said with a smile

“M-Metaverse?” The word made even less sense coming from my mouth.

“Yeah, it’s a lot to take in” another figure uttered dressed in similar black attire, but with a red ascot tied around his neck, a loose belt around his hips filled with what looked like shotgun shells, and a mask that resembled the top half of a skull.

“Ryuji?”

“I don’t know Ren, should we have brought her here?” A girl, who looked and sounded like Ann asked. Her outfit was even more bizarre. She wore a red spandex outfit with large zipper in the middle and two shorter zippers on either side of her chest. The girl wore tall heels, and her red mask bore pointed ears at the top. Making her look an awful lot like a cat.

“A little too late for a take backs don’t you think?” Yusuke’s distinct smooth voice resonated from a man wearing a loose black silk shirt and pants. He wore knee-high white boots and gloves with an alternating black and white sash across his waist. The way his white mask was shaped reminded me of the face of a small hound, or a similar hunting animal with a narrow face and pointed ears.

“Will you pipe down you idiots? The Shadows will hear us!” An entirely new voice squeaked. I looked around me for the source.

“Did you guys hear that?” I asked

“Down here!”

I looked down and saw a creature that looked a lot like a cat with a black and white fur pattern, but it could walk on its hind feet and had a bulbous head with large blue eyes, and a solid yellow bandanna tied around its neck. The thing wore a small black utility belt around its waist that carried a couple of small pouches and a large saber in its sheath.

“W-Woh! It’s a monster cat!” I lept back from shock “What is that?! Why can it talk?”

“Not so loud!” It shouted back. As if it couldn’t get stranger, its voice sounded like it was a young boy that hadn’t yet hit puberty.

“And I am not a cat!” It spat. It even crossed its little arms in disapproval. If it were a different time and place I would have found this thing adorable.

“He’s not a monster, at least not in that way” Ann explained, “His name is Morgana hes-”

“I’m a human that is stuck in this thing’s body” Morgana pouted

“And… you’re not a cat?”

“He’s totally a cat” Ryuji taunted

The little monster spun around on the spot “Am not! And at least I know which end to hold on a sword, Ryuji!”

“I cut my hand on your sword ONE time, and you just can’t let it go can you, you little weirdo!”
“Ok-Ok, enough!” I shouted at the pair “Is someone, anyone, going to explain where the hell we are and why you all look like that?”

“Like Ren said earlier” Yusuke started “You're in a place called the Metaverse. It’s an alternate dimension that runs parallel to our own.”

“Parallel…dimension?”

“Yeah,” Ann picked up “It’s like a separate world that exists for human cognition. The strong thoughts and feelings from our world exist as reality here.”

“Ok, so why do you all look like that and I look the same?”

“It’s because we possess a thing called a persona.” Morgana answered, “So, this is a world where intense feelings and cognitions come to life right?”

“Sure,”

Morgana continues “So in this reality when you have embraced and recognized your true potential as a person, and overcome the darkness in your heart, you develop your own cognitive self. Your persona. Your appearance in the Metaverse reflects the persona that exists within you. And with that persona, you can fight the monsters that live here.”

“There are monsters here? Monsters that want to kill us?” I asked concerned

“Malicious spirits haunt the Metaverse and will attack anything, even each other. These monsters, we call them Shadows, are also attracted to intense dark emotions and motivations.”

“That’s why I didn’t want to bring her to the palace guys!” Ann protests “She can’t fight these things, they could kill her!”

“Don’t worry about me, Ann. I’ve trained extensively in the art of Aikido. I can handle myself.” I explained confidently

“Right,” Morgana rubs the back of his head “It’s going to take a little more than self-defense to defeat these things…”

“What did you mean when you said palace, Ann? Is that another term for this ‘Metaverse?’”

“Yes and no,” Morgana answered for her “the Metaverse is this universe, a palace is like, how to explain it, it’s like a smaller dimension within it that belongs to just one person.”

“So we are in a palace?”

“Close,” Ryuji chimed and pointed up. I followed his finger and saw a massive floating building sitting on top of a flying saucer that rained dollar bills. “That’s Kaneshiro’s palace.”

“Oh my god. That building… It’s flying! How?” I clasped my hands to my head

“Yeah, it gets weirder than that,” Ren looks around, and I follow his gaze.

I had been so absorbed by their exposition and wild outfits, I had mistakenly thought we were alone on this mirror Central street. But we were actually surrounded, not by people, but by walking ATM machines.

“A-Are these the shadows you were talking about?”
“Nah, you’ll know a Shadow when you see it. We are in Kaneshiro’s palace, right? So we are seeing the world through his heart's eyes. Or in other words, seeing our word as he sees it.” Morgana pokes one of them with his sword. It has no reaction.

“So he sees people as walking ATM machines? That’s awful,” I look back to the group “You said this is a mirror world right? Does that mean there is another me running around here?”

“Probably,” Morgana continued “there’s a shadow version of all of us, but it’s not as big of a deal as you might think. Metaverse clones are not especially intelligent, and the world is not going to explode or anything if you find the other you. It’s just like if you touched your reflection in the mirror or something.”

“Ok, so let me get this straight. This ‘Metaverse’ is a dimension that runs parallel to our world. It’s a dimension where strong thoughts and feelings from our universe become real, and this ‘palace’ is Kaneshiro’s distorted heart. So basically this whole world is an optical illusion biased in social cognitive psychology but gone real somehow?”

“What?” Ryuji rubs his head

Morgana smiles especially wide. Or at least I assumed so taking into an account for the massive size of his head “That about right! You’ve caught on pretty quick! Or at least quicker than some others…”

“Was that supposed to mean something you stupid cat?!” Ryuji raged

“There is one thing I’m still a little fuzzy on,” I thought aloud “You five have special abilities in this world because you… read a self-help book or something?”

“It’s a little hard to explain.” Yusuke chimed in “You embrace this energy within you and wield it in battle.”

“I guess you will just have to see that part for yourself.” Shrugged Ann

“Fair enough” I look backed at the flying building overhead “What is the point of being here? At this palace I mean. How do you steal a heart?”

“It’s not a heart in the literal sense. It’s the heart of a person's twisted desire. Usually, it’s represented by an object. When we steal their most treasured possession in here, it takes away the source of their corruption. Causing a change of heart.”

“I see. So that’s why Kamoshida had such a sudden change in attitude. You five stole his heart.”

“You bet! We brought his sorry butt down a peg!” Ann cheered

“I still have plenty of questions, but I think that will be enough to go on for now. Shall we get going then?” I examine the surroundings for any kind of ladder or transportation

“The problem is we can’t even get up there to get the treasure,” Ren explained

“We brought you here because I think you could be our key in,” Morgana clarified

“Hmm, I can understand that. Considering hes' clearly money obsessed and that thing is raining money. I assume it’s safe to say this is the bank mentioned earlier, correct? I wonder,” I walk towards the floating monstrosity
The group follows me close behind. As I approach a large ramp extends from the bank to my feet.

“Woah, how did you do that?” Ryuji asked amazed

“Well, Kaneshiro made me his customer, right? Wouldn’t be good business to lock out your customers would it?”

“Exactly my thought!” Morgana jumped with glee.

“Shall we?” I ask walking up the ramp

“Hang on just a sec,” Ren stands in place, “I think Ann might have a point. Makoto, palaces are swarming with Shadows. These things don’t play around.”

“There could be other security measures up ahead to stop your progress. Like doors only I, as a customer, can access. Besides, I’m with you all, the Phantom Thieves of Hearts, I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“Didn’t he make us customers too?” Ann asked around

“I suppose so, but the ramp didn’t extend for us. It was only when she approached it.” Ren considered out loud

“I think she has a point.” Morgana joined “We’ve already wasted enough time trying to get into this place. I don’t want us to only get so far and need her again. We’ll just have to be extra careful.”

“Ugh, great. As if this shit weren’t hard enough, now we have an escort mission” Ryuji wined

“Hush,” I shot back at him “You may find that I’m not as much of a burden in a fight as you may think, Ryuji.”

Without waiting for a reply I continued my ascent, Phantom Thieves following close behind.

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!

Thanks for reading! If you’ve enjoyed this installment of Makoto’s Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
Chapter Summary

Upon entering Kaneshiro's palace, Makoto and the Thieves are captured. In an attempt to escape it all comes down to Makoto who is required to face her own shadow. With the help of a mysterious woman...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Chapter 19: The Bank of Greed

The group panted from exhaustion when we finally reached the top of the ramp.

“It looked” *pant* “so much smaller” *pant* “from the ground” Ryuji slumped over, supporting himself by his knees

“Aren’t you the one who runs track?” Ren wiped the sweat from his brow

“Yeah, but a track is flat. Not 9,000 feet in the freaking air!”
“Good lord,” Yusuke pointed out a pile of dead ATM people on the opposite side of the saucer. “Guess that’s what he does to the people who can’t pay anymore…”

“Shush!” Ann pointed to a massive man stationed at the door of the ridiculous bank. The front doors were as tall as the building and made of gold with giant dollar signs etched on the faces. The bank itself was equally as subtle. Ivory pillars held up the marble roof which was also trimmed in gold.

The guard looked more like a bear in a man suit. He stood several meters tall and had a thick built. The man was dressed in riot gear and wielded a billy-club. What I found equally as odd was, like the Thieves, he also wore a mask. However, unlike the masks of my companions, his mask was blank looking a featureless minus a couple of eye holes.

“That’s a bank guard right?” I asked the group

“He may look like that, but that’s probably just the shape Shadows take in Kaneshiro’s palace. That’s definitely a bad guy.” Ann explains

“Well then, shall we?” Yusuke draws a long katana from a sheath I hadn’t noticed earlier

“Hang on” I put my hand in front of him and look back at the guard

“I’m customer, right? Let me try something.” I make my way towards the guard

“What the hell? Are you trying to get killed?” Ryuji whisper-shouted

“You there!” I straighten my back and speak with authority

The monster man shifts his gaze to me

“My name is Makoto Niijima. I am Kaneshiro’s favorite customer, and I demand entrance!”

“Niijima” The creature growled. He turns to his right and slaps a button on the wall. “Enter” he commands as the doors split open.

I wave my dumbstruck companions over “You seriously have to stop pressing your luck,” Ren mutters as we walk through the threshold

“I got us in, didn’t I? I’m just doing what you all brought me along to do.”

The main entrance was just as gaudy as the outside. The floor was comprised of marble tile with a long red carpet leading from the entrance. Large golden chandeliers dangled above and an elaborate water feature with a dollar sign as the fountain piece stood opposed to us at the other side of the hall.

“Subtlety is not his forte is it?” Yusuke remarked examining the fountain

“It’s kind of like in our world where he flaunts his wealth and power. Why wouldn’t he do it here too?” Ann replies

“Intruders!” a gnarled voice sounds over an intercom. Seconds later guards surround us. The group circles around me, weapons drawn.

A single guard approaches us and holds up a radio to his mouth “We have cornered the thieves, boss. What do you want us to do?”
The radio crackled “Excellent, bring them to my office.”

The man nodded, and two other guards came from behind “Follow” the Shadow with the radio demanded

“We better do as they say… for now” Morgana mutters.

Still clustered together with weapons at the ready, we make our way up to a few flights of stairs and are escorted through a security door.

“Well, look who it is…” a familiar, yet equally distorted voice sounded from behind a tall leather office chair “So you brats thought you could pull a fast one, eh?”

The chair swiveled around revealing a round man who looked exactly like Kaneshiro. But unlike the mobster we saw earlier, this Kaneshiro had purple skin, yellow eyes, and disgusting teeth that showed a nasty grin.

“You dumb-asses really thought you could just walk into my place? Start telling my men what to do?” The nasty little man shook his head “tsk-tsk Niijima, smuggling in bandits? I expected better from my new favorite customer. Looks like your stupidity will, once again, be your downfall.”

I ground my teeth ‘Did I seriously just play into another trap? How stupid can I be?’

“Look, if you’re going do something, save us the speech and get to it already, would ya?” Ann remarked

“Oh, such a mouth on that one,” Kaneshiro remarked, “I wonder what else that mouth can do?”

“Alright,” Ann reached for her belt and pulled out a submachine gun

‘Where the hell did that thing come from?!’ I thought loudly

“I’ve had about enough of this shit” She pointed it and Kaneshiro and unleashed a barrage of bullets in his direction.

He scrambled to the floor behind his office desk. Once the mayhem ended he popped his chubby little head back up “What the fuck are doing standing there, morons?! Kill them!”

The guards snap into action, the closest ones pulled off their masks and transformed into a puff of black smoke. In their places now stood horrific looking monsters.

One transformed into a twisted looking lion with purple skin, pointed ears, and razor-sharp claws. Another doubled in size and took on the appearance of a demon with blood red skin, horns and a long black spear.

One by one they transformed into the beings of only the worst nightmares.

“RUN!” Morgana shouted

Yusuke grabbed me by the arm and tugged me out of the room as the others made a path. “T-These are the Shadows you talked about?!” I shouted

“No time for talk! Just run!”

“Yusuke, get her to the door! We’ll buy you time!” Ren commanded
“On it” he responded

Ryuji halted at the office door and faced the lion “Think your tough shit kitty?” he peels back his skull mask and a transparent figure stood behind him. The figure was roughly double Ryuji’s size and strongly resembled a classic looking pirate but with no flesh, just a skeleton in a captain’s outfit.

Ryuji raised his hand in the air and slammed it to the ground. The figure mimicked him precisely, and a bright bolt of electricity suddenly appeared and struck the ground in front of him, stunning the advancing monsters.

My eyes were wide with shock. ‘They really did have superpowers in this world.’

A different creature conjured a spear of ice and lobbed it down the stairs. “Look out!” Ann shouted as the shard of ice picked up speed and honed towards mine and Yusuke’s position “I got you!”

She then removed her own mask, and behind her, a tall skinny woman appeared that wore a long flowing red dress, high heel stiletto shoes and long flowing curly black hair tied back in pigtails. This figure wasn’t alone though, she was accompanied by three men who crawled on all fours with big red heart-shaped heads all on a leather leash she held in one hand.

Ann extended her arm, and like Ryuji, the woman imitated Ann’s actions. A spout of flame flew from her hand and eviscerated the ice missile.

“Guards at the entrance! Someone clear the way!” Yusuke cried

Morgana sped past us. His little cat legs moving so quickly I couldn’t even see them. “Zoro!” he shouted, and a strong looking man dressed in a black leather outfit and black mask wielding a rapier appeared.

Morgana drew his own sword and sliced through the air. Zoro repeating the action and a hurricane-like gust of wind scattered the guards. “Go! Hurry!”

Yusuke and I reach the door, but before we could open it, a guard snatches me out of Yusuke’s grasp.

“Makoto!” He turns in place and removes his mask. A faint figure of a pale white shogun is summoned. The fighter was dressed in a beautifully ornate robe and sash. Most notably he wielded a large katana, like Yusuke.

Yusuke ran his gloved hand down the length of his sword. The shogun repeats the action but on his sword started coating itself with layers of sharp ice. The two thrust the sword and stab the guard between the eyes. The Shadow goes limp, collapses to the ground, and fades away in a cloud of smoke.

“Come now. We have to hurry!” he grabbed my arm again, but as we turned to face the door we found two new guards blocking the only exit.

“I got these two! Move!” Ren rushes pasts us and removes his mask. A strange looking phantom appears behind him. The creature wore long red boots that reached up to its hips, a black vest and short red leather coat. Its face didn’t resemble a human in any way. It looked more like a continuous burning black fire that wore clothing. In the position where the eyes usually would be the flames turn red for a moment, giving it a terrifying expression of glee.

A fixed its head a cartoonishly tall black top hat and protruding from its back, it bore two long black wings.
Ren threw his fist to one side, and a blast of dark energy appeared, knocking the guard to the ground. The second Shadow saw its opportunity and ran up to Ren with billy-club held high. Before the blow could land Ren’s dark figure disappeared, and vicious looking Cerberus took its place. One of the heads of the monster dog bit and snapped the club in half. A different head wrapped its sizable jaws around the Shadow’s had and crushed it. The guard disappeared in a puff of black smoke.

Ren’s dog vanished, and he started pulling on the doors handle with all his strength. It was no use, It wouldn’t budge.

All of us gathered now at the front door, guards started appearing faster then they could be defeated. It didn’t take long before the Thieves were restrained and thrown to the ground. I stood in the middle of the room. Completely helpless.

The sound of a slow clap echoed from up the staircase. A smug looking Kaneshiro emerged from the shadows.

“Was a good effort kidos, but playtime is over. This is a place for adults, not for a bunch of rotten little children.” He stood several meters from me, one guard on each side.

“Makoto! You have to run! Don’t worry about -” Ren was cut off as a guard wedged his knee further into Ren’s back

I looked around. I only saw more and more guards pouring in. There was nowhere to run and no escape

“You escape death once already, but you had to go begging for another slice huh?” Kaneshiro asked

I examined my person for anything I could use as a weapon, then the floor ‘Maybe a guard dropped a club or a piece of debris? Anything?’ I came up empty handed

“I looked you up after you left. You have an older sister who works for the court yeah?”

I looked at him with panic

“She's a hot little piece of ass too. When the scandal gets out that her dumb little sister owed money to the mob, she is sure to get tossed on the street by her boss and will need a new employer.”

“You keep her out of this!” I yell

“Or what?” he laughed “What are you going to do little worm? Don’t know if you’ve noticed, but your only hope has been pretty thoroughly crushed” Kaneshiro gestured to the restrained group of teens. They struggled and writhed on the ground, but it was no use.

I fell to my knees “Please. They have done nothing wrong. It was me who went after you, not them. Release them, and I will come with you quietly.”

“You will?” he pulled out a cigar from his coat and started puffing “Awwhh. How noble of you.” he released a lung full of smoke

“Normally I let my customers pay off an ever-increasing debt, but this feels like a special occasion. How about this, I take your friends apart limb by limb, slowly while you watch. Then you work for me. Don’t worry, I’m sure you will pay off your debt in no time with a body like that.” he took another long drag from the cigar
“Of course, your life will be ruined forever,” Kaneshiro stated matter of factly “I wonder how your
dead daddy would feel about how his dumb whore daughter turned out.”

My eyes went wide “What did you say?”

“Don’t like me talking about your dumbass dad? What did he die of again? Saving some stupid
kid?”

My back tensed, senses heightened. Newfound adrenaline made my heart pounded like crazy. I
slowly stood up. My fists clenched so tightly my fingernails dug into my palm and caused them to
trickle with blood.

“Say that again, motherfucker” I growled

“Are you deaf and stupid? Your dad was a fucking moron, and he spawned a dumb, useless bitch!”

I pointed at him, hand dripping with fresh blood “Shut your damn mouth you money grubbing
asshole!” I screamed

Then, everything went white.

I blinked my eyes and my vision slowly corrected.

I was no longer in the bank but some musky wood-paneled bar. The stench of stale beer and
whiskey lingered heavily in the air.

“What the hell?” In front of me was the bar. Lines of different species of alcohol ran across the
shelves. The bar itself was old and the wood scratch and damaged but polished and smooth to the
touch.

The stools were, and hand made patches were sewn into many of the cushioned seats. This bar was
old but clearly loved.

*Thunk*

“What?” I looked behind me.

*Thunk*

There was a tall woman playing darts. She wore tall black leather boots, her hair was long and
bright blue with one side of her head shaven. She wore a black leather jacket with a large image of
a falcon mid flight holding a skull in its claws, and a rose in its beak on the back.

“Who are you? Where are we? Where is Kaneshiro?”

The woman jolted to attention, she clearly did not expect company. She turned and saw me
“Makoto? You see me?”

I nodded “Yeah?”

She dropped the darts and sprinted over to me and embraced me in a tight hug that squeezed the
breath out of my lungs.

“Oh my God! Makoto, you see me!”

After a while, she finally loosened her bear hug, and I shoved her away. “Who are you and where
are we? Answer me, damn-it!” I shouted

She put her hands in front of her “Woah there, everything is fine, your safe in here.”

“Tell me where we are!”

“That can’t be summed up so easily, why don’t we-”

“No!” I continue to rave “I’ve gone through hell today and have had enough of this insanity. Tell me where we are, now!”

“Ok. Ok. We’re in your heart, your cognition.”

“My heart?”

“My name is Johanna, and I have waited a very, very long time to meet you, Makoto. I'm here to help.”

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: [https://khytal.tumblr.com/](https://khytal.tumblr.com/))**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
The Birth of a Queen

Chapter Summary

"I am thou, thou art I"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Chapter 20: The Birth of a Queen

“H-Help?” I backed up till my back hit the wall.

The tall woman seemed to sense my anxiety and took a few steps back

“Yes, help.” She pauses and collects herself “I’ve been around for a long time, Makoto. I’ve been given many names and have taken many forms, but what has remained constant is my belief in true justice. I’ve pledged my existence to defend and serve those who can not for themselves, and crush those who seek to bleed them dry.”

I met her gaze. Her eyes were like nothing I had seen before. They were a vibrant blue, and her irises seemed to somehow slowly rotate around her pupil. Her face was equally warm and welcoming as it was stunningly beautiful.

“I have watched you for some time, Makoto.” She slowly and gently placed one foot in front of another. Closing the gap between us.

“From the moment you were born, I recognized greatness in you. You didn’t know me then, but I was there for your first steps and words. With you during your campaign to become student council president. Even with you during your recent... struggles.” She looked to the scars on my knuckles from where I punched the mirror before. I swiftly conceal my hand behind my skirt.

She continued “I know not only how powerful you are, but also the kindness and love you hold deep in your heart.” I dared not let my eyes meet hers again. Her kind words were too much. If she were as observant as she claimed she would have seen all the deceit and blackmail I had committed recently. How I so selfishly wanted the only heroes in this whole story to rot in a jail cell somewhere, or how I forced those same selfless teens to save me because of my sheer stupidity. I wasn’t sure what Makoto she was talking about, but it certainly wasn’t me.

She stopped a short distance away. I noticed a large revolver swaying at her hip, it was contained in a holster with a skull and crossbones imprinted on the front.

Her face changed from a smile to a slight frown, and her kind eyes looked suddenly sullen. If what she said was true, she had been living in my heart my whole life. It made me wonder if she somehow heard my thoughts.

“It’s ok if you don’t believe it fully yet,” She placed her hand gently on my shoulder “I’ve met many incredible young women throughout my life, Makoto, and know few hold a candle to who you are deep in there” She pointed to my heart “In time, I know you will see it too.”

I bit my lip and looked up to her chin, still not having the courage to meet her eyes again.

“Now, there is a reason you are here” She explained, “This is a moment, a decision, that will affect the rest of your life.”

“What?” I speculated, momentarily forgetting my shame

“These past few months have been hard for you. I’ve watched you struggle with the world around you. Finally asking the real questions and wrestling with the answers you get.” She squatted down to my hight and held my arms.

“Makoto now is the time to decide if you are going to answer the call to uphold your justice.”
“Uphold my justice?” I mutter

“In all our lives, we face a moment that defines who we are for the rest of our lives. How we see ourselves and our place in the world. Right now, you and your friends are in great danger. You face a man who will, without a second thought, kill your companions and use you as a tool for his own gain.”

She tightened her grip on my arms “You must decide, here and now, are you going to play into men’s hands like him for the rest of your life, or are you going to accept yourself, even the parts you don’t like, and become a champion of justice? Are you going to be another victim, or are you going to become a queen who chases scum like him back to the nasty little holes they crawled out of?”

I blinked and met her eyes. They were irradiated with passion and vigor. Causing her to practically glow.

She stands back up and releases her grip on me “Now is the time, Makoto. It is time to decide who you truly are.”

“If you will have me, I want to help you realize your true potential, truth, and your personal justice. I want to form a contract with you and defeat those who use their power to harm others. Bring those to justice who think themselves above the law. Wield me as your weapon, your persona, and let us continue your father’s legacy.”

“I-I” I feel my legs buckling

“Cast away your inner shadow Makoto Nijima! See yourself as I see you. Not as a burden, or useless, but as a crusader of justice!”

I swallowed hard. My heart pounded out of my chest.

“There is only one condition. If you accept my offer, there is no turning back. We will become as one and will see our mission through to the very end. I will be not only your sword in battle but also your trusted companion.”

“What is your decision then?” Johanna extends her hand “Will you accept my offer?”

I breathe in deeply and find my resolve.

I reach my hand towards hers, and she recoils slightly “I will warn you, this could sting a little” She chuckles dryly

I grin and clasp my hand to hers “I accept your offer, Johanna! Let us honor my father’s legacy and finish what he started!”

Chains appear and wrap themselves around mine and Johanna’s hands followed by an intense blue flame.

“Very well!” She shouts “Then it is done. We shall become one!”

My ears start to ring.

My head pounds.

Everything fades to black.
“Hellooo?!” I heard Kaneshiro’s voice echo in the darkness “What’s with this chick?”

“Makoto! Are you-” Ren was cut off

My senses slowly return to me “Junya Kaneshiro” an otherworldly voice speaks through me as I pick myself off the ground

“W-What the hell?” I hear him stammer

“Your tyranny ends here…” I mutter. Power coursing through my veins

I stand up and point at the nasty little man “Junya Kaneshiro! Prepare to be shown what true justice looks like!”

Suddenly the power becomes too much. I fall back to the ground and begin thrashing

“Makoto!” Yusuke shouts

“I-Is she?” Ann squeaks

‘I am thou, thou art I…’ I hear Johanna echo in my mind

‘You have finally found your own justice.’

My insides were on fire. It felt like my chest was about to burst

‘this memorial day marks your graduation from your false self. Awaken Makoto Nijima!’

I clasp my hands to my face but didn’t feel my cheeks. Instead, I felt some sort of metal visor covering my eyes. I tug at it but felt as if it was fused to my skin.

I summoned the last bit of strength I had left and ripped the object from my face. The pain doubled in strength becoming too much to bare.

I scream as my body is engulfed in flame followed by an explosion of hot blue fire

“What the fuck is hap-” Kaneshiro is cut off as he is thrown into a wall from the blast.

Suddenly, all the pain vanishes. I open my eyes and find I’m no longer on the floor, but astride a large cobalt-blue motorcycle with a woman’s face as a figurehead on the front. My clothes had changed. The damaged school uniform was replaced with sleek blue body armor with spikes fixed on the shoulders and knees, a jet-black corset, black knee-high boots, and a long flowing black scarf draped around my neck.

An intoxicating energy circulated through my body. My muscles felt taught and strong, and I felt as if I could leap over the tallest building.

“I-I feel incredible. I feel...I feel like myself... Me!” I shouted with ecstasy

I felt reborn.

The shock waves from the blast knocked the impenetrable crowd of guards to the floor, freeing the Thieves.

“Holy shit!” Ryuji shouts “Her persona! Is that a motorcycle?!”
“I’ve never seen anything like it!” cries Morgana

I grip the handlebars and rev the engine. Blue electricity arcs off my body and strike my immediate surroundings.

I spotted Kaneshiro picking himself off the floor at the other end of the lobby “Johanna!” I shout “Gun it!” and let go of the brake. Sending myself flying missile-like towards Kaneshiro

“Fuck!” The fat man reacted faster then he had ever before in his life and lept to one side. Just missing the onslaught

He looked to his guards standing by idly “What you dumbasses gaping at?! Kill them! Kill them all!” He screamed

The masked guards snap out of their haze and rush me

“Not today!” I reach for my skull and crossbones engraved holster and pull out a beautifully engraved pistol “Now it's my turn!” I pull the trigger and let loose a barrage of bullets that soared through the air with blue tracers following their path. The Shadows were sent flying.

“You all!” I shout to the wide-eyed group of teens “I’ll clear the way!”

Tires screeching I speed towards the exit. The bike made quick work of the locked door.

“Behind you!” Ren shouts

I look in one of my mirrors and find a black van with blue headlight behind me

“Where did they get that?” I whisper

As I got further away from the bank, my surroundings begin to change again. The colors shift and recede in waves.

Before I knew it, we were all back in our regular clothes and back in our world.

“God, that was too close,” Ann grunted doubled over on the sidewalk

“For real. I-”

“Did you all see that!” I shouted over Ryuji. Still adrenaline high “I ran over Kaneshiro and got us out! Me!”

“Makoto, that was incredible!” Yusuke remarked

“That thing was kick ass! Was that a persona Morgana?” Ryuji asked but when I looked around the monster cat was nowhere to be seen.

“Don’t know anything else that would be capable of that sort of power.” I heard his voice but still didn’t see him

“Where is he? Morgana?” I called out

A little black and white cat with a yellow collar jumped out of Ren’s school bag and onto this shoulder. “That was quite impressive, Makoto!” it chimed

“Um, Morgana?” I questioned
“Oh right, sorry. Forgot you're new to all this. This is what I look like in your world.” He explained

“Huh, that would explain the random mewing I hear around you all. Wait…” I look to Ren
“You’ve been bringing a cat to school? No way ’s in the rule book.” he merely shrugs

“So, does this mean the Phantom Thieves have a new member?” Ann addresses her comrades

“Hell yeah, we do!” Ryuji bursts “With a persona like that on our team, we’ll take out Kaneshiro in no time!”

I hold my hands out in front of me “What? Me a Phantom Thief? I couldn’t possibly… I-I’m not like you guys. I’m just… me. Boring old miss president.”

“If that power is within you,” Yusuke started “boring is the last word I would use to describe you.”

“Yeah,” Ann joined “It's not like any of us are any more special or capable than you and we’re still doing it.”

“That is very generous of you all, really, but… this is all so sudden…”

“How about this,” Ren speaks up “Kaneshiro is your fight as much as it is ours. How about you join us in taking him down, and see how you feel about sticking around after?” He smiles “No pressure and no obligations, ok?”

I smile back and nod. Grateful for his offer to compromise “I think those are more than acceptable terms. Thank you, Ren.” I look to the others “Thank you all, for everything. I am forever in your debt.”

“No sweat, saving lives and kicking ass. It’s all in a day’s work for a Phantom Thief.” Ryuji beams

“She will need a code name.” Yusuke looks me over

“A code name?” I ask like a true novice

“Oh right,” Ann recalls “we all use code names in the Metaverse to protect our identities in case they got out somehow.”

She starts to name each member “Yusuke is Fox, Ryuji is Skull, Morgana is Mona, Ren is Joker, and I’m Panther.”

“I see, so you’ve named yourselves after what your masks look like.”

“Pretty much,” Ryuji crosses his arms “But what about you, you got that whole post-apocalyptic raider thing going for you and your mask kinda looks like a visor… how about biker? No! Raider?”

“A little basic don’t you think?” Yusuke remarks

“War dog?” Ann squeaks

“What kind of name is that?!” Ryuji ejected

“I don’t know! We have a lot of cat themes in this group! Thought I would balance it out.” She hid her face behind her long blonde hair

“What do you think, Ren?” Yusuke asks
He puts his finger to his chin and looks me over a minute “Witch?”

I scrunch my face and shoot him a glare “Are you trying to say something by that?”

His eyes go wide for a moment “Uh… I-I don’t…don't think so?” he blushes from embarrassment

“What do you want to be called?” Morgana asks me over Ren’s shoulder

“Hmm…”

Johanna’s words echo in my mind ‘Are you going to be another victim, or are you going to become a queen?’

After a moment of consideration, I gave my answer “How about Queen?”

“Queen? I don’t know-”

“Hey,” I cut off Ryuji ”either come up with a better name or zip it.” I scowled at him

“Y-Yes Queen!” He stammered

Ann chuckled “I think that’s the perfect name, Makoto.”

I rubbed my neck “Sorry Ryuji didn’t mean to snap. I think I’m just ti-” A sudden feeling of light-headedness washes over me and I collapse to all fours on the concrete.

“Woah there!” Ann helps me back up “You’ve had a crazy day. Let’s get you home.”

“No, no I’ve been enough of a damsel in distress,” I stumble back to my feet with her help “I can get to a train by myself.”

“You're not a damsel in distress,” Ann motions Ren over to get my other side “You’re just a person who's been through hell and could use a friend’s shoulder to lean on.”

I quietly submit, and the group escorts me down to the station. They sit and wait with me for the late train to arrive. Fluctuating in and out of consciousness I, without realizing it, lean my head against Ren’s arm.

The last thing I remembered thinking about was what Ann said. ‘You could just use a friend’s shoulder to lean on.’ Even sitting on that dirty subway bench in the middle of the night, I felt more at ease then I had in months. I remember feeling warm and safe as I slowly drifted into a peaceful sleep.

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**
Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
"A bottomless pit grew in my stomach. This entire time I thought Isis had all the answers. That these two were just holding out on me for whatever twisted reason, but in reality, they were just as lost and afraid as I was." - Makoto

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Chapter 21: Interlude 4

[LEM]

I slowly start to stir and find the ground beneath me

"Johanna..." I mumble and crack open my eyes. I realize that I'm slumped forward, the chains connecting me to the wall drawn taut.

As my vision slowly returns to me, I find myself in the same cell, but it felt different. I now could
clearly see all its components. Before, I only ever saw dark haze and the stone floor directly in front of me, but now I could see the cramped, cold space for its entirety. Even the iron bars that held me in this god-forsaken place.

Strangely though, I found my new clarity comforting. At least I had a clearer idea of what was going on around me now.

"Makoto, you're awake." I looked up and saw the bird woman, who called herself Isis, sat along the stone wall to my left. She smiled faintly. It was almost like the depressing environment was even draining her spirit away.

"Yes… I think I'm starting to remember…" I shook my head trying to make sense of things "Phantom Thieves… Kaneshiro… Metaverse" My head shot up from recollection "Metaverse. We're in the Metaverse, right?" I looked at her. Desperately hoping I had cracked some kind of code.

She tilted her head back a moment and looked to her fellow cellmate. The skeletal man that went by the name Biker. He was sat on the opposing side from her against the wall of iron bars with a lit cigarette dangling between his teeth. He met his companion's gaze for only a moment then looked away.

"We can't say for certain," She returned her attention to me "I can only assume so considering you can see us and talk with us. But this is a place foreign to us."

I blinked in contemplation. It wasn't much, but at least it was more info then I had when I started.

"Johanna… If I'm in the Metaverse, why can't I sense Johanna? We formed a contract. She said she would stay with me."

"Well," Isis clasped her hands together "that is still true."

"Where is she then? Is she locked away somewhere too?" I ask curtly. Already frustrated with the lack of straight answers.

Isis sighed and held out her arms "You looking at her, Makoto."

"You?"

She looked to Biker again and back at me "We are. He and I are the entity you know as Johanna."

"Shit," Biker suddenly chimed in, taking a long drag before continuing "remember when we used to be hot, bird lady?"

She shot him a glare "What do you mean 'used to be'? I'll have you know men have died seeking my hand in marriage."

"And the ones that got there? Did they off themselves too? God knows I wish I could when we were fused at the hip."

"Hey!" I shouted over them "What do you mean you both are Johanna? Enough with the cryptic answers!"

"What? You want answers, princess? Do you think knowing how royally fucked we are will change anything?" Biker spat

"At least I might be able to come up with some ideas on how to get out!" I shouted back
"Oh, right. I'm sure a teenage girl will solve the issue two thousand-year-old spirits, who have lived multiple lives, can't crack." He flicked his cigarette butt to the corner "Fucking pissant." He growled under his breath.

An uncomfortable silence filled the room for a time before Isis chimed again "Even we don't know how it happened," She started. Sounding more resigned than ever "It just happened so… suddenly. One moment we were Johanna, then we were here, in this… place." She looked around morosely

"All I remember was feeling a sort of fear that I had never felt before. Whatever did this to us Makoto, it is not of either of our worlds." She lowered her gaze to the ground "It's a power I didn't even know possible."

A bottomless pit grew in my stomach. This entire time I thought Isis had all the answers. That these two were just holding out on me for whatever twisted reason, but in reality, they were just as lost and afraid as I was.

"As far as everything that brought us to this point," she met my gaze "there is nothing more we can explain. You need to remember, Makoto. Remember your reason why. Your reason for being. Neither of us can answer that for you."

Her words stirred something in me. A small fire sparked in the catacombs of my soul. Perhaps the last bastion of my will. "We will not die in here."

I rattle and shake my chains "Do you hear me? I will get us out of here alive if its the last thing I do, that you can count on Isis. If that means me remembering everything before now, then that is what I will do!"

A high pitched wining starts to resonate throughout the cell.

"Makoto! Look!" She points to the chains knotted around my body.

I look down and spot one of the bands glowing a bright blue. The pitch continued getting higher and higher till *POP*, it snapped off and evaporated into black smoke.

"Goddess!" Isis cried "Makoto! You're doing it! You're starting to remember!"

The spectacle even got Biker's attention for a moment before he swiveled his head away again, without comment.

I wiggled my fingers, feeling them for the first time since finding myself trapped here. "I'm not dying in here damn-it," I mutter to myself
**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
Chapter Summary

The gang introduces Makoto to the crazy world of Momentos, and put her new abilities to the test!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 22: Mementos

It was nearing the weekend now, and I hadn't done much reached out to the Phantom Thieves.

After the incident, we exchanged numbers, and they added me to their private chat to discuss Thieves matters, but I hardly participated. My mind still boggled from what happened. Part of me was still convinced it was some sort of dream, but the pair of ruined tights and damaged school uniform I still had from that night spoke of a different story.

After school, on a Saturday afternoon, I received another text from the group chat. Ren was asking
me if I was available for some Thieves business. I initially wanted to make up some sort of excuse, but I knew I need to make good on my word and agreed.

To my surprise, Ren asked me not to meet them in their usual spot at the subway access, but in the Central street subway terminal. Strange, but I didn't question it.

When I arrived about an hour later, I saw everyone had already gathered and was waiting for me.

"I apologize," I started "I certainly hope you all weren't waiting long."

"Nah, I just got here a few minutes before you." Ryuji slurped on a smoothy

"So," I drew in a deep breath, "Shall we continue our infiltration of Kaneshiro's palace?"

"We will, but your still way to green to handle all the craziness of a palace," Ann explained, rettying one of her long blonde pigtails

"There is more to the Metaverse then just Kaneshiro's palace. There is a place that we use to train and take on smaller missions." Yusuke elaborated

"Oh?"

"Have you had a chance to look over your phone lately?" Ann asked

"My phone? Not particularly. Why?"

"Open up your recently used apps." She instructed.

I followed her orders and found a new strange icon. It was an outline of a black eye with a red background.

"What's this?" I tapped it, and a plain black screen appeared with three choices: Bookmarked, New, and Help.

"I don't remember installing this," I looked to Ann "I assume you are referring to the creepy looking eye app?"

"Yep, we all have it. It's our key to entering the Metaverse."

"But how did it get on there?"

"Don't know," chimed Ryuji "we've all tried deleting it before we knew what it was, and it would always just reappear."

"Anyway," Ann continued, "Open up the bookmarked tab."

I did so and found two locations. One named Kaneshiro and the other, "Mementos?" I asked out loud

"That is where we are headed today." She replied, "Like Yusuke said, its a super handy place that allows us to train at our pace against Shadows and carry out small missions, but we can get to that stuff later."

"Oh- ok," I replied, more confused than ever

"Go ahead. Tap it, and let's get started." Instructed Ren
I did as he asked and the strange black and red ripples appeared again, but this time my phone was the epicenter instead of Ren's. Once again, the world changed and shifted before my eyes. Colors were being pulled back and forth like the tide of an ocean. They seemed to mingle and intertwine with each other until they finally found a position they agreed with.

Before I knew it, everyone had changed into their Metaverse Thieves outfits. Complete with masks and assorted weapons. I looked down and saw that I too was different now. Back in my blue and black combat armor with a metal visor covering a portion of my face.

The skin-tight suit made me feel a little silly, it was a pretty bold fashion statement for sure, but more than anything I felt powerful. Like back in Kaneshiro's palace, I felt leaner and more agile. I felt like I could bench press a truck, and a part of me wanted to try.

"Welcome to Mementos" the monster cat chimed while shaking Ren's school bag off his leg.

I looked around my immediate surroundings. Structurally, it was the same as the terminal we were in just a moment ago, but now the walls and floors were in different shades of black. A few select pillars and doors had changed to crimson red, but it was roughly the same train station.

"What is this place, exactly?" I ask Morgana

"So palaces, like Kaneshiro's, are actually rarer then you might think. It takes a person with an especially twisted heart to create a whole palace to themselves. This," he gestured around with his cartoonishly small paws "Think of Mementos as the people's place. Or the collective unconscious."

"That actually makes sense," I state

"It does?" Ryuji asks shocked

"Yeah, think about it. So many people come and go out of the subway every day. Makes sense that so many people in one spot would have some sort of impact on this world." I look to the black walls and empty storefronts that lined the terminal "Though it's a little disconcerting how creepy it is."

Morgana clears his throat and continues, "Anyway, Mementos, essentially being a giant palace, has Shadows in it too, but for some reason, none of them travel up to the terminal. It's not till you get into the subway tunnels do they start appearing."

"How deep does Mementos go?"

"We don't know" Yusuke shrugs "We've gone down several levels now but always seem to get stopped at some point. An impenetrable wall will erect itself, suddenly preventing anymore advancement."

"Heh, erect," Ryuji giggled to himself

"How old are you?" Ann asked him curtly

"We have noticed something odd though," Ren talks over the two "Whenever we bust a new palace, like with Kamoshida's and Madarame's, those walls we hit crumble down."

"I have a theory about that," Morgana rubbed his chin, "I think it has something to do with our popularity. Think about it, every time we steal a palace owner's heart, we get headlines. Thus more popular. Because more people are aware of our existence, we are granted deeper access into the collective unconscious."
"That's why we need to bring down bigger and bigger targets! Soon, everyone will know the name Phantom Thieves of Hearts!" Ryuji flexed

"Something like that," Morgana replied

"But that's not why we are here today" Yusuke spoke up "we need to put you through your paces and see what you can do."

"So, you want me to beat up some Shadows or something?"

"In time," Morgana explained, "right now we want to see what abilities you even posses."

"How do I do that?"

"Well, you have to super cool pistol" he pointed a paw at the holster on my left hip "Let start with that. How about you draw it and shoot at Ren."

"What? You saw what this thing did to Shadows in Kaneshiro's palace. I'll kill him if I do that!"

"Trust me," Ren smiled coyly "I'll be fine"

"O-Ok. If you're sure, I guess" I draw the gun and aim for the masked man across from me. My hands shook. Before a few days ago, I had never even held an actual gun. I had no idea how these things worked.

For whatever reason though, I subconsciously pulled back the revolver's hammer, and squeezed the trigger. A bullet rocketed towards Ren's face but was suddenly brought to a halt by a translucent barrier floating in front of him. Ren didn't even blink.

"Woah!" I breathed a sigh of relief "I-I never even shot a gun before! How did I know to do that? A-And, how is he ok?"

"It's you, and not you, doing these things." Morgana explained, "Like how your outfit changes when you are in the Metaverse, in a way, it's not just you inhabiting your body. It's your persona too. So when you are in here, you have not only their special powers but their skills and abilities as well!"

A childlike grin grew across my face "I have to admit, that is really cool."

"But I'm confused" Ann questioned, "Her bullets were blue before, weren't they?"

"Very observant, Panther," Morgana flashed a knowing smirk "I don't think those were ordinary bullets she was shooting before. Let me try something." He pulled a ridiculously giant slingshot out of one of his tiny pockets in his utility belt.

The cat aimed for Ren and let loose a large, yellow glowing pellet. Ren once again blocked it but was knocked to the ground.

"Woooah!" Exlamied Ryuji "I didn't know we could do that!"

"Huh, me neither" Mona contemplated aloud "It seems like we can shoot some sort of charged shot if we channel our power while aiming"

He pointed to Ren, "Try channeling your persona this time."

"Ok, I'll try" I take aim once again and squeeze the trigger like before, but another regular bullet
flew out "Sorry, I guess I just don't understand what you mean."

"I think I know the problem" Ann ejected "Remember when you first got your power? How unbeatable and powerful you felt? We all had that same feeling during our awakening and did some crazy stuff."

"Oh yeah," Ryuji agreed, "I remember when Ann awakened in Kamoshida's palace. She stole a sword from a Shadow and cleaved another one in half with it. She was freaking scary."

She gave him a side eye "You should still be scared of me." He swallowed

"Anyway, when I use my powers, I recall that feeling. Feeling strong and confident in myself. Maybe give that a shot?" She shrugged

I took a deep breath on concentrated. I thought about that night, the conversation I had with Johanna. The intense feeling of loathing toward's Kamoshida. I thought about how scared for my sister I was. The incredible feeling of having Johanna's seemingly limitless power course through my veins. I visualized pushing all these raw emotions into the chambered bullet.

After another breath, I opened my eyes and stared down the barrel at Ren. With a shout, I squeezed the trigger, and a powerful flash of blue filled the room. Ren managed to block the shot but was sent flying across the room and into a wall. I fell to a knee and panted.

"Wow," Yusuke mumbled

"Now that's what I'm talking about!" Morgana cheered

"You ok Ren?" Ann shouted down the corridor. He gave a thumbs up from a pile of rubble down the hall.

"That was… intense" I breathed heavily

Mona helped me back to my feet "When you channel your persona's energy, you expend your own too. While stuff like that is powerful, you may want to use it, sparingly."

"Can I go next?" Ryuji equipped his pump-action shotgun.

"No!" Ren shouted from the other side of the terminal.

"So that's your gun," Mona explained, "you should also have a weapon for fighting melee."

"Oh," I searched my person but found nothing other than the holster at my hip "I don't know Mona, I'm not finding anything"

"Uh," He pointed a paw at my hands, "I think that's because you already have them readied."

I looked at my palms and saw that I was wearing a pair of brass knuckles. "That's strange. I swear these weren't there a moment ago."

"They probably weren't. Things in this universe work a little differently then you are used to. Like how your outfit and powers reflect the power of your persona within, so do your weapons. And like your powers, they appear as you request them."

Morgana rubs the back of his neck with his paw "Bare in mind though that you can't just summon any weapon you want. You limited to specific ones, but at least you don't have to worry about carrying a ton of gear."
"Let's give Joker a break. Why don't you try attacking me with those?" Morgana drew his long cutlass.

"I wouldn't even know where to begin with these things, but I guess I said the same about the gun," I took a ready stance that I recalled from my old aikido days "Ok, ready?"

"Don't hold back!" Mona replied.

Then, as effortless as breathing, I unleashed a hailstorm of punches and kicks I didn't even know my body capable of. At first, Morgana dodged with ease, but my speed slowly started to pick up with him until, Whack, with a yell Mona went flying into the group of spectating teens.

"Oh my God! I am so sorry, Mona! Are you ok?" I shouted after him.

The group got back to their feet and dusted themselves. Morgana rubbed his massive head pathetically.

"Ok" Mona moaned, "I think she's got the basics."

"Enough with the boring shit" Ryuji bursted "If she is going to fight Shadows she needs actually fight Shadows, don't you think?"

"For once I agree with you," Mona replied, "I think fighting a Shadow is exactly what we need you to do next so we can figure discover your hidden powers!"

"Cool!" Ann chirped "I wonder what her element will be. I remember back at Kaneshiro's she had all that blue lightning flowing off her. Is her power lightning based like Ryuji?"

"It's possible, but I actually have an idea what hers might be," Morgana hopped down a few flights of stairs and into the train platform "Come on!" he shouted back up at us.

We descended a long staircase and joined Morgana below. Similar to the terminal above, the subway platform looked largely identical to the ones in our reality but with a slightly dark red haze looming in the air and had several more cracks in the concrete and wall tiles.

What was more concerning were the actual subway trains that serviced the tunnels. Lines of people, who lacked any distinctive color other than gray, entered black, creaky, subway cars. Once the trains were at capacity, they rocketed off down their track, and soon another appeared in its place.

"These people are like the walking ATMs from Kaneshiro's palace, right? They aren't sentient?" I asked the group.

"Dumb as a doornail" Morgana admitted.

"Come on, guys! I want to see what she can do already!" Ryuji leapt off the platform and onto the rails below.

"Hey, is that safe?" I shouted.

Yusuke pointed for a train headed right for Ryuji who stood there none the wiser "Watch," he
instructed.

I watched wide-eyed as the subway picked up speed and… just passed right through him. The entire train went transparent while moving over him, then regained it solid appearance once it had passed.

"Woah, It's some sort of ghost train?"

"Close enough," Mona replied as we joined Ryuji on the tracks.

We followed the train's path into the tunnel until we found a ghastly looking monster. A large black mass stood on two spindly legs, with two long droopy arms, and also had one of those blank looking masks like the Shadows back in Kaneshiro's palace.

It was looking the opposite way and hadn't noticed us yet.

"Joker," Mona addressed Ren "Want to do the pleasure?"

He nodded and started sprinting towards the creature, but instead of attacking it head-on, he jumped and started running up the wall, onto the tunnel's ceiling, and dropped down on top of the monster. The creature flailed its arms up at him, but Ren had his legs wrapped tightly around its neck and wasn't budging.

"Reveal your true form!" Ren yelled and, all in one swift motion ripped off the Shadow's mask and lept back towards the group.

The creature exploded into a black cloud and in its place stood a floating jack-o-lantern that had a blue cape, a pointed wizard hat, and a floating hand that held an old lantern. It kind of made me wish everything in this world was as cute as it was.

It flew towards us, cackling.

"Zorro!" Shouted Morgana then the mysterious looking tall, black-clad man stood behind him once again. Morgana extended his little arm in the direction of the creature and a vortex of wind suddenly appeared in the tunnel, halting the creature's advancement and keeping it in place.

The monster shook with frustration and threw a small fireball from its lantern at Morgana.

"I got it!" Ann exclaims and leaps into the path of the flame, catches it in her open hand, and seemingly absorbs its energy into her body

"Ok, Makoto" Mona called while trying to maintain his focus on the task at hand "Try attacking the thing with your inner power."

I blew out a huff of air and looked around 'Again with this inner power thing? Anyone have some non-vague instructions for this stuff?' I thought

Ann looked back, "Remember what you did with the gun? But instead of channeling your energy into your weapon, try conducting it through your body. Like this," She held out her arm, and a small jet of fire appeared

I mimicked her stance, closed my eyes, and dug deep within myself 'Ok, like before. I feel powerful, I feel strong, I feel… like an idiot.'

I opened an eye and looked back at the group. Ren waved, and Ryuji flashed me a thumbs up. I
closed my eyes tightly and begged for something to happen

'Don't force it' A familiar voice echoed in my head

"Johanna?" I whispered

'Our power is our life essence. Like water running and cascading at the end of an extended arm, let your body act as the conductor to the energy within you.'

I took a deep breath

The voice continued, 'You are not a gun, you can't pull a trigger and expect something to happen. Have faith in your inner spirit to supply you with the power needed. Merly act as its vessel.'

"Be the vessel, not the gun" I whispered and relaxed my face

"There you go! Now you're getting it!" Ann shouted

I opened my eyes and saw a plume blue sparkling energy flowing from my open palm

"Now try directing it at the Shadow."

'Remember to breath, let the energy cascade off your body' The voice echoed

I turned my stance towards the creature. Another small flume of blue sparks appeared but didn't strike the monster.

'If you want more power, merely let loose the valve in your heart, Makoto'

I reached deep within and let loose all the emotions I had been repressing lately. The fear, anger, excitement, I unbottled it all and concentrated it all on my extended hand.

A sudden blast of energy flew out of my open hand, knocked me back and onto the ground. When I looked up, I saw a ball of pure energy consumed the angry little pumpkin. The tunnel was filled with the sound of a strange whirring and popping electricity. When the smoke cleared, there was nothing left of the monster but a pile of ash.

"Damn!" Shouted Ryuji, "That was intense!"

Morgana supported himself by his knees. Clearly, the strain of holding the creature in place for so long wore on him, "I think," He breathed deeply, "I think your ability has something to do with radiation."

"Radiation? I thought each of our abilities were based in elements" Yusuke challenged

"It doesn't have to be, from what I've seen, there isn't much limit on what a power can be structured by," Mona pointed to Ren "We've seen that with Joker plenty of times."

I stood back up and saw that my body was glowing blue.

'Remember to breath' Johanna's voice echoed softly in my mind.

I did as she said. I closed my eyes and took another deep breath. When I reopened them, I was back to normal. "Interesting," I mumbled to myself

I returned to the group "I was wondering about that, what is Joker's deal with his persona? I
remember him having multiple back at Kaneshiro's."

"You got me on that one. Since we've met, he's been able to take on new personas from shadows we defeat. Sometimes calls forth spirits I've never even seen," Mona looked admiringly over Ren "I call him our wild card."

"Do you know why you have this ability, Ren?"

He bit his lip and shrugged "No idea. I'm surprised you guys can't do the same."

"Well anyhow," Morgana turned to me "great job today! I think there is hope for you yet! We can squeeze in a couple of extra practice sessions then back off the Kaneshiro's palace!"

The thought of going back to that awful place sent a shiver down my spine, but I did at least feel a little better knowing that I now possessed the ability to defend myself.

"Are we calling it a day already?" Ryuji whined "I kinda wanted to see her roast more stuff."

"Yes, I'm exhausted" Mona wiped his brow "And probably so is this guy. Makoto did a good job roughing him up earlier." Mona leapt onto Ren's shoulder

"It was nothing," Ren grimaced as he contained the sharp pain now originating from the shoulder Mona rested on.

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
In our darkest moments, we often need to look within ourselves for strength. In Makoto's case, this may have been taken to literally.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 23: The ‘Help’ Option

I had a hard time sleeping that night, and it wasn’t because I wasn’t exhausted.

Putting my new found powers through the paces was tiring work on not only my body but my mind as well. The amount of new info I’ve been asked to process would put any exam I’ve taken to shame.

I laid in bed, scrolling through my phone. It had been roughly a half hour since my last text from Ann. Looking at the time, I felt it safe to assume she had probably passed out.
Ann had become a real bastion of sanity for me in all the newfound kayos. Not something I would have even considered thinking a week prior. After what transpired at Kaneshiro’s club before my awakening still haunted me. It felt silly to admit so since I had faced real monsters and demons since then, but that feeling of utter helplessness still lingered in the back of my mind. When I closed my eyes at night, I could still see Kaneshiro’s thugs eyeing me over like I was nothing more than a plaything to them. I dared not consider what could have happened if the Thieves did not track me.

When the events of that night entered the forefront of my mind, the same couple of words roll off my tongue ‘so stupid.’

When the group saw me to the train after the events of that night, Ann pulled me to the side, “Whenever you are ready to talk about what happened, day or night, please text me. That stuff… It’s not something you want to keep bottled up. Believe me,” She told me just before releasing me onto the subway.

The boys had been great, but it was helpful to be able to talk to someone else who had been there.

Having had about my fill of reading social media feeds and online forums, on a whim, I decided to open up the Metaverse Navigation App, or Meta-nav as the others called it.

When I clicked the creepy looking eye, the same black screen appeared with the same three options: bookmarked, new, and help.

I put together what the first two did, but I was curious about the help option. I hoped that it may give me some insight into the app’s creator.

I tapped the ‘help’ option, and my dark room was suddenly flooded with bright light. The new light caused me to shield my eyes, and when I reopened them, I found myself laying on the floor of a familiar dimly lit bar.

“Was starting to wonder when you’d show up!” Johanna’s voice rang from across the bar.

I got to my feet and dusted off pajamas.

“Take a load off girl, I poured you a glass” She patted the bar stool to her left.

I did as she asked and took a seat on the well-worn bar stool next to her. I plucked my offered glass from the bar and sniffed it. I wreaked with alcohol

“Oh um, I’m too young to drink, Johanna.”

She nodded, “Fair enough, try it again.”

I sniffed the glass again and found the drink had changed entirely, “Apple juice?” I asked her

She shrugged “Or whatever you want it to be really,” She chucked “Believe it or not girly, this is your world, I’m just living in it,” She winked

I forgot how hypnotic Johanna’s eyes were. It was a consistent reminder that though she had a warm and welcoming demeanor, that I didn’t doubt was genuine, she was still very other-worldly.

She rested her hand on my shoulder “Still taking it all in, huh? I don’t blame you, it’s a lot,” Getting a closer look at her face, I noticed her two cross-shaped earrings swaying with her as she moved.
I looked back down at the bar sheepishly “Yes… it has been,” My voice drifted

I cleared my throat, “But don’t worry. I will still follow through with my resolve. I made a promise, and I intend to keep it.”

“I never doubted that, Makoto,” Johanna swished her drink around in her glass “What does the term ‘brave’ mean to you?”

I squinted my eyes, “Brave?” I blinked from the sudden shift of subject “It means to face something intimidating or powerful without running from it right?”

“No bad definition,” She tossed back her drink and placed the glass gently back on the bar “Mind if I tell you what I think when I hear the word ‘brave?’”

“Please,” I answered, curious as to where this line of questions would lead

Johanna traced the rim of her glass with her finger “As I told you before, I’ve had several lives. I’ve joined many stories and seen a lot of what your world has to offer. Often times, I even find myself learning something new. When I hear the term ‘brave,’ I think of a young woman named Joan. She was a warrior, like you. She fought alongside many other warriors to reclaim her homeland from a ruthless army. One sleepless night I remember her and I had a similar conversation. I remember her feeling more terrified than ever for an upcoming battle. I remember feeling the dread deep in her heart.”

Johanna’s glass magically refilled as she tossed back another round “She told me she had a bad feeling. A few of her fellow soldiers even told her to stay out of this fight.”

“What did she end up doing?” I asked

“The next morning she prayed a tearful prayer to her God, gathered her armor and equipment, and joined her men on the battlefield. She fought long and hard, but she was captured by the enemy. After a ‘trial’ she was sentenced to death and burned at the stake.”

“My God” I mouthed breathlessly

“She deserved better,” Johanna continued “I was there with her in her final moments, and you know what I read in her heart?”

“What?”

“Peace. She knew she did her part in saving her country, and soon after her sacrifice, her people regained their freedom.”

I looked back down at the bar, somber

“When I think of bravery I think of Joan. She was scared, a part of her knew she wasn’t going to live after that battle. But she faced the enemy and fear head on anyway. Liberating her home.”

Johanna placed her hand on mine “What I’m getting at, Makoto, is it’s ok to be scared. You will get through this, and you are capable of changing the world,” She squeezed my hand “You are a brave warrior, and I know Joan would be so proud of you, Makoto. Just like I am.”

My breathing became labored, and I felt the tears welling behind my eyes. I clasped my hands to my face in an attempt to conceal my shame.
“I…I can’t” my voice cracked

“It’s ok,” Johanna wrapped her arms around me

“I-I’m sorry…I’

“Don’t be sorry for being human, Makoto. It’s ok to be scared, and it’s ok to hurt.”

The bar grew quiet except for my occasional sobs. After a few minutes, I reclaim my composure and wipe away my tears on my sleeve.

“I have been feeling a bit overwhelmed with everything,” I shakily clear my throat “It’s just, what happened that night, it was a lot.”

“It was,” Johanna nodded

“I remember just going limp on the floor of that club and accepting my fate, I didn’t feel brave at all. Just scared, and in the palace or Momentos. It’s all just so much, and I wonder… am I really capable of doing this? Are you sure you have the right girl?” I ask Johanna

She wiped a tear from my face with her thumb “Honey, I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else or with anyone else. Remember, the brave never escape fear or doubt, what makes them brave is they chase after what they know is right, regardless. And that is exactly what you are doing.”

I smiled up at her.

She stood up out of her seat, “Now if we are to be partners,” She placed a handful of darts on the table, “we have got to work on your dart game.”

I chuckled, “I don’t think I’ve ever even thrown a dart.”

“That changes tonight, baby” She swivels my bar stool around to face the dartboard “And for a little extra motivation,” She snaps her fingers, and a picture of Kaneshiro appears over the dartboard.

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!

Thanks for reading! If you’ve enjoyed this installment of Makoto’s Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
Palace Infiltration

Chapter Summary

The Phantom Thieves show their latest member how true thieves steal a heart.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
"You ready?" Ryuji asked with far too much zest as I approached the group in the access tunnel.

"As ready as I'll ever be" I stated and shrugging

"Don't worry," chirped Morgana from out of the top of Ren's school bag "You've been training for days. The Shadows won't know what hit em!"

"Besides, we really need to get this thing started. We don't have much more time till Kaneshiro's deadline," Ann explained, "N-No pressure, I mean!"

I flashed her a smile, "It's alright, Ann, I operate well under pressure."

"Will Yusuke hurry up already?" Ryuji tapped his foot with increasing repetition

"He does have to travel halfway across Tokyo to get here, Ryuji," Ren replied

"Well, he should have gotten an earlier start. I want to must some heads already!" Ryuji grumbled

"Sorry, I'm late everyone!" Yusuke shouted as he ran over from the other side of the platform, "I missed my train and had to run over here." He explained panting

"It's fine" Morgana replied "Now, I think our newest Thief should do the honors" the cat swiveled his head to me and flashed a smile

"If you insist I suppose," I pulled my phone out of my bag and started the Meta-nav. "Um, i-is everyone ready?"

"Hit it!" Ryuji exclaimed

I swallowed and tapped Kaneshiro's palace in the navigator's drop-down menu.

Once again, the world altered and shifted around us. Colors intertwined and receded from each other, and before we knew it, we were back outside Kaneshiro's tastelessly decorated bank.

Morgana, now back in his cartoonish form, scanned the environment. "Lucky for us it looks like security has calmed down since last we were here. Guess they thought we wouldn't come back."

"So, we bring Kaneshiro down by stealing his treasure, right?" I recalled

"Yep," Ren replied

"Do we know where it is?"

"Nope," Ren countered again

I huffed, "Ok, well, where do we start infiltrating then?"

"Obviously the front door is out of the question," Morgana rubbed his paws together "That's where the most security will be posted. We need something subtle. The gap in their tightly knitted security grid…"

"Hey guys," Ryuji hollered "I pushed on this pig statue and found a secret entrance!"

"T-That works too I guess…"
The rest of us joined him and eyed down the dark tunnel beneath the green piggy bank statue.

"Well," Morgana started "You found it, you go first" he ordered Ryuji

"Me? Why do I have to do it? Why don't you do it!"

"Don't be such a coward!" Morgana argued

"I'm not a coward! I did my part. I found the thing!"

"Would the two of you shut up?" Ann whispered tersely, "In case you dummies forgot, we are trying to sneak in remember? I'll go!" Without another word, she lept into the dark passageway. When she reached the bottom, she snapped her fingers, and a flame appeared in her hand.

"Oh lady Ann," I caught Morgana whisper "such bravery!"

"All clear! Come on down!" Ann's voice echoed from deep in the pit

Ryuji crouched to start his decent but was shoved away by Morgana, "Now you have the courage to go, huh?"

"What? I found it first, you stupid cat!"

In unison, Yusuke and Ren kicked both the squabbling pair down the hole.

"You better get used to that," Yusuke whispered to me before leaping in the pit himself. Followed closely by Ren and myself.

"This way," Ann's voice echoed from down the narrow passage, "I think I see a way out."

We followed her down the increasingly tight passageway until we were forced to crawl on our hands and knees.

"Geez Panther," wined Ryuji "You find that way out yet? I'm tired of staring at your big butt!"

"You should consider yourself lucky to be this close to my butt, Skull!" Ann shot back "Hang on" I heard a blast from the front of the tunnel "Got the grate open, come on."

One by one we piled into a dimly lit room with pealing moss green wallpaper and a checkered white and green tiled floor. The walls were lined with dusty file cabinets.

"Well, this is certainly a change drastic change in decor when compared to the lobby," Yusuke remarked

"No kidding, Fox" Ryuji replied

"We must be just beneath the ground floor," Mona considered.

The cat creature leaped onto a particularly high file cabinet and sniffed the air "Hmm, I can barely sense the treasure. Looks like we still have a way to go. Considering there wasn't much to the upstairs other than the lobby, Kaneshiro's treasure must be deep within the bowels of this place."

Ren pulled out a note pad and pencil. I watched over his shoulder as he sketched out a crude looking map. Labeling one small rectangle as 'Entrance.'

"Smart!" I beamed.
It hadn't even occurred to me to consider mapping out the area. During our practice sessions at Mementos, Morgana mentioned maps were useless down there. Apparently, since Mementos is the 'people's' palace, it's continuously shifting and changing due to the number of perspectives it's compensating for.

"Yeah," Ren replied, "Fortunately, this place remains the same since it belongs solely to Kaneshiro, so it doesn't hurt to figure the place out."

"That's something we found out pretty quick back in Kamoshida's palace," Ann spoke up "Probably took us twice as long to figure out that place without a map."

"Looks like the coast is clear guys," Mona whispered from the cracked door leading to the rest of the bank.

We cleared the doorway and bounded down the hallway. "Remember everyone," Mona spoke over the clamor of our running footsteps "We need to find a way further down. So look for stairs, elevators, anything to get to the floor below!"

Fox was the first to reach the corner and peered around it. He then looked back to the group with a single finger across his lips "Shadow," he whispered

"Got it," Skull and Panther both responded and walked into each other "Hey!" they shouted in unison

"Huh? Who goes there!" Demanded a deeply distorted voice

"Ugh, amateurs!" Mona lept to the opposite wall, then rebounded into the shadow "Show us what you really are!" I heard him yell from around the bend.

We joined him just in time to see the dense cloud of smoke clear and another one of those large, red-skinned, demon looking monsters stood in its place. The creature ripped Mona off its face and flung him towards the group.

Ren dodged the flying cat with ease, but Yusuke wasn't quite as lucky. The pair were sent souring back into the wall behind them.

"Carmen!" Shouted Panther, then the transparent slender woman stood behind her once again. She held her arms out in front of her and, as before, the woman mimicked her exact actions with a massive plume of fire, leaving her fingertips.

The goliath like monster crossed his arms in front of his face defensively and the flames cascaded around him. Rendering him with a couple of burns but mostly untouched. The creature threw back its arms and roared back in Panther's direction.

"I've got what this dude needs!" Skull ran up to the demon wielding an aluminum baseball bat, cranked it back as far as he could, then followed through with an impressive looking strike.

Unlike the flames before, Skull's blow didn't even land. Instead, it seemed to hit an invisible barrier. Much like the barrier, Ren possessed when I tested my pistol on him.

The demon chuckled a grisly laugh and merely flicked the thief away from him with an overly large finger.

"Queen! Try using your powers!" Ren commanded
"O-Ok!"

I studied the demon standing before me. Seeing my much more seasoned allies defeated so quickly made me want to turn tail and run back. 'What am I doing here?' I thought loudly, 'This thing is nothing like the creatures we faced in Mementoes. T-This thing could kill me!'

'Makoto, you don't stand alone,' Johanna's other worldly voice echoed amidst my hysteria’ grasp the bravery within… remember your resolve. Call upon me!

"Johanna!" I shout, then find myself lifted off the floor. The same blue motorcycle from before appeared beneath me.

"Let's fry him!" I raise my hand in front of me, Johanna's engineroared approvingly as I did. I then clutched my hand tightly as if I was ripping away at something unseen in the air. A cloud of blue energy surrounded the creature from underneath. Arcs of blue light zapped it from all angles. The beast roared in pain and clawed the air.

I held my fist tightly, pouring all my energy and focus into it. Beads of sweat formed on my brow. Despite my best efforts, the demon started slowly walking towards me and picked up speed with every step.

I increased the intensity of my attack, but it didn't seem to matter. Forward he continued to stride.

Then Ren joined me at my side and summoned his own power, another creature I hadn't seen before. This one looked primarily like a human woman, but dressed in a leotard and had two leathery bat wings protruding from her back. Ren held one finger to his temple and pointed with his other hand.

"Succubus!" He cried, "Control him!"

She mimicked him, and the red giant started stumbling. He first fell into the wall on his right and then the left. All the while, flailing his arms madly. Still, the beast continued to get closer till one of his swipes slammed into the trunk of my body and sent me soaring off Johanna and tumbling onto the cold tiled floor.

"Damn it!" Ren cried, "Fox! Put this thing on ice!"

Now shaken out of his daze, Yusuke threw Mona off of him and rushed to the front. He swiftly summoned his mysterious shogun and held his hands out in front of him "You will not take another step!" he shouted as a freezing wind flew from behind him and started coating the demon in layers of jagged ice.

True to his word, the demon was, literally frozen in its tracks.

"One last shot!" Skull lept in front of the group and clapped his hands together. A narrow bolt of lightning blasted from his hands and shot the shadow between the eyes. With one last guttural groan, the monster fell to its knees and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Whew!" Ryuji shook his hands "That was a hell of a warm-up, huh?"

I sat up on the floor, Mona soon joined my side. "That was a nasty hit, you ok?"

"Yeah, I'm-" I put my hand on my side and saw a stream of crimson on my glove, "Oh!" I gasped in surprise.
"Hang on" The cat placed two paws on my wound, blue sparks appeared on the site as the gash closed itself up "How does that feel?"

"Much better. Thank you."

Ren walked over and helped me to my feet" Good work" he elated

I smiled back and stumbled slightly. My knees feeling suddenly weak

"Woah, remember to pace yourself!" Mona braced my leg to help me from falling over

"Yeah," I brushed my short hair behind my ear.

"That wasn't too bad. Or at least, we've certainly had worse starts." Fox brushed some dirt off his arm

'Worse starts?' I thought to myself 'They told me palaces were full of shadows and we barely took down the one… did they fight every battle as loosely coordinated as that?' I was about to open my mouth to say something but remembered my place. I was still wholly new at all this, and they had taken on two palaces prior. I thought it best to keep my opinions to myself, for now at least.

We continued our infiltration and, much to my chagrin, the rest of our encounters were far too similar to the first. Each thief seemingly threw themselves at the creature until it was defeated. By the time we reached the end of the hallway, I was ready to call it quits for the day. How we were going to defeat this entire palace and secure the treasure before time was up was beyond my comprehension.

"Wait!" Mona halted directly in front of us while we continued to limp our way down a new corridor.

The cat stood statue-like, sniffing the air, the little hairs in his ear twitching. "I sense a safe room nearby."

"Finally!" Ryuji moaned and opened a random door "Not this one," he reported

The others did the same, opening random doors and closets till "Found it!" called Panther

I followed the others as they walked through the door into a room that was entirely different from the rest of Kaneshiro's palace. The place looked like it belonged in the basement of a fraternity house.

A frayed black couch sat across from the doorway with two mismatched beanbag chairs on either side of it. On one end of the room stood a counter that held jars of assorted nuts and candies, and a surprisingly ornate looking coffee machine with mugs lining the side.

On the other end of the room sat a duct-tape covered Foose ball table that was missing half of the little players, and, the most official looking piece of furniture in the whole room, a strangely formal looking conference table. It was surrounded by high back leather office chairs and a bright overhanging light. The only thing taking away from its impressive presence was the faded orange shag carpet that it sat upon.

"What in the world?" I asked to no on in particular

"Oh, right!" Mona turned to me, "Welcome to our safe room! It's this room that appears in most palaces were the owner's cognition is weak. It's like a little pocket dimension just for us!"
Ryuji plopped on one of the bean bag chairs. A hand full of stuffing flew out of an unspecified hole in the chair. "We took a little time decorating the place to make it homie! You like?"

"It's… It sure is something," My eyes had a hard time leaving the repugnant looking carpet

"I know its not the nicest place ever," Mona jumped up on the conference table "But I couldn't help that these guys were broke as heck, so we had to make do with the furniture we found around."

I pointed to the conference table "Did you guys find that too?" I asked befuddled

"This? No actually. Weirdly it was already here. Chairs and all." Mona informed me

Ren drew back a seat at the table and looked over his notes silently.

"Want some candy?" Panther asked with her fist deep in a container labeled 'Ann's Treat's' in duct tape.

I held up my hand, "N-No, thank you, Ann."

She shrugged and poured the container in her mouth.

Yusuke made his way over to the coffee machine, tapped a few buttons, and placed a clean pot in the receiver.

"Ok, guys, gather up," Ren directed

Without another word, the others took their seats at the table and listened up.

Ren placed his hand-drawn map in the middle of the table "So, we've searched most of this first floor and have found nothing to take us down further," He explained "Has anyone noticed any signs of a way to go down? Any guards leaving a secret entrance or anything?"

"Now that you mention it," Yusuke replied and pointed at a specific spot on the map "I remember hearing a dinging and rattling of chains around this point. Maybe that could be our way down."

"Yeah!" Ann agreed, "Further down the hall, I did see a shadow appear where he wasn't before!"

"Sounds like a secret entrance" Morgana nodded

"Then, after a quick break, we should pick up our search there." Ren stroked his chin

"All I needed to hear was 'after a break!'" Ryuji shot back up and reclaimed his favorite beanbag chair.

I rubbed my eyes and took a breath

"You should try eating something if you're tired," Ren explained, "just a sec," he stood and walked over to the counter. After searching a couple of drawers, we walked back with a pair of protein bars.

"Try this, helps me out when I'm especially wiped out" He handed me one.

I looked the packaging over. The brand read 'Buff Cat' and featured a picture of a large muscular cat flexing with the brand name written over its bicep. Underneath the logo read in small letters' Value brand.'
"I've never seen this in any store" I read the ingredients list

Ren chuckled "Um, yeah... pretty sure they only sell this at the 500 yen or less store by my house..." His voice trailed off as he took a silent bite of his protein bar.

I shrugged and took a bit of the bar. My mouth was washed over with artificial sweeteners and high-fructose corn syrup. I swallowed the chunk of protein bar hard.

"What do you think?" Ren asked me.

"G-Good! Thanks for sharing!" I smiled in appreciation.

I placed the remainder of my bar on the table and looked to Ren, "Mind if I ask you something?"

"What's up?" He asked, mouth full of buff cat protein.

"The way we have been taking on shadows, is it the way you guy have always done it?"

He tilted his head, "What do you mean?"

"U-Um, well..." I stalled by looked around the room a moment. I didn't want to come off ungrateful or rude, but, if I was honest, I was shocked they had made it as far as they did.

Their infiltration strategy seemed to be comprised of flailing around in the dark till they stumble upon something, and their method of defeating shadows was near nonexistent. The fact it took me as long as it did to discover them was honestly baffling to me.

I wondered how to put it delicately.

"You all are clearly good at what you do," I started "And I know full well I have no place to criticize how you take down a palace. You've obviously done it twice before, but even the best of plans and strategies can be improved... right?" I could feel my face turn red from embarrassment.

Ren looked to his team and back to me, "Makoto, I have no idea what I'm doing."

I blink, "Oh! N-N-No I didn't mean-!

He snickered, "I know what you mean. Our methods could use some work." He ran his finger over a crease in the protein bar "Morgana is knowledgeable about the Metaverse, and I'm ok with adapting to situations, I guess, but when it comes to tactics and stuff I-" He rubbed his neck "I don't know, I just don't think that way, you know?"

"Well," I started, "I could, I mean, If you don't mind-" He met my gaze "I could try thinking of some more efficient ways of palace infiltration. I-If that's ok..."

He smiled, "I would really appreciate that actually," He chuckled again, "its kind of dumb, but do you remember back when you busted us on the rooftop of Shujin?"

It took me a moment to recall that day. It felt like years ago now "Of course" I replied.

"Well, when you found us, and just about laid our plans out in front of us. It was then I really wished we had you on our side."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah, especially then. We had just started out and had no idea what to do. I didn't know how at
the time, but it was then I knew I needed to somehow convince you to join us." He looked back at me, "Guess it worked?"

I looked at his cheezy grin and snorted with laughter, "Yeah, yeah, I guess it did!"

Morgana suddenly reappeared at the table, "What are you guys talkin' about?"

"I think we should call it here for today," Ren explained, "What's our time?"

Morgana pulled a kitchen timer shaped like an egg out of one of his pouches "about two hours."

I pointed to the timer, "I mean, do I need to ask?"

"Most technology doesn't work right in the Metaverse. Try checking your phone."

I did as Ren instructed and pulled my phone out my pocket. The time read 45:13 pm.

"That's weird" I responded and checked my apps "Only the metaverse app is opening."

"That why we have that," Ren thumbed the kitchen timer "for some reason it works out here, and we use it to figure out how long we've been in here."

"Sure you want to call it now?" Morgana questioned Ren

"Yeah, Makoto is going to help me out with something."

"Ok, but remember, we only have a week till the deadline…" Mona warned

Ren nodded and addressed the room, "I think that's enough for today, guys."

Ann relaxed her position on the couch "I'm just fine with that." she moaned

"But," Yusuke held a mug that read '1# Dad' in front of him, "I just made coffee."

"Sorry! I just think we will have better luck tomorrow," Ren explained

"But Joker," Yusuke continued "This is the special coffee I saved up for."

"Y-You can still drink your coffee you know," Ryuji responded

"Yeah," Yusuke walked to the sink, defeated, "But… It's not the same" He poured out the mug's contents down the drain

"Anyway," Ann stood and stretched "Same time tomorrow?"

Ren nodded. The group gathered in a circle, and he pulled out a small purple bead from his pocket. He threw it at the ground, and we were engulfed in smoke. When the air cleared, I saw that we were back at the front entrance.

"That's convenient" I muttered

"Safe rooms allow us to travel immediately back to our way in." Morgana spoke up, "Teleporting back and forth is partly why we can keep the safe room so stocked with snacks!"

"I guess someone thought of everything!" I chuckled.

Together we walked down the ramp leading to street level and rejoined our world.
**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
Chapter Summary

Ann and Makoto, having nothing better to do, decide to spend the afternoon together after school.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 25: The Grass is Always Greener

After school that next day, I found myself hard at work in the student council office.

'Ok, so Ann’s fire would cancel out Yusuke's ice attacks… or is the other way around? Either way, they wouldn’t form well together. Maybe Yusuke’s ice sword and Ren’s dark attack? IS darkness an attack?’ I considered to myself

'I'll get back to that. What about forming up Ryuji’s electrical attacks with Morgana's wind element? Could form some sort of lightning storm?’
I tapped my pencil's eraser against my chin. 'Honestly, I think those two would sooner kill each other than coordinate an attack on a shadow.'

A soft knock rang at the office door. In a panic, I slammed my work shut in my binder, and reflexively threw my pencil to the floor.

"Yuuto! I told you I've got it covered, please go home!" I looked up, and much to my chagrin, it wasn't my well-intentioned, yet hopelessly lost treasurer, but a wide-eyed Ann staring back at me.

"I-I'm sorry! Is this a bad time?" she chuckled humorlessly and clutched her bag with both hands.

I slapped my hand to my mouth, face hot from embarrassment. "Ann! I am so sorry! I thought, er, you were someone else! Please, won't you come in?"

She slid the door closed behind her and took a seat next to me at the table. "Who is this Yuuto guy?" she asked.

I palmed my face. "Oh, he's the student body treasurer. He's been pesturing me all afternoon to help plan a project, or assemble resources for an event, he's been... a real pain in my side."

Ann snorted with laughter. "I mean, you know why he's doing all that right?"

I sat back upright and glared, confused as to where she was finding humor in my misery. "Sometimes, I think he just does it just to drive me crazy."

She shook her head, her long blond hair flapping around her. "No dummy, he wants to spend all that time with you because he totally has a crush on you." She giggled.

The color drained from my face. 'C-Crush?'

My mind flashed through all our interactions from the past year. The times he insisted on opening a door for me, even going out of his way to do so. Or the time he helped me decorate for a festival by handing me decorations while I stood on a tall ladder. I felt particularly nauseous when I recalled the time he volunteered to launder my gym clothes after class... 

I stared at Ann. "I thought... he was just being nice..." I tugged my school bag over my head.

Ann pulled the bag off my face, "Seriously? Makoto, have you never had a guy hit on you or ask you out before?"

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Um..."

She tilted her head. "I mean, are you more into girls or something?"

My eyes darted back at her. "N-No!" I took a breath. "I mean, I know there is nothing wrong with liking girls, I just don't, and, um," my gaze trailed back to my school bag in Ann's hand. Wishing more than anything I could resume hiding my shame. "And, well, no. Boys don't usually talk to me about that stuff..."

Ann crossed her arms. "Huh? I have a hard time believing that Makoto! Look at you, you got it going on! Guys dig a lady with power!" She chuckled again. "There are probably plenty of other boys like Yuuto that you also haven't noticed!"

"I mean, I guess," I crossed my arms. "I don't have time for stuff like that anyway, Ann. School, student council, and now Phantom Thieves are far more important than high school romances."
"Hey, no judgment here." Ann handed me my bag back "If your not to busy with school, student council, or Phantom Thief work, do you think you have some free time tonight?"

I placed my binders back in my bag and searched the floor for my pencil "Um, tonight? Aren't we going to the palace?"

"Nope, Ren canceled. Sent a message in the group text earlier," she pulled out her phone "No palace tonight, gang. Need to catch up with some homework."

She snickered while reading, "Then Ryuji responded 'I'm sure you have plenty of paperwork to get done in your room tonight, Ren' he then followed it with a winky face."

Ann continued on "Then Yusuke then replied to Ryuji 'I wonder if he would like a study buddy.'" Ann smirked, "Don't think Yusuke got the joke, and if he did, bold."

*

Ann and I claimed seats in front of a small cafe down the road from Shujin. Once our long-awaited teas arrived, we sipped happily in silence.

I leaned back and watched as the crowds of office workers walked down the sidewalks and into the subway stations below. Like dozens of worker bees going home for the day a long day of work.

The sun had finally sunk behind one of the tall buildings in Tokyo's downtown. Allowing a pleasant break from the intense summer's heat. Looking up at the clouds in the sky and saw them slowly turning shades of pink and yellow, giving a teasing glimpse into the evening's sunset.

We both sat still in the late afternoon air, enjoying possibly our first moment of peace we've had since we met.

Ann was the first to break the silence "Hey, Makoto…"

I took another sip of tea and looked to her

"I wanted to apologize," She looked down, her face was covered by her wavy blonde hair

I tilted my head and rested my teacup on the table between us "Apologize? What would you have to apologize for?"

"I was a real jerk to you when we first met."

I chuckled looking back on it. How not so long ago we were so viciously at each other's throats "Well if I remember right, I got pretty nasty with you too."

"Even still, I called you some pretty awful stuff that was completely out of line. I-

"Oh Ann," I smirked "its ok! Of course, I forgive you. Like you did me, remember?"

"No, Makoto, I really… I hated you, not even for following us or whatever," I noticed her hand holding the tea trembling "I didn't understand why I hated you so much at first. Not until I thought about it again recently."

I bit my bottom lip "What did you figure out?" I asked, not sure if I wanted to hear the answer.

"I finally realized, I was jealous of you…"
"Jealous? Of me?" I laughed, "How on earth could you be jealous of me?"

She remained stoic "My parents are fashion designers, and so we've had to move a bunch of times for their work. And no matter what school or academy I ended up at, I was always treated as the dumb blonde. I was seen as nothing more than eye candy…"

I saw a single tear fall from her covered face and into the tea in her hand. "My parents were never home, and no one at school talked to me except to make some stupid remark about my looks… I've felt so alone for so long…"

"And then I saw you," Her voice cracked "You were the student body president. You always had the best grades in any class and had everyone's respect. You were the smart one, the dependable one. The one everyone wanted to work with."

"But I was always the dumb bitch whose only hope in life was to marry a rich man. The only people who ever wanted to talk to me were boys asking if I'd put out for them like I did Kamoshida…"

Without thinking, I placed my arm on her shoulder. She turned her head to look at me, her brilliant blue eyes were red and puffy. "Ann, I'm so sorry… I didn't realize-"

"How much of a pathetic loser I was?" She interjected

"No, not at all," I shook my head then swallowed my growing anxiety, "I-I was… I was jealous of you, too."

She blinked, "Why?"

"I saw how beautiful you were and how all the boys would talk to you. And then Ren and Ryuji started hanging out with you…"

I showed her the scars on my knuckle "One night, I was looking in my reflection in the mirror and hated what I saw looking back at me. I hated my hair, my eyes, everything. I felt so hideous. Without thinking about it, I balled up my fist and…" I started to choke up myself

Ann wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her uniform "It sounds like, maybe we're more alike then we thought huh?" she chuckled dryly

Feeling so overwhelmed by the sudden wave of emotion I could only manage a nod

"Do-Do you think we could put the past behind us and be friends, Makoto?" She asked wearily

Not giving it another thought, I reached over the table and embraced her in a hug, "We already are, Ann."

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes
**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
Second Time’s The Charm

Chapter Summary

Rested and newly organized, thanks to the Thieves latest member, The Phantom Thieves are ready to bring the bank of greed to its knees!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Propping up my leg on one of the office chairs, I tightened the laces on my combat boots. "You all ready? Any last questions about-"

"Nope!" Ryuji stretched out using the safe room's doorway for support "Man I'm ready to tear some shadows a new one! I'm tired of wasting time with Phantom Thief homework and ready to start acting like one again!"

Yusuke inspected his long katana then resheathed it. "I hardly call our recent training a waste of time, Skull. I find our new addition's insight rather refreshing."
"Agreed," Morgana lept onto the conference room table and crossed his tiny arms, "Even I have to admit Queen's insight has proven handy with our test run down in Momento's."

Ann threw her long blonde hair over her shoulders "How much time do we have left till the deadline, Mona?"

"Let me put it this way. We better do well today."

"Oh, no pressure or anything," Ryuji groaned

Ren placed his hands in the pockets of his long flowing black coat and addressed his crew "Ok, to recap, we need to find a way downstairs." He unfurled a scrap of paper from his pocket and examined it "Last time, Fox mentioned hearing some funny sounds from behind a wall on the opposite side of this floor. I say we check that out first."

"That sounds agreeable," I chimed

The masked boy nodded, then clasped the golden handle to the safe room's front door, "Ready?"

"Lead us into battle, Joker!" Morgana cheered

Without another wasted moment, Ren threw open the door, and we followed his lead down the hall in the V formation we had practiced so much in the days prior. He reached the corner then crouched down. The team formed a line behind him along the wall waiting for his signal.

Joker glanced around the corner then back at us and held up two gloved fingers. The group nodded in acknowledgment and took the appropriate positions. Ren pounced upon an unsuspecting Shadow who leaned against the wall on the opposite side of the corner. Then, in one smooth motion, ripped the giant's mask off, lept off the creature's shoulders and landed facing it's back.

The Shadow, as all have before it, exploded into a thick cloud of black smoke, but instead of waiting for the horrid creature to show its true form, Ann and Ryuji swept in taking the low ground and quickly closed the distance between them and their target. The second a robust-looking pair of red clawed legs appeared, Ann snapped her long leather whip and coiled it tightly around the creature's legs. The gigantic red demon glanced first at its trapped feet, and then to the substantially smaller leather-clad girl hold the whip. However, before the confused monster had a moment to consider it's situation, Ren tackled it from behind, knocking it to the ground and right at the feet of a skull masked youth who already had his weapon raised and ready. The last thing the demon saw was a metal bat with the words embroidered 'Louisville Slugger' bearling right for his vulnerable face.

Without even so much as the chance to raise a finger, the Shadow exploded into the same puff of black smoke from wince it came. "Oh my God, that was awesome!" Ann clapped

"Quiet down, dummy! Do you want the whole place to hear us?" Ryuji growled through gritted teeth

"Hey! Who's down there?" A distorted voice shouted from down the corridor. Two beefy looking masked guards rolled around the corner and flashed a pair of flashlights.

"Oops!" Ann squeaked

"Who are you, clowns?" The pair of Shadows bounded full speed for us

Ren flashed a grin and looked back at me "What do you think, Queen?"
I couldn't help but smile back, eager to see my plans form in real-time. I straightened my back with new-found authority "Fox, Panther, Skull," I closed my fist in the air, "Make it rain!"

The three rushed past me, Yusuke taking the center mumbled something quietly, rubbed his hands together, then held them back out in front of his body. A long thick sheet of ice materialized over the unsuspecting guards' heads. Ann rebounded herself off a wall and shot a scorching plume of fire into Yusuke's ice block. Letting off a considerable puff of steam, the ice had been transformed into a heavy-looking splash of water.

Microseconds apart from Ann, Ryuji rebounded off the opposite wall, held out his hand and arched of yellow and white electricity shot from his body onto the falling pool of water below. The pair of Shadows were first slapped with the wave of cold water, knocking them to the ground hard, then were followed up with Ryuji's explosive electricity. They seized and raved on the floor, but only one had exploded into a puff of smoke. The other moaned and stood to its feet.

The surviving guard ripped off its own mask and shrunk significantly into a large droplet of floating water. Two glowing yellow eyes formed on either side of a toothy grin in the middle of the droplet.

"What the-" Ryuji was interrupted as the two air bound teens smacked into each other mid-leap and collapsed into a heap behind the creature.

"Why don't you watch where you're going?" Ann shoved Ryuji off of her on the ground

"Me? You jumped right for me!" He protested

Their argument was cut short when the tiny Shadow cackled, raised the water off the floor and surrounding walls, then drew it all into the spot Ryuji and Ann stood bickering. The two were consumed by a floating pillar of loose water, and no matter how much they struggled, it seemed to have no escape.

"Lady Ann!" Morgana cried

"Mona!" Ren rallied, "On me!"

Ren began sprinting full speed for the nasty looking droplet. Morgana took position behind him, and using his cutlass as a sort of windmill, summoned a large gust of wind that propelled his leader forward. Feeling the air beneath him, Ren launched himself into the air and aimed himself missile-like for the monster. As he picked up speed, he began to spiral with dark energy forming around him.

The leader struck right on the small target which exploded on impact and through the watery tomb freeing his companions. Prone on the floor, Ann and Ryuji gasped for fresh air and clutched their throats.

Yusuke and I ran up to our teammates and helped them back to their feet. "Are you guys, ok?" I asked Ryuji while I offered my hand.

The drenched thief scoffed "Pfft if I had another minute, I could have figured it out."

"I'll keep that in mind next time I have to save your butt," Mona gloated

The team dusted themselves off, or in Ann and Ryuji's case, dried, then continued on down the twisting and turning corridors of the bank's sub-basement. Till Morgana held up a single paw. "Hold it!" His ears twitched, "I hear… grinding metal… chains maybe?"
"That's the sound from before!" Yusuke explained, "Where at, Mona?"

He pointed his outstretched paw in the direction of a largely featureless looking wall. "Um, sure those ears are working right?" Ryuji sighed

"It's a hidden door idiot!" The cat blurted, "Look for a way to open it!"

We meticulously investigated the wall, and it's surroundings. Moving furniture and potted plants but came up with nothing. I was walking along the wall's perimeter to help Ren move a heavy-looking couch when the sound of crackling electricity erupted from a particularly ugly-looking portrait of Kaneshiro.

Curious, I took down the painting and saw a biometric hand scanner with a light above it that shifted between red and green randomly. "Hey, I found something!"

The group formed around me and watched the scanner continue to spasm. "I don't think it's supposed to do that," Yusuke observed

"I just heard the crackling when I walked by. Do you think it got damaged in the fight?" I proposed

"You said it did that when you walked by?" Morgana questioned, "Try stepping away from it for a sec."

I obeyed his instructions and walked several paces backward. The sizzling wires sounded as if they had calmed down significantly as I walked away.

"Interesting," I reapproached the scanner which resumed its high pitched whining, and got louder the closer I got. "I wonder," I placed by hand on the scanner then summoned Johanna's power from the depths of my being. I could feel a tingling sensation route through my arm and into my palm. Sparks shot from the panel while I pumped the machine full of blue rippling energy.

With little effort, the scanner pattered, smoked, and the small flashing LED died quietly along with the rest of the console. Suddenly the beige painted wall next to us slid open, revealing a large storage room featuring a giant elevator in its center.

The industrial-sized elevator large enough to transport heavy cargo or freight, so fitting all of us in at once was no sweat. However, just as the last of us crossed the gap to get on board the elevator, a passing guard on patrol noticed the secret door had been opened and investigated.

"What- Hey!" The Shadows gnarled voice echoed off the barren brick walls of the elevator room. "Thieves! Get out of there!" The black and red giant dressed up in a guard uniform raised it's billy club and charged right for us.

"Sorry, buddy, no more room!" Ryuji hammered the close door button, but nothing happened. Panicked, Ren rushed to his friend's side and joined him in his frantic button mashing.

"Move!" Ann shoved the boys out of the way and slammed her heeled boot into the control panel. It sputtered then a pair of thick metal doors emerged from either side just as the powerful-looking guard stuck its hand through, trapping his arm with us. We cowered in a corner away from its grasp and watched as the elevator descended, the flailing arm ascended higher and higher in the elevator till it reached the top of the box. The momentary sound of giant gears wrestling with the resistance echoed in the elevator shaft before the arm was severed and flailed around on the ground like a fish out of water.

"Eww!" We all winced in unison.
"Hey Panther, need a hand?" Ryuji chuckled obnoxiously to himself.

Ann grabbed him by the back of the head and threw him into the dis-embodied arm, causing the whole elevator to shake. Ryuji squealed a high pitched shriek as the arm slaps him repeatedly on the ground. A sudden stab from a long sword put the arm out of its misery, and much to Ryuji's relief, the arm disappeared into a puff of smoke.

"That was getting ridiculous," Yusuke said coolly, sheathing his katana.

The lighting on the closed doors in front of us started strangely shifting. Curious, I spun around and noticed that the other half of the elevator was made entirely of glass and overlooked an enormous circular room lined with thousands of lockboxes. In the center sat an elaborate looking circular maze that leads to a small building in its center.

"Guys, check this out."

The group surrounded me on either side and watched in amazement "You've got to be kidding me. After all this, I thought we were sitting right on top of the treasure..." Ryuji griped.

"Oh we're close," Morgana's nose twitched "I can sense it. It has to be under the maze somewhere."

"What a weird looking room," Ann commented absentmindedly.

I narrowed my eyes and examined as close as the thick glass would allow. "The way the maze is laid out, it kind of looks like a giant tumbler lock."

The elevator reached the bottom with a loud 'ding,' and the massive doors slip open to two unaware guards that we quickly dispatched of. Now on the ground floor, the room looked as if it had even grown in size. Shiny metal safety deposit boxed lined the walls from top to bottom. Or at least I assumed, the top was so high up I couldn't even see where it ended. A small cloud had formed covering the ceiling. 'Strange' I thought to myself.

In front of me stood a solid-looking circular wall of solid steel. I walked closer, the heels of my boots clicked on the metallic floor and echoed through the large hallow room. I spotted a terminal sitting in the center of the otherwise featureless wall. I approached it for a better look.

The computer screen was vast and contained a flickering green background and a white-fronted phrase that read:

'To you, rude I would never be, though I flag my tongue for all to see. What am I?'

Yusuke approached my side, "Oh, lovely!" He chimed, "A riddle! I so loved these as a boy."

"Freaking riddles? What the hell?" Ryuji let out a long droning moan, "Someone shoot me now!"

Ren walked closer to the computer screen and placed a single finger to his chin. His eyes squinted, lips puckered, I could see the gears hard at work in his mind's eye. His ability to shut out the world and focus so intensely was inspiring. After giving him a moment I walked up next to him and struck a similar pose "What do you think, Joker?"

He analyzed a moment longer then meet my gaze "...No clue."

I blinked, "O-Oh."

"Hang on. Allow me to, once again, bail us out." Morgana bounded onto Ren's shoulder and leaned
on his head for support. He quietly mumbled the riddle to himself then a moment later raised a single paw.

"Ah-ha! I've got it," The cat leaned down to the keypad and begin typing. His answer appeared below the provided text in black.

'A Piano'

A large red X appeared over the screen, and a small turret slid out of a panel in the wall which unleashed a volley of bullets in our direction. Thankfully, all managed to jump out of the way in time and came out unharmed except for Morgana who was so shocked, he slipped, fell, and landed face-first into the cold metal ground.

"You dumb cat!" Ryuji cried, "Are you trying to get us killed?"

Morgana straightened himself out and scowled at the teen "I'd like to see you do better! I bet you couldn't even spell piano!"

Next, Ann walked up to the keypad a begin typing.

'A flag.'

Another red X and another volley of wildly aimed bullets.

"Damn. What kind of bank uses riddles for passwords!" Ann punched the screen

Yusuke joined Ann at the terminal "May I have a try?"

She threw her hands up and sauntered away from the keypad. The fox masked thief leaned over the keyboard and pecked each key one at a time:

'A Dog'

A giant checkmark popped up on the screen, and the entire wall began to shift to the left.

"What? How did you know?" Ann asked shocked

"I knew it after I read it. It was a fairly simple riddle after all."

"You knew the whole time and said nothing!" Morgana steamed

Yusuke giggled "Well, I didn't want to hog the riddle fun!" The group stared blankly back at him at a total loss for words.

"Hey Fox, feel free to have all the riddle fun from now on," Ren stated humorlessly

The scratching sliding wall finally came to a halt, revealing a passageway to a second terminal just beyond.

Yusuke, uncharacteristic giddy, practically skipped to the next puzzle dragging the rest of us behind him. He walked up to the new problem and studied the flickering screen.

'Metal or bone I may be, many teeth I have and always bared, yet my bite harms no one and ladies delight to my touch. What am I?'

It took Yusuke but a minute to let the phrase raddle around in his brain then output another
seemingly arbitrary answer.

'A comb.'

Again the walls slid, exposing another passage and another terminal. One after another no riddle could stump the, thankfully, cunning fox. While initially couldn't consider anything more boring than watching someone puzzle a riddle out, the act became strangely exciting. Yusuke after a time allowed us to shout our own answers to see if we could get them correct. After a few attempts, even I got one right! Soon the drab mind scramblers drudged up a sense drunken excitement out of us as if we were watching some sports game.

"A car!" Ann shouted

"A bus?" I scratched my head

"Clearly it's a billboard!" Morgana bounced up and down in front of us.

Yusuke, truly embracing his new-found game-show host role, dismissed each answer with a curious new-found charisma "No, no and no. Come on, people, think about it. 'I run around the city but never move' it must be stationary and wrap around a city!"

Ren waved his hand in the air "A wall!" he shouted excitedly

Yusuke grinned deviously and typed in the answer, like before, the wall slid into place, revealing another terminal with the small building just beyond. We raced for the terminal and took our positions as the adoring game-show crowd. Yusuke popped his knuckles, hovered his hands over the keypad and looked up at the screen.

'There are 2 ducks in front of 2 ducks. There are 2 ducks behind 2 other ducks. There are 2 ducks beside 2 other ducks. How many ducks are there?'

We waited breathlessly for Yusuke to flamboyantly spin around for us to start firing answers at him, but he stood still. Eyes glued to the flickering screen.

"Fox, is something wrong?" I questioned

"W-Wrong? No! I, um, just need a moment…"

He pressed a single key that appeared on-screen '8' then the long-forgotten red X appeared.

"Um, Fox-" Concern grew in Ann's voice

"Don't worry! I've got it."

'12' another red X

'6' Another X

An alarm overhead began to blare. Red rotating lights spun nearby.

"Intruders sector five!" Yelled a Shadow from the other side of the tumbler walls

"Fox! Stop messing around!" Morgana glanced down the passageway they had entered in from.

"I know this one! I just need a second-"
I glanced down the passageway we had created and watched as dozens of ghastly looking Shadows barreled towards us.

"Come on, man, now you're just guessing!" Ryuji crouched behind a wall, summoned his shotgun and started firing wildly into the platoon of guards.

"Just a moment more, please!"

Ren and Ann joined Ryuji and fired a wave of hot lead down the corridor into the stream of enemies. Knocking down a few, but hardly stopping the horde.

"Um, two ducks behind… but also beside," Yusuke sweated

Thinking rashly, I shoved him out of the computer and laid my hands on the screen. Pouring all the energy I could summon into my fingertips and unleashed every ounce of power I could muster. The screen flicked wildly, and keys started popping off the keypad.

"Come on, come on!" I cried, pushing even harder than before. Sweat trickled from my brow and down my face.

The gunfire ceased behind me, and I could hear the tell-tale signs of combat. Billy clubs hitting swords and the crack of Panthers whip. Doing my best to close out the world around me, I made it my life's purpose at that moment to channel every last bit of my being into destroying the riddle computer.

Finally, I heard a loud crack. Looking up, I saw four pixelated ducks flash on the screen just a second before it exploded, sending me straight for the floor. I heaved as I watched the final tumbler wall rotate and reveal the small building that held another elevator.

"Queen did it!" Yusuke helped me to my feet "Come on! Get inside!" He shouted to the others then escorted me inside.

I looked over my shoulder and found bolts of electricity and walls of dark energy dancing over the crowd of angry looking bank guards. Ann was knocked to the floor, fending off a spindly four-legged creature with a long tongue. Ryuji batted away at the surrounding nightmarish monsters as Ren kicked the thing off of his companion and rushed to the elevator, teammates in tow.

Once everyone was safely inside, the elevator doors snapped shut, and we were sent plummeting even further into the depths of the insane bank. Each of us looked at each other exasperated and short for words.

"I hate riddles," Ryuji muttered

Yusuke breathed sharply "Agreed."
Following another deep decent, we felt the elevator ease to a stop, and the doors slid back open. We were exposed to another large bank vault lined with more safety deposit boxes, but instead of an overly complicated maze in the center, a single elevated platform sat in the center with an odd-looking pulsing gold-colored cloud sitting atop it.

I stared at it in amazement, "What is that?" I asked without intention.

Morgana grinned from one pointed ear to another, "The treasure."

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com
Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
Calling Cards 101

Chapter Summary

The art of the calling card

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
"The treasure?" I parroted, "If that's the treasure... how do we take it?"

The big-headed cat bounded out of the elevator and towards the low hovering cloud.

"We don't," explained Ren, "at least not yet."

"Hmm?" I shot him a bewildered look

Morgan lept onto the platform, the cloud hovered over, and pranced excitedly around it, "Ooooh, what do guys think its gonna be? Gold? Precious jewels?" The cat moaned a squeaky and droning meow, "It's got to be something good, right? I mean, this is a bank!"

"I don't know, Mona," Ann replied, "Think Kaneshiro is a one-track mind kind of guy. It could just be a stack of cash, not that I would complain."

"But that's booring!" Morgana groaned childishly

I cleared my throat, "Someone care to explain?"

"Oh right," Yusuke picked up, "its easy to forget this is your first time stealing a treasure, Queen. Now is the time we send the vile Kaneshiro a calling card, a note where we inform him that we have discovered his treasure and for him to be prepared for it to be taken."

I scratched my head, "We were just going to tell him this whole time? Doesn't that seem a little counter-intuitive to being thieves? I would think having your target know what you are about to do is the last thing you would want."

"Normally, yeah," Ann continued, "But in this world, the only way for his treasure to materialize for us to steal it is if he thinks it's being threatened. The effect doesn't last long, though, so we'll need to act fast."

"This world has yet to baffle me in its logic," I rubbed my temples

"So let's get out of here and get it done already!" Ryuji snatched Morgana mid jump

"Wait! Wait!" Morgana shouted in his ear

"Dammit you dumb cat, what?" Ryuji wrestled with him

Morgana managed to free his two front paws and stroked the floating cloud lovingly, "I'll be back for you, my sweet."

"You're such a dumbass," Ryuji wrapped his arm around Morgana's throat and forced him away from the pedestal. Once the group reformed, Ren withdrew the smoke capsule from his pocket, smashed it on the floor, and we were once again back outside the bank, down the ramp and back into our world.

We slowly rematerialized in the same busy accessway tunnel we disappeared from. However, unlike before, it seemed the sun had set entirely, and now the tunnel was fully illuminated by flickering overhead fluorescent lights and leaked in light through the windows of the buildings and cars just outside.

I nervously glanced around the crowd walking around us and was relieved to see either no one had
noticed a group of teens suddenly appear, or they merely didn't care. It made me wonder how long our luck would last before an observant pedestrian began asking a few questions.

"Good work, team!" Morgana popped his, now tiny cat size, head out from Ryuji's clutched arms.

"Oh, now look and see who's acting all normal," Ryuji tossed the cat to Ren who just managed to catch him

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?" Morgana wined

"So, how does one go about sending a calling card?" I inquired the group

"Well, first we got to write it," Ryuji eyes darted to each member of the group, "What do you guys think? It's been a while, how about letting me take another shot at it? Eh? Eh?"

"No way," An replied dismissively, "You've lost all calling card privileges after that first lame-o one."

"First one?" I considered out loud, "Ryuji, you wrote the original calling card to Kamoshida? The one that was littered all over the school?"

"Yep!" He thumbed up to his massive grin, "What did ya think? Pretty good right?"

"I 'think,'" I stated pithily, "I spent a very long time that morning cleaning up your mess!" I stuck a finger inches from his nose.

He recoiled, "Y-You did? I-I-" he stuttered incessantly.

"Why don't you write it, Makoto?" Ann spoke up

"Me? I wouldn't even know where to start!"

"Just tell him that we know who he is, and we are going to take the source of his desires." Morgana instructed, "Oh, and be sure to make it sound super ominous and threatening."

"Ok-" My voice trailed off into a sort of question

"Why don't you come over to my place and we can do it together?" Ren recommended nonchalantly, "I don't live that far from here. We can write it and deliver it tonight if you want."

I repeatedly blinked, "You want me to what? Go where?"

He shrugged, "If you don't want to you don't have too."

'Just relax, Makoto.' I reassured myself, 'It's just going to a friend's house, writing a note, and dropping it off.'

I swallowed and straightened my back, "No, Kurusu, I think that is a perfectly acceptable plan." I articulated robotically.

"Whatever," Ryuji stretched and yawned, "Well, you guys do what you want, I'm headed home."

The blonde boy turned, waved, and set off to catch the next train home.

"It is getting late," Yusuke remarked, "If I am no longer of use, I think I shall do the same. Goodnight all." He walked off and disappeared down the corridor
Ann backed away and waved to us, "See you guys tomorrow!" she squeaked and followed the boys.

Ren stepped ahead and turned to me, "We can walk, it's just up the road." He rubbed the back of his neck, "I mean if that ok with you."

I turned my head, 'Is he blushing?' I couldn't help but crack a small smile. "That's just fine. I could use the air."

The stretch of road outside the subway was unexpectedly quiet. It was evident that we had long avoided the packs of roving office workers on their walk from work and the bustle of the evening commuters. The streets were empty with the few exceptions of a handful of pedestrians either walking home with dinner in a paper bag or youths on their way to evening jobs.

The warm evening breeze felt refreshing on my face. The Metaverse was had a lot of things, but fresh air was not one. The air felt oddly thick in some places and thin in others. Cold in pockets that made no sense. It was a bizarre place, to say the least.

Our walk lacked in conversation, but I didn't complain. For as long as I had known Ren, he never came off as the most talkative type anyway. Most would call him a loner type, which must be why so many students at the school were terrified of him. The reputation didn't help either. But after spending more time with him, I could see glimpses of a more gentle soul. Like when we first met all that time ago in the library, when he helped me collect all the papers, he had accidentally scattered, and how repentant he was to the first year he bumped into.

Or, in more subtle ways like when he was around his friends. His typical downcast stony face cracked a smile and laughed, and his hunched back suddenly became straight and confident. Even then, on that walk, his leg span was significantly longer than mine and often caused him to walk a few steps ahead. However, every time it occurred, he would keenly shorten his strides and made an effort to keep in pace with me. I said nothing at the time but found the act endearing if not slightly adorable.

"This is it, over here," He took us down an ally and stopped in front of his home, Cafe Leblanc. To not give way wholly to my obvious snooping from before, I attempted to act surprised at his home's location, "Cafe Leblanc, huh? You live in a coffee shop?"

He shot me a look and a grin while he fumbled with his keys, "Yep, but you knew that already, right?"

I scratched my chin and looked away, sheepishly, "H-How, would I know where you live, Kurusu?"

The lock clicked open, and we stepped inside the dark, empty, cafe. It was odd, being in a restaurant after it closed. Like, being at school long after classes had ended. Then again, I suppose I was more familiar with that feeling then I cared to admit at the time.

Ren flipped on the lights and locked the door behind us so no late-night coffee addicts would get the opportunity of joining us. "I'm upstairs," He walked ahead and lead me up a set of creaky narrow stairs into his sparse looking attic. The room, while surprisingly tidy, was near empty. A large mattress laid across a wood pallet under a long window that sighted the ally below. Across the bed and in the corner stood an antique looking table covered in strips of duct tape, plastic, and cat treats.

Positioned next to the desk sat a squishy looking green couch that was fraying at the edges and was
riddled with signs of deep claw marks along the sides. On a small table positioned at the end of the
couch was a fat looking TV with two antennas sticking out of the top. One appeared to have been
broken and was amateurishly mended with duct tape and tinfoil. The rest of the large attic room
was empty and felt strangely mute.

Ren set his bag down on the couch where Morgana instantly jumped out and scrutinized his empty
food bowl nearby, "Ren! Food!" The whiny cat demanded.

Ren shook his head and sighed, "Sorry, give me just a second." He sauntered over to the far corner
of the room, snatching Morgana's food bowl along the way, and wrestled with a large bag of
generic brand cat food in the corner.

"It's no problem," I sat my school bag down next to the desk and had a seat in the creaky wooden
chair. Watching Ren, I attempted to hold in my giggles as he struggled with the overly-large bag of
kibble, once accidentally knocking it over onto the ground sending a small avalanche of brown
pellets cascading to the floor where Morgana happily hoovered them up like a vacuum.

"Here," Ren spat irked and dropped the bowl of food at his feet

"Yay!" Morgana dove into the dried food, sending even more brown pellets of kibble skipping
across the floor.

Ren rubbed his eyes beneath his glasses and joined me at his desk, "Sorry about that." He
apologized again

"Please, think nothing of it," I chuckled

He pushed aside the disbrie on the desk, withdrew a large official looking card from a small
drawer, and placed it on the desk in front of me. I took up the card and examined it, it was blank
and had a black and red alternating ripple pattern along its face. On the opposite side was a sleek
looking black top-hat and mask with one flaming eye. An elaborately written text read below:
'Take Your Heart.'

"Quite the upgrade from before," I observed, proud of their strides as a group

Ren gave a dry chuckle, "It helps to have an artist on the team."

He rooted around in the same drawer and withdrew box of thin, organized white tiles that
contained an individual letter of the alphabet per tile.

"So, what you do is, write out a message using these letters. Once you are happy with the
message," Ren leaned over me and picked up a dusty looking hairdryer from atop the desk. "We
heat them up on the card, and they stick in place."

"Smart," I took the box of letters from his hands and plucked a few select characters, "No way to
trace handwriting if there is none," I remarked.

One character at a time I quickly spelled out my message, finding the activity to be more cathartic
than I initially thought it would be. After neatly lining up the characters and scrapping a few
phrases for better ones, I presented my work for approval.

'Sir Junya Kaneshiro, the money-devouring sinner of gluttony,

You indulge in scamming others with horrendous methods that target minors exclusively. We have
decided to make you confess all your crimes with your own mouth. We will take your distorted

desires without fail.

From,

The Phantom Thieves of Hearts'

Ren grinned from ear to ear, "I think you'll fit in just fine around here, Makoto." Gave the card a once over with the hairdryer, which reeked of burning hair, and our calling card was complete.

"Shall we deliver our hard work, Joker?"

He nodded, swung his bag over his shoulder, and handed me mine, "Lets."

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
Chapter Summary

The gang finally face the bank's owner, Shadow Kaneshiro. Will they survive the transaction, or will their lives be forfeit?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 28: Shadow Kaneshiro

"Well, you two look awful proud of yourselves," Ann greeted Ren and I that next day in the subway access tunnel, "Is it done?"

"You bet!" I couldn't help but beam with pride thinking about the adventure from the night prior. Crafting a calling card, delivering it to a target in the dead of night, just to disappear into the cover of darkness before anyone was the wiser. Never had I done something so risky before. I felt like a real thief, I felt alive.

"Makoto and I delivered it last night. I slipped it under their front door." Ren informed her
"Think he got it?" Ann asked

Morgana popped up out of Ren's school bag and stood on his shoulder, "Only one way to find out!" He glanced at his surroundings, "Hey! Where's the weirdo and blondie?"

Ryuji emerged from a thick group of Shujin students and shot the cat a dirty look, "You talking about me again, you dumb cat?"

"Now all we're missing is Yusuke," I looked back at the crowd of students expecting him to magically appear like Ryuji, but no blue-haired boy appeared.

Ren glanced at his phone, then back into the swarm of recently arrived students. "None of you guys have heard anything, have you?"

We shook our heads. I could feel butterflies begin to flutter in my stomach, "You don't think Kaneishiro took him, do you?"

"Not sure why he would take Yusuke of all people," Ann proposed, "No offense Makoto, but I'm pretty sure of all of us, he would take you."

Strangely enough, her words didn't ease my anxiety at all. After several texts and phone calls, we decided to stay put and wait for the stray thief. A little over an hour later, we heard frantic footsteps headed in our direction from the top of the stairs leading to surface level.

I spotted Yusuke with wild-looking hair, and his elegant white button-down shirt was soaked in sweat. "I'm so sorry, everyone!" He bowed deeply before us; sweat dripped from his chin to the cracked, tiled floor. "I missed my train and had no money for cab fare. Then I tried calling you all, but my phone had died-"

"Whoa, slow down there," Ann handed him her water bottle. He snatched it up and emptied it into his mouth, "Hey! I wasn't offering the whole thing!"

He wiped his lips with the back of his hand and thanked her.

"Finally! Can we go now?" Morgana moaned, "I wanna get my hands back around that treasuuuure." His slitted pupils grew dramatically in size.

"You really do live for one thing, don't you, Morgana?" Ann mocked

"Not true!" The cat leapt to the floor and rubbed his whiskered face against her leg, "No treasure compares to you, Lady Ann." She rolled her eyes and kicked the cat off her leg. Landing him directly into a nearby garbage can.

Morgana re-emerged with a rotten banana peel sat upon his head and sighed with an odd sort of contentment "What a woman," He muttered dreamily.

"What a freak," Ryuji pulled a phone out of his pocket and checked in with the group, "You guys good to go?"

"Hang-on, I could-"

Ryuji cut Morgana off, "Ok, let's go!"

After being spun through a whirlpool of color, we reappeared, in full uniform, outside Kaneshiro's bank, but something was amiss about the strange palace. The building had a perturbing red glow
about it, more Shadows then ever before patrolled outside the bank's front doors, and even the weather had shifted.

Before, it seemed like the climate never shifted in the upside-down world. The skies were always heavy with clouds, the air always still, borderline stagnant, and I had yet to see it rain there. But now the outside felt as if a hurricane was getting ready to pass through. The raining cash from the bottom of fly saucer flew sideways into the dark city below. Even some of the guard in the bank's courtyard had a hard time not being pushed to the ground from the wild weather.

"I'd say he got the calling card!" Ann shouted over the howling wind.

Ren threw down one of his two smoke pellets, and we appeared, once again, in the safe room and thankfully out of the tornado's reach. Even inside though, the building creaked and moaned under the intense gusts outside.

"This dude is pissed!" Ryuji glanced around the room

"We should get this done quickly or risk having the place fall on us," Yusuke insisted

"Has that happened before?" The anxiety of a building collapsing while we were inside added to my list of ever-growing fears

"Not before we got the treasure," Ren stated coolly

"Not 'before'?" My eyes darted to the rest of the team, "W-What is that supposed to mean? Is this place going to blow up or something?"

"Wouldn't want to ruin the surprise," Ann smiled coyly

"N-No, ruin the surprise, please! In fact, just ruin every surprise from here on!" I stuttered nervously

"Come on, I want to kick this guy's butt already!" Ryuji pushed open the safe room door and disappeared into the hallway.

"Will you wait just a second you moron?" Ann ran after him. Yusuke looked to Ren with a look of confusion.

He shrugged in return and chased after his team with the rest of us close behind.

Faster then we had ever before, we retraced our well-worn path into the dark heart of Kaneshiro's bank. A heavy sense of foreboding and a sort of existential dread hung in the air. It reminded me a little too much of how I'd feel around Sae back at home. At least in the days before she avoided me like the plague.

The security was far more substantial then we had seen to date, but thankfully we were still mostly able to avoid the more significant groups of Shadows and eliminated any weak stranglers as need be.

Then, there we were, past the giant tumbler puzzle, and descending once again into the cavernous treasure room. Everyone looked so confident and raring to go, particularly Ryuji, but I would be lying if I said I shared their belief in another victory. I dismissed it as nerves or simply having been exposed a little too long to the dread rampant in Kaneshiro's heart, but something felt off. Like we weren't the only ones in that elevator descending into the treasure room.
The elevator slowed to a halt, and the large steel doors split open, exposing us once again to that cold bank vault. As a unit, we exited the lift and readied our weapons. I glanced ahead and saw it, the treasure.

The shapeless cloud was replaced with a gold-plated suitcase that hovered ever-so-slightly above the pedestal. There it was laid before us, the source of all our recent anxiety, sleepless nights, and broken bones, just sat there ready for the taking.

I resisted my initial animalistic urge just to rush up, snatch it, and run. Felt like a good idea at the moment, but I had learned by then that nothing in this world was ever as simple as it seemed. We edged our way closer, an eye on every corner of the room, till we were right on top of it. Precious gemstones lined the briefcase and glinted welcomingly from a source-less light above.

Ren stood by the treasure and investigated it cautiously. He reached out his free hand and just as he was about to clutch the handle, a blur of black and yellow flashed by us. Ren blinked and saw Morgana wrapped himself around the case with his large eyes bulging out of his enormous head and purring so much it was audible from even where I stood.

"Seriously, Mon-" Ann was cut short as we were all shoved suddenly and sent tumbling to the floor.

Before us stood Kaneshiro's Shadow, the disgusting purple skin, yellow-eyed creature himself. Cackling maniacally like a cartoon villain. "You little dumbasses should have seen your faces! Did you really think you could just take my treasure and walk out of here?"

A jerking at the suitcase, Kaneshiro now held, detracted him from his monologue. He held the case up to his face and saw the treasure crazed cat, still clutched onto the case, reared back and hissing at the mob boss. Kaneshiro chuckled another hearty laugh, then flicked the cat off his property as if he were a common bug.

We collected ourselves during his overly long round of laughter and got into position.

"Kaneshiro!" Ren extended his hand in Kaneshiro's direction, "You're reign of terror, and bottomless greed ends here! We aren't leaving without that briefcase!"

The shadow man bit his lip to contain his continued snickers, "I'm sorry, what do you think this is, kid? You bust into my place, break my shit, and you think you'll be waking out of here period?" He held open his coat and stuffed the suitcase paradoxically into a hidden pocket then slowly rose into the air.

"I think its time someone taught you brats a lesson." He snapped his fingers, and the elevator doors behind us slammed shut. An overhead light began pulsing red.

Kaneshiro giggled hysterically as his chubby face twisted and rearranged. Two, wet, veiny wings extended from his back. The spheres of his yellow eyes blew out of his face, turning a deep red, and began to resemble a more honey-comb like structure. His newly mutated form looked like a nightmarish vision of a fat horse fly.

His distorted voice grew louder and bounced off the barren metal walls surrounding us. "You little shits want a fight? Looks like you found one!" Kaneshiro loudly gagged, doubled over gripping his knees, and fired a ball of green, foul-smelling bile from his mouth. We easily dodged his attack but watched in disgust as his splattered juices smoldered on the floor next to us.

Kaneshiro flapped his translucent wings rapidly, rising higher and higher in the air.
"We can't reach him from up there!" I declared

"Then we bring him down to us," Ren withdrew his chrome pistol from a holster in his coat and cocked it. "Fire at will!"

Being sure to spread out to avoid more of his acidic spit, we opened fire upon the vile creature. He raised some sort of opaque shield and laughed as our bullets uselessly glanced to the side.

"Keep firing! I've got this!" Morgana drew his cutlass and whirled it in the air above his head summoning a cyclone. The whirlwind picked up our bullets and concentrated them into a steady stream of hellfire to a near single point on our gloating adversary.

Too busy laughing, Kaneshiro didn't notice his shield begin to buckle and shatter before him. His squishy purple body, and more importantly his wings, were drilled with holes and the vile little man was sent to the floor in a bone snapping heap.

We surrounded Kaneshiro; I noticed a tar-like ooze pouring out his multiple bullet wounds.

"Huh, that was easy," Ryuji poked the body with the tip of his shotgun

Suddenly the floor began to tremble. My eyes shot back to the body and witnessed the ooze being absorbed back into Kanehsiro's corpse. His awed expression twisted into a nasty smile. Something large and round suddenly dropped from the ceiling, scattering us, but landing directly on top of Kaneshiro's body.

The colossal orb steamed as four stubby legs shot out the bottom. One side grew a snout, with what looked like a vault door, facing outward. Two eye sockets opened up on either side of the snout with large gun turrets emerging from the holes, and the opposite side extended a metallic corkscrew tail.

Out the top through a large slit jumped out a newly formed Kaneshiro who did an odd sort of jug atop the creature. A microphone appeared in Kaneshiro's open hand, "Welcome to the ring, the one, the only, Piggytron!"

The monster's machine gun eyes went ballistic upon hearing its name firing in random directions as fanfare erupted from an unseen band and fireworks shot into the air exploding into the name Piggytron.

"This is so stupid," Ryuji moaned

"What did you say, Imp?" Kaneshiro bellowed into the microphone, "Piggyton, teach this brat the meaning of fear!" He slid back inside the metal pig as the robot grew more guns out of its side, all aimed at Ryuji.

Bullets, tracer rounds, missiles, lasers, even throwing knives were fired in Ryuji's direction who was forced to run full speed the other way with a hailstorm of death following in his wake. "What are you guys waiting for!" He shouted in a panic

Ren blinked, then looked to Ann, who smacked Morgana who laughed hysterically at Ryuji's expense, who then looked back at me.

"Erm, alright," I turned and faced the beast. I called out over Yusuuke who joined my side, I look to him, "feel like going for a ride?"

He cocked his head, curiously, "A ride?"
I called forth Johanna, who's motorcycle form lifted me off the ground. Her engine purred, and I felt her power coursing through my veins. Blue flames licked at my heels. I gun the engine, tires screeching beneath and jerked me forward. Quickly building up speed and snatched Yusuke's hand and swung him around to sit behind me.

"Get that sword of yours ready! We're about to bust open this piggy bank!" I called out over the roaring engine then gunned it straight for Piggytron who was still too preoccupied with Ryuji to notice.

Within seconds we were underneath the belly of the beast, and Yusuke ran his razor-sharp katana along the length of its stomach. Following a shower of sparks, looking back we both saw we hadn't even left a dent in its body.

I cursed under my breath and circled the battlefield, "Our weapons are useless against that metal, Joker!"

"Swords might not work, but maybe this will!" Ann summoned forth her SMG and took aim

"W-Wait, Panther, I don't know-" Morgana's voice was drowned out by the intense rhythmic rapping of her handheld machine gun. As the hot lead connected with the monster's metallic skin, her bullets harmlessly glanced off and rebounded around the room, forcing everyone to take cover.

"S-Sorry!" Ann choked

"Don't be sorry, do something already!" Ryuji wailed as he continued to barely outpace the hellfire behind him.

"If it's made of metal, I wonder," Ren considered out loud then gripped his thin mask, "Ame no Uzume!"

A beautiful, ghostly looking woman appears behind him. Her long legs were traced with purple tattoos, and she wielded two traditional paper fans. She slashed at the air, and large bolts of lightning dropped like anvils from the sky onto the pig. Following an impressive display of sparks as the electricity danced across the tank's surface, it was clear that the target was left entirely unphased.

"Let me try!" Ann took Ren's side and summoned her own Persona. The long brunette haired seductress known as Carmen appeared behind her and fired a sizable flaming bolder made of molten lava into Piggytron's face. Following an explosion that shook the entire room, once again, the pig stood. It's metallic skin glowing red, but still wholly unharmed.

"What is it going to take to hurt this monster?" Yusuke commented behind me as I continued to circle the room.

"It has to have a weakness, right?" I replied, "What if…What if we're thinking too literally?"

"What do you mean?"

"This world is determined by a sort of abstract thought, right?" I explained, "This whole palace is a reflection upon Kaneshiro's heart. From the bank to the monsters, hell, even the air can feel thicker depending upon his mood. Maybe his weakness isn't guns or even a persona's power…"

My mind raced through every interaction we've had with the crooked mobster from the bitter beginning. All the way from Touma Tanaka explaining how the mob was extorting him for cash. How Kaneshiro's whole enterprise was run on squeezing every last dime out of a person. That even
the people outside the bank were walking ATM's.

I pulled up next to the exasperated Ryuji, "Hey, you got your wallet on you?" I shouted over the gunfire behind us

"What? I'm about to die, and you want train fare?" Ryuji cries out in a sweaty panic

"Give me your wallet, I'm about to save you!"

Ryuji cursed loudly then tossed me his duct-tape bound wallet from his back pocket, "I swear you better have a good idea!"

I veered away and handed Yusuke the wallet, "Pull out a few Yen and toss em." I instruct him

Yusuke wordlessly roots through the mostly barren wallet and tosses the few crumpled bills and coins onto the floor.

The second they touched the ground's smooth surface, Piggytron ceased its assault. Kaneshiro poked his head out the top, his bug eyes glimmering lustfully.

"D-Did I just hear the sweet pitter pater of cold hard cash?" The man lept out of the piggy bank and scoward the spot where the change had landed. He first rolled around in the loose bills like a pig in a patch of fresh mud. He tongue drooped from his mouth as he kissed each coin individually

"Everyone, attack!" Ren commanded as every thief lept (except for Ryuji who was panting in the corner) in for the kill. Kicks, punches, and blades stuck true on the greedy little man. Leaving him battered a bloody but far from surrendering. He wiggled is way free of our grasp and crawled back into the safety of the Piggytron, which powered back up and returned to its Ryuji centered blood lust.

"What the hell!" Ryuji screamed as he once again attempted to outpace the onslaught, "I didn't even do anything!"

"No one calls Piggytron stupid and gets away with it you little shit!" Kaneshiro's voice echoed from inside the pig-shaped tank.

"Great idea, Queen!" Ann cheered then glanced at Ren, "Got any cash, Joker?"

"Why do you need my cash? Don't you have your own money?" Ren replied

She gestured to her skin-tight leather suit, "You see pockets on this thing?"

Ren looked her over for a few beats too long, "Hey! Before Ryuji is turned to swiss cheese!" She spat.

Snapping back to attention, Ren dug through his coat pocket and produced a small wad of paper bills. He dropped the money clip unceremoniously at his feet and waited. Seconds of the money touching the ground, the Piggytron halted once again, and the little purple man sniffed the air, then shot out of the coin slot. Kaneshiro moved so quickly he was nothing but a blur right up until he found the money. He halted meters away from Ren, sweating and staring at the stack of bills just sat there in front of him.

Kaneshiro slowly backed away, obviously learning his lesson from last time, but he was too late. We had again surrounded him, Ren gave the signal, and we pounced. A cloud of dirt was kicked up from the sheer number of punches and slashes running through the air in every direction. I even
landed a few solid hits with my brass knuckles.

Despite our efforts, the battered Kaneshiro once again slipped from our grasp, and he sprinted full speed back to Piggytron. Though the tubby man was surprisingly quick, he noticed a split second too late as Ryuji appeared from behind the giant pig tank, and struck a hard blow to the creep's face that connected with a satisfying thud.

"Suck on that, loser!" Ryuji panted

Kaneshiro was sent tumbling backward and landed at my feet. He shook his blood-covered face, which returned to its human form. His beady little eyes slowly looked back up and met my face. He trembled and pathetically attempted to scoot away from me. I stomped on his chest and dug my heel into his abdomen, knocking the wind out of his lungs.

Sweat poured from his brow, tears streamed from his eyes, "P-Please… h-have mercy. I'm just a little man!"

"Close," I said cooly, picking him up by the collar. I rushed for the armored pig and threw the mobster full force into its flank, leaving a sizable dent. Catching him before he could slump into the ground, I pinned him against Piggytron, "You're worse than a little man, Kaneshiro. You prey on the helpless to fuel your greed. Take advantage of the poor and forsaken so that you can live on your false ivory throne made of lies and murder. You're a parasite, Kaneshiro that isn't even worthy of being crushed by the heel of my boot."

With my free hand, I lay into the portly man with full strength. Sinking blow after blow into his flabby face and sizable gut. The bloodlust grew with every strike, everything around me began to fade except for my mewling enemy who was at my mercy. Finally, after all this time, I was the one in control, not Kaneshiro, not Kobayakawa, or even Sae. It was finally me.

"Makoto," I felt a hand land on my shoulder. I halted mid punch, turned and saw Ren stood at my side, a look of worry spelled across his face.

"Makoto, he's done, look at him."

I glanced back at Kaneshiro's mangled form. His face was near recognizable from the heavy blows and bruising. His white suit was untucked and bathed in the dark tar-like substance.

"If you kill him in here, he will suffer a mental shut down in our world and die," Ren explained.

I shoved Kaneshiro again into the side of the tank, "S-So!?" My face felt hot, "Would the world be worse off without revolting pieces of garbage like this!" A tear rolled down my cheek as I stared daggers into Kaneshiro.

"That's your call," Ren explained levelly then gently grabbed my blood-caked fist. "But remember, you're better than him, Makoto. Don't lower yourself to his level. You're no murderer."

I met Ren's eyes once again, he too looked like he was on the verge of tears. I looked down to the floor and released my grip allowing the vile man to slide to the floor in a mess of sticky blood and broken bones. Consumed with rage and frustration, I struck the spot Kaneshiro's face sat moments before with all my remaining power. Waves of blue rippled from the blow across Piggyton, causing it to suddenly crack and split open.

Coins and gold bricks spilled out onto the floor at our feet, burying Kaneshiro up to his neck. In front of me, sat atop the piles of riches was the gem-encrusted case from before. The case too had popped open, revealing millions of yen stacked in paper bills.
The group gathered around me and eyed the case with bewilderment. "Finally! Some real treasure!" Morgana slobbered.

I silently shut the case and gripped the handle. After a few pats on the back and 'good jobs' exchanged, we returned the way we came. Leaving the mobster to stew in the burial of his ill-gotten gains. Ren hung back from the group and stood with me. He said nothing other than resting his hand on my shoulder, giving me a reassuring squeeze, then flashed a cheesy grin.

"Hey!" Kaneshiro shouted from the gold pile, "Aren't you guys going to finish me like the others?" He shakily questioned with only one eye still open.

"We aren't like you, Kaneshiro!" Ann replied, "We aren't murderers!"

The small man chuckled.

"What the hell you laughing at!" Ryuji grunted

"Either you guys are full of shit, or you're not the biggest and badest in the game."

"Explain," Ren commanded

"You pack of nitwits aren't the only ones who can get to this world, you know. I heard word of someone else who can go between worlds as well. Someone who's not afraid to get their hands dirty for the right price." Kaneshiro explained coyly, "Was planning to use the service myself before, well-" He gestured to his gold tomb.

Out of nowhere, the ground beneath us started to shake, and a large crack appeared in the metallic floor under our feet. I shoved the case into Ren's arms and rushed Kaneshiro, again holding him by the throat and shaking him.

"Explain yourself! What service? Who else can get into this world?"

He rolled his head back and chuckled to himself insensately. Which grew louder and louder as the room around us quickly began to cave in on itself.

"Forget him!" Morgana called out, "The palace is collapsing, if we get stuck in here were toast!"

The group ran for the elevator. I followed after shooting Kaneshiro one last dirty look.

The elevator car ascended, and the moment everyone had escaped the shaking car on the top floor, the cord snapped. Dropping the elevator car to the ground floor with a loud crash. The hall we stood in suddenly split in two, our half falling into an unknown abyss below. Full speed we ran and jumped just as the other half of the bank was swallowed up into an all-consuming black hole. The Shadow guards panicked and scattered, many mindlessly jumping into the void below. We pushed our way past, through another set of collapsing stairs, and through the portal back to our world without another second to spare.

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes
**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6**
Interlude 5

Chapter Summary

"It feels like the deeper I dig into my memory, only more unanswerable questions are dredged to the surface. Isis keeps assuring me we are getting closer to finding a way out of here, however, I'm still finding it hard to believe.

"Then again I'll be damned if I let Biker's sour attitude extinguish my dwindling hope... no... I must keep the faith. I... must remember everything."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Chapter 29: Interlude 5 [ELEM]

The skeletal man breathed in sharply, "The power, the rage," he chuckled, taking another drag off of his white-foiled cigarette. Thin lines of smoke raised from his hallowed eye sockets before he blew a cloud into the air above, "It's better then sex I tell you."

Isis, sat in the opposite corner of the dungeon, scoffed and rested her head on her nimble shoulder.

"What? What smart shit do you have to say now, woman?" Biker grumbled

"Nothing that I haven't already voiced, you pathetic little man." Isis retorted
I shouted over their bickering, "Will you two cut it out for a second?"

"You better get used to this, princess." Biker snubbed out the smoldering cigarette on his bleach-bone skull, "We got all eternity to look forward to being stuck in this dump."

"We'll see about that," I mutter under my breath. I wriggle my chains, long abandoning hope of shaking a way out of them, but I needed to shift my weight occasionally or risk losing all feeling from the waist down.

"I remember now, we defeated Kaneshiro and stole his treasure… but I still don't feel any closer to understanding how we got stuck like this…"

Isis scanned over me with her bright eyes, "Kaneshiro was but your birth into this world. There is still far more for you to remember. Major players you yet recall, and trusted allies you have yet to meet."

I sighed, "Of course there is," and rolled my head back dramatically. Silence washed over the room while my sleep-deprived mind sorted through the recovered memories.

"Isis?"

"Yes, my dear?"

"Was I right… to spare him?" I questioned reluctantly

"Not asking my opinion?" Biker shot

"I've had my fill of your opinions," I replied, vexation hung heavy in my voice. He snorted, withdrew another filterless cigarette, and lit up.

Isis crossed her legs in front of her and sat forward, attentively, "I believe you know the answer to that already, Makoto."

"I don't know that I do. I thought I did, but…" I closed my eyes and considered, "What's to stop people like him from resuming his evil deeds? We stole the source of his corrupted desires, sure, but what's to stop him from making a new one? Possibly something even worse."

Isis stroked her feathery arm, considering her words carefully. "Well, you have no way of knowing he wouldn't return to his old ways for sure. You can never really know. You can only do your best to set a person on the right track, rehabilitate them, but after a certain point, you have to let go and trust that they will do the right thing when the time comes."

"I understand, but if I were to…you know… there would be no risk of him returning to destroy more lives. Isn't that enough reason?"

"Your logic is sound," Isis sighed, "but there is value in every life, Makoto. We all have justifications for what we do. In the end, you are the one that has to live with your decisions. So yes, if you had killed him, he wouldn't have come back. But what is then separating you from the villainy you and your friends fight so valiantly against?"

I leaned forward, the chains leashing me to the wall straighten and support my weight. I begin to sway absent-mindedly back and forth.

"The bird is right, kid." Isis and I both looked to Biker curiously. "Killing… is complicated. It feels great at the moment, hell you're king of the world for a second. But you don't come back the same.
You leave a little piece of yourself with that body. Can only do it some many times before you've got nothing left to lose, but then what do you have left for yourself?"

His words penetrated my skull and rebounded around in my brain, "I… suppose you are right, and murder does equate to justice.

"The abilities I have gained in this world have also granted me power over others. A power that, if not kept in check, would surely lead me down the same path as that money-grubbing creature, Kaneshiro." My voice trailed as I considered, "I suppose you are both right, I am no murderer."

A subtle high pitched whining sounded again and rebounded off the barren stone walls. I felt an intense burning sensation on my bare arm, followed by another sudden *POP*. A new layer of chains lazily slumped to the floor and faded into a black smoke mere moments later. I couldn't help but smile as the burden on my body had once again lifted.

Isis smiled warmly, "Slowly but surely we are getting there, sweet girl."

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @markmcinturff6
Chapter Summary

What to do when you have all the money in the world and nowhere to spend it?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 30: A Thief And Her Treasure

"Ugh, my head-" Ren groaned

"Shit! I don't think my leg is supposed to bend that way!" I heard Ryuji cry somewhere close by.

"Will you get off of me?!" Ann shouted, followed by a loud thwack and the whimper of a dumbstruck Yusuke.

I reluctantly cracked my eyes open, head spinning. I blinked several times before I finally saw the crowd of pedestrians circled us. "Ut-oh," were the only words I could think to mutter.

"Is everyone alright?" Ren uttered dazedly

"Oh, god," Ann's eyes dart between the onlookers, "everyone is staring at us!"

"Forget em, what about my leg?!" Ryuji whimpered, "I-I think it's broken!"

I picked myself off the rough tile floor and located the blubbering teen. I gave him a quick glance over and saw face down in the ground, eyes shut tight, but nothing else out of place about him. "Ryuji, you're fine, just stand up!"

"I-I don't-"

I gripped him by his collar and hoisted him back on his feet in a single swoop. He emitted a sharp yelp along the way up then looked to me with blaring eyes, "Holy crap, you're strong!"

"Has anyone seen Morgana?" Ann asked

"I think I see him over there," Ren pointed through the crowd. I followed his outstretched arm and found a small black and white cat sprawled out on the ground, the heavy gold suitcase laid on his back.

"Looks like our cat," I advanced towards him but was stopped by a large man in casual wear.

"Whoa, there young lady, you and your friends took quite a fall. I notified the paramedics a few minutes ago. They should be here any minute… say, where did you all fall from? Seems like you just sort of appeared mid-"

"That's awfully kind of you!" I shouted over him, "But I assure you we're fine! We're just going to collect our cat," I shot a look to the rest of the group, "and be on our way!" I chuckled mirthlessly

My not-so-subtle hint finally seemed to click into place as I heard the mad shuffle of footsteps behind me. The others pushed past the crowd and snatched Morgana and the golden suitcase from view.

The polite man scratched his thinning hairline, "Um, I suppose, but-"

Once our downed teammate was back in Thief's hands, Ren flashed me a thumbs up over the man's shoulder. "W-Well thanks so much again!" I shot past the man and joined the others in bolting out of the access tunnel. Leaving a massive wake of confused and well-intended adults behind us.

Safely away from prying eyes, we ducked into a nearby ally. Ryuji unceremoniously dumped Morgana's twitching moaning body onto the paved ground.
Ann shook the gold and gem-encrusted suitcase in her hands, "I can feel something heavy moving inside. What do you guys think it is? Oooh, maybe its more gold?"

"I don't think that would be much use to us. Where would we go to sell gold and not look incriminating?" Yusuke observed

"What's maybe even more incriminating is probably trying to break open a gold suitcase in an alley," Ren stated

"Right," Ann agreed, "Looks like the access tunnel is probably a no-go now."

I looked to Ren and tapped my chin, "I think I know just to place to lay-low."

"Where ever that may be, we should probably get Morgana fixed up." Ann crouched down next to the loudly groaning cat

"He's fine!" Ryuji tapped Morgana with his foot, jostling his vacant looking face. A puddle of collected saliva in his mouth tipped, causing a long strand of drool to leak from his mouth and onto the dirty ground.

* 

"Owww! It's tender!" Morgana winced at Ann's touch.

"Stop fidgeting, would you! I don't love picking sharp bits of metal out of your butt either, and your whining is only making it take longer!" Ann reached back towards the cat's hind legs with a pair of tweezers

"Yeowww!"

"Will you hush? We don't know if we are even allowed to be up here with Ren!" Ryuji barked

I couldn't help but wonder what the patrons, of the ordinarily vacant cafe Leblanc must have thought as a group of teens, pushed their way through the bustling crowd with an unconscious cat and gold suitcase in tow. Probably not what they were expecting on an evening out getting coffee and curry at their local cafe.

"Damn, its no use," Yusuke plopped the briefcase down on the foldout table Ren had set up in front of the decrepit couch. "It's a combination lock. No matter how much I try, I can't guess the correct sequence."

I concluded my silent perusing of Ren's room and joined the others, "You said it was a combination lock?" I raised the case from the table and held the handle in front of me. It was flanked on either side with two sets of three-digit sliding numbers. At least what loosely represent numbers. After number three, the numbers strangely shifted into symbols that looked more like hieroglyph then tradition numbers.

I glanced to Ren, "May I borrow a flat head screwdriver and a mallet from you? I believe I saw them laid on your desk earlier."

"I fear you may be wasting your time," Yusuke insisted, "I used every tool available, and I didn't even put as much as a dent into it."

Ren passed me the requested tools, and I gave him an appreciative nod, "It just takes the right amount of pressure in the right spots." I wedged the screwdriver between the seams, located the
arm mechanism of the lock and gave a precise firm tap on its handle with the hammer. Then repeated the process on the other side. I heard the tell-tale click and the case pop open in my hand.

"What?" Yusuke exasperated

"Looks like the school prez has a little bit of a wild side!" Ryuji rocked back in his chair, "Broke into a few cases already, have ya?"

I shot the blonde boy a dirty look, "It's nothing like that. My sister is an attorney and uses cases similar to these all the time. She once got a new case, forgot the combination, and I helped her figure out this method of recovering her files."

"If you say so, now, let's crack that baby open!" Ryuji insisted

I laid the case back down and gently opened the lid. Everyone's mouth dropped, even Morgana who was still mid tweezerimg.

"Whoa," Ren muttered

"Whoa is right!" Ann shot out of the couch, "Look at all this paper!"

Inside sat hundreds and hundred of neatly stacked and counted bills, filling the case to the brim. I plucked a stack out and examined the paper binding, "Looks here like each stack is a million yen… and there are about thirty in here…"

"THIRTY MILLION YEN?" Ann chocked

"OH MY, GOD," Ryuji sprang out of his chair, knocking it to the ground, "DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY BEEF BOWLS THAT IS?"

"Is all you think about is food, you idiot?" Morgana spat

"What's wrong with food?" Yusuke mumbled

"Hang on," Ren plucked a bill out of the case and scrutinized it, "Doesn't this… look a little odd to you?"

I pinched a single bill from a stack and held it in the sun-lit window. On either side of the bill were two headshots of Kaneshiro with a crown, sporting a wide smug grin, and holding up peace signs in each hand.

"Wow," I muttered bewildered.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Ryuji clutched a fist full of bills, "All these just have his stupid face on them? It's all worthless!" He stepped backward to plop back in his seat but fell hard on the floor when nothing was there to catch him. "Damn it!"

Yusuke plucked another bill, "So… no beef bowls then?"

"What an egotistical prick!" Ann slammed the case shut, "What are we going to do with this thing now?"

"Well, the case still looks real enough." I dropped the stack of useless paper on the table, "We could sell it."

Ryuji sprung back to his feet, suddenly forgetting about his sore back, "I forgot about the case!"
This thing has got to be worth, what, at least like twenty million, right?"

"I… don't know about that." I replied, "But it will certainly be better than nothing."

Ann reclaimed her seat on the couch, "Now I got all the shrapnel out of your butt, how you feeling, Mona?"

The cat rubbed his face with his paw, "Ok, I guess. My head is still pounding from were that stupid case landed."

"Didn't lose any more memories, did ya?" Ryuji mocked

Morgana flashed him a wrathful look, "No, I didn't. But I certainly didn't gain any back though."

"You have amnesia, Morgana?" I inquired

"Yeah, I can't remember much before being captured in Kamoshida's palace. A little while before I met Ren and blondie."

"But he's hunted treasures before," Ann interjected, "he taught us everything we know."

"And you taught me even more than that, Lady Ann." The cat looked dreamily up at her

Ann growled, "Focus, cat."

"So what's the plan now?" Yusuke asked

"We lie low." Morgana answered, "Like all the other palaces, we see what the blow-back is and operate as needed."

"And while we are lying low, I'll see what kind of cash we can get for this case and throw a welcome party for our latest member!" Ryuji cheered

"Don't you understand the meaning of 'lying-low?'" Morgana spat, "Don't you think it would be a little suspicious-looking for us to hawk a gold suitcase right now?"

"Morgana has a point," I agreed, "besides, there is no way we have time for a party right now given the circumstance." My fellow teammates looked at me with blank expressions. "The finals. The finals that are coming up in a couple of weeks. You've been studying for them, haven't you?"

"F-Finals?" Ann hesitated

"Oh crap, fucking finals," Ryuji lowered his face into his hands

"I can't believe you all! The end of the semester is just around the corner, and you all haven't even considered our final exams?"

"To be fair," Ren interjected, "we've been a little busy."

"Yeah!" Ryuji shouted, "besides, we're Phantom Thieves! What kind of heart-stealing Thief has time to worry about useless tests?"

Ann smacked him from across the table, "Shout a little louder so the WHOLE neighborhood will hear you, why don't ya?"

I pointed to Ren, "First off, no excuse." Then to Ryuji, "Second, if the Phantom Thief ever wants
to get out of high school, they better do well on their exams!" I ball my hand into a fist

"Y-Yes ma'am!" Ryuji stuttered

Ann giggled, "Looks like we found just the lady to keep Ryuji in line!"

Following a stern lecture by me on the importance of studying, and a few stolen snacks from the cafe downstairs, we decided to part ways for the evening. Headed home after a hard day's work to get some well-deserved rest.

The others disappeared into the restaurant below as I gathered the last of my belongings. Just as I started to make my way to join them, Ren caught me at the staircase. "Hey, got a sec?"

"Of course, what's up?"

"Well, as you know we have tomorrow off from school. Following a long and in-depth study session," Ren flashed me scared expression. Probably terrified I'd dive into another rant about diligent work and school, "I wanted to ask if you'd like to hang out? You know, like a movie or something?"

‘One on one time with Ren?’ I considered his proposal, ‘Now that I think about it, other then the calling card and a couple of accidental run-ins, we haven't 'hung out' per-say. This may actually be the opportunity I was hoping for to conduct some personal research.’ I studied him a moment more, ‘Why are his cheeks turning red?’

"It's fine if you don't-" Ren murmured

"I would love to, Ren. Actually, this could be really beneficial for me." I beamed

"Beneficial?" He echoed

"Since hanging out with you all, I'm a little ashamed to admit, but I've been living in quite the ivory tower. I feel like, maybe I've lost touch a little bit."

"What do you mean?"

I fidgeted with the bottom of my plaid skirt, "Well, all I really do manage student counsel and study. I have a little bit of a hard time connecting with my peers, you know? Maybe if I, er, 'loosen up,' a little bit, I may be able to better understand my student body and be of better service to them."

"So, you want me to be your research project?" Ren stated flatly

I blinked, "Oh, well when you put it like that it sounds so… cold." I sighed, "Maybe I should just loosen up more in general. Forgive me I-"

He smiled and patted me on the shoulder, "I'd love to be research partner!" He held his hand on my shoulder a beat too long, blushed again, and retracted is arm a bit too late.

A giggled rolled off my tongue at the absurdity of the situation, "Ok then, partners it is! Meet up here, say around noon, and go from there? You're just along my train route so its no inconvenience to me."

He nodded, "I look forward to it, Makoto!"

"Me too!" I gave him a polite nod and made my exit through the busy restaurant and to the streets outside. Feeling an odd flutter in my chest.
**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: markmcinturff.com

Twitter: @ArtofLupin**
Trials By Fire

Chapter Summary

Out for an afternoon of fun with Ren, Makoto draws quite the crowd at the local arcade when she makes a bet she dares not lose.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 31: Trials By Fire

I stood outside the cafe Leblanc and examined my watch, ‘12: 05?’ I cursed under my breath, ‘Damn train, hopefully, he will understand and not hold my tardiness against me.’ I sucked in a breath and pushed my way through the white paint-chipped door.

For a moment, I thought the place was closed. The plush red booths along the wall were abandoned, and fresh silverware sat atop nicely folded white napkins on polished tabletops. The bar was clean minus a few additional sets of cutlery and a small stack of books and magazines on the end closest to the door.
My eyes caught a glimpse of a beautiful painting on the wall to my right when the barman noticed me.

"Welcome," The smooth dulcet toned owner greeted me, "What will you-" He adjusted the half-circle glasses that rested on the bridge of his nose, "Say, haven't I seen you in here before?"

He had several times. In fact, I'm sure he would have found the amount I had uncovered during those initial days of investigation about Ren's reluctant guardian, Sojiro Sakura, a little unnerving to say the least. "I'm sure you've seen me around, sir. I'm a friend of your charge, Ren."

He ran a hand over his slicked-back thinning black hair. "Maybe," He narrowed his eyes. "Didn't you once sit in a booth reading the same magazine for hours?"

I darted my attention to the painting a second time, "This painting! It's quite unique." I stuttered, eager to change the subject. Though it wasn't a lie, the painting was something special. It depicted a beautiful woman cradling an infant child. A full yellow moon hung in the sky behind her, and an eerie-looking tree branch stretched across her slender figure from off the canvas. A small inscription at the bottom read 'Sayuri.'

The owner followed my eyes and nodded approvingly, "Oh yeah. I'm holding onto that for another one of Ren's more, um, interesting friends. Sweet kid, think his name was Yusuke? He stayed here for a few nights after something happened to his guardian."

I tilted my head. A little ashamed, I had no idea about Yusuke's living situation, or that something had happened to his guardian. Interesting that I was capable of all that research, but yet I still knew so little about the rest of my team.

The loud squeaking of the rickety stairs to the attic interrupted my train of thought. My eyes raised and noticed Ren walking up to me. Shaggy hair covering half his face as usual and eyes obscured by his overly-large glasses. Despite his unkempt natural looks, his clothes offered a great deal of thought. A pressed white open button-up shirt draped over a slim-cut black undershirt and faded blue-jeans. A minimalist yet classy look.

Morgana popped his little head out of the brown leather bag Ren kept on his shoulder. "Hey, Makoto! Might I say you look lovely in your summer attire."

I straightened out my white blouse and flashed the cat a smile, "Well, thank you, Morgana."

"You really take that cat everywhere you go, huh?" Sojiro chuckled, "What do you do if it, you know, needs the bathroom or something?"

Morgana lept out of the bag and sat on Ren's shoulder, glaring at the cafe owner, "What do you mean what do I do? I find a bathroom like anyone else!"

Sojiro's eyes widened, "Whoa. Hey, did I offend it or something?"

With both hands, Ren shoved Morgana back into the bag and zipped it tight, then looked back to his guardian, "I'll be back tonight."

He shrugged, "You got a key, come back whenever. Just remember to clean the dishes when you get back and, for the love of all, try not to get into trouble." Sojiro glanced over at me and grinned, "Be sure to keep him in line for me, would ya?"

I nodded respectfully, "Oh, I intend to."
Ren held the door open for me as we exited the cozy cafe and back into the bustling streets outside. "He seems nice," I commented as we rounded the block.

Ren shoved his hands in his pockets, "Yeah, he's ok. He's stopped reminding me of my probation as often which is nice."

I grip the strap on my bag tightly, "Oh right. I often forget the reason your here… If I may be so bold to ask, what exactly happened to bring you here? I heard of the assault charge, but I never uncovered the specific altercation."

He rubbed the back of his head, "I… don't really remember."

I bit my lip reflexively at my faux pas, "My apologies. I know this must be a delicate matter, and it's not my place to ask. I guess the prosecutor traits run deep in the family." I gave a sober chuckle.

Ren shook his head, "No, its fine. I really just don't remember very well." He cupped his forehead, "There was this man… a bald man… Ryuji and I came across him when he was with his body guards once. I know he had something to do with it. But what…"

I cut in front of him and faced him, he met my eyes startled by my sudden brash action, "Please, don't dig up past trauma for my sake. This afternoon is for fun." I placed a single finger on my cheek, "I know, why don't you pick something, and we'll do it!"

"Hmm, well…"

"Well, how about you list a few things and we can go from there?"

He looked off into the distance and started counting on his hand, "Well, there's the library, the movies~"

"The library is great, but I don't think that would exactly stimulating to you. I do love the theater, but I go there often." I paused a beat, "What is it you enjoy doing?"

Ren grinned bashfully, "Well, there is this game at the arcade I've been trying to beat…"

I considered, "The arcade… of course!" I pressed my fist into my open palm, "That's a popular spot for youth our age! Our peers go there all the time to blow off steam and would be an excellent place to begin my research." I beam, "A wonderful suggestion, Ren! Lead the way!"

Thankful to have Ren spearheading the journey, we navigated the packed subway and the vast Tokyo underground till we reemerged in the bustling Central Street plaza. Seemed all the metropolis's inhabitance decided to take advantage of the beautiful weather and stormed the streets in droves. Chatter and laughter filled the air and peoples from every walk of life shopped and ate at the colorful shops lining the bustling avenue. My eyes peered through the crowds, specifically to the street corners and alleyways to spot more of Kaneshiro's shady-looking thugs trying to recruit more victims, but found their usual haunts empty. 'Maybe that change of heart thing did do something…' A swell of hope sprang in my heart.

Ren turned into one of the shops that held a modest sign reading 'Arcade' above the entrance along with the icon of a blocky looking alien next to it… or was it a mushroom? He held the door open for me and a blast of cold air followed by the cacophony of chatter by the many youths inside. Doing my best to swallow my sudden flair of anxiety, I straightened my back and boldly stepped inside with Ren following me close behind.

A stale sort of sticky-sweet smell filled my nose as the glare of hundreds of colorful screens
overwhelmed my senses in the dimly lit room. I could feel my heart begin to pound my chest. "So this is an arcade…" I felt like some sort of astronaut landing on a new world. Wide-eyed and ready to bolt at any moment, only sheer curiosity stopping my feet from racing back the other way.

"Have you ever been to one before?" Ren joined my flank

"N-Not exactly… no. How does this work?"

Ren directed me towards a loudly decorated machine that featured ample picture instructions. An arrow with a Yen symbol pointed to a coin slot and a cash receiver, followed by a second arrow that pointed to small dispenser at the bottom.

"You feed the machine your money, and it gives you coins to play with." He explained, dredging around in his pockets.

"So it's like gambling?" I interjected

He stuck his tongue out and continued to rummage, "Not exactly. Some machines give you tickets that you can use to collect prizes and," He paused to glance back at me, "Actually, you might be into something."

Giving up on his trouser pockets, he opened up his bag, shoved poor crumpled Morgana out of the way, and continued scouring. Moments later he surfaced with a handful of crumpled bills covered in lint and one yen coin with a solidified half-chewed morsel of gum attached to it. He sorted through the pile of disgusting currency, "Its not much, but at least enough for a couple of games."

I silently opened up my own bag and withdrew a crisp stack of bills from a wallet inside and offered it to him, "How many coins could we get for this?"

His eyes widened, "Um… a lot of coins." He shook his head, "but I don't want to ask you to do that. I can get us," He opened his bag again, "I'm sure I saw another-"

After I finished feeding the machine, a cascade of shiny gold coins rushed out of the dispenser. Several were knocked out the dispenser's small receptacle and dropped to my feet. Collecting two fist fulls of coins, I turned back to my companion, "Where shall we begin?"

Even with our combined effort, Ren and I were unable to carry the sheer number of tokens that exploded out the machine. So I offered the remnants to a few gawking children, and we continued on our way. Ren took me on a tour of the surprisingly large facility. Pointing out his favorite games or, 'cabinets' as he called them. Each of them looking more involved than the last. But all seemed to flock around one game in particular. The game was displayed on a large screen in the center of the floor and featured two plastic guns. Competitors would take control of the toy weapons and fire at terrible looking monsters on the screen. Then darted their avatar around in the virtual world using pedals on the floor.

All, including Ren, watched in awe as players of varying skill levels approached the game and tried their hand at defeating the monster horde. Rows of cheers exploded from the onlookers as the players would clear a stage and enter a new one, or when they would discover a hidden -power-up that allowed them to kill more zombies in one shot. It was like some sort of sporting event.

"This is the latest game," Ren explained, "No one has beaten it yet, and everyone is itching to get the high score."

"Let's do this then, it looks like fun!"
Ren scratched his cheek, "It's kind of difficult. Wouldn't you want to start on something a little more simple? Like 'Bunnies hop up Copperfield Mountain'?

I shoot him a look, "Are you trying to say something, Kurusu?"

He bit his lip, "N-No, It's just a kind of difficult game, and I know you haven't played before…"

I chuckle at his pathetic back-peddling, "Calm down, I understand what you meant. But I seek to better understand my peers, and this is the sort of thing they like. I don't think getting a pink rabbit up a hill will help much in my research."

Ren let out a breath, "If you say so." He placed a coin on the cabinet indicating he claimed next turn and we waited and watched. Seemed, the pair of teens before us had made the most progress according to how the crowd's eyes were glued to the flashing screen. I withdrew a pad of paper and a pen and took careful notes on the competitor's method. What monsters they prioritized and when what power-ups seemed the most effective for what situation, even how they held the gun. I noted when facing a particularly difficult enemy, one of the boys would grip the toy pistol with both hands and alternate trigger fingers to double their rate of fire.

Finally, their last life was spent, and the gathered gawkers let them out with a round of applause. My belly filled with butterflies as Ren informed me we were up. I followed him onto the 'Battle Floor' in front of the screen and reached for the closest of the two pistols. Quickly recoiling when my hand glanced over the sweaty pistol grip left by the prior user. Face contorted with disgust, I reached into my bag, withdrew a handy sanitary wipe, and purged the grip of residue.

"Oh man, a girl?" I heard a boy directly behind me, moan, "Alright guys, take five, this should be done quick."

I saw Ren turn to face the teen, but I beat him to it, "Excuse me?" I spat back at the boy.

He snorted, "You heard me. What are you even doing here? You know the tea shop is down the road, right?" A few of his little friends snickered around him.

My eyes narrowed, "Oh, is it? Since you already know where it is, why don't you be a dear and bring me back a hot tea, hmm?" I pump the slide on the pistol dramatically

The boy's friends 'Ohhed' while the boy crossed his arms, "Ok, let's make this interesting." He slammed a bag overflowing with tickets on the counter, "If you beat the game, you can have all my tickets. BUT when you lose," He wiped his nose with the back of his hand, "you have to give me a kiss," he sneered.

The crowd of teens looked back at me with mouths agape. I saw Ren place the plastic gun back in its holster on the console, "Come on, Makoto. This guy is a creep, lets just-

"Don't you give up on me now, Kurusu." I turn back to the smug-looking teen, "You're on!" I prop up my notes on the table in front of me, fed the coins into the slot, and started the game. Ren scrambled for his plastic pistol and stood by my side as we faced the approaching zombie horde.

First-round didn't go well. Got a 'game over' before we even saw the second stage. The game seemed much simpler watching from afar then being the one behind the controls, but I wasn't too concerned. We a pile of shiny gold tokens to play with and I was a fast learner. Not to mention it lured the nasty boy and his snotty little friends into a false sense of security, making it even more satisfying when I inevitably crushed their confidence in front of them.
In the second game, we managed far better, nearly finishing the second stage. By the third, Ren, who was primarily carrying our dynamic duo, had started to struggle to keep up with me. On our fourth attempt, Ren informed me we had reached the halfway point of the game, and we were beginning to draw quite the crowd. More importantly, I saw the gamer boy starting to sweat. By the end of our fifth attempt, the arcade was overflowing with spectators. The arcade's owner was forced to begin escorting crowd members out for fear of violating the building's safety code, but when he saw the number of people buying his expensive snacks, he thought the fire code could be overlooked for at least one afternoon.

Then, there we were, the final boss of the final stage. A place no teen in that arcade had ventured before. The boss was a gargantuan, drooling nightmare with long tentacles protruding from its sides and strips of rotten flesh dripping from its mangled body. The creature was surrounded by its monster brood who threw themselves at us in a desperate final push.

Ren began blasting at the waves of zombies while I took on the brood mother. The grotesque creature flailed at my avatar. I narrowly escaped the onslaught, but Ren wasn't as lucky. While I ducked into cover, my eyes glanced at his screen just in time to see him get overwhelmed by a particularly aggressive mob and the dreaded 'Game Over' flashed on his screen. He patted his pockets for more coins but came up with nothing. I began to sweat when I recalled that I had to run out of my share of the coins an hour before. Like it or not, I was now alone against the monster no player had yet seen let alone beat.

Equipping my shotgun power up, I cleared a path back to the brood mother and unleashed hell upon her till I heard the fake gun 'click' out of ammunition. I scrolled through my digital armory and found I only had pistol I started out with left. I equiped the low-level gun and fired into the horde, but it wasn't enough. The enemy was closing in faster then I could repel them.

Suddenly, my mind's eye flashed back to earlier in that day, the way the player before us used his pistol. I wrapped both hands around the pistol grip and interchanged trigger fingers, doubling my rate of fire. Zombie brains poured at my virtual feet as I eviscerated the legion before me. I could hear the crowd cheer behind me, chanting my name. On my left, I spotted Ren fixed on my screen, not daring to peel his eyes away for a moment. On my right stood the teen, mouth agape, visibly sweating.

"Hey you," I called to the boy, his eyes darted to me, panic spread across his face. "You better have that tea ready for me."

I stopped on a peddle on the floor, launching my avatar into the air and toward the creature. Raining hellfire upon the monster in my quick descent. With a ghastly wail, the creature split in two, and my character landed in the newly vacant space between the two halves. She stood, turned to the screen, posed, and flashed a giant peace sign. Great golden letters spelled across the screen, 'You Win!' Followed an over-the-top fan-fare.

The crowd went ballistic with cheers. Startling me, a few people grabbed me, gently lifted me off the ground and into the spectators who carried me around the room. Proceeding to do something called a 'crowd surf' as Ren described to be later. Whatever it was, it couldn't end soon enough. Being tossed around the air was not my idea of a fun time, and I frankly didn't know who would enjoy such treatment. The entire time I was just terrified of losing a shoe or my blouse riding up!

After a time, the euphoric spectators heard my protests over the cheers and set me down. Following a well-deserved reprimand by me about safety and 'keeping one's hands to themselves,' the crowd dispersed, allowing Ren the room to greet me from the other side of the room. His face was alight like I had never seen before. In the fast-paced rhythm of an excited boy on Christmas
morning, he informed me how proud he was of me and how I had apparently beat the 'unbeatable.'

I couldn't stop myself from blushing, but I told him the game was far from unbeatable. I informed him that one can beat anything given enough time and research. The boss had obvious patterns, and it merely required studying them and attacking its vulnerable points.

"What happened to that snotty boy?" I inquired crossly

Ren chuckled, "He didn't take losing well. As soon as he saw you won then threw his tickets down and stormed out by himself."

"Tisk, typical sore loser."

"Who cares?" Ren help up the plastic bag of tickets, "With this, we can get anything on the top shelf!"

Ren escorted me to the ticket counter where the establishment's owner, a tall, muscular man with dark skin, stood grinning ear to ear down at us. "There she is!" He let loose a hearty bellow, "Finally someone beat that thing. Its been here for months and no has even gotten close!" He studied the bag in Ren's hand, "Looks like you all got enough tickets there for anything I got!" He gestured his python-like arm to the shelves behind him.

I scanned the colorful shelf filled with massive stuffed animals and toys till, consumed with pure glee, I pointed emphatically at my selection.

"Buchimaru!" I exclaimed in childlike wonder.

The man chuckled and lowered a giant fluffy panda and passed it over the glass counter. I wrapped my arms tightly around the panda's neck, a pleasant waft of strawberry scent filled my nose from the overly-stuffed plush bear.

I heard a choked giggled from my flank and darted my eyes to Ren. The corners of his mouth were upturned and quivering. I stared icy daggers at him, "I swear if you tell anyone about this-"

He held up his hands, "I didn't say anything!"

The clerk gestured to the phone in his hand, "You two mind if I take a picture for the wall?" Ren and I nodded and stuck a goofy pose with Buchimaru in the middle. The owner grinned and aimed his phone's camera, "You two make such a cute couple."

My eyes blasted open, face suddenly burning hot, "C-Couple?" I stuttered and was only answered by the bright flash of his camera.

* *

Every step I took down the tiled hallway of Shujin rebound off the vacant walls and only seemed to grow louder with each foot fall. My palms were sweaty. Hand clutched tightly around the band of my school bag, but my back was straight, and head held high. I was a different girl now and was, for the first time, confident in my resolve. But they always say, its the anticipation that's the real killer.

I jumped as my phone suddenly began to wail from inside my bag. Unsheathing it from its holder, I examined the pulsing screen and found it was Ann calling me. I reflexively answered, and before I could even raise it to my ear, I heard Ann's voice blast out my tiny speaker.
"Hey! Where are you?" She squeaked

"Hi, Ann. I'm at the school currently, what's up?"

"Hi, Makoto!" I heard Ryuji's voice sound off nearby.

"At the school still?" Ann continued, "Do you have student counsel stuff or something? All of us are back at Ren's place, doing a big study sesh. You should join us!"

A small smile curled across my lips, 'A study session… They do listen to me.'

"That does sound like fun, but I'm unfortunately going have to pass tonight. Principal Kobayakawa has called me in for a surprise meeting, and I don't know how long it will be."

"Kobayakawa?" Ann stated shrilly. I heard the indistinct mutters of the others on the other end. "Do you want us to come down there as backup?"

I chuckled, "I appreciate the offer, but I can handle him. No need to worry about me."

"Ok. Well, if you need us, we'll be here for you, alright?"

A warm feeling grew in my chest, causing an even wider grin to expand on my face, "I know you are. I'll talk to you later."

"See you! Good luck!"

I ended the call and found myself in front of the faded birch wood door to the Principal's office. A wave of conflicting feelings flushed through my heart and mind, but something stronger surfaced through the kayos. I gripped the golden handle to the office, threw it open, and entered.

"Miss. Niijima." Principal Kobayakawa greeted me flatly. He patted his bald head and the folds in his face with a white handkerchief.

I gave him a slight bow, "Good evening, sir. You called for me?"

"Yes," He tucked away the handkerchief into his tan blazer pocket and interlocked his fingers on the large desk in front of him. "I wanted to inquire on your investigation regarding the Phantom Thieves. I know its been some time since my last check-in, I've been busy you see. Have you made any progress into uncovering these vigilante's identities."

I stood straight, hands held neatly at my sides. "No, sir. Unfortunately, I haven't gotten any closer to uncovering the Phantom Thieves identities and doubt I will ever be able to flush them out."

"Excuse me, miss?"

He sighed and leaned back in his tall leather black chair, "I see," He studied me a moment. "You know, just today I was talking to a college recruiter about you. Told him you were my shining star here at Shujin and he would be a fool to not consider you. Now I'm beginning to question if my assessment of you may have been overly confident."

Unmoved, I met his gaze, "I appreciate your assistance regarding my future, Principal Kobayakawa, but I think I'll get into college under my own merit. I will admit, though, it has been difficult performing my tasks as a student body president, and fulfilling my own studies while being pressed to follow through with a frivolous goose chase that has been this investigation."

"Excuse me, miss?"

"I don't believe I stuttered. Perhaps if I rephrased my prior statement will become more clear. I
wonder what the education board would think of their principle, sending an underage girl after a
group of potentially dangerous terrorists."

My steely resolve and laser focus buried into his contempt glare. He leaned forward in his chair, 
hands flat on the desk, "Is that a threat, Miss Niijima?"

I shook my head, "No, sir. Merely an observation. Though, I suppose you would be the expert on 
thinly veiled threats since it seems to be the only way you know to communicate."

His eye twitched, teeth bared on his lip. Then, just as quickly, his face relaxed, head tilted 
downward to the floor. "I've heard quite enough out of you, Niijima. Get out of my office now."

I offered another bow, turned, and sought my way out. Hanging back just long enough on the other 
side of his door to hear him dial a phone number and begin speaking in hushed tones. "Hello? Yes, 
sir. No, sir, everything is still going well on this end, I'm just going to need a little more time-"

A sudden pause struck filled with muffled shouts from the other end of the call.

"I-I understand, sir! It will only be-" I saw the Kobayakawa's silhouette exchange the phone rapidly 
between his ear and his face, "H-Hello? Hello? Are you still there?" He slammed his phone on the 
table and grumbled, "Damn it."

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are 
interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: artoflupin.com

Twitter: @ArtofLupin**
A Change of Heart

Chapter Summary

News finally breaks about Kaneshiro's change of heart

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Chapter 32: A Change Of Heart

In the days following the palace collapse, my eyes had been glued to the news. Even set an alert on my phone for any mention of the name 'Kaneshiro,' or 'Mob,' but nothing popped up. I was beginning to get nervous. A week had passed since the deadline Kaneshiro set for us to pay him three million yen, but I had heard nothing. No strange texts or strangers approaching me on the subway. He may not have been able to easily find my home address, but he knew where we all went to school. Still nothing.

My anxiety had temporarily left my mind while I was finishing up a bit of homework at the kitchen table one evening. More often then not I did my studies in the school library, so if there was an issue student counsel related, I could be on the scene in a matter of minutes. However, given the kayos of recent events, I've learned to value my alone time in whatever way I can make it. Not to mention since my 'conference' with Principal Kobayakawa, I haven't felt much of a desire to stay late after school anymore. With Sae gone more often than not, I've converted the kitchen table into a makeshift study for myself.

Whenever studying, I tend to my phone nearby but usually with the screen down on the table as to not distract me. I like to keep it close in case Sae needs to get a hold of me, so I never typically muted my phone. It also never seemed much of an issue before since… well, no one was usually trying to get ahold of me. But that night my phone kept buzzing off the proverbial hook. I pushed the pesky device away. Figuring if it was thief business, it could wait till I was done, or if it was Sae, well I wasn't in a particular hurry to answer her calls at the time either.

But the phone kept buzzing away like it was its job. Enough, so I was starting to be concerned something had broken with it. With a huff, I dropped my papers to the table and checked my messages. My mouth dropped when I saw I had nineteen news alerts, each one with Kaneshiro's name in the headline.

I lept out of my chair and clicked on the TV. I had long ago set the home station to the evening news as to not waste time in such an event. It appeared I had joined in the middle of an interview with a correspondent at the jail-

"That's right, Kobayashi. He just walked in and confessed." Stated the well dressed male reporter at the prison. "The officer on duty that night reported that Kaneshiro was red-faced and appeared to have been crying. The officer allowed him some time to cool off before a detective interviewed the notorious mob boss. Despite being offered a lawyer multiple times, claims the detective, Kaneshiro refused any legal representation and actually pleaded that they would just get to the recorded confession. Now the police have, on record, Kaneshiro himself confessing to years of crimes including his latest scheme in blackmailing teenagers on Central Street."

I clutched my gaping mouth with both hands, my ears refused to believe the reporter. 'Oh my, God… did we do it?'

"That's incredible! The local law enforcement in Shibuya had been looking into busting Kaneshiro for years have they not?" Questioned the in-studio news anchor.

"That's right. But that's not where the tale ends. The entire time Kaneshiro clutched a small red note, which has since been confiscated and taken into its evidence. Its contents are currently classified, due to being part of an open investigation, but it seems the rumored 'Phantom Thieves of Hearts' are involved."

I leaned closer to the screen, my heart pounding so hard I could hear it in my ears.
"The 'Phantom Thieves of Hearts' you say? The same involved with gym teacher at Shujin Academy and the artist Madarame only weeks ago?"

The correspondent nodded, "The very same. Seems even a group of fans have collected and started a website called the 'Phan-site' where many of them post people's names in hopes they might have a sudden 'change of heart.'-"

"Tsk" I heard a voice remark behind me

Startled, I snapped my neck to the door and found Sae glaring at the TV, her bag over her shoulder and arms crossed.

"Oh, hi, sis! I didn't hear you come in." I stated cordially and reflexively muted the TV

"I didn't think you would. Your eyes were practically glued to the television." She dropped her bag on the couch, "They've been running that Kaneshiro story all day."

I turned and sat on my knees, "But it's good news, isn't it? A guy like Kaneshiro going away like that? Sounds to me like the Phantom Thieves did a service making the streets safe for people again."

"Temporarily maybe. It's only a matter of time before some new scum bag takes Kaneshiro's place. Then the cycle begins a new as it always has before. Maybe they are the ones hoping to fill the void he left behind and are merely clearing out the competition."

I blinked, "Maybe, or maybe they were just helping was to police couldn't. The reporter said the authorities had been trying to bust this guy for years."

Sae placed her hands on her hips, "Don't tell me you actually are starting to buy the ridiculous notion this group is anything but another gang with an agenda. Do you know how close I was to busting the mob syndicate wide open in Shibuya?" She gestures aggressive to the TV, "Now there is no way I'm going to get my promotion with that confession. Months of work for absolutely nothing."

"Not for nothing, sis. Kaneshiro's going to be in jail for a long."

Sae held up her hand, "Enough, Makoto. I don't have the energy to entertain you naive ideas or debate any more of Phantom Thief justice." She glanced at my homework on the kitchen table, "Don't you have studying to do anyway?"

"What's the point?"

The intensity of her glare was so intense I could feel it drilling holes through my head. "What was that?"

A fair question. One I didn't even have the answer too. If I was honest, I wasn't entirely sure what I meant either. Maybe more than anything I just wanted to knock my sister off her high horse for a minute. See her get caught off guard and shuffle around in the mud with the rest of us where it wasn't so cut a dry.

However aimless, I continued my thought, "Let's say I manage to make my entrance exams with flying colors and get accepted into a renowned college. What then? Work in an office for the rest of my life under a boss who will belittle me day in and day out? Work long hours and still feel like I accomplished nothing at the end of the day. All while slowly building up resentment to family and friends around me?"
Sae persisted in her glare, her expression somewhere between dumbstruck and boiling anger. "What has gotten into you, Makoto? Have you suddenly started thinking you're better than the rest of us? That you deserve the world to just hand you a good life?"

"I'm just asking questions, sis."

She picked her bag up off of the couch, "I think you and I should have a talk about where you have been getting all these foolish sentiments."

"Just name the time and place, and I'll be there," I replied

Sae rolled her eyes and disappeared down the hallway. Slamming her bedroom door closed behind her.

I released the long-held breath in my lungs and slouched against the foot of the couch. "Is it really all about promotions with you now, Sae? You've changed sis." I glanced at the TV and watched the talking heads blather away in silence.

"No mater. I now know there is more to life than settling for being kicked around and that justice, true justice, is achievable. I'll show that to you soon enough, Sae."

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: artoflupin.com

Twitter: @ArtofLupin**
Chapter Summary

The gang takes a little trip downtown to celebrate their most recent victory.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 33: Fireworks Festival

I met up with Ren, Ann, and Ryuji on the subway platform outside of school a few days later. At this point, I had witnessed the gang go through hell and high water back at Kaneshiro’s palace, but never before had I seen them more exhausted.

"Morning all," I greeted warmly. Ren smiled and nodded back through tired eyes.

"Hey, Makoto," Ann yawned and stretched.

Between them sat Ryuji, who better resembled a pile of dirty laundry crumpled on the tile floor of the subway than a teenage boy. Spots of blonde hair poked through his tightly clenched fingers on his head. "Shit-Shit-Shit," I caught him mumbling under his breath.

Curious, I placed a single finger to my chin and loosely gestured to the teenage heap on the ground, "Um-"

"Second years got the final results this morning," Ann explained.

A small black and white cat lept out of Ren's bag and onto his shoulder, "And Ryuji got a big fat F!" He exclaimed.

Ryuji threw his head back, "It was so unfair! I studied my ass off, and none of the questions were about the material!" He punched the colorful tile wall he leaned against, "What the hell am I supposed to do about that? Become psychic?"

Ryuji rolled his head towards Ren, "Come on, man, you have to admit that shit was ridiculous!"

"Nope!" Morgana lept to the floor and squared his face with Ryuji, "maybe if you found your name anywhere other than at the bottom of the grade list, you would know Ren made the top of his class!"

Ryuji looked with wide, forsaken eyes from the cat to his best friend, "Are you for real?"

Ren bit his lip and rubbed the back of his neck.

Ryuji groaned even louder and punted the sneering cat to the opposite side of the terminal. "Efff these stupid tests, man!" He clutched his face once more, "My mom is totally going to murder me, man."

Ann crossed her arms, "What were you studying, Ryuji?" Without looking, he dug through his bag, dredging up several candy bar wrappers and manga books before tossing her a thick, well-worn textbook. Ann had to scramble with both arms to stop the brick-like book from falling flat on the ground. She cracked open the old tome, the spine of the book making an audible snap as she did so.

"Um…" She placed a hand over her lips, her eyes narrowed. I swiftly made my way across the boys and looked over her shoulder. The page she had flipped to was faded, and all the text and diagrams were in black in white. The margins were filled with notes and graffiti of varying styles and penmanship. The pages felt frail and had an oddly sticky, waxy feel to them that caused many of the pages to stick together.

"Ryuji," I called, and he moaned something unintelligible back, head still held firmly between his knees. "Where did you get this textbook?"
"Book-sale," He mumbled, "My mom didn't want to have to shell out all the money for new textbooks, so she found some second-hand ones."

"Understandable," I said as I attempted to rub off the sticky, dusty residue on my pleated skirt. "Ryuji, this is nothing like the books I studied from in second year. I think you may have unintentionally gotten an outdated copy-"

Ryuji snapped his head back in frustration, "Are you serious!?" He leapt to his feet and snatched the book from Ann. "I've been studying out of this freaking dinosaur for no reason!?" He stretches out an arm to Ren, "Dude, let me see one of yours."

Ren glanced at the book in Ryuji's hand, then withdrew the book most closely resembling his. The distraught teen grabbed Ren's book from his offered hand and flipped through vehemently, "Dude, what's with all these pictures? Wait… yours goes past the turn of the century?"

I blinked, 'I certainly hope he means the turn into the TWENTY-FIRST century… how old is that book?' I thought silently to myself.

"Damn it!" Ryuji raised his textbook in the air and smashed it into the hard ground. The decrepit book severed in two on impact, launching several pages into the air that fluttered to the ground like confetti. "Oh, damn it!" He scrambled to the floor and snatched up all the papers he could find. Several were now muddied with the shoe prints of passersby.

He sat on all fours, his forehead held to the cold floor, "Damn it, damn it, damn it!" He pounded the ground with his bare fist, "Not only did I flunk the finals, but now my mom is going to kill me for destroying this stupid book!"

The rest of us glanced to one another, silently pleading that someone had the right words to say at that moment. I crouched down next to Ryuji on the floor, and tentatively patted his shoulder, "You know, I may still have my old second-year books floating around. If you'd like, I could hunt them down for you to use."

Ryuji turned his head to face me. A significant red mark was imprinted on his forehead from where it was pressed into the floor, "Are you serious?"

I shrugged and chuckled slightly, "I mean, it's not like I'm using them-"

He jumped to his feet with a newfound energy and wrapped his arms around me, "Oh my God, you are a lifesaver!" He shouted.

Ryuji's tight grip squeezed the air from my lungs, "I-It's not a b-big deal, really!" A second later, the absurdity of the situation finally seemed to dawn on him. He quickly pushed himself away from me, his eyes darting to Ann who was clearly snickering behind me. He stood to full height, his face ablaze with embarrassment.

Eyes downcast, he absent-mindedly rubbed his arm, "I mean, th-thanks Makoto."

I straightened my hair and stood back up, "Don't mention it," I offered him a reassuring smile. Ren flashed me a thumbs up from over his shoulder.

"So," Ann started, "now that finals are over, it's time to celebrate our victory over Kaneshiro! Right? So what do you guys want to do? Do I hear buffet?" She clapped her hands excitedly together

"Ooooh!" Morgana raced back to us at the mention of food, "Do I hear fatty tuna!" He smacked
his salivating chops

"About that," Ryuji mumbled, "I hawked that suitcase like you guys wanted… It wasn't worth a ton."

"How much was it worth?" Ann questioned

"Not buffet money."

Ann cursed under her breath.

"What's this about a buffet?" I asked

"Just a little tradition we do," Ann explained, "there's this buffet place in the city that serves killer food. All you can eat too!"

"Well, I don't know that it's tradition," Ren spoke up. "I mean, we did it once."

Ryuji leaned against the wall, "Well, what do you suggest we do?"

Ren snapped his fingers, "I rented all these movies from a place on Central Street. We could do a movie night?"

I tilted my head and grinned at him. That actually sounded pretty nice to me.

"Boooring," Ryuji groaned

Morgana looked at the frizzy-haired youth, "I hate to agree with him, Ren, but I think this celebration should be a little more - er - grand then all of us cramming around your tiny tv."

I ran my hand through my short, brown hair, "Well, there is the fireworks festival happening in a couple of days."

"Oh, right! The fireworks festival!" Ann jumped in excitement, "I've always wanted to see it! Great suggestion, Makoto!" She grabbed my shoulders and continued bouncing up and down, her long blonde curls whipping my face. "We could do each others’ hair, and make-up, and eat soooo much chocolate beforehand!" I did my best to conceal my mild fright at her sudden burst of excitement.

"Yukata!" Morgana shouted, "Y-You two are going to wear Yukata, right?" His pupils dilated while staring fervently at Ann

"I suppose I may have one laying around in my closet-" I mumbled

Ann continued to shake me, "If you don't, you can borrow one of mine. Ohhh this is going to be so much fun!" She gripped me by the hand and began tugging me away from the group.

"H-Hey! What are you doing?"

"You and I have got to get ready!" She shouted back at me

"B-But the festival isn't for a couple of days!" I protested

"Giving us just enough time to find your shade!"

I glanced back at the boys and waved frantically at them, "I-I'll text you guys?" I shouted
Ren waved back at me, "Have fun!"

*

I clumsily made my way off of the train. More shoved off then stepped off really. Though the Yukata breathed well and felt gentle against my skin, the traditional woodblock slippers that accompany the outfit were neither functional, nor comfortable. While I stumbled and tripped my way down the subway platform below Central street, Ann glided like a fish in water.

Though she may have only been half Japanese, Ann knew far more about this sort of thing then I did. Her Yukata was fitted perfectly and her sash was tied with expertise. Her glamorous light blue dress highlighted her natural beauty, making her quite the captivating image to behold.

I ended up going with one of Ann's other dresses. Initially a problematic fit due to my lack of certain - erm- curves, she kindly tailored the dress so it would fit me just so. A little more modest than Ann's, mine was a simple white fabric with the occasional tasteful pink and red blossom to bring life to the remarkably made gown.

We were just about to round the corner to meet with the others when Ann suddenly stretched out her arm. Halting me in my tracks and nearly knocking off my already precarious balance. "Wha-

"Shh," She held her finger across her lips and pointed to the other side of the subway terminal. Among the sea of similarly colorfully dressed people, I spotted the boys talking to a couple of pretty girls I did not recognize. Ryuji, dressed in his typical cargo shorts and a yellow tank top, practically had his chin to the floor as he gawked at them.

"I don't know about this, Ryuji." We heard Yusuke over the crowd of chattering arrivals. It appeared that while Ryuji and Ren were dressed casually, he was the only guy in our group to have dressed up for the event. He had on a rich and deep blue Yukata that matched his long, blue hair. The three boys appeared to be in a heated discussion with the two pretty girls standing nearby.

"It's not that big of a deal, man! They're late anyway, we can always apologize later." Ryuji bargained

Yusuke straightened his back and crossed his arms, "We came to celebrate with our friends, and that is just what we'll do!"

Ryuji balled his fists into his eyes and groaned, "Ugh, come on! The girls never come up to US, dude! Who knows when we will get a chance like this again?"

Yusuke merely shook his head and looked away from his companion in contempt.

"Forget you," Ryuji turned and looked with wide puppy-like eyes to Ren, "I know you’re on my side with this one buddy." He swooped to his best friend's side and wrapped an arm around his shoulder, "I mean… do you see how tight the dress is on that one?" I noticed Ann clench her fist and grit her teeth.

Ren pocketed his hands, "Yeah, but… ditching would be a pretty shitty thing to do. Especially since this is supposed to be our celebration, you know?" He whispered back to Ryuji, then approached the girls. "Hey, we um, are actually waiting for our friends. Thanks for inviting us to your party but-" Ren rubbed the back of his head, "um, you know-"
The taller of the two scoffs, "Whatever," then shuffles away. Her friend shot Ren a nasty look then turned to join her.

"DUDE! WHAT THE HELL?" Ryuji flailed his arms dramatically

"Yeah, Ryuji," Ann rounded the pillar we took cover behind, "what the hell?" She stared daggers into the boy. I could feel the heat of her anger steaming off of her as I took her flank.

"A-Ann?" The boys stood at attention. Ren and Ryuji's eyes went wide upon seeing the pair of us, and both simultaneously crossed their legs in front of them.

"Y-Y-You look g-great, Ann!" Ryuji was visibly sweating

Ann walked up and gripped him by the shirt, "You bet your ass I do!" She shook him violently, "And looking this good takes time you, shit-head! So learn how to wait or don't bother coming!"

"I'm sorry!" Ryuji choked out

Ann dropped him hard on the floor and turned toward me, "Come on, Makoto. We have fireworks to see." She interlocked arms with me and, once again, tugged me away from the scene. "Come on, Ren, Yusuke. I'll ALLOW you both to join us." I heard the shuffle of the boy's feet behind us.

"W-Wait up!" Ryuji shouted and ran after us.

As we ascended the stairs, we could hear popping and crackling overhead indicating the fireworks had already started. The street was filled to the brim with colorfully dressed onlookers watching the display in the night's sky above. Ohhs, ahhs and similar sentiments echoed amongst the assembled onlookers.

We shoved our way through the crowd until we found an adequate spot on the sidewalk. Dazzling flashes of oranges, reds, and blues filled the dark sky. I was reminded of being a kid again, going to this same festival with Dad and Sae. I was too little to see the fireworks above the tall adults of the crowd then, so Dad let me ride on his shoulders. I was terrified of heights at the time, but the magic of the overhead display washed away all my fear. I remember being so blown away that such scary explosions could produce such an elaborate bouquet of color and sparkles.

I was well wrapped up in the cozy warm memory when I felt a sudden cold drip of water on my forehead. Quickly followed by another and another. Seconds later, what first appeared to be a clear night was smothered in dark, angry-looking clouds. Buckets of water soon began pouring down on us.

A man dressed in a reflective vest shouted into a bullhorn, "Due to the weather, the night's festivities have been canceled. Please proceed indoors." Crackled his megaphone.

The crowd groaned and grumbled. Ann stomped her feet, kicking up a large puddle, "What? Come on! It just started!" Her long hair matted against her forehead and neck as she stared up at the sky.

I took her by the arm, "Come on. Were getting drenched out here." I utter in defeat, escorting her under the awning of a nearby grocery store. The boys soon joined us while Ann and I were doing our best to dry off our Yukatas. They stood suspiciously silent next to us so I glanced up, only to discover all three boys staring at mine and Ann's bare thighs while we attempted to wring out our dresses. They quickly averted their eyes once they figured out I noticed their wandering gazes.

"H-Hey!" I shouted
Ann looked to me, then to the boys. Noticing their hot faces, she was quick to put things together, "Eww, you perverts!"

"We didn't do nothin!" Ryuji protested

"You pig!" She slapped his arm repeatedly, "What is with you tonight? Is all you think about that stuff? God!"

Ren blinked repeatedly and looked between us, "Should we go inside and get some towels?"

"Yes! Splendid idea!" Yusuke tried shaking off the water from his arms, "This simply will not do!"

The group began to file inside when something odd caught my eye. Across the street was a girl, roughly my height, with distinctive fluffy red hair. She was being led by a man in a suit to an awaiting limo. Her sad eyes were a stark contrast to her gorgeous pink Yukata. I didn't exactly recognize her, but there was something oddly familiar about her.

"You ok?" I heard Ren ask from the doorway

"Y-Yeah. Sorry, I just thought I recognized someone…"

"Who? The girl in the limo?"

"Yeah," I looked back at him, "It's probably nothing. Shall we?" He held the door open for me, and we joined the others inside. The number of sad people dressed in happy, colorful clothing was almost laughable. Seemed everyone from the festival had the same idea to seek shelter inside the grocery store.

"Ugh, this sucks!" Ann crossed her arms and pouted in one of the aisles containing cans of pickled meats and vegetables.

"Well, maybe if you girls didn't take so long-" Ann shot Ryuji a sinister look that made him immediately retract his thought "S-Sorry." He whispered under his breath

Yusuke observed a small TV held up in the corner of the mini-mart, "Hey, look up there. They're talking about the Phantom Thieves."

Curious, we crowded around the TV and read the subtitles carefully. Before us sat a reporter with the Phantom Thieves logo floating next to his head. My stomach fluttered thinking it was further praise for the Kaneshiro bust, but instead, my heart suddenly turned into a lead weight as I continued reading.

"-The mysterious hacker group by the name of Medjed has taken control of our own news station website this morning and posted the following message."

A wall of text scrolled across the screen, "To the Phantom Thieves causing an uproar in Japan: Do not speak of your false justice. We, Medjed, are the True Justice. Our voice is that of the people, and we are many. However, we will give you an opportunity to repent your ways. Have your own change of heart, and we will accept you. Our hammer of justice will find you."

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**
**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: artoflupin.com

Twitter: @ArtofLupin**
Interlude 6

Chapter Summary

“Justice is just the set of rules that the man with the biggest gun made up for the little guys underneath his boot”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
“Another player takes the field claiming to know True Justice; this is troubling indeed.” Isis’s warm tenor echoed off the frigid hard walls of the prison. She sat next to me, one of her beautiful winged arms wrapped around my chained shoulders. Her presence reminded me of a long day at the park, or a hike through a meadow full of bright flowers. Her scent was that of fresh air floating in a gentle breeze on a warm spring afternoon.

Rider grunted and shifted in his crouch in the far corner. “This is why I don’t bother with these
“grand,” he air quotes, “‘meta’ discussions you two seem to love so much. It don’t matter. None of it matters. Everyone’s got a different opinion, and everyone is wrong.” He snubbed out one of his white, filterless cigarettes on the ground.

“Oh? Sounds like you have some insight on the matter. Please, do enlighten us.” Isis questioned her malcontent companion with a thick layer of sarcasm.

Rider exhaled a lungful of toxic smoke from the corners of his mouth. That coupled with the small flames illuminating his eye sockets would have terrified me before, but I’ve grown used to his grumpy demeanor and constant flair for the dramatic.

“There’s no such thing as ‘True Justice.’” He drew his revolver from its holster and twirled it around his gloved index finger. “Justice is just the set of rules that the man with the biggest gun made up for the little guys underneath his boot, and I was stupid enough to stick my claim with the likes of this chick.” He threw his revolver full force into the stone wall opposing him, causing the gun to fire on impact. The bullet ricocheted around the room before harmlessly lodging itself into a wall outside the cell.

“Are you insane?” Isis shot up from shielding me with her arms. “Is getting her killed your magical solution?”

Rider waved away her concern, “Shes fine. She can’t die in here.”

Isis stepped forward to confront the sullen man, “You don’t know that! What if she had been hit with that bullet? Not only would you have killed an innocent girl, you probably would have sealed us both in here forever!”

Rider snapped to his feet and met her glare, “At least I could’ve done that much for her!”

I blinked and looked the skeletal man, “What do you mean by that?”

His blazing eyes cooled slightly as he shifted his gaze to me, “Nothin’. I meant nothin’.” He leaned his back to the wall and slid back down to his original crouch. Isis rejoined my side and an uncomfortable silence hung in the air for several moments.

“Why are you like this, Rider?” I asked abruptly

“What? Don’t you mean; ‘how did you get this happy-go-lucky attitude all of us enjoy so much, Rider?’” He growled back. I met his burning gaze with a composed, yet steely stare.

“Why are you here? Why did you agree to help me in the first place if you hate it so much?”

“I’m the spirit of vengeance. You wanted revenge, and I felt like doing some killing. Come on kid. You’re weak, not stupid.”

For about half a second I was prepared to accept his answer. But after being stuck in this cell for so long, you get to understand the people you are stuck with. A bitter living skeleton was no different. There was something he wasn’t telling me.

“Bullshit.” I declared

“Excuse me?” The flames in his eyes turned a blazing white-hot.

“You heard me.”
He stood back to his feet and approached me slowly, menacingly. Isis planted herself firmly between us.

“Calm down, Rider.” She commanded. Though I could sense a slight tinge of fear in her otherwise authoritative tone.

“Get out of my way!” He grabbed her by the throat and threw her aside like a rag-doll. She smashed into the wall opposite me with such force that I could hear her head crack on the stone wall as she slid down to the featureless gray floor. Her body went limp on contact.

Fire leaked from his body, flames licking his pants and leather jacket. I could feel the heat as he lifted me from the ground by my binds and brought me within centimeters of his face. “Say it again you little worm. SAY IT!” I could feel his violent vibrations of pure rage passing through his arms and onto me.

A foreign, yet strangely familiar passion arose in my own heart. “You heard what I said. I do not repeat myself to you.” I stated, without even a trace of regret in my voice.

He forcefully pinned me against the wall behind me, “You insolent little maggot! Nobody talks to me like that, y’hear?” He wound up the back of his hand, “Don’t you understand I’m just trying to protect you, Jen?!”

“Jen?” I muttered without thinking

Suddenly Rider’s jaw relaxed, his death grip loosening, the flames in his eyes smothering. He released me and I fell hard onto the floor. He staggered away and clutched the metal bars of the prison cell, hanging his head low.

“Who’s Jen?”

“No one.” He replied in a whisper, then silently walked over to Isis’s body and touched the back of her head. She slowly blinked awake, fluttering her brilliant blue eyes and looking to him in surprise. He leaned down to her ear, and through strained hearing I swore I heard him apologize.

Rider then retreated to the furthest corner of the cell from me. He unsheathed a fancy looking knife from his belt and stared at it. For an enduring amount of time he didn’t move or speak, just stared.

\[**Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**\]

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: artoflupin.com

Twitter: @ArtofLupin**
Chapter Summary

An anxious late-night text exchange between the sleep-deprived Thieves.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Chapter 35: [1:32 AM]

[01:32]

Ryuji: “Is anyone still up?”
Yusuke: “Yes, I am here”
Ann: “Been hard to sleep since the festival.”
Ryuji: “I know, right?”
Makoto: “Yes. We haven’t had much time to talk since then.”
Makoto: “Ren, you awake?”
Ren: “Yeah”
Makoto: “What are your thoughts on our current state of affairs?”
Ren: “I think we don’t know anything yet.”
Ann: “Have any of you guys ever heard of this ‘Medjed’ before?”
Makoto: “No clue.”
Ryuji: “We sure this ain’t some sort of prank?”
Makoto: “It would have to be one heck of a planned out prank to be able to get on TV like that.”
Ann: “Are we in danger?”
Ryuji: “You think I know?.”
Ryuji: “This effing sucks!”
Ryuji: “We shouldn’t be sitting on our asses like this. We need to figure out who this guy is and wreck em!”
Makoto: “The way the threat was phrased on the TV, it sounded more like a group. It would be hard to know where to start.”
Ann: “These are hackers right? What could they do to us, really?”
Makoto: “Well, our lives are on the internet. I imagine that their reach is virtually limitless: steal bank information, credit cards, find a way to reveal our identity…”
Ann: “Could they really do that?”
Makoto: “I don’t know, it’s really just speculation”
Ann: “Yusuke, do you know anything about this sort of stuff?”
Ann: “…”

Ann: “Yusuke? You still up?”

Yusuke: “Hmm? Apologies, I was reheating some delicious curry. I know nothing about hacking.”

Ryuji: “Dude, you know what time it is? Should you really be having curry THIS late?”

Yusuke: “I fail to see your point.”

Ryuji: “You know what, nvm.”

Ann: “Makoto, if they can find us, there must be a way to find them, right?”

Ann: “I think I saw something about it on TV. There’s like, digital forensics or something.”

Ann: “I mean, we’ve got to do something, right?”

Ann: “They can’t just take us down, right?”

Ann: “Like, the meta-nav is an app right? Maybe we can do something in the Metaverse?”

Ann: [Ann is typing…]

Makoto: “ANN STOP TYPING SO FAST”

Ann: “Srry…”

Makoto: “It’s ok. Like I said before, I don’t know anything about hacking or computers. I hardly know how to use my phone.”

Yusuke: “So what shall we do?”

Ren: “We wait. It’s all we CAN do.”

Makoto: “Ren is correct. It is only a matter of time before they reach out again.”

Yusuke: “Do you all remember what Kaneshiro said when we defeated him in his palace?”

Ryuji: “Nah. I stopped listening to that creep the moment he opened his fat mouth.”

Ann: “Said something about a dark masked figure right?”

Yusuke: “Correct. Is it possible these things are related?”

Makoto: “Maybe… but that would mean Medjed would have access to the Metaverse. If this is as big of an organization as they claim, I feel like we would have seen them by now.”

Makoto: “It is not impossible. I am just not convinced they are within the same wheelhouse. This black-masked figure sounded more like a gun for hire than a collective group of mysterious hackers.”

Ann: “This ‘black mask’ kind of scares me more. If he's real, then there really is another Metaverse user. Could you imagine the damage someone could do in there?”

Makoto “I would rather not think about it.”
Ryuji: “You guys catch what that freaking dweeb Akechi said about the whole Medjed thing?”

Yusuke: “Akechi?”

Makoto: “Goro Akechi. Self-proclaimed ace detective. He occasionally works with my sister in the justice department.”

Yusuke: “You have a sister who works in the justice department?”

Ann: “Yeah, I didn’t know that either.”

Ryuji: “ANYWAY, Akechi claimed that the Phantom Thieves and Medjed were just two sides of the same coin.”

Ryuji: “As if these jokers could keep up with us. Like to see these losers try to take on half the shit we’ve dealt with in the Metaverse.”

Ann: “Who cares what that pretty-boy detective thinks.”

Makoto: “More people then I care to admit. We should not be so quick to dismiss him as an adversary. Though I detest him, I have to admit he is quite smart and resourceful. I doubt anything could stop him from seeing the Phantom Thieves jailed.”

Ren: “Let’s take things one thing at a time.”

Ren: “Everyone just try to keep a low profile and let's wait to see what Medjed does next.”

Ren: “Srry, gotta go. Morgana won’t stop telling me to get back to bed.”

Ryuji: “It’s cool man. We’ll stay in touch.”

Yusuke: “Excellent timing. I’ve just finished my curry. Off to bed then.”

Ryuji: “Such a freak…”

Ann: “Night all <3”

Makoto: “Sweet dreams”

[02:07]

Ann: “Makoto”

Ann: “Srry, u still awake?”

Makoto: “Yeah”

Ann: “We’re… gonna be ok right?”

Makoto: “As long as we stick together, we can deal with anything life throws at us.”

Ann: “I… hope you’re right.”
**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: artoflupin.com

Twitter: @ArtofLupin**
Yusuke, The Space Cadet

Chapter Summary

A day out on the town with Yusuke!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Makoto's Story
Chapter 36: Yusuke, The Space Cadet

Leaning against the tall brick wall behind me, I watched as people entered and left the gargantuan planetarium entrance. Many children were running laps around their parents, shouting about how “cool” the show was. All the while they shook their new planet and space-man toys in their faces. There was nothing quite like watching a small family to make me suddenly go back on the idea of ever having one of my own.

Several couples, a handful I even recognized from school, were also making the most of their Sunday afternoon by spending their date on a fulfilling educational experience. I caught the eye of a few students and waved; they waved back before quickly tucking into their partner’s ear and whispering. I even caught a snippet of one girl whispering, “Did she get stood-up or something?”

“You know who that is, right? If I had a date with her, I’d probably reconsider at the last second too.” The boyfriend replied in hushed tones.

Ouch.

But at the same time, hearing such gossip about myself wasn’t completely foreign to me. I learned a long time ago that by merely existing you were already guaranteed to be subject to a few rumors. Being student body president didn’t help. I liked to pretend it didn’t bother me, but how could it not?

Regardless, I shook off the spiteful comments of the passersby and checked my wrist-watch for the third time. The screen automatically flashed on as I raised my wrist and informed me that I may very well have been ‘stood-up.’ It had been a near hour since I arrived, with no missed calls or text messages.

I crossed my arms and observed the growing shadow cast by the building behind me. ‘I certainly hope he didn’t get the impression that this was some sort of date,’ I thought. ‘He is a sweet guy, but...’ I shivered at the thought. ‘Not my type.’

After several more minutes of waiting, I withdrew my phone and was fully ready to let him have a piece of my mind when I heard loud footfalls headed my way.

“Makoto!” I heard a fatigued shout ahead of me. I raised my head in surprise and spotted a sweat-soaked, hair-matted Yusuke ahead of me. He ceased his full-blown sprint several meters in front of me and propped himself up on his knees as he caught his breath.

“Makoto, I-” He panted, “I must beg your forgiveness. When I found that my student metrocard... didn’t work on the line leading up here-” He wiped the sweat out of his eyes. “I tried paying but then found I... didn’t have enough for a train fare.” He patted his forehead with his sleeve, “Then-”

I raised my hand, “Whoa there, Yusuke,” I laughed an awkward chuckle. “Slow down and catch your breath. I’m getting exhausted just looking at you.”

He took several beats to steady his breathing. Then straightened to his full, giant-like height and cracked his back. “Goodness,” He looked himself over. “I am quite a mess.” He bowed deeply, “Again, I cannot apologize enough. You were kind enough to invite me out on such a special occasion, and this was no way to meet your generosity.”

I waved my hand, “Please, Yusuke! By the sound of it, you hardly had any part to play in your tardiness!” I laughed again nervously, silently begging him to take the hint and drop the matter. People were starting to stare.
He kept in his bowed position, body parallel to the ground. “I insist, my friend, please allow me to make it up to you somehow.”

My eyes darting between the various staring pedestrians, I forcibly grabbed Yusuke by the hand and tugged him towards the front doors. “Make it up to me by hushing and getting inside!” I felt him stumble behind me as I dragged him along.

I threw open the front doors to the planetarium, and my face was greeted with a blast of ice-cold air-conditioning. The entranceway was as tall as it was wide. The black squishy carpet was filled with little yellow stars. The high domed ceiling was decorated similarly, except the stars glinted in the dim light with a vast array of planets and sparkly comets hung on thin strings overhead.

Yusuke still in tow, I approached the wrinkly woman sitting behind the ticket counter. “Good afternoon!” I chimed, “When is the next show?”

The woman stared through her beady, dark eyes at me without moving her neck. “Five minutes ago.” She croaked through long thin lips.

“Oh!” I blinked, “Would it still be possible to get in?”

She continued to stare without blinking. “Welp-” She paused.

I awaited on pins-and-needles for her to deliver her front-loaded reply. But after waiting several long and painful seconds, it was clear she had either forgotten what she was going to say or just didn’t care enough to finish her thought. I cleared my throat to gently prompt her response but was met only with her continued, unyielding glare.

‘Is she dead?’

I dug through my purse and produced my wallet, “How much for two tickets?”

She continued staring. My eyes widened with disbelief, “Okay…” I slapped a few yen on the counter and shouldered my purse. “I’m just going to leave that there and if you need more, just let me know after the show.”

The woman slowly turned her piercing gaze to Yusuke, “I take it you’re the boyfriend?”

He blinked, “I-I don’t think so?”

The lady snorted, “She’s got you good. Good luck with that one, sweety.”

I rolled my eyes and tugged Yusuke in the direction of the large central double doors. Quietly creaking open the door my eyes were suddenly dazzled by the elaborate show ahead of me. Small jets of steam acted as a canvas while brilliant lights danced along with puffs of smoke. The child in me cheered at the spectacle.

“Makoto,” I heard Yusuke whisper and wave ahead of me. “I found some seats.” We ducked to avoid blocking the view for the other spectators, and slipped into a pair of surprisingly comfortable seats.

The trials and tribulations of the day had suddenly slipped from my mind as we were taken on a tour of the universe. Large, heavenly bodies were presented before us with incredibly intricate lighting and design. A pleasantly deep-voiced narrator described each planet and star system to us. Giving us their histories, mineral compositions, and informing us of their many moons.
As the planets in the solar system were introduced, the display panned out to the greater milky-way galaxy. The violet and shimmering silver arms of the greater nebula slowly rotated overhead. The display was so tantalizingly close that it made me want to steal one of the stars and stuff it in my pocket for myself. But before I could become a space thief my rational senses kicked back in just long enough to remind me that none of it was really there.

I glanced at Yusuke seated next to me and found him on the edge of his seat, utterly enthralled by the exhibition overhead. His eyes wide, I could see the multitude of gears churning in his mind. It was obvious to me that he was no longer next to me in Tokyo, Japan, but instead in a star system far, far away.

As the show came to a close and we were returned to reality, I spotted Yusuke dabbing at tears in his eyes. Without thinking, I patted him on the knee and asked if he was ok, concern heavy in my voice.

“Hmm?” He looked to me through bleary eyes and chuckled. “Oh, my apologies. I hope I didn’t distract you from the show with my antics.”

“Not at all,” I flashed him a warm smile. “Just - well - I’ve never seen anyone so moved by a projection show before.”

“Projection show?” He blinked and chuckled. “Yes, I suppose that is all it was, wasn’t it?”

The hairs on the back of my neck suddenly spiked. Feeling a pair of eyes on me I glanced upward and found the grumpy woman from before glaring down at us from her staggering height, a dusty broom clutched in her fist. “We’re closed,” She croaked

“Yes of course.” I stood and fiddled with the hem of my blouse. “We’ll get out of your way then.”

Once Yusuke stood, the brick-house woman shimmied to the side, briefly allowing us passage onto the aisle. But as soon as I was clear, she stopped Yusuke with her broom. “You can do better,” I heard her whisper to him through her gravelly voice.

“I don’t understand,” he replied confusedly

She grunted and lifted the broom out of his way. I pinched the bridge of my nose, ‘What is with everyone getting on my case today?’

With a good couple of hours of light left, and the air finally sinking to a reasonable temperature, we decided to take a walk around the nearby pond while digesting the other-worldly experience. Though it seemed many of my observations were completely lost on him.

“I had no idea that Saturn had sixty-two moons! Or that the rings around it are one-hundred-million years old!” I stated excitedly

“Yes,” Yusuke answered with the tone of a half listening father. “Quite old indeed.”

“Also, did you know Pluto was no longer considered a planet? Tough break for it, right?”

He nodded softly, “I suppose so.”

I chomped down on my lip nervously. ‘What's with this guy? Crying in the planetarium one minute and now he couldn’t care less about it?’

“Well - um - what was your favorite part?”
He placed his hand on his chin in thought. My anticipation weighed heavily in the air.

“I don’t know that I could point to any one thing.” He stated casually

My heart sank into my shoes. The cold sting of failure pierced my limbs, and my hands went clammy.

“O-Oh.” My shoulders rolled and stiffened. “I’m sorry, Yusuke. I thought this would be fun. For some reason I thought, as an artist, you would appreciate space. Maybe… it is just kind of a boring, nerdy thing after all.”

He suddenly stopped. Startled, I turned and looked at him.

Yusuke’s face was stony, a single eyebrow raised. “Boring? Nerdy?” A sudden burst of laughter erupted from his mouth that caused me to take several alarmed steps backward. Now I had no idea what to think.

Hands pressed to his chest, his laughter finally subsided. “Oh, Makoto, it seems I owe you yet another apology.” He wiped a tear from his eye and grinned widely. “I must confess, I was still digesting the majesty of the heavens!”

I blinked, “So… you had a good time?”

“Did I have a good time?” He asked and leapt into the air with an explosion of what I could only describe as pure ecstasy. “Makoto Niijima, you took me to dimensions and places previously unexplored to me. Alien worlds and galaxies yet unsullied by human hands!”

He spun whimsically around, hands outstretched to the air as if giving space itself a great bear-hug. “Nature is the ultimate artist. She has already painted on a brilliant canvas larger than either you or I could ever understand. Used colors and methods my brush could never truly harness. She is my muse and I am her humble subject!”

I blinked again, “so… you had a good time?”

For a good long while, the previously stoic Yusuke filled my ears with his observations of the event. Along with his many theories and ideas on how to capture its majesty in his own work.

“Though I know I never could.” He continued, “but I suppose that’s not what art is. It’s merely my interpretation of a subject or idea. Allowing others a glimpse of my own soul and mind’s eye.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised,” I started, “But I never thought you would walk away with such feelings and ideas from just one planetarium trip. I learned a few cool facts, but you talk about it as if you were walking on the surface of Mars in there.”

“There is so much beauty and emotion in the universe, Makoto. It’s really stopping just long enough for us to recognize it.” He halted again and turned towards the pond. “Like here. What do you see here?”

I touched my chin, “Um, well I see a duck, and the sun setting is kind of pretty.”

Yusuke shook his head, “No-no, not what you see. I mean what you see.”

I scratched my head, “I think the duck is a girl duck?”

He wiped his face with his palm, presumably in disappointment. I propped my fists on my hips,
“Ok then, what do you see?” I spat.

Yusuke approached the waist-high wooden railing and gazed onto the scene. “I see tranquility amongst death.” I stood at his side and gripped the rail. “The duck floating along peacefully in the quiet lake. Warming herself in the dying sun.”

He touched his finger to his tongue and raised it in the air. “The wind is still, the air at peace.” He cupped his ears with his hands. “Listen.”

I did as he instructed and heard a previously unheard cacophony of chirps. “Crickets?”

“Keep listening.” He stated softly

A new layer of sound appeared from the soft croaks of nearby toads. The occasional break in the water from splashing fish. A whole ecosystem unseen.

“All around us is life making the most of its dwindling hours,” Yusuke stated. “The creatures around us have no concept of later or tomorrow. They know nothing of plans or schedules. Only here, only now. The small creatures sing songs about it. The fish dance merrily just beneath the water’s surface. All present, all still. All so magnificent. These are the sorts of things I, as an artist, pray to capture in my work. To record the beauty of our universe the best I can, the way that only my mind’s eye can perceive it.”

He looked to me, his head tilted, an eyebrow arched. “Why are you crying, Makoto?”

I dabbed at my eyes with my sleeve, “N-No! Y-You’re the one that's crying!” I blew my nose into a handkerchief.

Yusuke scratched his head, “I don’t think I—” A vicious, gut-wrenching growl shook the air between us.

“W-What was that? Another animal?” My eyes shot between the bushes.

“No,” Yusuke stated uncomfortably, “I’m afraid I haven’t eaten all day.”

“Oh,” I cleared my throat and tucked away my handkerchief. “Dinner then?”

He pursed his lips and stared at me nervously. I rolled my eyes, “Don’t worry, I’ll pay.”

A smile snapped across his face and he ran full speed back up the trail. “I know just the place that makes an excellent beef curry! Hurry now, I think it closes soon!” He shouts over his shoulder

“I-Hey!” I yell back and shake my head. “It’s as if he was just waiting for me to offer.” I take one last glance at the pond, trying to be present a moment longer, before following my companion back up the pathway.

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/**

Chapter End Notes
**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: artoflupin.com

Twitter: @ArtofLupin**
Alibaba

Chapter Summary

Anxiety grows as a new character reares its ugly head in Makoto's already stressful double life.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter 37: Alibaba

Considering how dead silent the Ren’s room was above Cafe Leblanc, I figured myself to be the first to arrive. But scaling the squeaky aged wooden stairs I found the room packed with Thieves, all sat eerily silent. Even Ann and Ryuji who were typically bickering about one thing or another were completely still.

Ryuji, sat wrong way around in Ren’s deck chair, stared silently at the dusty floorboards. Ann curled up on Ren’s bed, held her head between her knees. Her long golden curls slipped through her clutched fingers and spilled onto the sheets.

“Hi, all.” I greeted timidly. My voice shattering the glass-like silence caused the group to snap their heads to attention. Half of their faces pale and terrified as if expecting a ghost, but then breathed a cleansing sigh of relief upon seeing it was just me. They soon returned to their contemplative, and some, remorseful looks. Except for Ren who managed to crack a slight smile at my greeting.

As reluctant as the others to address the elephant in the room, my eyes wandered to Ren’s ficus in the corner. While I couldn’t say I fully understood why a teenage boy like Ren had the even the most remote interest in botany, I was happy to have the plant’s bright green company in the otherwise currently bleak room.

I approached the ficus and impulsively pinched a leaf between my thumb and forefinger, and then ran my thumb over its waxy surface. As my digit ran the length of the stem, I felt the edge of the leaf wrinkle slightly at my touch.

“Hey, Ren, when was this plant last watered?” I asked abruptly.

“This morning,” He replied in a prepared, even tone. “I don’t remember the last time I gave it food though.”

I glanced back at him and saw him point to the shelf at my left.

“If you wanted to feed it, I keep its nutrients on the self next to you.”

I nodded, swiped the small yellow box off the shelf and poured out a small handful of little green beads into my palm. After evenly distributing the little pods in the well-maintained soil, I felt a small surge of warmth in my heart and a friendly chime in my ear. Though oddly soothed by the strange sensation at the time, looking back on it, the stress must have been really getting to me in more ways than one.

Yusuke straightened his posture on Ren’s tattered couch and addressed the room. “Now that we are all here, we really should discuss matters.” His voice clear, but I could still spot a dash of doubt in his otherwise valiant tone.

Ren nodded then looked to me, which I returned subconsciously.

“Everyone got the text, right?” Ren withdrew his phone from his pocket, as did everyone else except Ann who kept in her fetal position.

Ryuji shook his leg and picked at the pealing rubber corner of his phone case as he studied its screen. He began to read out loud, “To the Phantom Thieves of Hearts, I know who you are. I know what you do. I know everything there is to know about you and more. Most of all I can prove it. If you have any doubt of my knowledge, allow me to enlighten you.”
I scanned ahead of his reading and spotted an attached file in the group chat of multiple screenshots of every conversation we had ever had. Most of which involved Phantom Thief business and recorded phone conversations we had with one another about Kaneshiro. I reviewed it all the night before, in the recorded conversations alone there were a near dozen instances where one of us had outright admitted we were Phantom Thieves and in-depth discussions about the Meta-nav.

It was obvious this individual was thorough and well researched. They had us dead to rights.

Ryuji swallowed and ran his hand through his blonde, spiky hair. His face twisted with anxiety and looked as if he was about to scream.

““I can take it from here,” I stated softly. “As you can tell, I’m not someone to be messed with,” I continued. “I have more than enough information to turn you all into the police and have you put away for a long time. But, I think we can make a deal.

“Like how I’m aware of all your secrets and abilities, I’m also aware of the news. Medjed is looking to take you all down. Lucky for you, I hate Medjed even more than you do. I’ll help you out with them. If you steal someone’s heart for me. If not, I’ll leak this info to the police and see what they think of your after school activities.”

I noticed Ann wince in the corner of my eye as I finished the last paragraph. My heart sank seeing her in such a state.

“That’s when I asked,” Ren stated, “Who are you and how do you know all this?”

I looked back at the texts. “You may call me, Alibaba. Do you find these terms acceptable or not?”

“It sounds as if we don’t have much of a choice.” Yusuke read his text out-loud

“That’s the idea.” I continued reading the blackmailer’s feed. “Steal this person’s heart and I’ll take care of your little problem.”

“Wait.” Ren read his response. “What’s the name?”

“I’ll be in touch.” I slowly lowered my phone to my side, “and that’s it.”

Ryuji, caught up in a sudden fit of rage raised his phone over his head and threw it full force across the room. Leaving a sizable dent in the wall and startling us all.

“This is such bullshit! Who the hell does this ‘Alibaba’ guy think he is? We should steal this asshole’s heart!”

“We know nothing about this person,” I stated in the most level tone I could muster. “We don’t even have a return phone number. It’s all scrambled and indecipherable. Plus, it’s highly unlikely Alibaba is even his real name.”

Ryuji stood suddenly out of his chair, knocking it to the floor. “Then we find out! Find out like we did with Kaneshiro!”

“Will you calm down!” I heard the small voice of Morgana then a sudden small black figure appearing from behind Ann. “You’re not going to get anywhere by shouting like an idiot! You’re only making Lady Ann more upset!”

“Calm down? Calm down!” Ryuji lowered his face down to Morgana’s. “Don’t you tell me to calm down you stupid cat! Is Ann really all you think about? If you didn’t notice, if word about us gets
“Enough!” Ren stated with a yet unseen sense of authority. He calmly crossed the length of the room and stood between two squabbling teammates. He raised the downed chair back to its feet and laid a hand on Ryuji’s shoulder. “I’m pissed too,” I heard him whisper. “This guy isn’t going to get away with this. We’ll get him one way or another.”

With one last nasty glare at Morgana, Ryuji relented and sat back down in a huff. Though my heart still raced from the sudden escalation, I felt my shoulders slowly relax and breath return to normal.

“Are we going to be ok?” I heard Ann mutter in tear-filled mumbles.

I crossed the room and joined her on the bed. I pushed her brilliant curls from her face and caught a glimpse of her blue gemstone eyes which were red with tears. “You know we are. We’ll figure it out, just like was always have.” I asserted gently.

The way Ann laid reminded me of when I was a little girl and Sae and I got the call that Dad had passed in the hospital. I remember asking the same questions. If the world was going to continue spinning after Dad had left. Sae held my head in her lap, wiped the salty tears from my hot cheeks though her eyes were filled with her own. Between sniffles, she said the same thing. ‘It’ll be ok. We’ll figure it out, just like we always have.’

“Seems the best course of action is to play along.” Yusuke’s cool voice ripped me back to reality. I looked to him, admiring how he could be so collected in a time of such uncertainty. Though upon further study, I saw that he had leaned back forward on the couch. His face cupped in his hands supported by his shaking knees.

“For now,” I added. “I don’t know how Alibaba got this information on us, but I think we should be especially careful from here on out.”

Ren looked to Morgana who had returned his attention to Ann. “How would someone figure this stuff out about us, Mona?”

The cat looked back to his caretaker with a confused expression. “How should I know?! I don’t even know how mobile phones work!”

Ren shook his head, “I’m not talking about that. I mean is there a way this person could access the Meta-verse and find stuff out about us?”

Morgana looked down at the bedspread contemplatively. “I-It would be unlikely. They would need to acquire the Meta-nav, and as far as I know, the only people in the whole world with that is in this room right now.”

“Could Alibaba be this black-masked figure Kaneshiro mentioned?” I questioned

“Possibly, but I doubt it. If that was the case, why wouldn’t he just steal this person’s heart himself? Why get us involved at all?” Morgana answered

I cupped my chin. “I suppose that’s true. This is much more likely to be an entirely separate entity.”

“This may not be such a bad thing.” Yusuke state suddenly, stealing back our curiosity. He raised his head and met our gaze. “Alibaba claims to hate Medjed even more then we do. If we steal this person’s heart, we could be taking down a second bird with this stone.”
“You mean, ‘Killing two birds with one stone?’” Ryuji stated with a groan.

“Isn’t that what I said?” Yusuke retorted

“What about this target? We know nothing about them. What if they are innocent? What would happen if we stole an innocent person’s heart?” I argued

“I-I don’t know,” Morgana answered, a little less fight in his voice. “I mean, if they don’t have a twisted heart, they shouldn’t even show up in the Metaverse. At least, I don’t think.”

“Not that it matters. We don’t even have a name to find this person by.”

Ren rubbed the back of his neck, “About that, I found this in the mail today.” He reached over Ryuji and snatched something off the top shelf of his desk. From where I sat, it looked exactly like one of our calling cards. Ren flipped the card over and revealed a hastily scribbled note on the other side.

‘To: Futaba Sakura

From: The Phantom Thieves of Hearts’

** Photo Credit: Khytal (tumblr: https://khytal.tumblr.com/)**

Chapter End Notes

**Hi all!**

Thanks for reading! If you've enjoyed this installment of Makoto's Story, and are interested in my other works, consider checking out my website!

Website: artoflupin.com

Twitter: @ArtofLupin**
Futaba Sakura

Chapter Summary

Futaba Sakura

Chapter Notes

FINAL CHAPTER IN MAKOTO'S STORY

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Chapter 38: Futaba Sakura

“Futaba Sakura,” We read in unison.

“That last name - it sounds familiar for some reason.” Ryuji pointed out

“It’s the last name of Ren’s guardian, Sojiro Sakura,” I explained, astonished

“W-What would this guy want with a relative of Boss?” Ann’s voice transformed into a nervous squeal as she spoke.
“I have no idea.” I looked at Ren. His arms were crossed, with the calling card jutting out of his clenched left hand. “Does Sojiro have a daughter, Ren?”

“It’s weird this would happen now…” he stated absentmindedly, eyes fixed on his own feet

“Ren?”

“I walked in on something weird the other day. I didn’t know what to think at the time… and now with this…” His head gently rose, his eyes fixed ahead, deep in thought.

“A few days ago when I got back to the cafe after school, I saw Sakura-san talking to this well-dressed woman. Normally he’d be thrilled to have such a pretty lady enter his store, but I noticed he was on edge. Like he was ready to leap over the counter and strangle her or something.”

“Wow,” Ann muttered. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him that intense before.”

“Me neither,” Ren replied

“What were they talking about?” I followed up

“I only got a few snippets, but I remember her telling him that she, or someone she represented, had suspicions of abuse of his daughter… Futaba.”

Shock ripped the air from my lungs. The tips of my fingers went numb. “Futaba… is Sakura-san’s daughter? A-And he’s abusing her?”

“Oh my God. Boss… he never seemed the type.” Ryuji muttered

“That’s not all,” Morgana sprung to Ren’s side and looked up at him from the corner of the bed. “Tell them the rest.”

I looked back to Ren in horror, “There’s more?”

Ren contorted his face, seemingly judging his next words carefully. “She then said she was willing to drop the charges if he was willing to talk about something called, ‘Cognitive Science.’”

“Cognitive Science?” I echoed

Ren continued. “She said she knew his involvement with it, and even as removed as he was, he may still know valuable information. Sakura-san got really tense and shouted ‘Don’t you dare bring Wakaba into this!’

“Then the woman just said it was his choice, and turned to leave, when Sojiro stopped her at the door and suddenly agreed to tell her everything he knew. The woman smiled, handed him a card and said she’d be in touch.”

“I’ve never seen the chief fume more then he did when she left.” Morgana pointed out. “He slammed the front door so hard a bunch of stuff on the walls fell down.”

“Wakaba, Futaba, and Boss.” Yusuke touched his long and slender finger to the corner of his mouth thoughtfully. “What could all these characters have to do with each other? And who could
“I wonder?”

“Ren,” I prompted, “what did you say the woman looked like?”

He scratched his bushy black hair. “Well, as I said, she was well dressed. She carried a leather bag that she kept a bunch of files in. Had long gray hair and red eyes, if I remember right.”

The cold, stinging sensation traveled from the tips of my fingers, up the length of my arms, all the way to my shoulders. It felt as if an anvil suddenly dropped in the pit of my stomach, causing me to physically stop myself from gagging. ‘Sae... The woman tearing this man’s life apart was my own sister.’

“Makoto, are you alright?” Ann looked up to me with her bright blue eyes from the bed.

“Yeah, you look as if you’ve seen a ghost,” Ryuji commented.

“Nothing - it’s nothing.” I bleated.

“Are you certain?” Yusuke inquired, then stood up from the couch. “Perhaps you’d like a seat-”

“I said I’m fine!” My voice cracked in my outburst. Then I suddenly became all too aware of all my friend’s eyes watching me with a mix of confusion and fear. I swallowed hard and cleared my throat. “Sorry, I’m just concerned about this whole abuse business.”

“I don’t blame her. Boss always seemed like such a nice guy.” Ryuji mourned.

“Weren’t you two listening?” Morgana barked. “What about this freaky cognition stuff? What does this lady want from Boss?”

“Seriously,” Ann continued. “And how was he ‘involved’ with it? And is his daughter the same Futaba whose heart Alibaba wants us to steal? And if it is, why?”

“All excellent questions. Did you follow up with your guardian at all, Ren?” Yusuke questioned.

“Yeah, I didn’t get far though. I asked who Futaba was and who he had just talked to. He told me it had nothing to do with me and that I should keep my head in school if I knew what was good for me.”

“That sounds vaguely threatening,” Ann commented.

“That sounds vaguely threatening.” Ann commented.

“Agreed,” Morgana nodded. “We need more information, but we don’t want to risk this guy getting tossed out for it.”

“This so effing confusing!” Ryuji pounded his forehead with his fists. “Who is this Alibaba guy and why does he want us to steal Sakura-san’s daughter’s heart?”

“Abuse aside, I’d have to agree with Ryuji. I believe the most important thing for us to worry about right now is this mysterious Alibaba and discovering his motivation. Not to mention this group of dangerous hackers known as Medjed.” Yusuke looked to me, still standing next to the couch in hopes of me accepting his offer after all. “Makoto, what do you think?”

“I think we drop it.”

The entire room’s attention returned to me with speechless expressions. “Drop it? What for?”

My mind raced, searching for a justification for my knee-jerk suggestion as my eyes darted from
one concerned face to the next. “We don’t have much to work with, do we? We don’t have a way of contacting Alibaba. We know Futaba is at the very least a relative of Sakura-san, but are unable to follow up much more. Not to mention this prosecutor who’s accusing him of child abuse-”

“You think the lady harassing him is a prosecutor?” Ryuji questioned

I felt my neck burn with intense heat, “Y-Yeah, I mean, she was talking about court stuff right?”

My shoulders relaxed slightly when I saw Ryuji nod thoughtfully in agreement.

“My point is, I think all we can do now is wait and see what happens next. Acting now would only cause more harm.”

“I agree. “Ann concurred, “This super sucks, but what else can we do?”

“Whelp,” Ryuji stood suddenly, “If that’s the case then I know what I’m going to do.” He scanned the room. “Who wants to go downtown for a beef bowl?”

The room stood in stilted silence. I watched nervously for the others’ reactions.

“That sounds… pretty good actually.” Yusuke turned and nodded to his friend

“Count me in, I could go for some comfort food.” Ann stood from the bed and rubbed her stomach. “I’ve been so anxious about everything, I forgot to eat today.”

“That’s something you can forget?” Yusuke responded

“Do they have fatty tuna at that place, Ryuji?” Morgana asked wide-eyed, desperately licking his chops

“They do, but no cats allowed,” Ryuji said with a smirk

“They will if he’s considered an ‘emotional support animal.’” Ann contested

Ryuji glared at her, “You can’t be serious.”

Ann dug through her bag and produced a small reflective vest with the words ‘service animal’ hastily scribed in black marker on the side. “Worked before!” She stated proudly

“Makoto, are you feeling well enough for a meal?” Yusuke inquired with what seemed like genuine concern.

I nodded shallowly, though in truth, food was the last thing I craved at that exact moment. But anything was better than the risk of seeing Sae at home.

Everyone in agreement, we made our way down the creaky stairs and through the buzzing restaurant. I eyed Sakura-san in passing and found no trace of his typical cavalier attitude. Instead of conversing with his customers at the bar and exchanging gossip, he kept his head down, took orders, prepared a couple of meals, and then attended to dishes in between rushes. His brow was furrowed and his expression was absent of all humor. The dim light above somehow exaggerated the wrinkles in his middle-aged face. It was as if some sort of invisible specter was hovering just behind him, siphoning the joy from his soul.

It seemed like only I took notice of the sad sight as we exited the restaurant and walked toward the train-station, illuminated by the low hanging orange-yellow sunset. The conversation was filled with what type of dish the others wanted to order and how hot the weather had been lately. Except
for Ren, who hung back from the group and walked in-step with me.

“He’s been like that since that woman talked to him,” Ren explained. “I don’t know if the abuse stuff is real, but I know Leblanc has definitely felt a lot colder lately.”

“It seems like the business hasn’t suffered for it, but he looks so miserable behind that counter now. I’ve never seen him look so sad. I don’t know him very well, but do you think it could be true? Would Boss abuse his child? If that is who this Futaba is, I mean.”

Ren shook his head. “There is no way. He can come off kind of aggressive sometimes, but that’s all an act. He would never hurt anyone.” I noticed him turn toward me at the corner of my vision. “Speaking of which, are you ok? You’ve been acting a little off today.”

His concern was touching, but I was still completely unprepared to reveal the possible identity of his guardian’s accuser. And yet I also didn’t want to lie to him. I bit the bottom of my quivering lip. “I - um … you see, that woman-”


My eyes snapped in the direction of the call and scanned the steady stream of people walking in and from the busy subway entrance. A distinguished-looking head of well-combed hair bobbed in the crowd and steadily pushed its way towards me.

Shoving his way past my fellow Phantom Thieves was the esteemed Goro Akechi, boy detective. “My goodness! What a small world, Niijima!” He flashed me a pearly white grin and extended his hand in my direction.

“It is indeed, Akechi.” I folded my hands neatly together in front of me, leaving his hand awkwardly hanging in the air. If my rudeness rubbed him the wrong way, he hid it well. He merely responded with a shrug and returned his gloved hand back to his side.

“Hey, you’re that guy from the TV station!” Ryuji shouted as he joined the cumbersome confrontation. The others soon joined his flank.

Akechi craned his neck in his direction and smiled. “So you do remember me! It seems I made quite the impression then.” He then returned his gaze, not back to me, but to Ren who stood at my side. “I certainly remember you. Had a few interesting things to say about the Phantom Thieves, if I recall correctly.”

“What are you doing in this part of town, Akechi?” I was sure to keep my tone diplomatic, yet sanctimoniously saturated with disdain.

He chuckled a stilted laugh. “Well, Miss Niijima, I do believe this is a free country and that I am free to go where I please. But if you really must know, I’m on this side of town to follow up a few leads, for I have recently been admitted to the investigation into the Phantom Thieves.”

“That thing is still going?” Ryuji asked with contempt

“Well of course! As long as there is still a group of vigilantes promoting their personal brand of ’justice,’ then our investigation will never rest.” He turned to my testy teammate and grinned once more. “I certainly hope that’s not some sort of issue for you, is it Sakamoto?”

“C-Course not!” Ryuji stammered and crossed his arms. “Just thought the police would have something better to do than investigate Phantom Thieves.”
“False justice and terrorism is something the government will never just let slide, Sakamoto. Worry not, we will not stop till we bring these criminals to justice and have them tried by the people.” Akechi’s bravado was disturbingly upbeat for such a damning decree.

The detective returned his attention to me. “Besides, it seems this trend of personal justice has become something of a buzzword as of late. Have you heard the news regarding Medjed?”

I shook my head and glanced at my allies behind him, who also shrugged in return.

“Seems Medjed has declared war on the Phantom Thieves. They updated their website just this morning with the news.”


Akechi tilted his head at Ann. “That’s quite the reaction! May I ask as to why?”

Ryuji’s eyes widened. “S-She’s a huge Phantom Thieves fan. Can’t enough of ’em!” He explained a little too loudly.

Akechi held his fingers to his chin, “I see. I would be wary of having any sort of admiration for their type. Though, I could understand why you all may identify with them. A group of teens, probably about their age. Difficult background with deeply embedded senses of betrayal, maybe?”

He tapped his cheek. “It’s funny, now that I think about it. Each of you have some sort of connection with the Thieves, don’t you? Of course, Niijima’s sister is spearheading their investigation,” He studied Yusuke a moment, “and of course, you’re Madarame’s former pupil, are you not? And the rest of you all go to Shujin, the place of the Phantom Thieves’ first attack.”

“Are you getting at something, Akechi?” I didn’t bother concealing my scorn any longer.

He chuckled his boyish laugh and ran his hand through his well-groomed hair. “Oh, don’t mind me! Just a funny set of coincidences, I’m sure. Anyway,” He looks to his shiny silver suitcase in his hand. “If you will excuse me, I have an investigation to get to. Stay out of trouble!” He nodded back to me before walking past and vanishing behind a street corner.

“What a creep.” Ryuji spat in disgust.

“Forget him, what’s this about Medjed declaring war?” Ann interjected

“Got it here,” Ren held his phone in the center of the group for all of us to see. His screen displayed a polished looking website with a blocky black logo header reading ‘Medjed’, with only a single block of text below.

Ren proceeded to read out loud: ‘We are disappointed in the people of Japan and their belief in the Phantom Thieves’ false sense of justice. Hence, we shall proceed with our plan to cleanse Japan on August 21st. As a result, the Japanese economy will suffer devastating damages.

‘However, we are benevolent. We will give the Phantom Thieves one last opportunity to repent. If they reveal their identities to the public, we will cast aside our judgment and spare the innocent.

‘The future of Japan rests with the Phantom Thieves’ decision. We are Medjed. We are unseen. We will eliminate evil ’
Chapter End Notes

Due to series life of circumstances, this will be the last chapter of my year-long fanfic, Makoto's Story.

I deeply regret not being able to fully flesh out the story in my fan work and apologize to all those who had followed the series so closely.

I do plan on releasing a new edition of Makoto's Story soon that is a little more polished grammatically.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!